

Title of Nomination: COMmonwealth of Pennsylvania Application for Social Services (COMPASS)

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CATEGORY: Digital\_Government\_G\_to\_C

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## COMMonwealth of Pennsylvania Application for Social Services

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

COMMonwealth of Pennsylvania Application for Social Services, or COMPASS, is an object-oriented, web-based solution that provides online screening and applications for social service programs offered by the Commonwealth. Pennsylvania's COMPASS serves as a cross-department, single access point for a wide variety of offerings such as healthcare coverage, food stamps, cash assistance, and home and community based services. By using COMPASS, anyone can avoid a commute and long lines at a County Assistance Office and instead apply any time during the day or night from the privacy of a home, library, healthcare clinic, community center—or any location with Internet access.

The screening portion of COMPASS indicates to applicants the services for which they and members of their household are likely eligible, including a myriad of local programs which many citizens may not know exist. Individuals are given the opportunity to apply for programs of their choice using COMPASS's integrated application. Thus, the application process is expedited by eliminating the need to enter redundant demographic and household data on multiple forms. Additionally, the COMPASS application is dynamic; it changes in response to the needs of each individual applicant. If a person is applying only for healthcare coverage, he or she will never have to see irrelevant questions related to food stamps or cash assistance. This makes for a simplified, less time-consuming process for everyone involved.

COMPASS interfaces with other department systems using middleware to provide an integrated delivery system for the program offices. This greatly helps expedite the application process. The use of an online application also helps to decrease common processing errors, as there are no handwriting issues to contend with on electronic forms. The COMPASS solution has allowed organizations in Pennsylvania to reduce barriers and improve participation in social programs. With clients and community partners entering applications and screening for social services directly in COMPASS, access is greatly improved, administrative tasks are reduced, and common errors are avoided. COMPASS leverages the power of the Internet to effectively eliminate issues associated with a traditional application process.

COMPASS successfully integrates the high technology capabilities of private industry with the mission of social program agencies. Since its launch in 2001, Pennsylvania's COMPASS (accessible via the web site [www.compass.state.pa.us](http://www.compass.state.pa.us)) has successfully processed nearly 21,000 social service applications. Approximately 50,000 screening questionnaires have been initiated on COMPASS in the first year that screening was available. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania continues to build upon the system's functionality in pursuit of a single point of access for social services.

## **WRITTEN JUSTIFICATION**

### **a. Description of project, including length of time in operation**

For governments, successful delivery of social services is as equally dependent on accessibility as it is on the quality of service offerings. When citizens or community partners are unable to access the social service application process due to their remote location, lack of transportation, busy work schedule or other hassles or embarrassment people contend with at a “welfare” office, an unfortunate and unnecessary disconnect occurs. This prevents individuals from receiving needed assistance, results in lower participation rates, and undermines the mission of government agencies committed to serving disadvantaged members of society. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has taken significant steps to overcome this disconnect by combining forethought with a technology-based solution: COMPASS, which stands for COMMonwealth of Pennsylvania Application for Social Services.

In 2000, Pennsylvania undertook the COMPASS initiative with the objective of extending the accessibility of the social service application process to public users and business partners of the Commonwealth. The first release of COMPASS was launched on the World Wide Web in October of 2001. This version of the system allowed users to apply for healthcare for pregnant women and children. Since COMPASS was an endeavor sponsored by the Department of Public Welfare, this first release initially was meant to offer only Medicaid programs. Nonetheless, as the project progressed, leadership at the Department of Public Welfare realized that residents would best be served by including the Insurance Department’s State Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) application on COMPASS as well. The COMPASS team then worked with the Insurance Department to incorporate both programs in the online application.

Due to this cross-department partnership, a user interested in receiving healthcare coverage could simply indicate this on COMPASS, answer the application’s questions, and the system would automatically route the application to either the Department of Public Welfare or the Insurance Department, whichever was appropriate based on the information submitted on the application. Furthermore, the two departments established a system of application exchange for cases where, if upon review, the agency to which the application had been routed deemed the applicant to be more likely eligible for the other department’s program.

A few short weeks after the first release of COMPASS went live, the Spanish version of the COMPASS application was made available online. This undertaking was a significant step for increasing social service accessibility, as it eased the application process for Pennsylvania’s large Spanish community. In every subsequent release, all features of COMPASS available to the general public can be viewed in both English and Spanish.

Release Three of COMPASS in April of 2002 more than doubled the offerings of the first release. Added to the online application system was a screening module that allowed users to screen for potential eligibility of all healthcare services. The screening tool and application component were designed to work together in such a way so that demographic and other high-level household information entered during screening is transferred to the application portion, eliminating the need for the applicant to enter the information twice.

In addition to screening, the third release also gave users the ability to apply for Medicaid for Adults (including Medical Assistance to Workers with Disabilities), adultBasic, Family Works, Food Stamps, and Cash Assistance (both Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and General Assistance). This version built in functionality for displaying information on Managed Care Organizations as well as Maps and Directions to a user’s local County Assistance Office.

The next version of COMPASS became available in September of 2002, offering a sophisticated screening tool for Food Stamps and Cash Assistance. The screening questionnaire groups target individuals in a household and sorts the groups into separate filing units when necessary. All of this logic is of course transparent to the system's user. On the screening results page, filing units are not only told whether or not they are potentially eligible for services, but if potentially eligible, they are also given a dollar amount for possible benefits. This number is based on the applicant's income, expenses, resources, county of residence, and other eligibility rules and further helps the user decide if it is worth his time to complete a full application.

The most recent release of COMPASS, made available in February 2003, has given residents of Pennsylvania the ability to screen for Long Term Care and some Home and Community Based Services. It also added the Department of Education's Free and Reduced Price School Breakfast and Lunch Program to the screening questionnaire. Future releases are already planned to increase the number of programs accessible through COMPASS. Other possibilities for new releases include allowing application renewals and case information management via the Internet. This web site is envisioned to unite services in Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare, Insurance Department, Department of Health, Department of Aging, and Department of Education.

Technically, the system architecture of COMPASS incorporates a Microsoft Windows 2000 web/application server and a data tier consisting of the Oracle 9i database hosted on a Sun Solaris server. The Microsoft Distributed Network Architecture model used in COMPASS combines a presentation tier, business tier, and data tier, which provides flexibility for system performance, operating system independence, security, and scalability.

#### **b. Significance to the improvement of the operation of government**

Every government agency aspires to bridge the perceived gap between government, citizens and community partners. In Pennsylvania, COMPASS has supported this challenging undertaking by allowing state residents to screen for and apply for a myriad of state social services, administered by different state departments and offices, from any place with Internet access. COMPASS has assisted Commonwealth agencies in its goal to become more citizen-friendly. It eliminates the need for citizens and business partners to understand the complex bureaucracy behind the administration of social service programs by automatically routing applications and client information to the appropriate program office for processing.

On the clerical and administrative front, an online application decreases common processing errors, as there is no illegible handwriting to contend with on electronic forms. COMPASS incorporates built-in validations, drop down menus, and mandatory fields that do not permit individuals to proceed with the application until required information is captured, thus reducing the number of incomplete forms submitted to program offices. All of these features allow clerical workers to spend less time dealing with faulty applications and more time serving the public. The electronic application form also reduces dreaded paperwork usually involved in application processing.

COMPASS bolsters the government's aim to ensure citizens' prized security, privacy, and confidentiality. Information entered on COMPASS is protected through 128-bit encryption and a unique user identification/password. Encryption protects the information during its electronic transmission, and the user identification/password ensures its confidentiality once the application is received.

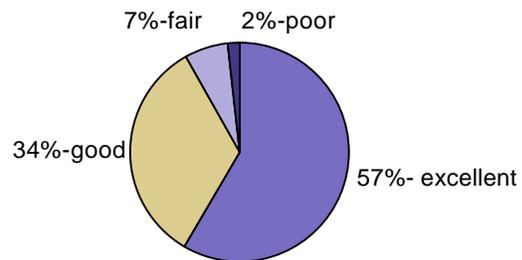
**c. Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency, or state**

Providing a common point of entry to an agency’s programs, COMPASS’ self service modules help ensure a “no wrong door” approach to screening and application for services to clients and business partners. There are help screens on every COMPASS web page which give expanded information on the questions asked on that page, as well as a help desk phone number and a link to e-mail questions.

User-friendly modules in COMPASS guide an individual through a completely automated process of collecting data and determining eligibility. Because of its compliance with ADA guidelines for web accessibility, COMPASS is easier for disabled persons to use than the paper application form. COMPASS also increases accessibility to non-English speakers by offering screening and application in Spanish.

The survey responses at the end of the COMPASS application are very telling of how the public has appreciated the increased accessibility made possible by the innovation of COMPASS. In the past year, an average of 26% of the COMPASS users who submit an online application complete the survey form, and this group overwhelmingly gives COMPASS high marks for ease of use, practicality, navigation, and clarity. Users consistently comment that COMPASS is significantly more convenient than the typical trip to a County Assistance Office.

**COMPASS General Clarity and Ease of Use**  
*as reported by users from COMPASS survey*



Additionally, they are grateful for the confidentiality that COMPASS offers in allowing a person to apply privately from their homes. Another telling statistic is that over 50% of applications completed on COMPASS are submitted outside of the normal business hours of Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. This reveals that COMPASS is allowing the government to reach a group of people who might otherwise be unable to apply for services.

COMPASS not only connects governments and ordinary citizens but businesses and non-profit organizations as well. The Community Partner Dashboard in COMPASS offers efficient application portfolio management to community partners who regularly submit applications on behalf of citizens. These partners include medical providers, workers at food banks, advocates of the needy, social workers, Family Works contractors, etc. A community partner needs a Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare-issued user name and password to enter the Dashboard. Once there, they can see on one screen all the applications they have personally entered as well as all the applications colleagues in their organization have initiated. They can access the applications that have been suspended and those that have already been submitted. The Dashboard also features a “quick reports” functionality, which displays counts of applications processed for each program and county.

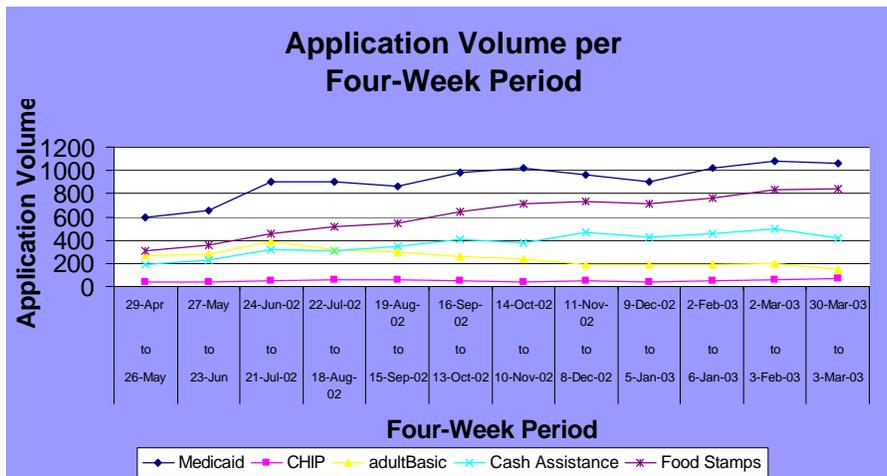
In the near future, community partners will also have the option of utilizing a “Power User” version of COMPASS. This module will minimize the time it takes for a partner to enter applications online by displaying condensed COMPASS screens and eliminating extraneous explanatory information unnecessary for someone very familiar with the application.

COMPASS functionality continues to grow as more programs and new usability features are added with each new release of the web application. It is truly evolving into a single point of access for social service programs in Pennsylvania. COMPASS successfully integrates the high technology capabilities of private

industry with the mission of social service agencies; it has helped distinguish Pennsylvania as a leader among states in its commitment to using technology to expand citizen services.

**d. Return on investment, short-term/long-term payback (include summary calculations).  
Projects must exhibit measurable operational benefit**

Because COMPASS’s primary objective is to increase accessibility to social services for the general public, it is difficult to put a dollar value on the convenience and increased quality of life experienced by COMPASS users. COMPASS is still in its early stages of development and will fully realize its potential when it evolves into the singular web portal for social services applications. It is expected that COMPASS may one day automate or nearly automate the application process throughout the state. This will have many cost-saving implications, particularly in the area of training and education. In the next few years, normal turnover of clerical workers will bring in a group of workers who are already web-savvy. For them, little to no training will be necessary on a completely web-based system, as opposed to the training currently necessary on the archaic mainframe system.



*Since the launch of COMPASS, the number of applications received monthly has been steadily increasing.*

One measurable indicator that COMPASS has increased efficiency and thus saved money for the state is the fact that COMPASS applications are less likely to be cleared into the system and then rejected than paper applications. County Assistance Offices receive many applications that have missing information. These applications are still entered into the system, but are “rejected” if the applicant fails to provide the missing information within the allotted time period. This equates to wasted time and money on behalf of county intake workers. Because COMPASS makes it nearly impossible to submit an incomplete application, there are few COMPASS applications that are cleared into the system and then rejected. CAO workers also save time and money with increased use of the Internet application because it is more user-friendly than the paper form. Thus applicants have less questions and thus take less of the CAO workers’ time.

Time and money are also saved by CAOs from COMPASS’s error reduction, since clerical workers do not have to type the information submitted by the applicant. Citizens who use COMPASS save valuable time by having the ability to screen for services first and determine the likelihood of being eligible. They also save time in not having to travel many times to a County Assistance Office to apply for services. Community Partners who use the Community Partner View save time with COMPASS because they do not have to call daily to check the status of their clients’ COMPASS applications, nor do they have to keep track of multiple paper copies of their applications.

*COMPASS is envisioned to evolve into a web-based, single point of access from which citizens and community partners can screen and apply for social services offered by several departments in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.*

