Using Human-Centered Design to Integrate Benefit Applications

Applications for benefit programs are often lengthy, duplicative, and written in a way that is driven by policy and legal directives rather than the need for simplicity and utility. Several states are making strides in a bid to change this paradigm by partnering with organizations focused on human-centered design.[1] The resulting benefits applications are:

+ Shorter

+ Use plain language that's clear and actionable

+ Use visual cues to highlight critical information

+ Can be used to apply for all benefits that an applicant may qualify for

Combining multiple redesigned benefit applications into one removes redundant questions and raises applicant awareness of benefits they may be eligible for but didn't know about. These improved, combined applications save time, reduce errors, and ensure caseworkers have all of the information they need to make timely, accurate decisions. Overall, this creates a less stressful, more dignified experience for applicants who need support.

1. Human-centered design describes the process of learning about users' lived experiences, needs, and wants through immersive research, then applying those learnings to create a different, better experience. Typically the new experience is created incrementally in pieces (as prototypes or pilots) and shared with the residents who would use it for their testing and feedback, then modified so the final experience is likely to address their needs.

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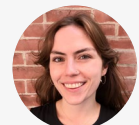
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The purpose of this guide is to illustrate how agencies can use human-centered design practices to revise and integrate benefits applications. The federal government recently emphasized the importance of improving customer/resident experiences with government programs. The 2021 Executive Order underscored the importance of efficient, fair, and effective processes for building public trust. Centering user experiences to build less burdensome, more streamlined benefits applications is one path to improving client experiences and promoting confidence in public institutions.

In this document you'll find:

+ Information about using human-centered design strategies to redesign and integrate benefits applications

+ Examples of the benefits of streamlining and integrating benefits applications

> "
> It's refreshing for [residents] to see something come from governments, from some of these public assistance programs, that's so easy and user-friendly and so well thought-out in terms of what their experience is. That really builds trust with the residents from the beginning of their experience and helps us try to continue to build on that trust, rather than starting off at a point of frustration."
>
> **KATE HEFFERNAN CARSON**
> Senior Department Administrator, Hennepin County, Minnesota
> From Minn. Hones Its 'Human-Centered' Benefits Web, Mobile Portal, Government Technology, from the October 21, 2021 issue of GovTech.com.
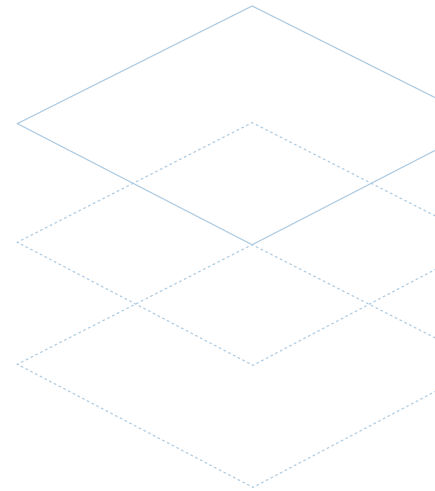
Shortening and Integrating Applications Using Human-Centered and Accessible Design Practices

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services worked with Civilla, a non-profit human-centered design firm, to redesign and integrate the applications for five types of benefit programs including Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other cash assistance, childcare, utility, and emergency relief programs.

After extensive interviews with applicants and caseworkers, workflow observations, and policy, legal, and content reviews, the team reduced the length of the combined applications from more than 40 pages and 1,000 questions, creating a shorter, core application with supplemental pages for each benefit program. The combined application also comes with an information booklet that details additional explanations and required legal language that may be difficult to understand. The new application is 80 percent shorter and can be processed in nearly half the time. After research and pilot phases, the redesigned application rolled out statewide in 2018, making it one of the first benefit applications in the United States that prioritizes the experience of applicants and caseworkers.

Assistance Application

MDHHS
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
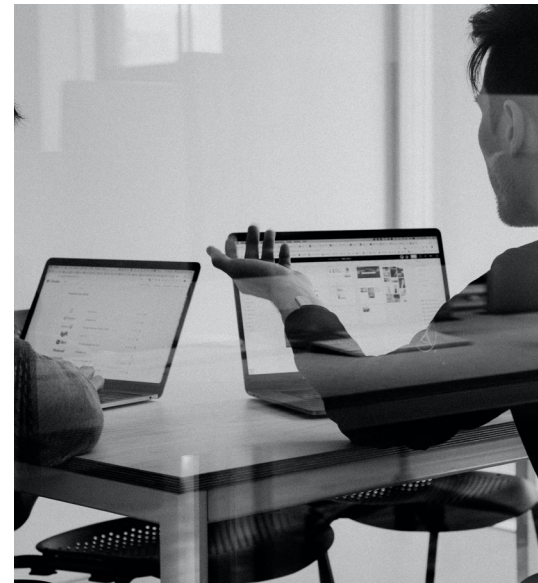
Submit this form by mail, fax, or bring it into a local MDHHS office

Find your nearest location at
www.michigan.gov/ContactMDHHS

Apply online:
www.michigan.gov/mibridges

○ **Welcome!**

● **Fill out the Assistance Application**
Answer questions about you and your household.

Fill out Program Details:

← Refer to the Information Booklet for details on each program

Healthcare Coverage

Food Assistance Program (FAP)

Cash Assistance Family Independence Program (FIP)
Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)
State Disability Assistance (SDA)

Child Development + Care (CDC)

State Emergency Relief (SER)

● **Submit your application for one or more programs**
You **will** need to interview with a MDHHS specialist, unless applying for healthcare coverage only.

● **Receive your results**

What language do you prefer?   Spoken Language   Written Language

If you do not speak English, have a hearing impairment, or have a disability, let us know how we can help you (an interpreter, sign language, TDD/TTY phone number we should call, assistance listening device, etc.) or bring your own support.

إذا كنت لا تتحدث اللغة الإنجليزية، تعاني من إعاقة سمعية، أو لديك إعاقة، أخبرنا كيف يمكننا مساعدتك (مترجم فوري، لغة الإشارة، رقم هاتف TDD/TTY يجب أن نتصل عليه، جهاز الاستماع للمساعدة، إلخ .....) أو أحضر أجهزة المساعدة الخاصة بك.

Si no habla inglés, tiene una discapacidad auditiva o tiene una discapacidad, háganos saber cómo podemos ayudarlo (un intérprete, un lenguaje de señas, un número de teléfono TDD / TTY al que debemos llamar, un dispositivo de asistencia auditiva, etc) o puede traer su propio apoyo.

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

MDHHS-1171 (Rev. 10-21) previous version obsolete

Case #:
ID #:
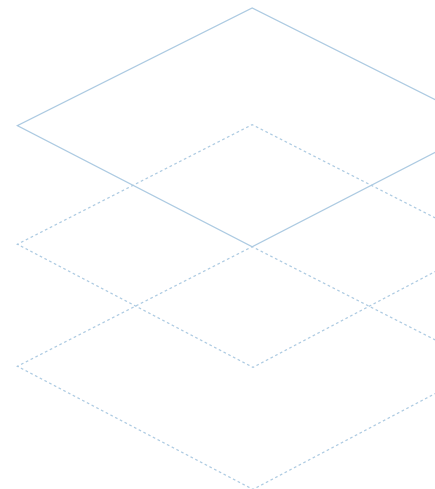
First page of Michigan's redesigned, integrated Assistance Application, which applicants can use to apply for multiple benefits programs.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services also redesigned its assistance application. The organization partnered with Code for America so it could better take into account applicant needs during the application development process. The result is an application that combines access to SNAP, TANF, childcare, housing, and emergency assistance programs.

While developing the combined application, the team also partnered with many of Minnesota's county benefits offices and tribal nations to better understand the needs of applicants and caseworkers. The redesigned application reduces the average time it takes to apply for benefits from one hour to 12 minutes, and allows applicants to upload documents rather than mailing them or bringing them into an office. Just as important: frontline staff consistently rate the experience of processing the new application as better than the previous one.[2]

In April 2022, Code for America published a blog post that details the benefits of the new application. At the time of publication, more than 85,000 documents had been uploaded to the Minnesota site using LaterDocs. Additionally, the number of applications processed via the site increased from 200 applications a week in December 2020 to 4,000 weekly applications as of April 2022.
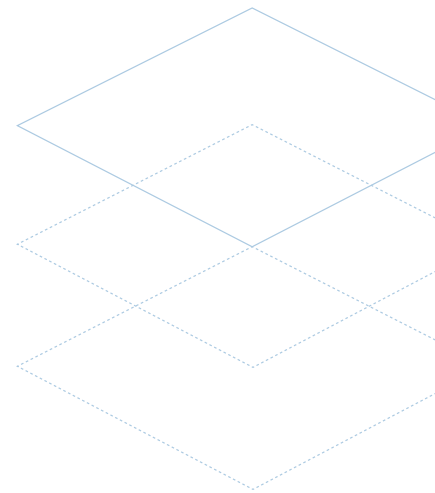
How this works

This application form should take about **20 minutes** to complete.

| We will ask you about | — |

- Personal information
- People who live with you
- Income
- Expenses
- Assets

| Submitting an incomplete application (SNAP only) | + |

| Adding documents | + |

| After you submit | + |

Continue

🔒 Your information is secure and will be handled in accordance with our privacy policy .

Application portal for MNBenefits which gives applicants a preview of the steps involved and time required.

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2. Palmer, D. (2021). Personal communication.

The Missouri Department of Social Services (DSS), inspired by Michigan's human-centered redesign, also launched a human-centered redesign. The agency is partnering with Civilla to finalize a human-centered redesign and integration of its Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and childcare applications. In a 2020 report, Missouri DSS and Civilla outlined several opportunity areas for improvement, including:

+ Designing an integrated application for the state's primary assistance programs

+ Standardizing interview guides and case notes to promote speed and accuracy

+ Streamlining verification processes to clarify requirements and reduce administrative burdens and denials

+ Developing clear, consistent communications—particularly for renewals, case action notices, and verifications

+ Modernizing case management to empower participants to use self-service options

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ⓘ **Find Out More on the Digital Benefits Hub**

Read more about large-scale redesign and small scale-redesign, as well as accessible content principles:

+ Starting Small with Human-Centered Redesign

+ Going Big with Human-Centered Redesign

+ Best Practices for Accessible Content

Learn more about human-centered design in Michigan, Minnesota, and Missouri:

+ Project Re:Form: Removing Barriers to Benefits by Transforming the Longest Assistance Application in America.

+ Form MDHHS-1171: Assistance Application and Program Supplements.

+ Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology. Chapter 2: Design, Data, and Delivery.

+ Four Lessons from Our Journey to Deliver Human-Centered Integrated Benefits.

+ Missouri Benefits Enrollment Transformation: Transforming the Enrollment Process for End Users.

Find Civilla's online courses to develop human-centered design capacity at your organization:

+ [Online Courses] Practica: Human-Centered Research and Design; Guidance on Redesigning Applications, Renewals, and Correspondence.
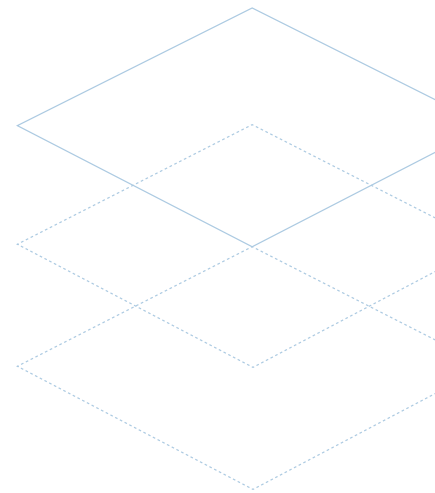
About this resource:

This resource is part of a larger initiative by the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University to document innovations in social safety net benefits delivery that are driven by human-centered service design, data-informed practices, and responsive technology. It also has the goal of spreading proven practices more widely. This resource was adapted from the report "Integrating Social Safety Net Benefits: Options for State and County Agencies Informed by Recent Integration Successes," written by Sara Soka for the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation in January 2022.

Much of the content in this resource is derived from a 2021 workshop featuring government employees who were instrumental in their state's integrated benefits efforts. The workshop, which was part of a series on the historic funding opportunities in the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), showcased different approaches to invest in infrastructure, human capital, and projects that integrate benefit applications, outreach, renewal, and service delivery.
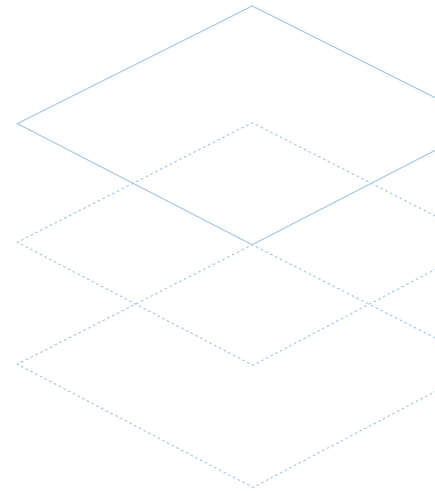
Get in Touch

Our Digital Benefits Network team is here to help!

Visit us at the Digital Benefits Hub

Please contact us with any thoughts, questions, or potential collaborations via email at digitalbenefits@georgetown.edu