# Large US city simplifies health and human services for its citizens

*The IBM Cúram solution helps a large city provide better service for those who need it most*

## Overview

### The need
The government benefits systems of a large city were not connected, which created inconsistent determination and a stovepipe view of citizens and families. Citizens had to apply for benefits in person because of a lack of virtual access. Also, a largely diverse population required a multilingual solution.

### The solution
The city selected the IBM Cúram solution for a web-based benefits portal to provide a common social services platform for current and future programs and to support eligibility determination for 35 city, state and federal human service benefit programs.

### The benefits
City residents can use the self-service web portal to check their eligibility for programs, create an account and apply online. Multiple agencies can share information about clients and collaborate in ways that weren't possible before. Seven different languages are available to support population diversity.

## Better service for those who need it most

With millions of residents who call it home, one US city has an extremely large job to do to provide health and human services (HHS) benefits. Along with the difficulties of serving an immensely diverse population, the city has struggled with the internal roadblocks inherent in government.

The objective to help people has always been there, but the barriers between the numerous HHS agencies often prevented citizens from receiving as much aid as they were qualified for. Inability to share information, lack of coordination between independent HHS programs and perceived privacy issues made it difficult for the city to achieve the outcomes that the recipients of social services need.

Much of that has changed with the creation of a central HHS web portal for citizen self-service. City residents use the portal to check their eligibility for 35 city, state and federal human service benefit programs. They can also create an account, apply for programs and manage their own cases online. Designed to reach the city's diverse population, the portal provides information in seven languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Arabic and Haitian Creole.

From a simple home page, users can get information on child care, food stamps, school meals, Head Start, Medicaid, senior services, housing assistance and other programs. Using an IBM Cúram solution, the portal takes a "no wrong door" approach that screens applicants for all HHS programs, regardless of why they arrived at the site. Therefore, citizens don't need to know about a specific program in order to apply for it. A virtual caseworker function on the site helps ensure that applicant needs are evaluated holistically.

## Solution Components

- IBM® Cúram Social Program Management Platform

- IBM Cúram Income Support

- IBM Cúram Provider Management

- IBM Cúram Universal Access

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— US City CIO

Citizens are empowered like never before to play an active role in their own HHS benefits. They get the help they need more quickly—and they interact with HHS programs at their own convenience with the web interface.

## Improving lives

The people who need services most are often those who have the hardest time getting to government offices to fill out applications. The portal drastically changes that process by enabling citizens to apply for and manage social services benefits electronically. Citizens no longer need to arrange for child care or take time off work to visit a government office.

"We can prevent the client from having to run around when they're already in a bad situation," says the city's CIO for Health and Human Services.

They can enter demographic and financial data into the portal and determine which programs they might be eligible for.

"In many cases, clients don't know which programs even exist and the details of them—and they shouldn't have to," said the CIO. "Now they can get online, and the system will say 'These are the seven programs you might be eligible for.' It's a very client-centric program."

The system is designed to be user friendly, even for citizens with few computer skills. The layout is easy to navigate, and each step is clearly labeled and logically ordered. The site even helps users fill out some of the applications.

## Positive outcomes

Unlike many online HHS offerings, the portal was built to provide citizen-driven self-service. Benefits recipients can interact electronically with city agencies in meaningful ways. After users enter their eligibility data, they can manage their own queries and cases over time. Perhaps a user has married or had a child since last updating the system; that will change their status for some benefits. Users can update their own records and they can check on the status of their cases whenever they want.

The initial approach was to use an incremental modernization and transformation (IMT) strategy to completely transform the delivery of HHS programs—making the process much more client-centric—without radically altering the underlying operations and technologies.

 "We took an outside-in approach completely, because we wanted to start doing things that make the client's life better without necessarily impacting or changing the business processes within the city," the CIO noted. "Once we did that, that would create demand for the next thing, which is online applications and two-way communications—all the things that technology allows for."

The IBM Curam solution enables the city to offer citizens easier access to HHS programs without wholesale changes to existing systems in multiple agencies. The approach was to maximize existing technologies by tying them together in a new way.

"It works well because it gets your foot in the door without having to deal with all the hard stuff in government, which was internal change," the CIO noted. "The sweet spot was doing the external work that makes the client's life easier."

The CIO sees a natural progression to more activity in the future. "Eventually we'll have a regular clientele," he said. "We have about 40,000 hits per month, and that creates demand for online applications. That creates demand for multichannel integration."

Multichannel integration means clients will be able interact with government in ways that they prefer. No matter what "door" they enter through, they can get the service they need. "Right now we're saying 'no wrong door,' meaning you walk into an office for food stamps, or you can call and get information, or you can mail, or you can use the web," the CIO said.

## The next steps

This city's portal is a key part of a larger technology initiative, which represents the next step in the city's effort to transform HHS. This larger initiative focuses on integrating programs offered by numerous city HHS agencies, eliminating internal barriers and enabling agencies to share information about clients and collaborate in ways that weren't possible before.

"This is about breaking silos within HHS in order to deliver more effective and efficient services to our residents," said the CIO. "We have this extreme fragmentation for nine health and human organizations that have more than 2,000 employees and a $15 - $20-billion operational budget. There's a maximum amount of complexity in the way the systems have grown. All of the agencies' standards are around technology or data. So trying to connect the data together has been a huge technological challenge."

He said the changes are necessary to achieve better client outcomes and improve the efficiency of city HHS programs.

"We realized that in order to make significant changes in the way we deliver services to our residents, we had to change some internal government as well," the CIO said. "When we thought about changing the internals of government, it needed to be a larger umbrella that dealt with the third-party providers, the nonprofits we deal with in terms of moving data back and forth, moving business processes back and forth, to deal with the way workers within an agency handle case management. We're trying to deal with the client, the worker, the agency and the third-party provider."

## Bright future

Since the system went live, it has proven to be popular with city residents. Homepage visits totaled 2.5 million and more than half a million accounts have been created and applications submitted. The innovative web portal has also drawn wide interest from government officials, both domestic and from abroad.

"A lot of places have contacted us. We built the largest and most in-depth pre-screening eligibility tool on the planet," the CIO said. "There's a lot of interest because of this and our vision for the future, which incorporates even more integration."

Sharing data between agencies will improve the quality of interactions between those agencies and the public. Caseworkers can be more effective when they have more complete client information, and that leads to better outcomes for recipients of social services.

"It's really transforming the culture of how we interact with clients," the CIO said. "And once we link the data together, we'll all have a better idea of what policies are working, which aren't working, and how to tweak certain things."

HHS officials expect use of the portal to continue growing each year. The CIO is confident that even more citizens will benefit from the portal features and will be able to use those features to improve their lives.

## For more information

To learn more about the IBM Cúram solution, please contact your IBM representative, or visit: **ibm.com**.

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