

Collaboration That Fed the Future of Tennessee

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

NASCIO Award Category: Information Communications Technology Innovations

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Strategic Technology Solutions

The Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low cost, or free lunches to children each school day. The program was first established in 1946 and about 7M children participated in the NSLP in its first year. Per the USDA FNS, the program now serves over 30.4M children nationwide per year (2016). In Tennessee, the program serves approximately 750k children across the state.

Although the program is federally funded through the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) organization within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), state departments are responsible for the administration of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). State Departments serve as the link between FNS and local program operators, ensuring the programs are managed according to the federal requirements. Within the State of Tennessee, the Department of Human Services (TDHS) holds this responsibility. TDHS facilitates communication between the program operators and FNS, guaranteeing the success of the program for Tennessee families.

A New Challenge

On January 27, 2020, the federal government declared a public health emergency due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance and regulations, recommending school closures related to the pandemic. Additionally, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued interim guidance to help K-12 schools and childcare programs plan for and prevent the spread of COVID-19 among students and staff.

The Tennessee Department of Education worked hard to support the school districts to ensure the health and well-being of their students and educators by following those CDC guidelines as applicable. This meant as schools were closed and students were sent home for remote learning, that many of the students who had previously been receiving free lunches and snacks at school were unable to do so. Accordingly, USDA authorized a temporary assistance program for households with children affected by school closures during the pandemic. The USDA granted US states significant program flexibilities and contingencies to best serve TN's families that were NSLP program participants. Flexibilities included waiving initial and recertification interviews, waiving face-to-face interviews, and postponing expedited service interviews.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 ([PL 116-127](#)), as amended by the Continuing Appropriations Act 2021 and Other Extensions Act ([PL 116-159](#)), the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021 ([PL 116-260](#)), and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 ([PL 117-2](#)) provided the US Secretary of Agriculture authority to approve state Department plans to administer P-EBT, or Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide free and/or reduced price funds for eligible Tennessee families with children most in need. Pandemic EBT became the solution to provide benefits to children who normally receive free or reduced-price school meals.

On March 20, 2020 the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) announced and began accepting state plans for Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) programs. Pursuant to the authority granted under Section 1101 of the Act, FNS approved Tennessee to operate P-EBT. In May of 2020, TN DHS received formal approval for their Tennessee State Plan for Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer Program (P-EBT). The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (P.L. 116-127) (FFCRA or the Act) authorized a temporary assistance program for households with children affected by school closures during the public health emergency that was declared on January 27, 2020.

The Need to Collaborate

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided the funding for the State of Tennessee that covered the cost of the free lunches, but the Tennessee Department of Human Services was tasked with the responsibility of distributing the federal funds to eligible children and their families in Tennessee. This was a daunting challenge for the state, as it was the first time DHS had to take on benefit administration at such a large scale in an abbreviated timeframe. In order for the TN P-EBT program to be successful and deployed quickly, DHS knew that technology would have to be leveraged significantly, as well a high degree of collaboration across DHS, the Tennessee Department of Education, STS, the state's centralized technology organization, and our vendor partner, Accenture. This public-private partnership that involved both business and IT units was essential to the success of the project.

Strategic Technology Solutions (STS) is a highly centralized IT organization that serves as the state's central information processing organization and as a computer service bureau to state departments. STS provides direction, planning, resources, execution, and coordination in managing the information systems needs of Tennessee's state government. STS provides technology support and services for many state boards, commissions, and departments – including the Department of Human Services as part of the STS Health & Human Services Business Domain.

Charles Bryson

Assistant Commissioner

Department of Human Services

“Accenture Team, thank you for your partnership over the last year to serve our customers during a difficult period.

Your work has allowed us to serve families in new ways providing much needed pandemic assistance. From assisting to build new systems and processes, to providing direct customer service through call center services and interactive chats, the Accenture team has helped us to expand our service offerings and reach more families. We very much appreciate each of your contributions and want you to know that you are positively impacting families every day.”

Tony Mathews

Chief Operating Officer

Department of Human Services

“After the devastating tornadoes that hit Nashville in 2020, closely followed by the pandemic, the Tennessee DHS was needed more than ever. The need for disaster and pandemic benefits was urgent and the partnership between DHS and Accenture was critical to the response. Accenture quickly identified the areas they could assist, assigned highly educated and qualified staff to our projects, and delivered everything needed and more! Citizens of the Volunteer State received the best DHS service possible, due in large part to the partnership with the team at Accenture.”

Project Requirements, Vision, and Design

As for any IT project of this scale, gathering accurate business requirements was vital for successful implementation. Due to the immediate need and short turnaround time, P-EBT Project requirements had to be defined quickly, and the requirements evolved over the life of the project through an agile approach. The state worked very closely with Accenture on developing requirements throughout all rounds of the project, planning extensively for the design and buildout of overall P-EBT system and parent/school portals. These requirements included:

- Use existing DHS case information to issue benefits to current SNAP households, including children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals
- Obtain all necessary data to issue EBT cards to eligible non-SNAP household, including children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals
- Identify Tennessee schools that were closed for at least five consecutive days during emergency designations
- Conducted a public information campaign regarding the purposes of P-EBT and how the benefits and EBT cards should be used
- Provide information to non-SNAP households about what to do if they did not wish to receive or use P-EBT benefits
- Identify risks for improper payments and ensure a high level of integrity
- Complete the FNS-292B form on a bi-weekly basis and continue to complete all required SNAP reporting (ex: FNS-46 and FNS-388 reports).
- Successfully issue P-EBT benefits to current Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households and non-SNAP households in Tennessee.

The project team was able to capitalize on knowledge and lessons learned from prior engagements to define key delivery components. Accenture and DHS aligned on the need for three distinct pillars and quickly mobilized team leads for each. These pillars included the P-EBT call center, technical automation, and modernization:



P-EBT CALL CENTER

- The Call Center Agent Support pillar is a dedicated team of **Accenture agents, supervisors, operations manager, and training leads.**
- The call center has successfully helped thousands of parents and 183 school administrators by scaling quickly, leveraging technology, and delivering continual process optimization.
- The call center handles inbound calls from parents and school, proactively engages schools if files haven't been submitted and answers emails from the TN Justice Center.



TECHNOLOGY AUTOMATION

- Leveraging **self-service and omnichannel within ServiceNow** the P-EBT Portal was designed, developed and launched in a matter of weeks.
- The portal allows both parents and school districts to **self-serve** benefits for Rounds 3, 1B and 2, rather than calling the call center.
- The tool delivers robust reporting and tracking.
- **AVA** the DHS virtual agent is live on the **P-EBT Parent and P-EBT School Portal.**



MODERNIZATION

- This pillar aims to take a **holistic approach in modernizing** the broader DHS function through technology and process
- Efforts in the initial term focused on supporting with the implementation of new cloud-based contact center telephony platform (**Nice inContact**)
- Post end-of-February MVP will follow with an **enhanced 2.0** rollout for FASC and migrating other DHS contact centers to the cloud

Ongoing IVR Optimization (AWS Connect)

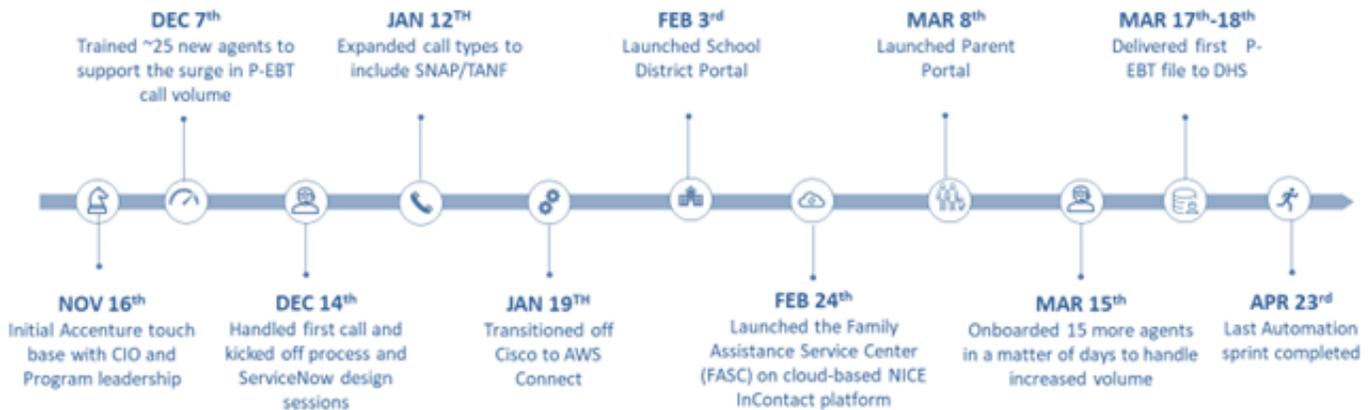
Program-Wide Reporting & Insights (CloudWatch)

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Following the requirements and design phase, focus then shifted to identifying the stakeholders who would ultimately be responsible for owning the final product and detailed design work began. Contractual flexibility between Accenture and DHS allowed for agile shifts in priorities. Leadership recognized that the teams needed to be adaptable as they built out final products while requirements, designs and approvals are still pending. Governance, full transparency and alignment on risk, issues and key milestones were critical.

Project Implementation and Summary

Accenture worked with the Tennessee Department of Human Services and other ecosystem partners on a platform led transformation to enable DHS to efficiently provide P-EBT benefits to Tennesseans in need



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*Graphic above highlights Accenture support to TN from December 2020 – April 2021 (Round 3 support). Round Three efforts currently ongoing through September 2021.

The P-EBT call center has successfully helped thousands of parents and 183 school administrators by scaling quickly, leveraging technology, and delivering continual process optimization.

- ### Background
- In **December 2020**, the P-EBT Round 3 contact center was stood up on **Amazon Connect** in preparation of **Round 3** support, and to assist with existing **Round 1** and **Round 2** inquiries
 - Agents have supported parents with card reissues, address changes, appeals, general Q&A, and more
 - Staff were trained on how to guide callers through **SNAP/TANF applications** in order to **reduce** the number of calls going to **FASC agents**
 - Agents have supported school/district administrators with student data submissions/troubleshooting errors
 - With the launch of the **Parent Portal**, agents have assisted parents with **linking** their children and with **address changes** to ensure that the **Round 3** cards are sent to the correct location
 - The team has performed **QA** on the data files to help **reduce** the number of errors and help ensure the **cleanliness** of the data

- ### Leveraging Technology
- Designed the P-EBT IVR to provide self service **deflecting volume from agents**, and **capture metrics on caller intents**
 - Continuously updated** the IVR with **enhancements and language updates** as new information was released
 - Engineered the IVR to accept **more SNAP/TANF volume** from the **FASC**
 - Directed all **FASC volume to Amazon Connect** first for **better insights/reporting**

- ### Support Scalability
- Quickly ramped up** a support staff of **25 call center agents**
 - Rapidly **scaled up** the number of agents in order to **accommodate increased call volume** over time (including over **15 new agents** for the **Round 3 launch**)
 - Since **December 2020**, the call center has handled **~66,403+** inbound and outbound calls

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**Image above references the Accenture call center launched in December 2020 to support TN DHS calls from Round 1 and 2 that were still coming into FASC with over one-hour hold times. This call center was also used to field calls in Round 3 in February of 2021.*

In December of 2020, Accenture started the design and buildout of an updated P-EBT solution in ServiceNow that would better serve both parents and schools.

The P-EBT School District Portal launched on February 3rd, 2021. It was created specifically for users to directly upload student data, making it less burdensome for the school district stakeholders responsible for uploading and submitting eligibility files. This information is received via the P-EBT School District Portal by Accenture. Accenture takes the data in and cleans it up for DHS, then sends it to DHS for processing and distribution of funds.

In addition, more extensive development work and modifications were done to create a P-EBT Parent Portal which Accenture launched in March of 2021. The Parent Portal allows parents to go in and search through the eligibility information submitted via the School District Portal to Accenture. If parents are unable to find their child listed but feel they should be eligible – they can file an appeal through regular processes.

The ServiceNow P-EBT Portal was designed, developed and launched in a matter of weeks. The self-service portal allows both parents and school districts to manage benefits for Rounds 3, 1B and 2. The tool also delivers robust reporting and tracking.



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Also, Accenture integrated their virtual assistant, AVA, within Amazon Connect to the state's ServiceNow Platform to provide secure, self-service capabilities. AVA boasts AI-powered chatbot technology that uses natural language understanding to address common DHS queries and service requests. AVA was added to DHS websites on TN.gov and to the P-EBT Parent & School District Portals, enabling users to easily ask questions on the channel of their choice and receive immediate responses without having to wait for a live agent. Within two days, AVA and system FAQs—began handling more than 82% of call volumes. These enhancements have made DHS support more readily available to citizens, 24x7 a day.

The AVA Virtual Assistant provides P-EBT specific information to parents and schools by answering commonly asked questions.

AVA is live across DHS's webpages, and enables users to receive answers to commonly asked questions **without the need to speak with an agent.**

AVA is live on the **P-EBT Parent and P-EBT School Portal.**

- Parents can ask questions specific to benefits and navigation
- District administrators can ask questions related to eligibility or how to resolve a submission error

AVA supported a **recent surge** in calls, handling over **5,000 conversations** on March 11th alone.

Virtual Agent (AVA) Web-embedded chatbot to answer common queries about DHS programs

Multi-Channel Deployed AVA across the **main DHS website and P-EBT Parent & School Portals** and answers questions specific to each channel.

Future Capability IVR deflection to reduce call volume & wait time

Migration to ServiceNow Seamlessly integrated with Tennessee's existing ServiceNow systems following migration from AWS to ServiceNow

Scope Expansion Expanded program scope from SNAP, TANF, & P-EBT to support FAQs related to Pandemic Child Care & the Summer Food Service Program

As of April 21st, AVA has supported:

1.1M+ Total via messages	367k Total conversations	181k Regular-hour conversations	188k After-hour conversations
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Introducing AVA

Built on **servicenow**

See AVA in action

Integration with existing DHS ServiceNow systems

Deployment across DHS webpages & P-EBT portals

A library of 101 intents

Free-type and guided navigation of menu

Support for portal navigation, checking of status, etc.

Another accomplishment that has been achieved was the conversion of the DHS Family Assistance call center from their legacy platform, to Nice inContact the new state-level platform. This conversion was significant due to the number of new features offered in the In Contact platform, which facilitated call routing, IVR messaging, and statistical tracking of call types and volumes.

Impact to Tennesseans

Technology Automation

Since its launch in June 2020, the virtual agent AVA has handled nearly 375,000 conversations and over a million messages across multiple channels. The virtual agent is live on the P-EBT Parent and P-EBT School portals and the DHS's various web pages, giving users quick answers to commonly asked questions without the need to speak with an agent. Parents can find out about benefits and application status. District administrators can get immediate help with eligibility requests or submission errors.

By taking pressure off the call center, DHS can move resources to other priorities. That includes its employees who can focus on more value-added work while AVA answers families' questions. The convenience of 24/7 availability means users get support where they are, and when they need it. In fact, about 51% of these conversations now take place outside of DHS's regular operating hours. With built-in intelligence covering over 50 typical topics, the average exchange with AVA takes only three messages. Conversations are monitored weekly, so if users ask different questions, updated content can be released within a week. For specific needs, AVA can connect the user directly to Live Chat for additional assistance.

Benefits/Funding Distribution

During round one of the P-EBT project, the state issued approximately \$82.8 million to 330,000 SNAP children and \$97.3 million to 388,000 non-SNAP children for school closures extending from March 23, 2020 through May 22, 2020, for a total of 44 days.

During phase two of the P-EBT project, the state issued an estimated \$36.3 million in P-EBT benefits for the start of school year 2020- 2021 through September 30, 2020 to 147,600 Tennessee children.

During phase three, Tennessee issued an estimated monthly \$80,692,200 (total approximate number of students from fall 2020 (765,000) multiplied by \$105.48) over eight months, totaling an issuance of approximately \$645,537,600.

In March 2021, TDHS proposed to amend its school year plan. This was done to increase previously issued and remaining school year benefits by \$0.96 for each virtual learning day, as authorized by the USDA. Tennessee also proposed to issue benefits to eligible children who may have been missed during previous phases. Tennessee's plan was approved by FNS USDA with the following amounts:

- \$105.8 million to the 765,000 eligible children in the state's school year 2020-2021 plan to account for the additional \$0.96 per virtual learning day from October 2020 through June 2021
- \$12.7 million for 368,000 children who received P-EBT benefits from the start of the current school year through September 30, 2021; these children will receive an additional \$0.96 per virtual learning day
- \$6.9 million to 100,000 children who were eligible for 10 days of P-EBT benefits that did not receive P-EBT benefits from the start of the current school year through September 30, 2020.

In total, the overall spend for the Tennessee P-EBT project has been around \$13.5M, which is of equal size and expense of most major modernization efforts for state Departments. Although the evolving pandemic shortened timeframes and demanded much from IT teams, both the State of Tennessee and Accenture are extremely proud of the work they have accomplished together to best serve school-aged children in Tennessee.

Public Information and Education Campaigns

TDHS developed a video for the parents and guardians of students interested in the P-EBT program. The video was designed to explain P-EBT and how users could leverage the new Parent Portal to determine eligibility, apply for benefits, update contact and address information, and file appeals if needed. The DHS produced promotional video entitled "Navigating the Parent Portal" can be viewed at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAXdHmPXHMQ>.

Accenture also designed and produced a public information campaign video regarding their support of the P-EBT project and their partnership with the State of Tennessee. The promotional video can be viewed at this link: https://youtu.be/L3_ju9auCGA.

P-EBT Program Conclusion and Future Implications

Following the conclusion of the 2021 summer season, the P-EBT program will be placed on standby and will remain available for use in the event of future crisis or disaster. However, the State of Tennessee sincerely hopes this program can truly retire and that it will not be needed in the future. Although the P-EBT program itself will hopefully not be needed again, there have been several outcomes from this project that will remain an ingrained part of DHS processes. These lasting outcomes include:

- AVA 24x7 online Virtual Agent for citizens
- Updated Student data files (accurate home addresses)
- NICE and InContact Call Center, IVR with enhanced call routing capabilities [Type equation here](#).

USDA FNS has expressed that TN's P-EBT program has been on the "leading edge" compared to most other states – and that is something Tennessee is very proud of. We know that this achievement would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts between federal government organizations, multiple Departments within the State of Tennessee, and public-private partnership with Accenture. This collaboration enabled the State of Tennessee to successfully serve approximately 750K children in Tennessee during an extended time of crisis and uncertainty.