# SNAP Application Assistance in Illinois during COVID-19: Outreach Workers' Perspectives

July 2021

By Cara Karter

The COVID-19 pandemic required organizations to abruptly shift to remote work environments. Organizations which provided face-to-face outreach and application assistance to connect families to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (e.g., food stamps) are now largely providing these services over the phone while also responding to increased need and changing administrative rules. This created a need for technology to enable remote outreach and assistance.

To meet this demand, mRelief developed an accessible platform for outreach workers to reliably connect with clients over the phone. Our customer relationship management platform, Johnnie, has enabled outreach workers at local food banks and community organizations to respond to this need and provide SNAP application assistance remotely.
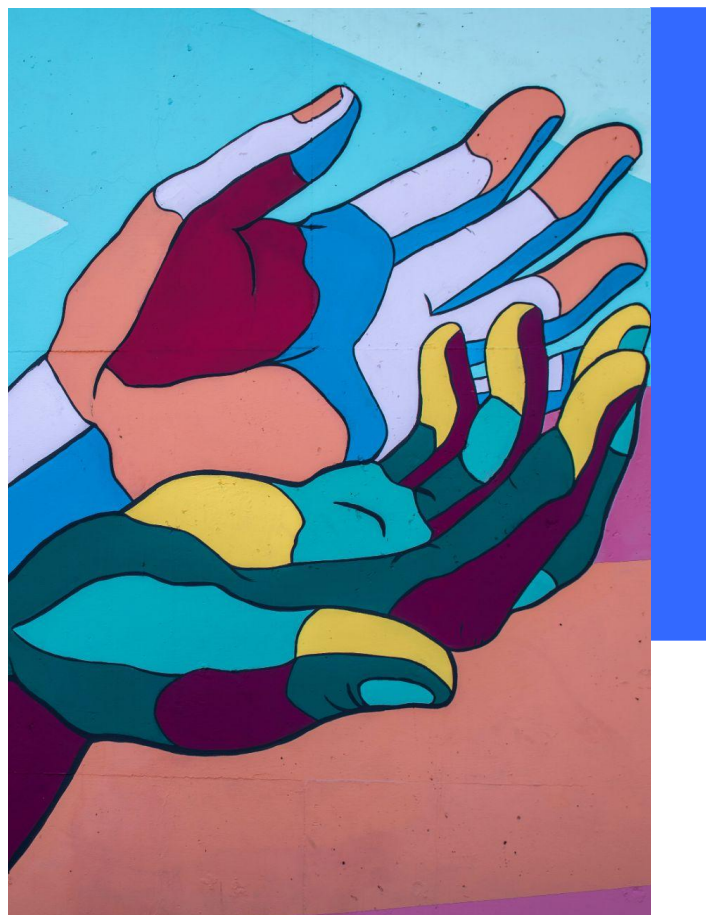
In March and April of 2021, mRelief interviewed 19 SNAP outreach workers from 12 different organizations in 6 counties across Illinois about their experience assisting individuals to apply for SNAP. Five of these workers had been using Johnnie throughout the pandemic, and 14 were using other existing or new systems.

This brief presents insights from these interviews on the shift to remote assistance and key themes related to providing remote application assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> " I think what everybody's going through with you know, going from in-person to remote is just a learning curve, all the way around...just getting used to this technology and figuring it out and things like that. I think that that was a huge challenge.

Shifting to Remote Assistance

All but one of the outreach workers we spoke to shared that their organizations provided SNAP application assistance prior to March 2020. While all organizations had the challenge of keeping up with federal and state policy changes and flexibilities throughout the pandemic, the decision and procedure for shifting to providing application assistance remotely varied.

Organizations previously providing remote assistance

Five of the outreach workers we spoke with, from three different organizations, were previously providing application assistance over the phone and submitting those applications through the ABE public benefits portal directly on behalf of their clients. These organizations experienced minimal service disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notably, for one of these organizations, the telephonic signature waiver that was active throughout the pandemic removed a step from the usual process. While previously they would fill out the application over the phone for the client but stop at the signature page and have the client login themselves to sign and submit, they were now able to sign on behalf of the client and eliminate that step.

Organizations previously providing in person assistance

The other fourteen outreach workers shared that prior to March 2020, the 9 organizations they represent were exclusively providing in-person application assistance.

No Shift to Remote Assistance. Two of these organizations continued to provide in-person application assistance throughout the pandemic for different reasons. One primarily assists homeless and hard-to-reach individuals through street outreach and is unable to reach this population effectively in any other manner. The other outreach worker shared that after shutting down for a few weeks in March 2020, their organization took a more flexible approach—allowing clients to choose to complete the application over the phone or in person. The majority of their clients, who are primarily older adults, preferred to come into the office to complete the application.

Shift from Paper Applications to Remote Assistance. The organizations which began using mRelief's Johnnie client relationship management tool during the pandemic previously had informal processes for providing application assistance. All but one of the five outreach workers we spoke to had never or very rarely assisted clients with SNAP applications. The one individual who had previously done SNAP applications regularly shared that they previously used a system called Oasis to track client outcomes but would otherwise complete paper SNAP applications in person.

Only one other organization previously completed paper SNAP applications in person with clients. After the start of the pandemic, they shifted completely to remote assistance over the phone, using the same process but entering the information directly into the ABE portal rather than submitting a paper application.

Shift from ABE Portal Applications to Remote Assistance. Four organizations previously completed applications with clients in person and submitted them through the ABE portal. While each of these organizations shifted to remote assistance during the pandemic, only three were taking advantage of the telephonic signature waiver to submit on behalf of their clients. One organization was instead asking its outreach workers to provide assistance by coaching clients to login to the ABE portal and submit the application on their own.

Efficacy of Remote Assistance

Remote assistance is convenient and preferred by most clients.
Outreach workers shared that for the vast majority of their clients, remote assistance is more convenient and preferred to in-person appointments.

"They're happy because **people who are working don't have to ask for the day off**. They just call me at their lunch time...I think 80% of my clients prefer to do this over the phone."

"I think from a client perspective it's probably a little more convenient. **They don't have to leave home, they don't have to worry about transportation, and they don't have to come into the office**."

Most outreach workers noted how efficient the application assistance process is now compared to how they were previously providing assistance to clients. This was true for nearly all outreach workers, but particularly among those who previously lacked a formal system who are now using Johnnie.

"I will say, though, that some of the **stuff has been easier related to the application process** and stuff. They're doing the application with the case manager remotely...I mean you know when you're sitting at home, the document is probably there somewhere...the ability to do that, I think expedites it and **it makes it a little bit more efficient**."

"Over **the phone saves me time**. It's very good I can cover more. When I meet a client in the office it's 30 minutes at least. **Now in 30 minutes I can take two, three different client's information**."

While the majority of outreach workers felt that remote assistance is more efficient, two individuals who previously only provided in-person assistance shared that regardless of how convenient it is for clients, it is still the same amount of paperwork for the outreach worker, and that phone assistance is more draining than providing that help face-to-face.

> "From my standpoint as the professional, it's a little **more draining over the phone**. It's not really more efficient, I don't think, because sometimes I'm missing documents or have to complete the same amount of paperwork."

> "I'm scanning it in myself and uploading it...whether they're in my office or on my phone. **I don't really think it's a huge difference**. I think sometimes people understand and attention wise **it's easier when they're face to face with me**."

Older adults and individuals living in extreme poverty are more likely to require or prefer to come into an office for face-to-face assistance.

While remote assistance is preferred by most applicants, outreach workers shared that older adults and people living in extreme poverty may not have access to or be comfortable using technology to complete their applications over the phone or online.

> "I know that at the end of the day, the outreach, and all this stuff that's done online - it's reaching a large percentage of people, but the **small percentage that aren't able to access these resources are the people who really, really kind of need this help**."

> "**Older people, they don't get used to this. They want to come either way to the office**. And they show up! So if they bring their papers, I go outside and talk to them. I use my face mask out there, and get everything, and they're happy with that."

> "For my clients who are mostly **seniors...even smartphones are a challenging technology** for them. So they are helpless if somebody does not assist them, they are not able to do anything on their own."

The prevalence of identity theft scams, particularly those that target older adults, make some client's hesitant to complete their applications with assistance over the phone.

Reaching people via phone to provide assistance that requires the exchange of sensitive information (notably, social security numbers, but also other personally identifiable information) is sometimes seen as suspicious, particularly among older adults.

Outreach workers shared several strategies for overcoming these suspicions, which are outlined in *Figure 1*.
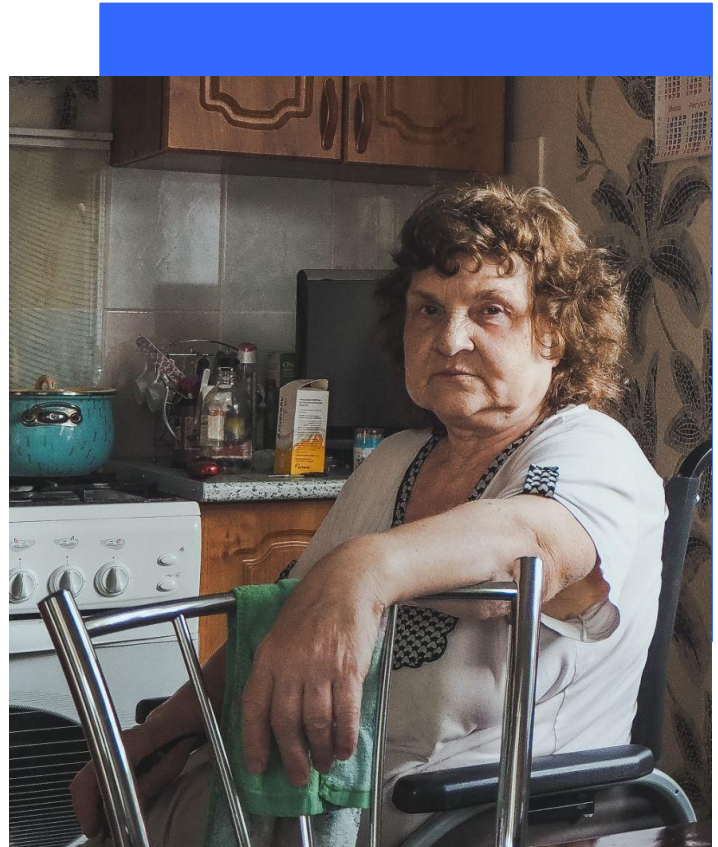
Figure 1.
Tips for overcoming suspicions related to remote application assistance

Maximize organization name recognition

"I have to make sure that they get that I'm not trying to sell them something. I explain that I'm with [community-based organization (CBO)]. I don't say mRelief because I don't think they know what that is...**[the CBO name], that opens up a lot of doors**, I mean **people think that they might be able to get help**. We're not people that usually sell stuff...I kind of stick with [the CBO name] and I explain it as fast as I can...before they shut it down."

Share specific information about their request for assistance

"The way I've been finding a little bit more success is...**being as exact as possible** with the information. For example, 'I'm from the [local food bank], I'm giving a call back for so and so, you left a referral message yesterday at 5pm.' So **it jogs the memory and they start thinking okay that's something that I did, you know**."

Build a rapport with the caller

"**Our area had a lot of scam calls...that's been challenging**. Some people have just been so direct like, 'Are you a scam?' and I'm like, 'No, I'm not I promise.' I try to just give as much detail as I can, if they're willing to listen, about who I am and what I'm doing. **I invite them to ask me questions** to get them more comfortable. I think those are a couple strategies I've used."

Allow applicants to choose what they are comfortable sharing

"The difficult part is getting them to divulge the social security number because, naturally...they're like wait a minute, who's this? But oftentimes establishing...that **human connection seems to improve the trust**...I usually frame it as like IDHS kind of requires this information, but also **let them know that it's also optional**, there's ways around it, just let them know that they're going to ask for it at one point, but it doesn't have to be me. But if you don't give it to me it's going to take a little bit longer to get your benefits, but making it as open as possible."

Conclusion

Technology has enabled mRelief's services to be responsive to the national crisis, filling in the gaps of the existing systems. However, there are still major barriers in the enrollment process for SNAP benefits, and in the fight to end hunger in America at large.

In the near term, as states' telephonic signature waivers expire, it will be critically important for SNAP applicants nationwide to still be able to access application assistance remotely. In Illinois, electronic signature restrictions pose the biggest barrier to continued remote application assistance. We urge the Illinois Department of Human Services to create a pathway for the acceptance of electronic signatures so that outreach workers can continue to provide SNAP outreach services over the phone to those who need help.

Contact
For more information:

Cara Karter, Research Associate,
cara@mrelief.com

Ashley Anthony, Product Designer,
ashley@mrelief.com

About mRelief
mRelief is a nonprofit technology organization working nationwide to help people gain access to social services and eat with dignity. Since 2019, mRelief has served more than 1.2 million households, unlocking an estimated $393 million in SNAP benefits.