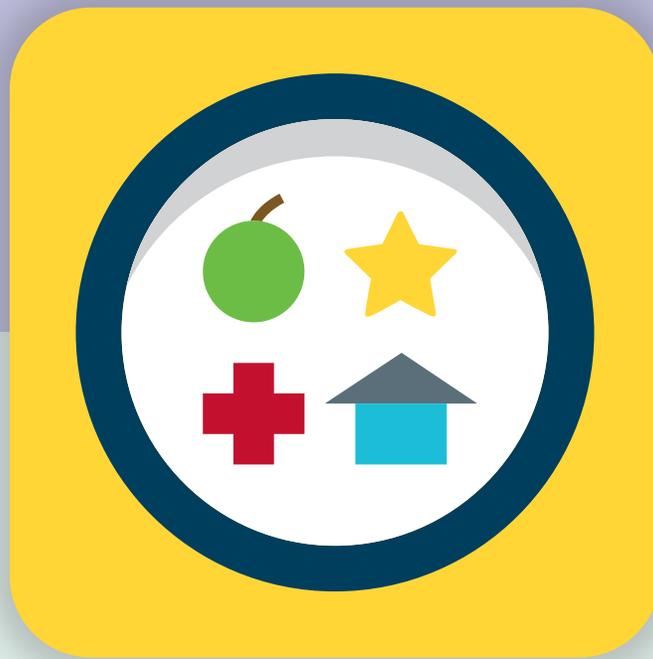


Client-Driven Solutions: *Recommendations for Improvement to ACCESS Nebraska*



BY

James A. Goddard

*Director, Economic Justice &
Health Care Access Programs*

AND

Molly McCleery, J.D.

Staff Attorney, Economic Justice Program



Introduction

Starting in 2008, Nebraska modernized the system through which low-income Nebraskans apply for and maintain public assistance. This initiative, known as ACCESS Nebraska, has had serious problems since its inception, creating barriers for clients to enroll in and maintain public assistance.

During the summer and fall of 2013, Nebraska Appleseed conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews with individuals utilizing food assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP). These focus groups and interviews took place in a number of locations across Nebraska: Lincoln, Omaha, Schuyler, Norfolk, Grand Island, North Platte, and Loup City. Participants filled out a survey, discussed their experiences, and provided recommendations for improving access to food assistance programs. Of the barriers in accessing food assistance discussed by focus group participants, some of the most significant were problems with ACCESS Nebraska, the entry point for obtaining SNAP.



This paper discusses the food program participants' experiences with ACCESS Nebraska and recommendations for administrative changes to improve the ACCESS Nebraska system.

ACCESS Nebraska – Overview

In 2008, Nebraska modernized its public benefits delivery system through the implementation of ACCESS Nebraska. ACCESS Nebraska significantly changed the way low-income Nebraskans access public assistance programs by transitioning from the traditional local office model to an online and call center-based system.

The ACCESS Nebraska model includes local offices, call centers (customer service centers), and a reliance on community partners. Community partners are organizations in the community where clients can access support of some kind, which could include a computer at a library or in-person assistance with applications at a food bank.

ACCESS Nebraska: Before and After

Before ACCESS Nebraska, individuals who wanted to apply for public assistance programs would go to a local Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (Department) office and apply for assistance with a paper application. The application would be processed, and the client would be assigned a specific caseworker. This caseworker would be available to answer the client's questions and assist the client while he or she received assistance.

With the implementation of ACCESS Nebraska, sweeping changes were put into place. This included closing some local

offices, eliminating individual caseworkers, moving to a call center system (customer service center), and a heavy reliance on technology. Now, a person can apply for assistance anywhere there is Internet access. Clients may still apply for assistance at local offices, but the offices may have limited office hours and fewer staff members.

At the beginning of the application process, clients are temporarily assigned caseworkers to process their applications. After eligibility is determined, individuals with special circumstances, such as those who are elderly or disabled, may continue to have an assigned caseworker. However, most clients no longer have an assigned caseworker and must call a customer service center for further assistance with their case. Clients are able to mail, fax, and email supporting documents, or submit them at a local office.

Moreover, community partners are heavily relied upon to help clients navigate the process. Each community partner offers a different level of support; some offering just a computer or fax machine, others helping clients apply for assistance and answering questions. There are Community Support Specialists (CSS) affiliated with the Department available to work with community partners to explain policy changes and provide other assistance, although they are limited in number.

The Client Experience with ACCESS Nebraska

Although a modernized system has the potential to create efficiencies, serious concerns exist regarding the effectiveness of ACCESS Nebraska. In the years since the system began, clients, advocates, and providers have expressed alarm regarding the challenges clients have faced in interacting with the system.

Specifically, clients have shared stories about difficulties in navigating the system due to issues with the phone system, lost documents, and challenges related to obtaining in-person assistance for questions or needs related to benefits. Participants in the focus groups and interviews also shared these stories:

Focus Group Stories

Need for In-Person Assistance

- Kathyⁱ from Grand Island: “I spent an hour and a half on hold...Filling out the papers is not so hard. It’s waiting on the phone that takes forever.” She continued, “They need to get workers back in these buildings and cut off this ACCESS stuff...they need to go back to the real people.”
- Allen from Lincoln: “If you don’t know what you’re doing, or looking for, it’s really hard to navigate.”
- Sherry from Norfolk: “Applying for them [SNAP benefits] is not very easy because now we have the ACCESS Nebraska line, and you have to wait on hold... it’s kind of a hassle. It was better when we just used to have the Health and Human Service office here that we have now but everyone just had a caseworker to talk to. It was one-on-one. You could always call them. You don’t have to wait on hold for an hour.”
- Denise from North Platte described having to wait for a very long time on the phone just to make a small change in her case information—correcting her son’s birthdate, which a caseworker had entered incorrectly.

Issues with sending or receiving documents

- Mary from Norfolk needed to verify her employment. Despite requesting the paperwork twice through ACCESS Nebraska, she never received it in the mail. After calling ACCESS Nebraska to ask about the paperwork, Mary could only resolve the situation by going to the local office and filling out the paperwork there and then mailing it to Lincoln for processing.
- Denise from North Platte had to apply for SNAP twice. The first time she applied, she went to a local office and filled out and faxed a paper application. Her application was lost in the system, and she had to apply again.

Difficulties in fulfilling client responsibilities

- In describing the recertification process, Sherry from Norfolk said, “They sent me a letter saying I had to call for an interview, but I was on hold until like 11:30, so then they disqualified me, and I had to reapply because my phone call was not in by 10:00...my phone call was in by like 10:00, but I had to wait on hold forever.”
- Mary from Norfolk explained a situation when she had a SNAP interview set for Friday morning but received written notice of the interview in the mail on Friday afternoon after the interview was to have taken place.

Nebraska Legislature Responses

In response to problems with the ACCESS Nebraska system, there have been nine legislative hearings on bills or resolutions related to aspects of the system. State laws have been passed to address deficiencies but problems remain. In 2013, legislators ordered an audit of the system, and an audit report was published in December 2013.ⁱⁱ The report found that the system “has failed dramatically to reach key, client-service goals set by the department [DHHS].”ⁱⁱⁱ

Specifically, the audit report found that clients experienced significant issues with the phone system. The report found that clients faced high call wait times and high percentages of

incoming calls ringing busy, and it was not uncommon for clients to face wait times of over forty-five minutes.^{iv} Moreover, there were high rates of call abandonment, with nearly one-third of clients abandoning their calls.^v

The report also states: “The extremely high busy signal rate generally, and likelihood that family eligibility cases will experience very high wait times, specifically, paint a picture of frustration before many clients even make contact with the program.”^{vi}

Additionally, the audit indicated that there is not a clear and public method for clients to ask for in-person assistance.^{vii}

The audit found:

- High call wait times
- High rates of incoming calls ringing busy
- High rates of call abandonment
- No clear and public method for clients to ask for in-person assistance.

Recommended Changes

Many focus group participants indicated that performance problems within the ACCESS Nebraska system have created barriers to accessing nutrition programs like SNAP. Based on their experiences, the information from the audit and the efforts that have been made to date, we make the following recommendations regarding the ACCESS Nebraska system:

- ***Ensure clients have easy access to in-person assistance***
- ***Ensure the system and eligibility requirements are streamlined and efficient***
- ***Ensure ACCESS Nebraska staff have the necessary resources and skills***

Ensure clients have easy access to in-person assistance

A phone call may be a good option for many clients, but many participants in the focus groups discussed problems with getting through the phone system and a desire to speak to someone in person. Although the Department has underscored that people can always access face-to-face assistance, the process by which such a request is made and under what circumstances it will be granted is unclear. Moreover, access to local office staff can be difficult, since they are tasked with many responsibilities and may not be

easily available for in-person assistance. Additionally, Community Support Specialists (CSS) are too few in number and may not be able to meet community partner demand.

The Department can address these issues in different ways. First, *create and promote a clear process whereby clients may request in-person assistance, as well as a caseworker for those with special circumstances*. An explanation of this process should be provided to all clients, including a description of the basis upon which requests for in-person assistance are granted or denied.

Second, *maximize the potential of community partners to provide in-person assistance through more formalized agreements*. These agreements could allow greater utilization of community partner resources, permit greater access to client cases, and lay out alternative means of communication with the Department, such as a specific phone or email contact for partners. Finally, *increase the number and scope of work of Community Support Specialists (CSS)*. Additional CSS workers could operate in more locations in the state and could answer questions about both policy and individual cases. A greater number of CSS workers could also potentially function as system advocates, a role that used to exist to help clients resolve questions or disputes.

(continued)

Recommended Changes

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Ensure the system and eligibility requirements are streamlined and efficient

A great deal of information is needed to determine eligibility for a program. However, some eligibility verification requirements could be streamlined to make the system more efficient for clients and workers.

Less paperwork would mean fewer client questions, fewer client calls, and less stress on the ACCESS System in general, which would mean clients would have greater access to a functional system.

With this in mind, the Department should streamline the application and verification processes to make things more efficient. This can include sharing client information automatically across programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, so that the same

information is not requested or processed twice. This could also include renewing multiple benefit programs simultaneously to the greatest extent possible. These are only a couple examples of how the system could be streamlined to be more efficient for clients.

Ensure ACCESS Nebraska staff have the necessary resources and skills

Many of the difficulties clients face with the ACCESS Nebraska system are likely caused, at least in part, by an insufficient level of staff and technology that needs to be updated. The Department should seek to increase staffing to sufficient levels to better manage caseloads and work tasks, as well as to provide additional support and trainings to employees. Moreover, upgraded technology could make the entire system more effective.

Conclusion

The ACCESS Nebraska system can be effective and efficient for clients. But steps must be taken to address the concerns and

barriers Nebraskans across the state have faced. The steps in this paper could help get the system moving in a better direction.

i) Names have been changed.

ii) See Legislative Performance Audit, "Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services: Efficiency and Effectiveness of ACCESS Nebraska," Dec. 18, 2013, available at http://nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/reports/audit/hhs_access2013.pdf *Id.* at p. 1.

iii) *Id.*

iv) *Id.* at p. 16

v) *Id.* at p. 15

vi) *Id.*

vii) *Id.* at p. 8



Nebraska Appleseed is a nonprofit organization that fights for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. We take a systemic approach to complex issues - such as child welfare, immigration policy, affordable health care, and poverty -

and we take our work wherever we believe we can do the most good, whether that's at the courthouse, in the statehouse, or in the community. We would like to thank the ConAgra Foundation for its support, which allowed this project to happen.

941 O Street, Suite 920 | Lincoln, NE 68508 | 402.438.8853 | 402.438.0263 Fax | info@neappleseed.org

www.NeAppleseed.org