

Courageous Imperatives for Human Services

Reducing Barriers for Families: Achieving Efficiency, Quality Customer Experience, and Confidence in Public Benefit Programs

APHSA's Transition Recommendations for the Administration and Congress



The following is part of APHSA's series, *Courageous Imperatives for Human Services*, which provides recommendations to the incoming Administration and Congress to help develop strategies that unlock the potential of human services. To learn more about this series and how we can work together to create a country where everyone thrives, visit our [Election Transition Recommendations page](#).



Courageous Imperative #6: Enhance human services benefit program integrity, administrative efficiency, and customer experience through cross-program policy flexibility and alignment, technology-enabled innovation, and the integration of human-centered design principles into benefits delivery.

Outcomes

1. Improve public trust in government through quality customer service and modern, user friendly technology:

Modern technology simplifies benefit applications and verifications, which generates time- and effort- savings for both applicants and administrators by speeding up application processing and improving accuracy.^{1,2,3} Updated technology and data infrastructure also presents new solutions to pervasive agency workforce capacity challenges. Ultimately, user-friendly technology development and maintenance practices enable agencies to align their service delivery across programs, creating a more coordinated and efficient experience for the public.

2. Strengthen customer experience and digital security through enhanced program design and delivery:

Adopting best practices in digital identity management enhances public access to secure online portals and benefit delivery mechanisms, such as Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) systems, while reducing inaccuracies and ensuring a more accessible and secure experience for users.

Why It Matters

The American public expects the same level of excellence in service delivery from its government as they experience from the private sector. There is proof that the American public's confidence in government is directly tied to its ability to deliver safe, secure, and modern technology systems that work seamlessly and reliably.⁴ When government services are outdated or glitchy, public confidence erodes, making it harder for individuals and businesses to engage effectively with programs designed to support them.

Federally authorized public benefit programs provide services to millions of Americans each year with major programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) providing more than 40 million families each month with grocery support; Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) providing essential preventative health coverage to over 90 million people; and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) helping new families thrive through pregnancy, early parenthood, and continued caregiving for young children.^{5,6,7}

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Efficient and reliable benefits delivery systems reduce barriers for families seeking assistance, enabling them to focus on contributing to their local economies. Medicaid, for example, prevents costly emergency

care by providing access to preventive services, ultimately saving taxpayer dollars. SNAP strengthens families and supports local businesses—research has estimated a multiplier of SNAP benefits on U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 1.54 during a slowing economy, meaning that every \$1 billion in SNAP benefits increases the GDP by \$1.54 billion.⁸ Counterpart programs like the WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program inject tens of millions of dollars into the farming economy.

Administrative burdens—complex procedures and requirements—disproportionately impact working families and families with young children, older adults, people living in rural communities, people of color, and other underserved groups by creating unnecessary barriers to accessing essential services. Research demonstrates that these bureaucratic inefficiencies waste taxpayer dollars and reduce the effectiveness of government programs, as fewer eligible individuals can participate.⁹ In early 2024, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified significant delays in SNAP application processing across most states.¹⁰ Delays in SNAP application processing force families to stretch their grocery budgets to the breaking point, leaving them unable to purchase enough food to keep their families fed and healthy. In Medicaid, the ending of pandemic-era continuous enrollment policies in 2023 led to increased application backlogs and delayed services in many states. This process, known as “Medicaid unwinding,” resulted in over 12 million people being disenrolled, contributing to system strains and service delays, and more concerning, putting the health and well-being of Americans at risk. By cutting red tape and streamlining processes, the incoming Trump Administration can ensure that public programs operate more efficiently, serve their intended purpose, and uphold the values of fairness and accountability.

Despite being instrumental to individual, family, and national economic prosperity and well-being, family-supporting benefits can be complicated to administer and frustrating for participants. Programs are authorized by various federal laws and implemented by various federal departments. The fragmented design of these programs—governed by differing federal statutes and administered across multiple federal agencies—creates significant barriers and confusion for families and inefficiencies for agencies.^{11,12} This misalignment in service design and benefit delivery results in bureaucratic mazes for state and local agencies, delaying access to vital benefits for families and exacerbating inequities for those with low income. Key examples of fragmented design in government services include the complex and time-consuming processes involved in determining eligibility for programs, followed by the multi-step journey required to enroll eligible individuals and activate their benefits:

- **Eligibility Complexity:** Household income thresholds and verification requirements vary widely across federal programs, forcing families to navigate conflicting criteria and correlates with increased errors for program administration. The primary causes of eligibility complexity are rooted in federal laws and regulations that have established different definitions of an eligibility unit, different timeframes for eligibility determinations and program enrollment, different rules on the treatment of assets (e.g., cars and bank accounts), different income thresholds, and variations about which income sources are included when counting income, and a wide range of verification requirements.¹³

- **Time-Intensive Processes:** Application steps often span multiple days, requiring extensive documentation and in-person interviews. Complex rules and delivery processes has resulted in states often struggling to meet application processing timeliness and payment accuracy standards. They create confusion for people seeking help, often during the most vulnerable period of their lives.

By adopting best practices from the private sector and prioritizing customer-centric service delivery, government programs can create stronger, more self-reliant communities, ultimately generating a positive economic impact for the nation.

Taking Action—Opportunities for Impact

The Trump Administration can prioritize program efficiency, quality, and customer experience of the nation’s benefit programs and take action to increase policy flexibility, alignment, and innovation across programs.



Align Policies and Increase Flexibility

Key Issues:

- Differing eligibility rules across programs, including those pertaining to income, assets, work requirements, verification, and reporting.
- Limited flexibility in program design, including federal merit staff requirements, constrain service capacity.
- Current financing models impact the capacity of agencies and trigger federal requirements and therefore impact agencies’ flexibility and ability to align program operations and service delivery for shared customers.
- Program performance measures exclude customer satisfaction metrics, focus on reporting requirements mandated at the federal level, and are not aligned across programs.

Key Opportunities:

- Streamline verification and eligibility by making consistent the disregard of subsidized income across programs such as Medicaid and SNAP, and support states to attain the best available tools across programs such as for income verification.
- Promote policy flexibilities that have proven effective at reducing administrative burden, such as allowing for extended certification periods for those with no earned income, allowing technology to support interviews and reporting, and streamlining eligibility across programs.
- Align funding models and the reporting and cost-allocation rules associated with program funding to enable seamless service delivery for customers served under multiple federal programs.
- Achieve cross-agency alignment by establishing a National Technical Assistance Center for Program Alignment and Integrity to align policies across federal programs, led by the Office of Management and Budget and guided by advisor representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Department of Labor (DOL).



Modernize Program Design and Delivery Models

Key Issues:

- The technology landscape including the increasing prevalence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly evolving, outpacing government policymaking capacity.
- State agencies face complicated and time-intensive requirements to obtain federal approval for testing policy, process, and technology innovations, and desire greater individual support for their unique programs.
- Federal rules continue to require states to report on compliance-oriented measures but leave out a focus on outcome-driven metrics and hold states accountable to unrealistic measures of program integrity.
- Disjointed cost-allocation rules hinder program alignment by restricting funds to specific programs, making it difficult to support shared resources, such as staff and technology, that could efficiently serve multiple programs and their shared customers.
- Typical decision-making processes in technology, program, and policy design often exclude end-user experiences or community voice.

Key Opportunities:

- Invest in modern technologies, including AI-powered interoperable systems, to enable states to streamline processes, reduce administrative burdens, and enhance service efficiency.
- Scale proven innovations by transitioning demonstration projects and waivers to permanent state options.
- Work with states to explore and adopt more reliable ways to measure program integrity and payment accuracy that assess program performance and incentivize innovation.
- Create an Office of Technical Assistance within FNS to support state SNAP agencies on identifying and tackling root causes of error rates.
- Require all federal programs to utilize inclusive engagement strategies that center the voices of communities served by human services programs and the end-users of government-built technology systems to ensure the right investments are made when programs are being designed, reformed, or modified.

APHSA and our members are committed to working with the Trump Administration to strengthen the nation's human services system so it continues to provide foundational support to families across the country. Through leadership, innovation, and executive action, human services programs can become an instrumental tool to attain our national priorities of health, well-being, and prosperity for all. To discuss our recommendations, please reach out to policy@aphsa.org. For media inquiries, please reach out to media@aphsa.org. Visit our [Election Transition Recommendations](#) page for additional publications.



Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2023). SNAP quality control timeliness report. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/qc/timeliness/fy23>
- 2 Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2023). Medicaid and CHIP eligibility operations and enrollment snapshot. Retrieved from <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid-and-chip-eligibility-operations-and-enrollment-snapshot/index.html>
- 3 Timeliness standards for benefit application and verification processes highlight the importance of efficiency in program delivery. For the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), federal regulations require standard applications to be processed within 30 days, with expedited service provided within 7 days for eligible households. Medicaid mandates eligibility determinations to be completed within 45 days for most applicants and 90 days for those requiring a disability determination. These benchmarks underscore the need for streamlined processes that reduce administrative burden while ensuring timely access to critical services
- 4 Moynihan, D. P., & Herd, P. (2018). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation
- 5 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Fiscal year 2023 participation data. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>
- 6 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). WIC program data for fiscal year 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/overview>
- 7 Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2023). Medicaid & CHIP enrollment data highlights: December 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/national-medicaid-chip-program-information/downloads/december-2023-medicaid-chip-enrollment-trend-snapshot.pdf>
- 8 United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2019). *The Food Assistance National Input-Output Multiplier (FANIOM) Model and Stimulus Effects of SNAP*. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=93528>
- 9 Moynihan, D. P., & Herd, P. (2018). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation
- 10 LPM News. (2024, February 21). Feds sent letters to 44 states to fix SNAP application errors and inefficiencies. Retrieved from <https://www.lpm.org/news/2024-02-21/feds-sent-letters-to-44-states-to-fix-snap-application-errors-and-inefficiencies>
- 11 Winston, P., Chien, N., Gaddes, R., & Holzwart, R. (2021). *Complex rules and barriers to self-sufficiency in safety net programs: Perspectives of working parents*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families
- 12 McDaniel, M., Karpman, M., Kenney, G. M., Hahn, H., & Pratt, E. (2022). *Customer service experiences and enrollment difficulties vary widely across safety net programs*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute
- 13 For example, household income thresholds are almost always different for SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, TANF, LIHEAP, and Child Care. Similarly, the timeframes by which applications must be processed varies by program. For SNAP, applications must be processed within 30 days and for Medicaid within 45 days for most applications and 90 days for individuals with disabilities that need a disability determination. Since LIHEAP, TANF, and Child Care are all block grants, states have flexibility in setting their application determination timeframes