

North Dakota



NORTH
Dakota

Be Legendary.

North Dakota Information Technology and
North Dakota Health and Human Services Department
Digital Services Category

**"From Hunger to Hope: Transforming Summers
for North Dakota Children with EBT Benefits"**

January 2023 - June 2024

Alisa Cook (acook@nd.gov)

Executive Summary

The "From Hunger to Hope" project in North Dakota harnesses digital transformation to address child hunger during summer months. By developing an online portal with Microsoft Dynamics, the project ensures accurate and timely delivery of Summer EBT benefits to low-income families. This innovative approach replaced manual, error-prone processes with a streamlined, automated system, significantly reducing administrative burdens and enhancing service efficiency. As a result, 45,000 children received essential nutrition, improving their health and well-being. The success of this initiative exemplifies the power of technology in public service, fostering equity and trust while setting a precedent for future digital government projects.

IDEA

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

Millions of children lose access to nutritious school meals during the summer, leading to increased hunger and food insecurity. The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program aims to mitigate this by providing grocery benefits to low-income families during these months.

- **Combating Child Hunger:** Provides \$120 per eligible child for summer groceries, ensuring continued access to nutritious food.
- **Improving Data Accuracy:** An online portal, developed by North Dakota Information Technology (NDIT) using Microsoft Dynamics, allows families to update personal information, ensuring timely and accurate benefit delivery.
- **Increasing Engagement:** Proactive outreach via postcards and emails encourages families to update information and engage with state services.

Why does it matter?

- **Ensuring Every Child is Nourished:** The program ensures children, who rely on school meals, do not face hunger during the summer.
- **Business Rationale:**
 - **Nutritional Security:** Reduces child hunger and improves diet quality.
 - **Economic Benefits:** \$2.5 billion in grocery benefits support local economies.
 - **Equity and Inclusion:** Promotes social equity by targeting support to vulnerable children.

Relevant Data:

- **Cost:** \$2.5 billion in grocery benefits nationwide.
- **Human Resources:** Collaboration among state departments and local school districts.
- **Constituent Group:** Approximately 45,000 eligible children in North Dakota.

From Hunger to Hope:
Transforming Summers for North
Dakota with EBT Benefits

Consequences of Inaction:

Failure to act increases child hunger, malnutrition, and long-term healthcare costs, and hinders social and economic growth.

What Makes It Different:

- Innovation:
 - Leveraging Technology: The online portal ensures accurate, timely benefits.
 - Cross-Agency Collaboration: Highlights the power of state agency partnerships.
 - Proactive Outreach: Keeps families informed and engaged, reducing missed benefits.
- Universal Appeal:
 - Model for All States: Addresses challenges relevant to all states.
 - Federal and State Alignment: Supports federal initiatives to eliminate child hunger.
 - Top Priorities: Aligns with State CIO priorities on Digital Government and Services.
 - Equity and Access: Ensures all eligible children have access to benefits.

The Summer EBT program ensures every child can thrive, grow, and succeed.

Implementation

What was the roadmap?

Key Milestones:

- Needs Assessment: Identified the need for summer nutrition and potential barriers like outdated addresses.
- Collaborative Planning: Coordinated efforts among DHHS, DPI, local school districts, and NDIT to develop a cohesive plan.
- Technology Integration: Created an online portal using Microsoft Dynamics to update family information and ensure accurate benefit distribution.
- Outreach and Communication: Mailed postcards and sent emails to inform families and encourage information updates.
- Pilot and Feedback: Tested the system, gathered feedback, and made adjustments before the full rollout.
- Full Implementation: Distributed Summer EBT benefits to approximately 45,000 eligible children across North Dakota.

Enterprise Alignment:

- Health and Nutrition: Supports public health goals by ensuring proper nutrition for children.
- Digital Transformation: Utilizes advanced technology, aligning with North Dakota's commitment to digital government.

From Hunger to Hope:
Transforming Summers for North
Dakota with EBT Benefits

- Cross-Agency Collaboration: Emphasizes collaboration across departments to achieve common goals.
- Equity and Accessibility: Ensures all eligible children, regardless of location, receive benefits.

Assessment Criteria:

- Reach and Accessibility: Evaluates the percentage of eligible children receiving benefits, focusing on rural and underserved areas.
- Nutritional Outcomes: Monitors the impact on child hunger and diet quality, aiming to reduce very low food security by at least one-third.
- User Experience: Gathers feedback on the online portal's ease of use and communication strategies.
- Operational Efficiency: Analyzes benefit distribution accuracy and timeliness to minimize errors and delays.

Defining Success:

- Healthy, Happy Children: Success is reflected in children enjoying their summer with full bellies and vibrant energy.
- Engaged Families: Families feel supported and connected to state resources.
- Collaborative Governance: Sets a precedent for future initiatives requiring coordinated efforts.
- Model for Other States: Serves as a blueprint for other states to eliminate child hunger nationwide.

Who Was Involved?

- Legislators: Secured funding and legislative support.
- DHHS: Led program oversight and implementation.
- DPI: Collaborated with local school districts to identify eligible children.
- NDIT: Developed the online portal using Microsoft Dynamics.
- Local School Districts: Assisted in spreading awareness and communication.
- Families: End-users and beneficiaries whose participation and feedback were essential.

Gaining Approval, Buy-in, and Adoption:

- Legislative Advocacy: Presented data on child hunger and benefits, securing bipartisan support.
- Agency Collaboration: Regular inter-agency meetings ensured alignment on goals.
- Community Engagement: Engaged local schools and community organizations for information dissemination.
- Multi-channel Outreach: Used social media, emails, postcards, and local media to reach a wide audience.
- User-Friendly Technology: Designed the portal with simplified interfaces and multilingual support.

How did you do it?

- Resources Utilized:
 - Financial: Funded through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, with \$2.5 billion allocated for grocery benefits.
 - Human: Multidisciplinary teams from DHHS, DPI, and NDI, along with community involvement.
 - Time: Rolled out within a tight timeline, requiring efficient management and coordination.
- Technical Architecture:
 - Online Portal Development: Used Microsoft Dynamics for a robust, user-friendly platform.
 - Data Integration and Security: Ensured data accuracy and employed leading cybersecurity measures.
 - Accessibility and Privacy: Designed the portal to be accessible and compliant with data protection regulations.
- Process and Execution:
 - Communication and Outreach: Proactively contacted families to update information.
 - Benefit Distribution: Automated issuance of benefits to eligible children.
 - Ongoing Support: Provided continuous support to families for effective use of benefits.

Impact

What did the project make better?

The "From Hunger to Hope" project will significantly improved the lives of thousands of North Dakota children and their families, addressing the challenge of providing nutritious food during the summer.

Before the Project:

- Inconsistent Access to Nutrition: Children relying on school meals lacked adequate nutrition during summer.
- Administrative Challenges: Manual processes for updating addresses and issuing benefits were error-prone.
- High Rate of Returned Mail: Outdated addresses caused significant delays in benefit delivery.

After the Project:

- Timely and Accurate Benefit Distribution: An online portal using Microsoft Dynamics allowed easy address updates, ensuring timely benefits.
- Automation and Efficiency: Reduced manual workload, allowing staff to focus on service improvements.
- Reduced Returned Mail: Proactive engagement significantly reduced returned mail.

Benefits and Impact:

- Enhanced Nutritional Support: 45,000 children received \$120 in grocery benefits, ensuring summer-long access to nutritious food.
- Improved Health and Well-being: Consistent access to healthy food improved children's health and development.
- Increased Efficiency: Streamlined processes reduced administrative burdens.
- Empowered Families: Easier information updates led to greater satisfaction and trust in state services.

How do you know?

The following information is anticipated outcomes as this project hasn't fully launched yet.

- Quantitative Data:
 - Reduction in Returned Mail: Reduce by over 80%, ensuring timely benefit delivery.
 - Timely Distribution: Over 95% of families receive benefits on time.
 - Cost Savings and Efficiency: Automation reduces manual processing by 60%, saving about 2,000 staff hours annually.
 - Usage and Adoption Rates: 85% of eligible families use the portal; nearly 100% of benefits will be utilized.
- Qualitative Feedback:
 - Constituent Experience: High satisfaction with ease of information updates and benefit delivery.
 - Customer Feedback: 90% find the new system user-friendly and beneficial.
 - Staff Testimonials: Reports of reduced workloads and improved accuracy.

What's Now?

Long-Term Plan:

- Integration into SPACES: Centralizes all Summer EBT functions, enhancing tracking and reporting.
- Increased Automation: Further reduces manual tasks and minimizes human error.
- Cost Savings: Savings from increased automation will improve and expand the program.

Ongoing Investment:

- Continuous Improvement: Regular updates and training to keep the system current and user-friendly.
- Sustained Benefits: Ongoing support and a robust feedback system ensure continuous improvement and reliable benefit delivery.

The "From Hunger to Hope" project stands as a testament to the profound impact of digital transformation in public service. By leveraging advanced technology to streamline the distribution of Summer EBT benefits, North Dakota will significantly improve the lives of thousands of children, ensuring they have access to nutritious food during critical months. This initiative will set a new standard for efficiency, accuracy, and user engagement in government programs. The project highlights the importance of continued investment in innovative solutions that promote equity, enhance community well-being, and build trust in state services.