

By Sundhar Sekhar and Wade Horn

The recession has affected everyone. While citizens struggle to make ends meet, state governments struggle to support their programs and plug enormous budget gaps. At the same time, states are seeing dramatic increases in the number of citizens applying for aid. Florida's food stamp caseload, for example, has grown by more than half a million people in the past 20 months, while Alabama's increased by more than 65,000

in food stamp benefits. It also provides \$290 million to help states administer the food stamp program (recently renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), with which states will need to update their benefits delivery systems in order to distribute the enhanced benefits. Given the recent increase in food stamp benefits contained within the ARRA, state agencies, now more than ever, need innovative ways to ensure that citizens who need

finding they are not only able to better handle rapidly increasing caseloads, but they are also better positioned to meet looming advanced benefit delivery needs.

## Wisconsin ACCESS ([www.access.wisconsin.gov](http://www.access.wisconsin.gov))

Many self-service systems were implemented to handle the opposite problem—low enrollment. Jim Jones, deputy division administrator for the Division of Health Care Access and Accountability in Wisconsin's Department of Health Services, said his state originally looked to move its Food Stamp Program online because enrollment was dwindling.

In 2002, Wisconsin applied for and received a grant from the Food and Nutrition Service and set out to build a web-based tool for citizens to apply

## (Self) Service with a Smile

people between November 2007 and November 2008.

To help those suffering the most from the recession, the recently passed American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides for a 13.6 percent increase

these benefits can access them quickly and effectively.

Some states are well on their way to managing both of these issues. States that have implemented self-service systems within the last several years are



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for benefits, check existing benefits status and determine potential eligibility. Wisconsin hired Deloitte Consulting LLP to help them design and implement ACCESS. Today, Wisconsin residents use ACCESS to check eligibility and apply for programs, including Medicaid, BadgerCare Plus, FoodShare Wisconsin and other programs. The state now receives about one-third of its applications online.

## **New York myBenefits (www.mybenefits.ny.gov)**

New York recently took notice of Wisconsin's success and set out to develop a self-service portal of its own. Called myBenefits, the new portal offers a pre-screening tool that brings together all the programs available to low-income New Yorkers in one place.

But since myBenefits, which includes a facilitated Food Stamp e-application, launched last summer, New York has seen an explosion in Food Stamp applications—many of which represent a population new to low-income family programs. “Food Stamp applications are up by 50 percent,” said Russell Sykes, deputy commissioner for the Center for Employment and Economic Supports in the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

Sykes said they've pre-screened 120,000 people since the system went live in June 2008, with an abandonment rate of only about 7 percent.

In June 2009, OTDA will pilot a public Internet version for the Food Stamp e-application starting in the facilitated enrollment districts and going state-wide by the end of 2009.

## **Georgia COMPASS (www.compass.ga.gov)**

Georgia also recently implemented a self-service portal. The Georgia Common Point of Access to Social Services, COMPASS, is a one-stop portal for citizens seeking to tap into the

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state's network of social service programs. “We're living in an age where technology is a major access point,” said B.J. Walker, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Human Resources. “It's driving a lot of connections so it's logical that the first point of contact even to a government service should use technology and that technology should take the transaction as far down the road as possible.”

Georgia COMPASS screens applicants, steers them toward appropriate programs and allows them to fill out an application for food stamps online. “It helps maximize the time of the applicant and the time of our staff,” said Walker.

## **Massachusetts Virtual Gateway (www.mass.gov/eohhs)**

The Massachusetts Virtual Gateway is a web portal that provides the general public, clients, providers and front-line staff in Massachusetts with access to health and human service information and services online. Using the Virtual Gateway, registered providers and applicants submit a single, online electronic application for multiple programs. Prior to the Virtual Gateway, providers were required to submit separate paper applications for each program and clients had to deal with multiple state agencies on their own.

From a citizen-facing perspective, “the first thing we did was food stamps,” said Andy Dodge, chief administrative officer for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services in Massachusetts. “Since we launched this, our applications have skyrocketed


and we are seeing comparable rates of approval and denial.”

Since the Virtual Gateway was implemented, Dodge said their call volumes are down and close to 80 percent of applications are coming in via the Internet. “We're taking increasing case loads and staffing levels aren't going up,” Dodge said. “That reiterates to me that we need to use these tools and more like them in the future to deliver care to our citizens in a quality way.”

## **Moving Forward In New Mexico**

New Mexico's Human Services Department is one of the most recent state agencies to join the efforts to provide access to services via the Internet. Jan Christine, program manager for the Your Eligibility System New Mexico effort, cites changing expectations and enhancing efficiency as the major drivers of the program.

Consistency in service delivery was a major focus of HSD as well, said Christine. “To support this we have planned to provide access to the major HSD, Children, Youth and Families Department, and Department of Health benefit programs including child care, cash assistance, medical assistance, low income home energy assistance, nutritional assistance, and Women, Infants and Children.”

YES NM is targeted to be available to New Mexicans this summer. 

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