Illinois Benefit Hub
User Testing Learnings

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OVERVIEW

Benefit Illinois conducted user testing to gather impressions of the Illinois Benefit Hub and recommendations for improving its usefulness, usability, and trust. Benefit Illinois contracted with Evaluation for Change to conduct the testing. Researchers conducted 30-minute interviews during which participants following a consistent protocol:

- Answered a series of questions about past experience with public benefits;
- Explored the website on their own, narrating their navigation and observations as they went;
- Answered a series of questions to gather feedback on clarity, usefulness, organization, navigation, and credibility of site information; and,
- Ranked the importance of various criteria in understanding public benefit programs and deciding whether to apply.

This document summarizes learnings from user testing and recommended actions for improving the site.

PARTICIPANTS

User testing was conducted at a community-based organization in Chicago in February 2026. Evaluation for Change assigned two researchers to interview 17 low-income individuals. Participants were compensated for their time and insights.

Demographics

Individuals ranged in age from 17 to 75, with a median age of 46. Gender data was only collected on half of participants. Of those, 75% were female and 25% were male. All but one participant were native English speakers, reinforcing the need to repeat user testing when we introduce the website in other languages.

Experience With Public Benefits

Most participants had prior experience applying for or researching benefits such as SNAP, Medicaid, Section 8, LIHEAP, WIC, or childcare assistance. Several participants had extensive experience navigating systems for themselves or others. One participant had never personally applied but had observed family members do so, while another noted difficulty navigating applications due to dyslexia and reliance on family support.

When looking for information about public benefit supports, most participants search by general area of need (such as housing or utilities) rather than by a specific program name. Several respondents said they often do not know program names and instead search broadly for help with a problem. A smaller group searches for specific programs they already know.

The internet was the most common source participants use to learn about benefits, followed closely by friends or family. Government offices and community organizations were mentioned far less frequently.

Response Options	Total Mentions	Percent of Participants Who Mentioned
Internet Search	12	71%
Friend/Family	10	59%
Government Office	4	24%
Community Organization	5	29%

Some respondents expressed distrust of websites that appear like scams and emphasized the importance of trusted community hubs and navigator assistance.

ILLINOIS BENEFIT HUB FEEDBACK

Users were asked to spend a few minutes exploring the website without guidance or direction from the researcher. Most participants spent a little time in each section of the website. The eligibility screener and application assistance sections were among the most-used features during this exercise.

After a few minutes of exploration, users were asked a series of questions to gather feedback on site clarity, usefulness, organization, navigation, and credibility.

Clarity

After exploring the site on their own, users were asked to describe what content was provided on the website using their own words. Participants described the website consistent with its intended purpose, e.g. a central resource for benefits, housing, healthcare, food assistance, and application help. Most participants felt the homepage descriptions generally explained the site content clearly.

In the application assistance finder section, several respondents felt overwhelmed by the amount of information presented:

- “It feels crowded with information”
- “There are too many categories and links”

Actionable feedback included reducing the number of categories, reducing text descriptions, and making the text content expandable. One user suggested that the images could better align with the section content to help make it clear who the section was for. Benefit Illinois has incorporated these recommendations into site improvements.

Usefulness

The strongest and most consistent positive reaction was appreciation for having many different resources gathered in one place. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the website reduced the need to search across multiple agencies, websites, or offices. Representative themes included:

- “Everything is together”
- “Saves time”
- “Easy to find multiple resources”
- “Helpful to have all the programs in one place”

Users also appreciated being able to access the information on their own. This convenience was particularly important for participants balancing work, caregiving, disabilities, or limited mobility. Several respondents valued:

- Being able to search at their own pace
- Having information available at any time
- Not needing to visit offices in person
- Convenience for people with transportation or scheduling barriers

A number of respondents said they learned about programs or services they had not previously known existed.

Eligibility screening and application assistance were consistently identified as the most useful sections. Respondents appreciated that these tools that helped them identify actionable next steps.

Recommendations for improving the usefulness of site content included:

- Making the content available in more languages
- Descriptions of programs, including required documents and how programs work
- More housing and mental health content

When asked whether they would use the site again or recommend it to someone they know, almost all users said they would use the website again. Several users wrote down the website address and indicated they were planning to use it again when they got home or share it with a friend.

The individuals who expressed they would not use it again were older adults who were uncomfortable navigating online in general.

Organization

Many respondents appreciated the professional appearance and general organization of the website. Several users noted that the organization made the site feel more approachable than government websites they had used previously. Participants liked:

- Clear categories by type of need
- Logical grouping of services
- Ability to browse by topic
- Structured presentation of resources

Navigation

Key confusion points were clicking images that were not interactive and not realizing that clicking links opened external sites.

- One user expressed a desire that clicking on both the section image and section title would take them to that section.
- Illinois Benefit Hub links to programs and services provided by a variety of government and nonprofit entities, opening a new browser tab whenever the user is leaving the Illinois Benefit Hub to go to another website. One older user found it confusing to navigate back to the Illinois Benefit Hub because they did not realize they were in a new tab.

Some participants reported uncertainty about what to do next or how best to move through the site:

- “I wasn’t always sure where to start”
- “I’d want clearer directions on what to do next”

Recommended solutions included guided pathways, for example “go here if you’re an older adult,” or general step-by-step guidance for using the site and making navigation decisions.

A recurring theme was the desire for personal assistance alongside online tools, such as a live agent that you could call on the phone or a chat bot:

- “I’d rather talk to someone if I got confused.”
- “It would help to have live support.”
- “Sometimes people just need a person to explain it.”
- “There should be easier ways to get application help.”

Credibility

Most respondents viewed the website as trustworthy and useful. When asked how trust could be increased, respondents suggested adding recognizable organization names and more human navigator support options. One user appreciated that all of the linked organizations were Illinois based organizations. Another user expressed less trust in the MyFriendBen screener because launching the screener opens a new tab and new “brand.”

Researchers asked users to choose from a selection of responses to indicate how using the website made them feel. The vast majority of responses were positive, including 100% of participants saying the site made them feel hopeful.

Response Options	Total Mentions	Percent of Participants Who Mentioned
Hopeful	17	100%
Supported	14	82%
Respected	6	35%
Calm	12	71%
Discouraged	0	0%
Alone	1	6%
Ashamed	0	0%
Stressed	2	12%

Other words participants offered to describe how the website made them feel were acknowledged (1), informed (1), and reassured (1).

PREFERRED INFORMATION FOR MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT BENEFITS

Users were asked what information is most important for understanding what benefits are available to them and deciding which benefits to apply for. This feedback will be used to improve the way current content is labeled and organized and to prioritize the addition of new content to the website.

Understanding Benefits Available

Users were asked the importance of different types of information when trying to understand the public benefits available to them.

Knowing when you will be able to connect with supports was widely identified as highly important when trying to understand benefits available – Do I have to wait to be approved? (88%); If approved, will I have to join a waiting list? (94%) – followed by what area of need the program addresses (76%) and what populations are eligible (71%).

Somewhat less frequently identified as high importance were how much in benefits you'll receive (65%) and how long it takes to apply (59%).

Less than half of users identified it is highly important to know whether the program is a government program you apply for or free/low-cost community service (47%).

Criteria	Low	Medium	High
If approved, whether you'll be enrolled right away OR join a waiting list	0%	6%	94%
Whether you can get services today OR you have to wait to be approved	0%	12%	88%
Area of need the program can support you with, like food or housing	6%	18%	76%
Which populations are eligible, like children or seniors	6%	24%	71%
How much in benefits you'll receive	12%	24%	65%
How long it takes to apply	24%	18%	59%
Whether the program is a government program you apply for OR a free or low-cost service at a community location (for example, SNAP vs food pantry)	18%	35%	47%

Deciding What Benefits to Apply For

Users were also asked the importance of different types of information when deciding whether to apply for a program.

Knowing what documents are needed to apply was most frequently identified as highly important (94%), even more than knowing whether I am eligible (88%). Understanding where they can ask questions or get help applying (88%) and understanding how the program works (88%) were also consistently identified as high importance. Somewhat less frequently identified as high importance was understanding where to go to apply (71%).

Criteria	Low	Medium	High
What documents are needed to apply	0%	6%	94%
Am I eligible	0%	12%	88%
Where can I ask questions or get help applying	0%	12%	88%
Description of how the program works (description of benefits, how many in person appointments, etc)	6%	6%	88%
Where do I go to apply	0%	29%	71%

INCORPORATING USER FEEDBACK INTO ILLINOIS BENEFIT HUB

Actions Taken

- Simplifying the categorization of application assistance options
- Shortening descriptions of site content
- Updating photos to better match section content
- Adding language to make clear that the site is a clearinghouse for information to connect users to the right outside resources so users are less surprised when the site opens up new tabs for external sites
- Adding “last updated” date to program updates so users know how up-to-date the information is

Actions Planned

- Adding a section with program descriptions for core benefit programs, organized by area of need
- Adding navigation guides for key populations to help them more quickly locate relevant programs and assistance organizations (older adults, college students, men, immigrants, etc)
- Translating the site into Spanish

Potential Future Considerations

- Adding a chat bot
- Adding access to phone-based support
- Translating the site into more languages

INCORPORATING USER FEEDBACK INTO BENEFIT ILLINOIS OUTREACH STRATEGY

While not voiced by every user, several participants expressed the desire for human benefits navigator support. This was especially notable for older adults, the one non-native English speaker, and individuals with less experience applying for benefits. The sentiment came up unprompted at multiple points in the user testing interview, not just in conversations focused on how to find help applying for benefits.

As Benefit Illinois work moves forward, the project should continue to identify opportunities to support access to benefits navigators, including during information sharing.