

# City of Monroe: AP Process Improvement Success



## Lean case study

### Background

The City of Monroe is committed to continuous improvement. After seeing strong results from earlier Lean projects, the city contacted the Center for Government Innovation, a service of the Office of the Washington State Auditor to take on a new challenge: improving their Accounts Payable (AP) process.

The team at the City of Monroe reached out early to discuss timing and explore options. They knew Lean could help them work more efficiently—and they were ready to take the next step.



*Municipal Campus - City of Monroe*

### Goals

To improve the AP process, the City of Monroe partnered with SAO to conduct a kaizen—a focused, multiday workshop that brings together staff from eight different departments to closely examine a process, identify problems and develop long-lasting solutions in real time.

The city's goals for the kaizen were clear:

- Streamline the AP process while maintaining strong internal controls
- Improve communication between departments involved in purchasing

- Clarify roles and expectations around approvals and receipt reconciliation
- Explore the use of electronic tools, without assuming a single solution

City leaders also wanted to bring in a broad group of participants—from Public Works, the Monroe Police Department, Parks and Recreation, Community Development and the Courts—to gain a shared understanding of how their roles impact the AP process.

## Challenges

Although the AP process functioned, it wasn't as smooth or consistent as the city wanted. Departments handled approvals and coding in different ways, and not everyone was clear on what was needed to meet deadlines.

During the kaizen, the team worked together to uncover the root causes of these delays. Over three days, they shared stories, asked questions and identified opportunities to improve.

- **Day one:** Staff realized that variation in the process wasn't necessarily a problem—as long as staff followed internal controls. This opened the door for departments to design workflows that made sense for their needs.
- **Day two:** The team realized that unclear expectations caused delays in their AP process. For example, staff didn't always know when to approve purchases, code expenses or submit receipts on time. It was also unclear who should complete these responsibilities.
- **Day three:** By the end of the week, participants understood how their work connected to the bigger picture. They identified ways to improve communication and support one another.

To keep the improvements going, the team created two practice tools:

- A high-level AP reference guide
- Visual flowcharts to clarify expectations across the agency



A key takeaway for us was seeing how clearly defined roles and communication made the biggest difference. It made everyone more confident in the process.

– City of Monroe employee



City Hall and municipal court  
– City of Monroe

## Results

Just one month after the kaizen, Monroe saw strong progress in their AP processes. Most notably, agency staff:

- Increased compliance with reconciled transactions by 86%
- Now consistently submit 98% of receipts within one day of purchase

## Sustaining the culture

After the kaizen, the group named themselves the “AP Lean Team.” Each team member took on the role of liaison for their department and helped reinforce the new process.

They also identified go-to staff who understood their roles in keeping improvements on track—an important step in building accountability and sustaining change.

When SAO followed up after the kaizen, one staff member said he was “ecstatic” about the experience.

**Ready to get started?** Email [Center@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Center@sao.wa.gov) to learn more about Lean services and how we can customize a project to meet your government's needs.