

Tackling Challenges Amplified by COVID-19: Best Practices for State & County Social Safety Net Agencies

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all a powerful lesson: government assistance matters. Historical evidence and the recent pandemic have shown assistance can not only be a lifeline for many, but also an excellent return on investment for taxpayers and the community at large. Government assistance is also one of the only tools today that can be used to help remedy long-standing inequity while also providing immediate relief to the American people. The simple fact that so many people relied on the \$600 temporary raise in unemployment benefits shows how close to the edge many Americans are.

Unfortunately, our social safety net systems around the country are crumbling under the stress of millions of users seeking to apply for help and needing immediate support. At this critical time during a public health and economic crisis, systems that provide critical government assistance must work efficiently and effectively rather than making Americans and government workers jump through hoops. To make matters worse, our unemployment insurance systems are perennially flawed, and ad hoc legislative fixes are required every time people need the support the most.

Based on our extensive experience helping turn public policy aspirations into functioning systems that public agencies use to help people, Alluma suggests states actively invest in and focus on the following:

- I. Modernize service delivery
- II. Reuse data
- III. Re-envision what success looks like
- IV. Modernize government procurement and contracting

I. Modernize Service Delivery

Requiring individuals and families to go in-person to a government office to obtain services is a significant barrier, pandemic or not, that prevents many eligible individuals from obtaining the help they need when they need it.

In response to the current crisis, government moved quickly to provide tools to allow their staff to work remotely and to deliver services to the public through contactless interactions. This simple change allowed people to obtain government services with ease and dignity.

Rather than returning to long-standing, outdated practices and assuming policy rules prevent modernizing how government interacts with the public, state and county agencies should continue with as many of these temporary practices as possible that make it easier for the public to conduct business with government.

Key Recommendations:

- A. Increase federal matching rates for administrative costs that are targeted towards modernizing service delivery through business process changes and use of technology for communication.
- B. Promote use of low or no touch service delivery such as:
 - Allowing telephonic or electronic signatures on applications as well as any other form or document that requires a signature;
 - Eliminating any perceived requirement that business must be conducted in-person;
 - Prioritizing use of electronic data sources over documentation that people must submit to prove their eligibility.
- C. Leverage digital information and communication technologies that the state has invested in for telehealth, communication and collaboration tools, and/or cloud infrastructure. This can reduce labor costs, diversify the workforce through telework, and improve internal organizational efficiency and productivity.
- D. Use alternative methods to provide income assistance for the unbanked population through EBT or debit cards, rather than mailing checks.

II. Reuse Data

Eligibility rules for health and human services programs are unnecessarily complex. Eligibility criteria across multiple programs do not have consistent rules and definitions for income or household, and/or may require different documents to prove eligibility. Application forms and processes may also differ.

An immediate way to streamline eligibility and enrollment without significant policy changes is to share and reuse available data across social services agencies. Data sharing across programs can help streamline eligibility, avoid duplication of effort, and reduce administrative costs. While agencies currently conduct some minimum data sharing mostly for compliance, more robust reuse of data across programs could significantly help agencies respond to the increased demand and increase efficiencies. States and counties should be strongly encouraged to revise existing processes and procedures through more short-term options to increase data sharing across agencies.

Key Recommendations:

- A. Incentivize agencies to increase reuse of data by allowing flexibility in existing administrative and/or IT funding.
- B. Require agencies to implement all available opportunities to re-use data. As outlined in our report [Opportunities to Streamline Enrollment Across Public Benefit Programs](#), states are already required and/or have the flexibility under existing federal policy to streamline eligibility into one program by reusing data available in another program.
- C. Require the reuse of data to streamline recertification or renewal of benefits in programs with similar eligibility requirements (e.g., state residency, immigration/citizenship status).

- D. Clarify that legal prohibitions, such as HIPAA, do not prohibit health and social services agencies from sharing data for the purpose of an eligibility determination.
- E. Encourage the development of agency-wide data sharing agreements.
- F. Obtain explicit consent from the applicant to get permission to share data specifically to determine their eligibility for other programs.
- G. Use existing electronic data sources to obtain information rather than placing all the burden on the person applying for benefits. For example, if income data is available electronically, people should not be asked to also submit a paper paycheck stub.
- H. Use electronic data sources not only for verification but for an eligibility determination (e.g., use existing state unemployment data to identify people who may be eligible rather than only using that data to confirm existing information).
- I. Authorize the use of a data hub or repository if data cannot be easily shared across multiple systems due to technology or data governance.
- J. Improve data sharing between social services agencies and other state agencies, such as state tax agencies or the Department of Labor (e.g., workers' compensation, unemployment, state disability).

III. Re-envision What Success Looks Like

State agencies have more data than they can analyze and must regularly provide extensive reports to demonstrate compliance or current performance. Today, program success is often measured by the number of enrollees (participation rates), spending within budget projections, or how much money from fraud was recovered. Yet success should be measured by the progress made to achieve the underlying goal or purpose of the program, such as the number of new households who enrolled. If fraud prevention is a key measurement instead of improving the accuracy of eligibility determinations, state agencies will face challenges in lowering additional administrative costs and increasing participation rates.

Thus, the first step for state agencies to adopt “data-driven” practices is to clearly define what success looks like beyond mere compliance with program requirements. For example, the ability to maximize or “draw down” federal funding is clearly a goal for states, but is not being viewed as a metric for success. State agencies can increase federal funding by increasing program participation rates, especially in programs that are 100% federally funded, like SNAP. Yet state and county practices that create barriers to enrollment effectively decrease participation rates, limiting the state’s ability to maximize federal dollars.

Without making increased federal funding an explicit measurement of success, agencies often fail to fully take advantage of all available opportunities. For example, despite the enhanced federal match provided to social safety net agencies under the [A-87 Cost Allocation](#) to modernize non-health IT systems, many states failed to do so and “left money on the table.”

Key Recommendations:

- A. Focus on the outcome of increased participation for more federal funding to encourage finding ways to streamline enrollment and help people get enrolled.

- B. Use cost-benefit analysis of the amount of administrative costs dedicated to preventing fraud to determine the amount recovered from fraud investigations.
- C. Use performance metrics to increase program participation rates.
- D. Measure administrative efficiency by the number of approved applications that are completed in a given time, not overall applications.
- E. Measure the change in administrative costs and processing times to document the impact of reusing data.
- F. Analyze application denial data to determine the number of procedural denials and ways to reduce the number of avoidable denials.
- G. Measure administrative efficiency based on the agency's ability to lower the number of procedural denials.

IV. Modernize Government Procurement and Contracting

Many states and counties continue to use procurement approaches that are firmly lodged in traditional methods, including the tendency to make individual purchases without a big-picture view of the implications and objectives. This approach results in several challenges such as: long timelines; poor definition of purchasing requirements; ineffective supplier performance management; an inability to adapt to the needs of people receiving support or the agency staff providing it; and a lack of transparency in managing the complexity of purchasing services to support safety net programs. What's more, these practices contribute to contracting inequities. For example, prime vendors and prime contractors to the government can exclude communities of color. Without more fundamental changes to the procurement and contracting process, a successful technology project in state and county governments will remain elusive.

In addition, in times of crisis, government procurement often lacks transparency, diversity of vendors, or realistic goals or timelines for the work because there is a sense of urgency. It is not speed, but good planning that can make or break a successful project.

For government to be able to procure services and solutions that will make a real impact and bring new thinking and approaches, state and county agencies can implement these changes to respond to short-term needs and make plans to keep them in place for the long-term.

Key Recommendations:

- A. Directly incorporate contracting equity programs into state and local procurement departments to help spread economic development to all communities and allow state and local governments to express their values of inclusion.
- B. Establish contracting equity policies and programs within state and local procurement departments based on an analysis of the particular barriers faced by people of color, women, and non-profit business enterprises in a specific geographic target.
- C. Streamline the vendor certification process to increase and diversify the pool of vendors.
- D. Incentivize and establish goals for a minimum percent of contracts that must be awarded to people of color, women, and non-profits.

- E. Give preference to a collaboration of vendors and avoid sole-source contracts.
- F. Use general services agreements for common work tools such as software as a services (SAAS), IT purchases (e.g., desktops for government staff), or internet or mobile phone service.
- G. Require government procurement departments to directly consult with the agency staff who are the subject matters experts on how the services and/or systems being purchased will be used before procurements decisions are made.
- H. Ensure procurement departments are required to gather and incorporate input from management, operations, policy/program, and line staff for any Requests for Information (RFI), Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI), Request for Proposal (RFP) or contract requirements before being finalized.
- I. Revise contract requirements to hold vendors more accountable to achieve state and local government agencies desired outcomes.
- J. Tie payment to vendors to outcomes desired, not just delivery of the work.
- K. Require in all IT contracts that a human-centered design approach is part of all phases of a project.

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