

**TESTIMONY OF AMANDA RENTERIA, CEO OF CODE FOR AMERICA
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RULES, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ROUNDTABLE EXAMINING HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP COMBAT THE HUNGER
CRISIS
JUNE 16, 2021**

Opening

Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, members of the Committee, and all the staff who have helped put this conversation together, thank you. I appreciate the invitation to be here on behalf of the entire team at Code for America, as well as our broader network. We are honored and inspired to be part of such an important conversation about eradicating hunger and view this mission as an important first step to truly unleashing the full potential of our systems and our society. My remarks today will take a broad view of the work we are doing to eradicate hunger directly through food assistance programs nationally and locally, and holistically by improving programs that increase access to tax benefits for low-income communities and removing barriers through automatic record clearance.

Background

Let me begin with the history of Code for America, a nonprofit organization that partners with government and community organizations to improve people's lives at scale. We started more than a decade ago with the simple notion of helping to create "a government by the people, for the people, in the digital age." In our vision, government services—especially services meant to help low-income populations—should be as good as those we are accustomed to in the private sector. They should be simple, easy to use, and fully accessible; outcomes should be measurably better; better can and should cost less; and perhaps most importantly, we believe that government services can and must treat everyone with respect and dignity.

To do this effectively, we center the people we serve as our starting point. We sit at kitchen tables, in living rooms, and in long lines at government agencies to learn how real people interact with government systems. For ten years, we have been listening, researching, and asking questions about people's basic needs, the challenges they encounter, and the barriers they face when accessing government services. From those deep conversations and further research and analysis, we design technology, processes, and policies with administrators and caseworkers on the front lines to create systems that work. Finally, we analyze the data in real time and measure outcomes.

Our team of data scientists, engineers, researchers, product managers, and client experts have been working with hundreds of governments, sharing what we learn, teaching them human-centered practices, and helping measure and understand data to iterate, and continuously improve services. Our end goal is government adoption because we hope to fully modernize systems in preparation for the challenges ahead due to a more volatile, ever changing environment and the opportunities that await in a more tech-savvy, diverse, and socially conscious generation.

Code for America has always known that government and technology are the two best levers we have to change people’s lives at scale. As the country resets post-pandemic, we believe we have a once in a generation moment to partner with all of you to finally create “a government by the people, for the people in the digital age.” This kind of government has the potential to end hunger and truly unleash the country’s full potential.

Five Case Studies for Technology in Government

#1 Food Assistance in the Digital Age

Our work first started in food assistance programs in California in 2013 when we examined the high SNAP participation gap in California, where less than two-thirds of eligible people were receiving food assistance—landing the state’s enrollment rate in the bottom five nationally. The team found that the online application process was a huge barrier for people seeking help; applicants had to answer 200 questions over 55 unique screens, couldn’t save their progress or go back a page, and many of these questions were redundant to those they would later be asked again in an interview. In partnership with county government, we created a “digital assister” that guided users through each step of the eligibility and enrollment process. Utilizing our principals and practices of digital delivery, we guided the state to a more efficient, empathetic, and equitable system.

	Before CfA ...	After CfA ...
1 Discovering + Applying for benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to find out about benefits (word of mouth, flyers, or complicated websites) • Stigma and myths lead people to believe benefits aren’t for them or could be harmful for them • Clunky website (no “apply” button, “help” link broken) with error-inducing, bureaucratic language • Paperwork must be brought in-person, mailed, or faxed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital outreach (SEO, targeted social media, cross-enrollment opportunities) to find them so they don’t have to find us • Clear information about what SNAP is and why it’s helpful, in commonly understood language • Online, mobile-friendly application, with searchable, shareable content • Simple process, with clear guidance, reminders, and live chat and SMS/email support
2 Eligibility notification + Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weeks (or longer) spent wondering about outcome • Notices filled with legal jargon • Notified by postal mail (may miss the notification altogether) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast-track clients to same-day service whenever possible, and proactively notify about remaining steps needed to complete • Plain language; clear if action is needed • Notified via preferred method of communication like SMS, email
3 Using + Maintaining benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional onboarding hurdles (e.g., signing & returning paper documents) • Have to submit reports by snail mail every 6 months; may not be aware, forget, or miss the deadline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to get benefits quickly and start using benefits right away • When reporting is necessary, also notified by SMS & email, with clear, simple steps • Pre-filled report to send back by phone

In the first year, we assisted 1,000 SNAP applications in one county and then started to expand across the state, focusing on remote populations in the far north, students along the Central Coast, and families in the Central Valley. Partner counties saw online applications grow four times faster than other counties (44% vs. 11% year over year) and total applications grew 10% year over year while they

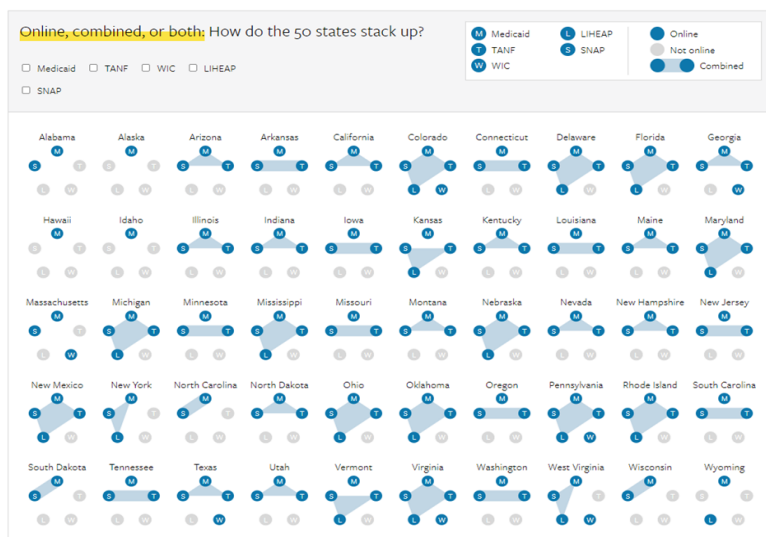
decreased in other counties. Based on this success, the California Department of Social Services contracted with Code for America to bring GetCalFresh to the entire state in 2019. As of today, GetCalFresh has now assisted with over 2.5 million applications and 250,000 renewals, helping over 6 million people and generating \$5.9 billion in GDP for the state of California.

#2 Integrated Benefits in the Digital Age

GetCalFresh has demonstrated the power of human-centered design in enrollment and retention within one benefits program. As the work evolved, it became clear that if a person is eligible for one safety net benefit, it's likely they are eligible for another. However, getting those benefits requires filling out multiple applications, with lots of duplicative questions, and sometimes traveling to multiple government offices. This isn't just a frustrating experience for the person, it creates mountains of extra paperwork, backlogs, and redundancies for government.

To better understand the national potential for integration, Code for America developed the first fifty-state view of the safety net across the nation using three of the most valuable indicators of whether a system is accessible and usable:

- **Online:** For many users, mail is frequently unreliable, business hours conflict with their work schedules, and field offices are located far from home. Making applications easily available online is one of the most important first steps in meeting users where they are.
- **Easy to complete:** Whether a benefits application is online does not say much about the application itself. One of the best measures of how an application functions is time to completion, which indicates the amount of friction in the user experience, like registration challenges, complexity, and form design. It is important for websites to be mobile-friendly, as one in four low-income households relies on a smartphone for internet access. Other barriers include requiring login and/or Remote ID Proofing, as an estimated 35-54 million Americans don't have enough credit history to be able to verify their identity online.
- **Combined:** If someone is income-eligible for one program, there is a strong chance they are eligible for others, and there is usually considerable overlap in application questions across programs. Combining and streamlining applications is a win-win: for applicants, it raises awareness of other programs and creates a single, simplified experience; for states, it can reduce demands on limited caseworker time and improve cross-agency coordination.



Since then, we have been working with states to deploy human-centered technology and integration tools. A few exciting examples in this effort are:

- **Pennsylvania:** Our team is working to improve outcomes on SNAP enrollment with data analytics, qualitative research, and service design.
- **Minnesota:** We have partnered with the state to build a single, streamlined online application for nine different benefits programs that can be completed in as little as 12 minutes, which is currently live in 16 counties covering 45% of the state population.
- **Louisiana:** We have recently closed out our initiative to help Louisiana residents enrolled in WIC, SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid maintain their benefits with timely and specific text message reminders. But shortly after our engagement ended, Louisiana used lessons from our integrated benefits pilot to deliver services during COVID-19, including text messaging more than 400,000 SNAP clients for continuity of benefits. The state also used emergency provisions to hire clients to form a new advisory and delivery working group.

In a world where technology has transformed almost every industry and aspect of our lives, it's time to utilize those same integration skills and tools for government systems that impact our lowest income families. States are already on their way, but we are just at the beginning of that transformation.

#3 Tax Benefits in the Digital Age

The ability of technology to help in the fight against hunger and poverty goes beyond the safety net. Early last year we launched a tax benefits product called GetYourRefund that brings the experience of working with the government's free, trusted tax filing service the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program online. As in-person VITA offices closed, we rapidly scaled our service to assist dedicated volunteers to help people file taxes online to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and all other eligible tax benefits, including stimulus payments. By the end of the year, we were able to disburse \$62 million in flexible cash in tax credits and stimulus payments, and our breakdown showed that we were able to reach a set of new filers: 35% of clients identified as Black, 22% identified as Latinx, and 25% had a disability. Technology, when built mindfully and intentionally, can have multiple positive outcomes. Our GetYourRefund work is just one example of using technology to help create a more efficient, accessible, and equitable system. This year we have already exceeded over \$250 million distributed in tax benefits delivered with the assistance of more than 7,000 registered volunteers across the country.

It's also important to note this conversation is happening just 30 days before the first monthly payment is disbursed for the new Advanced Child Tax Credit. We are refining our tax benefits tools and systems for eligible applicants and volunteers to assist in the distribution of the new Advanced Child Tax Credit payments. From our work, we know the guidance must be clear and the portal must be simple, accessible, trustworthy, and mobile-friendly to reach all who are eligible. We also know that, for some new filers, they will need guidance and help to reach completion. We are hopeful for the unique opportunity to implement the new Advanced Child Tax Credit using human-centered technology from the start. In that spirit, we hope to partner with Congressional leaders to ensure that one of the most effective programs to end hunger and eradicate child poverty works for all of our kids, now and into the future.

#4 Justice Systems in the Digital Age

Beyond economic programs, we have also seen the promise of technology transform the process of record clearance. In the US today, one in three people have a criminal record that appears on a routine background check, and nearly half of all children have at least one parent with a criminal record. We've seen how a criminal record can be a life sentence to poverty, creating countless barriers to opportunity in jobs, housing, education, and more. In fact, nearly every state has existing laws that allow people to seal or clear their record after a crime free period. However, tens of millions of Americans who are currently eligible for record clearance under existing laws are held back because those laws require confusing and complex legal processes. Today, only 6.5% of eligible people receive relief—which has significant consequences for the success of re-entry, the well-being of communities, and the cost of recidivism for state governments.

Two years ago, Code for America began working with states across the country to design an end-to-end automatic record clearance service. We are currently helping more than 20 governments to move from the petition-based service model to a model where the government provides automatic expungement relief for all eligible records at the moment the record becomes eligible. The technology capability to conduct careful data matching and sync with multiple agencies simultaneously is the key to automatic expungement and successful efforts to reduce incarceration and improve re-entry.

At Code for America, we often say “justice is about getting implementation right,” and our work on automatic record clearance is a step in that direction and a key part of fighting poverty.

#5 Mutual Aid in the Digital Age

As we strive to strengthen our government programs, we also know volunteer community networks play an important role in addressing hunger at the local level. Our volunteer groups, known as the Brigade Network, include more than 25,000 volunteers distributed across over 80 cities nationwide, committed to Code for America's values and dedicated to helping their local governments be responsive, especially during crises. A few recent examples are as follows:

- In partnership with FEMA's crowdsourcing team, we recruited two dozen volunteers from our Brigade Network to help low-income families find food with the World Central Kitchen Coronavirus Food Relief map.
- Open Twin Cities built a digital map for mutual aid efforts in their community called Twin Cities Mutual Aid Project, which helps Minneapolis-St. Paul residents find and distribute essential supplies like food, clothing, PPE, and more.
- Code for Tulsa partnered with public schools, the nonprofit Hunger Free Oklahoma, and the state's department of human services to build a SNAP screener to help families find out if they are eligible for food assistance.
- Code for San Jose worked with their city government to improve accessibility, mobile responsiveness, and user experience with a tool to help people find free food and groceries during the height of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Members of our Brigade Network were also critical in our efforts to rapidly scale our GetYourRefund service in 2020. Hundreds of Brigade volunteers stepped up to help onboard new VITA partners whose in-person tax clinics had closed—providing them with

comprehensive documentation, helping them train their volunteers with a set of video modules, and more. Some volunteers even became VITA-certified themselves so they could directly help filers with their questions and help them claim tax credits.

Over the years, our Brigades have always stepped in during moments of crisis. In addition to all the work above, they have built resources to help people find food and shelter in the aftermath of natural disasters, learn about tenants rights when they've lost income, connect directly with their local government, and more.

The Lessons of COVID

It was only a handful of months ago when record-breaking numbers of people were out of work, families were lining up in parking lots across the country in need of food and basic necessities, and people were completely unable to access a government office for critical benefits. It was the first time since the Great Depression where the entire nation was, at once, in crisis and in desperate need of a government that worked.

But, for us, the pandemic was a window into what we have been seeing for some time now. There is a monthly cadence of regional emergencies: wildfires out west, hurricanes along the coast, tornados mid-country, and, more recently, cyber attacks on critical infrastructure. When they happen, government systems consistently fail. Government buildings close, food pantries run out of food, schools shut down, and too often systems go completely dark and offline for weeks. We simply can't allow that to happen in America, ever. Our government systems must be prepared for a more volatile future and we must ensure that government works to meet everyone's basic needs.

The view of thousands of cars in food bank parking lots across the country is a failure of our system and a reality of the need in America—specifically the need for food.

My intention is not to focus on the past, but to take all we've learned from the last 18 months and do better. In fact, we did see more than just a glimmer of hope. We had a test-run of what is possible with technology as a true partner for feeding America's children.

When COVID-19 hit, the pandemic forced schools to shut down essentially overnight. This meant over 30 million kids living in poverty would no longer have access to the free school meal program on campuses across America. School districts were scrambling to find students; schools didn't have the most updated records; neither did social services, the county, or the state. And if they did have data, there was no distribution mechanism to get resources, or even a simple message of where to find help for kids who were hungry.

Amidst this uncertainty and confusion, Code for America identified an opportunity for states to innovate and together learn how to better serve their constituents. Within weeks, we partnered with a range of government agencies to piece together data with a human-centered approach. We asked where was the best place to communicate with families online, especially those that were hardest to

reach? Who was the most effective, trusted messenger? What was the right message for specific communities? What was the best way to help families get food for their kids?

Together, we created a human-centered product and process with community organizations, modern data matching techniques, and emergency state and federal policy changes. By centering kids and families, Code for America helped states distribute more than \$600 million in resources through Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) to those reliant on school lunch programs. In those handful of months together, governments saw the possibility of a new, more effective and equitable way to design and deliver benefits to families in need.

Closing Thoughts

Now, as states anticipate an infusion of resources from legislative relief packages like the American Rescue Plan, American Families Plan, and the American Jobs Plan, along with directives to reduce child poverty by 50% and expand food assistance through increased SNAP benefits, WIC eligibility and benefit levels, and P-EBT, we have a chance to set in place a new way of delivering services. A system that utilizes human-centered technology to improve reach, efficiency, and equitable delivery of government benefits to end hunger and alleviate poverty.

For the first time in more than a generation, financial incentives and government directives are aligned for states to rebuild stronger, more effective systems to end hunger and poverty in America. We at Code for America stand ready to partner with governments at all levels to achieve that mission.

Thank you.