Executive Summary:

Modernizing Access to the Safety Net
Lessons from The Rockefeller Foundation's Grantees during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Written by:

Kevin O'Neil, Director for New Frontiers at The Rockefeller Foundation
Chukwudi Onike, Senior Program Associate for New Frontiers at The Rockefeller Foundation
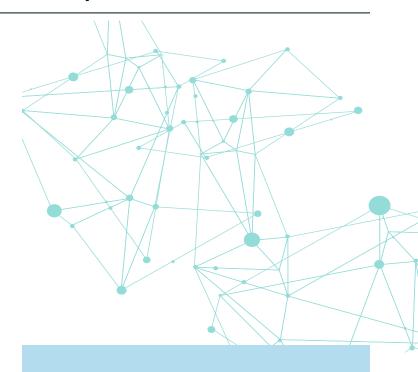
The
ROCKEFELLER
FOUNDATION

Executive Summary: Modernizing Access to the Safety Net

The federally-funded social safety net is meant not only to give people in need the means to get by, but also to pave the path to a healthier, happier future. Amid debates over how generous assistance should be, it is easy to lose sight of an important fact: benefits can help people only if they can actually access that help when they most need it. Confusing, frustrating or broken systems all too often turn people away. An estimated 13 million people living in poverty are not connected to any of the major federally-funded safety net benefits and over $60 billion in benefits are estimated to go unclaimed every year.

The Covid-19 pandemic plunged millions of people into unemployment and food or housing insecurity in 2020. The pandemic exposed not only how important access to the safety net truly is, but also how weak that access can be. Federally-funded aid bolstered by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was so effective that it actually lowered the poverty rate through the summer of 2020. Nevertheless, millions of people got help too late or not at all, as offices shut down and websites failed under the weight of unprecedented demand.

Innovators inside and outside of government are working to improve access to the social safety net using data, technology, and design. They are replacing time-consuming, rigid, impersonal, and confusing processes with an active safety net that reaches out to offer help when it is needed, provides multiple ways to seek help, and responds to individual needs.

EXAMPLES IN ACTION

In this report, we highlight innovations carried out by The Rockefeller Foundation's Data and Technology grantees from 2018 to 2021, including extraordinary efforts to meet the challenges of the pandemic.

Those grantees are:

- Benefits Data Trust
- Code for America
- Georgetown University's Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation
- U.S. Digital Response
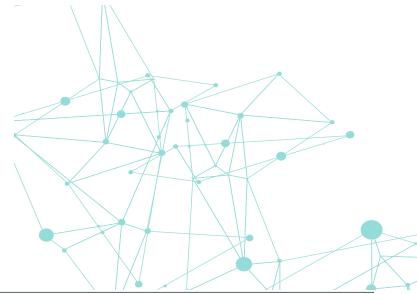- The Digital Innovation and Governance Initiative at New America

In 2020, these projects secured more than $200 million in benefits for close to 100,000 people across at least 36 states, and helped millions more through policy change, training, and guidance.

Nine critical lessons emerge from their work with state, local, and federal government agencies and their social sector allies.

The federal government creates the rules, performance measures, informal and formal norms, and expectations that govern the safety net. The Biden Administration has a transformative opportunity to help people and rebuild faith in government by improving access to the safety net. A cross-agency federal task force could be a first step toward implementing these lessons:

1. Optimize for access. Benefits exist to help people. Universal access should be a primary goal and the right indicators should be used to measure progress toward it.

2. Policy is primary. Decisions on administrative requirements (such as whether to require a person to apply in-person) have profound impacts on the effectiveness and efficiency of the safety net.

3. Human-centered design should be standard. Employing user research and feedback to continuously improve processes makes the safety net stronger in good times, and more resilient during crises.

4. Good tech empowers, not replaces, social service providers and eligibility workers. Automating paperwork can free up human professionals and volunteers to do what they do best: solve people's problems.

5. The safety net can reach out. Safety net leaders are using data and machine learning to identify people in need and proactively offer help—sometimes before they are in crisis.

6. Coordinating data use offers big returns. The safety net is a patchwork—but common systems and sharing data securely can allow formerly siloed programs to function as one.

7. Use data to create a holistic view of needs and impact. Better data can show the connections between health, housing, and nutrition, help test what works for which people, and document long-term payoffs, especially when it comes to social risk factors for health.

8. Change the way governments buy and build technology. Better safety net systems start with modern software and system development practices—and they don't cost more than old, failed methods.

9. National strategies are needed. The 56 states and territories face common challenges in administering federal benefits. Common approaches and tools, especially open-source solutions, can speed the pace of innovation while respecting local differences.

Executive Summary: Modernizing Access to the Safety Net

The field of benefits access is at an inflection point, where a critical mass of early adopters of human-centered design and technology is at work across the country, but their efforts have not yet reached every program and agency. The challenge now is to scale up and spread their efforts nationwide. The Rockefeller Foundation is excited to see these leaders pulling together in groups, such as the Social Safety Net Benefits Research Group and the Digital Benefits Coalition, in order to share insights, coordinate efforts, and advocate for better policies.

We hope they will find strong and growing support in doing so. Changing what benefits are available, how they are structured, and who is eligible are all important ways to make the safety net more effective at reducing misery, insecurity, and inequality, while promoting opportunity. In addition, making access to the safety net more universal and more dignified also has substantial impact, unlocking billions of dollars and impacting millions of lives.