

State of Connecticut

Department of Social Services

Connecting to Citizens Where They Are:

MyDSS – Progressive Mobile App

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Award Category: Digital Government: Government to Citizen

Idea

MyDSS Ideation

The Department of Social Services (DSS) strongly believes in human-centered application design and Technology solutions. State government must work for the people, and by the people, starting with the people who need our services most.

In keeping with our beliefs, we developed the MyDSS Progressive Web Application (MyDSS). The primary purpose of the MyDSS Project was to implement mobile capabilities for Health and Human Services (HHS) consumers to access HHS services and to further support the State’s ‘No Wrong Door’ (NWD) vision of integrated eligibility. The current DSS client self-service portal (Connect) limits the ability for consumers to interact with the Department via the use of a mobile device. It is not mobile friendly, has a busy landing page, and outdated look and feel.



Old Website on a Smartphone

Similarly, CT residents expressed the same frustrations with the state’s client portal mobile experience.

“[I want it to] be easy for me to move around with confidence...When I go to a page I [want to] know immediately what information is there and what I need to do.”

-Connecticut Resident

Every online option of the state’s applications across five large federal programs core programs (SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, WIC, and LIHEAP) were reviewed in Aug 2019 with the following results:

- Three of the five benefits programs were available online across two applications. Clients could complete both applications at once, but it involved starting in one application, redirecting to a new page for the second, and then coming back to finish on the original page—missing the opportunity to combine and streamline the experience.
- Completing both applications took an estimated 110 minutes, one of the longest processes in the country. Both applications require user registration, and the Medicaid application makes passing identity proofing a requirement. **Neither application was mobile friendly.**
- Users required almost two hours of uninterrupted access to a desktop computer to apply for Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF online in Connecticut.

Connecticut	
2 sites, 3 programs	
Access Health CT Medicaid	ConneCT SNAP TANF
45* Minutes to complete	50* Number of screens
No ID proofing required? ✗ ⓘ	No ID proofing required? ✓ ⓘ
Mobile friendly? ✗ ⓘ	Mobile friendly? ✗ ⓘ
No registration required? ✓ ⓘ	No registration required? ✗ ⓘ
<small>* Estimated</small>	

The MyDSS Mobile Platform project addressed these issues by designing and architecting a mobile first solution that provides a consistent experience across all devices and channels. The addition of a mobile channel is a key component of the State's Shared Services vision and represented a major progression in the promotion of self-service options in line with the No Wrong Door approach.

MyDSS Mobile Platform realized several related business objectives including:

- Expand access for individuals who may not have access to a computer or home internet service.
- Expand real-time services available to clients beyond current client portal offerings
- Offered reliable services to DSS consumers and community partners
- Promoted increased levels of consumer satisfaction
- Decreased the level of effort required to interact with the Department
- Enhanced the Department work force efficiency and satisfaction levels
- Created agile internal platform that can be quickly and efficiently modified to meet the changing needs of the agency
- Reduced external vendors costs associated with updating client portal
- Reduced document management scanning vendors costs

The Integrated Mobile Platform also provides several tangible services and benefits to HHS consumers:

- Allows immediate access to case and benefit information.
- Provides self-service for clients to update case information and demographic details to lessen workload of field office staff
- Reduces phone and office wait times
- Reduces un-necessary trips to field offices
- Enables document upload, of different formats, in near real time reducing the overall wait time for case status and benefit changes.
- Enhances streamlined verification submission process and reduced case workload
- Provides timely alerts and proactive reminders to clients on application status, renewals, etc.
- Pushes notifications on office closures due to emergency or weather events
- Enables electronic notices and reduces agency cost on postal and logistics
- Provides relief to in-person channels as consumers adopt mobile functionality

Improvements to date have been documented by our residents:

"You sign up online with your DSS [client id] number, email, and a password, and you basically do everything online. If they ask you for copies of pay stubs, you upload them onto your account, and it shows you when someone actually goes in there and looks at it. Everything's very easy. It's simple."

"[Doing the renewal on MyDSS] seems more streamlined than the application [on ConneCT] - larger text, higher contrast. I'm not legally visually impaired but I did struggle with the application website, it looked very legal. And very intimidating. The renewal one was pretty easy, click some checkboxes and you're done."

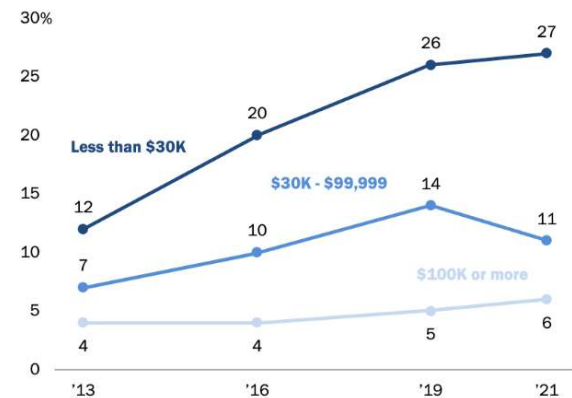
Business Problem or Opportunity

MyDSS was built upon the success implementation of Connecticut’s integrated eligibility system, ImpaCT, which provides comprehensive eligibility and enrollment services for various social service programs, including Modified Adjusted Gross Income (MAGI)-based Medicaid, Connecticut Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Temporary Family Assistance (TFA).

The MyDSS Mobile Platform is an opportunity for the State to show progress on the development of a shared services vision to realize the NWD vision. This project serves as example of the Department leveraging a modern cross-platform architecture solely developed by the state inhouse technical teams, to achieve service offerings based on a single set of code regardless of the channel the consumer chooses to interact with. In line with re-use goals and the optimization of technology assets, the mobile solution is powered by real-time logic based on a single code base for both the existing web-based consumer services and the mobile functionality. This also enables pluggable web service and architecture features across platforms.

This effort allows the Department to take advantage of trends that show many households primarily use and own smartphones as opposed to personal or laptop computers. A 2021 survey from the Pew Research Center shows that roughly a four-in-ten adults with household incomes below \$30,000 a year do not have home broadband services (43%) or a desktop or laptop computer (41%).¹ Moreover, the share of Americans with lower incomes who rely on their smartphones for going online has roughly doubled since 2013.

% of U.S. adults who say they have a smartphone but no broadband at home, by household income



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted 1/25-2/8, 2021

MyDSS is focused on empowering citizens with ready access to benefit-related information and with convenient tools to ensure continuity of their benefits. MyDSS is also part of a statewide initiative to implement an “all-digital government” where citizens are found “online, not in line.”

What makes it Universal

The MyDSS Mobile platform solution was implemented in line with the State CIO’s Top Ten Policy and Technology Priorities for 2022. Some of these are listed below.

- Digital Government/Digital Services -- improves/digitizes citizen experience
- Identity and Access Management -- making use of Single Sign-On (with existing login)

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/22/digital-divide-persists-even-as-americans-with-lower-incomes-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/>

Implementation

MyDSS in Context

As noted previously, MyDSS was built upon the success of the state’s integrated eligibility solution, ImpaCT. ImpaCT provided technological infrastructure and supporting business processes that made MyDSS possible. ImpaCT was focused on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of benefits management and providing social service personnel with more effective tools to support their mission.

Stakeholder Engagement

The concept of a mobile solution for DSS was ideated by the policy and management team within DSS. While there was initially some concern about pursuing an internally developed solution, discussions with the Governor’s office, DSS, legislators, the State’s CIO and the agency’s Chief Innovation Officer determined to launch the phase 1 of the project. The project was lead by DSS Policy & SNAP division as product owners. The project team worked closely with DSS business stakeholders, frontline staff, community action agencies, other technical team within the state, other HHS states within US, clients and aging and disability services to get their feedback. QR codes were printed and posted as displays across the 12 offices in DSS and other partner agency locations to promote the application.

Project Management and Resourcing

The project was managed in a hybrid agile manner, where user-interface development unfolded in sprints that were driven by a prioritized feature list and regular feedback from project stakeholders and citizens during their field office visits. To ensure timely delivery of prioritized product features, the project was implemented in three phases:

Phase	Theme	Features
1	User security integration, file upload, and read-only functionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Account creation, login, and logout with single-sign-on credentials (same as eligibility system)• View account summary information• Receive important notifications (e.g., renewals)• View documents and notices• Upload required documents in multiple formats for submitted forms
2	Additional write functionality and enhanced user features	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confirm user/household information (system initiated at regular intervals)• Change user/household information (user initiated)• Renew services for SNAP, cash assistance, medical coverage, Medicare savings, and other long-term support• Allow third party to submit documents on behalf of the client• Enroll in electronic notifications (and suspend paper notifications)• View Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) balance information in real-time• Provide one-click translation to Spanish
3	Additional functionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Administrative dashboard• Other administrative tools• Other app enhancements based upon user feedback and system evaluation (e.g., Frequently Asked Questions)

The project team consisted of the following technical roles: project director (part-time role), a project manager, an application architect/developer, quality management testers and two additional application developers. The product owner, business users and the agency’s quality management teams were engaged for testing and validating product functionality. Community partners and support from Aging and Disability services were utilized to ensure the application was compliant per their requirements.

Architecture and Design

MyDSS was designed as a Progressive Web App (PWA). PWAs combine advantages of web applications – including discoverability by search engines, linkability for websites and web applications, and always-up-to-date applications – with advantages of native mobile applications – including app-like usability, homepage anchoring, and offline functionality.

The design of the user interface was driven by significant, incremental feedback from project stakeholders and citizens during their field office visits as well as through conversations with other states that have implemented similar mobile solutions. The result was a very clean and functional mobile application that provided citizens with convenient, benefit-related, self-service capabilities.

The application was soft launched on July 24th 2021, to a limited population of clients. The soft launch enabled the department of monitor client engagement, enhance functionality based on client feedback and usage. The application has been fully launched and live for use by all clients.

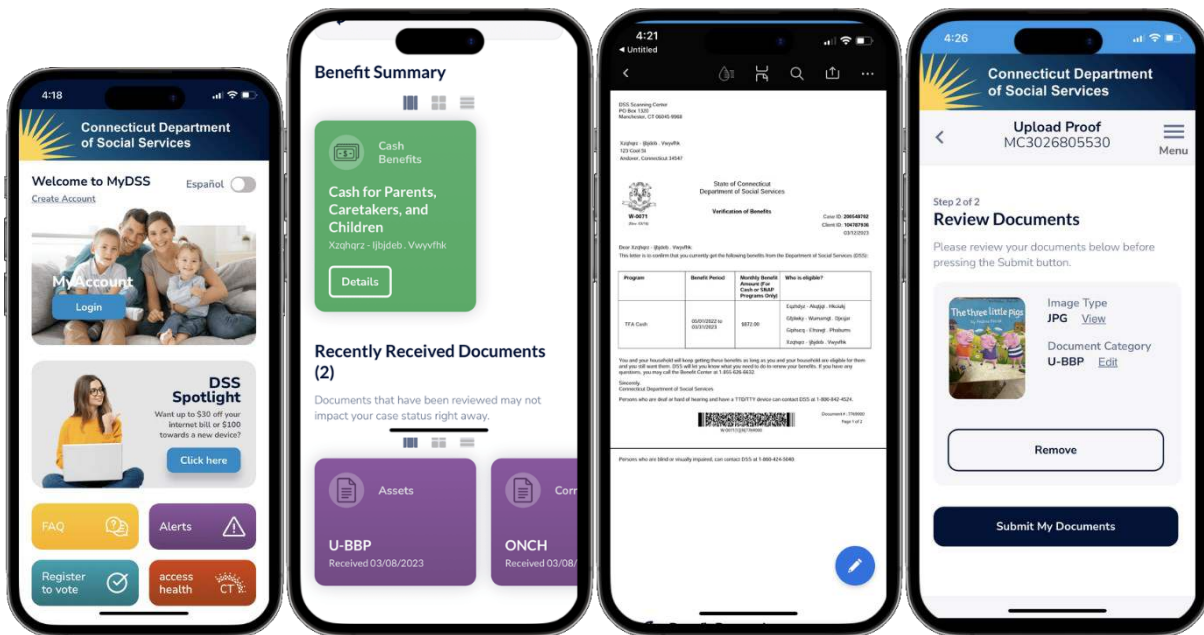


Figure: Sample screens from MyDSS showing the main page, a view of benefits and document, a scanned proof of benefits document, and the uploading of a scanned document. For view of MyDSS, see [MyDSS Interactive Wireframe](#).

Impact

MyDSS Impact

The MyDSS Mobile App saves customers time in the application process and provides easy access to information about Benefits.

Research

Research identified expanded customer needs. To be able to report changes, submit documents, complete renewals, request administrative hearings, and check their EBT balance in real-time, and download letters verifying their receipt of DSS benefits.

Ease of Use

The MyDSS Mobile application reduced application times from using paper forms from 40 minutes to 15 minutes. This also improves data quality, and reduces paper processing costs for the agency. In addition, simple changes that clients would call or visit DSS to report such as changes of income or changes of address can now be updated through MyDSS. Clients can perform the updates from the convenience of their mobile devices and save the time and effort visiting a DSS office.

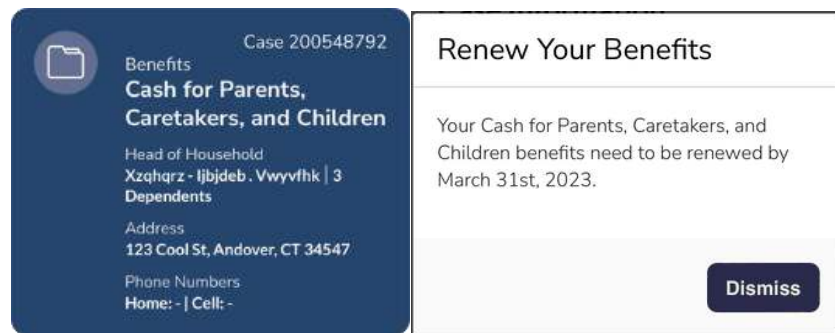


Figure: Sample screens from MyDSS showing the Benefits, a view of renewing your benefits and document. For a more interactive view of MyDSS, see [MyDSS Interactive Wireframe](#).

Spreading the News and Updates

DSS promoted MyDSS through social media channels, email campaigns to community partners, up-front messaging on the agency IVR system, posters and video board displays in its offices, the DSS agency website, and through press releases in February of 2022 with updates on new features and releases, filtering through the same channels.



To conclude MYDSS is an example of how multiple state teams and agencies came together to work towards a common goal of enhancing the client's experience working with the State. The vision continues to strive towards empowering citizens to have better self-service tools and access to information thereby enhancing their journey with the State through technology anytime, anywhere.