Person-Centered Approach for Minnesota's Benefits

State of Minnesota — Minnesota IT Services

CATEGORY:
Digital Services: Government to Citizen

CONTACT:
Emily Dornfeld
Director of Communications
emily.dornfeld@state.mn.us
(O) 651-201-1011
(C) 651-485-1354

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Executive Summary

One of the pillars of the Governor's One Minnesota Plan is children and families, and one of Minnesota IT Services' (MNIT) goals is to promote people-centered digital government services. MNbenefits is a major accomplishment towards both of those goals. Launched in November 2020, MNbenefits combines nine public assistance programs for cash assistance, food, and health care into a single, streamlined application to simplify processes and get help to Minnesota's most at-risk individuals and families.

Before MNbenefits, it took nearly an hour to apply for benefits—now, the median time to completion is less than 12 minutes. This change means thousands of hours in saved time for people to date; valuable time that families can use to search for a new job, find stable housing or childcare, or any number of other things to take care of themselves. This application was developed using human-centered design in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), Code for America, and MNIT. Code for America held over 100 shadowing and interview sessions with state and county staff, benefit recipients, and held technical discovery sessions with MNIT staff. Counties and tribal nations had the opportunity to opt-in to the early rollouts of MNbenefits. What began with two counties, quickly expanded to 16 counties as interest in the pilot grew. Now, 87 counties and three tribal nations are using MNbenefits.

MNbenefits is mobile-friendly, available in Spanish, allows for easy upload of documents, and includes live chat support at the time of application. It leverages existing eligibility systems to mirror current business processes, resulting in little training for staff. 156,778 applications have been processed since September 2021, representing 345,725 people served. The project's success has been covered by Star Tribune, GovTech, and the New York Times.

Idea

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

Accessing safety net benefits, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, the Women, Infants & Children (WIC) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program, and other programs, is a critical service that state government provides to Minnesotans. The process to apply for and receive these benefits has historically been frustrating and built to meet requirements, rather than focusing on meeting the needs of the people we serve. Many people are eligible for multiple basic needs benefits but they were required to complete separate applications and provide multiple verifications, with duplicate information for each benefit program. Compounding these challenges, health coverage applications were requested in a separate application from basic nutrition and cash assistance applications. This application environment could delay the receipt of necessary coverage, especially as families often have urgent care and benefits needs.

Until recently, Minnesota had one of the longest estimated digital benefits applications in the country. According to Code for America research conducted Aug. 2018-May 2019, Minnesotans may have

needed up to 60 minutes to apply for some benefits, and up to 50 minutes to complete a 35-screen process to apply for Medicaid through MNsure. The State of Minnesota's research shows that the average family applying for benefits in Minnesota spend more than 110 minutes. The project target is to reduce this time to a total of no greater than 20 minutes.

Why does it matter?

Approximately one in five Minnesotans access safety net benefits any given year. Minnesota needed to get this "front door" to the state's service delivery right for the over one million Minnesotans who apply for cash assistance, food assistance, and health care every year. The previous application, ApplyMN, was not mobile-friendly, only available in English, and took about 1 hour to complete. Reducing the time to complete the application and providing clear application instructions would immediately improve Minnesotans' ability to get the benefits they need and improve outcomes.

ApplyMN also produced a PDF that thousands of state and county staff used to determine eligibility for benefits. In a survey of 200+ county staff, less than one-third reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with this PDF, since it didn't display all relevant information. Staff frequently received the e-document, printed it, made annotations by hand, and then scanned it back into the system.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges. County and tribal human service offices closed to in-person appointments. Minnesotans lost access to common spaces like libraries, community hubs, and other offices to apply on a computer or print and drop off applications. Just as demand for services exploded, it got harder to submit and process applications, which created inequitable access for many of our citizens.

What makes it different?

This project sought to take Minnesota from one of the worst online benefits application experiences to one of the very best in the nation by focusing on the people we serve. MNbenefits unlocks critical resources for Minnesotans and improves the efficiency and performance of systems that state, county, and tribal staff rely upon.

The project improves on the legacy application in several ways:

- Mobile-friendly design. According to 2021 Pew Research, 15% of adults are smartphone-dependent and that rises to 17% for Black adults and 25% for Hispanic adults.
- Availability in Spanish. There is an easy roadmap to additional languages using Transifex.
- Ability to upload documents from the mobile-friendly design. Applicants can upload documents during the process, or afterward.
- Live chat support and automated feedback surveys at the time of the application, one hour later, and 30 days later.
- Leverages existing eligibility systems to mirror current business processes, resulting in very little training needed for staff.
- Direct development with clients, front-line staff, and MNIT staff.

What makes it universal?

Every state must deliver critical federal safety nets, but states have a wide margin in how they implement the delivery of those services. This project is built in the state's existing programming language and to fit existing system architecture, but the code is open source and can be adopted by anyone.

MNbenefits is especially relevant to the following NASCIO CIO Top 10 Priorities:

- Digital Government/Digital Services: MNbenefits rises to resident expectations for a clean, simple, and modern interface when trying to access benefits, while supporting staff working from home. Government can work for the people, by the people, in the digital age.
- Cybersecurity and Risk Management: MNbenefits is built on a best-in-class platform to protect resident privacy and mitigate cyber risks.
- Customer Relationship Management: MNbenefits opens new pathways to engage with Minnesotans, from end-of-application satisfaction ratings, automated text-based follow-up surveys, email confirmations, and live chat support.

Implementation

What was the roadmap?

This project followed a **human-centered, agile approach**. This included a discovery research period, where Code for America shadowed and interviewed more than 100 state and county staff, and benefit recipients. They held technical discovery sessions with IT staff to understand enterprise priorities. Outcomes of the interviews included:

- Tangible, targeted suggestions from state, county, and tribal staff regarding how to ask specific questions based on typical client responses. For example, county staff suggested a change to the description of the state housing support program in order to convey eligibility more accurately to clients.
- Benefits recipients also give ongoing, actionable feedback, like explaining confusion in the household builder page that led to a clearer description of who should be included.

Following a human-centered design approach, the team released a pilot in two counties. The pilot included a minimum viable product with a subset of benefits programs available to single adults. Frequent, iterative releases gradually added features and capabilities in two-week sprints. Between January 2021 and March 2021, there were 13 product releases.

Minnesota developers and system architects partnered with Code for America to build the project, including directly contributing code and participating in agile rituals like sprint planning, retrospectives, and client research. The goal of the project was to reduce the application time from one-two hours to under 20 minutes without further burdening state, county, and tribal staff with application processes. After the pilot period, the project team decommissioned the legacy application and handed off service delivery to DHS staff.

MNIT, DHS, and Code for America are incorporating best practices learned from this project, such as cloud computing, DevSecOps, and automation, to the other areas of MNIT that support DHS.

Who was involved?

This is a joint project between the nonprofit Code for America, DHS, and MNIT, and is sponsored in the the Business Solutions Office (BSO) of DHS. Stakeholders are included from various business areas, including the state healthcare exchange (MNsure). Stakeholder roles included:

- **DHS**: DHS provided operations, business process, and policy input, as well as serving as the project sponsor. The Business Solutions Office (BSO) helped state stakeholders prioritize the project and unblock sticking points. Project teams met weekly and organized a monthly senior stakeholder share out.
- **MNIT**: MNIT provided technical and system architecture expertise, evaluated potential solutions, and advised on how to build in a sustainable way. Later in the project, MNIT staff developers were directly embedded on the Code for America team to co-develop code and participate in broader team processes.
- **Counties and tribal nations**: Subject matter experts and staff who administered benefits for Minnesotans completed interviews with Code for America, and could opt-in to the pilot.
- **Code for America**: Code for America pitched this project to the State of Minnesota as an extension of another integrated benefits pilot in 2019, including an initial site visit to state and Hennepin County offices. Code for America raised separate funding to cover their engagement and served as a general facilitator.

One of the primary tools for sharing the project was the demonstration website: demo.mnbenefits.org. Counties that participated in the pilot found innovative ways to use the application, from sharing on social media to pre-loading it into county human services kiosks at community hubs.

- Social media communication about MNbenefits (example from Sherburne County).
- Link to where it lives on a county website (example from Olmsted County).
- Highlighted in County Commissioner email (link).
- Staff referrals from county help center lines.

How did you do it?

The project included a no-cost contract with Code for America. The nonprofit raises funds through philanthropic resources to support its work. The initial product team included approximately 10 Code for America staff (software engineers, designers, researchers, and product managers) and has since expanded to approximately 15 people. The Code for America team is matched by their counterparts at DHS and MNIT, including developers, system architects, and business solutions officers.

The team used a modern, open source approach that leverages the states existing technology systems. The web application is built on a Java Spring framework using AWS and the Aptible platform, and an API sends completed applications to the state's Enterprise Service Bus and the appropriate county electronic

document management system. The technology architecture allows the system to have greater agility, faster time to market, and reusability.

In an earlier engagement, Code for America learned that more than 80% of applicants for the state's Pandemic EBT program (a population largely overlapping with those using MNbenefits.org) used a mobile phone for access. By building the application in a mobile-friendly way, DHS and MNIT ensured Minnesotans can access services in their preferred manner. The time Minnesotans would spend filling out an application has steadily dropped since January 2021, owing in large part to iterative improvements based on client feedback that can come through live chat support, follow-up surveys, or analysis of the application funnel metrics.

Impact

What did the project make better?

MNbenefits transforms how Minnesotans access benefits. Nine different benefits programs, from SNAP to Housing Support to Emergency Assistance to Child Care Assistance are now available on mobile devices. For the first time ever, benefits are also available in an application translated directly into Spanish. With its multiple language availability and mobile-friendly format, MNbenefits represents a significant improvement for equitable program access for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) applicants.

MNbenefits also improves how counties process applications. Staff now receive applications in a format that mirrors paper applications and fits with the standard interview flow of the legacy database, saving time and eliminating the practice of annotating printed out copies. Outcomes include:

- Significantly reduced process time for front-line staff in pilot counties and reduced the number of re-key and process errors.
- Opening new avenues for communication and partnership with community-based organizations, creating a more efficient safety net.
- Creating a methodology for quick identification of applicants that warrant expedited processing.

What began with two counties, quickly expanded to 16 counties as interest in the pilot grew. Now that the pilot is over, 87 counties and 3 tribal nations use MNbenefits.

How do you know?

156,778 applications have been processed since September 2021, representing 345,725 people served. **Before MNbenefits, it took about an hour to apply for benefits—now, the median time to completion is around 13 minutes.** This represents more than 122,809 hours in saved time for people through April 2022, **valuable time that families can use to search for a new job, find stable housing or childcare, or any number of other things** to take care of themselves.

Customer feedback was paramount in this project. At the end of each application, clients can select a happy, neutral (meh), or sad face for their experience (similar to the satisfaction buttons in an airport). One quarter select meh, and less than 1% select sad, and 70% report happy, suggesting high customer satisfaction ratings.

The project teams rigorously evaluate client outcomes in partnership with the state's data and research departments. They look at key metrics: time to eligibility decision, approval rate, and other factors that could yield insights, like how equitable the outcomes are and whether applying for one program results in additional eligibility determinations. Feedback from Minnesotans:

- "It's a great idea for people that are housebound."
- "I really appreciated the simple user interface and also the note about sex/gender because I'm trans/nonbinary/genderqueer."
- "I was recently released from prison so I don't have much of anything so I pray for a fast response and assistance. This process has been great and not too difficult. Even after being incarcerated over 17 years."
- "It was very easy to work with and I have not been on a computer for quite a few years."
- "fue rápida" [it was quick]

What now?

In the final phases of the project, Code for America worked closely with MNIT and DHS to sustainably own the application, providing training and transition support for an agile, human-centered staff team. MNIT engineers were directly contributing code to MNbenefits for months, and the technical team focused on transferring the full tech stack into Minnesota ownership.

The application laid the groundwork to incorporate additional benefits programs. Code for America, MNIT, and DHS are scoping how to integrate healthcare benefits (Medicaid and MinnesotaCare). Other state programs expressed interest to be considered for the 2022 roadmap, including:

- Minnesota Department of Health's Women, Infants & Children (WIC) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program
- Minnesota Department of Education's Early Learning program
- Minnesota Department of Commerce's Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)