



Transforming Health and Human Services Digital Experience for Ohio Residents

State of Ohio

CATEGORY:

Digital Services: Government to Citizen

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Agency:

Ohio Department of Administrative Services

PROJECT INITIATION:

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PROJECT END DATE:

December 2021

Executive Summary

The Ohio Benefits Self-Service Portal (SSP) enables residents to apply for multiple public assistance benefits online. Last year, the ratio of “Smartphone-dependent” households in the U.S. grew to one in five. One Ohio Benefits User Experience Study found that only 37% of respondents reported having a computer with internet access at home, while 73 percent said they could access the internet through a mobile phone. Implementing a modernized and mobile-responsive user interface on the SSP was critical to ensuring that millions of Ohioans could apply for benefits with whatever device was easily accessible to them.

The State of Ohio Department of Administrative Services (DAS) Ohio Benefits Program modernized the existing SSP quickly and at a low cost, without the need to create or maintain separate mobile applications. The goals for transforming the resident experience included:



Modernize the look and feel, while enabling users with the ability to use the site on any device.



Enable document upload via the user’s native device camera to streamline verifications.



Add a simpler password reset capability via a secure email link.

Idea

The idea for modernizing the SSP was born out of a need to improve access to essential services for Ohioans. For example, “Sally” is recently divorced and has two minor children under the age of three. She moved into an apartment and is unable to afford internet service at this time. She is researching benefits on her smartphone and trying, unsuccessfully, to complete her application at benefits.ohio.gov. Getting to the library to use a computer is especially challenging for her with two young ones, and she is not allowed to use the computer at her work for personal activities. Saturday is the only day she can really get to the library and checking on her application status is worrisome for her with so much on her plate.

While the Ohio Benefits SSP was previously available on a mobile device, the user experience on non-desktop devices was difficult before the SSP upgrade. The screens displayed in a static size, causing challenges with navigation and with reading application details on smaller screens.

Unfortunately, “Sally” represents the one in five residents that only has internet access via a smartphone, making this a common issue that all states are facing.

Recognizing this challenge and similar scenarios, the Ohio Benefits Program sought to transform the resident experience by modernizing the SSP with a mobile-friendly user interface. This directly aligns with NASCIO’s State CIO Top Ten Policy and Technology Priorities. Specifically, the Digital Government / Digital Services category, which improves and digitizes experiences for Ohioans.

Implementation

In June of 2021, the State of Ohio embarked on a six-month journey to transform the Ohioan experience. Guiding principles and requirements for this project included:



Ensure minimal disruption of SSP



Leverage existing SSP investments (no re-coding or re-platforming, no additional mobile applications to create or maintain)



Modernize the look and feel while enabling residents with the ability to use SSP on any device



Enable document upload via the user’s native device camera to streamline verifications



Add a simpler password reset via a secure email link

To gain a better understanding of how to improve the SSP experience, the product team engaged with and reviewed feedback from end users and community-based organizations. From a system perspective, the Java Bootstrap framework was selected to enable existing functionality to display with a responsive user interface without the need to rebuild the

underlying application. This approach aligns with NASCIO’s State CIO Top Ten Policy and Technology Priorities, Legacy Modernization.

Java Bootstrap’s framework allows a developer to quickly apply a responsive user interface to the existing web application pages. Responsive web pages can be viewed using many different devices, such as a desktop, tablet, or mobile phone. When a responsive web page is viewed on a device, it will adapt its content to fit the device in which it is being displayed.

In addition to enabling a responsive user interface for the SSP, the Ohio Benefits Program leveraged the Java Bootstrap framework to allow users to upload documents from their device’s native camera. Now, users can navigate and easily use the SSP from the device of their choice and directly upload verification documents required for eligibility determination.

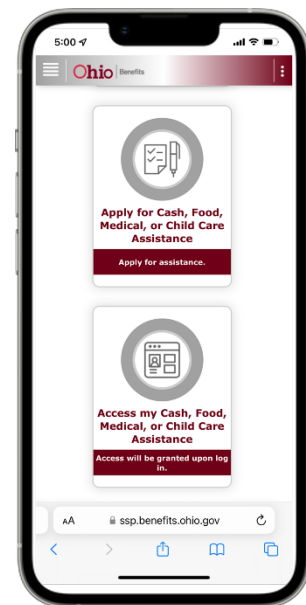
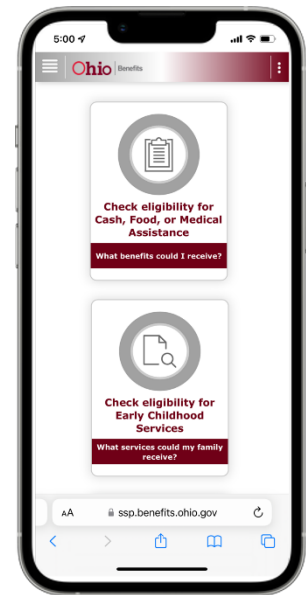
The SSP upgrade was implemented in conjunction with an existing release in the program roadmap, enabling the Ohio Benefits Program to gain delivery synergies and to continue to meet already committed obligations for other new enhancements and planned releases.

Impact

As of December 2021, the State of Ohio has transformed the digital experience for Ohio residents applying for and maintaining their public assistance benefits through the SSP. Users have a more streamlined experience in navigating the portal, with more screen real estate allotted to the actions necessary for the resident to apply for and to maintain public assistance benefits.

Let us visit “Sally” again. Today, she can use her smartphone to apply for services, submit documentation through her camera on her phone, and check the status of her application and services. “Sally” now benefits from a much more complete experience when using the SSP.

To support the transition to the upgraded SSP, the Ohio Benefits Program also facilitated a weeklong rapid response phone bridge for food banks and community-based organizations in the event they encountered issues. The feedback from this open communication was positive. For example, a representative from one of Central Ohio’s largest foodbanks, who works with



Ohioans to register and apply for benefits utilizing mobile tablets, dialed into the bridge unsolicited to share his feedback on the positive impact of the updated portal. He shared that since the upgrade, not only has his experience improved on his tablet device, but it has also greatly reduced the time it takes him to assist applicants. This reduction in time has allowed him to increase the number of Ohioans that he is able to help each day.



Document Verification Submissions via Native Camera

Missing verification documents are a common reason for application denial. At any given point, one in five cases in Ohio Benefits are pending verification documents. It takes an average of 50+ days to receive and

verify a document, which delays benefits processing.

Think of “Sally” trying to rely on the library computer and needing to be prepared with required documents on her person, all while trying to manage her little ones. Does the library computer even have a camera or scanner? While the SSP has always had the capability to upload documents, it required applicants to already have the document electronically on their device at the time of the application. Should “Sally” store this highly confidential information on the library computer? “Sally” can now take a picture and directly upload the required documentation from her smartphone.

With the SSP upgrade, there was an immediate 10-20% increase in the number of documents being uploaded through the SSP. In February 2022, this translated to 13,000 additional electronically uploaded documents. In addition to increased convenience, this reduces follow up mail correspondence with households, saves paper, and ultimately helps improve processing time for applications.



Password Reset via Secure Email Link

“Sally” now also has multiple ways to reset her password without requiring a call or an in-person visit. The SSP was updated to enable users with an ability to reset their password via a secure email link. Previously, Ohioans were only provided with the option to reset their password by verifying their identity with their previous account password or by answering the

security questions from their initial account registration. Users often actively utilize their account during application processing, but login less frequently once they are approved for benefits. As they login less frequently, users tend to miss the 60-day password reset requirement, which temporarily locks their account.

If users were not able to provide their previous password or to answer the security questions, they were directed by the Ohio Benefits Help Desk to create a brand-new account. Now, users

can request a secure password reset link through their verified email address after confirming their first name, last name, and date of birth.



Continued Enhancements into the Future

The SSP modernization has greatly improved the digital experience and enabled a faster path to benefits. Additional human centered design enhancements are in flight to continue improving the user experience and driving efficiencies in benefits eligibility determination.

For example, users have commented that they are unsure of all the information needed to apply in the online application and where they are in the process. Simplified navigation pages and user guided transition pages are being introduced to aid users in understanding where they are in the process, what information will be needed for the application, why certain information is collected, and how their sensitive information is protected.

The Ohio Benefits Program is also expanding digital communications to end users. Over 400,000 SSP users have already opted-in to receive text messaging. Targeted proactive communications are being implemented to send text messages to users at key moments that matter, such as reminders for interviews and pending verification. When individuals miss these steps today, it can result in them being discontinued, which leads to a loss of benefits and/or additional caseworker processing to reinstate their benefits.

The Ohio Benefits Program is committed to making sure that “Sally,” and all applicants, can use the SSP to easily apply for their eligible benefits and to receive them in a timely manner.