

Montgomery County Data Services Manager, Victoria Lewis: An Interview

Find out what makes her county number one, and what she's working on next.



Tyler client Montgomery County, Maryland, is an exemplar tech county with a long vision. As an integrated enterprise, all departments make use of reliable, secure data to enhance internal operations and improve citizen service. New, notable initiatives and innovative future plans gave Montgomery County its well-earned number one place in Government Technology's [2018 Digital Counties Survey](#).

These noteworthy county initiatives include:

- An accelerated cybersecurity program with an enterprise cybersecurity dashboard and monthly reports to all departments;
- New connectivity between the county's bio-health sector and Ashburn, Virginia, data centers across the river;
- An interactive self-sufficiency dashboard that provides the county and its partner agencies with data to solve challenges faced by low-income residents;
- A new, web-based interagency jail management system;
- A cryptocurrency working group and blockchain pilot; and
- On-site power generation to allow two mission-critical facilities to operate off the grid if necessary.

Digital integration of the county's Identity Management System, Active Directory, and ERP system is already underway, and the county is also prototyping the use of AI voice tools, such as Alexa, to answer resident questions with nuanced specificity.

In the midst of all of this action, Montgomery County's Data Services Manager, Victoria Lewis, took time to offer her perspective and vision to Tyler in the interview that follows.



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Tyler: What is it you're doing with data that is making Montgomery County a better place to live?

Victoria Lewis: Our government works tirelessly every day to help residents, businesses, and visitors. Every time we inspect a restaurant, cut checks for housing assistance, or issue a building permit, it's to help the public live safely and thrive in Montgomery County. Data resulting from all of this is valuable knowledge. Residents no longer have to navigate our department websites or submit multiple public information requests to find out about crime or development in their neighborhood or where we spend public funds. Our open data portal, [dataMontgomery](#), (follow @dataMontgomery), takes the middle man out and gives immediate access to all the public data we generate, making public information fully available to those who want or need it.

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What is working that you're doing with data, and why is it working?

We are seeing an uptick in usage of data specific to where a resident lives. It is heartening to see that users are looking at data as a way to view activity in their neighborhoods, including incidents, county service schedules, and future plans. This is used by groups like neighborhood associations that embed community maps on their websites and also by any resident who is simply keeping an eye on what's going on around her house. A main tenet of our program is providing reliable, updated, and understandable data. When residents start trusting data, they start using it.

What are the hallmarks, or critical components, of a successful county data program?

In order to be successful, I think you really need to focus efforts on a few basic things:

1. Show that you take this seriously.

Make a visible statement about your government's commitment to making public data freely available. The first and most crucial step is either hiring or assigning a person full time to this effort. This lucky individual will have his or her hands full with motivating departments to share data, creating a framework to responsibly publish data, ensuring the data stays relevant, and looking to the future. Trust me, it's enough to keep at least one person's hands full, probably more.

2. Create a repeatable process.

There are too many what-ifs when publishing data. Every level of government at some point has an issue, question, or concern about publishing its data and that's okay because sometimes you need to work through the "whys" to get good data. To help make this a smooth experience, create a process to work through all these issues. Whether it's a data scoping and review process, general guidelines or templates, just have a way to objectively review data for publishing.

3. Prepare for unforeseen events.

The hardest test any program can go through is how to weather a crisis. What if you accidentally publish sensitive or inaccurate data? If you don't have a plan on how to resolve this, your data set, or worse – your entire program could be shut down indefinitely due to bad press, escalating politics, or unhappy users. Have a plan ready ahead of time to navigate emergencies.

How can counties across the country learn from your example?

One aspect I am really proud of is that we truly try to make open data available and accessible for everyone. Many times, you'll see data published and geared toward researchers, data scientists, and developers. Look around you. Do all of your neighbors fit in those categories? Probably not. Our [dataMontgomery](#) categories and tags were created by librarians. Our publishing guidelines encourage departments to minimize government speak and publish data using language that residents use. We have websites that provide guided views of our complex financial data. Sure, that technical audience is out there, but don't forget the majority of your taxpayers who could benefit from open data don't fit in that mold. Build and publish with everyone in mind.

"Build and publish with everyone in mind."

Once the information is published and accessible, how do you get citizens there?

From the beginning, we involved residents in our open data program. We started the program with town halls across the county to solicit ideas as to what we should publish. Resident focus groups helped shape requirements for important data sets such as crime and county spending. Library patrons assisted with shaping how are datasets are categorized for searches. We have conducted many dataMontgomery training sessions, in-person and virtually, through online instructional videos. Our departments also do a good job of raising awareness of the data that's available to their stakeholders, and we take the extra step of helping residents figure out how to use it. I like the examples where residents use crash and traffic citation data to view where

unsafe intersections are or use crime incident rates to see trends in their neighborhoods. The power of data is a two-way street. If a resident goes to a police town hall with a comment that her neighborhood is not safe, that is subjective. What crime is she referring to, and how does that compare with other neighborhoods? Now, a resident can use data to analyze her beliefs and have conversations with police district commanders. The district commanders can reference the same source of information to provide answers. If residents and government are using the same basis of information, it will result in a meaningful discussion.

Does your approach consider how the disparate departmental and back-office systems work together?

We use hundreds of back-end systems to run county government. Our program uses an in-house developed ETL tool using open source software ESB to automate the publishing and updates to our data sets. With frequencies of updates ranging from annually to once every few minutes, the tool pulls the latest information from our department sources and loads it into dataMontgomery.

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We maintain a countywide enterprise architecture, and new systems must comply with that architecture. Departments are also encouraged to use enterprise-provided databases and storage for security and economy, which also enables easier access to data.

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What's next for Montgomery County?

We are constantly looking for additional ways in which open data can be used, whether it's helping departments identify what data to use to work through priority issues or helping residents use our information. We just finished prototyping the ability to answer resident questions with open data using common AI voice tools such as Alexa or Google Assistant. It's exciting to realize that we can utilize open data to provide custom responses based on where a resident lives.

Can you tell us more about your work with open data and AI?

Our AI exploration was geared toward exploring how we can use common household devices and apps, like Amazon's Alexa, to provide helpful information to our constituents. We already knew from other local governments that voice-enabled technology could be used to provide general information such as county events and news. Our project focused on how to use open data and geographic boundaries to provide custom responses to each resident in three use cases:

1. Doing business with Montgomery County

What is the status of Solicitation 123?

When does Contract 456 expire?

2. Resident services

When will my leaves be collected?

3. Emergency management

Where is my nearest shelter?

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These scenarios provide a way for us to give a tailored response to a resident or business while removing the need for navigating department websites or dataMontgomery. The use of AI and open data holds great potential for communicating important information to residents.

To learn more about the potential of open data and how it can enhance your county's digital maturity, visit

tylertech.com/solutions/data-insights/connected-government-cloud#OpenData.

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