



# Trial by Fire:

## Inside the Eventful First Year of Anh Selissen, CIO Texas DOT

**S**imilar to most things in the Lone Star State, the Texas Department of Transportation (TX DOT) is big. With an annual budget of just over \$30 billion,<sup>1</sup> TX DOT maintains 80,455 centerline miles of roadways, along with 6,500 traffic signals and nearly 36,000 vehicular bridges. The agency also oversees aviation and rail transportation, as well as public transit systems throughout the state, which handle some 29 million rides a year.<sup>2</sup>

Managing the technology needs of the department—and its employees, which include 12,500 full-time workers plus another 7,000 or so contractors—is a big job too. Anh Selissen began serving as the CIO of TX DOT in September 2019. Selissen had been in office for six months when the coronavirus pandemic hit, followed soon after by a malware attack that shut down her agency's entire network.

"Anh's dynamic leadership has been critical in helping TX DOT navigate the events of 2020," says Brian Troup, Vice President – State, Local and Education for AT&T Public Sector. "It's leadership like Anh's that will play a vital role in reimagining the transportation systems of the future."

*Government Technology* spoke with Selissen and George Spencer, Sales Center Vice President – State of Texas, AT&T Public Sector, about the pandemic, the cyberattack and what other states can learn from Selissen's approach to leadership.



### You had a historic first year on the job. Tell us what stands out most?

**Selissen:** I started in September 2019 by assessing where we were as an agency in terms of our people and our contracts with vendors. We did a major staff reorganization in October, and then we reassessed the vendor pool. At TX DOT, we have been highly outsourced since 2013. I took the opportunity to see whether the delivery of the contracts we had met my level of expectation, and I made some modifications to vendor support.

That facilitated us bringing in the right people to address some of our security needs and looking at rearchitecting and modernizing our network. Then the pandemic hit.

### Given the pandemic, how well did your team pivot to remote work?

**Selissen:** We worked hard to make the transition to virtual work seamless for our employees. We definitely had your normal challenges in terms of connectivity. But overall, I think the agency has transitioned very well

when it comes to things like laptops, our videoconferencing and collaboration tools, and VPN capabilities. Some of the efforts we made prior to the pandemic to increase our network bandwidth really helped with some of the challenges of shifting to remote work.

### Tell us what surprised you the most about the transition?

**Selissen:** Honestly, there was so much change in the first six months of my tenure that when we did go through the pandemic, I think I was already prepared for at least knowing the lay of the land.

TX DOT is huge. Because I hadn't been there for that long, I was surprised at just how supportive and inclusive the agency was, from IT to construction to engineering to maintenance. For such a large agency, everyone was able to pull together and support each other to get to a good place.

### On May 14, in the middle of the pandemic, TX DOT was hit by another crisis: a crippling ransomware attack.

### How did that impact your team, and how were you able to manage through it?

**Selissen:** Within a five-hour period, we had to shut down all our networks. It was very disruptive. We had to scan our entire environment before we could open anything back up to the internet. And then we had to look at how to recover our servers from backups.

The team did a wonderful job executing our business continuity plan to get us recovered in an expeditious manner—and putting together a game plan to make sure we were not re-compromised.

**Spencer:** Anh communicated very early on that the internal and external stakeholders needed to work together as a single team to get TX DOT operations back online quickly and safely. There were a lot of moving parts, but that was the clear, stated goal.

**Selissen:** There needs to be a single leader who's in charge. Because TX DOT is so outsourced, you have a lot of vendors in the mix, so you need a very clear game plan. Once everyone is aligned on where they're going, the recovery process is a lot quicker.

**Spencer:** We all met at least twice a day—sometimes more—with the goal of getting everyone together to measure progress against our agreed upon benchmarks and clear obstacles any team player may be facing. Sometimes those calls were at six in the morning; sometimes they were at 10 at night or later.

### How did TX DOT's response to the attack differ from past experiences?

**Spencer:** Anh established a single-team approach at the onset, which created the rapid cooperative environment needed to manage an event of this magnitude. With her transparent and unifying leadership style, she was able to have the resources from several

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George Spencer



multi-billion-dollar companies at the ready to aid TX DOT and work toward a rapid recovery.

**Selissen:** I'm a CIO who takes a really active role. I was involved in every single meeting until we were fully recovered. You have to own it; you can't hand it off to someone else.

**Spencer:** I've been supporting and serving the State of Texas for a long time. Being available 24/7 is an expectation of my role. But in this particular case—the energy and engagement were constant, even on early-morning and late-night crisis calls. Anh united everyone in a positive way around a shared mission. It was bigger than our individual roles. It was a personal commitment. The environment Anh created had our team enjoying the long days and hard work between the calls. Our team was energized and “all in” for this one-team approach.

And although this effort required a lot of hours and hard work, it also had meaning. With the COVID-19 crisis and the cyberattack, Anh was the absolute best person to lead the effort.

### In this ‘new reality,’ what are you planning to focus on in the months ahead?

**Selissen:** It's very clear from that ransomware event that we've got to bring certain core services back in and have that in-sourced. This next year is going to be about looking at the balance between outsourced and in-sourced. Let's look at that criteria and the risk-benefit when we make each one of those decisions.

In year two, I won't still be trying to figure out my team. We've got a really good team in place, and we know TX DOT. We know what our expectation is. So this year is going to be about, how do we improve our services for the rest of the agency and the state?

### What leadership qualities do you rely on most in challenging times?

**Selissen:** I want to be a leader who's considered thoughtful. I want people to understand that I'm leading with the mission of this agency and the state as a whole. But also, I'm a people-leader: I care about this agency, but I also care about the people that I lead. People will follow along with you when they know you care and clearly understand your focus, strategy, mission and objectives.

### What makes Anh such a stand-out leader, that other CIOs can look to for guidance?

**Spencer:** Leadership is acting without always having perfect information or the obvious answer. You have to be willing to act, and she does that. Anh builds the team around her, gathers data and quickly makes informed decisions. This approach is what allowed TX DOT to perform so well under such challenging conditions.

She's action- and progress-oriented. With Anh, we know we're not going to just come together and talk about something; we're going to come together and do something.

Endnotes:

1. <https://www.statesman.com/news/20200730/txdot-asks-for-slim-cuts-to-budget-despite-grim-predictions>
2. [http://ftp.dot.state.tx.us/pub/txdot-info/gpa/pocket\\_facts.pdf](http://ftp.dot.state.tx.us/pub/txdot-info/gpa/pocket_facts.pdf)

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