

The Mobile App that Connects Job Seekers with the Services They Need

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Executive Summary

The best digital solution provides a top-class customer service experience, effective service delivery, and straightforward communication between providers and recipients. That's why Minnesota IT Services (MNIT), in collaboration with the state Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and the Department of Human Services (DHS), developed the [Workforce One Connect app](#) (WF1 Connect).

WF1 Connect is a mobile app designed with a human-centered approach, serving as a one-stop shop. It allows customers enrolled in public services across multiple state agencies to securely communicate with staff and remotely submit documents necessary for compliance via their smartphones or tablets. The app's user-friendliness and flexibility save customers time and money.

The WF1 Connect mobile app reimagined the service delivery of 20+ state and federal employment service programs. The app empowers staff to securely retrieve messages and documents from customers to update their cases. Integrated with the Workforce One (WF1) web-based case management system, the app eliminates the need for additional systems for communication, document storage, and workflow processing. Nearly 2,000 state, city, county, and nonprofit employment and training providers rely on the web-based client management application to track employment and training services for more than 100,000 customers.

The app's ease of communication bridges customers to Minnesota's employment and economic support programs, ensuring compliance and giving them the best opportunity to succeed while improving their quality of life. The new engagement tool ensures

that disadvantaged groups are not left behind and enhances the operational effectiveness of both employees and the programs for long-term success. It aligns perfectly with the vision of One Minnesota to "engage and empower Minnesotans to establish shared sustainable prosperity for all Minnesotans."

According to a report by the IBM Center for the Business of Government, "ownership of smartphones, and dependence on them for Internet access, is especially high among minority groups. African Americans and Hispanic adults spend more time on apps than the average user. Low-income households are also more likely than high-income households to depend on smartphones for online access. The greater accessibility of smartphones to traditionally underserved populations raises the prospects of delivering social services through apps."

The WF1 Connect mobile app went through several iterations based on user feedback, incrementally adding features to make the app more usable. For instance, the app's launch of the English language version in April 2021 was followed by versions in Spanish, Somali, and Hmong. Increased engagement with customers and streamlined administrative workflows ensure a net positive Return on Investment (ROI) for the State of Minnesota.

Why it matters: A new mobile app removes barriers to accessing benefits and services for 20+ state and federal employment programs to make it easy for staff and users to securely communicate and submit documents, saving time and money.

Inspiration Behind the App

The project aimed to make service delivery more equitable and accessible, and Minnesota began by mapping-out customer journeys. Customers accessing services focus on physiological needs and learning processes to submit paperwork while tracking important deadlines that vary from county to county to maintain basic needs. They must rely on referrals to resources from staff during business hours. Time spent focused on maintaining compliance with program requirements directly impacts customers' ability to focus on other goals.

Any interruption in receiving cash, food, or childcare benefits could be detrimental to customers' success. When WF1 customers lose benefits, they're unable to maintain employment or dedicate time to job searches, which leads to housing and food insecurities, creating greater inequities for Minnesotans experiencing poverty and systemic racism.

Complicated program requirements and processes can inadvertently fuel inequity, but mobile apps can remove barriers and close gaps between public resources and residents. The WF1 Connect app removes barriers to access for customers who may not have easy or reliable access to transportation or a computer; [85% of Americans have access to smartphones](#).

Through a collaboration between several state agencies, county and tribal providers, and community-based organizations, WF1 Connect launched in April 2021 to provide a customer-centric solution to navigate complex government systems and to mitigate risks in customers losing their benefits.

Messages and documents sent from the app are instantly stored in the web-based case management system, eliminating the need to scan paperwork or share multiple copies of the same documents with different case workers. The removal of burdensome paper trails saves customers time and money to mail or submit documents in person. Users get an immediate confirmation, reducing submission anxieties.

From Pilot Project to Launch

The Department of Human Services (DHS) partnered with the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota to pilot a mobile app for customers accessing cash and food benefits from the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) – federally known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Participation in the program requires supporting documentation via fax, mail, or personal delivery.

The pilot aimed to develop a mobile app for easy communication and case tracking.

Feedback from staff and customers allowed a replicable, yet customizable design to expand usage across 20+ programs and services. DHS partnered with Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) to enhance an existing web-based case management statement to integrate with a mobile app for customers.

MNIT teams began gathering requirements in August 2019, and when the pandemic hit a few months later, the teams had a new sense of urgency to develop the tool for easy communication between recipients and service providers. The prototype was perfected with input from end-users through bimonthly meetings. A completed user acceptance testing in early 2021 led to the statewide rollout of the Workforce One Connect app in April of that year. Soon Spanish, Hmong, and Somali versions of the app were developed to benefit a larger pool of users.

An accessibility coordinator helped development teams comply with accessibility laws to ensure users accessing the app with assistive technology have the same experience and receive the same information as users who do not use features such as Voice Over, Talk Back, or a large font size.



Developing For Users & Staff

MNIT and DEED worked together to develop an app that met the needs of users and staff. The team held bimonthly meetings to provide an opportunity for end-users to review the prototype and influence design. This community of practice was essential throughout the creation, launch, and improvement of WF1 Connect, ensuring its design is easy to use and valuable.

The team took into consideration the needs of Financial Workers (FW) and Childcare Workers (CCW) who use a different system – other than the Workforce One case management system – to determine customer eligibility for public assistance benefits. They worried a new mobile app might increase their workload, they might not know when to access the Workforce One case management system, or that customers would expect an immediate response to messages or document submissions.

To address this, the team created an email alert system to inform staff of new unread messages, prompting them to log into the WF1 case management system. Developers also built a feature that generated an auto acknowledgment after customers sent a message.

DHS has hosted Learning Network meetings since development began and they continue today. The meetings allow staff to learn from each other. For example, paperwork has historically been received in person, through mail, or via email. Each agency has its way to get the document to the right staff. Agencies and programs have different requirements for processing paperwork – some process in the order received and others are based on priority. Since WF1 Connect allows a new way to submit paperwork, agencies learned from each other about how they could work this new method of receiving information into the workflow that already existed.

WF1 Connect App in Action

WF1 Connect was created to simplify communication for customers accessing essential Workforce and Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I and IV, as well as public assistance employment service programs administered through multiple agencies. The app is available to participants in MFIP, DWP, MFIP/DWP Child Care Assistance Program, SNAP Employment & Training, DEED Employment and Training Programs, State Services for the Blind, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and many more.

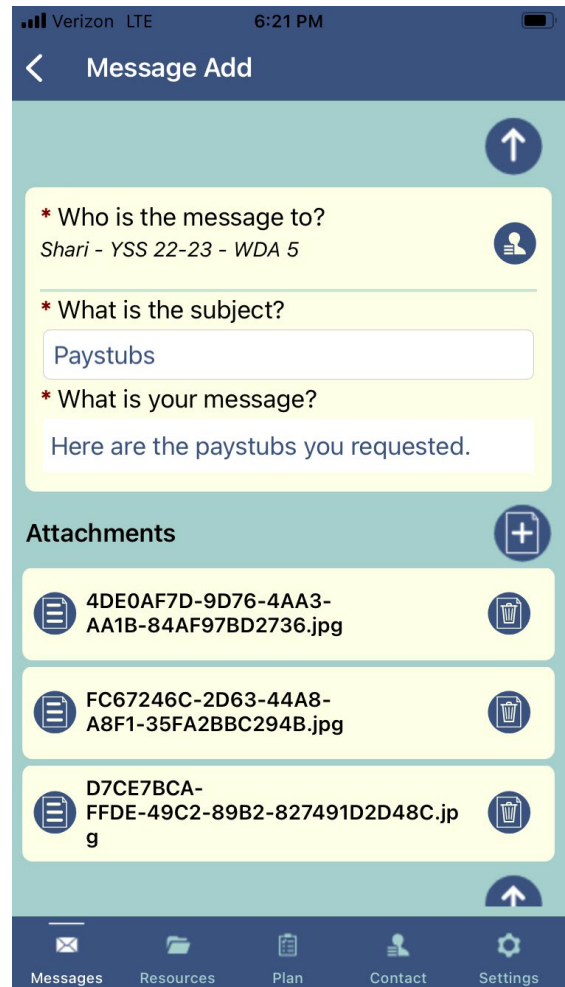
Across 76 agencies that have activated WF1 Connect, more than 4,600 customers have used it. Reportedly, 37,734 messages have been sent back and forth between staff and customers with almost half of all messages containing an attachment.

Besides reducing paperwork and decreasing the possibilities of administrative disruptions to receiving benefits, the mobile application has allowed greater ease of access and faster processing in administering benefits to customers. It helps them to focus more on their families, education, and/or employment, and become self-reliant.

The strong partnership among various teams facilitated the statewide rollout of the mobile app. MNIT led the effort on staff training and technical support while DHS took the lead on policy questions and the implementation plan – both supporting each other to troubleshoot issues.

Together, the MNIT teams at several agencies made a conscious effort to provide technical assistance to staff in an open, engaging process so they could learn from one another. The teams received suggestions from users and customers for app improvements.

The collaboration between state and local government, community-based organizations, and customers in this effort was key to a successful outcome. It ensured all perspectives were taken into consideration with the design of the app to assist customers.



Message Add screen with attachments.

It was important to design the app in a simple, yet customizable format. For example, giving customers the ability to change their display settings to light or dark mode, and normal or high contrast, and making sure VoiceOver (iOS) and TalkBack (Android) were compatible with the app.

Unique Features and App Updates

The mobile app's integration with the web-based case management system makes messaging and case-noting seamless for staff at different agencies. The availability of the app in four languages (English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali) expands its potential use.

In January 2022, DEED surveyed customers and staff to gauge what they liked about the app and what could be improved. After reviewing hundreds of survey comments, MNIT and DEED improved the app in multiple ways:

- Added a local resource search by area.
- Allowed customers to view their employment plan, or their contract (that includes goals, steps they need to take, and information/documents they need to provide) with Employment Services to help them stay the course.
- Helped customers locate local resources even after the end of their participation in public programs.

Benefits Beyond Measure

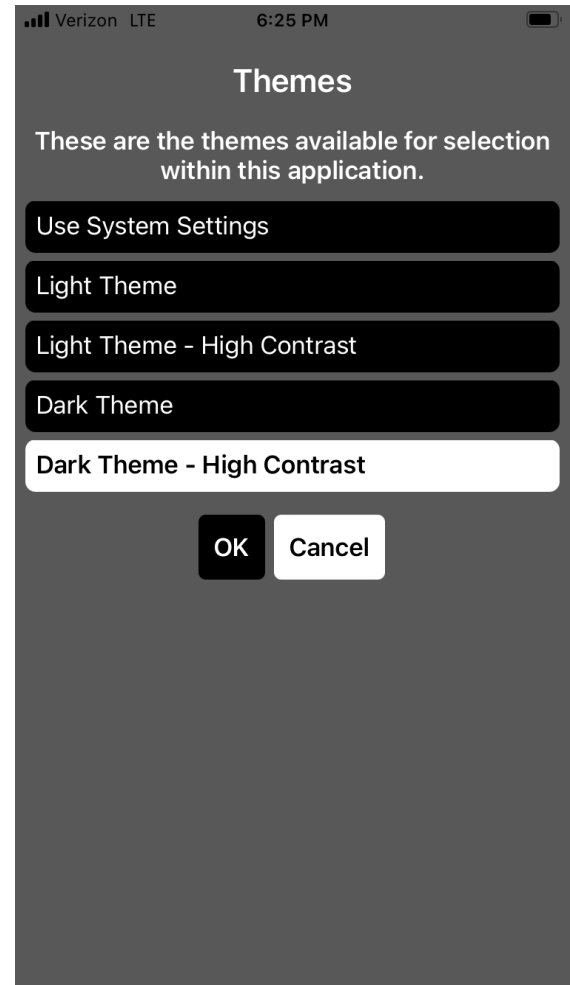
For Customers

Before WF1 Connect, customer communications were very traditional and disparate. Most documents were exchanged in person or via U.S. mail. WF1 Connect allows customers to easily sign in using their smartphone or mobile device to send documents with the click of a button rather than finding a stamp and mailing a document, printing, scanning, or emailing paperwork.

Staff assignments can also change frequently, and customers had a difficult time remembering who their workers are and which worker needs which document(s). WF1 Connect helps because they always know who their assigned staff person is. Sometimes, two different workers (i.e., a Financial Worker and an Employment Counselor) need the same document from a customer. The customer can choose to send their message/document to one staff person or multiple at the same time.

The cost or time savings for customers may be difficult to quantify, but every dollar saved in printer ink, paper, and stamps allows agencies to use those dollars elsewhere such as supporting how its clients get gas/bus cards to get to work, clothing for interviews, or equipment necessary for their education and employment.

Knowing that customers move throughout the state and may access services from agencies in multiple areas, they can now search for resources in other areas, which can help them plan for a move or search for resources



Theme selection menu with high contrast options.

that may not be available in the area in which they live currently. By removing barriers to accessing benefits and services, it is easier for clients to focus on their education and work to become successful and improve their lives.

For Staff

The majority of staff do not have work-issued cell phones. Since WF1 Connect is integrated with the case management system, staff do not need a work-issued cell phone to use the communication tool, saving the agency money in the long run. Staff receive messages and documents within the case management system and can reply and case-note the conversation easily. They can quickly discover who was included in the message and know whether it needs to be forwarded to other staff working with the customer.

Staff benefit when customers are in compliance, and they can more easily support themselves in their education and/or employment goals. Since messages and documents are received within the case management system that staff already use, they can make case notes and save attachments to Electronic Document Storage (EDS), eliminating extra steps of scanning paperwork or copying/pasting emails into case notes. When private information is kept safe within a secure app instead of in emails, DEED, DHS, workforce development areas, and community-based organizations avoid security risks and associated costs.

What the Community Says

Recently, the WF1 Connect app won the [Merrill Baumgardner Innovation in Information Technology Award](#) at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA). It demonstrates that service delivery can be reimagined through collaboration. The WF1 team set an example of how state agencies, county and tribal providers, and community-based organizations can maximize resources through a common interest in serving customers and reducing barriers. With the proper investment and collaboration, this human-centered design is replicable nationwide. The app also won the 2021 Golden GOVIT Awards in the Service category.

The 2022 customer survey showed that:

- 81% of customer respondents indicated they were very or somewhat satisfied with WF1 Connect.
- 51% of respondents were current, active users of WF1 Connect.
- Most users log into the app a few times a month.
- Customers heard about WF1 Connect from their employment counselor, financial/childcare workers, and DEED marketing materials.

Looking Ahead

Employment services staff also continue to promote the app to their customers and help them set it up for use. The teams created videos, flyers, and how-to guides for staff to use when offering the app to their customers. They also implemented a support structure for questions and issues that arose.

MNIT and DEED continue to seek feedback and recommendations from both customers and staff in a variety of ways – through meetings, a change request form, and surveys. The app has gone through eight builds since its launch in 2021. Currently, the teams are exploring if and how to allow customers to electronically sign documents from within WF1 Connect.