



RESEARCH REPORT

Strategies for Improving Public Benefits Access and Retention

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Strategies for Improving Public Benefits Access and Retention

Introduction

When people struggle to make ends meet, public benefit programs have the potential to help them meet their basic needs for food, housing, health care, and cash. Within federal laws and regulations, state policy choices, service delivery practices, and technological capacity can make a difference in how easily people can access and retain the benefits for which they are eligible. Prior research has shown that many families and individuals do not participate in the programs that could help meet their needs and for which they are eligible (Giannarelli et al. forthcoming). In this report, we present a menu of strategies that have the potential to increase access to individual public benefit programs or a package of benefits. This report has a special focus on Illinois, but the strategies identified are relevant throughout the country.

Understanding the Problem

Though numerous public benefit programs are available, people often have difficulty successfully navigating the systems to access and retain the benefits. These programs include, chiefly, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child care assistance provided through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), public and subsidized housing programs, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

Because the programs are regulated and administered by multiple different federal and state agencies and are governed by federal laws developed across several Congressional committees, the programs differ widely in their eligibility criteria, definitions, requirements, and application and renewal processes (Lower-Basch and Russell 2021). All of this complicates the experiences of people seeking to access multiple benefits and services.¹ Some states and localities have made strides in providing the public with integrated access to multiple benefits either under one roof or on one website or

application. However, opportunities are often missed for referring people or checking their eligibility for additional benefits.

Even the process of accessing a single program can be challenging, sometimes intentionally (Floyd et al. 2021; Herd and Moynihan 2018).² An emphasis on program compliance and eliminating potential fraud, as well as the sheer complexity of federal and state program rules, can require applicants to provide extensive documentation and navigate cumbersome bureaucratic processes, and to periodically do so again to confirm their continued eligibility.

Further, enrollment in Medicaid or CHIP alone does not necessarily mean that children can access quality, timely, affordable, evidence-based, and culturally effective care. A forthcoming Urban Institute report assesses access to health care among Medicaid- or CHIP-enrolled children (Haley et al. forthcoming). Using 2016–19 survey data, it finds that though relatively few Medicaid- or CHIP-enrolled children had unmet needs, many faced at least one issue accessing care, such as delays in obtaining care, parental frustration when trying to obtain care, and lack of regular preventive medical and/or oral care. Additionally, several subgroups were at higher risk of experiencing such issues (Haley et al. forthcoming).

Identifying Potential Solutions

To identify proven and promising strategies for increasing access to public benefits, we consulted subject matter experts and literature. We consulted national experts on benefits access, including those with expertise in using technology and data science in tandem with policy and practice changes to facilitate program participation. Specifically, we interviewed experts from the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, Benefits Data Trust, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Center for Law and Social Policy, Civilla, and Code for America to discuss the implications of their work. For feedback on the implications of the potential strategies in the context of Illinois, we consulted with a Public Benefits Advisory Group composed of experts and stakeholders based in Illinois, including representatives from Community Organizing on Family Issues, Erikson Institute, Greater Chicago Food Depository, Heartland Alliance, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map, Quad County Urban League, Shriver Center on Poverty Law, and Women Employed. In addition, we reviewed research literature and publicly available information on efforts to streamline and coordinate benefit delivery systems.

The range of potential solutions reflects the range of challenges to accessing public benefits. For example, some problems and their associated solutions are rooted in federal policy; if federal rules were

consistent across programs, application and renewal policies and practices could be simpler, which would ease access for people seeking assistance. Though some fundamental solutions would require federal action, we focus in this report on the numerous strategies for improving benefit access within the current federal policy context. The strategies included in this report are geared toward state-level solutions that state governments, community organizations, civic tech companies, or other entities could implement within a state or substate area; philanthropy also has a role in directly or indirectly supporting changes. Because people seeking public benefits encounter access challenges at each step of the process, from learning about what benefits are available to applying for and retaining benefits, strategies for improving access are also necessary at each step. Strategies for improving public benefit access can involve revising service delivery practices and processes, changing state or local policies, or using or improving technology.

We have identified 30 individual strategies and organized them into 10 overarching strategies for increasing access to public benefits:

1. treat clients with dignity and humanity
2. engage community
3. conduct intentional, data-driven outreach
4. use technology to simplify application and recertification processes
5. adopt practical phone call processes
6. reduce program application siloes
7. revise unnecessary and burdensome policies
8. streamline renewals
9. expand eligibility and benefits
10. partner with civic tech and others

Structure of This Report

We begin with a discussion of how to prioritize among the various possible strategies. Though we do not explicitly prioritize the strategies ourselves, we offer suggestions for the issues to consider in setting one's own priorities. The bulk of the report is dedicated to outlining the specific strategies for improving access to public benefits. Throughout, we highlight a few real-world examples of how these strategies

have been implemented. We conclude the report with a discussion of philanthropy’s role in supporting these strategies. A complete strategy matrix that summarizes key aspects of each potential strategy is included as an appendix.

Prioritizing Strategies

In the face of so many challenges and potential strategies, where should one start? Because all the potential strategies are worthwhile, we encourage readers to use the information provided to identify which strategies are best aligned with their own strengths, interests, and capacities. To facilitate this process, we identify for each strategy the customer access point it affects, the type of intervention involved, and the actors we expect to be best situated to take action. Again, we deliberately focus on actions at the state and local levels rather than federal-level actions.

Nonetheless, we also offer insights on other considerations for prioritizing strategies, including the scale of a strategy’s expected impact, action required for implementing the strategy, and timeline for implementing the strategy. Some strategies may be immediately feasible and provide instant relief from an irksome practice, while others may require a longer, concerted effort to implement but have the potential for greater impact on economic security.

In addition, readers may benefit from heeding the business advice to “start small; go big.” Starting with “quick wins” can build the buy-in necessary for enduring longer-term efforts. And long-term efforts can start with a pilot program to identify and overcome challenges before launching into a full-scale change.

SCALE OF IMPACT

The potential impact of increasing access to benefits, and reducing the amount of unclaimed benefits, is significant. To understand the potential scale of the impact of improving benefits access, recent Urban Institute research in Illinois identified the number and demographics of people eligible for various public benefits, as well as participation rates among eligible people (Giannarelli et al. forthcoming). Here are a few key implications of those findings:

- **Strategies affecting SNAP have the greatest potential reach.** More households are eligible for SNAP (25 percent of Illinois households; 1.2 million in the average month of 2018) than any of the other major public benefits listed above except Medicaid. In contrast, TANF has the smallest reach, with only 3 percent of Illinois households (151,000) eligible in the average

month in 2018, though improvements to TANF could greatly affect the experiences of those 151,000 eligible households.

- **Families with the youngest children will disproportionately benefit from strategies improving overall access** because families with the youngest children (from birth through age 5) are more likely than other families to be eligible for public benefits. The impact on this population can be increased further through specific targeting.
- **People of color will disproportionately benefit from strategies improving overall access.** People of color are more likely than white people to experience poverty and the need for public benefits because of economic inequities created by structural racism.

Potential impact depends not only on who is eligible but also who participates. The Urban analysis found higher participation rates among eligible assistance units with (1) the lowest incomes, (2) only one parent or guardian, and (3) a member with a disability (Giannarelli et al. forthcoming). Patterns of participation by race and ethnicity differed across programs; for example, participation rates in WIC are higher among eligible Hispanic people than non-Hispanic people, but participation in public or subsidized housing or CCDF is lower among eligible Hispanic people than other groups.³ The Urban analysis also found variation in participation patterns across Illinois counties, though generally participation rates in Cook County were slightly higher than in the balance of the state (Giannarelli et al. forthcoming). Recent Urban analysis also found that in 2018, Illinois residents received 49 percent of the dollars potentially available to them through public benefit programs. The analysis found that if all seven programs (SNAP, SSI, WIC, LIHEAP, TANF, CCDF, and public or subsidized housing) were fully funded and had full participation in Illinois, the amount of benefits received would increase to about \$13 million, meaning there is \$6.6 million in unclaimed benefits (Giannarelli et al. 2023).

Outreach, application, and retention strategies each affect program participation and could have greater impact by targeting people or places with relatively low participation rates. Though a focus on outreach and application may seem obvious, retention strategies are also important for facilitating program participation. Many people who are eligible for but not enrolled in a program may have previously participated but then lost coverage because they did not renew their program eligibility before it lapsed.

Even if a strategy affects a relatively small number of people, the impact for those individuals can be enormous.

ACTION REQUIRED FOR IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

Prioritizing strategies can take into account the action required for implementing the strategy, including whether action can be taken in-house or it requires external approval or cooperation. For example, strategies requiring only that a state agency director chooses to implement the strategy may be considered “low hanging fruit” that could be prioritized to achieve a quick win. Other state-level actions could require more complex engagement, such as procuring new IT capacities, seeking a federal waiver, increasing funding in the state budget, or revising state policies, regulations, or laws. Most of the strategies presented in this report are those that states have the authority to implement, as opposed to those requiring changes to federal law or regulations. State-level advocates may wish to prioritize support for strategies that require action only within the state.

TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

The timeline for implementing a strategy may reflect the type of action required—strategies that require new legislation could be expected to take longer than those requiring philanthropic funding—but also may be hard to predict. For example, successfully coordinated efforts on the part of advocates and philanthropy could lead to unexpectedly rapid development of new legislation. Likewise, new state or philanthropic funding for a broadly supported strategy could be derailed by a global recession. Nonetheless, **a series of strategies may be prioritized in a logical sequence that starts with quick wins while laying the groundwork for longer-term efforts to improve benefits access.**

Strategies for Improving Public Benefits Access and Retention

For each of the ten overarching strategies, we begin with a table that identifies for each specific strategy the customer access point(s) it affects (i.e., outreach, application, renewal, or cross-cutting); the type(s) of intervention(s) involved (i.e., process and practice changes, policy changes, or technology changes); and the actors we expect are best situated to take direct action (i.e., state governments, community partners and advocates, or civic tech companies and others). Though we identify which actors we expect can take direct action on each strategy, they also can encourage others to take additional actions. For example, advocates obviously can encourage the state government to take actions only the government can take. In addition, philanthropy can support the actions of community partners and advocates as well as civic tech and other organizations implementing these strategies.

With few exceptions, these strategies can be applied across nearly any public benefit program or group of programs.

1. Treat Clients with Dignity and Humanity

Treating clients with dignity and humanity is fundamental and can help people access and retain public benefits. Strategies for treating clients with dignity and humanity include using simple language, clear communication, and human-centered application design and providing a welcoming local office environment and culture.

TABLE 1
Strategies for Treating Clients with Dignity and Humanity

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Simple language and clear communication	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Human-centered application design		x	x		x		x	x	x	x
Welcoming local office environment and culture				x	x			x		

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

SIMPLE LANGUAGE AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Information about benefits that is clear and written in plain language can help people learn about public benefit programs and figure out if they are eligible (Baudoin et al. 2014). Though governments offer information, including screening tools, to help potential recipients figure out eligibility, navigating that information can be confusing and burdensome. Even people who successfully access government websites can come away with questions and sometimes look to social media for information.

Thoughtfully framed communication about programs and digital advertising for public benefits programs can make a difference in take-up. For example, outreach pamphlets can include the title and other key information in multiple languages on the first page, rather than including an insert ten pages in with a number to call for information in a particular language.

Further, communications sent to clients about benefits renewal can use simple language clearly stating what the client is required to do to continue receiving benefits. Because clients receive many letters from government agencies, changing how the renewal letter looks or feels can help call attention to the client's need to respond to the renewal letter.

States can proactively obtain feedback on the clarity of their communication materials by testing them with a demographically diverse group of people. They can test the readability and understandability of the language (even using a paper copy) as well as the digital interface to illuminate where applicants encounter challenges.

(For more on accessible content and clear communication, see Kennan, Soka, and Sullivan 2022.)

HUMAN-CENTERED APPLICATION DESIGN

A streamlined application that is short, simple, and relevant leaves the client feeling confident that they have completed the application correctly and requested the benefits they wanted. A straightforward and user-friendly application is more likely to be completed with correct information (Sullivan et al. 2021). For example, something as simple as putting the signature box in bold can reduce the number of applications deemed invalid because of a missing signature. Human-centered design applies to both paper and digital applications. Changing digital applications may require some changes in the specific wording or flow of the application but usually can be accomplished without implementing new technology.

WELCOMING LOCAL OFFICE ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

In-person office experiences can impact an applicant's experience including how far they must travel to reach the office, how safe or clean the office feels, and how they feel when interacting with staff in the office. In addition, an office culture that embraces a self-sufficiency ideology may disincentivize caseworkers from assisting applicants with verification collection because of a desire for self-sufficiency. Training could instead focus on framing the interview process as helping the applicant in the moment. For example, Washington State includes verification collections as part of a caseworker's responsibility, so caseworkers are accountable for supporting applicants in providing documentation.

2. Engage Community Members, Organizations, and Advocates

States can partner with community organizations, engage community members and program participants, and engage with advocates to change processes, practices, and technology in ways that improve customer access to public benefits.

TABLE 2

Strategies for Engaging Community Members, Organizations, and Advocates

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Partner with community organizations	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	
Engage community members and program participants	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	
Engage with advocates	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Community partners can play a vital role in outreach and application. They are often trusted sources of information for people who may be eligible for or are participating in public assistance programs. When states identify enrollment gaps among specific demographic or geographic communities, states can partner with organizations in these communities to assist with outreach and application. A key Illinois example with broad reach is the HelpHub⁴ at the Shriver Center on Poverty Law, a hub of enrollment assisters that provide training, assist with complex cases, and answer questions about public benefit eligibility for immigrants. There could also be a role for managed care organizations (MCOs) in doing outreach for renewals, possibly including MCOs completing renewal forms with clients and submitting them directly.

ENGAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Programs could embrace an ambassador outreach model where community members themselves conduct grassroots outreach and build relationships. In addition, programs can actively seek and act on input from community members and program participants. Similarly, states can partner with clients in

the cocreation of policy. For example, the Washington Poverty Reduction Work Group,⁵ co-led by the state Departments of Commerce, Employment Security, and Social and Health Services, has a steering committee composed of people with lived experience of poverty. States may not be able to compensate participants for their time, and this may be a role philanthropy can address.

ENGAGE WITH ADVOCATES

Advocates also bring an important perspective and provide sustained attention to issues across changes in state administrations, holding the state accountable to priorities. States can hold standing meetings with advocates so they do not have to request meetings when issues arise. (For more on strategies for administrative advocacy, see Wikle 2020.)

HIGHLIGHT 1

Engaging Community Members, Organizations, and Advocates in Illinois

The Illinois state government actively engages with community members, community organizations, and advocates through several formal councils, committees, and partnerships—for example:

- The Social Services Advisory Council (SSAC)^a includes clients, service providers, local governmental units, advocacy groups, academia, and the general public and advises the Department of Human Services on policy, service delivery, and community issues.
- The Early Learning Council^b is a statutory public-private partnership that includes senior state officials and nongovernment stakeholders appointed by the governor to ensure representation of all Illinois children from birth to age 5.
- The Family Advisory Committee (FAC) of the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) is a diverse group of parents providing input to the Early Learning Council on Illinois’s early childhood education and care systems.^c
- The Child Care Advisory Council (CCAC) is a group of invited parents, providers, community organizations, state officials, and other invited stakeholders who provide input to the Office of Early Childhood of the Illinois Department of Human Services on issues related to child care.^d

^a“Social Services Advisory Council (SSAC),” Illinois Department of Human Services, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=126807>.

^b“Early Learning Council Members,” Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/EarlyLearningCouncil/Pages/members.aspx>.

^c“Family Advisory Committee (FAC),” Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/EarlyLearningCouncil/Pages/Family-Advisory-Committee.aspx>.

^d“Child Care Advisory Council,” Illinois Department of Human Services, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=118674>.

3. Conduct Intentional, Data-Driven Outreach

States, community partners, advocates, and civic tech organizations can work independently or cooperatively to conduct intentional, data-driven outreach to improve benefits access.

TABLE 3
Strategies for Conducting Intentional, Data-Driven Outreach

Strategy	Customer Access Point			Intervention			Primary Actors			
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Data-driven outreach	x				x		x	x		
Targeted population outreach	x				x		x	x	x	x

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

DATA-DRIVEN OUTREACH

States can use data to inform outreach. For example, this could include outreach to zip codes with the largest participation gaps. In addition, states can compare clients' data with eligibility requirements for other programs. For example, the Benefits Data Trust (BDT) and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) ran a pilot in which they conducted text message outreach to WIC-eligible families and found one in five recipients engage with texts and one-third of that group requested a WIC appointment (Maneely and Neuberger 2021).

States can not only use data to target digital ads that help applicants find the service, but they can also pay attention to search engine optimization to ensure that benefits are the top search result returned. In addition, web analytics can show where people fall off at a certain point in the application process and can show if digital ads worked for the target population. This does require an active manager of the state systems, whether states manage this work internally or contract it out.

TARGETED POPULATION OUTREACH

Programs could also do targeted outreach to specific population groups. For example, outreach to immigrant communities can clarify what programs people with various immigrant statuses can access and counter inaccurate information about the public charge rule.⁶ Additionally, digital outreach can be

highly targeted to specific audiences and provide information in the primary language of the targeted population. Outreach for SNAP could target older adults, college students, mixed-status households, justice-involved individuals, and people experiencing homelessness. The WIC program could work with home visiting and early intervention programs to target more cross-program outreach to the families with young children these programs serve.

HIGHLIGHT 2

Using Data Matching to Target Outreach

Data-driven outreach can help reach populations that are eligible for but not receiving benefits. For example, Benefits Data Trust (BDT) and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) partnered with Colorado, Massachusetts, Montana, and Virginia to pilot data matching and text outreach for residents adjunctively eligible for WIC based on enrollment in Medicaid and/or SNAP.^a The pilot found that text messaging is an effective and low-cost way to reach residents eligible for WIC, and 1 in 5 residents who received text messages responded.^b Targeted outreach through text messaging can help reduce gaps in enrollment for residents who are receiving benefits from one program and are eligible for other programs but not enrolled.

Challenges sharing data between agencies can make data-driven outreach difficult and be a barrier to targeted outreach strategies. However, proactive data-sharing agreements and informal referrals from agencies can direct people to benefit programs that they are eligible for, based on their participation in other programs. Also, reviewing existing case data can potentially be used to target outreach, for example by identifying people enrolled in Medicaid who are eligible for other programs based on their Medicaid enrollment. This strategy utilizes Medicaid as the funnel program to connect Medicaid recipients to benefits they are adjunctively eligible for. For example, BDT used data-driven outreach to increase SNAP enrollment for older adults in Pennsylvania by identifying underenrolled older adults through the Low-Income Subsidy for Medicare applicant pool and reviewing the case data to target older adults not enrolled in SNAP. Overall, the pilot increased SNAP applications for older adults and did not increase the cost or administrative burden on county offices.^c Data-driven outreach is an effective and potentially low-barrier strategy to increase benefits access in populations currently underenrolled, if data sharing exists between state agencies and/or community-based organizations have the capacity to do outreach.

^a “Adjunctive eligibility” confers automatic income eligibility for WIC applicants who receive SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance.

^b See Maneely and Neuberger 2021.

^c “Reaching the Underserved in Pennsylvania,” Benefits Data Trust, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://bdtrust.org/reaching-underserved-pa/>.

4. Use Technology to Simplify Application and Recertification Processes

States, community partners, advocates, and civic tech organizations can use technology to simplify application and recertification processes. Strategies that use technology to simplify application and recertification processes include mobile-friendly applications, telephonic and electronic signatures, online scheduling, document uploads, and texting and two-way texting. Some of these strategies first require policy changes.

TABLE 4

Strategies for Using Technology to Simplify Application and Recertification Processes

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Mobile-friendly applications		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Telephonic signatures		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Electronic signatures		x	x		x	x	x	x		x
Online scheduling		x	x			x	x	x	x	x
Document uploads		x	x				x	x		x
Texting and two-way texting	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

MOBILE-FRIENDLY APPLICATIONS

While most public benefit programs now offer online applications, not all programs offer mobile-friendly applications (accessible from a mobile web browser without an additional download). Many households are “smartphone dependent,” meaning they do not have internet at home but own a smartphone. Twenty-seven percent of households earning less than \$30,000 a year are smartphone dependent.⁷ By ensuring that applications are accessible from the browser of a cell phone and do not require a login or an app download, applicants can submit applications more easily. (For more on mobile-friendly applications, see Civilla, Code for America, and MDHHS 2019.)

TELEPHONIC SIGNATURES

Illinois not only allows telephone signatures, but also currently has a SNAP waiver that allows community-based organizations to collect telephone signatures when assisting SNAP applicants, with steps underway to get a more permanent version of the waiver.

ELECTRONIC SIGNATURES

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many states, including Illinois, shifted to electronic signatures. Though most states allow applicants to call and provide application information over the phone, some then mail a form that must be physically signed and returned. Electronic signatures allow clients to apply for benefits remotely and help people get the help they need faster.

ONLINE SCHEDULING

During the pandemic many actions that had required in-person interaction moved online or to the phone, allowing some recipients more flexibility. Online scheduling options for WIC and the continuation of remote visiting options, which started during the pandemic, could offer such flexibility (ICEH 2021). Washington State's WIC program saw a reduction in missed appointments while remote appointments were available.⁸

DOCUMENT UPLOADS

Many states, including Illinois, have document upload capabilities on their websites and allow clients to upload their materials online. In addition, the ability to upload documents as photos from a mobile phone is important for increasing access. The ability to upload documents online or from a mobile phone, which became available in more states during the pandemic, is especially helpful when applicants need to gather multiple materials and may not have all their materials at the time of the interview. This option for providing documentation could also increase the likelihood that recipients submit the necessary materials to continue receiving benefits and reduce the churn rate. A state's difficulty setting up document uploads can depend on their existing technological capabilities. (For more on prepandemic document uploads, see Baudoin, Weiss, and Hensley-Quinn 2014).

TEXTING AND TWO-WAY TEXTING

Using text messages to send out notifications or reminders can be more effective than the traditional method of mailing these notices. This more accessible form of communication could increase client response rates, ensuring more clients complete the steps needed to renew their eligibility and continue receiving benefits. When full communication through texting is not possible, states can use text

messaging to communicate to clients that they will get a notice in the mail that they must respond to in order to continue receiving benefits. Illinois advocacy groups have supported an in-process texting program that will include text and email notifications for SNAP and Medicaid. A Kaiser Family Foundation study found only 11 states, including Illinois, plan to use text messages to notify Medicaid enrollees that they must take an action to continue their coverage after the Public Health Emergency and continuous enrollment requirement end (Brooks et al. 2022).

In addition to sending text messages, states can use two-way texting or live chat to further enhance communications with clients. In other words, texting can be used for not only notifying clients when information is needed, but also for allowing clients to provide the needed information. Though engaging in two-way texting is an added responsibility for caseworkers, the efficiency it creates (e.g., by reducing “phone tag” or the need to mail notifications) can substantially reduce the number of calls they receive and reduce their overall workload, according to people experienced with the practice. (For more on text messaging, see Wagner 2019.)

HIGHLIGHT 3

Text Messaging Pilots

Implementing alternative methods of communication, including texting, between benefit agencies and clients can positively impact the application and renewal processes across benefit programs and reduce benefit churn. In Michigan, a two-way text messaging pilot that was implemented for two months prioritized accessible communication between caseworkers and clients for document uploads during the verification process. The pilot found that flexible communication options allowed clients to respond to requests whenever they had documentation and caseworkers could respond in time frames that better fit their schedule, and two-way texting facilitated faster problem solving so that errors could be resolved in a few hours, rather than days or weeks. The pilot also found that the number of days to determine eligibility decreased from 13 days to 10 days and the percentage of applications approved for benefits increased from 53 percent to 67 percent. The percentage of procedural denials remained the same (43 percent), but two of the three caseworkers involved in the pilot had no denials for missing verification documents.^a

Using texting as a reminder system can positively impact the application and renewal processes by increasing the likelihood that clients meet deadlines at application and renewal. Regularly communicating clear guidance through texts can also reduce call volume. Code for America partnered with Louisiana to pilot a one-way text message reminder system, LA'Message, for residents who are eligible for and receiving Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and WIC benefits. In general, the information and cadence of the text message reminders differed across programs, but each approach included clear information about appointments and/or interviews, which state agency the communication came from, guidance on next steps and required documentation, and follow-up texts leading up to deadlines.^b

Overall, the pilots described here demonstrate the value of implementing text messaging as a strategy to reduce benefit churn by increasing flexibility in communication between staff and residents as well as increasing response rates to deadlines and documentation requirements during application and renewal. Text messaging is a relatively low-cost strategy with low barriers to implementation that helps people maintain access to benefits, opens avenues for targeted outreach, and helps reduce the administrative burden on clients and staff. See the discussion about partnerships with civic tech organizations for additional information about implementing alternative methods of communications during outreach, application, and renewal.

^a See Civilla, Code for America, and MDHHS 2019.

^b “LA’Message,” Code for America, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.codeforamerica.org/features/louisiana-demo/>.

5. Adopt Practical Phone Call Processes

State, community partners, advocates, and civic tech organizations can adopt practical phone call processes, such on-demand interviews and “heads-up” calls and texts, during application and renewal to improve customer access to public benefits.

TABLE 5
Strategies for Adopting Practical Phone Call Processes

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
“Heads-up” calls and texts		x	x		x			x	x	x
On-demand Interviews		x			x		x	x		x

Source: The authors’ study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

“HEADS-UP” CALLS AND TEXTS

A two-call system can give clients a “heads-up” about a call from their caseworker and increase the pickup rate among clients. In the two-call system, caseworkers call and leave a message explaining who they are and why they are calling—also giving the number they will call from again in ten minutes. In Civilla’s Project One Day with Michigan, which aimed to make same-day determinations for benefits, the pickup rate increased by 45 to 60 percent when using this system, according to people involved with

the project. Similarly, a texting pilot where applicants received a text letting them know a caseworker would be calling from a particular number at a specific time increased pickup rates by about 70 percent.

ON-DEMAND INTERVIEWS

On-demand interviews allow applicants to call at a time that is convenient for them without needing to schedule an appointment or be available at a preassigned time. This low-cost, low-tech practice can significantly increase access to benefits. Though state agencies have been allowed to offer phone interviews as an alternative to face-to-face interviews for several years, clients sometimes do not receive clear and timely information about the time of their phone interview. On-demand interviews avoid this challenge and can increase application completion and efficiency, in part by reducing the need to schedule interviews or reschedule missed interviews (CBPP and CLASP 2018).⁹

6. Reduce Program Application Siloes

States can revise policies and practices and partner with civic tech organizations on technology to reduce program application siloes. Strategies to reduce program application siloes include joint applications and linked eligibility.

TABLE 6
Strategies for Reducing Program Application Siloes

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Joint applications		x			x		x	x		x
Linked eligibility		x				x	x	x		x

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

JOINT APPLICATIONS

Joint applications allow people to apply for multiple programs at the same time, ideally saving them time and effort. Joint applications that are set up as “opt-out” will automatically consider eligibility for all programs included in the application, further increasing benefits access, compared with “opt-in”

approaches that require applicants to actively check a box or otherwise indicate their interest in applying for each program included in the joint application. Illinois's ABE (Application for Benefits Eligibility) portal includes SNAP, TANF cash assistance and Medicaid and was recently changed from a strictly "opt-in" approach to now require applicants to actively select "yes" or "no" for each program before proceeding. Illinois's joint paper application for these benefits also includes "yes" and "no" boxes but applicants will be reviewed for any programs for which neither box is checked. States like Illinois that already have joint applications could consider adding more programs to that application, though some experts warn about a tipping point after which including too many programs on a joint application can begin to reduce its efficiency. (For more on cross-program enrollment, see Ambegaokar, Neuberger, and Rosenbaum 2017.)

Auto-referral is an alternative to joint applications that can automatically direct people to apply for other programs they may be eligible for, even though they may need to complete a separate application for that program. For example, if someone is applying for SNAP and has a child younger than age 5, they are likely eligible for WIC.

LINKED ELIGIBILITY

Linked eligibility and enrollment can allow people to efficiently access multiple programs. There are several ways to link eligibility and enrollment across programs. In Medicaid, states may use express lane eligibility, which allows them to use information from TANF, SNAP, the National School Lunch Program, and other programs to determine children's eligibility for Medicaid or CHIP. In addition, people receiving Medicaid can be adjunctively eligible for WIC, meaning that the WIC program finds them income eligible. Though this does not automatically enroll applicants, it does streamline their application requirements. Strengthening referrals from Medicaid to WIC could improve enrollment. Four state pilots with CBPP and BDT explored data sharing between Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC to identify people who were adjunctively eligible for WIC but not enrolled and provide subsequent outreach to those people (Maneely and Neuberger 2021).

(For a more detailed framework for understanding these linkages, see Ambegaokar, Neuberger, and Rosenbaum 2017.)

7. Revise Unnecessary and Burdensome Policies

States can improve benefits access by revising unnecessary and burdensome policies. They can expand identity-proofing options, adopt reasonable compatibility thresholds, and raise or eliminate asset limits.

TABLE 7

Strategies for Revising Unnecessary and Burdensome Policies

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Expand identity-proofing options		x	x			x	x	x		
Reasonable compatibility thresholds		x	x			x		x		
High or no asset limits		x	x			x		x		

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

EXPAND IDENTITY-PROOFING OPTIONS

Sometimes when clients engage with state websites, such as when they access benefit information through an online case management portal, they first need to prove their identities. Though there is a valid security need for verifying their identity, the required method for identity proofing can leave some clients without access. This method, called remote identify proofing (RDIP), typically asks users to respond to questions about information that would be found in a credit report, such as information about their mortgage or a car loan. For “credit-invisible” people who do not have credit reports with this information, the system will not be able to generate these questions and the person will not be able to prove their identity and access the portal. This disproportionately affects people of color, returning citizens, and people experiencing homelessness. States ideally should establish systems that do not rely on RDIP, but if they do use RDIP they should take care to include alternative options. (For more information on identity proofing, see Wagner and Gaudet 2020.)

ADOPT REASONABLE COMPATIBILITY THRESHOLDS

Reasonable compatibility thresholds are used when data provided by an applicant and data from an electronic data source do not match, and the data provided by the applicant is less than the eligibility standard while the data from the electronic data source is more than the eligibility standard. If the difference in the amounts reported by the applicant and the electronic source is small, states are allowed to use a reasonable compatibility threshold to consider the applicant eligible. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois used a 5 percent threshold,¹⁰ but the state increased the threshold to 30 percent during the pandemic.¹¹ (For more on reasonable compatibility thresholds, see Wagner 2016.)

RAISE OR ELIMINATE ASSET LIMITS

Increasing the asset limit or removing the asset test requirements all together reduces the amount of documentation clients must provide to verify income and reduces the administrative load on staff as well. Because the vast majority of clients have assets well below the limits, removing this unnecessary requirement significantly reduces burden.

8. Streamline Renewals

States can improve benefits access by streamlining renewal processes through changes to policy, technology, processes, or practices. Strategies for streamlining renewals include prepopulating information in renewal forms, automatically renewing program eligibility with information already in state systems, lengthening certification periods or allowing continuous eligibility, and aligning renewal dates across benefits.

TABLE 8
Strategies for Streamlining Renewals

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Prepopulate information for recertification			X		X		X	X		
Streamline Medicaid renewal through ex parte			X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Longer certification periods or continuous eligibility			X		X	X	X	X		
Align renewal dates across programs			X		X	X	X	X		

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

PREPOPULATE INFORMATION FOR RENEWAL

States could increase automation of the renewal process by prepopulating information in the renewal forms with data provided during the application process. This would reduce the need for clients to repeatedly provide the same information and could be structured so that clients are required to review the prepopulated information for accuracy. Reducing the burden on clients could increase the likelihood

that they meet redetermination deadlines and reduce the number of people who lose their benefits at renewal (Baudoin, Weiss, and Hensley-Quinn 2014). One caveat is that if the information in the system is very out of date, it can create more work for clients to correct old information, rather than just providing current information. Nonetheless, it is still a good approach to have a “no changes” option instead of always requiring clients to complete a new form.

STREAMLINE MEDICAID RENEWAL THROUGH EX PARTE AND EXPRESS LANE ELIGIBILITY

Medicaid agencies can streamline the renewal process through “ex parte” renewals, in which Medicaid recipients are automatically renewed using the data already captured by the participant’s application, or additional electronic materials. Ex parte Medicaid renewals do not require the recipient to take any action, so the renewal is automatically completed and there is no gap in benefit receipt (Wagner 2021).

State Medicaid agencies can also use Express Lane Eligibility (ELE) for automatic Medicaid renewal for children receiving SNAP. ELE allows Medicaid agencies to use the income information available from SNAP to renew benefits for children (CBPP 2020).

LONGER CERTIFICATION PERIODS OR CONTINUOUS ELIGIBILITY

Increasing the length of certification periods and continuous eligibility for specific populations can reduce churn rate at renewal. For example, WIC participation rates drop significantly after age 1, so the retention rate for WIC recipients could be improved if the certification period is increased to two years (Baudoin, Weiss, and Hensley-Quinn 2014).

Illinois opted into the SNAP Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) waiver, which simplifies recertification by removing the interview requirement, increasing the certification period from 12 to 24 months, and increasing the font size on forms for older adults. The ESAP waiver also includes the option to increase the certification period to 36 months, although Illinois did not request that length.¹² Reducing barriers at the recertification period for SNAP helps older adults continue receiving the benefits for which they are eligible.

Illinois could consider continuous eligibility in Medicaid for adults, in addition to the current use of continuous eligibility for children, when the public health emergency and required continuous eligibility end. Continuous eligibility for adults could include flexibilities that allow 12 months of benefits regardless of temporary increases in pay that might make the adult ineligible (Wagner and Solomon 2021).

ALIGN RENEWAL DATES ACROSS BENEFITS

Aligning the renewal dates across benefit programs reduces the burden on clients to keep track of multiple deadlines and could reduce the need for collecting new information or documents. Clients may not know they need to take action on renewal deadlines and find out they missed the deadline when they lose their benefits. Because of the pandemic, many people have not had to recertify to continue receiving benefits. Streamlining the deadlines across benefit programs could help flag what clients need to do to continue to receive benefits.

9. Expand Eligibility and Benefits

States can improve benefits access by changing policies to expand eligibility and benefits. Such strategies include raising TANF income-eligibility thresholds, increasing TANF cash grant amounts, passing through child support payments to families receiving TANF, expanding SNAP eligibility and access, and expanding options for redeeming WIC benefits.

TABLE 9
Strategies for Expanding Eligibility and Benefits

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Increase TANF cash grant amounts; pass-through and disregard child support				X		X		X		
SNAP statewide ABAWD waiver				X		X		X		
Extend SNAP eligibility				X		X		X		
Expand WIC redemption rules				X		X		X		

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

Notes: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, ABAWD = able-bodied adults without dependents, WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

TANF: INCREASE ELIGIBILITY, GRANT AMOUNTS, AND PASS THROUGH AND DISREGARD CHILD SUPPORT

Under federal TANF rules, each state establishes TANF eligibility criteria and benefit amounts. States can increase access to TANF by expanding eligibility and increasing the size of the cash grant. In July 2020, a family of three in Illinois could be eligible for TANF only if their monthly income were no greater than \$889 a month, which was less than 50 percent of the federal poverty level. This means that even a family living well below the federal poverty level would have income too high to qualify for TANF cash assistance. TANF benefits in Illinois, at \$533 a month for a family of three, were equivalent to 30 percent of the federal poverty level (Dehry et al. 2022). Similarly, changing the child support pass-through and disregard policy could allow more money to be passed to families and not considered when calculating eligibility or benefit amounts. In January 2023, the Illinois General Assembly changed the state's approach so that parents' child support payments will go to their children receiving TANF rather than being retained by the state, and the child support payments will not reduce the families' TANF grants.¹³ Previously, Illinois passed through and disregarded only the first \$100 of child support collected, or \$200 for a family with two or more children (Dehry et al. 2022).

SNAP: SEEK STATEWIDE ABAWD WAIVER AND EXPAND ELIGIBILITY

In SNAP, states can request waivers for areas with high unemployment, which exempt able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) from meeting the three-month time limit. Currently, Illinois has a statewide ABAWD waiver. States can also use administrative flexibility to extend eligibility. For example, states could extend SNAP eligibility to people receiving TANF-funded services, like college student aid funded by the state that could make college students eligible for SNAP. This type of flexibility could allow significant numbers of students to gain access to SNAP. States can also implement programs like the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program, which allows some SNAP recipients to purchase hot food at authorized restaurants, increasing access to food among those who do not have a kitchen.¹⁴ Illinois began participating in the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in 2022.¹⁵

WIC: EXPAND REDEMPTION RULES

In WIC, states could expand redemption rules, allowing for online ordering. (For more on online ordering, see "WIC Supports Online Ordering and Transactions in WIC," US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, November 2, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/supports-online-ordering-transactions>; see also "Blueprint for WIC Online Ordering Projects by Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition" at Gretchen Swanson 2021.)

10. Partner with Civic Tech and Others to Implement Strategies

States can improve benefits access in partnership with civic tech organizations and others who have specialized knowledge and expertise in implementing many of the strategies described in this report.

TABLE 10

Strategies for Partnering with Civic Tech and Others to Implement Strategies

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Primary Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
Partner with civic tech and others to implement strategies				x	x		x	x		x

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

States face time and knowledge constraints to fully developing and implementing these strategies, but partnerships with civic tech organizations or others with specialized knowledge can help. Civic tech partnerships have helped several states redesign their outreach, application, and renewal processes. For example, the BenePhilly SNAP Demonstration Project, a partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and Benefits Data Trust, piloted ways to increase SNAP among senior households in Philadelphia. The pilot found that allowing BDT to help seniors complete their applications and interviews in one phone call increased enrollment by 23 percent (BDT 2012). However, these partnerships may require complex data-sharing permissions and trusting relationships with partners who can protect and secure data.

HIGHLIGHT 4

Examples of State Partnerships with Civic Tech

Partnering with civic tech organizations is one way to effectively pilot strategies for increasing benefits access. As discussed throughout the report, there are many examples of successful pilots in states partnering with organizations like Benefits Data Trust, Civilla, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and Code for America. For example, through a successful collaboration with Code for America, Minnesota developed MNbenefits, a streamlined online application for multiple programs that takes applicants fewer than 20 minutes to complete, includes easy document upload, is mobile friendly,

and is available in Spanish. This partnership provided positive outcomes for Minnesota residents and is unique in that the state owns the application service delivery technology and is responsible for incremental updates.¹⁶ For more information on outcomes for various state partnerships, see Code for America's Integrated Benefits program and Social Safety Net Innovation Lab.^a

Additionally, Nava has partnered with Montana in an effort to increase accessibility to WIC benefits through updates to technological processes. Strategies to reduce barriers to access for residents enrolled in WIC include continuing to offer and improve remote options for engaging with program requirements, implementing central management systems using APIs to streamline access to data within an agency, and improving access to program tools for participants.^b For additional information on this partnership, see Nava's Montana Project.

See also Civilla's hub for using technology with a human-centered design to improve benefits access at the state level.^c

Overall, there is evidence of successful partnerships between state human service agencies and civic tech organizations to improve the accessibility of benefits for residents eligible for and enrolled in benefit programs. Partnering with civic tech organizations can help ease the implementation burden on state agencies and assist in overcoming barriers to access across benefit programs.

^a "Code for America's Integrated Benefits program and Social Safety Net Innovation Lab" (Press release), Code for America, April 12, 2022, <https://codeforamerica.org/news/audacious-project-investment-to-launch-safety-net-innovation-lab/>.

^b See Martelle Esposito and Sasha Reid, "How APIs Can Help WIC Better Meet Staff and Participants' Needs," Nava, April 13, 2022, <https://www.navapbc.com/insights/api-standard-wic-mis/>; "Unlocking Technology for WIC with the State of Montana," Nava, May 11, 2022, <https://www.navapbc.com/news/unlocking-technology-wic-montana>.

^c "Human-Centered Design," Civilla, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://civilla.org/human-centered-design>.

Role for Philanthropy

Philanthropy can play a vital role in improving public benefits access by making investments that promote sustainable implementation of the strategies discussed in this report. Philanthropic funding can support all the actors engaged in designing, testing, and implementing these strategies: states, community organizations, civic tech, research organizations, and community members. We discuss a few of these options below.

- **Fund community partners' ongoing initiatives.** Many community partners are already engaged in outreach, application, and renewal strategies that help states increase access to benefits. For example, state agencies are working with community partners identified as primary partners in SNAP outreach plans. But community partners often have limited funds to cover the costs of training, implementation, and staffing. Philanthropic dollars can help fill these gaps. More funding to community-based organizations that do outreach and enrollment could also help

them assist applicants with multiple benefit programs and could incentivize collaboration among organizations that do outreach across different programs (Wikle 2021).

- **Leverage philanthropic dollars to access additional federal funds.** Community organizations can use blended public and private funding to support multiple initiatives, maximize their impact, and leverage federal funds. For example, states and their community partners identified in state SNAP Outreach plans can be reimbursed for up to 50 percent of the cost of approved outreach activities and application assistance. Greater investments of philanthropic funding could support SNAP partner organizations and allow state and partner organizations to draw down additional 50–50 federal match funding.
- **Fund the design and development of benefit navigation tools.** Several of the strategies identified in this report include a role for civic tech organizations, which play an important role in designing and developing tools that improve benefits access. Philanthropy can support this important work.
- **Fund engagement with community members.** When states engage community members as advisors and cocreators, states may not be able to compensate participants for their time, but this may be a role for philanthropy.
- **Assist community partners and research organizations in piloting and evaluating strategies.** Before launching full-scale changes intended to improve benefits access, states and community organizations can pilot the strategies, monitor and tweak the implementation, and evaluate the outcomes. Philanthropic dollars can support these pilots and evaluations to hone the strategy and make the case for large-scale state investments.
- **Support technical assistance.** Philanthropic funding can supplement state leadership to support implementation of various strategies. For example, philanthropic funding could support technical assistance to states on how to procure useful technology, diagnose process inefficiencies, facilitate cross-agency prioritization, and train caseworkers for better cross-program alignment.
- **Fund state systems change.** State systems-level change can be daunting, but philanthropic funding can make it possible. As a key example, the Ford Foundation, with crucial support from the Open Society Foundations, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and JPMorgan Chase, funded the five-year Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative that was a first-ever effort to improve access to key public benefits in multiple states, including Illinois, through flexible philanthropic funding and focused external support (Hahn 2016). Relatively small

(\$250,000 per year) focused, flexible grants to states allowed them to hire (either as state employees or contractors) data analysts, business process specialists, and staff dedicated to managing and coordinating their efforts. In addition to the grants, the WSS initiative provided states with peer-learning opportunities and technical assistance in child care, health, SNAP, data, and business process improvement. Further, the structure of the initiative—the grant, TA calls, progress reports, and conferences—brought visibility and external accountability that helped state agency leaders and staff keep their focus on improving benefit access and retention, even through political transitions and in the face of competing priorities. Though all participating states had prior intentions to improve benefits access, most noted that they could not have achieved as much as they did without the support of the philanthropically funded WSS initiative.

Appendix.

FIGURE A.1
Strategy Matrix

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Key Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
1. Treat clients with dignity and humanity										
Simple language and clear communication	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Human-centered application design		x	x		x		x	x	x	x
Welcoming local office environment and culture				x	x			x		
2. Engage community										
Partner with community organizations	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	
Engage community members and program participants	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	
Engage with advocates	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	
3. Conduct intentional, data-driven outreach										
Data-driven outreach	x				x		x	x		
Targeted population outreach	x				x		x	x	x	x

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Key Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
4. Use technology to simplify application and recertification processes										
Mobile-friendly applications		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Electronic signatures		x	x		x	x	x	x		x
Telephonic signatures		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Online scheduling		x	x			x	x	x	x	x
Document uploads		x	x				x	x		x
Texting and two-way texting	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
5. Adopt practical phone call processes										
“Heads-up” calls and texts		x	x		x			x	x	x
On-demand Interviews		x			x		x	x		x
6. Reduce program application siloes										
Joint applications		x			x		x	x		x
Linked eligibility		x				x	x	x		x
7. Revise unnecessary burdensome policies										
Expand identity proofing options		x	x			x		x		
Reasonable compatibility thresholds		x	x			x		x		
High or no asset limits		x	x			x		x		

Strategy	Customer Access Point				Intervention			Key Actors		
	Outreach	Application	Renewal	Cross-cutting	Process and practice changes	Policy changes	Technology changes	State	Community partners & advocates	Civic tech, etc.
8. Streamline renewals										
Prepopulate information for recertification			X		X		X	X		
Streamline Medicaid renewal through ex parte			X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Longer certification periods or continuous eligibility			X		X	X	X	X		
Align renewal dates across programs			X		X	X	X	X		
9. Expand eligibility and benefits										
Increase TANF cash grant amounts; pass-through and disregard child support				X		X		X		
SNAP statewide ABAWD waiver				X		X		X		
Extend SNAP eligibility				X		X		X		
Expand WIC redemption rules				X		X		X		
10. Partner with civic tech and others										
Partner with civic tech and others to implement strategies				X	X		X	X		X

Source: The authors' study of strategies for improving public benefits access and retention.

Notes: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, ABAWD = able-bodied adults without dependents, WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Notes

- ¹ The Center for Law and Social Policy's (CLASP's) *Understanding State Contexts for Benefit Administration* (Lower-Basch and Russell 2021) provides information on the variation across states and the factors that influence state administration of benefit programs, including information on program participation and reach; political and economic context; governance, operations, and technology; and state initiatives and policy choices
- ² Angela Guo, "Addressing Structural Racism in Social Impact: Lessons from the Social Safety Net," Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, August 28, 2020, <https://beeckcenter.georgetown.edu/addressing-structural-racism-in-social-impact-lessons-from-the-social-safety-net/>.
- ³ The Urban analysis used the term "Hispanic," as this is the primary terminology used by the US Census Bureau in the American Community Survey, which provides the household-level data for the analysis. Survey respondents are asked to report race and ethnicity, including whether or not they identify as being of "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin."
- ⁴ "HelpHub," Shriver Center on Poverty Law, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://helphub.povertylaw.org/home.html?returnUrl=%2findex.html>.
- ⁵ "About the Work Group," Washington Poverty Reduction Work Group, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://dismantlepovertyinwa.com/about-the-work-group/>.
- ⁶ Under US immigration policy, people can be denied legal permanent resident status or entry to the US if they are, or are expected to become, a "public charge," defined as "primarily dependent on the government for subsistence"—see Field Guidance on Deportability and Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds, 64 Fed. Reg. 101 (March 26, 1999). This policy has long applied to people receiving cash assistance or long-term government-funded institutionalization. In 2019, the Trump Administration implemented regulations that allowed use of noncash assistance programs, such as Medicaid, SNAP, and housing assistance, to be considered as a public charge ground for deportation or inadmissibility—see Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds. 84 Fed. Reg. 157 (August 14, 2019). Subsequently, many immigrant families avoided receiving public benefits for which they were eligible (Haley et al. 2021).
- ⁷ "Mobile Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/?menuitem=011fca0d-9756-4f48-b352-d58f343696bf>.
- ⁸ "Boost in Enrollment, Drop in Missed Appointments After WIC Goes Remote," Dismantling Poverty in Washington, March 8, 2021, <https://dismantlepovertyinwa.com/wic-goes-remote/>.
- ⁹ "Best Practices for Implementing the Telephone Interview to Reduce SNAP Client and Administrative Burdens," Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), February 2017, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/best-practice-snap-telephone-interviews.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ "Table 9: Income Verification and Real-Time Eligibility Determinations, January 2020," Kaiser Family Foundation, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://files.kff.org/attachment/Table-9-Medicaid-and-CHIP-Eligibility-as-of-Jan-2020.pdf>.
- ¹¹ "Summary: Reasonable Compatibility Threshold," policy memo, Illinois Department of Human Services, July 13, 2020, <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=123618#:~:text=Due%20to%20the%20COVID%2D19,communication%20required%20when%20verifying%20income>.
- ¹² "Elderly Simplified Application Project Guidance," US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, last updated December 16, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/elderly-simplified-application-project>.

- ¹³ Finance—High-Impact Business, S. B. 1720, 102nd Ill. Gen. Assembly (Jan. 9, 2023), <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/billstatus.asp?DocNum=1720&GAID=16&GA=102&DocTypeID=SB&LegID=134360&SessionID=110> (see Public Act 102-1115, <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/102/PDF/102-1115.pdf>).
- ¹⁴ “SNAP Restaurant Meals Program,” US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, last updated June 3, 2022, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer/restaurant-meals-program>.
- ¹⁵ “SNAP Restaurant Meals Program,” Illinois Department of Human Services, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=134997>.
- ¹⁶ Dustin Palmer, “Four Lessons from Our Journey to Deliver Human-Centered Integrated Benefits,” Code for America, May 20, 2021, <https://codeforamerica.org/news/four-lessons-from-our-journey-to-deliver-human-centered-integrated-benefits/>.

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