

Benefits Project Pilot  
Frontline Staff Survey Feedback Summary  
February 23, 2023

Agencies participating in the Benefits Project Pilot were asked to have their frontline staff assist program participants/clients with utilizing the benefits calculator. A survey was administered to these frontline staff to provide feedback on their experience with assisting users with utilizing the calculator and navigating the public benefits system. The document summarizes feedback obtained from nine frontline staff. Six program participants/clients were given this survey, in place of the participant survey so the summary will include their responses as well.

***Applying and Navigating Public Benefits System***

There were 2 survey questions related to applying and navigating public benefits system.

-Prior to participating in the Benefits Project Pilot, did you help your clients/program participants apply for public benefits and/or navigate the public assistance system?  
- If you answered “Yes”, tell us what challenges you had when helping clients/programs participants apply for benefits. Also tell us what helped make the process easier to navigate or apply for benefits.

**Six frontline staff helped clients/program participants apply for public benefits and/or navigate the public benefits system prior to participating in the Benefits Project.** Some challenges they had with assisting in this way include:

- Inadequate paperwork
- Missed appointments
- Denial and frustration
- Slow decision time
- Complicated and burdensome system, and people having understandable concerns about how a paycheck would impact their income
- Difficult to tell whether clients/program participants qualify
- Illustrating the breadth of services they may qualify for, the fiscal limitations/qualifications and documentation to prove income

There was one comment noting what helped make the process easier to navigate or apply for benefits which was: “being able to physically walk through questions and view for program participants/clients what the output is increased awareness and understanding of services”.

It is suggested that a follow-up focus group with frontline staff occur to delve deeper into understanding these challenges and ways to address them, if they still exist today. Solutions to these challenges can be explored in the next project phase. The 2 survey questions asked of frontline staff (in this section) can be posed to program participants/clients in a follow-up focus group.

### ***Experiencing a Benefits Cliff***

There was 1 question centered around the experiencing a “benefits cliff”:

-If you had or have clients/program participants who experienced a “benefits cliff”, please tell us what caused them to have this experience.

Definition of Benefits Cliff: The perception of a “Loss” sometimes happens when a person receiving government assistance (e.g. cash assistance/SNAP) is no longer eligible for this benefit due to increased income in a household. This is sometimes defined as a “Benefits Cliff”. When this happens, an individual has to use his or her income (wages, social security, etc.) to pay bills directly and meet household expenses. This can be a challenge.

**Five frontline staff noted instances of a benefits cliff, which were:**

- Being paid while attending school.
- Because housing assistance is income based, when a participant’s income increases, their rent share also increases, which could result in a cliff.
- Some people believe that social security will automatically cut benefits once they work more than 20 hours/wk. There is a lack of knowledge on ways to reduce the burden and a need for benefits counselors.
- Showing program participants having multiple jobs and a lot of income due to identity theft. The participants are assisted with connecting to LawNY.
- In the Vocational Education program, program participants/clients were able to see how their future pay increase after graduation directly impacted current supports and worked with a financial planner to budget for the pay difference.

Overall, this question may be better asked in an interview or focus group style in order to probe for a more in depth understanding of the answers provided.

### ***Missing or Limited Community Resources***

There was 1 question that asked about missing, limited or needed community resources:

-What community resources, if any, are needed, missing or are in limited supply to help your clients/program participants meet their household living expenses?

**Five frontline staff shared their thoughts about community resources that were missing, limited or needed.** The toolkit used for the Pilot will be revised to incorporate feedback around community resources provided by frontline staff. Some comments shared include:

- Transportation in rural areas and for when RTS may be unsafe
- Childcare
- More resources for undocumented clients
- Pantries for items not covered by SNAP or when a person is found ineligible for items (e.g. diapers, hygiene needs, etc.)
- Benefits advisors for expert support
- Peer support to assist with system navigation and sharing tricks/tips
- Utilities/managing the high cost of utilities (a persistent issue)

- Back rent, rental assistance, availability of quality affordable housing

**Three out of the 6 program participants/clients given this survey shared their thoughts about community resources that were missing, limited or needed, which were:**

- Transportation
- Jobs
- Alcohol
- Abuse treatment
- Directions on where and how to start receiving benefits, and a way to forward the information to make the process easier

### ***Experience with Assisting Users with the Benefits Calculator***

There were 4 questions asking to reflect on his/her experience with helping clients/program participants use the benefits calculator:

-Please rate your experience with guiding clients/program participants through the benefits calculator, Your Benefits Now.

-Please tell us what could have improved your experience as a provider.

-How often do you see yourself using the benefits calculator, YourBenefitsNow, in the future? Please feel free to tell us why or explain your answer.

**Responses were nearly split --- 4 rated it fair/okay and 5 rated it good/great --- as to rating the experience with guiding program participants/clients through the benefits calculator.**<sup>1</sup> The majority of frontline staff (7) shared that they would use the calculator a few times a month or 1-2 times a month.<sup>2</sup> One frontline staff shared that he/she will “never” use the tool because it would not be in his/her job duties. There was a frontline staff who shared that the tool would be incorporated as a screening tool in conjunction with the agency’s employee resources and supports. Doing this would eliminate using agency funds to support staff with emergent needs. Another frontline staff noted that he/she would use the tool when a program participant/client contemplated accepting a job or wanted to see what the impact of taking a job would be. The following comments below provided by frontline staff will be addressed in the next phase of the project. Comments regarding how to improve the experience include:

- Improve language accessibility – offer in Spanish, simplify the language, account for lower literacy level, account for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Verify the accuracy with Monroe County Department of Human Services (MCDHS) to ensure calculations are accurate<sup>3</sup>
- Add an option for users to live in congregate settings such as shelters or supported/supervised housing

<sup>1</sup> For analysis purposes, rating responses were collapsed into two categories: “okay” and “fair” were combined and “good” and “great” were combined.

<sup>2</sup> There were 4 rating options provided for the question “How often do you see yourself using the benefits calculator, YourBenefitsNow, in the future?”, which were: “never”, “1-2 tiems a month”, “a few times a month”, “weekly” and “multiple times a week”.

<sup>3</sup> Ensure a person who receives SSI are shown to be eligible for Medicaid, HEAP and SNAP. Add congregate settings as a living option and map algorithm to reflect benefits eligibility and amounts for those living in these settings.

- Be able to link to provider and submit benefits applications as there were participants with general feelings of frustrations and anxiety knowing that they had to “redo” the application to actually apply for benefits
- Ensure the ability to go the next page after entering information

**Five out of the 6 program participants/clients given this survey rated their experience with “guiding program participants/clients through the benefits calculator as “good/great”.** Like frontline staff, all of the program participants/clients see themselves using the tool a few times a month or 1-2 times a month.

***Using the Toolkit***

The toolkit is a companion document for frontline staff and clients/program participants to refer to for: 1) description of and links to applying for the 8 public benefits that make up the tool and 2) links to other available community resources should a client/program participant be ineligible for a benefit and desire to know of other available resources.

There were 2 questions related to the toolkit:

- Did you use the toolkit during any part of the Pilot?
- What are your thoughts on the toolkit? How can it be improved?

**Six frontline staff shared that they used the toolkit.** Comments around the toolkit and how to improve the toolkit include:

**Thoughts on the Toolkit**

- Easy process
- Families responded excitedly about it  
Access to updated electronic version will be crucial
- Do a lot of good for people in the future

**Thoughts on How to Improve the Toolkit**

- Streamline the toolkit so that information is easier to access

**Ten program participants/clients who completed either the participant surveyd or the frontline staff survey shared that they used the toolkit.** Their feedback included the following:

**Thoughts on the Toolkit**

- Found it informative
- Lauded it (e.g. easy to use, amazing, perfectly made)
- Felt neutral about it (e.g. it was ok)
- Unaware of it

**Thoughts on How to Improve the Toolkit**

- Have it available in other languages (e.g. Spanish)
- Make it user-friendly

A few comments provided by frontline staff and program participants/clients about the benefits calculator and the toolkit mirrored suggestions made at community stakeholder meetings (e.g. have them available in other languages). Feedback provided about the calculator and toolkit will be incorporated in the revision of both items.