



After Hurricane Gustav tore through the Louisiana and surrounding coastal regions, a record-breaking 2 million people received disaster food stamps, drastically increasing the number of previous recipients. The overwhelming need for assistance resulted in victims waiting hours and even days to receive benefits. Complicating and delaying the necessary benefits, the state was plagued by problems, overpayments, underpayments and fraud.

Delivering on the commitment to completely revamp the process and delivery of Disaster Food Stamp benefits to Louisiana citizens, the Department of Social Services launched a new online pre-registration system to expedite benefit delivery. Residents looking to avoid the hassle of applying for disaster food stamps in the immediate aftermath of a hurricane or other natural disaster now have the ability to pre-apply for benefits.

“Collecting the required income information for the Disaster Food Stamp application is easier to do before a hurricane strikes rather than after an evacuation,” said DSS Secretary Kristy Nichols. “I hope all residents who may be eligible will make pre-application for Disaster Food Stamps part of their hurricane preparation plan.”

The mission of social enterprises, including human service, social security, and workforce service agencies and their community partners, is to support citizens in their time of need. Unfortunately, many families who require help do not find it. Long lines, often at multiple offices, complicated application processes, and a lack of knowledge on available benefits and services act as barriers and deterrents, preventing families from finding the support they really need. To date, some organizations attempting to improve service have focused on reducing the complexity of the application and the use of community partners to assist in

completing the necessary forms. While certainly a step in the right direction, shorter forms and on-line form generation and submittal falls short of the vision of fundamentally changing how benefits and services are delivered to citizens.

True service delivery thought leaders are focused on implementing a dramatically different strategy underpinned by the belief that citizens should be empowered to anticipate potential needs and proactively drive their inter-

actions, and service plans. New citizen-driven self-service solutions have the potential to remove the barriers and make benefits more accessible, more quickly to those in need. Supported by innovative technology solutions, agencies, community partners and their client families can finally focus on achieving positive outcomes using a secure, online access to services across agencies and programs. It enables citizens to easily find information on programs and services, check eligibility, and conveniently apply for benefits.


that in this day and age, where more and more of these programs are aimed at the working poor, people were having to take time off from work to do this and it was just a terrible inconvenience. It was a major, major change in the way services were delivered by the city,” explained Paul Cosgrave, commissioner of the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications.

Empowering citizens to pro-actively screen and register for benefits from

Moving from In-line to On-line— Citizen-Driven Self Service

Louisiana is not alone in its mission to use technology to transform service delivery through citizen-driven solutions. New York City has also pioneered new methods and channels for service delivery and screening. A critical component of the mayor’s fight to combat poverty in the city, the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications created ACCESS NYC to consolidate the screening and application process for 21 different city, state and federal programs. The new online tool saves time and money for the agency, community partners, and most importantly, needy individuals

“By and large, we just realized that we were putting a burden on people—

income support to school lunches to disaster food stamps in the case of an emergency is the most transformational approach to human service benefit and service screening and delivery seen in decades. By extending the possibilities of client interactions from on-line fact gathering and form submittal to proactive client engagement throughout the case management lifecycle, the vision of improving outcomes for children and families in need can become a reality. 

Ernie Connon is president of Cúram Software Inc.

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(director, Oregon Department of Health and Human Services; commissioner, Maine Department of Human Services; director, Iowa Department of Human Services)

Julie Paradis, administrator, Food and Nutrition Service

Lisa Pino, deputy administrator, Food and Nutrition Service 

For more details on these and other policy issues, contact Larry Goolsby, director of legislative affairs, or see the APHSA web site at www.aphsa.org.