

Incremental Steps to Integrated Benefits

If you work in government and administer social safety net programs, you may have heard about the advantages of integrating benefits, both for people who are eligible for benefits programs and government agencies and employees. Approaches to integrated benefits encompass a variety of changes and new processes including:

- + Combining benefits applications
- + Linking client data across programs
- + Conducting outreach to residents who are likely eligible for additional programs
- + Cross-training frontline staff so they are knowledgeable about multiple benefits

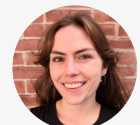


The process of integrating benefits may seem daunting. It can require the cooperation of multiple state and county agencies, deliberation over policy questions and data sharing, capacity of government IT staff and technology vendors, and backing from government leadership. The purpose of this resource guide is to show how taking an incremental approach to integrating benefits may be feasible and effective in your state or county.

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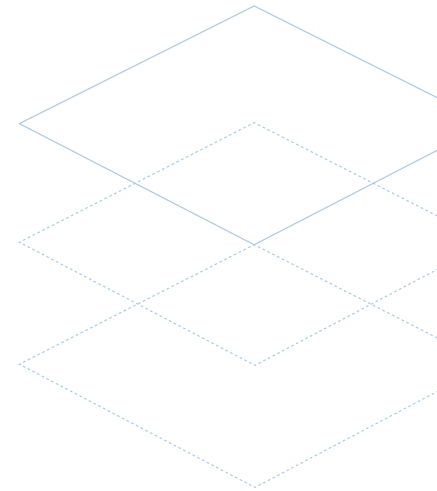
By taking one or more steps to implement benefits incrementally and on a small, more localized scale, you can make progress and improve resident and staff experiences. This will also reduce risk, allow for course corrections, and build buy-in for future steps. In this resource, you'll find:

- + Ideas for launching an integrated benefits application in stages
- + Strategies to pilot new tools

Rolling Out an Integrated Application in Stages

Minnesota is a good example of an organization that started small in its drive to integrate benefits programs. For instance, its recent statewide rollout of its online integrated benefit application website, [MNbenefits.mn.gov](https://mnbenefits.mn.gov), started as a pilot in 2020 with [Code for America](#). The pilot encompassed two counties including Hennepin County, where Minneapolis is located. The pilot later expanded to four counties, then 16 and a tribal nation. The final roll out, which took 12 months to implement, included the state's 87 counties and three tribal nations.

Another notable aspect of Minnesota's incremental approach was its use of a website with a .org URL ([MNbenefits.org](https://mnbenefits.org)) during the pilot. Following the pilots, the state IT team worked alongside Code for America engineers, to transfer the website to an official .gov URL ([MNbenefits.mn.gov](https://mnbenefits.mn.gov)) in October 2021.¹ Organizations can emulate this strategy by starting very small and expanding as they see success.



m MINNESOTA

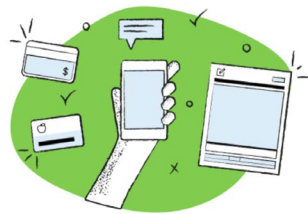
Apply for benefits easily online.

Finish an application in 20 minutes or less.

[Already have a case with the county? Upload documents here.](#)

Apply now →

Aplica ahora →



The landing page for <https://mnbenefits.mn.gov/>, which directs users to apply for benefits or upload documents if they have an open case.

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

Piloting a Document Uploader With One Office’s Caseworkers and Clients Before Broader Adoption

Another example of an iterative, integrated benefits program is what state agency leaders in Vermont did for the state’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applicants. Working with [Nava PBC](#), they approved a small-scale pilot that allowed SNAP applicants to use their smartphones or computers to upload documents verifying benefit eligibility. The pilot eliminated the need to send documents via postal mail or having to drop them off at one of the state’s 12 Economic Services Division Offices.

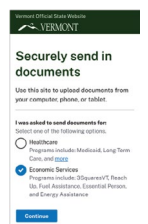
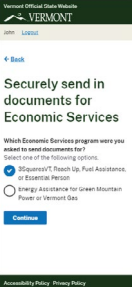
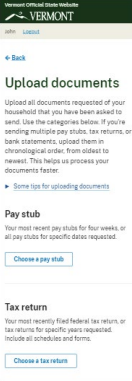
When the online document uploader was piloted in a single office, applicant wait times for benefit determination were cut by 44 percent. This led the Vermont legislature to approve the budget needed to roll out of the SNAP document uploader statewide. The secure, online document uploader is now used for other Vermont benefit programs. This allows applicants to upload required verification paperwork for 37 different benefits programs including SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and energy assistance.

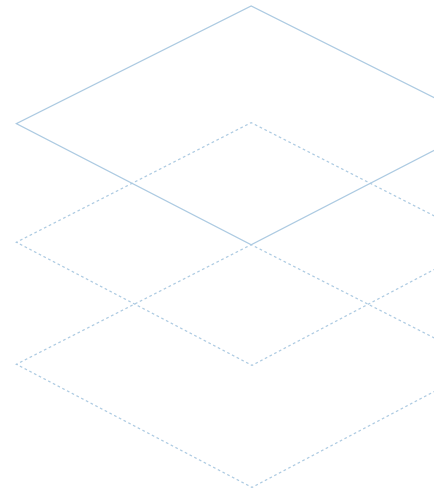


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Need to Send Us Documents?

Use the internet. Do it the safe way in 3 easy steps!

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take clear pictures of the documents you need to send us. You can use a smartphone, tablet or digital camera. You can also upload a pdf file (preferred). Go to ahsuploader.vermont.gov on the internet. Use the newest version of your internet browser. Log in to the document uploader. If you don't have an account, create a new account (see the other side for instructions). On the first page, click "Economic Services". Then click "Continue". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You will see a new page. Click on either "3SquaresVT, Reach Up, Fuel Assistance, or Essential Person" OR "Energy Assistance for Green Mountain Power or Vermont Gas". Then click "Continue". The next pages ask questions about your account. Answer the questions and click "Continue". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The next page lets you upload the documents we asked for. You can add more than one document by clicking "Add another document". When you're done, click "Finish and submit". 
<p>Want to find out if we got your documents? Wait 5 business days after you send them in.</p>		



Three-step instructions for securely using the Vermont Department of Children and Families’ document uploader tool.



By starting small and working in iterative steps throughout Vermont's benefits forms, the state was able to tackle what otherwise could have felt like a very overwhelming, daunting, and expensive project. But running a tiny 12-week pilot with a form, a [document] uploader, and 50 people on the phone outside of a mining town felt doable.

TARA DAWSON MCGUINNESS AND HANA SCHANK

From [Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology](#)



Expanding a Successful Texting Pilot During the COVID-19 Pandemic

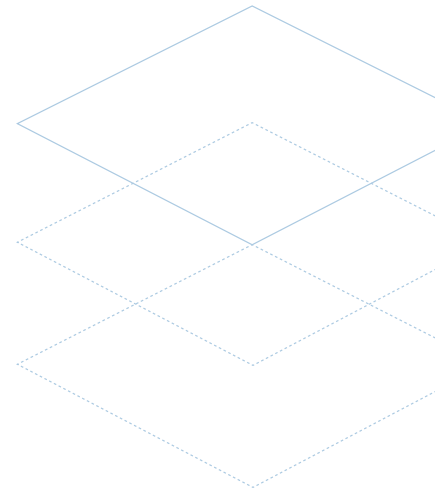
Like many states, Louisiana saw an uptick in benefits applications that was sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, looking to speed benefits delivery, took advantage of an existing texting pilot program. Designed to send text message reminders to SNAP applicants and clients, the organization expanded the pilot to its full SNAP caseload to reach more residents.

When the pilot, a collaboration with [Code for America](#), started the previous year, it served approximately 1,000 SNAP clients. The expanded text messaging program now reaches more than 400,000 households. The program was such a success that the state expanded it to include TANF benefit reminders as well.

Understanding Current Problems and Opportunities to Inform Priority Setting

Gaining feedback from benefits users and staff is one of the best tools you can have when working toward integrating benefits programs. The Missouri Department of Social Services did just that before it began its 2020 human-centered redesign and integration of its SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, and childcare applications. In partnership with [Civilla](#), the organization invested in a period of discovery research, which they documented in their joint [report](#). Combined, they spent more than 250 hours interviewing benefit applicants and staff. They also surveyed more than 1,000 staff statewide. Armed with that data, the team was able to prioritize which changes would address its users' most pressing needs.

An incremental approach to benefits integration such as this provides agencies with the space and time to design, adjust, and implement new tools that can improve application and enrollment processes. If you are considering smaller-scale updates to benefits processes, you may



be interested in the [Small-Scale Human-Centered Redesign](#) resource. This resource lays out actionable ideas for state and local benefits agencies to improve applications, renewals, and correspondence. If your organization is considering broader transformations to applications, renewals, or correspondence, the [Large Scale Redesign](#) resource offers guidance on human-centered design for major program updates.

i Find Out More on the Digital Benefits Hub

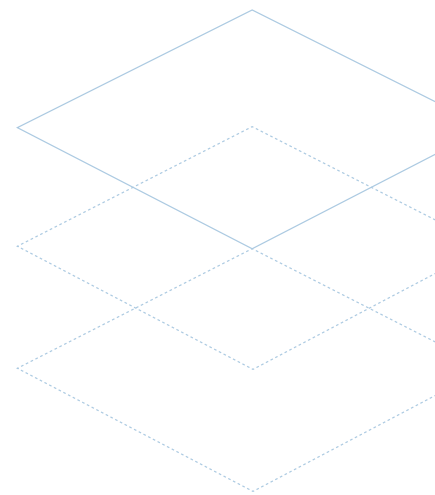
Read more about the incremental steps used by Minnesota, Vermont, and Missouri to integrate benefits:

- + [Four Lessons from Our Journey to Deliver Human-Centered Integrated Benefits.](#)
- + [Moving Child Care Assistance Applications Online Means More Families Get the Help They Deserve.](#)
- + [Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology. Chapter 2: Design, Data, and Delivery.](#)
- + [Missouri Benefits Enrollment Transformation: Transforming the Enrollment Process for End Users.](#)
- + [Integrating eligibility and enrollment, one piece of software at a time.](#)

About this resource:

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

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



Get in Touch

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