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5 Ways State and Local Governments will Operationalize AI in 2026.

COMMENTARY | Why 2026 will be less about adopting AI and more about embedding it responsibly into the work government already does.

State and local governments don't have the budgets or staff to experiment endlessly with artificial intelligence. Constituents expect services to work efficiently and accurately every time. Agencies making progress are not chasing silver bullets; they are strengthening the workflows that already run government.

Recent pilots revealed a clear lesson: standalone AI tools that sit outside day-to-day systems create operational friction. CIO forums and legislative hearings increasingly reflect frustration with tools that require parallel processes, extra training, or manual reconciliation.

That distinction matters. In high-impact areas such as health, infrastructure, investigations and service delivery, automation must be accountable and explainable. In 2026, agencies will move beyond pilots, embedding AI directly into real-world processes where it can operate reliably and at scale. Five shifts already taking shape illustrate how state and local governments are putting AI to work.

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Route Fifty

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