



Communicating P-EBT Benefits to Families When Schools Closed

State of Minnesota – Minnesota IT Services

CATEGORY:

Information Communications
Technology Innovations

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic led many families in Minnesota to face food insecurity. On top of record unemployment, school closures meant that many families could no longer receive assistance through free and reduced meals options. In March 2020, the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act created the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program to provide food benefits to families with children who qualified for free and reduced meals at school, but who were not receiving those meals because school buildings had closed.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) had to quickly create a way for Minnesotans to learn about, apply for, and receive benefits distributed by the P-EBT program. In June 2020, DHS opened applications for P-EBT for the 2019-2020 school year, using a web-based application for individuals who needed to apply for the new program. To ensure that more families had access to federal and state P-EBT benefits, the Department of Human Services and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) used text messaging features to communicate with Minnesotans in a person-centered way. During that school year, more than 265,000 children received P-EBT benefits in the state, totaling \$166 million in benefits. To prepare to launch the benefit for the 2020-2021 school year (in production on March 15, 2021) and improve communication even further, MNIT and DHS added a cloud-based call center to ensure that more Minnesotans understood the benefits and eligibility needs for P-EBT.

Idea

What problem or opportunity did this project address?

The COVID-19 pandemic led many families in Minnesota to face food insecurity. On top of record unemployment, school closures meant that many families could no longer receive assistance through free and reduced meals options. In March 2020, the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act created the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program to provide food benefits to families with children who qualified for free and reduced meals at school, but who were not receiving those meals because school buildings had closed.

Why does it matter?

DHS had to quickly create a way for Minnesotans to learn about, apply for, and receive benefits distributed by the P-EBT program. Minnesota estimated 350,000 families could have been eligible for P-EBT in the 2019-2020 school year. At the time when applications for P-EBT launched in Minnesota, June 8, 2020, Minnesota's unemployment rate was 8.8%. Minnesotans needed a way to feed its families.

What makes it different?

To distribute funds as quickly as possible to Minnesotans for the 2019-2020 school year, the P-EBT project tackled several complications: data matching, eligibility requirements, and timing. The state of Minnesota also

supplemented the federal funds with a Summer P-EBT benefit program, which heightened the need for new ways to communicate about these benefits.

- **Data matching:** For families to be eligible, students needed to be enrolled in a program where they were already receiving free or reduced lunch. Applications for the first round of the P-EBT benefit distribution opened on June 8, 2020 and required extensive data matching with the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to verify families' free and reduced-price meal eligibility. *Address information needed to be easy to correct to allow for benefits to be processed in a timely manner.*
- **Eligibility requirements:** Many families automatically had P-EBT funds added directly to their existing EBT cards. However, families that were receiving free or reduced meals for the 2019-2020 school year but were not receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) benefits needed to sign up for the P-EBT card to receive additional funds. *The solution needed to capture eligibility information, report issues with applications, and answer questions in a timely manner.*
- **Communication:** The project needed to find innovative ways to communicate with Minnesotans during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Minnesotans relied on virtual connections more than ever due to public health regulations and school closures. To reach individuals in an equitable way, DHS knew they needed to rely on more than complicated web forms that require access to a computer. More than 1 in 5 Americans are smartphone dependent (no internet at home except through a cell phone), and this number rises to 1 in 4 for Black and Hispanic households. *The program launched with a text message option to quickly alert Minnesotans who applied for P-EBT that their benefits had been issued, and the texts provide general information about the program.*
- **Timing:** When the CARES Act created the P-EBT program, many states scrambled to find ways to connect the people they serve with these benefits. Minnesota took a unique approach to execute the project, relying on radical collaboration between state agencies. The cornerstone of that collaboration was a partnership between MNIT, DHS, and MDE. For the launch of the first web application, DHS worked with Code for America. The texting service relied on close partnerships with Amazon Web Services (AWS). *The project relied on working sessions where all the decision makers, analysts, developers, and QA testers worked together to move the effort forward.*

On Feb. 9, 2021, the federal government approved Minnesota's plan to issue P-EBT benefits for the 2020-2021 school year. MNIT, DHS, and MDE again needed to work quickly to ensure that Minnesotans could understand their eligibility, apply, and receive these benefits for children who are not receiving free or reduced-price school meals as they normally would while they are distance- or hybrid-learning during the pandemic. The P-EBT program for the 2020-2021 school year differed significantly from the previous program in terms of eligibility criteria, process, and payment amounts. To help with these changes, DHS launched a web-based call center for application assistance on March 15, 2021.

What makes it universal?

When the CARES Act created the P-EBT program, every state had to quickly created a benefits program and notify those that were eligible. Minnesota focused on a person-centered way of communicating with those that

we serve, seeking to improve the relationship between our residents and government services. This project fits two NASCIO CIO priorities:

- **Data management and analytics:** The project required extensive data matching between DHS, MNIT, and MDE to determine those eligible for the P-EBT program, as well as to ensure their information was accurate from the 2019-2020 school year to the 2020-2021 school year.
- **Customer Relationship Management:** The ability for MNIT to quickly create the systems and communication to deliver P-EBT benefits, they agency improved its relationship with DHS. Though the project didn't use follow all aspects of agile project management, team followed core concepts and focused on communication and Adaptive collaboration.

Implementation

What was the roadmap?

- March 2020 – CARES Act passed, which created the P-EBT program.
- May 2020 – Minnesotans eligible for P-EBT due to enrollment in MFIP and SNAP programs began to receive benefits.
- June 8, 2020 – DHS collaborated with Code for America and launched Minnesota's online P-EBT application to the public, encouraging families to apply for the 2019-2020 school year if they have not received benefits through SNAP or MFIP benefits already.
- July 31, 2020 – Applications for P-EBT benefits for 2019-2020 school year and Summer P-EBT benefit closed.
- Aug 4, 2020 – Minnesota enhanced internal systems and set up texting system to begin delivering Summer P-EBT benefits.
- Aug 11, 2020 – MNIT deployed changes related to internal and P-EBT texting systems for internal testing.
- Aug 18, 2020 – DHS began sending text messages to eligible P-EBT recipients.
- August-October 2020 – DHS continued to send text messages to let P-EBT recipients know when Summer P-EBT benefits are available through SNAP and MFIP payment cards. Text messages also contained information about the P-EBT program.
- Feb. 9, 2021 – The federal government approved Minnesota's plan to issue P-EBT benefits for the 2020-2021 school year.
- March 15, 2021 – Application for P-EBT benefits for the 2020-2021 school year launched to the public. DHS sent text messages to eligible P-EBT recipients to provide information about 2020-2021 program.
- March 15, 2021 – Minnesota launched web-based call center for application assistance.
- March-May 2021 – MNIT and DHS teams continued work on enhancing internal systems that supported P-EBT program based on user feedback.

Who was involved?

From concept to launch, each element of the P-EBT program included key stakeholders.

- **MNIT leadership:** Approved the overall technology approach to the project and signed off on project deliverables.
- **DHS and MDE project staff:** Interpreted program requirements, approved project approach details, scope, prioritization, and signed off on project deliverables.
- **MNIT project management staff:** Managed project, including defining the work, building the work plan and budget, managing the work plan and budget, scope management, issues management, risk management, and more.
- **MNIT development staff:** Implemented all required processes and student eligibility and benefits calculation.
- **DHS leadership:** Worked with MNIT to make resources available to sign off on requirements. Participated in testing and sending text messages.
- **Code for America:** Partnered with DHS to launch initial web-based application.
- **Cloud vendors:** Used AWS's pinpoint service to setup text messaging infrastructure. Their technical architects worked hand in hand with MNIT technical architects to implement the text messaging infrastructure.
- **End users:** DHS estimated more than 350,000 families in Minnesota could be eligible for P-EBT benefits. DHS engaged text message recipients to provide feedback on their experience with the feature through a text message survey.

Working sessions with key stakeholders (bolded above) allowed for efficient approval processes. The working sessions led to requirement, prototype, and design development. Stakeholders prioritized attending these meeting, which allowed for quick approvals and avoided waiting email responses and other delays due to conflicting priorities for project resources.

How did you do it?

2019-2020 School Year Web-Based Application

DHS partnered with Code for America to launch web application on June 8, 2020 for eligible recipients to apply for the first round of federal P-EBT benefits for the 2019-2020 school year. Prior to launch, DHS and MNIT collaborated to ensure that MFIP and SNAP recipients that were eligible for P-EBT started to receive benefits. MNIT extracted data from MFIP and SNAP databases and sent the information to the payment card processor so benefits would available on existing benefit delivery systems.

P-EBT Summer Benefit Text Feature

After the initial launch of the web application, DHS identified a need to quickly notify P-EBT eligible families of benefits and information about the program. The MNIT and DHS teams chose SMS or text messaging to solve this need.

Three MNIT groups – MNIT DHS, and teams at MNIT Enterprise working on system security and cloud technologies – collaborated with Amazon Web Services to spin up the technology, ensure the infrastructure was in place, and identify security mechanisms. The team used AWS Pinpoint service, an emerging cloud technology,

to send SMS/text message notifications. They also worked with legal teams at DHS to review and approve the texting strategy to ensure that the program complied with all state and federal privacy and communication laws.

In less than 10 days, MNIT and AWS set up the texting environment to test campaigns. They sent text messages in seven different languages. Separate campaigns are created for each language. Amazon Pinpoint service distributes the text messages, and results are streamed to Amazon S3 storage to be read through SQL queries using the Amazon Athena service. MNIT also developed a python-based script to query Amazon Athena and send results upon request. The service launched to the public while Summer P-EBT benefits were delivered in 2020, and within less than two months after initial requirements gathering.

After initial set up, DHS staff could send out text messages to families who need support from P-EBT without MNIT's help.

2020-2021 School Year Call Center Application

The call center application demonstrated rapid software development entirely in the cloud. MNIT and DHS first aligned on the problem that needed to be solved by the application, identifying the needs to better issue P-EBT benefits in a timely matter:

- An online help form that would allow the public to submit questions, report issues, or report address changes.
- Questions and requests processed through an efficient ticketing mechanism.
- Allow DHS to follow up with Minnesotans through phone or email.
- Address changes processed and verified by DHS staff.

After these needs were identified, MNIT and DHS used agile or "shift left" development, which allowed MNIT to produce a demo application within 10 days from requirements gathering to demo software. With the software demonstration, MNIT gathered feedback early in the process and developed the software iteratively. MNIT deployed the application to production within 3 weeks after the final requirements sign-off. MNIT also built the application on cloud infrastructure, which ensured test environments could be built in less than a day.

Impact

What did the project make better?

The P-EBT program allows Minnesotans to access benefits to feed their children during the pandemic. The approach that MNIT and DHS took to let individual know about these benefits an innovative way through text messages. The text messages help quickly alert Minnesotans who applied for P-EBT that their benefits had been issued, and the texts provide general information about the program. Messages have been sent in eight different languages: English, Spanish, Hmong, Arabic, Somali, Vietnamese, Karen and Russian.

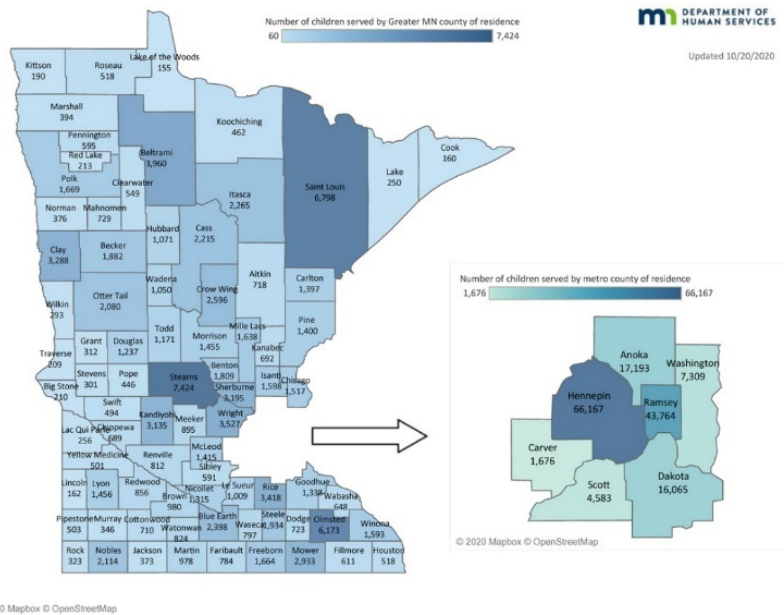
The addition of the web-based call center in 2020-2021 application cycle allows Minnesotans to get their questions answered more quickly, so they do not have to wait on hold. This was the first application DHS developed entirely in the cloud, which meant that Minnesotans were able to access the benefits of the call

center quicker than any other such project before. The call center allows DHS to reduce call volumes by 1,000 to 1,500 phone calls per week.

How do you know?

In the 2019-2020 school year, DHS estimated that 350,000 Minnesota families could have been eligible for P-EBT benefits. Approximately \$116 million of P-EBT in federal and state funds were paid out for 2019-2020 school year. Because of the communication, text outreach, and ease of the web application, over 265,000 children received the benefits. In a survey to 7,000 Minnesotans who received P-EBT benefits, over 83% agreed that the P-EBT benefits they received were helpful. For the 2020-21 school year, over 285,000 Minnesota families are eligible for P-EBT benefits. Figure 1 shows how the benefits helped Minnesotans across the state.

Figure 1 - Minnesota Pandemic EBT children served, by county of residence



The survey of P-EBT recipients also found that 98% of individuals preferred receiving their information about the program through text messages. In the first week of April 2021, the state marked an important milestone in the pandemic response – 1 million text messages sent to families to inform them about benefits for the P-EBT program. DHS continues to send text messages for the 2020-21 P-EBT program and by the end of May 2021, approximately 1.3 million people received text messages.

What now?

The call center and web-based application will help Minnesotans apply for P-EBT as long as the program is supported by the federal government. The call center paves the way for rapid future application development in the cloud for DHS and helps the agency plan for other times when they may need to scale up robust support.

Other business areas within DHS are beginning to explore how text messaging can aid in communication and access to information, which encourages equal access to services for all Minnesotans.