DHS Applications Online
Childcare and Family Assistance

The State of Tennessee
Department of Finance and Administration
Division of Strategic Technology Solutions

Department of **Finance & Administration** | Strategic Technology Solutions

Executive Summary

The population growth in the State of Tennessee is significant and ongoing. This is good news! Tennessee's arms are always open and welcoming to new residents.

As the state's population grows, so does the need for family services. In an effort to meet this ever-increasing need for services, the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TNDHS) has implemented two online applications: The Family Assistance Online Application and The Child Care Payment Assistance Online Application.

These new, online applications provide 24X7 access and eliminate the need to apply in person, during standard business hours, Monday through Friday, in brick and mortar state office buildings. Additionally, as Broadband Accessibility Grants bring high speed internet to the most remote areas of Tennessee, citizens from those regions will no longer need to make lengthy journeys to apply for the services they need.

As a result of this implementation, not only has TNDHS been able to provide much faster response times and operated with greater accuracy and efficiency, but it has also provided the foundation for future, transformational projects within the department and across the state.

Concept

Business Problem

As Tennessee's population continues to grow significantly each year, the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TNDHS) clientele has also continued to grow. Annually, TNDHS receives 24,430 Child Care benefits applications and 439,736 Family Assistance benefits applications.

The additional need for services created challenges for people who apply for services with TNDHS. Previously, the only available channels to apply for these benefits were through mail and in-person. The lobby hours for TNDHS offices were limited to 8:00am to 4:30pm and weren't easily able to be altered to accommodate most of Tennessee's clientele. Creating online channels by putting service applications online allows for 24/7 access to the TNDHS service population.

Project Goals

The goal for this project was to bring the easiest, most convenient access possible to the application process for Tennessee's citizens in need. The solutions had to be intuitive, easy to use, and provide an excellent customer experience.

Customer Experience and Usability

File Upload Capability

Mobile Device Enablement

The solution architecture included a custom-built User Interface/User Experience (UI/UX), custom-built application, collateral uploads, and custom-built document storage. The project team used the Agile methodology for this project. The entire process took six months, utilized a team of 10 people, and culminated in a total cost of $150,000.

This initiative is part of TNDHS's focus on transitioning their overall business model to incorporate the latest technology to meet an ever-growing need, and bring the most intuitive, easy-to-use, and easy-to-access application process to Tennesseans in need.

The solution will be assessed by an ongoing review of how many customers have been successfully served and the benefits delivered through the system. Accessibility and security will be ensured through already established state IT security protocols. Individuals will also be encouraged to create a password protected account. The oversight of this process will be owned completely by Tennessee State Government.

Communication

The communication plan was multi-pronged and utilized multiple media vehicles to reach as many citizens as possible.

News Conferences

Press Releases

Social Media

Significance

The overall scope of the solution includes Tennessee-based and impacted customers, the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Strategic Technology Services, the Office of the Governor, and the Federal Office of Federal Nutrition Services.

The TNDHS operational business model has been permanently changed for the better as a result of this project; more emphasis has been placed on the online and telephony channels and less on in-lobby visits. The knowledge gained from these services will further inform the department's customer journey mapping exercise and customer experience perspective.
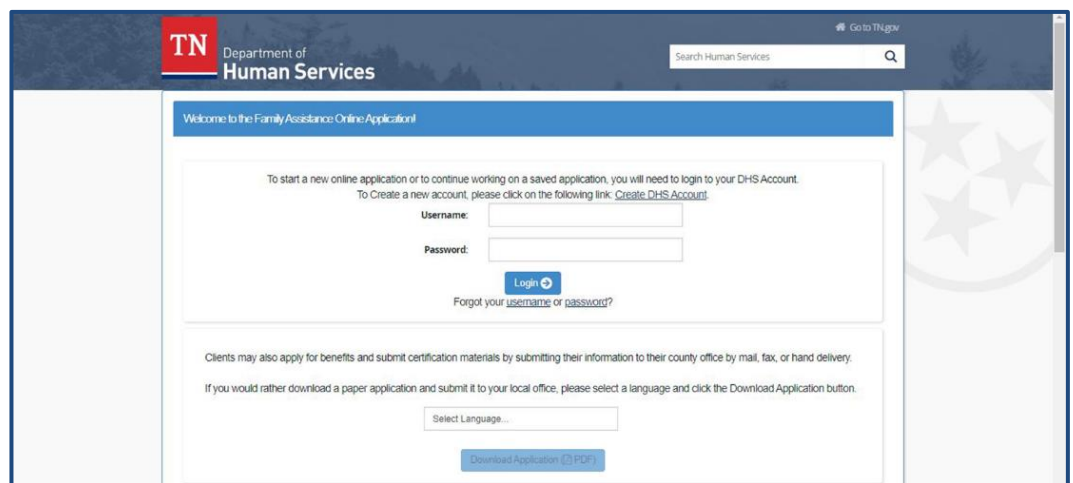
Online Applications

Another important component of online applications for both programs is the ability to upload application support documents via the internet rather than email, fax, traditional mail, or in-person application submission. A feature of this online capability is to create a DHS Account which allows citizens to enter, store, and manage account information for multiple DHS services. Customers now have the capability to build accounts with file intake, storage and indexing processes. This allows the upload of documents needed for eligibility determination. In addition, customers can access the application on their mobile devices.

Family Assistance Online Application

The Families First program helps participants by providing temporary cash assistance, transportation, childcare assistance, educational supports, job training, employment activities, and other support services. People may apply for Families First benefits at their local Department of Human Services county office or by applying online using the Family Assistance (FA) Online application.
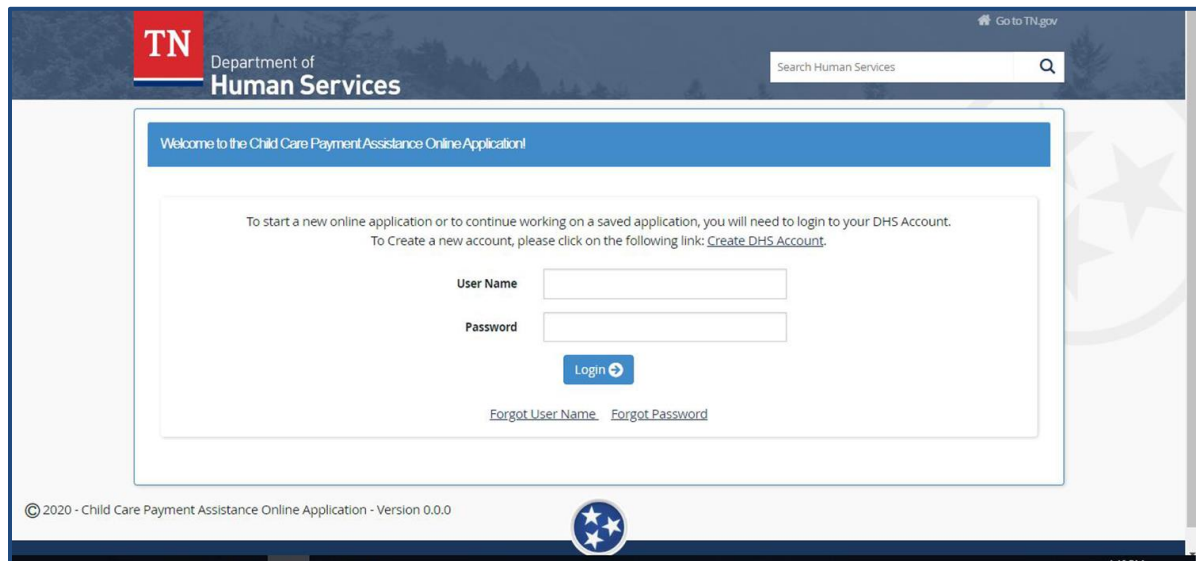
Child Care Payment Assistance Online Application
The Child Care Payment Assistance program encourages and recognizes quality childcare programs, improves the quality of childcare in Tennessee, and provides support and information to parents as they seek to secure quality childcare for their children.
Citizens may apply for these benefits at their local Department of Human Services county office, or by applying online using the Child Care Assistance Online application.

Governor's Priorities
Of the four Governor's priorities (https://www.tn.gov/governor/priorities.html), this project most aligns with "Supporting Rural Tennessee." It provides the ability for citizens to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits online rather than coming into an office which could be a significant distance for some in Tennessee's rural counties.

In addition, with this technology, citizens can upload key documents online that are necessary to receive their benefits instead of mailing them or even bringing them to the office, which could greatly expedite application processing. Another benefit is the ability for applicants to submit their applications at any time of day rather than regular office hours, which can often be a source of significant complication because of work and other commitments. The State of Tennessee's Broadband Accessibility Grant, which brings high speed internet access to remote areas of Tennessee, makes the Family Assistance and Child Care Payment Assistance programs even more impactful to rural Tennesseans.

Outlining A Successful Implementation

For the project to be successful, the solution would need to reach more customers, be easy to use, and launched on schedule.

Reaching more customers
Supporting the need to reach more customers and make service application more convenient and straightforward.

Easy to Use
Solutions that are intuitive, easy-to-use, and provide an excellent customer experience.

On Schedule
All solutions launched on schedule.

Impact

Improvements Gained

This project has provided faster response times to meet citizen's needs, more efficient self-service options for citizens, and the department with valuable insights into their user-experience and behavior. The stage has been set for future transformational projects within the department, and within the state. Since implementation, **4,343** Child Care benefits applications and **217,110** Family Assistance benefits applications have been completed online.

Benefits of This Effort

There were several benefits that were a result of this effort.

Insights
Valuable insights into customer experience and behavior.

Self-Service
Better/more effective self-service options for customers.

Building Foundation
Stage setting for future transformational projects within the department and state.

Streamlined Process
Created for both external customers and internal staff which increased accuracy and reduced overall processing time.

Valuable Insights

There were three valuable insights into customer experience and behavior.

Convenience
Customers need convenience of applying when it works best for their schedule.

File Upload Capability
Customers must be able to upload documents needed for eligibility and know that they have been successfully uploaded.

Status
Customers must be able to check the status of their application on-line.

A Streamlined Process

This resulted in a streamlined process for both external customers and internal staff which increased accuracy and reduced overall processing time.

Faster processing times for applications	**Fewer staff needed to process applications**	**Higher accuracy rates on applications**