

# Accessible Benefits Information

Reducing Administrative Burden and Improving Equitable Access  
through Clear Communication About Safety Net Benefits

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# Table of Contents

<b>Guidebook Credits</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Principles and Best Practices for Accessible Content</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Getting Started with and Scaling Accessible Content</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CASE STUDY: University of Michigan Poverty Solutions: Accessible Content for Economic Recovery</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>CASE STUDY: Propel: Timely, Localized Updates to Benefits Information</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CASE STUDY: New York City Benefits and Programs: Designing, Translating, and Scaling Accessible Content</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CASE STUDY: City of San José: Machine Learning for Translation</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>The Time is Now: Improve Equitable Access Through Clear Communication About Safety Net Benefits</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Resources</b>	<b>33</b>

# Guidebook Credits

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This guide 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, with a goal of spreading proven practices more widely.

To discuss this guide further, feel free to reach out to us at [digitalbenefits@georgetown.edu](mailto:digitalbenefits@georgetown.edu).

# Introduction

Information about public benefits is complex—including specific eligibility requirements, application processes, variations by state, the different agencies involved, and so on—and often published in multiple locations including legislation, agency guidance, bulletins, websites, and social media. Additionally, as benefits policies are transformed into public-facing resources, the content needs to remain legally binding and accurate to the program rules.

Complex benefits information creates unnecessary barriers for residents and navigators trying to understand what’s relevant to them and take action towards receiving benefits. This is especially acute in moments of crisis like COVID-19, where program changes are happening rapidly.

There have been great strides in the U.S. Federal government and in some states and local governments to improve content accessibility, including the [Plain Language Writing Act of 2010](#)<sup>1</sup> and related executive orders, that have helped democratize the use of clear language in communications. Complex information, requirements, and processes continue to be identified as administrative burdens that impact some populations more than others.<sup>2</sup> Larger policy changes may be needed to fully solve for all administrative burdens. However, there is a tremendous opportunity to begin to address equity in accessing and receiving government benefits. Agencies can reduce complexity and improve information about the services by considering the perspectives of people who are accessing the programs.

In this guide, we focus on ways that public benefits administrators and delivery organizations can make content about public benefits and programs more accessible. For example, writing in plain language to be understood by people at varying levels of literacy, translation of content into languages other than English, co-creating and testing messaging with residents and other stakeholders, and using technology tools to help manage and scale content.

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<sup>1</sup> Law and requirements. plainlanguage.gov. (n.d.). <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/law/>

<sup>2</sup> Young, S. D. (2021, July 20). Study to Identify Methods to Assess Equity: Report to the President. White House. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-E013985-Implementation\\_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-E013985-Implementation_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf)

# Principles and Best Practices for Accessible Content

Through our research on government, nonprofit, academic, and private sector organizations that are working to improve access to safety net benefits, we have developed the following principles for accessible benefits content and the best practices of organizations.

## **Accessible content is:**

- **Centered on the people who read and use the content**  
Accessible content is written to be used by the greatest number of people including beneficiaries, navigators, and policymakers. The information centers the needs of these groups and considers how to meet those specific needs, while also creating accessibility for all audiences. Consider the audiences for your content. If possible, test the content with multiple groups to improve accessibility.
- **Written in plain language**  
Using language that is simple and without jargon, acronyms, or complex terminology makes the content more accessible. One way to think about plain language is through writing for grade-level equivalency comprehension, such as a “fifth-grade reading level” rather than “post-graduate reading level.”
- **Organized with a hierarchy**  
Hierarchy helps readers navigate to the most important information. It can include content elements such as program titles or application dates, as well as how to style and order the text so the most important pieces of information are easiest to find.
- **Offered in multiple languages**  
Multilingual content increases accessibility for people who do not speak English as their first language. Which languages to include should be assessed based on the people who will use and read the content. It is important to consider both the most widely used languages based on geography, which is available via U.S. Census data, as well as underrepresented populations who may be a focus for a program or service. Be sure to consider particular dialects or indigenous languages. When your content is first written in plain language English, it makes for better translations.

## **Organizations that create accessible content:**

- **Use collaborative tools**  
Collaborative tools and products help organizations engage colleagues and stakeholders in content creation. These can include shared text documents that allow for collaboration and iteration, as well as more advanced content management tools that allow for co-creation and enforce editorial workflows.

- **Invest in capacity building**

Invest in training to expand the number of people who can create accessible content. In many organizations, multiple individuals and teams produce content, and only having one accessible content expert can create a bottleneck. By investing in training more people to create accessible content, setting up style guides, and requiring accessible practices, organizations are able to shift to accessibility as the rule rather than exception.

While the best-in-class organizations and products achieve all of these principles and best practices, it's possible to start small and scale over time. In the next section we'll show you how to get started, followed by case studies that demonstrate how organizations are putting these principles and best practices into use and illustrate how they can be replicated for the further accessibility of benefits information.

## Getting Started With and Scaling Accessible Content

Every organization has work they can start doing today to improve the accessibility of their content.

### Consider starting small

This report showcases examples at varying levels of complexity, but it's possible to start small and scale incrementally.

For example:

- University of Michigan Poverty Solutions started with a guide to one benefit, Coronavirus Stimulus Payments, and replicated the same approach for the Child Tax Credit (CTC). [See case study.](#)
- Propel first created a Benefits Hub on its FreshEBT app to help its users understand changes to benefits made in response to the pandemic, offering information about SNAP, Unemployment, and Economic Impact (stimulus) Payments. Since then they've added information about more benefits, including the Child Tax Credit and Emergency Rental Assistance, under the app's new name, Providers. [See case study.](#)

## Audit your content

Consider the goals of different content and how content could be redesigned or rewritten to better meet those goals and the needs of residents.

For example:

- University of Michigan Poverty Solutions and Civilla reviewed and created content with “an FAQ mindset,” thinking through what their audience would most want to know and adding additional FAQs based on user feedback. [See case study.](#)

## Engage your audience

Consider how to start involving people and incorporating what they need.

For example:

- NYC Opportunity conducted user research to identify key questions of residents and navigators seeking benefits information and iteratively designed and tested prototypes of the program guides. [See case study.](#)
- University of Michigan Poverty Solutions and Civilla tested content with people in their target audience, asking what parts of the content grabbed attention or were confusing. [See case study.](#)
- The City of San José used translators for Spanish and Vietnamese to help recruit users who speak those languages and to validate translated content. [See case study.](#)

## Use technology to manage & distribute content

For states in the midst of a website or service redesign, it's a great time to consider a new process for creating, managing and distributing content.

For example:

- NYC Opportunity has a powerful content management system in place to organize and distribute content. They advise others to start small, but consider the scalability and interoperability to work with other systems and scale as needed. [See case study.](#)

# University of Michigan Poverty Solutions: Accessible Content for Economic Recovery

## Introduction

The need for simple, actionable guidance about public benefits became broadly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when millions of U.S. residents—including 12 million people with incomes low enough that they are not required to file income taxes—were at risk of not receiving their stimulus payments unless they took steps to report their income and address/bank account information to the Internal Revenue Service, or file taxes.<sup>3</sup> These payments were impactful, later shown to boost food security and reduce other hardships for low income households,<sup>4</sup> yet many people in need who did not receive payments were left confused about why they didn't receive them.<sup>5,6</sup>

Some of the first and clearest guidance about what to do to receive stimulus payments came from [Poverty Solutions](#),<sup>7</sup> an action-based policy research center at the University of Michigan, on their [Coronavirus stimulus payment website](#).<sup>8</sup> The site, which launched just two days after the first stimulus payments were issued in April 2020,<sup>9</sup> garnered over 170,000 unique views in the first two months after launch, and kept getting unique views for a total of 600,000 by the end of the year.<sup>10</sup>

This type of public, plain-language resource was a slight departure from much of Poverty Solutions' previous work. Launched in 2016, the center offered research and evaluation to support community-based poverty reduction initiatives, conducted policy and data analyses as a partner to state government, and advised on policy at the local, state, and federal levels.

3 Holtzblatt, J., & Karpman, M. (2020, July). Who Did Not Get the Economic Impact Payments by Mid-to-Late May, and Why? Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102565/who-did-not-get-the-economic-impact-payments-by-mid-to-late-may-and-why.pdf>

4 Deparle, J. (2021, June 2). Stimulus checks substantially reduced hardship, study shows. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/02/us/politics/stimulus-checks-economic-hardship.html>

5 Singletary, M. (2020, July 1). Perspective | new data reveal how many poor Americans were deprived of \$500 stimulus payment for their children. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/30/new-data-reveal-how-many-poor-americans-were-deprived-500-stimulus-payment-their-children/>

6 Cooney, P., & Taylor, S. (2021, April). Listening to SNAP participants to improve access to the expanded child tax credit. Poverty Solutions. [https://poverty.umich.edu/files/2021/04/CTC-Access\\_Propel\\_Poverty-Solutions\\_042321.pdf](https://poverty.umich.edu/files/2021/04/CTC-Access_Propel_Poverty-Solutions_042321.pdf)

7 University of Michigan. (n.d.). Affecting Change TO PREVENT & ALLEVIATE POVERTY. Poverty Solutions. <https://poverty.umich.edu/>

8 University of Michigan. (2020). 2020 coronavirus stimulus payment. Poverty Solutions. <https://poverty.umich.edu/stimulus-checks/>

9 Slagter, L. (2020, April 13). New website answers Michiganders' questions about federal stimulus checks. Poverty Solutions. <https://poverty.umich.edu/2020/04/13/new-website-answers-michiganders-questions-about-federal-stimulus-checks/>

10 Soka, S., & Cooney, P. (2021, November 19). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.



However, the impact of one of their 2019 projects—a [resource guide](#) that detailed 26 sources for home repair funding available to qualifying Detroit residents<sup>11</sup> made Poverty Solutions more aware of the need for plain-language translation of policies directed toward those who stood to benefit from them. The home repair guide, produced in collaboration with city and state government agencies, community coalitions and nonprofits, churches, utilities, and banks, was publicly received as what one Detroit community leader said, “the single best piece of research [Poverty Solutions has] done.”<sup>12</sup>

## Learning Human-Centered Design, Plain Language, and Content Design with Civilla

Upon learning how the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) planned to distribute the first stimulus payments, Poverty Solutions and other organizations that work to reduce poverty anticipated many of the barriers that low-income U.S. residents faced.<sup>13</sup> State and local governments were urged to conduct aggressive outreach to inform people who were unlikely to receive a payment automatically—primarily low-income non-tax filers, and people who are unbanked—about the steps they needed to take.

This is when Poverty Solutions connected with [Civilla](#), a Detroit-based nonprofit design firm lauded for its recent redesign and combination of Michigan’s public benefit applications. Civilla partnered with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to interview benefit applicants and caseworkers, then used that input to create, test, and refine a public benefit application that was 80% shorter than the sum of the previous versions and reduced processing time by half.<sup>14</sup> Key to this success was Civilla’s use of human-centered design, which included their translation of lengthy, confusing questions into plain language and their use of content design principles.<sup>15</sup>

Poverty Solutions and Civilla embarked on a rapid user research and design process to produce the [Coronavirus stimulus payment website](#). They translated information from IRS bulletins into clear questions and answers about the stimulus payment that walks people through a step-by-step process to provide the IRS with their current address, file a free, simple tax return, or open an affordable and safe bank account, while also providing links and phone numbers readers might need. Then, Civilla tested that language with people in the site’s target audience, asking what parts of the content grabbed attention or was confusing. The users’ feedback got incorporated and prompted Poverty Solutions and Civilla to add more questions and answers.

11 Ruggiero, R., & Cazares, J. (2019). Detroit Home Resource Repair Guide. Poverty Solutions. <http://sites.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty/files/2019/10/Detroit-Home-Repair-Resource-Guide-2019-reduced-size.pdf>

12 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Cooney, P. (2021, October 7). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

13 Marr, C., Cox, K., Bryant, K., Dean, S., Caines, R., & Sherman, A. (2020, October 14). Aggressive State Outreach Can Help Reach the 12 Million Non-Filers Eligible for Stimulus Payments. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/aggressive-state-outreach-can-help-reach-the-12-million-non-filers-eligible>

14 Project re:form. Civilla. (n.d.). <https://civilla.org/work/project-reform>

15 Self-guided online courses on content design for government practitioners are available at [civilla.org/practica](http://civilla.org/practica)

CORONAVIRUS STIMULUS PAYMENTS

# What are the Coronavirus Stimulus Payments?

The government distributed two payments to eligible families to help during the economic crisis caused by the Coronavirus. If you haven't received any payments or are waiting for your second payment, this site will help you understand what you need to do to get your money.

## Who is eligible for a Stimulus Check?

The vast majority of Michigan residents are eligible to receive a stimulus check from the federal government this year. Even if you have no income, you are still eligible, but need to take action to receive your stimulus payment. **This includes individuals with low or no earnings who normally don't file taxes.** Every American adult earning less than \$75,000 (or couples earning less than \$150,000) is eligible for a stimulus check from the federal government this year. While this site is geared toward Michigan residents, the information is applicable nationwide.

If you still have questions about your stimulus check after reviewing this website, call the IRS at [800-919-9835](tel:800-919-9835) or, United Way at [844-322-3639](tel:844-322-3639).

[See if you're eligible](#)

[Information in Spanish and Arabic](#)



**Above: The Coronavirus stimulus payment website followed the content design principles of information hierarchy, listing the most important information first, then dividing additional content into several headlines each relevant to a particular set of readers. Each piece of content included action steps and links to external resources.**

### Stimulus Check FAQs

Here are some answers to common questions and concerns

- Who is eligible to receive a stimulus check? ▾
- How will the IRS determine my income for the stimulus payment? ▾
- How much money will I get? ▾
- When will I receive my check? ▾
- Will the stimulus money be considered income that I have to claim on my taxes? ▾
- Will I have to pay my stimulus payment back next year? ▾
- What if I don't have a bank account? ▾
- What if I haven't filed taxes? ▾

#### What if I don't have a bank account?

If you don't have a bank account, the government will send you a check by mail. If you did not receive your first stimulus payment, but believe you are eligible, and are claiming the payments through the [Recovery Rebate Credit](#) on your 2020 taxes, you could choose to set up a bank account and report this information to the IRS, if you do not want to receive your check by mail.

Here's a list of safe and affordable accounts that are [Bank On certified institutions](#). Sign up online:

- [Bank of America, Advantage SafeBalance Banking Account](#)
- [Chase, Secure Banking Account](#)
- [Citi, Access Account](#)
- [Dollar Bank, No Overdraft Checking Account](#)
- [First Commonwealth Bank, SmartPay Card](#)
- [KeyBank, Hassle-Free Account](#)
- [Northwest Bank, Compass Digital Account](#)
- [BB&T, MoneyAccount](#)
- [U.S. Bank, Safe Debit Account](#)
- [Wells Fargo, EasyPay Card](#)

**After you sign up**, make sure to add your account information on the IRS website. If you don't want to sign up for a bank account, you can also link to your prepaid debit card instead.

You can also receive your funds through the [Cash App](#), by providing the IRS with the routing and account numbers connected to your Cash App. You can download the Cash App or locate your Cash App account information [here](#).

**Above: Poverty Solutions and Civilla started creating their content with "an FAQ mindset,"<sup>16</sup> thinking through what their audience would most want to know and adding additional FAQs based on user feedback.**

16 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Cooney, P. (2021, October 7). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

Poverty Solutions and Civilla took additional considerations to assure the website could be accessed by the people who needed it most. Its design is mobile-responsive, important because U.S. residents with low incomes are the most dependent on smartphones for their internet access.<sup>17</sup> The website content is available in Spanish and Arabic, the two most commonly spoken languages in Michigan after English.<sup>18</sup> Poverty Solutions continued to update the FAQ after rollout, and added questions and answers about the next round of stimulus payments.

Though the website was written with a Michigan-based audience in mind, the information it provided was relevant nationwide. The cities of Detroit, Michigan and Durham, North Carolina repurposed its content for their government websites, and Poverty Solutions was glad to make the content “open source” in this manner to reach more people.<sup>19</sup>

## Applying Accessible Content Principles to New Work

Having practiced the principles of human-centered design, plain language, and content design while partnering with Civilla on the stimulus payment website, Poverty Solutions applied these principles to their next policy communication effort for the public. In April 2021, Poverty Solutions launched [a new website](#) with a similar breakdown of steps needed to get the Child Tax Credit, which was expanded under the American Rescue Plan.<sup>20,21</sup> Once again, many people (this time, those who support children up to age 17 in their household) with incomes low enough to be exempt from filing tax returns would miss out on impactful cash assistance if they did not submit information to the IRS.<sup>22</sup>

This time, Poverty Solutions partnered with [Propel](#), the company that operates a smartphone application called [Providers](#). (This application was known as FreshEBT until June 2021, and is the subject of the next case study in this document.) More than five million households enrolled in SNAP use this app to check their SNAP balance, and Propel occasionally surveys its users. Poverty Solutions and Propel surveyed its users about enhanced Child Tax Credit in early 2021 to gauge their awareness of the opportunity, their understanding of what they would need to do to receive it, and questions that they had.<sup>23</sup>

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17 Pew Research Center. (2021, April 26). Demographics of mobile device ownership and adoption in the United States. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

18 Statistical Atlas. (n.d.). Languages in Michigan (state). The Demographic Statistical Atlas of the United States. <https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Michigan/Languages>

19 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Cooney, P. (2021, October 7). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

20 Slagter, L. (2021, April 26). New website answers Michiganders questions about expanded Child Tax Credit Comments. Poverty Solutions. <https://poverty.umich.edu/2021/04/26/new-website-child-tax-credit/>

21 A Poverty Reduction Analysis of the American Family Act. Center on Poverty and Social Policy. (2021, January 25). <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5743308460b5e922a25a6dc7/t/600f2123fdfa730101a4426a/1611604260458/Poverty-Reduction-Analysis-American-Family-Act-CPSP-2020.pdf>

22 Policy basics: The Child Tax Credit. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2019, December 10). <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/the-child-tax-credit>

23 Cooney, P., & Taylor, S. (2021, April). Listening to SNAP participants to improve access to the expanded child tax credit. Poverty Solutions. [https://poverty.umich.edu/files/2021/04/CTC-Access\\_Propel\\_Poverty-Solutions\\_042321.pdf](https://poverty.umich.edu/files/2021/04/CTC-Access_Propel_Poverty-Solutions_042321.pdf)

Poverty Solutions used those survey responses, along with information available from the IRS and a national network of people and organizations that were following the policy, to construct [a website](#) to answer, in plain language, many of the questions that potentially eligible Child Tax Credit recipients had. Like the stimulus website, the information in the Child Tax Credit website was applicable for people nationwide, though they offered translated content into languages most relevant for Michigan’s population (Spanish, Arabic, and Bengali).



CHILD TAX CREDIT

# The Child Tax Credit: What You Need to Know

The new Child Tax Credit is worth \$3,000 per year, per child ages 6-17 and \$3,600 per year, per child under 6 years old. It will be paid out in monthly payments, not once a year. If you have children under 18, you are likely eligible even if you do not usually file taxes or have low/no earnings.

[See if you're eligible](#)

Information (باللغة العربية / In Arabic) (বাংলা ভাষায় / In Bengali) (En Español / In Spanish)



## Child Tax Credit FAQs

Here are some answers to common questions and concerns

- When will I start receiving the payments? ▾
- How much is the Child Tax Credit worth? ▾
- Will getting the Child Tax Credit reduce my benefits? ▾
- I'm used to getting my refund at tax time. Does this mean I won't receive this money at tax time? ▾
- I don't usually file taxes. What will I need to file taxes so I can get the Child Tax Credit? ▾
- What does "fully refundable" mean? ▾
- Do I have to file taxes? ▾

## Do I have to file taxes?

- If you filed your 2020 taxes, 2019 taxes, or entered your information into the IRS Non-filer tool for stimulus payments, the IRS already has your information on file and will begin sending out payments on July 15. Sit tight and wait for your payments.
- If you are single and your income was over \$12,400 (\$24,800 for a married couple) in 2020, you have to file your taxes to receive your Child Tax Credit. To get help filing your taxes, visit [getthetaxfacts.org](https://www.irs.gov/efile).
- If your earned income was below \$12,400 (\$24,800 for a married couple) in 2020, you will get the maximum amount of payments by filing your taxes. In addition to the child tax credit, you may also be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit, Home Heating Credit and the Homestead Property Tax Credit. But you do not have to file your taxes to get your child tax credit - you can also fill out the [IRS Non-filer tool](#) to get your payments payments, and any stimulus payments you may have missed in 2020.

However, if you are able, we encourage everyone to file taxes, even if you are not required. Filing your taxes may also qualify you for **other payments**, like the Earned Income Tax Credit.

**Above: Similar to the principles used in the stimulus payment website, Poverty Solutions’ Child Tax Credit website uses information hierarchy, lists broadly relevant information first, then responds to particular situations in a FAQ. All content is in plain language with minimal jargon, and offers links to relevant resources.**

## Supporting Governments in Delivering Accessible Content

Poverty Solutions' websites on stimulus payments and the expanded Child Tax Credit help fill the need for plain-language translation of policy, written specifically for the people most affected by it. Even so, staff at Poverty Solutions recognize that there may be a larger role for government to play in the ways that complex policies are communicated to the general public. Though partnering groups can support government when the capacity to create these types of resources isn't sufficient in house, ideally government agencies would have the needed resources to invest in building their capacity to do this type of work, recruiting staff that are expert implementers of accessible content principles, training and enabling existing staff in this type of communication, and providing adequate funding to deliver it to the public.<sup>24</sup> While governments take steps to develop this capacity, Poverty Solutions remains an example of a vital government partner whose efforts to apply accessible content principles should be replicated.

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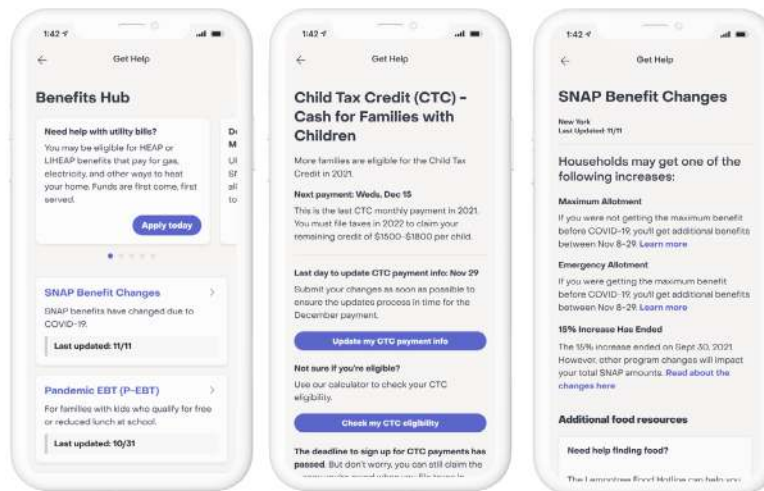
<sup>24</sup> Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Cooney, P. (2021, October 7). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

# Propel: Timely, Localized Updates to Benefits Information

## Introduction

[Providers](#)<sup>25</sup> is a free smartphone application (app) that lets Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits (SNAP) participants in any state monitor the real-time arrival and balance of their benefit allocations—information that otherwise can be difficult for benefit recipients to get, with pathways that vary in complexity from state to state. The Providers app, which has more than 5 million monthly users (serving approximately 1 in 4 SNAP participant households),<sup>26</sup> is a product of Propel, a company with the mission to “... [build] modern, respectful, effective technology that helps low-income Americans improve their financial health.”<sup>27</sup>

Alongside their benefit balances, the Providers app's Benefits Hub gives its users aggregated, localized information about changes to benefits, other benefits that users may be eligible for, and links to resources where users can learn more and take action. The Benefits Hub is the second most used feature on the app after the balance-checking feature.<sup>28</sup> In July 2021, the app added a debit card, which allows users to manage all of their income and expenses, including direct deposits from employers and other benefits and credits they're eligible for, such as Social Security Income and Social Security Disability Income (SSI/SSDI) and the tax refunds like the advanced Child Tax Credit.



**Above: The Provider app's Benefits Hub offers its users timely, localized updates about changes to benefit allocations, plus details about benefits that users may be eligible for but yet aware of, all in plain language. Links to outside resources encourage users to take action.**

25 Until June 2021, the Providers App operated under the name FreshEBT and provided balance information for SNAP only. Providers. (2021, July 12). <https://www.joinproviders.com/>

26 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Taylor, S. (2021, November 12). Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

27 Propel. (n.d.). Our Mission. <https://www.joinpropel.com/about-us>

28 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Taylor, S. (2021, October 6). Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

## Providers' Benefits Hub Relieves Burdens with Accessible Content

It typically takes a lot of effort for people to learn about benefit programs, whether they're eligible for each, and the steps involved in applying, receiving, and using each benefit.<sup>29</sup> This can be difficult and time-consuming because information about benefit programs is often spread across different governmental and non-governmental websites, hard to locate, and written to comply with regulation rather than for understandability. The Benefits Hub attempts to reduce these burdens for its users by aggregating information that's personally relevant in a place that's easy for users to access on demand, and by explaining benefits information in a way that's easier to understand. In interviews Propel conducted with users of the Providers app, many people have said that they find the Benefits Hub helpful and have learned about new benefits from it.<sup>30</sup>

New information about benefits gets collected by Propel staff, who frequently check the websites of state and federal agencies that administer benefit programs, then translate this information into plain language.<sup>31</sup> Centralized resources such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture web page, which [lists states participating in Pandemic-EBT](#), makes the information gathering straightforward.<sup>32</sup> What appears in the Benefits Hub are short explanations, the date the topic was last updated, and links to outside resources like a government website where a user can apply for a benefit online, or nonprofits where the user can get help with the process.

## Listening to Users to Make a Better App

Propel prioritizes getting feedback from the users of the Providers app, both to learn what features its users find most helpful and to learn what additional information its users want. In addition to employing traditional user research methods (like user surveys, interviews, analysis of customer service requests, and rapid feedback mechanisms like asking, "Was this helpful?" with a thumbs up and thumbs down button), the organization hosts a closed Facebook group. In it, a few thousand people who use the app exchange information about changes to benefits and troubleshoot navigating various benefits processes together. Propel considers all of these information sources valuable and uses them to tailor content. For instance, after one discussion among users when they asked each other why additional benefit dollars were landing in their accounts, and whether they could be confident it was not an overpayment and spend it without worrying the government will ask for it back, Propel staff added information that responded to these questions in the Benefits Hub.<sup>33</sup>

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29 Moynihan, D., Herd, P., & Harvey, H. (2014). Administrative Burden: Learning, Psychological, and Compliance Costs in Citizen-State Interactions. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 25(1), 43–69. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muu009>

30 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Taylor, S. (2021, October 6). Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

31 Ibid

32 USDA. (2021, February 1). SY 2019-2020 P-EBT State Participation. Food and Nutrition Service. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/sy-2019-2020-pebt-state-participation>

33 Kennan, A., Soka, S., & Taylor, S. (2021, October 6). Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

## **Impact**

The Providers app now provides information in all 50 states about benefits ranging from unemployment, healthcare, and supplemental security income (SSI) to food, housing, utility, and broadband assistance, as well as the Child Tax Credit and Economic Impact Payments. The Propel team works to trace and track policy updates across the multitude of agencies that administer benefits in order to provide timely, accurate information to Providers users. There is an ongoing opportunity for government agencies to produce content that can be disseminated through third-party apps like Providers, which have an ongoing relationship with residents.



# New York City Benefits and Programs: Designing, Translating and Scaling Accessible Content

## Introduction

[ACCESS NYC](https://access.nyc.gov/)<sup>34</sup> is New York City's public benefits information site and eligibility screener. The website serves as a one-stop-shop where residents can learn about more than 80 city, state, and federal social safety net benefits and programs (including how to apply and what documents are required), check their eligibility for more than 40 benefits and programs, and find help nearby, all in 11 languages.

In 2016, the [New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity](https://www.nyc.gov/opportunity)<sup>35</sup> (NYC Opportunity) set out to redesign ACCESS NYC. The goal was to make it simpler for residents to get easy-to-understand information about benefits and screen for potential eligibility in one place. The original ACCESS NYC had launched in 2006—a truly innovative solution to helping residents seeking benefits at that time. Over time, however, the original technology infrastructure couldn't keep up with the need to support residents using mobile devices, evaluate usage data, shorten development cycles, and connect to backend publishing systems that allow for less technical staff to make updates. These challenges impeded NYC's ability to deliver up-to-date accessible benefits information and eligibility screening to residents when they needed it.

Over the course of nine months, NYC Opportunity did a comprehensive redesign of ACCESS NYC. Taking a human-centered approach, the team grounded the redesign in the needs and experiences of benefits-seeking residents. To do this, the team engaged residents, benefits navigators, and staff at government agencies via iterative prototyping and user testing throughout the redesign process.<sup>36</sup>

The new, mobile-responsive ACCESS NYC site launched in March 2017. It included a complete rewrite of more than 450 pages of public benefits content to ensure it is accurate, written in plain language, and available in commonly spoken languages. Content design was central to the redesign, both for the content as it appears on ACCESS NYC and as part of a wider infrastructure to publish accessible information to other websites, agencies, and organizations.

34 Access NYC. ACCESS NYC. (n.d.). <https://access.nyc.gov/>

35 The Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.nyc.gov/opportunity>

36 NYC Opportunity. (2018, April 26). Case study: Access NYC - part 1. Medium. <https://civicservicedesign.com/case-study-access-nyc-part-1-5ccdf1c4a520>



**Above: ACCESS NYC is mobile-responsive to work seamlessly on any device and is available in 11 languages.**

## Content Redesign

NYC Opportunity **centered redesign around the needs and experiences of residents seeking benefits.** The team reviewed ACCESS NYC usage patterns and connected with residents, benefits navigators, and staff at government agencies to understand why people come to ACCESS NYC, the information they seek about benefits, and the challenges they face in accessing that information.

Through user research, the team learned that people often come to ACCESS NYC looking for specific information about benefits. Common questions include:<sup>37</sup>

- How long will it take? Is it worth taking the time to apply?
- What do I receive from the program?
- Does this affect my immigration status or does my status prevent me from receiving benefits?
- Is it possible to do this in person or receive assistance with the application?
- Will this affect my eligibility for any other benefits?

The NYC Opportunity team used these questions to help define the core elements to include on ACCESS NYC and how to present the information. They developed a set of program guides providing key information for initially more than 40 public assistance programs, which has now grown to more than 80. Guides cover how programs work, eligibility requirements, steps to apply and documents needed, options for applying, and ways to get help. They also streamlined the benefits eligibility screener to make it easy for residents to complete in 10 steps.

<sup>37</sup> NYC Opportunity. (2018, March 13). Case study: Access NYC - part 2. Medium. <https://civicservicedesign.com/case-study-access-nyc-part-2-f86130ebdead>

Once the team landed on the most important information to include on ACCESS NYC, they partnered with staff across city agencies to do a complete rewrite of the content. All content about benefits was rewritten in **plain language** and to be understandable for individuals at an eighth grade reading level.

To help people find the most important information quickly, the team reorganized the **hierarchy of content** presented on ACCESS NYC. Through user testing, the team learned that residents and benefits navigators are better able to find, understand, and take action on benefits information when a short, plain language description of the type of assistance comes first, followed by the official program name.

**1. How It Works**

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) | NYC Human Resources Administration

1. **How It Works**

2. [Determine Your Eligibility](#)

3. [What You Need to Include](#)

4. [How to Apply](#)

[Print the whole guide](#)

[Share the guide](#)

**1. How it Works**

Get help paying for groceries with SNAP. SNAP benefits are sometimes called food stamps. They come on a debit card that you can use at many grocery stores and farmers markets.

**Update:** Return your Cash Assistance 6-month mailer and SNAP periodic report to HRA. Starting July 2021, if you do not return your Cash Assistance mailer or SNAP periodic report, your case will close.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 temporarily expands [SNAP College student eligibility rules](#) by amending the allowable exemptions to the work requirement in 2 additional ways:

- College students eligible to participate in state or federal work-study, regardless of whether they are actively employed or participating in work-study may be eligible for SNAP

**Above: Example of a redesigned program guide on ACCESS NYC.<sup>38</sup>**

Today, the NYC Opportunity team uses a style guide when drafting content for the program guides to ensure consistency across content.

<sup>38</sup> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ACCESS NYC. (n.d.). <https://access.nyc.gov/programs/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/>

## Excerpt from the Program Guide Style Guide Used by NYC Opportunity

### Section 1: How It Works

This section describes the program's value proposition and other operational details. It's made up of two main sections: Program Description and Heads Up.

#### *Program Description*

- 1-2 sentence summary of the program's value proposition. Treat this as a topic sentence to the Heads Up section below.

#### *Heads Up*

- Gives more information about the program. The Heads Up section supports the Program Description with more details in bullet point form.
- Details include but aren't limited to:
  - How much money someone gets or saves from the program
  - Times that the program is available (application periods, deadlines, etc)
  - High-level eligibility criteria or info about citizenship requirements (if it's a key requirement of the program or needs emphasis).
  - For example, the Excluded Workers Fund was available mainly to undocumented workers. We had a bullet stating: "Application forms will not include questions about citizenship or immigration status."
  - Related or interconnected programs if they're prerequisites or have similar eligibility criteria. Example: Lifeline and Emergency Broadband Benefit have very similar criteria. Thus, it made sense to market them together. "Your household may also qualify for a temporary \$50 monthly discount on your internet bill through the Emergency Broadband Benefit."

## **Section 2: Determine Your Eligibility**

Many programs have eligibility criteria that a resident has to meet to qualify. This section is where you should write about these criteria. For resources that are available to everyone, consider omitting this section.

## **Section 3: What You Need To Include**

This section describes the documents someone might need when applying for a program or utilizing a service. This section is split into two:

*Leading content* which describes in general the types of documents someone will need.

*Accordions* which can show specific documents that can satisfy proof for certain things like identity, residency, or other proofs. Accordions are further split into 2 subsections:

- Heading (typically “Proof of \_\_\_\_”)
- Accordion content (the list of documents someone can show as proof)

## **Section 4: How To Apply**

This section shows all the ways someone can apply for something.

Each application method is contained within pre-named accordions depending on the method. Each accordion contains several parts:

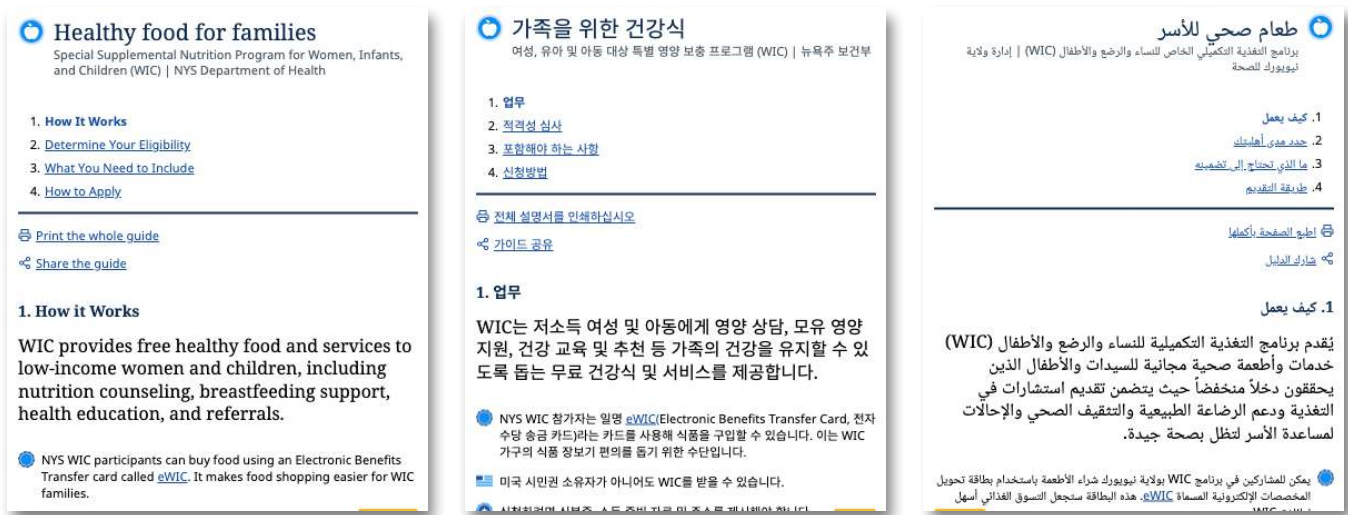
- Content
- CTA button

## **Section 5: More Ways To Get Help**

This section contains more information on how someone can get help or learn more about a program. These may be customer service touch points, whether they be from the agency or a community based organization. You may also link to FAQs, hotlines, and agency websites that have more info.

To improve accessibility of benefits information for residents with limited English proficiency, NYC Opportunity worked with a team of professional translators to make ACCESS NYC available in seven languages in 2017, adding four more languages in 2018. ACCESS NYC now supports **11 languages**: English, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese (Traditional), French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu. It is the first website in New York City to be fully compliant under [Local Law 30](#), which mandates that City agencies make public services available in these languages, enabling 86 percent of residents to navigate in their primary language.<sup>39,40</sup>

ACCESS NYC's typography also creates dignity across all languages by using [Google Noto](#). Using this open-source typeface, which was developed specifically for multilingual communications, characters in all languages appear equally on ACCESS NYC.<sup>41</sup>



Above: example of a program guide on ACCESS NYC in English, Korean, and Arabic.<sup>42</sup>

## Process Redesign

As part of redesign, the team reimagined the **editorial flow** by which content for ACCESS NYC and other websites owned by NYC Opportunity is created, managed, and distributed. All benefits content now follows the same set of steps: once content is drafted and edited, it goes through reviews with plain language experts and benefits agency liaisons, before getting final approval and undergoing translation. This editorial process was a key to ensuring consistency across content creation and maintenance for ACCESS NYC, given the large volume of content.

39 Language and disability access. Language and Disability Access - MOIA. (n.d.). <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/immigrants/about/language-and-disability-access.page>

40 NYC Opportunity. (2018, February 14). Increasing online language accessibility: Access NYC now in eleven languages. Medium. <https://medium.com/nyc-opportunity/increasing-online-language-accessibility-access-nyc-now-in-eleven-languages-48db3198cd8f>

41 NYC Opportunity. (2018, March 13). Case study: Access NYC-part 2. Medium. <https://civicservicedesign.com/case-study-access-nyc-part-2-f86130ebdead>

42 Women Infants and Children (WIC). ACCESS NYC. (n.d.). <https://access.nyc.gov/programs/women-infants-and-children-wic/>



**Above: Diagram of the editorial flow used by NYC Opportunity to create, review, publish and track content.**

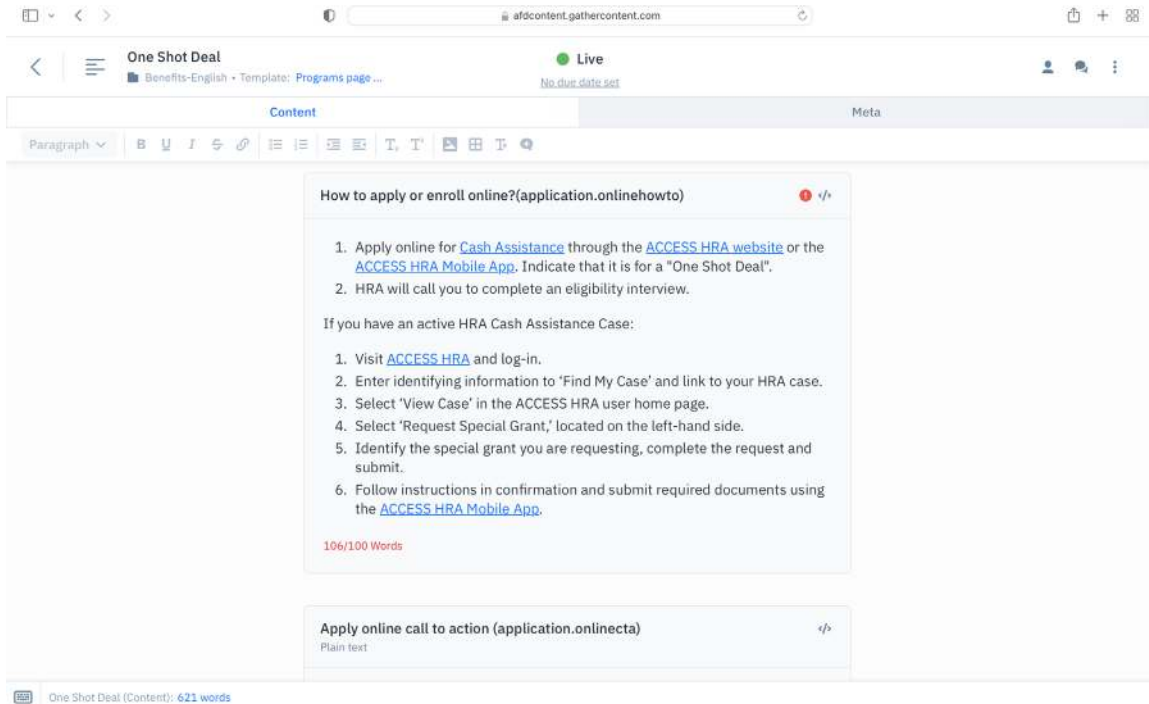
NYC Opportunity also recognized that successful redesign required building a team with expertise across plain language, information architecture, user experience, and user research. The team’s product designer, business analyst and content strategist worked together to rewrite benefits content and redesign the ACCESS NYC site in collaboration with residents and agency liaisons, who are continually engaged for updates and changes. Since the relaunch, the team has developed a set of style guides and templates, cross-trained staff at partner agencies to **build capacity** and scale the creation and management of accessible program content for other types of government services.<sup>43</sup>

## Leveraging Modern Technology

NYC Opportunity began using a **content management system** (CMS) called [GatherContent](#), to centralize content and streamline editorial workflows. All benefits information for ACCESS NYC is housed in the CMS, and every step of the editorial flow can be done directly in the CMS, which allows for real-time collaborative editing.

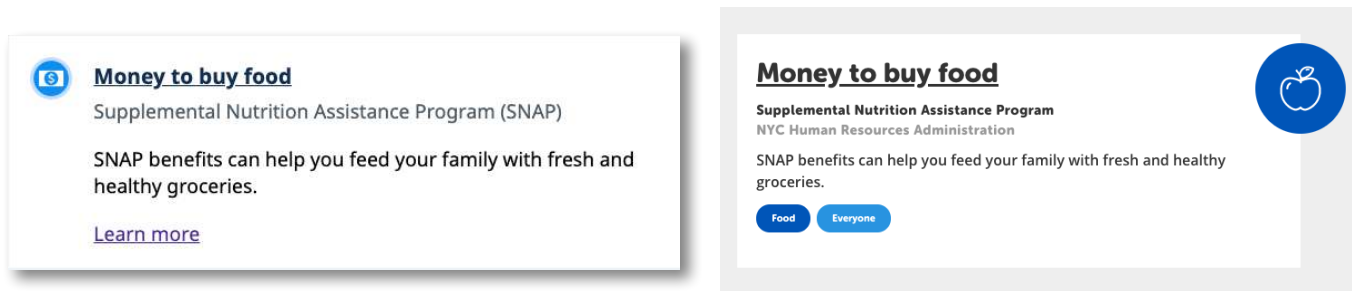
The CMS, which is interoperable with other backend systems, also helps facilitate publishing at scale. Benefits information for ACCESS NYC is pulled directly from the CMS. This ensures that all benefits content across the site is consistent and up-to-date. It also eliminates the need for a developer to manually go in and make changes to site content, cutting update timelines from months to days.

<sup>43</sup> Kennan, A., Sui, H., Sessoms, D., & Sullivan, K. (2021, October 5). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.



**Above: View of content in the GatherContent CMS.**

The CMS also enables NYC Opportunity to easily use the centralized benefits content for other websites. In addition to ACCESS NYC, the CMS powers the [Generation NYC](#)<sup>44</sup> and [Growing Up NYC](#)<sup>45</sup> sites, which provide benefits and programs information specifically tailored for young adults and families with children.



**Above: Program cards on ACCESS NYC and Growing Up NYC. The sites have different visual styles, but utilize the same content.**

44 Generation NYC. Growing Up NYC. (2021). <https://growingupnyc.cityofnewyork.us/generationnyc/>

45 Growing up NYC. Growing Up NYC. (2021). <https://growingupnyc.cityofnewyork.us/>



## Content Management Systems

As a content set grows, it can be helpful to use more robust tools for storing and distributing content. By writing and storing information in a content management system (CMS), content can be more easily created according to a style guide and in collaboration with colleagues, follow an editorial workflow, and automatically publish content to websites.

There are many CMS solutions available on the market. You'll want to consider if your organization already has one available, and what requirements a solution will need to meet, such as compatibility with your existing technology, ability for collaboration, ability for multilingual content, etc.

The NYC Opportunity team uses Gather Content as their CMS, which allows them to use the editorial flow (see page 23) to draft content, collaborate with colleagues, get approvals, and manage human-translated content in 10 languages in addition to English.

When structuring content in a CMS, it can be broken down into key elements such as “program name” and “program description” which can then help with further distribution of the content to additional materials and channels including Content APIs (see page 27).

In an effort to scale its accessible benefits content, NYC Opportunity publishes the benefits and programs content to an **Application Programming Interface** (API) called the **Benefits and Programs API**<sup>46</sup> hosted on the **NYC Open Data portal**.<sup>47</sup> The team set up a “batch process” where content from the CMS is pushed to a database on a weekly basis.<sup>48</sup> From there, the data pushes to the NYC Open Data portal. The Benefits and Programs API can then be called from the Open Data portal.

46 NYC Opportunity. (2021, November 8). Benefits and programs API: NYC open data. Benefits and Programs API | NYC Open Data. <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/Benefits-and-Programs-API/kvhd-5fmu>

47 City of New York, N. Y. C. O. D. (2017). NYC open data. NYC Open Data WP Engine. From <https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/>

48 Kennan, A., Sui, H., Sessoms, D., & Sullivan, K. (2021, October 5). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.



**Above: Diagram of the content and data flows utilized by NYC Opportunity to manage content across websites and share the information as open data.**

The Benefits and Programs API allows software developers at any organization or agency to use the benefits content for their own websites. For example, the [STH \(Students in Temporary Housing\) Resource Site](#),<sup>49</sup> a cross-agency initiative and website designed by Public Policy Lab, uses the Benefits and Programs API for the core content so that it is automatically kept up to date from the centralized NYC Opportunity content.

This is a complement to another open resource, the [NYC Benefits Screening API](#),<sup>50</sup> which provides open developer access to the machine-readable calculations and criteria for the 40+ programs that the ACCESS NYC screening questionnaire screens for.

These two open resources comprise the NYC Benefits Platform, which supports organizations that make it easier for NYC residents to discover and be aware of multiple benefits they may be eligible for, and supports accelerating the creation of new technology tools for benefits discovery and navigation.

49 STH Resource Guide for NYC Families & students in temporary housing. STH Resource Guide for NYC Families & Students in Temporary Housing. (n.d.). <https://sth.cityofnewyork.us/>

50 NYC Benefits Platform Screening API. (2021). NYC Opportunity. <https://screeningapidocs.cityofnewyork.us/>

## Content APIs

Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) can help accessible content reach more websites and audiences. A content API takes the content that is broken down into key elements, such as “program name” and “program description” and makes it so those elements can be retrieved from where they are stored, whether that’s directly from the CMS, a database/repository, or open data portal.

Content APIs are common for news publications. A news organization like the *New York Times* has a central CMS, called [Scoop](#), that allows them to create and store content that is then published in the printed newspaper, website, apps, and also make the content available for others. For example, the *New York Times* Developer Network offers many APIs, including the “Times Newswire API” for articles [as they are published](#). It breaks down the news article into key elements to create a data schema including “section” for what section of the news the story appears in, “title” for the title of the story, “byline” for the author(s) of the story, and so on. Another developer could then use these data elements to create their own newsfeed on a third party website, set up text message breaking news alerts, or post on social media (the possibilities are endless).

## Impact

ACCESS NYC’s redesign provides a model for how states and local governments can create and deliver accessible benefits information that meets the needs of residents. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on just how critical this is. Site traffic increased to hundreds of thousands per month with a total of more than 6.4 million browsing sessions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and 326,000 eligibility screenings completed.<sup>51</sup> With heightened need and an evolving benefits landscape, benefits-seeking residents were able to turn to ACCESS NYC to get easy-to-understand and actionable information about programs and eligibility all in one place. Because of ACCESS NYC’s ability to reach a broad population of benefits-seeking residents and the team’s ability to update and communicate information rapidly, City Hall now approaches the NYC Opportunity team as a first place to go to update benefits information for the public.

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51 Kennan, A., Hia, S. (2021, Nov 18). Social Safety Net Research: Accessible Benefits Content. personal.

# City of San José: Machine Learning for Translation

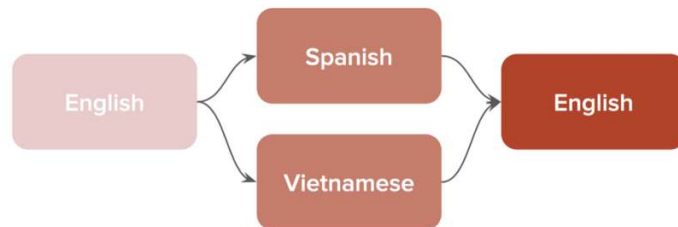
## Introduction

The [San José 311](#) service allows residents to report neighborhood concerns such as potholes, streetlight outages, and graffiti, as well as manage garbage and recycling services. As part of those requests, residents enter text on the website to describe their needs and certain requests prompt a response from city staff via email.

In San José, more than half of residents speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish and Vietnamese being the most common languages. Because of this, the City of San José has invested in expanding language inclusivity in their 311 service to better support correspondence between city staff and residents by using machine learning to build a custom translation model. This allows residents to write their 311 text descriptions in their preferred language, which is then dynamically translated in near real-time to English for city staff, who can then respond in English and their response is dynamically translated back to the resident's preferred language.<sup>52</sup>

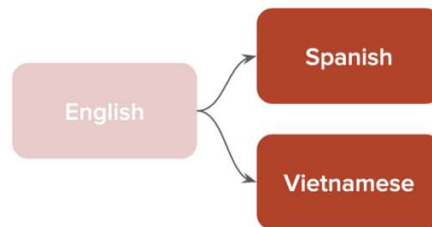
**Use case:**  
Residents submit non-English service requests

**Source text:**  
100 San Jose 311 app service request descriptions



**Use case:**  
City staff respond in English

**Source text:**  
100 sentences from Customer Call Center email scripts



*Above: Diagram demonstrating the translation directions and sources utilized.<sup>53</sup>*

<sup>52</sup> Kim, J. (2020, December 14). Better language translation through Machine Learning: Everything I Wish I knew 6 Months Ago. Medium. <https://medium.com/swlh/better-language-translation-through-machine-learning-everything-i-wish-i-knew-6-months-ago-8fa212fb1731>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

The custom San José translation model is built using [Google AutoML](#), which has extensive documentation on preparing training data, creating and managing datasets and models, and evaluating models.<sup>54</sup> The 311 website uses the [Google Translate API](#) to translate the content on the page, although the website could be transitioned to the custom model in the future.<sup>55</sup>

## Resident Engagement

Prior to undertaking the development of the custom translation model, the City of San José worked with Code for America to better understand low-income and non-English speaking residents' digital service access needs.<sup>56</sup> The research team focused on access to My San José, an earlier version of the 311 website. They conducted in-person interviews with 19 residents and utilized interpreters to help facilitate interviews with Spanish and Vietnamese-speaking residents.

The research team used inclusive practices to recruit residents to participate in 20-30 minute interview sessions, including offering a \$10 gift card as an incentive and working with Vietnamese and Spanish interpreters to approach residents in public spaces such as a flea market, libraries, and laundromats with a high percentage of Spanish-speaking or Vietnamese-speaking residents. The team also conducted outreach via a network of community organizations. In the interview sessions, the team asked open-ended questions and reviewed prototypes of a redesign for My San José to garner feedback. The team also conducted staff interviews to understand agency needs and participated in a few “ride-alongs” with city staff responding to 311 requests in the field.

While not the sole focus of the research, the challenges of language accessibility were a primary finding. They found that many residents preferred a plain language, simple English version as the machine-translations were inaccurate or not context specific. Additionally, they found that some digital phrases like “sign in” or “log out” are most commonly seen in English, and sometimes don't exist for speakers of specific dialects, such as pre-1975 Vietnamese speakers. This research helped inform the design and development of the custom translation model and user experience updates to the San José 311 website.

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54 Google. (n.d.). Automl translation documentation | google cloud. Google. <https://cloud.google.com/translate/automl/docs/>

55 Google. (n.d.). Cloud translation documentation | google cloud. Google. <https://cloud.google.com/translate/docs>

56 Datta, N., & Kim, J. (2019, August). Designing Inclusive Digital Services in San Jose. CFA Fellowship Report. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HD8-ZJTsqNjM5K99rM6O47qkXAnaZtcYU1XPDDuiOSk/edit>

## Translation Approaches

Translation greatly increases the accessibility of content for people who do not speak English as their first language. When your content is written in plain language, it also makes for better translations. However, translation can also be expensive and add another step to your process. There are a few ways to make translation more accessible to your organization:

- **Create a glossary of common words and phrases.** A glossary can help track words that your organization uses often and may be specific to the context you work in. For example, the Center for Participatory Change has created an [English-to-Spanish glossary](#) for terms used in their community organizing.
- **Identify the most used materials.** Use web analytics, flyer distribution counts, or other metrics to identify the most used web pages or printed materials to prioritize for translation. You may find that there are pages on your website that are infrequently accessed that can be served by a translation API, and prioritize your translation budget for the most accessed pages.
- **See if your organization or agency has a master services agreement for translation services.** You may be able to buy into the agreement, often saving time and money over going to a vendor independently.
- **Integrate a translation API.** While human-translated content is the highest caliber, it may not be achievable for all content. By using a translation API, you can offer full pages or supplement pieces of human-translated content across your websites and print materials. There are many translation APIs available as open source and paid resources. Your organization will need to evaluate which solution works best for your needs based on considerations such as quality of translations for the languages you plan to support, integration with your technology, and cost.
- **Use hybrid approaches.** The NYC Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer has been exploring how to keep content automatically and continuously up-to-date in the 11 languages commonly spoken by New Yorkers, using a combination of neural machine translation and human translation vendors.<sup>57</sup> Through a partnership with United States Digital Response, the NYC[x] Innovation Fellows built [Easy Localization System Access](#) (ELSA), an open source prototype which can pull English content from any source, such as code, text file, or Wordpress and send it to any third party translation API. It can also track changes between versions of content and only send the minimal amount of content for translation to help save money and time. The process can be fully automated or inserted as part of an editorial workflow where a person or series of reviewers who speak the language can review and approve the content.

<sup>57</sup> New York City Government. (n.d.). Project ELSA. <https://elsa.cityofnewyork.us/#/>



# The Time is Now: Improve Equitable Access Through Clear Communication About Safety Net Benefits

It is imperative that government agencies continue on the path to creating more accessible content for the benefits they administer. The case studies in this guide demonstrate some of what's possible, but what could a future look like where every government and organization involved in benefits delivery starts to follow these principles and best practices? In addition to improving access for residents seeking benefits, if accessible content flowed from the Federal government to states, local government, and navigator organizations, there would be reduced overhead from less need to interpret program and policy information.

Imagine all content is written in plain language and available in key translated languages, with clear steps and resources for people to take action to apply and receive benefits. Imagine content is managed centrally as a single source of truth and published via APIs to consistent places for announcing benefit changes, such as agency websites, tools and places that offer updates on multiple benefits, and social media.

While information accessibility is just one part of reducing the greater administrative burdens on residents seeking benefits, we hope this vision inspires you to start reviewing and revising content, and as your organization is ready, start to use technology to further improve accessibility and publishing capacity. If you're interested in sharing other work on accessible benefits information, please email [beeckcenter@georgetown.edu](mailto:beeckcenter@georgetown.edu).



# Resources

## Online Courses on Accessible Content Design for Government Practitioners

- Civilla Practica: Foundations, Design Principles, User Research, and User Testing; Guidance on Redesigning Applications, Renewals, and Correspondence (2021). <https://civilla.org/practica>

## Guidance on Plain Language and Content Design

- Federal Plain Language Guidelines. <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/>
- Digital.gov Plain Language: Accessibility for Content (2021). <https://digital.gov/event/2021/03/10/plain-language-and-section-508/>
- Harvard Digital Accessibility: Use plain language (2021). <https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/use-plain-language> and accompanying article: Technique: Writing Readable Content <https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/technique-writing-readable-content>
- Commonwealth of Australia: Content Strategy Guide (2018). <https://guides.service.gov.au/content-strategy/>
- UK Government Digital Service: Content Design (2021). <https://gds.blog.gov.uk/category/content-design/>
- UK Digital Service: How DWP used the easy read format to make its content more accessible (2019). <https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2019/10/11/how-dwp-used-the-easy-read-format-to-make-its-content-more-accessible/>
- Nielsen Norman Group: Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts (2017). <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/plain-language-experts/>

## Tools for Checking Readability

- Hemingway App (2021). <https://hemingwayapp.com/>
- TextCompare Readability Formulas Test Calculator (2021). <https://www.textcompare.org/readability/>
- Everyday Words for Public Health Communication (a thesaurus-like search engine gives simpler alternative words in exchange for more complex words) <https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/everydaywords/>

## Resources on Equity and Administrative Burden

- Study to Identify Methods to Assess Equity: Report to the President (2021). [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-E013985-Implementation\\_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-E013985-Implementation_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf)
- Moynihan, D., Herd, P. (2019). Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means. <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/administrative-burden>
- Moynihan, D., Herd, P., Harvey, H. (2014). Administrative Burden: Learning, Psychological, and Compliance Costs in Citizen-State Interactions. <https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article/25/1/43/885957>

## Metrics for Measuring Change and Effectiveness

- Code for America National Safety Net Scorecard (2021). <https://www.codeforamerica.org/programs/social-safety-net/scorecard/the-national-safety-net-scorecard/>