research corner

By Ariel Kennan

Equity and Access: Ways to Reduce Administrative Burden and Center the User

From coast to coast, there are opportunities to begin to address equity in accessing and receiving government benefits. Public benefits administrators and delivery organizations, like those in San Jose and New York City, are focusing their efforts on making content about public benefits and programs accessible, easy to understand, and informed by the needs of constituent communities.

Content about public benefits and programs can be accessible by writing in plain language that people at varying levels of literacy can understand, by translating content into languages other than English, by co-creating and testing messaging with residents and other stakeholders, and by using technology tools to help manage and scale content. The Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University has sought to highlight best practices and the governments and organizations undertaking this work in our January 2022 guidebook, "Accessible Benefits Information: Reducing Administrative Burden and Improving Equitable Access through Clear Communication About Safety Net Benefits."[1]

Centering Stories From Coast to Coast: Replicable Ways to Get Started With Accessible Content

Every organization has work they can start doing today to improve the accessibility of their content.

Consider starting small with writing in plain language

If the task of overhauling all your content seems monumental, it is possible to pilot the approach and then replicate it at scale. University of Michigan Poverty Solutions[2] started with a guide to one benefit, Coronavirus Stimulus Payments,[3] and replicated the same approach for the Child Tax Credit.[4] They engaged the nonprofit design firm Civilla[5] to create the initial designs that they were able to test with residents for feedback. Through this plain-language resource, the team at Poverty Solutions showed how to quickly and effectively provide benefits

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information in a time of crisis that the team has continued to duplicate to support additional languages and frequently asked questions.

Engage your audience and center their needs

Accessible content is written to be used by the greatest number of people. Consider the audiences for your content. If possible, test the content with multiple groups to improve accessibility.

Providers[6] is a free smartphone app that lets Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program participants in any state monitor the real-time arrival and balance of their benefit allocations. Alongside their benefit balances, the Providers app's Benefits Hub gives its users aggregated, localized information about changes to benefits, other benefits users may be eligible for, and links to resources where users can learn more and take action. The team prioritizes getting feedback from the users of the app, both to learn what features its users find most helpful and to learn what additional information its users want. In addition to employing traditional user research methods (like user surveys, interviews, analysis of customer service requests, and rapid feedback mechanisms like asking, "Was this helpful?" with a thumbs up and thumbs down button), the organization hosts a closed Facebook group. In it, a few thousand people who use the app exchange information about changes to benefits and troubleshoot navigating various benefits processes together, and the Providers team uses their feedback to add information and update features.

Offer multiple languages

Translation greatly increases the accessibility of content for people who do not speak English as their first language. When your content is written in plain language, it also allows better translations. There are many ways to implement translation, including prioritizing the most used materials, creating a glossary of common words and phrases, using a contract for professional translation

services, an integrated translation application programing interface (API) for computer-translated content, or using a hybrid approach that combines these methods. The City of San Jose has invested in expanding language inclusivity in its 311 service to better support correspondence between city staff and residents by using machine learning to build a custom translation model. This allows residents to write their 311 text descriptions in their preferred language, which is then dynamically translated in near real-time to English for city staff, who can then respond in English and their response is dynamically translated back to the resident's preferred language. The 311 website uses the Google Translate API to translate the content on the page, although the website could be transitioned to the custom model in the future. They used translators for Spanish and Vietnamese to help recruit users who speak those languages in their initial service research and to validate translated content in their eventual implementation.

Use technology to manage and distribute content

For organizations or governments in the midst of a website or service redesign, it is a great time to consider a new process for creating, managing, and distributing content. When the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity[7] set out to redesign ACCESS NYC,[8] the city's public benefits information site and eligibility screener, their primary goal was to make it simpler for residents to find which benefits they may be eligible for, and start the application process. The team also sought to modernize the technology stack to support the improved public-user experience and internal operations. The team reviewed ACCESS NYC usage patterns and connected with residents, benefits navigators, and staff at government agencies to understand why people come to ACCESS NYC, the information they seek about benefits, and the challenges they face in accessing that information.

The relaunched site includes information about more than 80

programs, and eligibility screening for more than 40, all in 11 languages. As part of the redesign, the team reimagined the editorial flow by which content for ACCESS NYC is created, managed, and distributed. All benefits content now follows the same set of steps: once content is drafted and edited, it goes through reviews with plain-language experts and benefits agency liaisons, before getting final approval and undergoing translation. NYC Opportunity has a powerful content management system in place to organize and distribute content to ACCESS NYC, other benefits sites, and as open data using an API. They advise others to start small but consider the scalability and interoperability to work with other systems and scale as needed.

While information accessibility is just one part of reducing the greater administrative burdens on residents seeking benefits, we hope these examples inspire you to start reviewing and revising content, and as your organization is ready, start to use technology to further improve accessibility and publishing capacity. ▪

Reference Notes
1. *https://beeckcenter.georgetown.edu/ report/accessible-benefits-information*
2. *https://poverty.umich.edu*
3. *https://poverty.umich.edu/stimulus-checks*
4. *https://poverty.umich.edu/child-tax-credit*
5. *https://civilla.org*
6. *https://www.joinproviders.com*
7. NYC Opportunity; *https://www1.nyc.gov/ site/opportunity/index.page*
8. *https://access.nyc.gov*

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