

A Report by a Study Team of the

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The Agile Pathway for Policymaking



October 2025

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EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP OF ACADEMY FELLOWS

Dr. David Bray

Dr. Donald F. Kettl

Jennifer Pahlka

Dr. Courtney Phillips

Dr. David Wilson



Officers of the Academy

Janet Weiss, *Chair of the Board*

Stan Soloway, *Vice Chair*

John Bartle, *Treasurer*

Lisa Benjamin, *Secretary*

James-Christian B. Blockwood, *President and Chief Executive Officer*

Study Team

Joseph Mitchell III, *Director of Strategic Initiatives and International Programs*

Amanda K. Mullan, *Project Director for Strategic Initiatives*

G. Edward DeSeve, *Advisor (Academy Fellow)*

Richard Callahan, *Advisor (Academy Fellow)*

James Higgins, *Analyst*

Jillian McGuffey, *Analyst*

The views expressed in this report are those of the study team. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Academy as an institution.

National Academy of Public Administration

1600 K Street, NW

Suite 400

Washington, D.C. 20006

www.napawash.org

October 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Photo Source: National Academy of Public Administration

About the Academy

The National Academy of Public Administration is an independent, nonprofit, and non-partisan organization established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984.

It advises government leaders on building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. To carry out this mission, the Academy draws on the knowledge and experience of its over 1,000 Fellows—including former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, state legislators, prominent scholars, career public administrators, and nonprofit and business executives.

The Academy helps public institutions address their most critical governance and management challenges through in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance, congressional testimony, forums and conferences, and online stakeholder engagement. Learn more about the Academy and its work at www.NAPAwash.org.

Foreword

For decades, the American people have registered their concerns about government and its operations, especially at the federal level. All too often, the promises made by legislative and executive policies are not turned into a reality, at least not in a timely and demonstrable way. When results are not achieved, the public's confidence in their government understandably declines.

This report proposes a new path forward for policy development and implementation. It builds on prior work of the Agile Government Center—a joint effort of the National Academy of Public Administration and the IBM Center for the Business of Government—to apply and extend Agile software principles to a broader set of government activities, tailor Agile principles to regulatory agencies, and develop methods for more Agile programs and processes. By applying lessons from software development to public policy and implementation, Agile approaches can increase innovation, speed, and adaptability while allowing for regular reflection and adjustment to improve results, especially when it is paramount to swiftly respond to community needs.

With Agile policy design and implementation, the purpose of a policy is clearly communicated and evidence-based; services are built around recipients' needs and expectations; unnecessary procedural hindrances to progress are eliminated; organizational capacity is strengthened; and results are rigorously tracked within a system of continuous learning, iteration, and improvement.

At its core, I believe that Agile policy can help foster a government that works better for the American people. Agile provides an opportunity to respond more effectively to international, economic, social, technological, and cultural challenges by being more proactive and innovative in addressing public needs. Moving forward, I hope that public leaders in both the executive and legislative branches at every level of government will put this new paradigm into practice for those they represent. I also hope that universities and faculty will incorporate these insights into their curricula to ensure that current and future public servants possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to provide Americans with the government they want, need, and deserve.

As an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit organization chartered by the U.S. Congress to improve government, the Academy exists to develop ideas that respond to the critical challenges of our time. I would like to thank the Freeman Charitable Trust for its support of this initiative, the academics and practitioners who provided their valuable insights, the Fellows who served on the Expert Advisory Group, and the staff who produced this report. I look forward to seeing how this report contributes to a representative government that meets the needs of all Americans.

James-Christian B. Blockwood
President and Chief Executive Officer
National Academy of Public Administration

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Executive Summary

While many public programs deliver important results, the context within which they operate continues to evolve significantly. The pace of change, critical public needs, societal polarization, and emerging technologies present both new challenges and opportunities. The status quo of slow-moving processes and over-centralization will not work to address public challenges that require multiple agencies, levels of government, and sectors to work together.

All too often, the public sector has been slow to adapt to major social, cultural, and technological changes. The gap between the public policy promises in legislation and executive branch initiatives and their results is vast and growing.

Unfortunately, policies often fail to achieve their intended results due to several interconnected challenges, including:

- Separation of policy development from implementation,
- Procedural constraints that do not prioritize speed,
- Rigid cultures that stifle innovation,
- Limited capacity in the public sector to achieve intended results, and
- Intergovernmental misalignments across federal, state, and local governments.

Government leaders can still achieve policy results by implementing Agile approaches that increase government responsiveness, transparency, accountability, and effectiveness at all levels. This will require adopting a new mindset, new organizational models, and a stronger focus on results.

Agile government allows policy to move at the speed of change to build public trust in the capacity of government to deliver positive results. Agile requires leaders to communicate clear missions and visions based on evidence, reduce unnecessary procedural constraints that hinder progress, build organizational capacity, rigorously track results, and foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

All major activities of government—programs, regulations, and policies—need to incorporate Agile principles to build a government that Americans want, need, and deserve.

Core Tenets of Agile Policy

Agile policy works in a results-oriented and iterative way to implement solutions to society's challenges that keep pace with evolving needs. It is a process of making and remaking policy, grounded in the recognition that solutions must be tested and continuously adapted to produce the intended results in an ever-changing world. If a policy does not achieve its intended results, as assessed through evidence and user feedback, then it should be iterated on and tested again.

Agile Policy requires Leadership Focused on Setting Priorities and Achieving Results.

- Adopting **leadership practices** with a rigorous focus on achieving intended results.
- Establishing a **clear** statement of mission and vision to **guide results-driven behavior**.

- Reducing unnecessary **veto points**, establishing **priorities** among competing objectives, and **eliminating unnecessary requirements** that hinder achievement of the principal goal.

Agile Policy requires an Iterative and Continuous Process based on Evidence and Feedback.

- Utilizing **iterative** development to allow for continuous learning and adaptive solutions, including, if needed, teams with cross-functional expertise ranging from policy development to technology and programmatic implementations.
- Implementing a **results-driven** approach that bases policies and their implementation on empirical evidence.
- Creating **feedback loops** that include data, user, and public feedback based on the principles of human-centered design.

Introduction

Today's challenges are evolving faster than the government's ability to respond. To increase their effectiveness, public institutions must break free from outdated processes and adopt Agile approaches to policy development and implementation, which can keep pace with change and deliver concrete results for the people. The time is now for the fields of public administration and policy to reimagine government by adopting new mindsets and approaches.

While many public programs deliver important results, the pace of change, critical public needs, societal polarization, and new technologies have rendered the status quo obsolete. Slow-moving processes and over-centralization—fit for purpose decades ago—fail to address modern-day public challenges that require multiple agencies, levels of government, and sectors to work together.

Historically, many of the challenges facing government could be described as [complicated](#)—characterized as “predictable and linear in nature” with a “clear beginning, middle, and end.” These types of problems can be solved through planning, chains of command, and traditional project management tools. The societal challenges now facing government are largely [complex](#) in nature, meaning they are “unpredictable” and cannot be anticipated using linear relationships.¹

As societal challenges have become increasingly complex, the public sector has been slow to adapt, and the gap between public policy promises in legislation or executive branch initiatives and their results is vast and growing. When the government fails to achieve promised results within a reasonable timeframe, the result is a decline in public trust in the government's capacity to meet public needs.

Policies can fail to achieve their intended results in a timely way due to several interconnected challenges:

- **Separation of Policy Development from Implementation:** Leaders responsible for policy development are often disconnected from those implementing the policies, leading to a lack of cohesion and understanding.
- **Procedural Constraints that Do Not Prioritize Speed:** Administrators must implement policies within a complex structure of legal requirements, procedural constraints, and reporting requirements that limit capacity to respond to new challenges and require extended timeframes.
- **Rigid Cultures that Stifle Innovation:** A rigid and risk-averse culture develops that stifles innovation, adaptability, and continuous learning.
- **Limited Capacity in the Public Sector to Achieve Intended Results:** All levels of government are struggling to build the people, processes, and technology necessary to achieve the intended results of major public policies, especially when no existing policy requirements are removed.
- **Intergovernmental Misalignments across Federal, State, and Local Governments:** The process of designing policy at the federal level and yielding implementation to the states and localities creates implementation challenges.

For more details about the challenges leaders face with the current approach to policymaking, see Appendix A.

Recognizing that the status quo no longer works, governments are increasingly adopting Agile approaches, combined with technological solutions, to enhance their responsiveness. By leveraging artificial intelligence (AI), the City and County of San Francisco has identified and eliminated outdated and duplicative reporting requirements, reducing procedural bloat. By prioritizing the needs of the public and leveraging new technology and management techniques, Pennsylvania was able to reengineer the customer experience, reducing or eliminating backlogs and shortening processing times for obtaining permits.

Agile government allows policy to move at the speed of change to build public trust in the capacity of government to deliver positive results. Agile requires leaders to communicate clear missions and visions based on evidence, reduce unnecessary procedural constraints that hinder progress, build organizational capacity, rigorously track results, and foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

With this framework, we seek to equip government leaders with a new Agile mindset for public policy. Agile policies are increasingly necessary to keep up with a changing world—where successful adaptiveness, speed, and pace in delivering results, tied to community needs, can also yield increased public trust over time. All major activities of government—programs, regulations, and policies—need to incorporate Agile principles to build a government that Americans want, need, and deserve.

How to Incorporate Agile into Policy Development & Implementation

This model applies the 10 principles of Agile Government to policy development and implementation. It provides specific examples of successful applications of Agile principles in policymaking and offers tools for government leaders to implement Agile policies in their jurisdictions. For the Academy's Integrated Agile Framework, see Appendix B.

This model provides practical and actionable guidance that can be applied by government leaders and practitioners at the city, county, state, and federal levels in the United States and worldwide.

Methodology

This model is based on interviews with leading experts at each level of government and a review of existing research. The focus of the interviews and review was to identify current approaches used in policy development and their associated challenges. Interviews were conducted with subject matter experts and practitioners to gather insights into the methods used to develop policy, the challenges they face under the current system, and to identify new practices and mechanisms for innovative approaches to solving those challenges.

An Expert Advisory Group of Academy Fellows shared their experiences and insights on current policy approaches and explored Agile practices and frameworks that would benefit policy development and implementation.

The relevant Agile frameworks and practices were used to draft an Agile policy Approach. The Expert Advisory Group was convened to further validate and enhance the framework.

Agile Policy Evolves as Fast as the World Does

Agile policy focuses on developing solutions to society's challenges that keep pace with the speed of change. It is the process of making and remaking policy under the assumption that solutions need to be tested and continuously adapted in our ever-changing world. If a policy does not achieve its intended results in a timely manner, as assessed through evidence and user feedback, it should be iterated on and tested again. In practice, this means that the government should utilize mechanisms that integrate policy development and implementation.

Agile Policy requires Leadership Focused on Setting Priorities and Achieving Results.

- Adopting **leadership practices** with a rigorous focus on achieving intended results.
- Establishing a **clear** statement of mission and vision to **guide results-driven behavior**.
- Reducing the **veto points**, establishing **priorities** amidst potential tradeoffs, and **eliminating unnecessary requirements** that hinder achievement of the principal goal.

Agile Policy requires an Iterative and Continuous Process based on Evidence and Feedback.

- Utilizing **iterative** development to allow for continuous learning and adaptive solutions, to include, if needed, teams with cross-functional expertise ranging from policy development to technology and programmatic implementations.
- Implementing a **results-driven** approach that bases policies and their implementation on empirical evidence.
- Creating **feedback loops** that include data, user, and public feedback based on the principles of human-centered design.

For more information on the previous work of the Agile Government Center and the IBM Center for the Business of Government, as well as other resources for creating Agile government, see Appendix C.

Bringing Agile Policy to Life: Strategies and Stories

This section empowers public leaders and teams to put Agile principles into practice with proven strategies, tactics, and lessons from real-world examples. Here, leaders will find actionable guidance for building cross-functional teams, streamlining processes, and centering policy around user needs. These lessons can be used to drive innovation, foster collaboration, and deliver measurable results, enabling organizations to respond rapidly and effectively to evolving public challenges.

Adopting leadership practices with a rigorous focus on achieving intended results

Adopting Agile leadership practices is key to starting any efforts to reform policy development and implementation. Leaders with an [Agile mindset](#) believe in the ability to learn and adapt while embracing challenges as opportunities to learn and grow.²

Agile leaders delegate responsibilities as much as possible while also empowering those with the capabilities to handle them. As noted by Stephen Denning in the [Age of Agile](#), leadership under Agile management looks much more like “gardening.” Agile leaders support their organization by clearing away obstacles for their subordinates.³

Under an Agile approach, both the legislative and the executive branches empower agency leaders by allowing them to prioritize requirements and make trade-offs where appropriate. Agile leaders within agencies can identify roadblocks to effective policy implementation, escalate those challenges to higher-level officials, and recommend changes to achieve the intended results. This creates an effective feedback loop across different parts of the policy design and implementation system.

A clear statement of mission and vision to guide results-driven behavior

During this time of increasing societal changes, no legislative body can reasonably specify all the things that should be fixed at the outset. When Congress, for example, attempts to solve too many societal problems simultaneously, it often produces massive, complex legislation that leaves the executive branch agencies with an unclear mission and vision of what to achieve, conflicting requirements, and inadequate tools for implementation.

Using tenets of Agile policy, legislative bodies at all levels of government should clearly establish the mission and vision to be achieved and work with a cross-functional team of policymakers and implementers to find ways to solve the clearly defined challenge. Legislators should establish guardrails and metrics for oversight and accountability while providing sufficient flexibility at the implementation level where appropriate. Creating a clear and concise vision and mission in legislation enables testing and iteration, rather than attempting to solve too many conflicting problems with a single massive bill.

For example, establishing a clear statement of mission and vision, and defining outcomes, was critical to the success of implementing the 2009-2010 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the Recovery Act).⁴

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

The purposes of this [Act include the following](#):

- (1) To preserve and create jobs and promote economic recovery.
- (2) To assist those most impacted by the recession.
- (3) To provide investments needed to increase economic efficiency by spurring technological advances in science and health.
- (4) To invest in transportation, environmental protection, and other infrastructure that will provide long-term economic benefits.
- (5) To stabilize State and local government budgets, in order to minimize and avoid reductions in essential services and counterproductive state and local tax increases.

With a clear mission and vision of what was to be achieved through the Recovery Act, and direction mandating that 70 percent of the money be spent within 17 months to generate jobs, Congress ensured that speed was an essential principle of the Act. For additional information about the key to success from the Recovery Act, see [Key Actions that Contribute to Successful Program Implementation](#).⁵



Photo Source: [CSHL.edu](#)

Reducing the veto points, establishing priorities amidst potential tradeoffs, and eliminating unnecessary requirements that hinder achievement of the principal goal

To create an enabling environment that allows Agile policy to thrive, policymakers and implementers need to consider how multiple veto points embedded in many (often conflicting) procedural, legal, and regulatory requirements can hinder the achievement of policy objectives. Agile policy requires leadership authority to take action to streamline decision making and eliminate unnecessary requirements that put policy results at risk. As Jennifer Pahlka noted in [Recoding America \(2023\)](#), “We constantly add to the laws, rules, regulations, and guidance that govern how agencies and departments at all levels build and buy technology. In practice, these policies tend to backfire...” Furthermore, “we desperately need to simplify and rationalize the policy that has accrued over many years and bogs down our system, to clean up the sludge that decisions made decades or even centuries ago have left behind.”⁶

Additionally, it is crucial to avoid establishing too many competing objectives within a piece of legislation, as this can render the primary objective virtually impossible to achieve in a timely manner. For example, state and local agencies applying for rural broadband funding under the

California's Office of Data and Innovation Agile Procurement

[California's Office of Data and Innovation](#) (ODI) applied Agile methods to procurement and service delivery, emphasizing an iterative process of “failing fast,” open collaboration, and eliminating requirements that were no longer relevant. ODI experienced seven years of failure with a Request for Proposal (RFP) to design a system for the Department of Health and Human Services. With each system design failure, additional terms and conditions were added to the RFP, resulting in hundreds of pages of requirements. ODI implemented an Agile review of those requirements, assembling a cross-functional team to simplify language and rigorously evaluating the necessity for each requirement. The team successfully managed to reduce the requirements to 15 pages, resulting in successfully awarded RFPs.

Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) process confronted several bottlenecks trying to adhere to policy requirements. Operating with limited resources, agencies struggled to obtain permits in a timely manner under the National Environmental Policy Act and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. A complex 14-step process was established in legislation for obtaining the funding, and additional requirements were incorporated by the Executive Branch during the implementation process. As of March 2025, the result was that only 3 out of 56 states and territories were initially able to obtain BEAD funding, and implementing rural broadband has been further delayed. Using the tenets of Agile policy, legislators and implementers would have worked together to streamline and speed up processes, delivering rural broadband to communities around the country.⁷



Photo Source: innovation.ca.gov

City of San Francisco's Attorney's Office

In California, the City and County of San Francisco's Attorney's Office used AI to review and analyze the 16-million-word municipal code and regulations to [identify outdated or duplicative reporting requirements](#).

This resulted in the elimination or consolidation of 36 percent of reports through a legislative proposal. Leadership and innovation can modernize government, reduce burdens, and increase capacity so that agencies can focus on their missions instead of red tape.

A key tool for reducing veto points involves establishing a process for identifying and removing requirements that are no longer aligned with a policy's clear mission and vision. If the legislative body wishes to delegate this to those closest to implementation, it can authorize a cross-functional team to identify those requirements and exercise discretion in reconciling them. AI can be a useful enabling solution for identifying those requirements. Critically, eliminating veto points often requires statutory changes or (at least) executive-legislative interactions, so establishing a feedback loop with the legislature can promote transparency and accountability.⁸

Iterative development to allow for continuous learning and adaptive solutions

Iteration as a practice is essential to Agile policy because it enables continuous learning and the testing of solutions in real-time to meet the public's needs. Agile policy continually uses feedback loops, prioritizes and makes tradeoffs, and identifies and removes barriers to ensure effective implementation. Due to a complex and ever-changing environment, policymakers and implementers must adopt continuous monitoring, evolving, testing, and iterating of their programs based on actual results.⁹

Applying Agile Policy to Artificial Intelligence

In September 2025, the Academy produced [*Bringing AI to Mainstreet: Boosting Local Economies with AI*](#). The report applies Agile policy tenets to local leaders' decision-making regarding AI.

For government support to keep pace with such a fast-evolving technology, it must utilize iterative design, intersectoral networks, and a clear understanding of community needs to inform local decision making.

Building upon the establishment of a clear mission and vision with defined outcomes, Agile policy encourages the creation of a team responsible for the end-to-end journey across policy development and implementation. Cross-functional, multidisciplinary teams that integrate policy makers, implementers, and technologists can ensure that policies achieve their stated outcomes in an effective, efficient, equitable, and accountable manner.

Whereas traditional policy development follows a highly constricted “waterfall process,” Agile policy facilitates testing ideas and potential solutions through an iterative process with feedback loops. Having a cross-functional team assembled maximizes the advantages of this process. For example, when solutions are proposed and tested with technologists participating throughout, it ensures that they are technically feasible and that the requirements are clearly defined. The graphic below illustrates how this process can be applied to iterative policy development and implementation.

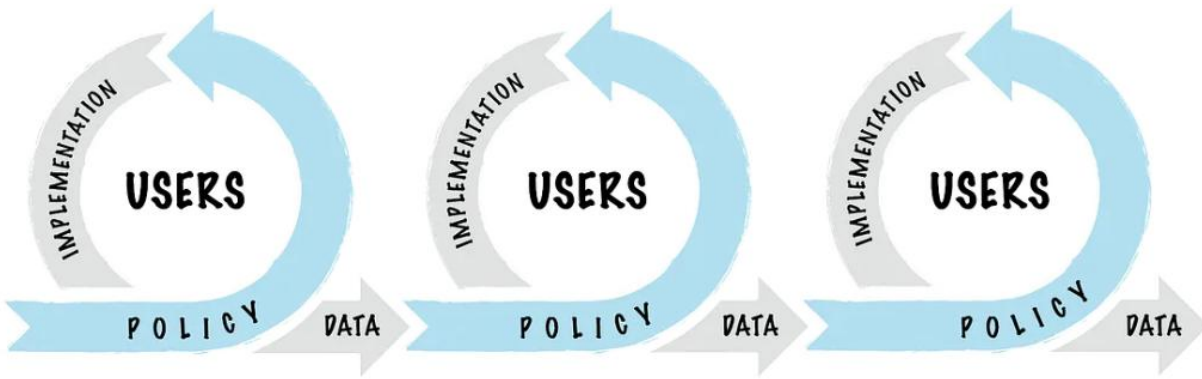


Figure 1: Agile Iterations of Policy From “[Data-Driven Policy](#)” by Jennifer Pahlka¹⁰

A results-driven approach that bases policies and their implementation on empirical evidence

Clearly defining the problem and the intended results of the policy at the outset allows policymakers and implementers to experiment early and make needed course corrections. To develop Agile policies based on solution testing and continuous learning, empirical evidence should be collected and evaluated throughout the iterative design process. Without a shared understanding of what success looks like, policy efforts risk becoming misaligned and ineffective.

Collecting and sharing evidence fosters transparency and accountability, which are essential for rebuilding public trust. When prioritizing limited resources, having clearly defined results enables decision makers to prioritize what is working over what has failed to achieve results.

The policy and process evaluation system will need to be reimaged to effectively realize results-driven Agile policy. Rather than adherence to process, programs should be evaluated against results-based metrics to determine whether they are delivering on their intended mission and purposes.

Creating feedback loops that include data, user, and public feedback based on the principles of human-centered design

For Agile policy, the public and the customer are the foundation and thus core for policy development and implementation. Yet, under a traditional policy development approach, policy implementers often operate far removed from the lead designers of the policy itself, meaning that the insights they gain from recipients and end-users are often disregarded.

The creation of more comprehensive feedback loops that incorporate both data and user feedback and connect to policy designers is essential to align policy development and implementation with human-centered design principles. These loops enable continuous learning and adaptation by ensuring that real-world user experiences and measurable outcomes inform iterative improvements. In cross-functional teams, especially those involving technologists, such feedback mechanisms help bridge the gap between policy intent and practical execution. By grounding decisions in user needs and empirical evidence, organizations can develop more responsive, inclusive, and effective solutions that adapt to changing contexts and evolving stakeholder expectations.

User-Centered Policy: Organizational Assessment Tool

To help leaders interested in centering policy around meeting people's needs and improving service delivery, the Beeck Center at Georgetown, New America, and the National Conference on Citizenship created an [Organizational Assessment](#) in 2020 to provide them with actionable, concrete steps to shift their approach and put users' needs at the center.

Open processes and participatory models are essential mechanisms for rebuilding trust in government, particularly in an era marked by public skepticism and institutional complexity. As a result, ensuring that the Agile policy development and implementation process emphasizes transparency and is participatory is key to its success.^{11 12}

Iterative feedback loops can incorporate open processes and participatory models to demonstrate how policies evolve in response to input. Policymakers and implementers should explore the power of publishing draft policies on public platforms to build societal buy-in prior to

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Los Angeles County's Poverty Alleviation Initiative

The [LA County's Poverty Alleviation Initiative](#) aims to reform the General Relief program, which has been problematic for over a century. The program provides \$200 a month to approximately 100,000 people, 70,000 of whom are experiencing homelessness, primarily single males. The reform initiative began with user input, engaging with individuals on the street to gather their ideas and feedback. This **user-centric approach** aligns with Agile principles, emphasizing collaboration and responsiveness to change. This iterative process ensures that the policy recommendations are well-informed and supported by stakeholders.

The initiative's focus on open processes and participatory models was fundamental to its success. Specifically, focusing on transparency and building consensus among the Board of Supervisors and other stakeholders throughout the process was instrumental in implementing policy reform. This approach helps to organically build trust and ensures that the policy changes are favorably received.

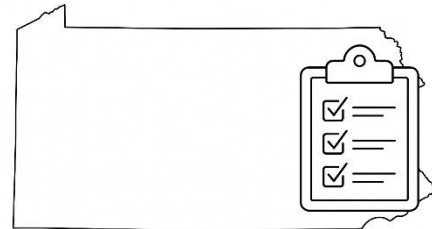
policy approval. Together, these approaches foster a culture of collaboration, accountability, and shared ownership—key ingredients for restoring public confidence in governance. These models emphasize transparency, stakeholder engagement, and iterative feedback loops that allow policy

to evolve in response to real-world outcomes.¹³

Pennsylvania Reforms to Reduce Paperwork and Improve the Customer Experience

In Pennsylvania, the governor directed a team to reform the [state's permitting application process](#) to improve transparency, accountability, and the customer experience. Specifically, the permitting approval should be redesigned with providing a good customer experience as the focal point.

The policy was directed by an Executive Order to create the Office of Transformation Opportunity and CODE PA, which worked with existing agencies to catalogue and analyze their existing processes, troubleshoot problems, identify solutions, and then implement changes, including the PAYback digital interface, to provide refunds if applications were not processed in a timely manner. This initiative was successful in reducing or eliminating backlogs and processing times.



At the federal level, an Agile approach would encourage policymakers and implementers to more carefully consider how their proposed solutions can be adapted to the communities being served while utilizing feedback from the states, localities, and nonprofits responsible for policy implementation.

Conclusion

Agile policy requires two critical elements: (1) leadership that sets priorities to achieve intended results and (2) a process for design and implementation that is iterative, continuous, and grounded in evidence and feedback. When applied effectively, Agile Policy allows the government to keep pace with today's rapidly evolving challenges. It enables the government to continually self-adjust and deliver visible, valuable results for the people it serves.

By maintaining the status quo, policymakers and implementers risk widening the gap between the challenges the government faces and the positive results it achieves. Using Agile Policy methods can produce results that strengthen public trust in the government's functioning effectively. This new model offers policymakers and implementers a means to address emerging challenges and accelerate the development of effective solutions.

Checklist for Adopting Agile for Policy Development and Implementation

Actions for Agile Policymaking to Achieve Intended Results: Agile Leaders Should...

STRATEGY:	
Leadership	- Clearly identify the leaders. Provide them with authority to prioritize requirements and make appropriate tradeoffs. - Focus on ways to “clear the brush” for their teams implementing the policy.
Mission and Vision	- Center around a clear mission and vision of what is to be achieved. - Ground the mission and vision in clear expected outcomes.
Evidence	- Base policies on empirical evidence and encourage the ongoing collection of data and establish mechanisms for needed adjustments during implementation. - Leverage data from a variety of sources, including different agencies and levels of government.
Objectives and Metrics	Establish guardrails for implementers to allow for greater flexibility in implementation.
ORGANIZATION	
Teams	Develop cross-functional teams that include policy designers and implementers, as well as technologists and scientists as needed.
Networks	- Leverage diverse voices (policymakers, technologists, advocates, and recipients/users, among others). - Use a multidisciplinary approach - Identify roles and responsibilities based on existing capacity before full implementation begins.
Customers/End Users	- Design processes around the recipient/user from the beginning - Collect data and leverage feedback loops to improve recipient/user experiences and achieve desired results.
IMPLEMENTATION	
Speed	Streamline existing policies and procedures as much as possible to maximize the likelihood of achieving the policy’s intended results
Innovation	Incorporate mechanisms that promote experimentation and creativity to achieve intended results.
Persistent Iteration	- Provide agencies and programs with the flexibility to start small and incrementally test what works. - Allow the opportunity to build, measure, and learn in smaller iterations and follow up when desired results are not achieved.

Appendices

Appendix A: Challenges to Achieving Intended Policy Results

Policies frequently fail to achieve their desired outcomes in a timely way due to several interconnected challenges:

- **Separation of Policy Development from Implementation:** Leaders responsible for policy development are often disconnected from those implementing the policies, leading to a lack of cohesion and understanding.
- **Procedural Constraints that do not Prioritize Speed:** Administrators must implement policies within a complex structure of legal requirements, procedural constraints, and reporting requirements that limit capacity to respond to new challenges and require extended timeframes.
- **Rigid Cultures that Stifle Innovation:** A rigid and risk-averse culture develops that stifles innovation, adaptability, and continuous learning.
- **Limited Capacity in the Public Sector to Achieve Intended Results:** All levels of government are struggling to build the people, processes, and technology necessary to achieve the intended results of major public policies, in the context of accumulation, where no existing policy requirements are removed.
- **Intergovernmental Misalignments across Federal, State, and Local Governments:** The process of designing policy at the federal level and yielding implementation to the states and localities creates implementation challenges.

Separation of Policy Development from Implementation

Leaders responsible for policy development are [often disconnected](#) from those implementing the policies, leading to a lack of cohesion and understanding.¹⁴ This separation creates many challenges for achieving an effective policy that delivers on desired outcomes. It also contributes to a lack of trust between policymakers and implementers and discourages the creation of feedback loops that would enable user feedback to improve policy design and implementation.

Lack of Feedback Loops

Currently, there is a lack of feedback loops between policymakers, implementers, and end users. Implementers often receive end-user feedback, but there are few mechanisms, if any, for implementers to relay it to policymakers. For example, Jennifer Pahlka's *Recoding America* (2023) highlights the difficulties that the director of the Employment Development Department (EDD) experienced from a lack of established feedback loops. Pahlka notes that the flow of information in a waterfall system always flows down. There was no feedback loop to allow the EDD director to influence those whose programs she was implementing. No experience from end-

users applying for benefits made its way back to Congress, the Department of Labor, the governor, or the labor secretary of California.¹⁵

Executive branch agencies should serve as the bridge between constituents and legislators. As it stands, there is a disconnect between administrators collecting data and legislators making policy, and there is a lack of empowerment for implementers to make real-time management pivots necessary to meet policy goals.

Lack of Trust

Lack of trust between policymakers and implementers hinders the smooth transition from policy development to implementation. There is a need to include implementers in the policy development process. This will encourage open dialogue between these groups, so that they recognize their shared goals and the need for real-time feedback.

Procedural Constraints that do not Prioritize Speed

Current policy development is constrained by significant procedural constraints that have not been eliminated or modernized to meet the complex challenges of the 21st Century. These constraints include laws such as the Administrative Procedures Act or the National Environmental Policy Act, and government processes, including procurement, hiring, and others.

Accumulation

Accumulation means increasing by continuous addition. In the context of policymaking, accumulation is when, instead of revisions or other actions, policymakers or implementers respond to conflict in implementation by creating more legislation or rules.

The [Administrative Procedure Act](#) (APA) outlines guidelines for how agencies should develop the rules needed to implement legislation or regulate the activity over which they have been given authority.¹⁶ This process is called rulemaking. The [National Environmental Policy Act](#) (NEPA) requires agencies to evaluate the environmental and related social and economic effects of their proposed actions before making decisions.¹⁷

The implementation of APA and NEPA has created many layers of federal, state, and local policy to which an administrator needs to recognize and respond when implementing a policy. The complexities and sometimes contradictions create unnecessary convolution. For example, sometimes guidance from APA contradicts state policy. This convolution delays implementation and causes stress for the implementers.

“The tendency is to write more bills. But what would be more effective is to follow up on why the bills aren’t working.”

Jennifer Pahlka

“Simplicity—the art of maximizing the amount of work not done—is essential.”

[The Agile Manifesto](#)

In addition, when a policy is not working as intended, legislators tend to write more policies rather than investigate why the policy is not working leading to even more policy accumulation.

Misalignments in Current Processes

There are misalignments among current processes. Legislators and implementers often have little time to analyze the data or feedback required for effective decision-making. In addition, traditional long-term planning cycles are often misaligned with the fast pace of technological advancements. Therefore, it becomes difficult to design policies that incorporate technology, which in today's world means almost every policy is outdated. Also, there is little holistic review of how a particular new policy will fit into the broader legal framework of connected policies. New policies and requirements tend to be piled on top of one another with little consideration for the negative impact that such accumulation may have on policy outcomes. Furthermore, no one owns policy outcomes. Individuals only own a cog in the larger machinery, so they do not feel responsible for the outcomes, even when they are heavily invested in the policy.

Rigid Cultures that Stifle Innovation

These significant procedural constraints have formed a rigid, bureaucratic culture. The government's bureaucratic nature produces barriers and hierarchies, leading to a lack of flexibility, ingenuity, and innovation. This is what Jennifer Pahlka describes as the “[cascade of rigidity](#)”: when organizational culture is characterized by risk aversion and incentives for overspecification, policies are likely not to have the intended impact.¹⁸

Incentives to Maintain the Status Quo

One of the most difficult barriers to overcome is the existence of incentives to retain the status quo. Change is hard and risky, and the current bureaucratic culture does not encourage taking risks. There are stakeholders who benefit from the current process and actively campaign for it. Incentives keep agencies in their own lanes rather than promoting collaboration, which could result in split funding, credit, and blame among agencies.

“Agencies have incentives not to collaborate. They want to maximize their budgets and do not want to share credit or blame.”

Don Kettl

Limited Capacity in the Public Sector to Achieve Intended Results

Governmental capacity is the ability of the public sector to accomplish stated policy goals. Procedural inefficiencies caused by overly complex procedures and bureaucratic requirements often hinder [public sector capacity](#).¹⁹ Lengthy permitting processes involving multiple agencies, for example, frequently prolong project timelines, preventing the government from achieving [policy goals in a timely manner](#).²⁰ Additionally, excessive litigation further diminishes state capacity by causing permit delays and introducing [additional obstacles](#).²¹

Delayed Results

The government is often delayed or fails to achieve its stated policy goals, and the public does not see results, creating frustration and lowering trust in its ability to get things done.

For example, it has been 20 years since the [Real ID Act of 2005](#) was passed, yet it has still not been fully adopted nationally.²² In January 2025, the Transportation Security Administration [established a rule](#) that gave the agency the option to push Real ID enforcement to 2027.²³ The delay originates from the fact that about half the states resisted Real ID at first, citing cost, privacy, and the burden of providing extra documentation. The federal government repeatedly delayed the deadline as it negotiated compliance details with states. Similar delays have been found with recent infrastructure policies, including Electric Vehicle Charging Stations and building a rural broadband capability.

Intergovernmental Misalignments across Federal, State, and Local Governments

Most policies are designed at the federal level yet implemented at the state and local levels. The federal agencies set the parameters, but they rarely consider how it is going to play out in the states. Processes are designed around federal needs and structures rather than for the states as end users or customers. The resulting misalignments cause problems for the state and local officials who must decode complex laws and overlapping and sometimes conflicting requirements.

Misaligned Federal and State Priorities

Federal agencies and state or local governments often have differing priorities when implementing policies. For federal agencies, the focus may be on ensuring that the right individuals benefit from the policy, such as preventing fraud in social service programs. In contrast, state priorities typically center on the rapid execution of policies to address immediate constituent needs. These different perspectives often lead to unnecessary administrative burdens on states that hinder their operations and undermine policy outcomes.

Complexity of Funding Streams and Requirements

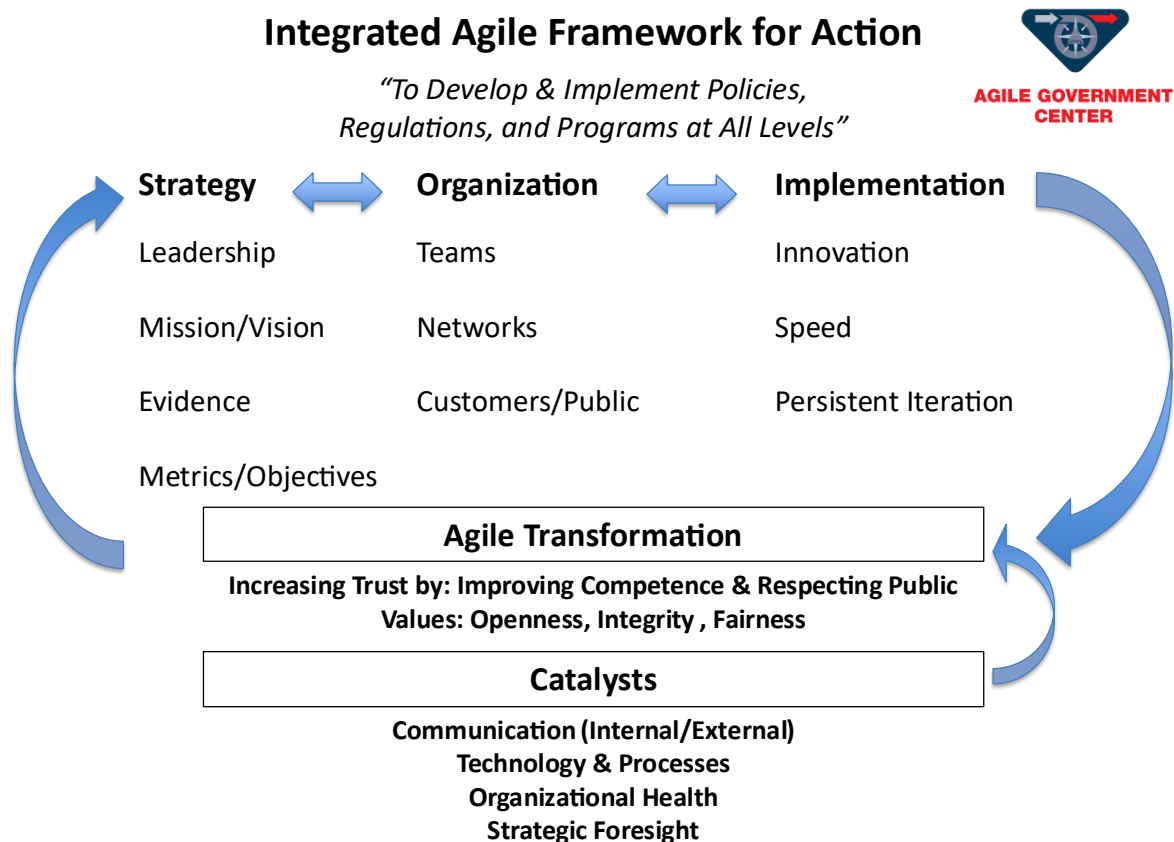
State and county governments face challenges in managing numerous funding streams for various programs. Each program, often designed in silos by different federal agencies, carries its own criteria, funding requirements, and rules, some of which may contradict one another. This lack of coordination adds layers of complexity, making implementation at the state level exceedingly difficult.

Disaster recovery funding vividly illustrates funding complexity across multiple sources. As reported in 2023 by the [Government Accountability Office](#), disaster recovery efforts are hindered by the complexity of navigating multiple federal programs with varying requirements.²⁴ State and local officials involved in recovery for disasters between 2012 and 2018 highlighted issues such as inconsistent criteria across different agency grant programs from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Federal Transit Agency, as well as differing timelines, limited data sharing, and the involvement of multiple federal authorities. These challenges strain state and local capacity to respond effectively.

Another example can be found in public benefits programs. Public benefits programs, designed and funded at the federal level but administered by states, localities, and nonprofits often serve overlapping populations that vary widely in eligibility criteria, documentation requirements, recertification processes, benefit levels, and time limits. For instance, in 2017 the [Census Bureau estimated](#) that among the 14.6 million children in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits programs, 92 percent also received assistance through at least one other program.²⁵ Despite serving the same populations, as reported on in the National Academy of Public Administration report on [Modernizing Public Benefits Delivery](#), it is difficult to “blend and braid” funds to serve the whole person, which creates inefficiencies and undermines service delivery.²⁶

Appendix B: Integrated Agile Framework

The Principles of Agile Government are organized for implementation in the Integrated Framework shown below.



Appendix C: Resources for Creating an Agile Government

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Appendix D: Expert Advisory Group and Study Team Member Biographies

EAG of Academy Fellows

Dr. David Bray is a Distinguished Fellow with the Business Executives for National Security and a keynoter for the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Space Force on AI & Trust since 2022. He is also a Representative Member on the International Digital Economy and Telecommunication Advisory Committee for the U.S. State Department. As Principal & CEO at LeadDoAdapt (LDA) Ventures since 2021, David has been an influential speaker at global boards, Fortune 500 companies, the United Nations, and the World Economic Forum. His academic affiliations include Carnegie Mellon University, Harvard, MIT, GMU, and the Institute for Human-Machine Cognition. David has received the Global Business Transformation 150 award twice and has served in various executive roles, including as a Senior Executive and Chief Information Officer at the Federal Communications Commission. He was named one of the top "24 Americans Who Are Changing the World" by Business Insider in 2016.

Dr. Donald F. Kettl is Professor Emeritus and Former Dean of the University of Maryland School of Public Policy. Don's career included leadership positions at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Virginia, where he has made substantial contributions to public policy and administration education. He is the author of many books, including two that received the Louis Brownlow Book Award of the National Academy of Public Administration for the best book in public administration: *The Transformation of Governance: Public Administration for the 21st Century* (2002); and *System under Stress: Homeland Security and American Politics* (2004).

Jennifer Pahlka is the Founder of U.S. Digital Response and the Founder and Former Executive Director of Code for America. She has also served as the U.S. Deputy Chief Technology Officer in the Office of Science and Technology Policy at the White House. In addition to her work with Code for America, Jen has held several prominent roles in the tech industry, including GM and Co-Chair of the Web 2.0 Expo at TechWeb, Conference Director at MediaLive International, President and Founder of Tiny Media, and Director of the Game Group at CMP Media. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Niskanen Center and the American Federation of Scientists.

Dr. Courtney Phillips currently serves as the Louisiana Department of Health Secretary, a role she was appointed to during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this, she served as Executive Commissioner for the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, the largest state department. In 2015, she was selected as Chief Executive Officer of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, guiding all health-related departments and leading numerous initiatives to help better the lives of NE residents. She previously worked for the State of Los Angeles for 15 years, holding progressive roles at multiple agencies.

Dr. David Wilson is the Dean of the Richard and Rhoda Goldman School of Public Policy and a Professor of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. As a political psychologist, he specializes in survey-based experiments to study political behavior and policy preferences, focusing on justice-related biases. He authored the 2022 book *"Racial Resentment in the Political Mind"* and has published in various research outlets. Before joining UC Berkeley, he held

leadership roles at the University of Delaware and worked as a statistical researcher at the Gallup Polling Organization. He holds a BA from Western Kentucky University and an MPA and PhD from Michigan State University.

Study Team

Dr. Joseph Mitchell III, *Director of Strategic Initiatives and International Programs*: Joe leads the Academy's thought leadership activities. He runs the Grand Challenges in Public Administration campaign and the Agile Government Center, facilitates high impact strategic planning sessions with public agencies, manages the Academy's externally sponsored events, and oversees the Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships. Previously, at the General Services Administration, he worked with other leaders in the Office of Government-wide Policy to stand up the Office of Shared Solutions and Performance Improvement and led a team responsible for cross-agency efforts in support of the President's Management Agenda. Before serving at GSA, he led the Academy's organizational studies program, managed projects requested by the U.S. Congress and agencies, and served as a senior analyst on reviews of a wide array of agencies across the federal government. He received a Fed 100 Award in 2022 for his contributions to increasing the agility of the federal government and moderated a joint series with the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee that received the Public/Private Partnership Award from the Council of Inspectors General (CIGIE). He is completing a second term on the National Science Foundation's Business and Operations Advisory Committee. He holds a Ph.D. from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a Master of International Public Policy from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a Master of Public Administration from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and a BA in History from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He's currently working on an Executive Certificate in Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Amanda Mullan, *Project Director*: Amanda is a Project Director for Strategic Initiatives working on the Grand Challenges in Public Administration campaign. Prior to rejoining the Academy, Amanda spent a decade in the federal government, most recently as a Program Analyst in the Office of Policy and Program Analysis at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) overseeing a diverse portfolio of programs and making recommendations to leadership on the agency's budget priorities and tradeoffs. Prior to her work at FEMA, Amanda served as a Senior Analyst at the U.S. Government Accountability Office conducting performance reviews of programs at the National Nuclear Security Administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Weather Service. Additionally, she played a crucial role in several crosscutting assessments aimed at enhancing the federal approach to disaster recovery and improving federal guidance on testing for lead in drinking water in K-12 schools. Amanda started her career as a Research Associate at the Academy working on organizational studies for the Social Security Administration, FEMA, and the National Weather Service. Amanda holds a Master of Public Administration from Cornell University and a BA in Political Science from the State University of New York at Cortland.

G. Edward DeSeve, *Senior Advisor (Academy Fellow)*: Ed is currently the Coordinator of the Agile Government Center and an Executive Fellow at the IBM Center for the Business of

Government. He has served at all three levels of government and in the private sector during his illustrious career. At the federal level, he was responsible for implementing the \$800 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act as a Special Advisor to President Barack Obama. He was also Deputy Director for Management and Controller at the Office of Management and Budget and Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. At the state and local levels, Mr. DeSeve was a Special Assistant to the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Director of Finance for the City of Philadelphia. In the private sector, he was a managing director at Merrill Lynch Capital Markets and the founder and president of Public Financial Management, which is the nation's largest independent financial advisor to the government.

Dr. Richard Callahan, Senior Advisor (Academy Fellow): Rich serves as the Chief Learning Officer for the National Academy of Public Administration's (NAPA) Center on Agile Government. He is full-time faculty, as a tenured Professor at the University of San Francisco. He is also a Principal and Partner in TAP International, a consulting firm for training, analytics and program evaluation. His presentations, research, teaching, and consulting focus on strategy and leadership behaviors that are effective in complex, demanding, and dynamic environments in the public and nonprofit sectors. He previously had leadership positions in county and city government operations and policy. And he is currently the lead consultant for the Milbank Fund's national Emerging Leaders Program for state legislators and executive staff in health policy and population health from over 42 states since 2016 and also is a consultant for the National Association of Medicaid Directors. Dr. Callahan is an elected Fellow and serves on the NAPA Board of Directors. He currently co-chairs a NAPA working group on the intergovernmental dimensions of homelessness responses.

James Higgins, Analyst: Mr. James Higgins joined the Academy as a Research Associate in March 2020. He currently supports the Academy's Strategic Initiatives including researching for its Grand Challenges in Public Administration campaign and producing the Management Matters podcast. Mr. Higgins has previously worked on studies for the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the United States Trade and Development Agency, and the project, Increasing the Agility of the Federal Government. James graduated with a B.A. in International Studies with a focus on Asia from Dickinson College, and a M.A. in Global Policy with a focus on Security and Foreign Policy from the University of Maine School of Policy and International Affairs.

Jillian McGuffey, Analyst: Jillian currently serves as the Fellow Engagement Specialist for the Fellow Engagement and Communications Team. In this role, she coordinates numerous award processes, hosts partnership events, and aids her team in the recruitment and engagement of the Academy's Fellows. She previously served as a Research Analyst for the Strategic Initiatives Team where she conducted research for the Grand Challenges in Public Administration. Jillian began working at the Academy in December 2020 after she completed an internship there where she served on studies for the Office of Space Commerce and the National Park Service. Prior to working at the Academy, she interned at the U.S. Census Bureau's Criminal Justice Branch and USCIS's Emergency Management Division. Jillian graduated from the University of Maryland with a Master of Public Policy after earning a Bachelor of Arts in Government and Politics and a Minor in Creative Writing.

Appendix E: List of Interviewees

- **Pia Andrews**, Regional Innovation and Digital team, UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub
- **Shannon Arvizu**, Civic Wisdom Foundation
- **Marybel Batjer**, California Strategies & Advocacy
- **David Bray**, U.S. State Department, International Digital Economy and Telecommunication Advisory Committee
- **Stuart Drown**, California Government Operations Agency
- **Marci Harris**, Popvox
- **Donald (Don) Kettl***, University of Maryland
- **Kate McEvoy**, National Association of Medicaid Directors (NAMD)
- **Chris Mihm***, The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University
- **Carrie Miller**, County of Los Angeles
- **Jennifer (Jen) Pahlka***, Niskanen Center
- **Courney Phillips***, Health Affairs at Louisiana State University
- **David Wilson***, University of California, Berkeley, Goldman School of Public Policy
- **Cori Zarek**, Apolitical

*Academy Fellow

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