Streamlining Access to Work Supports: A National Issue for Low-Income Families

Olivia Golden, Heather Sandstrom

Abstract

States can both save money and serve low-income families better if they create integrated eligibility systems for all the support programs they administer, propose Olivia Golden and Heather Sandstrom in this commentary for Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity.

During the Great Recession, state governments saw caseloads for public assistance programs spike. Yet as these states face rising family need, they also struggle to deal with tightening state budgets. One way for states to address these challenges is by making it easier for low-income families to access and retain work supports, which can stabilize parents’ employment and improve family well-being. But with the significant differences in eligibility rules and service delivery across programs, they often can’t work together as an effective system. That’s why, to truly help these vulnerable families, we need to streamline the pathways that provide support.

Right now most of the supports we provide to families are “silied.” Each federal work support program is administered by a different agency, and the same is true of many state and county programs.

Funding structures also differ by program. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, for instance, are entitlement programs, so any eligible individual can claim benefits. The child care subsidy program, on the other hand, is funded through a fixed federal block grant, and state resource caps usually mean that not all eligible families get help. Complicating matters is the fact that eligibility criteria as well as application and documentation requirements vary by program.

The structure results in clients applying for one program without realizing they may also be eligible for another. Families seeking several benefits may need to visit multiple offices, speak with a number of caseworkers, and complete numerous applications requiring similar information. Duplicative applications burden would-be participants and bog down caseworkers. This results in higher administrative costs, increased errors, and added strains on agencies and staff.

The good news is that there is momentum for change. For example, demand for streamlining has increased with the expansion of Medicaid eligibility. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) has created an urgent need for states to develop more efficient and integrated eligibility systems because millions of people newly eligible for health coverage will already be enrolled in SNAP or other assistance programs. ACA allows eligibility information from other programs to be shared with Medicaid via an “express lane” to expedite the approval process.

Taking advantage of online applications, document imaging, and other tech tools to share information is essential to meeting low-income families’ needs for support and states’ needs for greater efficiency.

Some states are betting that streamlined approaches to helping eligible families access and stay on work support programs are not only good for families, but also, in the long term, administratively effective and cost efficient. The double hit of increased caseloads and likely decreasing staff and resources has already prompted some states to move integrating and streamlining programs to the top of their agendas.

Several of these “vanguard” states can offer promising insights into future efforts to better facilitate access to benefits.

For example, take the Work Support Strategies: Streamlining Access, Strengthening Families (WSS) demonstration project. With funding from the Ford Foundation and support from the Open Society Foundations and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, WSS is directed and evaluated by the Urban Institute with technical assistance from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Currently, nine states participating in the WSS design year are diagnosing and assessing their program delivery systems to develop a plan for policy and practice changes that will make it easier for low-income families to apply for and receive the benefits for which they are eligible. Notably, the regional and political diversity of the 27 state applicants for the design year signify that streamlining access to work supports is a
cross-cutting, national issue.

WSS grantees’ work demonstrates just how informative program data and an analysis of business processes can be. Monitoring the flow of caseloads, the timeliness of processing an application and determining eligibility, and the reasons for denials are critical steps in assessing a state’s performance and the way it does business. Some states are finding that many clients fall off a program after an agency fails to recertify on time.

Even if families don’t give up in frustration, churning on and off a program means they experience a short-term break in services. So, rather than let families risk losing their child care - and, potentially, their jobs - skimping on groceries, or not taking a sick child to the doctor, several participating states are making reducing churning a key theme of their plans.

Making headway against churning and other problems that bedevil benefit-eligible low-income families will require further integrating systems and streamlining access procedures. To do that, states must embrace the idea of changing the way they do business—or view streamlining access not as a change but as something that always should have been.

More states can learn from the WSS experience, and join the growing movement of governments that are implementing innovative solutions to improve access to services at a time of increased need and increased constraints.

Heather Sandstrom is the Work Support Strategies project manager and a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute.

Olivia Golden is the Work Support Strategies project director and an Institute fellow in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute.

Other Publications by the Authors
- Olivia Golden
- Heather Sandstrom

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