

Community Innovation Challenge (CIC) Final Report

Project title: Berkshire On-line Municipal Building Permits

Participating Communities and Entities:

Town of Becket

Town of Dalton

Town of Lee

Town of Lenox

Town of Monterey

Town of Richmond

Town of Sheffield

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

Submitted: April 1, 2013



Permit Application Login Page Page 1 of 1

BERKSHIRE ONLINE PERMITTING PROGRAM

User Name:
Password:

New user? Create your account
Forgot password? Retrieve your password

http://permities.com/berkshire/user_login.asp 3/29/2013



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INTRODUCTORY LETTER

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Executive Director

April 1, 2013

Tim Dodd
Local Government Program Manager
Executive Office for Administration and Finance
State House Room 373
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Berkshire On-line Municipal Building Permit

Dear Mr. Dodd,

Most of the municipalities in the Berkshires are small towns with limited staff capacity and limited office hours. A major goal of the Berkshire On-line Municipal Building Permit program was to provide an online option that would allow the public, homeowners and contractors, the ability to submit permit applications, follow the progress of the permit application, have the option of paying for the permit fee online or mailing a check and being able to print their own permit at their convenience, from their home or place of business.

Through the use of Community Innovative Challenge Grant funds seven towns in the Berkshires, Becket, Dalton, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Sheffield and Richmond implemented an on-line system for building permits and other construction related permits (including electrical, gas, plumbing and sheet metal). The software implemented was a cloud based program, PermitEyes, developed by Full Circle Technologies, Inc. With this software, for most permits, applicants are able to go through the entire permitting process without having to go to town hall. Through this program, the municipalities retain autonomy and control over their inspectional services but achieve a regional consistency as the forms and processes are standardized amongst the seven towns. An added benefit for contractors is that they only need to register once with the system and then they will be able to process applications in all seven participating towns.

With the on-line program, municipal Building Officials are spending much less time on administration and more time on inspections and code compliance. Prior to the online permitting software, an estimated 75% of all permit applications submitted were incomplete. Applicants

had to be contacted and instructed to complete the permit application. That could take days and in many cases, weeks chasing voice mail messages. With the online permitting software, permit applications cannot be submitted unless they are complete. This has enabled Building Officials to spend more time on other important activities, such as conducting annual inspections, dealing with vacant and abandoned buildings and processing trench and sheet metal permits, relatively recent responsibilities.

An added benefit that came out of this project was a more efficient method of doing annual inspections. Prior to the on-line system, it was very time consuming for the Building Officials both in the field and at the office and for the office clerk to conduct periodic inspections. The seven towns currently participating in the on-line permitting program are on the leading edge of developing a very efficient, cost effective and time saving method of doing annual inspections. Through the on-line programs the following steps occur:

- Certificate of Inspection applications are now emailed automatically to the client from the online permitting program two months prior to the expiration date of their current certificate;
- The client completes the application, attaches any required documents, chooses a method of payment and emails the application back to the permit software;
- An administrative position receives the application and the required documentation. Once the fee has been appropriately paid, that clerk sets up a time for the inspection and assigns a Building Official through the permit software;
- Building Officials upload their inspections for the day onto their tablet from any Wi-Fi site;
- The annual inspection is done with the contact person listed on the application. When the inspection is completed, the contact person reviews any violations with the Building Official. If they agree about the violations, the contact person signs the application on the Building Official's tablet. The inspection report is then uploaded to the permit software and a copy of the inspection report is emailed to the contact person's email address. If a re-inspection is required, the contact person requests an inspection through the permit software. Once all violations are corrected, the clerk notifies the contact person to go to the online permitting software and print the Certificate of Inspection.

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, who served as the grant applicant and administrator, appreciates the opportunity to participate in this endeavor. This program is another example of efforts by towns to achieve efficiencies that maintain critical local services in a cost effective manner.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas Matuszko", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Thomas Matuszko
Assistant Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seven towns in Berkshire County Massachusetts, Becket, Dalton, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Sheffield and Richmond implemented an on-line system for building permits and other construction related permits (including electrical, gas, plumbing and sheet metal). The on-line program is called PermitEyes and was developed by Full Circle Technologies, Inc. This project was funded by a Community Innovation Challenge Grant through the Massachusetts Executive Office of Administration and Finance. The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission served as the grant applicant and administrator.

This program allows homeowners and contractors the opportunity to apply for, submit material, pay application fees, schedule appointments and receive approvals on-line. For most permits, applicants are able to go through the entire process without having to go to town hall.

To access the program Applicants (homeowner / contractors) must register with the program. This takes less than 5 minutes. Once registered, applicants have the ability to

- Have some of the information auto-fill on the permit application
- Have the ability to view the status of their permits
- Edit the application before the permit is issued
- Add attachments (plans, pictures, specs, etc.) to the application
- Conduct an on-line chat with the inspectors
- Pay for the permit
- Print the permit as soon as it has been issued
- View the inspection results

All parties involved benefit as this system dramatically reduces the amount of time it takes for the permitting process. Homeowners and contractors don't have to get to town halls during allowable office hours, which are sometimes limited in the small towns. Municipal inspectors are spending less time on permit administration and instead are concentrating on conducting actual inspections. Contractors can spend more time on the job and less time filing permits and tracking down inspectors. An added benefit for contractors is that they only need to register once and then they will be able to process applications in all seven participating towns.

Grant funds also were used to provide needed equipment to the municipalities, such as tablets and public work stations. Tablets enable inspectors to enter material learned from field inspections to be entered directly into the software and communicate instantly with contractors and the public. Public work stations enable residents without computers or with slow internet access to have the full opportunity to benefit from this program.

This software program is expandable to other types of municipal permits for those municipalities wanting to expand to other types of permits or licenses.

PARTNER COMMUNITIES

The participating municipalities are the towns of Becket, Dalton, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Richmond and Sheffield who partnered with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. The primary participants from these towns were the Building Inspectors, except that in one town the Town Administrator was the most active.

The Building Inspector from one town, the Town of Lenox, was the most active overall and was the main driver of the project. This Official coordinated the standardization of forms used, coordinated various trainings and spent an enormous amount of time “field-testing” the equipment and working through the bugs with the software. This Official also made himself available to work with officials from other towns to train them on the program and get them comfortable using it.

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission was the Community Innovative Challenge Grant applicant and recipient and served as the fiscal agent for this effort. The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission provided administrative oversight and assisted with coordinating trainings, assisted with development of contracts between the vendor, Full Circle Technologies Inc. and the towns, provided information about procurement of equipment, and conducted grant reporting.

By design from previous planning efforts, each municipality entered into their own contracts with the vendor, Full Circle Technologies, Inc. As such, there was no formal governing structure. Decisions were made by an ad hoc working group made up of Building Inspectors and Town Managers and Administrators. This group met as needed at key decision points throughout the process, such as recommending final selection of the vendor in the initial part of the process, to deciding when to “go-live” in the communities near the end of the process.

GOALS

The primary goal of the project was to automate the creation, processing and management of building permits and replace existing permitting systems with an internet-based program that allows for future expansion to other types of municipal permits. Through this project the Towns of Becket, Dalton, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Sheffield and Richmond contracted with Full Circle Technologies, Inc. and installed PermitEyes software in their communities.

Other objectives were to:

- Create consistency with the building permit application and approval processes across Berkshire County
- Increase coordination between municipal officials and boards through an automated, electronic workflow
- Facilitate and improve the efficiency of the permitting process for residents and contractors

As the project progressed, another objective became important as well:

- Implement a more effective and efficient method of doing annual inspections

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Background Activities

This project was initiated and initial feasibility work was conducted through the use of District Local Technical Assistance Funds. Beginning in 2010, several Berkshire County Town Managers and Administrators requested the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission facilitate a process to identify a preferred option for online municipal permitting. Through several working meetings in 2010, elements of the strategy were developed which included the following items:

- Municipalities were to retain local control over the permitting process, rather than aggregate into a regional / sub regional permitting program. Hence, contracts are directly between the municipalities and the vendor, Full Circle Technologies, Inc.
- A modest “build as needed” and “build on success” approach was recommended to implement online municipal permits. Instead of converting all permits, applications, licenses, etc. at one time, a decision was made to concentrate in one area and have municipal officials and users get comfortable with that process and then expand as appropriate. Therefore, any software selected for use by the municipalities needed to be expandable to enable other municipal permits to be added at a later date. Building permits were selected as the first item because there had been previous interest expressed by Building Inspectors and there are a relatively small number of Building Inspectors in Berkshire County, some of whom work part-time in several communities.
- The system had to be cloud based because many of the towns, mostly small in population size, do not have the IT infrastructure and capacity to maintain their own program.
- The system had to be affordable.
- The system had to work with dial up as many Berkshire municipalities still do have reliable high speed internet access.

Work progressed in calendar year 2011, when again, District Local Technical Assistance Funds were used to advance this effort. Berkshire Regional Planning Commission staff again coordinated the efforts of a working group of Building Inspectors and Town Managers & Administrators. Meetings were held in early 2011 when several perspective vendors were researched and provided the opportunity to present the software. Outreach efforts were conducted to Berkshire County municipalities to try to maximize the number of participating municipalities.

The Massachusetts State ITS43TechSpec Technical Specialist Contract was identified as the appropriate procurement mechanism to follow. In late 2011, a Request for Services and Price Quote was prepared by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. Price quotes (on behalf of interested municipalities) were sought from three qualified vendors on the Massachusetts State ITS43TechSpec Technical Specialist contractors list. Two vendors submitted responses. Full Circle Technologies Inc was judged to be the best choice based on the pre-approved criteria established by the participating municipalities and on behalf of the thirty-two municipalities of Berkshire County and was selected as the pre-approved vendor for the municipalities. PermitEyes is the name of the software/service that was purchased.

Grant Specific Activities

The following activities were conducted through the Community Innovation Challenge Grant.

ACTIVITY: Finalization of Agreements between Municipalities and Full Circle Technologies, Inc.

One of the initial activities conducted through the Community Innovation Challenge grant was the development and execution of Agreements between the municipalities and Full Circle Technologies Inc. As stated earlier, in lieu of a regional program, municipalities entered into separate agreements with Full Circle Technologies Inc. The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission prepared a template Agreement. This Agreement was distributed to the seven towns and reviewed by individual town counsels. Revisions were made accordingly to the standard template as requested by the towns. This activity was originally scheduled to be completed in March 2012. Contracts in all municipalities were not finalized until August 2012.

ACTIVITY: Software Installation and Launch in Communities

The primary activity conducted under the grant was the installation of the PermitEyes software in the 7 municipalities. This involved representatives of Full Circle Technologies Inc working with the municipalities to obtain the town specific information, such as permit cost structure information, assessor's information (PermitEyes software is assessor information based and linked), permit approval "work-flows", appropriate forms, electronic signatures, etc. This activity also involved having the permit software operational on tablets so the inspectors can conduct many activities in the field and have the information directly entered into the software program. This activity was originally scheduled to be completed in September 30 2012. The software was not formally launched in all 7 towns until March 1, 2013.

ACTIVITY: Equipment Purchase

Municipal building departments needed appropriate equipment to have the program function appropriately. The Community Innovation Challenger grant allowed municipalities the opportunity to purchase appropriate equipment. The needs of the municipalities differed substantially based on a number of different factors, such items as number of inspectors and adequacy of existing equipment. This activity was originally scheduled to be completed in September 30 2012. All equipment was purchased by December 31, 2012.

ACTIVITY: Training

Building Officials needed training sessions to learn the software. Other officials needed training as well because the software is designed to send e-mail reminders to other municipal officials if their review or approval is required. Training had originally been timed to coincide with the launching of the software. Because the launch of the software occurred later than anticipated, training also was more spread out. The original proposal suggested regional training where groups of Building Officials would be trained at the same time and location. Several group trainings did occur and were relatively well attended. However, more training sessions were

needed than anticipated. Trainings were most useful with inspectors working in small groups with Full Circle Technologies Inc. representatives. Some of these training occurred as web based trainings.

This activity was originally scheduled to be completed in September 30 2012. However, training is still occurring and will likely be needed in the foreseeable future until all municipal officials are fully functional with the software. In addition, ongoing training will likely be needed for residents and contractors.

ACTIVITY: Performance Data Collection

This activity was to collect and assess performance data. The original end date was supposed to be October 2012. However, since the software was not launched until March 1, 2013, little data has been collected. The data collected has not been collected for a long enough time to produce conclusive results.

BUDGET

The total budget for this project was \$110,835. The line item budget is shown below.

ITEM	TOTAL COST
Software and equipment procurement costs for municipalities	\$100,759
Administrative costs	\$10,076

Budget Development

The budget for the software and equipment cost line item was developed from:

1. Software: A price quote from the vendor. Price quotes (on behalf of interested municipalities) were sought from three qualified vendors on the Massachusetts State ITS43TechSpec Technical Specialist contractors list. The Full Circle Technologies Inc. price was based on a per capita annual license fee and one-time implementation fee. In addition, municipalities could chose to add the following options; ability to function with a tablet, integration with GIS, integration of historical data and a feature to have the public have the ability to review permits. These quotes were through fiscal year 2014.
2. Software: Identification by the municipalities of the options they desired. Municipalities had the opportunity to select the options they desired. All municipalities chose the options for tablet functionality and GIS integration. One municipality chose the option for the public to have the opportunity to view permits.
3. Equipment: Identification by the municipalities for their equipment needs. Municipalities had the opportunity to select the equipment they needed. Equipment needs varied substantially by municipality. These variances were based on a set of wide ranging reasons, including but not limited to personal preference, number of inspectors, status of prior equipment and size of community. In general, all municipalities purchased tablets for inspectors to use in the field. Most municipalities purchased large scale monitors. The program allows for the submission and review of plans electronically as a pdf attachment. Inspectors wanted larger monitors to be able to review the plans. Many municipalities also purchased public work stations. This item proved to be very important and more communities wanted to have funds for public work stations. There needed to be the opportunity for those applicants without reliable computers or internet access a way to complete an on-line application. In the development of the Community Innovation Challenge Grant application, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission staff researched typical costs for typical equipment items and then itemized out by the number of items desired.

The administrative cost budget was a straight 10% of the other costs.

Budget Modifications

The overall expenditures matched with the budget subtotals by category, Software and Equipment, and Administration, very closely. Administration costs ran slightly higher than budgeted.

Based on what was requested by the municipalities during the development of the Community Innovation Challenge Grant application, each municipality was provided with a total budgeted amount for software and equipment. Within that budgeted amount, municipalities could change their needed equipment requests, provided the new request was related to the overall on-line permitting objective of the project. For instance, when the Community Innovation Challenge Grant application was prepared it was believed that portable printers would be included. These would be used with tablets in the field by the inspector to actually print out a document, for instance an inspection approval document. As the project developed, these printer turned out not to be feasible, hence these budgeted items were re-directed by the towns. In addition, there was a slight variation from the budget price of an item versus the formal quoted price of an item.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

This project took more time than originally anticipated or desired. However, overwhelmingly this project was extremely successful. Officials from 7 towns in the Berkshires worked together to implement a common platform for building permits and other related permits. This is impressive given the lack of IT infrastructure or IT capacity in many of the town halls, the limited exposure to on-line permitting and limited staff capacity in the Building Departments in the towns. Several of the participating towns have a single inspector, sometimes working part-time, with limited or no administrative support. In less than a year's time, the Building Departments went from paper permit applications to digital applications. One town is only accepting digital applications while other towns are still accepting paper applications for a limited time. The goal is by the end of calendar year 2013 to have 100% compliance with digital applications.

The main element that contributed to a successful project was the dedicated commitment by the Building Inspectors in the participating towns. Despite having to assume additional work to coordinate their town's participation in this program, learn the program and work through the program glitches, the Building Inspectors maintained a steadfast commitment to making the program work. In the long run, this consistent commitment, despite numerous frustrations, was the key to implementing this program.

In particular, this program was successful through the efforts of one committed individual, William (Bill) Thornton, the Building Inspector for the Town of Lenox. Bill had a vision of implementing a system where an applicant or contractor could go through the entire permit application process as quickly and effortlessly as possible. Bill spent a significant amount of time working with other inspectors to have the forms standardized for the 7 participating towns, researching the appropriate equipment, finding an equipment vendor, working with the software vendor to design specific functional aspects of the software, correcting numerous glitches that arose, writing an on-line user guide and training other municipal officials.

Another contributor to the success of the project was the cooperative nature of the participants. In particular, the representative from the software vendor, Rajan Nanda from Full Circle Technologies, Inc., spent a significant amount of time patiently requesting information from the towns, addressing questions, correcting glitches and training (and re-training) municipal officials.

Some specific challenges encountered related to the overall design of the program. The municipalities wanted to retain ultimate authority for the issuance of permits, rather than delegate that authority to a regional entity. However, there were elements of program sharing that were required, primarily consistency with the forms being used in the seven towns and the desire to have a user only have to register once and have access to the seven towns. This was seen as a desired cost-saving element for contractors. It took longer the Building Inspectors to develop the common forms, but they kept working at it until they were finished. The desire to have a onetime user registration required software modifications which were made by the vendor, Full Circle Technologies, Inc.

Another specific challenge was related to periodic inspections. The non on-line method of periodic inspections was cumbersome and time consuming. The on-line system automates much of the process. Applicants are e-mailed a Certificate of Inspection application in advance of the expiration date. The applicant completes and returns the application by e-mail and may pay electronically as well. The Building Department clerk schedules an inspection with the inspector, when appropriate. The annual inspection is conducted. The applicant is informed of any violations on the site and is e-mailed an inspection report with violations, if any, listed. The applicant then corrects the violation and notifies the inspection department by e-mail. If another inspection is required, it is scheduled electronically. Once all violations are corrected the applicant is notified and requested to print a Certificate of Inspections. This requirement was new to the software vendor who had to develop the software.

Another specific challenge was related to full user access. High speed internet access is unreliable in Berkshire County. Also, there are a number of individuals in Berkshire County who lack computer sophistication or have a reliable computer. If this program is to be implemented 100%, computer access needs to be provided for those users. Public work stations were provided as a solution to this challenge. In one instance, a public workstation was provided in a public library because the library has a longer range of operation hours.

A final specific challenge has to do with training and use by Building Officials. There are several aspects of this challenge. Many Building Officials, noticeably Electrical and Plumbing inspectors are part-time. This group was not the main driver of the on-line permitting program. Consequently these individuals have been slower to be fully integrated into it and have been slower to use it. These individuals will require continued training to maximize full use of the system. Also, it was anticipated that Building Inspector training would be able to be conducted in a group setting to achieve an economy of scale. Several group trainings were conducted, however, addition training in smaller setting were required, especially as Inspectors were expected to be using the program as it went live. Full Circle Technologies, Inc. provided more training sessions than originally anticipated.

OUTCOMES

The Community Innovation Challenge grant proposed to measure the success of this project in the following ways; implementation of the program, savings (time and material) on routine administration items by municipal officials, and improved delivery of building inspection services and long-term regional benefits.

1. Implementation of the Program.

It was anticipated that the software would have been implemented by September 30, 2012, with training sessions to occur between October and December. As detailed in other parts of this report, it has taken much more time to have this program operational. The program only went operational in all seven towns on March 1, 2013. Thus, from the broad perspective this element was completely successful in that it operational in all 7 towns. However, it would have been desirable to have it operational sooner.

2. Saving on Administration Items

It is not possible to fully and fairly quantify the cost savings to the municipalities yet. The program was supposed to have been implemented by September 30, 2012. It was not fully implemented until March 1, 2013. This is not sufficient time to quantify benefits. In fact, it has taken a considerable amount of time for the municipal officials involved with the program to work with the software vendor to provide quality assurance and fully learn the program. Over the short term there may be no net benefit from the program. The full savings will be recovered over the next several years.

It is possible to *estimate* the magnitude of *some* cost savings. The Town of Lenox has been using the system since January 2, 2013. Since that time 75 residential or commercial permits have been applied for. Prior to the on-line permitting, it was estimated that 75% of the permits were incomplete, necessitating follow-up by the inspectors, sometimes multiple times. A 15 minute follow-up per application would mean that about 14 person hours would have been spent on simple application completeness follow-up. A \$25 / hour typical rate for a Berkshire County inspector would yield about \$350 in avoidance costs on this item alone. Over the course of a year this would yield about \$1,400 in avoidance costs simply to deal with complete applications.

A similar estimate can be made regarding on-line payment. In the Town of Lenox there was about \$12,750 collected in permit fees for 123 total permit applications. This is about \$103 / permit application. If it takes an Administrative staff person about 10 minutes to process one check it would therefore require about 20 person hours to process check payments. Assuming a \$12.50 / hour typical rate for a Berkshire County administrative position would yield a total cost of about \$256 to process checks. To date about 25% of the permit fees are being submitted electronically yielding about \$71 in avoidance cost. Over the course of a year this would yield about \$284 in avoidance costs, simply by not having to deal with checks. It is anticipated that the percentage of on-line payments will increase substantially in the future, resulting in greater avoidance costs.

These estimates are only for one town. Savings would be realized from each town in a proportionate manner based on comparative items, such as the number of permits, number of inspections, etc. These estimates only cover a few work elements. Substantial cumulative cost avoidance savings are likely from additional work elements.

3. Improved Service Delivery

The grant application identified the following items that would be quantified. These numbers are mostly for a period of about 1 month, the month of March 2013. (NOTE: The Town of Lenox has been using the system for since January 2, 2013.):

- Number of municipal officials receiving PermitEyes software training = **20**
- Number of municipal inspectional officials functional in PermitEyes software = **73**
(NOTE: This is the number of officials who have some type of regulatory approval or sign-off responsibility in the towns, not the number of officials who are proficient in the program.)
- Number of inspection violations. It was not possible to get comprehensive numbers from the software system. Instead this measurement will be changed to the following;
 - Number of permits denied = **10**
- Number of “hits; to the website by the public = **2049 = hits on the user login page**
309 = registered users
- Number of uses by other municipal officials such as Fire Department officials, zoning officials, Department of Public Works officials = **314**
- Number of Certificates of Occupancy = **6**
- Number of Certificates of Inspection = **308**

The true measure of success for this project will be seen through improved delivery of inspectional services by the municipalities. Once inspectors become familiar with program and all the “bugs” have been worked out, inspectors should be able to spend a significantly smaller amount of time on routine administrative items. This will allow more time on permit review and inspections themselves, decreasing the amount of time it takes to process a permit.

The demands on building inspection departments have increased while at the same time the building inspection department staffs have remained the same. For instance the State made the decision to require trench permits and sheet metal permits in Massachusetts. In some towns the responsibility of issuing these permits was assigned to the Building Inspection Department. Freeing time from administrative requirements will enable the inspectors to conduct these inspections.

Also, inspectors will be able to conduct other inspections that they have not been able to conduct due to time constraints. For instance, in the Town of Lenox, the online permitting software has allowed the department to begin annual inspections of multi-family dwellings in town. This required type of inspection had never been done. The online permitting software has also allowed the department to address the vacant and abandoned buildings in town. Inspections have already been completed on two buildings and the sign off requirement for demolition have begun.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Building Official Contact:

William Thornton Jr., Building Commissioner
Town of Lenox
6 Walker Street
Lenox, MA 01240
413-637-5500 ext 3
bthornton@townoflenox.com
[Town of Lenox Website](#)

Administrative Contact:

Thomas Matuszko, Assistant Director
Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
1 Fenn Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201
413-442-1521 ext. 34
tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org
[Berkshire Regional Planning Commission website](#)

REFERENCES

The following are links to the town websites for online permits:

- [Becket](#)
- [Dalton](#)
- [Lee](#)
- [Lenox](#)
- [Monterey](#)
- [Richmond](#)
- [Sheffield](#)

Copies of the following material are available at the website of the [Berkshire Regional Planning Commission](#). Scroll down to Regional Projects, On-Line Building Permit Project.

- [Request for Price Quote from ITS 43 approved vendor](#)
- [Sample agreement between the software vendor and the municipalities](#)

Resources

- Information about ITS43 contractors can be found at the website of the [Massachusetts Executive Office for Administration and Finance](#).

