U.S. Digital Service Crisis Response Playbook[1]

As technology experts at the White House or other government agencies, we're often the first group that our partners will tap in an emergency situation that requires technical expertise. We're known by our peers as a group that mobilizes quickly and deploys cross-functional teams that the White House or agencies don't already have in-house.

We usually don't have much warning when we're pulled onto a team that's been tasked with responding to a crisis. This playbook is a living document that's designed to help USDSers as they get pulled onto "crisis response" projects and draws on lessons from past USDS work. It provides five high-impact "plays" with practical information that will help set teams up for success in the early days of their project work.

For the purpose of this playbook, a crisis is defined as: *an emergent call to action that warrants a quick response*. Crises are typically high-stakes matters of national significance that have a lot of visibility, both in government and in the public.

Why crises are different than other USDS projects:

- There's no roadmap, engagement strategy, or exit criteria defined when you're pulled onto the project.
- The team must be flexible and adaptable as the work is fluid and unpredictable, making it difficult to plan ahead or work in sprints.
- You tend to partner with high-level stakeholders, and your expertise gets you a seat at the table right away.
- Some team members may be expected to work outside of normal business hours.

Crisis Plays

[1] The last internal updates to the USDS Crisis Playbook were made in February 2023; minimal edits for readability, grammar, and redactions were made in July 2026.

Play 1: Question the problem and solution you're handed when you kick off a crisis response project.

Stakeholders may be wedded to a solution, like a website or tool, that they think will quickly address the crisis. They probably haven't had time to dive deep into the problem but are under pressure to act quickly to prevent the crisis from getting worse. You may need to do the discovery work in parallel with developing the solution that is requested by stakeholders. Be prepared to pivot based on what you learn. You may feel like you're doing the work inefficiently or out of order, but it's necessary to move as quickly as possible when doing crisis response work.

Practical tips:

- **Acknowledge the discomfort:** You may feel like you support the "mission" of addressing the crisis, but not the chosen tactics or solution. You might also feel deeply uncomfortable that senior decision-makers are pursuing a solution without validating the problem or doing any user research first, but you don't have any evidence to support a pivot. Acknowledge and discuss this discomfort as a team up front while aligning around tactics to validate the problem.
- **Conduct discovery, assess feasibility, and pursue development simultaneously:** As you're conducting user research and pressure-testing the solution, you may find that you need to ditch the solution because it's infeasible or won't address the problem. This may feel like a big blow or a setback, but there's no throwaway work in a crisis. Acknowledge from the beginning that you're conducting discovery and development in parallel, even if the work isn't framed that way to stakeholders.
- **Explicitly state the hypothesis behind any solutions you're developing** so that those can be tested and validated rapidly. If you're building a tool to manifest flights, make sure you can answer *why* flight manifesting is the key technology problem to solve in this crisis. Once you've formulated this hypothesis, begin to assemble a plan for what you'd need to know to validate it, as this will hopefully lead you to know what data you need to understand the problem better.
- **Get air cover to speak the truth, even if it's inconvenient or hard to hear: Senior stakeholders may be attached to a specific solution** they think will help. It may also have good optics or align with the story your stakeholders want to tell. Ensure you have air cover to mitigate any pushback on user research or data you surface.
- **Find creative ways to do user research:** In a crisis, it may be difficult to stick to the usual methods for conducting research. Make use of the White House Office of Public Engagement to connect you with groups and organizations that can help you recruit

participants. Use “social listening” techniques (e.g., join Facebook groups, search Instagram and Twitter) to get an understanding of the situation on the ground, which will help validate the problem and proposed solution.

Play 2: Build relationships with the people who do the nitty-gritty work, not just their bosses.

You may be partnered with senior stakeholders when the project kicks off. While they provide good air cover, they likely have multiple priorities and may not have all of the in-depth information you need to explore a problem in detail. In addition to working with senior stakeholders, prioritize building relationships with working-level agency partners, like program or data analysts, who are in the weeds on a daily basis. They’ll likely be your direct line to the information you need and will get it to you faster.

Practical tips:

- **Get specific about what you need:** To find the right working-level partner, it can be helpful to get pretty specific about data. While you might not immediately care about the data’s format, how they’re handling cleanup and ETL processes, or the actual schema of the data the agency is working with, asking detailed questions in those areas can get you to the analysts and engineers who know the actual details of the data the agency is relying on. Once you’ve met the engineers and analysts, see if you can help them and see what other holdings they might have access to that could help the team better understand the crisis. You likely have context and questions no one has shared with the analysts, and they likely have data holdings that more senior stakeholders don’t know about or understand.
- **Pick up the phone:** If you can’t get in touch with someone, call them on the phone. People often don’t answer emails during a crisis. A phone call can elicit more candor about a problem that people don’t want to document in writing, build trust, and get people to move more quickly.
- **Leverage external partners:** Look outside government and find partners who’ve been working in this problem space for their entire careers. Nonprofits, advocacy and activist groups, and professional associations can be given a seat at the table during a crisis, rather than filter important knowledge through USDS to stakeholders second-hand. In the short term, this may mean setting up frequent touchpoints to share information and learn. In the longer term, you may be able to formalize a relationship through a Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) that enables external partners to contribute knowledge in an official capacity.

- **Bring working-level partners together:** Once you find the right partners, use USDS' unique convening power to bring them together and share information across agencies and public-private lines. Individually, they hold important data that can unlock key insights when pieced together. They'll also scrutinize each other's analysis and help ensure the right information is being used.

Play 3: Prioritize getting accurate information to decision makers.

Be critical of the data used to inform decisions during a crisis. If it's not measuring what it needs to be measuring, nip it in the bud early so stakeholders don't come to rely on it. Go out and find additional, alternative data that depict a more accurate on-the-ground reality. Complement hard data with real stories of people who are affected by the crisis.

Practical tips:

- **Prioritize action-oriented data**: Focus USDS resources on data gathering and analysis that directly inform decision-making and policy action. If an analysis is not informing a specific decision or key question, *deprioritize it*. Since data gathering and analysis capabilities are limited across government, the team will receive dozens of extraneous requests for analyses, and you should resist these requests as best you can.
- **Have a healthy amount of skepticism about data until it's verified on the ground**: Early on, all data and narratives derived from it should be viewed through a critical lens. Work to verify the data on the ground through user interviews, field visits, and discussions with experts from non-profits, advocacy and activist groups, and professional organizations. This on-the-ground research will help determine if the data is reliable and representative of the whole problem. If the on-the-ground picture you collect is inconsistent with or not fully captured by the data, look for new data sources.
- **Find out who is consuming existing reporting and in what context:** As you develop expertise in the problem space and a better sense of ground truth, get in front of the folks who can actually take action. Find out who those people are as early as you can and what they're used to consuming.
- **Don't rely exclusively on 3rd-party data aggregators: Data aggregators are a good place to start, but they often produce** over-optimistic, insensitive, and incomplete projections. Their large and often poorly defined samples can bury acute marketplace challenges and make them insensitive to rapid changes. Use them with caution and understand what they're measuring (and how) before using them.
- **Request data directly from industry:** Align internally on the most concise and informative asks. Define a regular cadence to receive the data from partners upfront.

Prioritize outreach to partners based on market share and the size of their impact on communities of interest. If the crisis is related to supply chain disruptions, request data at each step of the supply chain.

- **Standardize data reporting for leadership:** Define a set of high-sensitivity metrics that can be consistently sourced. Report a set of simple visualizations with clear written takeaways on a regular cadence.

Play 4: Protect your team and yourself.

We can only operate in crisis mode for so long until we start to experience compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout, which could lead to becoming deeply ineffective. Crisis work is also adrenaline work, and everyone at USDS might not be best suited for this kind of project. Even with this said, it's critical to find ways to maintain your own and the team's health and mitigate burnout by staying focused and protecting your boundaries.

Practical tips:

- **Know who you do (and don't) answer to:** Define a stakeholder map as quickly as possible to understand who's in charge of what and who has authority over the work that's important to the team. This will help you prioritize incoming asks, delegate asks, and protect the team from unnecessary distractions. USDS leadership and the SADELs we work with are excellent resources for understanding relationships between stakeholders and who reports to whom.
- **Don't take on all the burden:** Don't become the go-to people for everything. Distribute the load to agencies or White House policy councils where it makes sense. Focus on the things that USDS is uniquely positioned to do, like bureaucracy hacking, innovative procurements, cross-government and EOP collaboration, and human-centered design, if your partners don't have access to those skills.
- **Prevent a single point of failure:** Make sure that more than one person is able to perform critical tasks, like generating a granular report, so that team members are able to take time off and provide coverage for one another.
- **Take turns covering meetings:** To reduce the burden on any one person, rotate people to cover meetings. Use a "live meetings" Slack channel to take good notes so others can follow along without attending. This role-sharing is a simple and practical way for the team to practice shared energy conservation.
- **Use the USDS values to stay on course and prevent scope creep:** Senior stakeholders may push USDS to do things that conflict with USDS values, especially when the situation is highly public and visible. Continually refer back to USDS values

to help evaluate whether the proposed work focuses on helping people impacted by the crisis or is motivated by other forces. Keep them visible in your workspace as a constant reminder.

- **Create a buffer between the team and stakeholders:** Stakeholders can create a feeling of ambiguous chaos with unstructured asks, unrealistic and tight timelines, and probing questions. Someone on the team should act as a buffer between stakeholders and shield the rest of the team, so everyone can stay focused on critical work without distraction or extra stress.
- **Check in on each other's well-being:** In crisis mode, it's easy to forget to take care of yourself. Remind your colleagues (and yourself) to take regular breaks and rest on the weekends as much as possible. Encourage team members working overtime to take time off when things are quieter. Check in with the team "for the good of the order" every day and openly acknowledge the heavy burden of working in a crisis. The value of debriefing and processing the work and the effect the work may be having is important for mitigating the long-term impacts of secondary traumatic stress and burnout. Don't forget to have regular retros and follow up with each other one-on-one. Project leads should anticipate supportive resources in advance, such as team care plans (e.g., agreeing to minimize meetings on specific days), using Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), securing leadership support, and bringing in trained, trauma-informed USDS colleagues outside of crisis work for additional support.
- **Know your limitations:** Some crisis projects may hit too close to home. If you have been tasked with serving on a crisis team and have a life experience or a conflict of conscience that might be triggering and could significantly impact your ability to do the work ethically and responsibly while ensuring your psychological safety, speak up and voice these concerns. There is no way to anticipate every potential triggering experience, so it's important to discuss this as a team, with the project lead, or with USDS leadership.
- **Recognize good work:** Even in crisis mode, remember to celebrate a job well done, whether within the USDS team or work done by an agency partner. A little recognition goes a long way in acknowledging the unique nature of crisis work and in amplifying morale and well-being. Don't forget that project leads, CoP leads, and USDS leadership can nominate anyone on their team for SPOT awards in the form of cash or time off.
- **Keep a log of achievements:** Things move fast in a crisis. Write down every win for the team. Refer back to this list to remind each other of how far you've come, especially when you feel like you're not making enough progress. This log is also useful for reporting within USDS and with stakeholders and for providing input for SPOT awards.

Play 5: Take the time to (quickly) set up repeatable processes.

In a crisis, it may feel like you don't have time to think about how the team will operate and work together, but the upfront investment is worth it and can greatly help you manage future tasks and implement scalable processes. It will help everyone work towards clear goals, stay on track, and manage their time to reduce burnout. There are ways to do this quickly that will reduce pain down the road.

Practical tips:

- **Define high-level goals:** Even if the problem is not fully understood, set a few high-level goals that are achievable and specific, and expect them to evolve. Socialize and pressure-test these goals with USDS leadership, senior stakeholders, and the team. Keep refining them as the situation on the ground changes.
- **Track daily goals:** When the situation on the ground is shifting rapidly, you may not be able to plan more than a few days out. Accept and roll with this, and try to set goals for at least the following day.
- **Do some digging to get the tools you need.** Figure out what tools you need to get the job done and ask for them. You might be surprised at what you can get during a crisis. If you need a tool that's not on this list, consider trying to get an ATO quickly.
- **Create a clear chain of command:** If a crisis team is large (over 6-8 people), identify "leads" by workstream or community of practice to interface with senior stakeholders and enable rapid decision-making. This will allow you to protect the rest of the team's time so they can focus on delivery instead of sitting in meetings all day. Ensure the team knows that this hierarchy is for efficiency and that no one is actually more "senior" than anyone else.
- **Set up lines of rapid communication:** Don't just use one Slack channel. Create a few channels for specific subjects to keep conversations on topic. Have a channel that's dedicated to note-taking for live meetings, where each meeting is a post in the channel, and notes are taken in the threads. Remember that Slack isn't the only way to communicate, especially with EOP colleagues. They tend to use email like they're texting, so expect this and use it to your advantage.
- **Agree on a team cadence:** In crisis mode, you probably won't be able to run sprints, although you should set up regular check-ins with the USDS team. Keep these short and structured. You might start with twice-daily check-ins and scale back once you have more well-established goals and tasks. Schedule a team retro within the first two weeks to flag issues and adjust early. Establishing this structure will minimize the sense of chaos and help team members feel better able to manage what is within their

locus of control.

- **Set up regular stakeholder touchpoints:** Establish a cadence with stakeholders so they can cascade information to USDS and vice versa. During a crisis, these may be twice a day, but be mindful of cognitive overload, overwhelm, and burnout with too many touchpoints. Be thoughtful and strategic about who needs to attend these meetings and allow the rest of the team to keep working. Maintain transparency and keep them informed of key decisions and learnings.
- **Set up project tracking:** Maintain a Kanban-style system for tracking daily tasks. A simple board on GitHub will provide a good focus for daily (or twice-daily) check-ins. If EOP is also involved, then consider using Mattermost. It has a good project tracking feature called “Project Boards” that anyone in EOP can use.
- **Create a place for project artifacts:** If the project is USDS-only, then use GitHub. If EOP is involved, consider using Microsoft tools online and filestores on max.gov. You’ll likely need a way to collaborate on documents with comment-tracking features.
- **Set up a lightweight repo to track research:** Use Airtable (if it’s approved by your partner agency) or a basic Excel sheet to capture research findings and insights. Tag each entry by topic. In a crisis, you’ll probably be gathering learnings for a while before you have enough context to hone in on more specific research questions. Tagging your research will help you quickly find, revisit, and make sense of relevant learnings later. It also allows you to quickly pull research quotes or insights to share with stakeholders.
- **Create a distribution list:** It doesn’t need to be an actual Outlook distribution list, but have a list of everyone who should be updated on the team’s progress, and then use it to send out regular communications.

How to contribute:

This playbook is a living document. The first draft was written based on lessons learned from USDS’s response to the 2022 infant formula shortage. We invite contributions from other USDS teams and need your contributions to make this playbook relevant and useful over time.

1. Download a copy of the playbook and add your contributions with track changes.
2. Upload the updated file into this folder and create a pull request.
3. Tag [ ] as reviewers.
4. The reviewers will take a look and check for logical placement of content, clarity and plain language, typos, and consistency of language and tone.
5. The reviewers will approve the pull request and archive the outdated file.

Appendix 1: Tips for getting an ATO quickly

In general, you'll want to avoid introducing new systems in a crisis and instead rely on systems that are already known and managed. In some cases, however, it's necessary, and the system must be authorized by the OMB CIO, typically as an authorization to operate (ATO) or an authorization to use (ATU). The infant formula team used this path to receive an ATO in about a week to build out a process to download files from an external SFTP service using AWS services.

Keep the following in mind:

- Look first to services that are already in use — can you use GitHub (pages, actions), some part of Cloudflare, or an Amazon Web Service? Each of those is in use by some part of OMB (the first two by USDS directly), so they've at least been partially evaluated and are familiar.
- Keep your focus on the end goal (helping people with the specific emergency) and treat your requests as proposals to be amended and improved. IT leadership at OMB is smart, experienced, and helpful, and they will ask clarifying questions and likely have ideas for how to solve your problem if they understand the root problem you're trying to address. They want to help you get to your goal.
- Avoid any authentication you can on the government's side — PULL data from external parties instead of having them push it to us. If we are pulling the data, we can avoid issues around authentication, identity verification, uptime guarantees, and the attack surface that comes with exposing services over the public Internet. If you can, have those parties host resources on HTTPS endpoints that we can just grab. Anything other than HTTPS is harder, but not impossible.
- Avoid proprietary or secret information. In the infant formula case, the data we were grabbing was going to be aggregated (but not anonymized) and displayed to the public, so it was effectively public information. If we had had more sensitive information that needed to be protected in some way, it would have made things more complicated.
- Resources that are intended for public consumption are less burdensome for OMB GC to clear than those scoped to specific audiences, like government employees. Like the above, the more of your workflow that is open and in the public domain, the easier time you'll have.
- Keep your attack surface as small as possible — don't use a server (like an EC2) when you can use a function (i.e., Lambda). In general, you want to keep your operational burden as small as possible, your request as narrow and simple as possible, and try to push as much of the patching/system security onto the service as you can.