



Midwestern legislatures among nation's most digitally advanced

by *Matthew Kemeny*
for *Stateline Midwest*

In the golden age of computer technology, several Midwestern state legislatures are on the cutting edge of fusing government and politics with the World Wide Web. In fact, several states in this region ranked close to the top in a recent national survey analyzing and ranking legislatures' use of digital technology to improve operational efficiencies and enhance services for lawmakers and the public.

The states of Minnesota and South Dakota finished second and third, respectively, in the "2003 Digital Legislatures Survey," which was conducted by the Center for Digital Government, a national research and advisory institute on information technology in government and education. Iowa (fourth), Illinois (fifth) and Indiana (sixth) also finished in the top 10. The state of Nevada topped the list.

A set of 12 questions was sent to 50 state legislative offices and served as the primary determinant for the rankings. Several components of an advanced digital legislature — from online access to legislation and elected officials, to legislative technology support and operations — were included in the questions.

According to Cathilea Robinett, executive director of the Center for Digital Government, the survey found that:

- 100 percent of state legislatures have a public online database of bills and amendments;
- 81 percent have a listing of representatives and senators by zip code or district;
- 77 percent have online bill status tracking;

• 74 percent have a listing of voting records online for bills; and

• 6 percent have a public database with voting records.

"With the lack of involvement and complacency of citizens in the democratic process, digital democracy has the potential to revive citizenship," Robinett believes.

Easy access to legislation, election results and campaign finance data also can serve as a method of decreasing corruption in government, she says, by ensuring that officials "watch their p's and q's."

The South Dakota Legislature's Web site allows people to search for the full text of bills, check on the status of legislation, and lets them hear debate in the chamber and in committees. In addition, an archives section of the site allows individuals to listen to past debate on particular issues.

"People at home are far more aware of how I voted than they ever have been in the past," says Sen. Kenneth Albers, a Republican from Canton.

If a person wants to contact a member of the state's General Assembly, the Web site provides not only a phone number for the member's Capitol office, but their business and home contact information as well. In addition, constituents are given the chance to express their thoughts on bills through an e-mail service provided on the site. In fact, heavy public support through e-mail contributed to the passage of a 2003 bill allowing public schools to transport private school students, Sen. Frank Kloucek says.

"We had a great outpouring of support for it," adds Kloucek, a Democrat from Scotland. "It passed both chambers of the Legislature and was

signed by the governor in less than 48 hours."

As this example illustrates, e-mail correspondence is becoming an important way for constituents and public officials to correspond with one another, and state legislative Web sites often serve as an ideal conduit for that kind of communication.

"I've benefited through a good flow of e-mail that's traceable to that site," says Minnesota Rep. Frank Hornstein, a Democrat from Minneapolis who admits he's not normally very "cyber-oriented." He adds that the Internet is a good way for individual representatives to get their messages out to constituents. Minnesota's state legislative Web site, along with several others in the region, includes links to the home pages, columns, newsletters or press releases of state lawmakers.

Constituents, meanwhile, can use legislative and other state government Web sites to stay informed and save time. Minnesota Rep. Alice Seagren says her state's Web site is a great efficiency tool for people who can't make it to the Capitol on a regular basis. For instance, entrepreneurs interested in starting a business in Minnesota now have the chance to file certification papers online.

"It's a time saver, because most things you can do at home; it's more efficient and convenient," the Bloomington Republican adds.

According to Robinett, both Minnesota and South Dakota have been leaders in the area of digital government for years, while Iowa and Illinois also are "ahead of the curve."

"These states have pushed online citizen access; they have pushed automation in the chambers; and they really seem to understand the benefits of technology in the legislative arena." ✈

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

One of the many services provided by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments is its Information Help Line, a research service intended to help lawmakers, legislative staff and state officials from across the region. The CSG Midwest staff is always available to respond to members' inquiries or research needs regarding various public policy issues. The Question of the Month section highlights an inquiry received by this office. To request assistance through CSG Midwest's Information Help Line, call 630/810-0210 or use the online form available at www.csqmidwest.org.

QUESTION: HOW MANY STATES ACCEPT THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT'S IDENTIFICATION CARD AS VERIFICATION OF IDENTITY?

ANSWER: According to the Embassy of Mexico, 14 states accept the Mexican government-issued "matricula consular," and four are in the Midwest — Indiana, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin. Mexican nationals living in the United States can go to a Mexican consulate's office and, if they are able to show proof of identity, receive an official ID card. The Mexican government says the "matricula consular" has the same security features as those of U.S. documents, such as special paper using colors, patterns and seals; a hologram; and invisible elements requiring a special decoder to read. These IDs are available to Mexican nationals living in the United States, whether they are here legally or not. Acceptance of the card helps these individuals open bank accounts or participate in various other services.

One contentious issue for states has been whether to accept the "matricula consular" as documentation for individuals seeking a driver's license. Officials from states issuing licenses to undocumented immigrants say they do so in order to make the roads safer, arguing that these individuals should learn the rules of the road and be able to pass written and driving tests like others who drive. However, since the Sept. 11

terrorist attacks, concerns have risen about the possibility of driver's licenses getting into the wrong hands. Various levels of government are placing an increased emphasis on the integrity of state-issued driver's licenses, the only proof of identity needed to board an airplane.

The Center for Immigration Studies suggests that states adopt procedures to enhance the security of driver's licenses. Specific recommendations include improving the verification of documents like the "matricula consular" by requiring that foreign nationals go to designated offices to obtain a driver's license. Personnel at these offices would be specially trained to spot counterfeit documents, and the offices would have access to certain government databases. The center also recommends that same-day licenses not be issued to foreign nationals, providing more time for the verification of documents.

For foreign nationals living legally in this country on a limited-time visa, the center suggests that states issue driver's licenses with the same expiration date as the visa or passport, rather than the normal four- or five-year license.