

Digital Benefits

Open source digital infrastructure facilitates faster, smarter and safer public administration

Public benefits protect our families, communities, and economy. The pandemic has exposed critical weaknesses in the systems that governments use to administer these programs. Existing benefits infrastructure is inefficient and unnecessarily burdensome to eligible recipients. As Congress pursues a long-term recovery effort in response to the pandemic, policymakers should dedicate a small fraction of that funding to building better systems and open source digital infrastructure to facilitate faster, smarter, safer public administration. Doing so will save time and money, prevent improper payments, prepare us for future public health crises, and help rebuild trust between people and public institutions.

When technology fails, government programs fail

Many programs in the U.S. are administered using aging digital infrastructure. If underlying government technology systems fail, programs become inaccessible, inefficient, and ineffective. Policymakers need a renewed focus on the delivery mechanisms of the programs that allow states and the federal government to serve families. Technology alone is not enough to ensure the effective administration of public programs, but broken technology is enough to prevent it.

Traditional tech modernization efforts are antiquated

The U.S. government spends over [\\$90 billion](#) on IT each year. These funds are mostly used to buy proprietary systems that service individual programs. This process leads federal agencies and states to repeatedly buy duplicative digital solutions that accomplish tasks like identity management and benefits eligibility for a range of specific programs rather than cooperating and sharing successful software across government agencies and state borders.

Covid-19 is pushing broken systems to the brink

The technology we use to disburse payments and validate eligibility for public benefits failed during the pandemic. Seventy million Americans waited weeks to receive paper stimulus checks after the passage of the CARES Act. Over 250,000 Americans endured 70+ day delays before their unemployment insurance checks arrived. Newly jobless workers encountered jammed phone lines, requests for faxed or physical copies of forms, and overwhelmed websites when attempting to validate their identities and eligibility for benefits. These broken systems disproportionately affect marginalized populations. They waste our time, prevent eligible citizens from accessing benefits, and are more costly to taxpayers. Americans deserve better.

Develop cost effective and more efficient digital systems for the public sector

A better approach would be to develop shared, interoperable infrastructure using open source software and design principles.

This strategy would allow individuals the option to identify themselves digitally and validate their eligibility for benefits with any government agency at a fraction of the current cost. U.S. government agencies could save billions in development and maintenance costs if they adopted this approach across the public sector, but federal agencies and state governments are failing to seize this basic opportunity for collaboration and savings.

Good tech relies on solid policy and processes

One of the most effective, efficient routes to improving public benefits distribution is creating better digital infrastructure. Other democracies have built digital systems that successfully cut costs, reduce waste, and improve public service performance. On their own, digital systems cannot remedy bad policies or poorly designed processes. However, they can dramatically streamline the work of agencies that serve as custodians of public funds and individuals who need help.

If Congress **allocated even 1% of the money wasted** on improper payments to building high quality digital solutions, it could prevent waste orders of magnitude greater than the investment required to solve these problems.

The IRS **mailed \$1.5 billion in stimulus checks to dead Americans**, and **\$8 billion** of unemployment funds have been **lost to cybercriminals**. Those figures are only a small fraction of the \$175 billion in improper payments that the U.S. government makes each year.

Citizens in India and Estonia **can identify themselves digitally**, quickly determine their eligibility for services, and rapidly access benefits. The United States needs to leverage similar systems to improve public sector performance.

Supported by The Rockefeller Foundation, the Digital Benefits Coalition is a group of organizations who are united in the belief that open source digital infrastructure can be harnessed to facilitate faster, smarter, safer public administration. Improving antiquated benefits systems will save time and money, enhance access to benefits while preventing improper payments, prepare us for future public health crises, and help rebuild trust between people and public institutions.



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