

POLICY BRIEF

Massachusetts State Government and Artificial Intelligence: ChatGTP is a fine start, But Much More Needs to be Done

By Gary Blank

Artificial Intelligence (AI) gets much attention these days for things like how companies use and advertise it, whether it represents a potential investment bubble, how governments should or should not regulate AI, and what various applications might mean for our kids. Designed and used responsibly, early examples have shown AI can help improve government operations, delivery of services to constituents, and save taxpayers' money—all within current law and without politics.

Governor Maura Healey and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman in February announced an AI Assistant application for state government workers to use ChatGPT. They designed the rollout over the next few months to make work “better and faster.” Data protections and various guardrails are in place.

The Healey-Driscoll administration should be commended for taking this step. The challenge will be coming up with use cases that truly transform agencies and not just employees integrating generic ChatGPT into their daily work. Typical workplace use of GenAI seems devoted to things like researching and drafting emails, reports, presentations, and other communications.

Key points:

- AI can help make government more effective and save money within current policies and laws and without politics or worker lay-offs.
- Thus far Massachusetts state government has only reported 20 use cases and with just three of them for constituents.
- The Commonwealth should learn from others. Some states have already deployed a GenAI application to their workers or developed use cases beyond usual work.

Collaboration

We're in the early years of AI and it changes rapidly. We need to learn more from each other. This is especially true in the public sector, where there's both more risk and less competition. Some agencies still use paper and may find efforts around AI unnerving. We can start with agency operations and constituent services—steering clear of surveillance, predictions, decision making, and other controversial tactics.

Federal, state and local agencies can and should learn from each other—both in terms of what to do and what to avoid. They should share their experiences on a non-partisan basis. The public sector can also learn from the private sector, but that doesn't mean solely transferring practices. Many technology companies and start-ups are already developing niche applications specifically to address government needs.

Massachusetts is not the first

Governor Healey overstated Massachusetts’s leadership when she declared the Commonwealth as the first to deploy ChatGPT for its workers. Vermont, New Jersey, Maryland, and Utah already developed or bought similar applications for their employees. Using OpenAI, the Vermont government started “ChatVT” for its employees last year. Vermont’s chief data and AI Officer said, “It looks like ChatGPT, basically, with some Vermont logos on it.” Other states are exploring pilot tests or launching for just certain agencies.

Most government agencies develop particular use cases and applications without launching a GenAI tool broadly to all employees. Some are using AI little or not at all. Los Angeles is the largest city to enable its workers with a GenAI app—Gemini by Google. At the federal level, agencies have been experimenting with and implementing AI in different ways. The federal government started a model with OpenAI last year for agencies to purchase ChatGPT. HHS appears to have begun distributing ChatGPT to its workers in a somewhat similar way to Massachusetts.

The City of Boston is developing various uses of AI. This includes traffic signals, the 311 system, housing permits, and the [Boston.gov](https://www.boston.gov) website. They’re ahead of some states, especially with their interest in trying to solve problems with AI, experimentation and willingness to learn along the way.

AI use cases reported thus far

In the past two years before launching ChatGPT, Governor Healey or Secretary of Technology Services and Security Jason Snyder announced 20 AI use cases for the executive branch. Typically agencies developed the use cases on their own with Amazon Web Services (AWS) or students at Northeastern or UMass. Table 1 tallies the use cases.

Table 1: Reported AI use cases by type of users

Users of AI Application	Number of Applications
Health & Human Services agencies	5
Education agencies	3
Transportation agencies	2
Other state government agencies	5
Staff across executive branch	2
External - general public, cities and towns, businesses, nonprofits	3
Total	20

They also created a sandbox, called GENIE, to test ideas. An internal sandbox for AI is a common technique in technology. Sandboxes are private, secure, and usually aligned with enterprise technology systems, but are kept separate from regular use. They can test-use cases, learn business and technology issues, uncover risks, help set guardrails, and selectively try employee training.

This is more than neighbors in New Hampshire, Maine and Rhode Island, where state governments appear to use AI much less. Conversely, states like New Jersey, California and others seem far ahead. Virginia, for example, has reported its state agencies are using or planning 120 AI applications.

Vermont, New Jersey, Maryland, and Utah already developed or bought similar applications for their employees.

AI use cases often help employees be more efficient at their current work, which is good, but this efficiency may take the place of transforming the work itself. This sometimes results in missed opportunities to save even more money, think differently about the process of a program, or fix problems. Transformation with AI can change how an economic activity is regulated or how a service or benefit is provided to a constituent without requiring a statutory change. Public policy debates can be left separate.

The extent to which AI is being used in a transformative way can only be understood by fully analyzing the use case itself, but at the macro level a potential indicator is whether AI applications directly involve any users outside government, such as individuals, businesses or nonprofits. A common scenario is an AI-powered chatbot for a specific need. Use cases can be transformative and make changes to programs while being solely internal but are more likely so far to just increase worker efficiency unless external users are involved.

So far of the 20 use cases reported in Massachusetts, only three are designed for external users.

- **RMV Virtual Assistant:** launched partly for a REAL ID deadline last year. The general public enters the chatbot which discloses that the responses now use AI. They ask questions in a conversational tone and are given information and instructions. With information only from the Registry for Motor Vehicles (RMV) it covers licenses, registrations, commercial vehicles, handicap accommodations, and other motor vehicle issues. They won an industry award for it.
- **GrantWell:** started last year and continues to expand its features. Administration & Finance offers the tool to Massachusetts cities and towns to help them get federal grants. Local officials can use the tool to search numerous grants. Once the user finds a grant they're interested in, the AI summarizes the grant and a chatbot can be engaged in questions about it. Lastly, the AI helps guide the user in writing grant forms.
- **Grants Navigator:** provided by Energy & Environmental Affairs to help people find agency grants. Farms, towns, businesses, and nonprofits can enter key words in the search function and be provided short summaries with links.

These tools can be accessed online, 24/7 and in different languages. Technology Services and Security has also begun to explore the Virtual Assistant tool with other constituent features on Mass.gov.

Results of RMV Virtual Assistant
Helped 200,000+ customers
Calls to agency dropped 1,000 per day
200 fewer emails per week
<i>Sources: MA Technology Services & Security, and NeuroSoph technology vendor</i>

Conversely, Massachusetts has created AI add-ons or chatbots for workers in call centers and other staff to support constituent calls, but they're not accessible by the constituents themselves. These include MassHealth, Unemployment, and Economic Development programs. The applications help call center workers search complex state information for programs and policies to help answer inquiries about what is available, eligibility rules, how to access them, and related issues. It would be more transformative to use AI to improve these programs and make fewer calls necessary. Doing so could make these programs more effective for constituents and reduce operating costs.

Table 2 lists details for all of them as reported. Overall several use cases sound promising, should be developed further, and could have meaningful impact.

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Table 2: AI Use Cases Reported for Massachusetts State Government

Project Name	Description	Secretaria or Agency
GrantWell	Helps municipalities decipher and apply for federal funding	Administration & Finance
IT Ops Genie	AI assistant for staff to query internal documentation	Health & Human Services
One L	Provides agency attorneys with vendor contract review and redlining	Operational Services Division
Highway Engineer Knowledge Agent (HEKA)	Chatbot for highway engineers to navigate policies and help design road features	Transportation
Business Enhancement & Assistance Center for Optimized Navigation (BEACON)	AI add-on to support staff to better help businesses access state grants	Economic Development
Assistive Buyer Engine (ABE)	Chatbot to answer staff questions for statewide contracts and related procurement issues	Operational Services Division
MassHealth Helper	Chatbot for MassHealth call center staff to query eligibility policy	Health & Human Services
EOTSS HR knowledge-base chatbot	Helps Technology & Security Services HR staff respond to other staff	Technology Services and Security
MassDOT RFI tool	Summarize vendor responses to Request for Information (RFI) notices	Transportation
Environmental grants & permits navigator	Help users navigate programs and fulfill applications	Energy and Environmental Affairs
Call center assistant tool	AI add-on to support staff answer unemployment assistance phone calls	Unemployment Assistance
Problem resolution system (PRS) report generator tool	Ingestion of complaints and generation of reports	Education
Child Support Payment Predictor	Innovation Mastermind Award: Child Support Payment Predictor tool	Administration & Finance
Predictive Analysis Tool	Community Hero Award: Predictive Analysis tool	Health & Human Services
Beyond the Inquiry Tool	Future Proof Solution Award: "Beyond the Inquiry" tool	Health & Human Services
Searchable Assistant Manager (SAM)	Service Excellence Award: Searchable Assistant Manager (SAM)	Education
Open Data Chatbot	Game Changer Award: EOE Open Data Chatbot	Education
RMV Virtual Assistant	Chatbot for people to search info and get instructions	Transportation
Multilingual communication tool	Game Changer Award for seamless multilingual communication tool	Administration & Finance
Privacy monitoring solution	Service Excellence Award for innovative privacy monitoring solution	Health & Human Services

AI Assistant

Massachusetts state government appears to have used a standard procurement process, known as a Request for Quotes (RFQ), when they selected OpenAI. For context, Google is often an active competitor in the public sector. In the launch of the AI Assistant application, state government purchased up to 30,000 licenses of ChatGPT Enterprise from OpenAI. Additionally, they may need to purchase advanced units if needed for certain use cases. Data protections, use and deletion of agency data, intellectual property, and other rules apply.

Looking Ahead: Pioneer will be delving into AI use cases employed by other states and guardrails needed to ensure protections and effectiveness.

The contract states ChatGPT Enterprise includes:

- Seamless organizational knowledge: integration via secure connectors and apps shall allow agencies to integrate their own systems and data sources directly into ChatGPT.
- Custom ChatGPT agents: purpose-built assistance that can be configured to specific workflows, departments or mission areas.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Slalom Consulting are part of the contract for development of use cases, implementation, and training services. These companies entered into partnership agreements with OpenAI last year and have been active with the Commonwealth in recent years. The contract includes:

- Help Technology Services & Security, the central technology department in the executive branch, revamp how they review, critique and monitor ideas from agencies
- Working groups, executive sessions, and hackathons to help develop, prioritize and implement use cases
- Codex, a ChatGPT Enterprise coding model, that turns language into computer codes
- Establishment of prompt libraries, playbooks, and champions network
- Design and provide various forms of employee trainings

It's up to each agency and worker how to use this powerful technology. All of them now have an AI solution they can use in many ways.

Going forward

Below are key steps for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to incorporate as they roll out ChatGPT and explore AI use cases.

- **Enforce guardrails.** State government already has agency and employee policies for AI, data protections, what not to do, and rules to curb any bias. These should be updated and strengthened.
- **Develop external use cases.** The Governor said AI Assistant would, “dramatically improve customer service to our seven million residents.” Like the RMV Assistant and the Grantwell tools, they should develop more customer-facing use cases, rather than just helping call center workers.
- **Balance buying commercial applications with building internally.** Massachusetts created the AI Assistant application by buying from a technology company. While this is a common practice, large companies and government agencies also sometimes build applications themselves using technology infrastructure and open source code.

Commercial off-the-shelf applications are often cheaper and more frequently updated, but data privacy, intellectual property and other vendor rules can be hard to administer. The public sector should support open source in AI. The Commonwealth risks being too reliant on a single technology company.

- **Factor costs and benefits.** This mindset seems to be missing from much of the discussion. Costs are beyond just building an AI application or buying it commercially. Creative use cases that transform an agency or work process might be hard to design and train employees on their use. Resistance to change should also be expected, but the benefits outweigh these challenges. We need to better measure such benefits, which can be more than just how much time workers save doing their usual work. Higher order benefits include transformational changes that improve program outcomes. Agencies should be clear about goals, evaluate direct and indirect costs and benefits, and consider time horizons.
- **Train employees.** This is very needed, but the curriculum depends on use cases. General ChatGPT training will not get employees very far. Plus, AI will evolve. A year from now, training may look different than it does today.
- **Create a feedback loop.** AI is a new technology and a new way of working. Mistakes will be made. Approaches can be improved. Getting feedback from internal and external users is necessary.
- **Publish an inventory.** Federal agencies are required to report their AI use cases annually. Many states also do it, but Massachusetts does not. Inventory details vary, but the inventories often include short descriptions of use cases, launch dates, vendors or partners, and how guardrails and policies may apply. The basic disclosure can help mitigate concerns about AI, but more importantly, it's another way to share use cases across governments and learn from others. Secretary Snyder pledged a “transparent usage of AI” and publishing an inventory would help.

Sometimes agencies in the Commonwealth or other governments might defer their AI strategy too much to technologists. Chief information officers (CIOs) and their teams should be experts who are integral parts of the strategy. They need to ensure technology infrastructure supports greater use of AI, but agency leadership should personally explore AI, own any process, and encourage other employees rather than just “punt” efforts to their CIOs. Involvement from others may lead to better use cases. Ideally, agencies will use AI to fix problems rather than just improve their technology and help employees be more efficient with existing routines.

Conclusion

Federal, state, and local governments are demonstrating AI use cases to improve the operations and constituent services of Medicaid, SNAP, Unemployment Insurance, and other programs. Some show how AI can help streamline—without removing protections—regulations, rules and reporting requirements that have become too cumbersome. The Commonwealth should learn from them.

Use of AI in government need not be another partisan political issue and Governor Healey should be recognized for creating the AI Assistant. The challenge now is how agencies take advantage of it. AI can be used in a variety of ways to help make government more effective and efficient.

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About the Authors

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