



**Title:** Michigan Helping Hand Portal  
**Category:** Digital Government: Government to Citizen  
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**Contact Information:**

Jim Hogan  
Information Officer  
Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget  
235 South Grand Ave  
Lansing, Mi 48933  
517-373-6702  
[hoganj@michigan.gov](mailto:hoganj@michigan.gov)

## **B: Executive Summary Government - to - Citizen (Helping Hand portal)**

In 2009, Michigan's unemployment rate peaked at 15.3% - the nations highest. Statistics showed much of this growth in unemployment was from first-time filers. As individuals ran out of unemployment benefits, there was the parallel climb in first time filers for other supportive services: cash, medical, food, energy and day care. As of April 2010, over 1/5 of Michigan's population is receiving some type of government assistance. Michigan's social safety net had been designed around the chronically underemployed. This new dynamic had first time filers (350,000 in 2009) being asked to navigate a social services delivery system for which they were unfamiliar. To meet the needs of this new cohort, Michigan developed an information and online one-stop for assistive services called the Michigan Helping Hand portal. The portal aggregates assistive services and eligibility information in one place. Eligibility wizards help citizens determine potential eligibility for dozens of state programs and offers online application for many of these services. This innovative service is helping first-time applicants determine resources available and guides them through eligibility determination and online application.

This project is a good example of using technology shared services to address a significant gubernatorial priority - helping to protect Michigan's vulnerable citizens from increased economic harm. Since our solution required multiple state agencies and private sector partners to join forces, we relied on a governance and project management structure to help plan, execute and sustain this effort. Our first step was to establish baseline of need. The Michigan team researched what other states were doing, had conference calls to learn from our peers, and visited Ohio to learn from their experience. With successful elements identified from across the nation, we determined the necessary elements for a successful cross-boundary platform required four main design components: (1) aggregate content from all websites engaged in delivering assistive services and information, (2) development of eligibility screening tools to help citizens learn what programs they may be eligible for, (3) development of streamlined online application for our most "in-demand" services, and (4) enlist the support of a broad network of community providers. Michigan next created a prototype portal that was vetted with a number of constituencies, both citizens and our non-profit community partners. We conducted focus groups across the state and used our state-of-the-art "usability lab" to ensure the portal design and navigation was easy for first-time users to understand. The Helping Hand portal (<http://www.michigan.gov/helpinghand>) was launched in August 2009 and offers these innovative services:

- Eligibility wizard to help citizens determine qualifying potential for several programs, including cash assistance, health care, food assistance, energy and other one-time non-energy assistance, day care, housing and foreclosure assistance, unemployment benefits and job training.
- Integrated use of Microsoft's Bing mapping utility to help citizens locate service providers within their community, including driving directions.
- Online application for food assistance, housing assistance, energy assistance and further refinements to our online application for unemployment insurance. This is supplemented with interactive voice response (IVR) and web-based client profile to check on benefit status and to make demographic changes.

### **C. Description**

Michigan was facing a significant looming problem with caseload projections for a sundry of assistive services anticipated to grow beyond staffing levels capable of responding in a timely fashion. Initial claims (new filings) for unemployment insurance in 2009 was 1.3 million claims (19% increase over 2008). Ongoing claims totaled 13 million. Likewise, many individuals lost their unemployment insurance in this same time period as extended federal benefits were exhausted. Our assistance caseload showed 350,000 citizen's seeking first time human services assistance in 2009. This new cohort of first time filers represented a segment of the population that had never needed state assistance. Michigan policy makers were concerned that many may not know what benefits were available, and many might forego the application process because of the stigma associated with receiving public assistance. A decision was made to use web technology to help this new segment of citizens determine eligibility and apply for benefits outside of the traditional face-to-face intake process. Michigan's self-service model for unemployment insurance application provided us with a working model to emulate.

A team of state leaders representing all agencies engaged in providing elements of human services (welfare, housing, health care, job training and unemployment) were joined by leaders of our non-profit organizations on a cross-agency project team. A project management structure was put in place to maintain progress and to quickly remove barriers that might delay production deployment. The design of the portal was finalized and re-affirmed with targeted focus groups. Our design was then turned over to four tactical teams with these specific roles:

- Content - cross agency teams, augmented with our non-profit partners reviewed all existing web content and developed story board navigation themes to cluster similar services into navigation themes. These consisted of: (jobs & training, unemployment benefits, health care, family support and housing help).
- Eligibility - subject matter experts on assistance programs were assembled to come up with a logic flow that allowed users to complete screening questions in fewer than 5 minutes to determine potential eligibility for several assistance programs. Our goal was to ask the least amount of questions while giving users a reasonable determination (85% accuracy goal) of eligibility.
- Technical - Technical teams were tasked with designing online application for food assistance (our most sought after program) including enhanced self-service capabilities allowing citizens to create web accounts or use (IVR) to check on benefit status for both food stamps and unemployment insurance. Our goal was to build real-time interfaces into our back-end eligibility systems to minimize worker intervention and hasten the determination process.
- Outreach - We have enlisted the help of over 100 community partners (United Way, Salvation Army, and faith-based organizations) to assist walk-in customers who may not have Internet access to apply for benefits. This same strategy included placing secure Kiosk enabled PC's in state field offices to provide clients with an additional channel to apply. Public Service announcements are broadcast in local television markets to increase outreach and adoption.

These four teams, working under the direction of a unified project management office was able to engineer a comprehensive solution in six months, at a combined cost of \$6 million to build out our self-service channel for food assistance and IVR. A separate team of dedicated state IT staffs made parallel improvements to our unemployment system to provide additional client flexibility in reporting changes on the web. The Helping Hand portal was launched in August 2009. Major solution elements of these combined solutions wrapped into the Helping Hand umbrella include:

- Content and information from multiple state agencies and non-profit providers aggregated under major navigation categories on the new portal.
- Development of a geo-spatial mapping service leveraging Microsoft's Bing mapping solution allows citizens to locate assistive services within their community, complete with driving directions. This same application has been developed for mobile device access.
- Rules based eligibility wizards help citizens determine potential eligibility. This includes Spanish and Arabic translation.
- Citizen facing self-service application for food assistance tightly integrated with our new eligibility "Bridges" core application. It enables citizens to apply on-line for Food Assistance and inquire and report changes on their existing cases.
- Online application for energy assistance.
- Interactive Voice Response (IVR) allows citizens to check their food stamp benefits using telephones. Citizens seeking answers to common questions (e.g., benefit amount, appointment time) can now call the IVR (or go on-line) and receive information at their convenience. This includes Spanish translation.
- Client self-service for unemployment benefits was enhanced to allow claimants to check on the status of a claim, provide responses for contested claims and to make demographic changes to their user profile.
- Over 120 community partners have registered to assist citizens in completing online submissions for food stamps via helping hand.

#### **D. Significance**

Michigan has improved government efficiency by continuing our expansion of self-service channels. Primary benefactors of our cadre of online assistive services are citizens who have no experience navigating our network of social services. Secondary benefactors are state employees who are managing higher caseloads without staff augmentation. Channeling segments of our citizens to self-service provides a measure of relief from intake, inquiries and follow-up duties. Finally, this project has helped raise the importance and necessity of cross-boundary collaboration. The partnerships between government and our non-profit assistive community have raised awareness on what is possible with collaboration. This awareness has manifested itself with a commitment from national foundations to provide funding assistance to the state of Michigan to expand the reach of the Helping hand portal, both in online applications and training for our community partners to assist citizens in using these services.

The Helping Hand portal embraces multiple gubernatorial policy, strategic and priority goals. Policy and priority objectives of helping vulnerable citizens through economic hardship has intersected with strategic technology acquisition to offer a enhanced self-

service channel to a new cohort of applicants not familiar with navigating the states network of assistance programs. Our efforts have been very successful in the first nine months of operation. Significant measures of benefit and utility to citizens include:

Citizens self service benefits (September 2009 – May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010)

- The Helping Hand portal is averaging 60,000 monthly visits since launch. Our navigation and design included input from users participating in regional focus groups (Detroit and Lansing). Our online survey encourages citizen feedback for our continuous quality improvement releases.
- Michigan has received over 105,000 online applications for food assistance with over 55% being approved for benefit issuance.
- Users have created 63,000 new web accounts to check on the status of human services benefits (food stamps) and view details about their case contact information, pending verifications, and appointments.
- Our toll-free IVR system has received 214,000 calls from users checking on food stamp benefit status, pending verifications and appointments.
- Our eligibility screening wizard has been used 175,000 times with 70% of users accessing from their home, followed by 10% using a public library.
- Our online children's health care application (MiChild) receives a monthly average of 10,000 applications via Internet submission. This represents 80% of total applications received.
- Users have created 133,000 web accounts for UIA self-service. This allows them to manage their accounts, change demographic information and provide information for contested claims to UIA adjudication officers.
- The Helping Hand portal offers online tax assistance, including help with filing the earned income tax credit. Our network of community action agencies have been trained to assist tax filers in completing the EITC form.

Michigan IT and human services policy leaders have demonstrated that cross-boundary teams can quickly effect change, when sharing a common vision and subordinating individual projects for an enterprise approach. The Helping Hand project has also addressed several key strategies and technology initiatives outlined by NASCIO members as priorities, including:

- Budget – Michigan's capture of metrics and economic impact data has been shared with private foundations and has resulted in commitments for funding assistance for self-service expansion in the next 12 months by the foundations.
- Cost control - self-help channels have reduced the urgency for caseworker hiring. Client web accounts (UIA and food stamps) reduce intervention with state staffs.
- Geographic information systems - Our use of Bing mapping provides a seamless process for locating government services. As we gain access to more community partner databases (address and location) this service will be extended.
- Connectivity - using our network of non-profit service providers helps bridge the digital divide by introducing hundreds of Internet connected facilities into our solution matrix, including state operated facilities.

- Infrastructure - Our Linux based solution leverages VM Ware to quickly add capacity to our Dell enterprise servers in a virtual environment. This infrastructure will be the back-bone as more online services (cash, day care) are added.
- Shared services – Michigan is using a web service to exchange information with major utility companies allowing us to validate billing and payment information for client online applications for energy assistance.
- Governance – The helping hand project is sustained by a consortium of stakeholders: government, non-profit organizations and private foundations. This group meets bi-monthly to review metrics and develop strategies for on-going outreach and expansion.

While the significance of this project has been measured with enhanced services to citizens, the economic impact of this project is being felt within state government and in local communities.

### **E. Benefits of the Project**

This project has demonstrated return on our investment and is being measured in several ways. These measurements are key to sustaining both legislative support and private foundation support for continued funding of this critical technology channel. These benefit measurements include:

#### Economic benefit

Michigan has long been considered a "donor" state - meaning we send to Washington more taxes than we receive back for direct assistance to citizens. Michigan leadership was looking for a technology solution that could help identify citizens eligible for federal assistance benefits, but not claiming them. In February 2009, The Michigan Association of United Ways led a statewide stakeholder group to study how technology could increase access to public benefits for households. Using state data and federal eligibility rules, the following was estimated as public benefits not claimed in Michigan;

<b>Program</b>	<b>Eligible / not receiving</b>	<b>Benefit not claimed</b>
Food stamps	584,000	\$636 million
EITC (estimate)	113,800	\$159 million
Children's Medicaid	59,000	\$108 million

This data led state policy makers to quickly decide our quickest return on investment would be to develop online application for food assistance. Online food assistance intake was introduced in the Helping Hand portal with our August 2009 launch. Data provided by the federal food and nutrition services agency (FNS) has developed the following standard metrics for calculating economic impact of food stamp issuance:

Every \$5 dollars in food assistance returns 184% or \$9.20 in benefits. This higher return calculates the "rolling" economic impact that includes additional hiring by food stores, wage earnings etc. Michigan's average monthly food benefit to families is \$267 - resulting in an increased economic benefit of \$491 ( $\$267 * 184\%$ ). For every additional 1,000 households served per month, Michigan is returned \$491,000. Since the online

food assistance program was launched, over 100,000 applications have been received, resulting in 54,000 positive determinations. This equates to \$26.5 million in economic impact (54\*\$491,000).

#### Worker operational benefit

Technology helps state workers keep up with increasing caseload demands by reducing certain client contact functions and reducing the urgency for temporary hiring, notably:

- Online food assistance and energy assistance applications are automatically routed to the appropriate regional field office based on the application address. Designated staffs complete the registration process - 90% time savings off face-to-face intake. Over 104,000 online applications have been received for food assistance – representing significant staff savings if these had been processed via traditional intake.
- 80% of Children's health care applications are processed electronically with minimal manual oversight. This is significant given projected caseload increases based on preliminary eligibility guidelines of the national health care reform act.
- 214,000 calls have been received in our IVR system to check on the status of benefit filings since August 2009. Each of these calls represents a reduction in worker intervention (phone call follow-up).
- Web-service technologies to instantaneously transfer information between select energy providers and DHS for energy assistance saves eligibility staff significant amounts of administrative time following up with utility companies while protecting clients from heat and electric shut-offs

#### Constituent Benefit

- Citizens seeking answers to questions (e.g., benefit amount, appointment time) can now call the IVR (or go on-line) and receive information at their convenience.
- Citizens can avoid office visits to determine benefit eligibility. Our online wizard provides determination with 85% accuracy for assistance programs. Office visits are reduced via online application for food, children's health care, unemployment and energy assistance.
- Citizens can create secure web accounts to manage benefit information, track status of payments and make certain account changes. This personalization of services has been adopted for both clients receiving unemployment benefits and those receiving cash and energy assistance. 63,000 accounts have been created for cash and energy assistance. 133,000 for unemployment benefits.

Our self-service offerings will be augmented within the next 12 months to include online application for emergency assistance, cash and day care applications. Michigan's decision to invest in open, scalable technology solutions, based on Linux and J2EE technologies has built a foundation to continue our strategic investment in expanded citizen self-service as a solution to increasing demand and limited staff resources. Michigan's innovative partnership with our non-profit community and measured progress in delivering self service benefits to multiple stakeholders has given us the track record to secure on-going funding support to maintain future momentum.