Federal Agencies Adapting Social Safety Net to COVID-19 Epidemic

Policymakers and IT leaders are looking for ways to better support an influx of Americans facing sudden unemployment and financial need.

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IT leaders from both state-level and federal agencies discussed ongoing efforts in technology and beyond to adapt America’s social safety net to meet the sudden demands of the COVID-19 epidemic.
With large swaths of the American workforce abruptly facing job losses or reduced work hours putting a strain on current available resources, one of the first responses has been nationwide emergency funding of the Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program.

“All 53 states and territories have issued emergency provisions for SNAP, raising maximum allotments for households and families for the next two months," said Jennifer Wagner, senior policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, at a Code for America virtual conference. "This injects more than two billion dollars a month for struggling families and into the economy."

While this has provided food aid for families struck by sudden income loss, it has required adaptations to address public directives of social distancing as well as required systems to move quickly to meet the demands. As Wagner disclosed, this has involved coordinating SNAP assistance with grocery delivery services while providing assistance for parents whose children are home from school.

“They’ve accelerated pilots to allow families to order groceries online," she added. "They’ve also extended nutrition programs to families no longer receiving school lunch due to school closures.”

Despite these emergency adjustments, Wagner admitted there are still considerable strains to be addressed — particularly in light of the millions of additional Americans projected to lose their jobs amidst the COVID-19 epidemic.

“There are plenty of things we’re concerned about, too — overwhelmed call centers, waivers that may jeopardize client rights, and the fact that we haven’t received a boost to SNAP for all households. So there’s a lot more work to be done,” she said.

In discussing the scope of the challenge at hand, Leo Ribas of the Change and Innovation agency referenced the patterns seen over the course of the 2008 recession.
“We have 22 million Americans on unemployment, and if we learned anything about the great recession of the last decade, is that over the next 12 months, 7 out of the 10 of those families will end up receiving Medicaid or food assistance," he said. "The bottom line is that more families than ever before will find themselves needing to access safety net services that states manage."

While this is a forecastable pattern, Ribas noted it still presented considerable stress in light of both the existing federal workforce as well as the decline in tax revenue due to the associated recession. The other side of the equation is that states are anticipating significant drops in tax revenue as fewer people are working and spending money in the economy.

“In a sense, this is what we call a classic capacity crisis where state agencies have to manage a much larger workload with much smaller bandwidth,” he added.

One of the immediate solutions to addressing this workforce strain is to ensure that agency workers are able to manage their responsibilities as efficiently as possible through remote access.

“In Nevada, we were very lucky that we already had the technology in place and were able to move our workforce directly toward working from home … our technology is already there. So we did not disrupt our services, we just had to change our services,” said Robert Thompson, deputy administrator of the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services.

However, even with workforce efficiencies in place, policymakers emphasized that the COVID-19 epidemic will require recalibration of certain assistance requirements.

“The CARES Act and the $600 it provides every week is now moving some Nevadans over income, so they can no longer receive food assistance. So it’s a double-edged sword," Thompson said.

Tracy Patterson, senior director of the Social Safety Net at Code for America, noted that efforts in the state of California to restrict or limit access to public assistance have left residents hesitant to apply for food aid and other forms of support even during a time of unprecedented crisis.
“Looking at policies that had been passed in the past few years ... has chipped away at people’s trust in these systems to respond to them in times of need. So what we’re seeing right now is a test of trust people have in government to respond in times of need,” she said.

As a broader solution, the panelists recommended implementing process efficiencies to lessen the workload on public servants and expedite aid to families in need.

“What's interesting is the number one solution states have put in place to manage workload is that no matter how the customer is reaching the agency ... the solution is to connect the customer with the expert worker who will make the decision 7 out of 10 times rather than sending someone who will just tell them to come back later,” Ribas said.

Ribas detailed a particularly successful model debuted at an aid agency in the American southwest that focused on lessening unnecessary hours dedicated to aid applications. The result was a marked increase in process efficiency and quicker allocation of assistance to state residents who had recently lost their source of income.

“When you went and began quantifying the number of calls, visits and additional interactions, the agency was managing nearly half a million visits," he said. "When we connected applicants directly with a decision-maker, we were freeing up 300 workers who were able to process another 40,000 applicants."

Going forward, the leaders recommended that both state-level and federal agencies pay special attention to data integration and information sharing for the purpose of both expediting aid distribution and removing unnecessary steps from the process.

“We also do client tracking through the 30 or 40 days it takes to get benefits — we text people, we email, we ask if they had their interview, we send verification documents and see what was confusing. This opens up a channel of communication and real time data ... and administrators can’t make an informed decision unless they know what their client is facing. We really learn what the applicants are facing, we share that information and data with the counties, the state and with providers,” Patterson said.
The culmination of this appears to be a movement toward a more streamlined, consolidated benefits system where Americans facing newfound job loss and scarcity are not forced to re-submit information to various siloed departments and agencies.

"Through our integrated benefits initiative, we have worked on streamlining and making connections between those programs so that someone coming in tells you they lost their job, they’re losing these many hours, they’re facing these challenges, we should use that information to input across programs," Patterson said. "If you make these programs easier to understand so applicants can make easier decisions as they move through, it smooths the process for real people who are in their own personal levels of crisis … it definitely helps caseworkers when they’re facing the volume of this crisis."

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