Tools to Manage and Share Content

The right tech frameworks can help organize and distribute accessible benefits information, both within your organization and beyond.

Policymakers and implementers who follow principles and best practices for accessible content will produce public benefits information that is understandable and actionable for residents. The right technology framework can facilitate internal collaboration with that information, as well as its organization, storage, and distribution. This primer introduces two foundational software types that can support organizations that are committed to accessible benefits information: content management systems (CMS) and application program interfaces (APIs). It also provides examples of how one local government leveraged these tools to improve services and workstreams.

What is a Content Management System?

A CMS is software that organizations can use to store, edit, and update web content. It's easy enough to learn for staffers who don't have programming experience, but robust enough to manage large libraries of content.

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A CMS breaks content down into key elements. To use a common analogy, consider news publishing. News organizations including the *New York Times* use a CMS to categorize news articles based on various attributes, creating a data schema. Categories can include "section," designating which section of the publication the story appears in, "title" for the title of the story, "byline" for the author(s) of the story, and so on. This allows for cross-referencing between multiple articles and content to help staffers sort and distribute it. It also simplifies publication of content across the printed newspaper, website, and mobile app. A CMS used for content related to public benefits might break content down by elements like "program name," "program description," and "steps to apply."

Some software even permits editorial flow to be done directly in the CMS, allowing for real-time collaboration. By writing and storing information in a CMS, organizations can create content based on a common style guide in collaboration with colleagues. It could then follow an editorial workflow and automatically publish content to websites. In addition, when a piece of content is edited in the CMS, it automatically updates in every place it appears on a site, saving time and reducing the potential for errors.

There are many CMS solutions available on the market. Considerations for selecting a CMS include whether an organization already has one available and what requirements a solution will need to meet, such as:

+ Compatibility with existing technology

+ Ability for collaboration

+ Capacity for multilingual content

What is a Content API?

In any situation where it would be beneficial to have content created and maintained by one organization and distributed by partners or other parties, an API is the essential link. A content API takes 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 or repository, or an open data portal—and published somewhere else.

Content APIs are common tools for news publications. The *New York Times*, for instance, has a central CMS called Scoop. It allows the publisher to create and store content from the brand's print newspaper, website, and apps, while also making content available for others to post elsewhere. The New York Times Developer Network offers many APIs, including the Times Newswire API for articles as they are published. Another developer can then use the section, title, byline, and data elements to create their own newsfeed on a third party website, set up text message breaking news alerts, or post on social media.
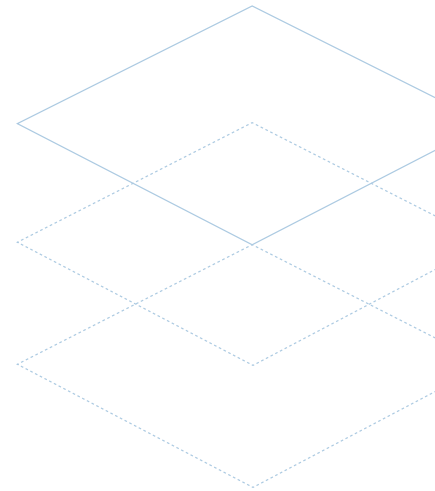
In the context of public benefits administration, a content API's possibilities are endless. For example, an API could be used to make content from one organization available to partners or the public to develop new resources. Using a content API, a single organization could develop and maintain benefits information that could then be embedded on multiple sites targeted to different resident demographics.

Putting a CMS and APIs into Practice

ACCESS NYC 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. ACCESS NYC includes information about how to apply for benefits and which documents are required for application. Users can also check their eligibility for the more than 40 benefits and programs available in the city and find help nearby—all in 11 languages.

IN 2016, ACCESS NYC was redesigned and rebuilt, and continues to be maintained by New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), which introduced new technology frameworks to manage and distribute accessible benefits information.
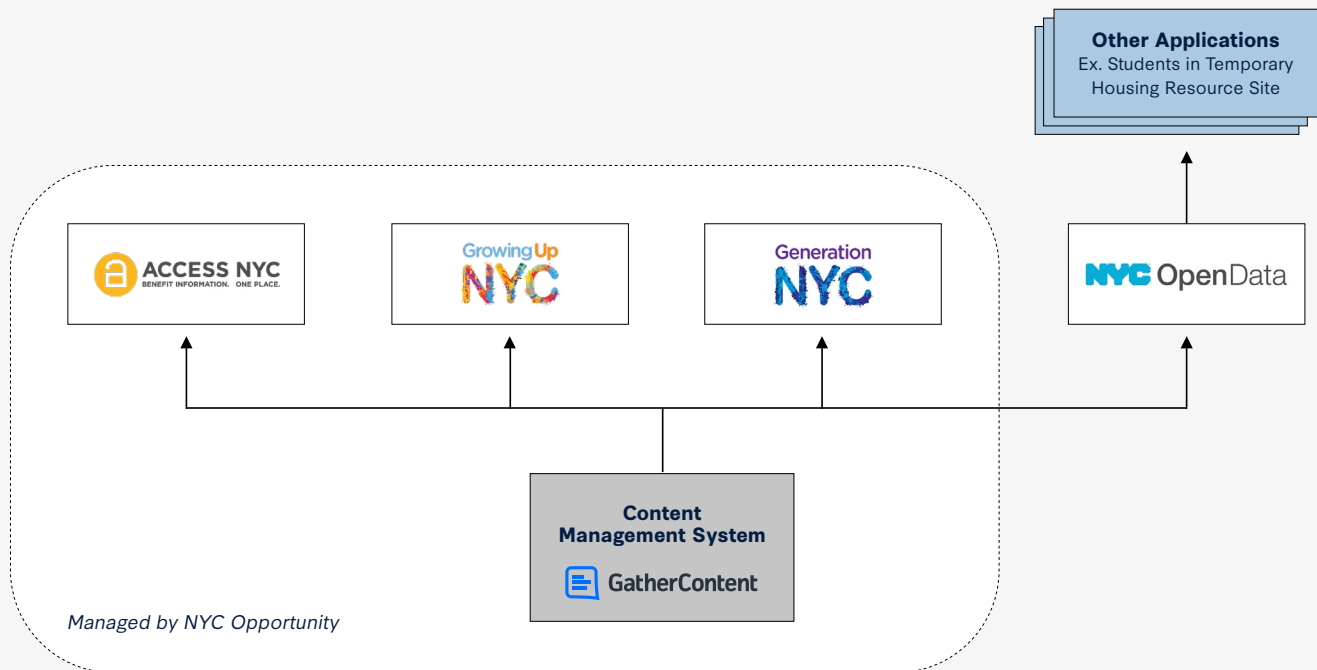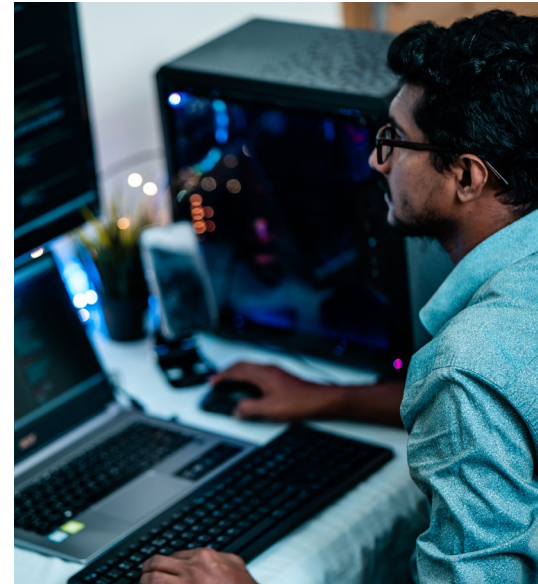

Diagram showing how content on various internal and external websites is pulled from NYC Opportunity's CMS.

NYC Opportunity uses a CMS called GatherContent to centralize content and streamline editorial workflows. All benefits information for ACCESS NYC is housed in the CMS, and each step of the editorial flow is handled directly in the CMS.

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 software developer to manually go in and make changes to site content, cutting update timelines from months to days as edits can be made by program and policy staff.
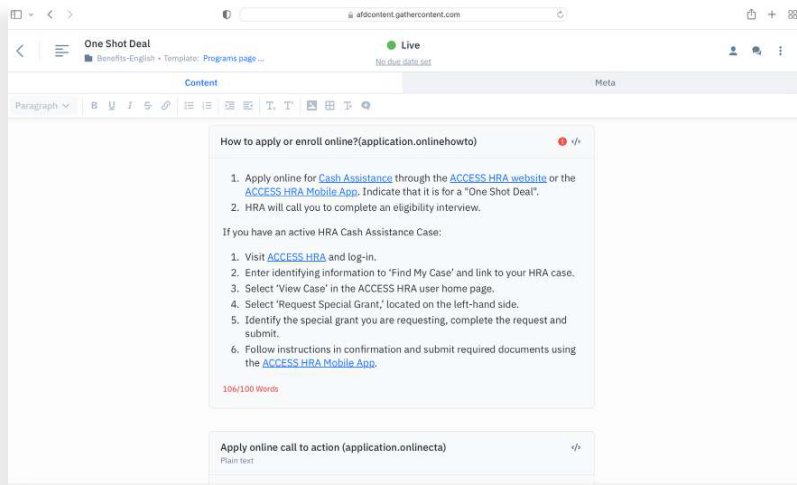
View of content in the GatherContent CMS.

The CMS also enables NYC Opportunity to easily use the centralized benefits content for other websites that they design, build, and maintain. For instance, the NYC Opportunity CMS powers the Generation NYC and Growing Up NYC sites, which provide benefits and programs information specifically tailored for young adults and families with children.
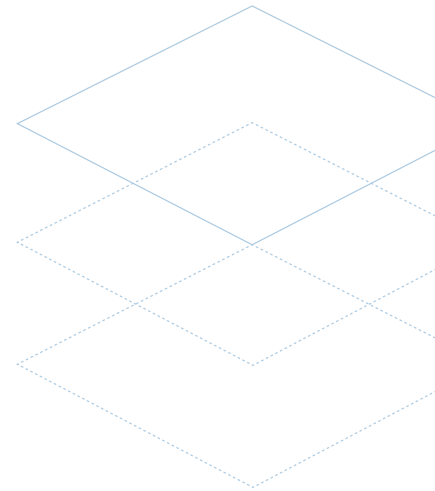
Program cards on ACCESS NYC and Growing Up NYC. The sites have different visual styles, but have access to and utilize the same content.

In an effort to scale its accessible benefits content, NYC Opportunity publishes the benefits and programs content to an API called the Benefits and Programs API hosted on the NYC Open Data portal. The team set up a batch process where content from the CMS is pushed to a database on a weekly basis. From there, the data pushes to the NYC Open Data portal. The Benefits and Programs API can then be called or accessed from the Open Data portal.

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, 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, which provides open developer access to the machine-readable calculations and criteria for the more than 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.

ⓘ **Find Out More on the Digital Benefits Hub**

To learn more about how NYC Opportunity became the team that City Hall now approaches first to update benefits information for the public, as well as how the infrastructure they built allows them to produce content at scale, read the full case study.

🖑 **Get in Touch**

Our Digital Benefits Network team is here to help!

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