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A one-stop shop for service delivery.(the field works)

By Julie Kashan & Elisabeth Mason | [Policy & Practice](#) - August, 2009

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Jobs are scarce. Housing costs are on the rise. Food expenses continue to mount. And millions of Americans remain uninsured. In recognition of this crisis, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides unprecedented levels of support for struggling American families--both the "chronically poor" whose circumstances have been worsened by the economic downturn and the "new poor" who may be experiencing poverty for the first time. Yet despite this remarkable investment, the safety net of work supports and services available to American families remains frayed and out of reach for far too many.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

In this time of rapidly increasing need, human service departments across the nation continue to serve vulnerable families--doing more and more with ever-tightening state budgets. Their partners on the ground--community-based organizations--face similar challenges. More than ever before, we must work together to leverage efficiencies and employ innovative strategies to re-knit the safety net and preserve the American Dream.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Time and again, studies have shown that federal and state supports provide substantial protection against the worst effects of poverty and help people to stabilize their lives. Food stamps stave off hunger; Medicaid facilitates preventive health care; child care allows parents to work; and housing subsidies prevent eviction. Individually, these programs act as band-aids--necessary but insufficient. Together, they can be truly transformative, providing the groundwork for establishing independence, enabling upward [mobility](#) and bringing an end to intergenerational poverty.

Unfortunately, about \$65 billion earmarked to provide food, child care, medical access and other basic needs for millions of poor working families goes unclaimed every year. Many families fail to claim any of the benefits they're eligible for, and those that do, often do not take full advantage of the support available to them. According to the Urban Institute, nationwide, only 25 percent of people eligible for the four major forms of assistance (food stamps, EITC, Medicaid and child care assistance) actually receive any; and a mere 7 percent receive all four. That means 93 percent of eligible recipients are missing out. In the current economic climate, we simply cannot afford to leave billions of dollars of resources on the table.

Too often, outreach dollars are the first to be cut from department budgets in tough fiscal times. The unfortunate result is that those who need to know that they're eligible for benefits and services often don't, and frequently lack the means to find out. One powerful solution is the comprehensive delivery of services and

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supports through the use of cutting-edge [technology](#) and successful public-private partnerships. Marrying the flexibility, innovation and holistic client-centered approach of the nonprofit sector with the mission, leadership and resources of government, to integrate the delivery of services and supports, is the key to reaching the millions of families in need and putting them on the path to self-sufficiency.

Single Stop USA, a national nonprofit with sites in New York, New Jersey, New Mexico and California, is one example of an organization employing these strategies. Based on a program piloted in New York City by the Robin Hood Foundation, Single Stop has developed a highly effective approach to fighting poverty by working with government agencies, and as an intermediary through partners such as CBOs, community colleges, and [health centers](#).

Deploying a screening tool that condenses thousands of pages of eligibility rules into a 15-minute question-and-answer session, Single Stop counselors provide clients with information about which federal, state or local benefits they are eligible to receive. This service, paired with legal and financial counseling and free tax preparation, is integrated into the array of existing supports and services partners already provide. In this way, Single Stop builds local capacity, leverages existing community expertise and relationships, and brings together resources in a singular, convenient location.

Single Stop also works with local government offices to serve clients as seamlessly as possible, and to pilot innovations that increase access to benefits and services. In New York City, Single Stop is testing a pilot program with the [Human Resources Administration](#) in which eligible clients can enroll electronically for both food stamps and Medicaid onsite, at the same time. A pilot program in San Francisco allows clients to conduct food stamp interviews via web-based camera.

As the numbers of eligible benefit recipients grow, we can ill-afford to continue with inefficient and outdated ways of reaching households in need. State human service departments can lead the way. In partnership with organizations like Single Stop, states can help develop the means and methods for effective, efficient and affordable benefits delivery. We have a unique opportunity to stimulate our local economies by putting federal dollars into the hands of those who need them most, and who will spend them quickly and locally.

Julie Kashen is vice president of policy, [knowledge management](#) and evaluation at Single Stop USA; Elisabeth Mason is the president of Single Stop USA.

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