

Title: **General Assistance Portal**

Category: Improving State Operations

State: Maine

Project Initiation: January 10, 2016

End Date: August 26, 2016

Executive Summary:

Municipalities in Maine provide general assistance to individuals and families living in their communities. The purpose of the general assistance program is to prevent residents from becoming homeless or being left with inadequate housing, and to ensure they have the necessities essential to maintaining standards of health and decency. General Assistance is determined through a variety of research completed by municipal representatives including verifying other forms of welfare benefits provided to the individual or family by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Once a municipality has granted assistance to the applicant, they may submit a request to DHHS and have a portion of the funds reimbursed. The online General Assistance Portal sought to simplify the research and reimbursement request process, and is the product of a four-way collaborative effort between DHHS, the Office of Information Technology (OIT), Maine municipalities, and InforME, the state's digital government provider.

By allowing municipal representatives to research existing benefits using the portal's self-service search tools, DHHS has already seen a reduction in staff workloads equivalent to one-quarter of a full-time employee. Nearly 4,000 requests for information have been made online by the 128 participating municipalities since deployment, and 124 reimbursement requests have been submitted online by the municipal participants since August 2016.

By using technology, the General Assistance Portal creates a secure and easy utility for municipalities to lookup benefits for general assistance applicants and to request reimbursement. The portal reduces the amount of phone traffic to DHHS, the amount of paper being transferred and processed manually, and the number of errors made on paper reports, which results in efficiencies for both DHHS and municipalities. Further, the online service helps to reduce fraud by increasing municipal visibility into existing benefits received by residents.

Project Narrative: Concept, Significance and Impact

The General Assistance program provides benefits to families when the family is threatened by destitution or homelessness due to an emergency situation. These situations include fire, natural disasters, termination of utility service, evictions, or lack of adequate shelter.

When a municipality is in the process of reviewing a citizen's general assistance application to determine eligibility, they must check what other benefits the family is currently receiving from the state. This research, and a determination of benefits, must be completed within twenty-four hours of submission per Maine state legislation, resulting in a significant workload to DHHS staff. Prior to having an online system, municipal representatives conducted such research by calling DHHS directly for each client. To ease the burden of the calls and requests for information, the online portal was created and provides municipal representatives with self-service tools to research clients and submit requests for reimbursement.

The online portal requires that municipal staff securely login to lookup client information on-demand from a DHHS database. Each municipal participant has a unique ID which tracks the search activity to prevent the system from being abused. The immediate availability of the client information allows municipalities to make a determination of eligibility much quicker and without the need for a returned call from DHHS. In some cases, determination can be made before the applicant leaves the town office. This far exceeds the legislative requirement that determination of eligibility be made within twenty-four hours of the request.

In addition to the lookup functionality, the portal also offers the ability for municipal representatives to submit monthly General Assistance reimbursement reports to DHHS. This report was previously completed on paper and mailed to DHHS. The form contains the combined total of all activity in a single month, across thirteen areas: Housing, Temporary Housing (Shelter, Etc.), Heating (all types), Electricity Service (non-heating), Propane Gas (non-heating), Food, Prescriptions, Medical Services, Dental, Burials / Cremation, Diapers / Baby Supplies, Household & Personal Supplies, and All Other Needs.

The new system streamlines the process for the municipal user by automatically calculating reimbursement totals, greatly reducing the chance for human error. DHHS administrative staff are now alerted when a report has been submitted and they are able view all the information in one system. The interface also allows them to revise submitted reports and to correct errors as needed.

The online public front-end service was developed in Java using fully-accessible and mobile-ready HTML templates. Client details are obtained through back and forth communication with an OIT back-end database using web services. Business rule logic, including verification of login credentials, is shared between the front- and back-end systems. The regulatory authority that oversees the General Assistance program, DHHS, is the custodian of the final data submitted and the client-specific data displayed to municipalities; the back-end system is held at OIT. All client data is securely hosted on OIT servers and the client-specific information is accessed on

an as-needed basis; this ensures client privacy and the highest level of system integrity. No data is maintained or visible to InforME at any point in the client lookup or reimbursement request process.

The application was first piloted with the City of Augusta, Maine's capital city, when it was launched in the fall of 2016. The new system was very well received by municipal users. Since the launch, DHHS has phased in additional municipalities. Currently the system has been adopted and utilized by 1/3 of all organized municipalities within the State of Maine.

The DHHS Office for Family Independence has been very pleased with the outcome of the project and the efficiencies it has created. It is estimated that the lookup services have saved DHHS staff approximately 2 hours per day. This is in addition to the municipal time saved manually calculating and submitting reimbursement requests.

This service is an excellent example of the efficiencies created by converting an existing multi-jurisdictional process to a cohesive online system which saves time for all the parties involved. The online service was created in partnership with InforME, the State of Maine's digital government portal. InforME is managed by Maine Information Network, LLC, a subsidiary of NIC. InforME was created by Maine state legislation to be the Internet gateway to government services and information under a self-funded, no appropriations model.