

Making Integrated Benefits Easy to Access Online and on Mobile Phones

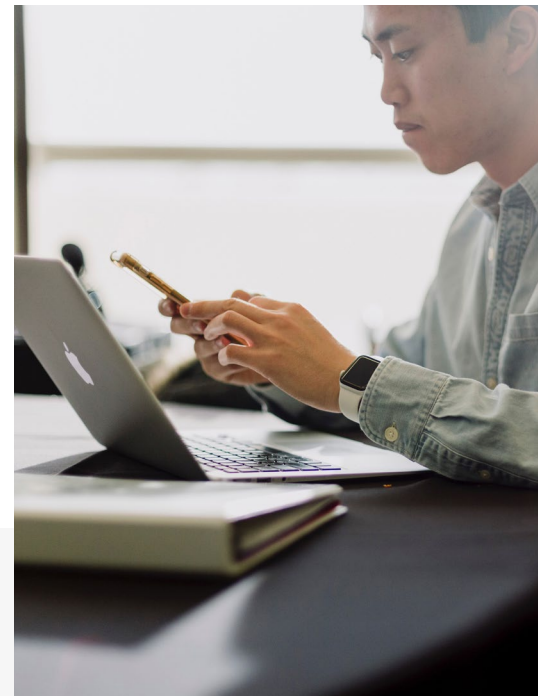
COVID-19 made the need for online access to government services more apparent than ever. But the push to put benefit services information online in a way that's designed to work well on mobile phones has been gaining momentum for years.¹ Having applications, change reporting, and renewal services available online allows residents to interact with the system at their convenience, rather than forcing them to make calls or office visits during weekdays. Offering services for multiple benefits in the same online location and format makes for greater efficiency.

This resource describes how different agencies have updated their systems to increase online and mobile access to benefits information and applications, including using text messages to share benefits information with residents. These approaches enable residents to more effectively access benefits information, and can meet resident needs across a range of accessibility requirements.

In this document you'll find:

- + Ideas for improving online benefit websites, including resources on mobile-first design
- + Information about conducting text-message outreach to benefits users

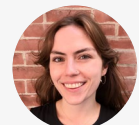
1. Many American adults with annual incomes under \$30,000 rely heavily on smartphones and need online services designed to be used on them. Of people in this income bracket, 76% own a smartphone, and 27% are considered "smartphone dependent," meaning they have a smartphone but no broadband access at home. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>.



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People used to come into the office all the time because they were confused about what was happening with their case. This [new] portal is so much better—it’s simple, understandable, fast, and to the point!

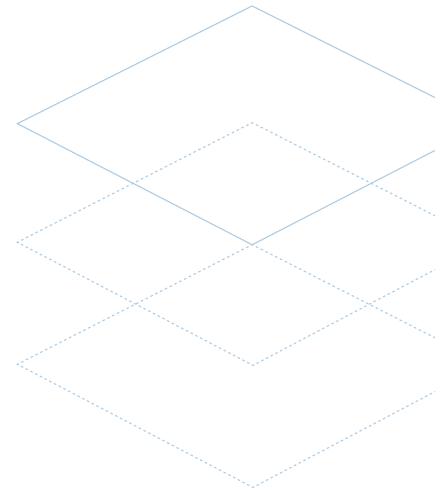
MICHIGAN CASEWORKER

From [Online Enrollment: Modernizing Online Enrollment for Michigan’s Largest Benefit Programs](#).



Making Online Benefit Websites Work More Effectively

After [Civilla](#) partnered with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) to redesign and integrate five types of benefit applications on [paper](#), they took the next step by using [Agile methodology](#) and [human-centered design](#) to improve Michigan’s [online benefits portal](#). The existing legacy system portal caused difficulties, errors, and delays for benefits applicants and caseworkers. It took applicants an average of 45 minutes to complete, often leaving them uncertain about the security and status of the information they submitted and necessitating phone calls and trips to benefit offices for help.



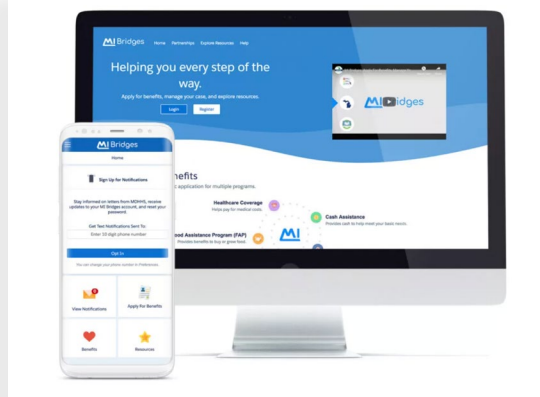
Apply For Benefits
A streamlined and dynamic application for multiple programs.

 A diagram for the MI Bridges landing page. At the center is a blue 'MI' logo. Surrounding it are six benefit programs, each with an icon and a brief description:

- Healthcare Coverage**: Helps pay for medical costs. (Icon: person with heart)
- Cash Assistance**: Provides cash to help meet your basic needs. (Icon: person with dollar sign)
- Food Assistance Program (FAP)**: Provides benefits to buy or grow food. (Icon: bowl of food)
- Women, Infants, & Children (WIC)**: Helps moms and kids up to age 5 with food, education, etc. (Icon: woman and child)
- Child Development & Care (CDC)**: Helps pay for childcare costs. (Icon: child in stroller)
- State Emergency Relief (SER)**: Provides help or assistance for emergency housing, utility, and burial situations. (Icon: house with dollar sign)

The [MI Bridges](#) landing page shows the six types of benefits residents can apply for using the site’s streamlined application.

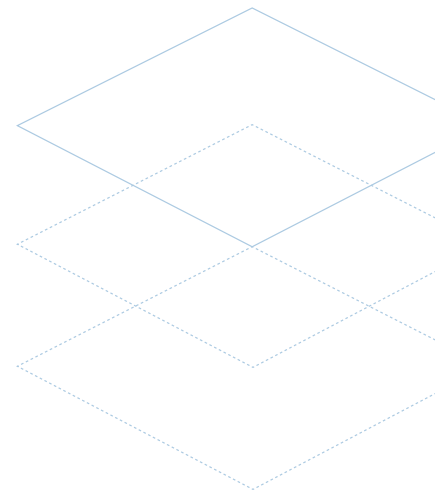
Now, the redesigned online portal at michigan.gov/MIBridges lets applicants apply for, renew, report changes to, and upload documents for six types of benefit programs. It's also optimized for mobile phones, meaning it's responsive to phones' screen size with short text and large interaction buttons. Site copy is written in warm, friendly, plain language, with clear indications for confirmations and next steps. Overall, this redesign reduced the time it took applicants to fill out the application by 50 percent and, according to caseworkers, lessened residents' confusion about the status of their application.



Example of mobile/desktop functionality for MI Bridges site. From Civilla's report [Online Enrollment: Modernizing Online Enrollment for Michigan's Largest Benefit Programs](#).

Before the portal redesign, MDHHS had promising results from a pilot that integrated SNAP and Medicaid applications, developed for mobile phones. This pilot, done in partnership with [Code for America](#) and [Civilla](#), was also developed using human-centered design and Agile methodology. In the nine months it was active in one Michigan County, application approval rates jumped from 53 percent to 71 percent. The report also offered several lessons for designing mobile-first applications for benefits users, including:

- + Provide a sense of time and place (i.e., help users see visual progress, and use splash pages as transitions)
- + Group questions around key themes
- + Use plain, friendly language
- + Require minimal typing, since tapping is an easier mobile interaction form
- + Design for accessibility (including large tap targets, wide buttons, and chunky dropdown inputs)
- + Provide confirmations and next steps to build user confidence and set expectations



Optimizing for Mobile Access

Minnesota's new online integrated benefits application portal, [MNbenefits.mn.gov](https://mnbenefits.mn.gov), was also designed (in partnership with [Code for America](#)) using the principles of human-centered design and Agile methodology. Like Michigan's application, it's optimized for mobile phone use and lets residents upload documents by taking pictures of them with their phones. The system doesn't require users to create an account to login, which can be a barrier to applying for new and returning applicants who struggle to manage email addresses and passwords. It also includes accessibility features to support clients who use assistive technology (like screen readers) to apply.

Texting Benefit Information

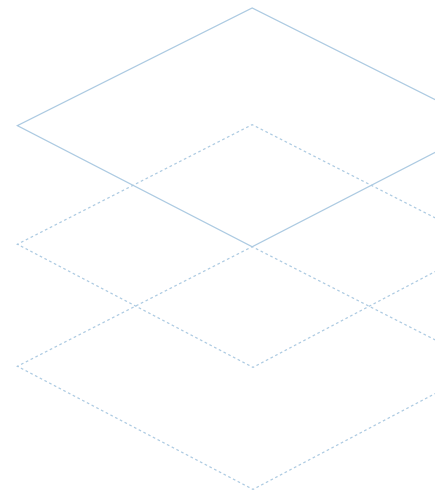
Louisiana is one of a growing number of states that uses text messages to reach benefit applicants and recipients on their mobile phones with updates and reminders about benefit application status and renewals. The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services uses texts to send messages about SNAP and TANF benefits, a program which began as a [pilot](#) with Code for America.

The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, which is responsible for food and cash assistance programs in the state, created a [text-messaging program](#) to reach residents during the pandemic. Initially, the text messages provided information about the pandemic Electronic Benefit (P-EBT) program and the department later used texting to share information about other programs as well.

Establishing a texting process required multiple steps, including:

- + Gaining leadership buy-in
- + Determining whether to build the system internally or contract with a vendor
- + Gathering funds and resources
- + Selecting a one-way or two-way system (Massachusetts chose a one-way system), and
- + Writing and sending text messages

Texting information to residents allowed the agency to provide content in more languages, and provide residents with short messages with actionable information.



i Find Out More on the Digital Benefits Hub

Read more on developing benefits communications over text:

- + [Text to Connect](#)

Read more about online and mobile access in Michigan, Minnesota, and Louisiana:

- + [Online Enrollment: Modernizing Online Enrollment for Michigan's Largest Benefit Programs.](#)
- + [Streamlining Access to Public Benefits in Michigan: Designing a User-Centered Digital Enrollment Experience.](#)
- + [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.](#)
- + [Cell Phones as a Safety Net Lifeline.](#)
- + [How Louisiana Rapidly Scaled Pilot Solutions to Combat COVID-19.](#)
- + [LA'MESSAGE Pilot: Text Reminders in Louisiana.](#)

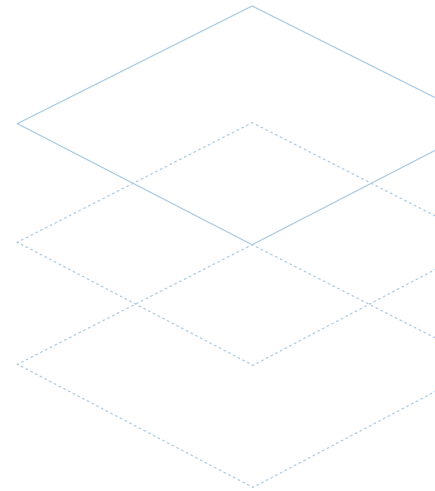
Find additional resources on online and mobile access:

- + [Blueprint for a Human-Centered Safety Net: Many Welcoming Doors.](#)
- + [The Missed Opportunity in Online Benefits Applications: Mobile First.](#)

About this resource:

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

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



Get in Touch

Our Digital Benefits Network team is here to help!

Visit us at the [Digital Benefits Hub](#)

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