

Find What You Need in a SNAP!

Redesigned Notices Created by and for Ohioans

STATE: State of Ohio

AGENCY: Ohio Department of Administrative Services

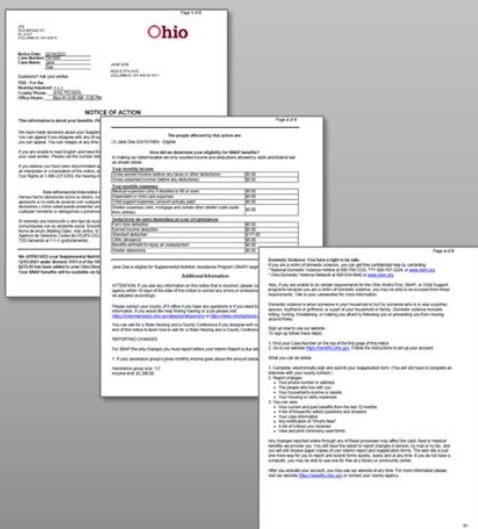
AWARD CATEGORY: Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships

PROJECT TITLE: Ohio SNAP/TANF Notice Redesign

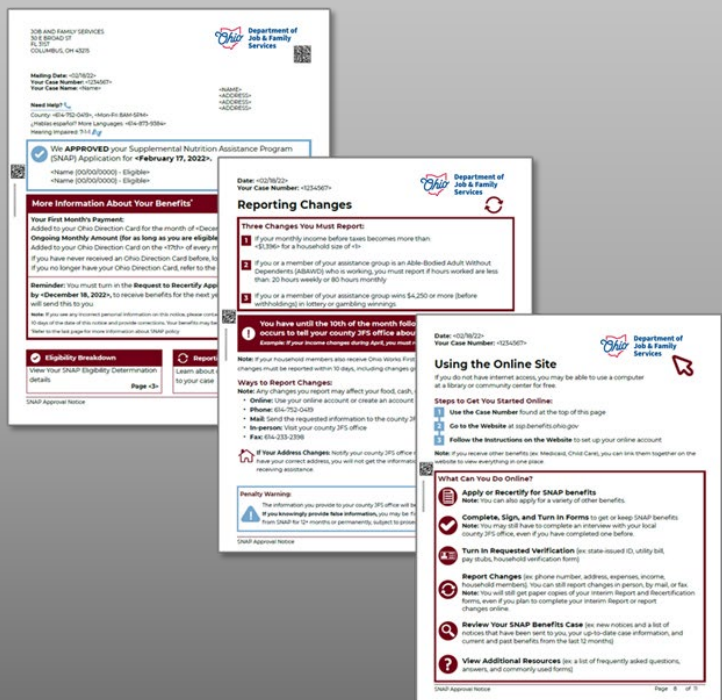
PROJECT DATES: February 2022 – June 2023

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Original Notice



Redesigned Notice



Executive Summary

*It's been a long day and you're shuffling through a stack of junk mail when a thick envelope from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services rises to the top of the stack. You open it and review the 20 pages of information, hoping to learn why you recently stopped receiving your food assistance. Frantically you scan, read, and re-read the pages of confusing text, looking for something, anything, to give you any insight as to what happened. After 15 minutes of trying to understand, you give up. You're unsure what is required to reinstate your benefits or how to complete the next steps. You determine that an hour-long call to your caseworker is your best option and add that to your mental to-do list for tomorrow, **frustrated and defeated**.*

Many of us have received outdated, text-heavy, jargon-filled government documents and forms in the mail. It can be a struggle to find the important information buried within blocks of text and sometimes it may even be immediately thrown away. The challenge of grabbing a recipient's attention within an important mailed document is not unique, but one we decided to tackle head-on. The State of Ohio recognizes it is critical to deliver Ohioans pertinent information in an approachable, useful format, so they can gain or continue to access their benefits. The Department of Administrative Services' (DAS) Ohio Benefits Program, in partnership with the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services (JFS), embarked on a transformative project to overhaul the way in which the state communicates with Ohioans regarding Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.

New, user-friendly notices and forms were designed using a Human-Centered Design (HCD) approach, demonstrating the state's commitment to enhancing accessibility and empowering Ohioans by providing the essential information they need in a clear and easy-to-read format.



By approaching challenges using the HCD lens, the Ohio Benefits Program is better equipped to make informed choices and create unique solutions that are desirable, feasible, and viable, all while maintaining a focus on the Ohioans at the heart of it all.

In total, the Ohio Benefits Program team identified **28 notices and forms** for redesign and worked in close collaboration with Ohioans, advocacy groups, and key stakeholders across multiple agencies and vendors, to identify their pain points and incorporate their unique needs into the redesign. Details regarding the approach and the outstanding outcomes of this work are detailed below.

Project Narrative

THE IDEA

The idea at the heart of the notice and form redesign was to modernize and enhance access to essential benefits information for all Ohioans. By adopting a HCD approach, the Ohio Benefits Program's notice redesign team committed to making information easily accessible and understandable, especially for those who struggle to locate or comprehend it. The team actively engaged with the community, conducting 20 focus groups with a total of 111 participants. This extensive community feedback informed the redesign process, leading to simplified language and improved visual aids in the notices. These enhancements significantly boosted clarity and comprehension for recipients. Recognizing the diversity of SNAP/TANF recipients—each with unique needs and life experiences—communications were tailored to be inclusive and effective, ensuring that all Ohioans could navigate their benefits with confidence.

The Ohio Benefits Program is responsible for ensuring all **Ohioans receiving SNAP and TANF benefits are properly notified** of changes to their recipient status or benefits using mailed notices and forms, per various federal requirements. The previous notices and forms were outdated and, in some cases, difficult for the average person to

understand. It was critical to gain an understanding of the challenges recipients may face in navigating the program's existing notices and forms. Some of the issues existing in the original notices included:

- Unclear purpose of the notice or form.
- Lack of visuals to support action items and large blocks of often redundant text information.
- Vague outline of next steps and objectives, including unfamiliar abbreviations and acronyms.
- Important due dates and actionable items buried within the text.

The Ohio Benefit Program's primary goal was to **leverage HCD concepts** to better understand SNAP/TANF recipients' notice experience and then redesign and develop **easy-to-read and understandable notices** that communicate important information simply and effectively. The team aimed to empower Ohioans in receipt of SNAP/TANF to understand and act upon information related to their benefits. To do this successfully, the team conducted research to gain a comprehensive understanding of recipients' needs and common pain points associated with the benefits process and with existing documentation. The Ohio Benefits Program also needed to understand the technological constraints of the Ohio Benefits Integrated Eligibility System (IES) in relation to design and functionality. The commitment to HCD principles helped prioritize accessibility, appropriate reading grade level, visual appeal, storytelling, conciseness, and actionability, in conjunction with technical ability, to make these new and improved notices and forms a reality.

WHY IT MATTERS

The State of Ohio administers SNAP/TANF benefits to nearly 1.4 million Ohioans, representing approximately 685,000 households. That means hundreds of thousands of mailboxes receive millions of notices and forms with critical SNAP/TANF benefit information. If recipients are unable to easily identify the important information communicated or requested in notices and forms, they may be at risk of losing their eligibility and benefits. Many of Ohio's benefit recipients rely on SNAP/TANF for basic nutrition and financial assistance for them and their families. The modernization of notices improves the chances of Ohioans being able to do so, while helping caseworkers by freeing up phone lines with more questions answered at the source.

WHY IT'S UNIQUE

The Ohio Benefits Program's investment in creating notices and forms reflective of the needs of a diverse group of Ohioans ensures that many voices and perspectives are heard and considered. Notice redesign distinctively emphasizes conducting user research with Ohioans, rather than just implementing industry norms and practices. By carrying out detailed studies and analyses of user needs and behaviors, the Ohio Benefits Program better comprehends the specific difficulties and obstacles that SNAP/TANF recipients in Ohio may encounter when looking for or maintaining their benefits. This allows the team to offer a cohesive customer experience that caters to the unique needs of Ohioans, rather than depending on generic or universal solutions.













WHY IT'S UNIVERSAL

The Notice redesign effort emphasizes tactics which are in line with an HCD approach and technological priorities: Legacy Modernization and customer relationship management. Notice redesign is modernization of legacy materials with the individual in mind. This project presents the opportunity to both consolidate and optimize resources and fosters an environment for accessibility and understanding across agencies and departments, leading to improved collaboration and communication between different government agencies and offices. Although Ohio continues to improve other forms of notification through telephony and online options, not all Ohioans have access to digital technology and may still require paper notifications. Ensuring all Ohioans have an equal opportunity to access the most important information at their fingertips is critical to advancing equity and accessibility to all. By giving priority to resident needs and behaviors and carrying out user research and analysis, organizations can attain a richer

understanding of their customers and develop solutions that genuinely cater to their needs in a simple, prompt, and user-friendly way.

IMPLEMENTATION: THE ROADMAP

The mission of the notice redesign initiative was to improve the delivery of services that promote self-sufficiency, safety and well-being of Ohio’s vulnerable individuals and families through agency, partner, and resident collaboration. Over the course of 16 months, the team worked collaboratively with advocacy group staff and recipients through four unique phases. The project maintained a HCD focus to tailor technology in a way that resonates with Ohioans and caseworkers. The project roadmap is detailed below, split into four distinct phases: research, assess, design, and implement. In the research phase, DAS developed the notice redesign approach plan, prioritized notices for redesign, and conducted focus groups with key stakeholders. During the assess phase, the team analyzed key findings from focus groups and engaged with legal and policy groups to determine any language that could not be updated based on policy and law. In the design phase, the team created templates for each category of notices and forms as well as incorporated and customized the content. Policy, legal, and program leadership were consulted to review and validate any updates to language. Lastly, during the implement phase, feedback and changes were incorporated into the notices and forms through an iterative testing approach. Notices were reviewed and approved by program areas and notices were added to the IES to be delivered to recipients. In addition to being provided via mail, the Ohio Benefits Program team made these improved documents available to the public on the JFS website, increasing reach and accessibility.

	Research	Assess	Design	Implement
Objective	Establish plan to conduct interviews and focus groups to identify difficulties, needs, and preferences of new SNAP notice designs	Assess content of current SNAP notices, specific purpose, trigger, and language	Create updated, easy-to-read notices that are visually appealing and can be supported by the Ohio Benefits system	Collaborate with the Ohio Benefits team to implement the changes to notices and any applicable changes to system generated triggers
Steps	 Develop Redesign Approach  Define Prioritized List of Notices  Conduct Interviews & Focus Groups	 Analyze Interview & Focus Group Data  Review Current Notices  Engage Legal & Policy Groups	 Create Notice Templates  Redesign Notices  Review & Validate Redesigned Notices	 Incorporate Feedback & Test Notices  Pilot Rollout of Notices  Deliver Notices to OBT

Using the HCD framework, the team developed insights based on key findings from focus groups that would help inform an **improved, user-friendly experience**. The Ohio Benefits Program team **interviewed SNAP/TANF recipients and advocacy group staff across the state** to gain a holistic and diverse understanding of the multifaceted challenges and barriers that recipients may encounter when receiving and interacting with SNAP/TANF notices. Insights were gathered from more than 100 diverse participants during two rounds of focus groups, which were then used to inform redesign.

THE WHO + THE HOW

DAS’ Ohio Benefits Program partnered with JFS on a truly cross-collaborative approach to make this notice redesign work possible. JFS led human-centered redesign strategy and focus groups, while the Ohio Benefits Program team led the IES integration piece of this initiative. This work also included cross-vendor collaboration between DAS and JFS partners, Deloitte, and Accenture, with Deloitte spearheading notice redesign and Accenture managing notice implementation in the eligibility system. In addition to meeting with recipients, the team met with Ohio-based advocacy groups, including legal aid societies, foodbanks, and organizations representing people with varying backgrounds, as well as non-English speaking groups. The importance of the partnership with advocacy group staff and SNAP/TANF recipients cannot be overstated with regard to the successful completion of this work. Recipients and advocacy group staff frequently expressed gratitude at having their input heard, prioritized, and implemented.

Overview of Focus Group Research Approach: The team used an HCD approach when conducting research to better understand the needs of SNAP and TANF notice recipients, develop insights to inform design changes, and implement key findings into a revamped, user-friendly experience. The team interviewed recipients and advocacy groups to gain a holistic and diverse understanding of the multifaceted challenges that recipients encounter when receiving SNAP/TANF notices.

The team organized the feedback received during the focus groups into themes, grouping together feedback related to:

- **Human-Centered Design:** *Utilize HCD principles to understand the needs of the user.*
- **Strategic Visual Design:** *Use design elements to highlight pertinent information.*
- **Need for Specificity:** *Explain notice information and necessary actions clearly.*
- **Need for Date Clarity:** *Provide transparency around key dates.*
- **Wider Accessibility:** *Provide expanded access to SNAP/TANF-related documentation.*
- **Technology:** *Use language that considers recipients’ usage and access to technology, as it varies among users.*

The feedback gathered from focus groups was used in conjunction with HCD principles to create and update notices and forms that consider the audience and help maintain benefits for those most in need.

Stakeholder Follow-Up and Communications: JFS communicated changes to counties and other stakeholders through presentations and roadshows, in addition to **proactively communicating changes to advocacy groups and recipients.** The official release of SNAP/TANF notice redesigns was widely communicated through strategic social media content, a banner on the Ohio Benefits Self-Service Portal, brochures distributed at key community sites, streaming platforms, robocalls, and text/push communications (“Proactive Communications”). Using graphics that focus on the positive changes coming their way, the team was able to prepare notice recipients for the transition.

THE IMPACT: WHAT WE MADE BETTER

Since launching in June 2023, the Ohio Benefits Programs has sent more than 8.7 million human-centered redesigned notices to Ohioans in need.

The team synthesized feedback from advocacy group staff and recipient focus groups to develop actionable items that informed key design decisions:

- **Choices and Options are Essential:** Clearly convey the methods by which applicants can view notices (e.g. using the Self-Service Portal (SSP), submit documentation, get help, or access additional resources).
- **Readability:** Where possible, lower the notice reading level to a 5th – 6th grade level on the Flesch-Kincaid scale, so language is easier for recipients to understand
- **Eye-Catching Page Layouts:** Utilize titles, sub-headers, and layout elements to aid users in quickly understanding the most essential content of each page and move the most important information to the beginning of the notice.
- **Transparency in Benefit Timelines:** Include a general timeline for when recipients will receive their SNAP/TANF benefits on the redesigned approval.

Research Process

- 1** Created advocacy group and recipient focus group questions to maintain consistency across focus groups
- 2** Developed and deployed JFS-approved email communications to engage advocacy group contacts and recipients
- 3** Hosted virtual and in-person focus groups with advocacy group staff members and SNAP recipients across Ohio
- 4** Analyzed focus group findings and data to discover the most important insights that would inform design changes for SNAP documentation

Focus Group Approach

The research involved the following categories of feedback to inform the future state of the notice redesigns:



Current SNAP Experiences
Insight shared on the SNAP application/benefits process as a whole and how recipients interact with SNAP documentation

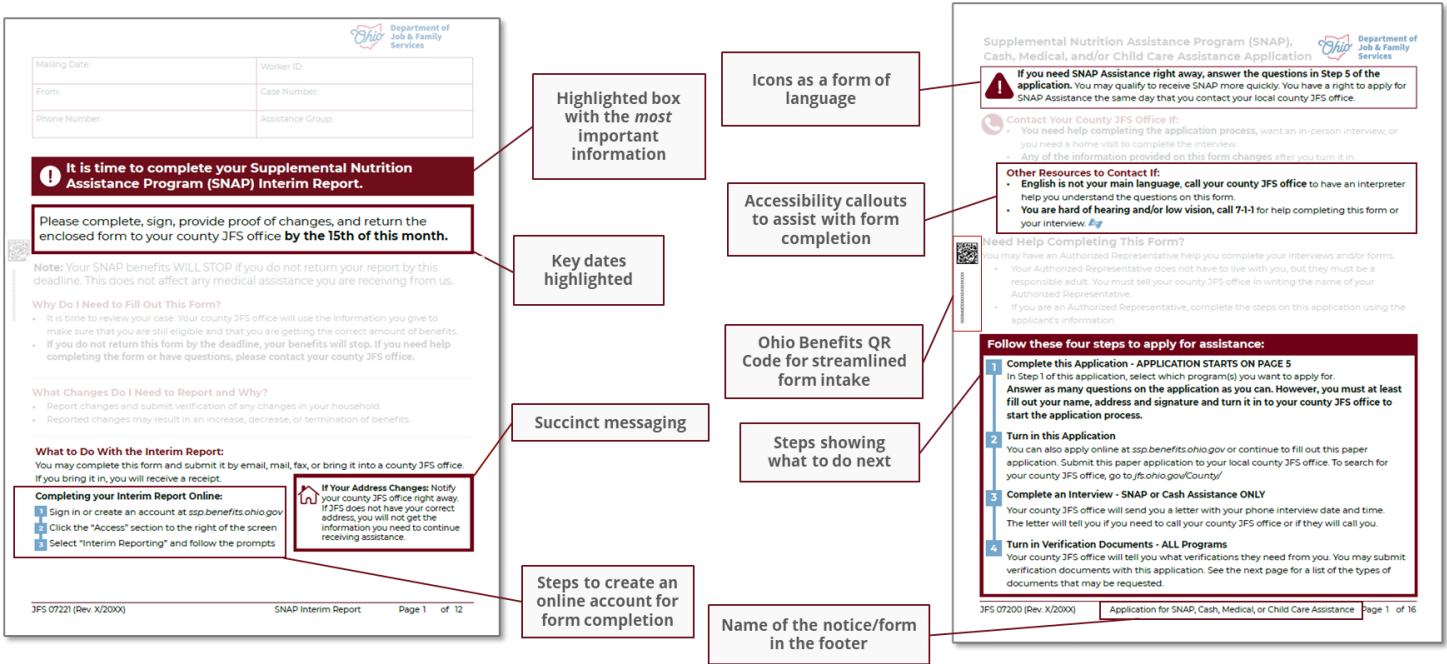


Current Notice Feedback
Language and visual design input on the notices and forms currently in circulation



Redesigned Notice Feedback
Language and visual design input on the draft redesigned Approval and Denial notices

- **Universal Icons and Graphics:** Select icons and visuals that are universal and familiar to the target audience.
- **Key Information Snapshots:** Identify and highlight the most important information in consolidated, easy-to-find boxes.
- **Clear, Actionable Steps:** Add in actionable steps on Page 1, so recipients' next steps are clear.



- **Community Resource Awareness:** Prominently features key information on resources and how to access them.
- **Language Sensitivity:** Soften the language used to address recipients and switch the point of view from first person to second and third person.
- **Larger Print Design:** Increase the font size of notices and forms where possible and create a balanced look with added white space (ensuring that these changes do not significantly increase the document length).
- **Instructions to Keep Necessary Pages from the Notice of Action (NOA):** Add in language up front instructing recipients to keep the attached forms included within NOAs, as recipients often throw them out.
- **Methods for Submission:** Order methods for document submission by most-used (ex. 1. online, 2. mail, 3. in-person, etc.)
- **Key Information Tearaway:** Include a tearaway at the end of notices, so recipients can keep and easily access their important dates.
- **Wide Range of Accessible Resources:** Provide community resources for recipients with disabilities, such as 7-1-1 and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities.
- **Incorporate Key Deadlines Upfront:** Include key deadlines on the first page of notices, so it's easier for recipients to understand next steps.
- **Link to Self Service Portal via QR Code:** Include a QR code providing direct access to the SSP to streamline the intake process and expedite access to benefits.
- **Addition of Ohio Assistance Programs and Services Page:** A new page was added to the notice packet to highlight additional resources for Ohioans seeking assistance such as domestic violence services, employment and unemployment services, childcare and support assistance, refugee services, and the LEAP (Learning, Earning and Parenting) program with the goal of linking Ohioans to the full suite of services available to them.

HOW WE KNOW

"I used to open this [Interim Report] and then throw it away. I didn't realize it was important."

– Ohioan and Benefits Recipient

**The Interim Report is a critical document in the benefits lifecycle that allows recipients to keep their benefits.

"These resources make me think they are concerned about me as a person."

– Ohioan and Benefits Recipient

"These redesigns are light-years better than the original notices and will be appreciated by recipients."

– Advocacy Group Staff

"The letters I used to get in the mail were very complicated to understand and created a lot of confusion. With the new notices, it's front and center what I need to do making it easier to get the support I need."

– Ohioan and Benefits Recipient

These new notices and forms led to an improved response rate from Ohioans because they include **diverse, equitable, and inclusive language** that **simplifies** the SNAP/TANF process. DAS also saw that **county worker intervention and call center volume were reduced** based on the easy-to-understand redesigns. In addition to the improved user experience, the documentation produced the following positive results:

- **Reduced Call Volume:** Clear information reduces confusion, leading to significantly fewer calls to county JFS offices.
- **Reduced Number of State Hearings:** Concise language and clear next steps reduced state hearing requests from individuals who are unsure how to receive or maintain benefits.
- **Increase in User Compliance:** Easy-to-follow actions help recipients maintain their benefits.
- **Overall Cost Savings:** Eliminating the requirement for the JFS7501 to be mailed and simplifying language in the redesigns reduces overall printing and mailing costs.
- **Improvements in Relationship with Advocacy Groups:** Closer relationships with advocacy groups and their staff were established across the State of Ohio through the coordination and execution of these focus groups, especially as their direct feedback was implemented in notice redesigns.

WHAT'S NEXT

The Ohio Benefits Program team and its cross-collaborative partnerships look forward to continuing the work this project started. The team continues to review and evaluate where HCD principles can be implemented, and feedback solicited to further improve the accessibility of benefit information for Ohioans and to proactively answer their questions. New initiatives continue to be born out of this work, including further introspection on current resources and information pools, such as the public-facing Benefits.Ohio.Gov site, on which some of the redesigned notice information lives. The success of this work is a testament to the transformative power of HCD, which has the potential to revolutionize the way government approaches complex challenges and creates more meaningful, human-centered solutions. The Ohio Benefits Program's ongoing emphasis on HCD innovations and solutions keeps Ohioans at **The Heart of it All**.