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HHSC Enhances Online Eligibility Portal

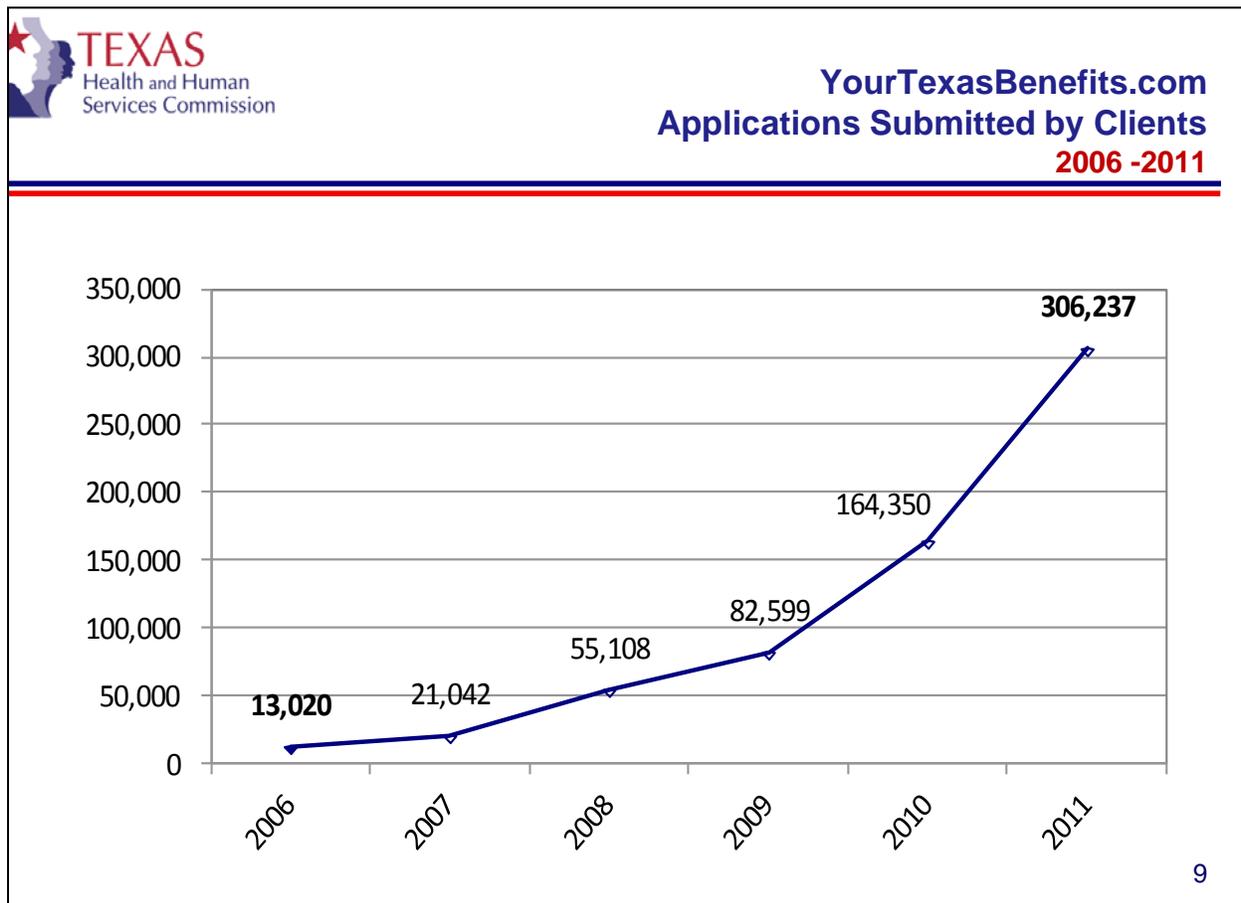
In April, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) launched the newest version of its web-based, “self-service benefit portal.” The online eligibility website, located at www.YourTexasBenefits.com, has been functional for several years, but the agency recently completed a major enhancement to the system. The modernized self-service portal aims to improve the experience of HHSC clients and reduce the workload of eligibility staff. Every month, the agency receives and processes thousands of applications and renewals for a variety of federal and state benefit programs including the Medicaid program, food assistance (SNAP), and cash assistance (TANF). Through improved technology and a network of community partnerships, the new self-service portal is designed to streamline the way that eligibility for benefits is determined. Also, through the YourTexasBenefits.com website, clients have access to information about their application status or benefits from any computer, at any time of day.

A key component of the self-service portal modernization is the participation of community-based organizations across the state. A variety of public and non-profit organizations have become partners with HHSC, assisting Texans in applying for state and federal benefit programs using the online portal. Additionally, partners are able to assist clients with submitting documents, updating case information, and getting basic information about their case. Later this year, Community Partners will also be able to assist clients in renewing their benefits online. HHSC has developed a training program for the Community Partner Program that has been used to certify employees and volunteers of community-based organizations (CBOs) as ‘navigators’ to the online application process. The trained navigators will be capable of assisting clients with the online application process. Organizations ranging from public schools to tax preparation sites to food banks will be participating locations with certified navigators.

Providing self-service options for clients will help to offset rising caseloads that the HHSC faces. The number of applications for federal and state assistance programs has risen dramatically since the recession hit Texas in 2008. The number of households receiving SNAP has grown by 60 percent, increasing from 918,000 in January 2008 to 1,480,000 in January 2012. With the scheduled expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act to include more working poor adults and the slow growth of the economy, caseload growth is expected to continue. CPPP estimates that about 1.4 million Texans will be potentially newly eligible for Medicaid in 2014 under the act and all new applicants will have to be processed in some way by the HHSC eligibility system.



The demand for self-service options in Texas is high and utilization of the online application continues to grow (see table below). HHSC has followed the lead of other states that have successfully implemented online self-service options. Florida launched their online self-service portal, Access Florida, in 2004. Today, the state has approximately 90 percent of their applications for assistance filed online and received a \$7.7 million bonus from USDA in 2010 for having the highest SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) payment accuracy rate of any state. Texas HHSC expects similar results from their newly updated system. “We are confident that we have developed a system that will utilize resources effectively and increase efficiency for clients and staff”, said Liz Garbutt, Director of the Office of Community Access at HHSC. “We have tested www.yourtexasbenefits.com from January to March with eight community-based organizations. HHSC provided training and technical assistance to the partner organizations. Using the feedback and data from this experience HHSC will be adding additional partners over the summer and we will continue to make adjustments to the Community Partner Program and its navigator training in order to maximize effectiveness.”



As the number of online applications increases, the number and length of in-person eligibility office visits will decrease and clients will have more options for submitting documents, completing eligibility interviews, and making inquiries about their case. Additionally, participating

CBOs will be able to track the number of clients that they assist and use this data for strategic planning and development purposes. By enhancing the capabilities of both clients and partner organizations in the eligibility process, access to services will be improved and individuals and families will receive the help they need in a timely and accurate manner.

The Health and Human Services Commission is currently recruiting community-based organizations to become partners in the Community Partner Program. If you are interested in becoming a participating community based organization or would like to learn more, please contact:

Liz Garbutt
Director of Office of Community Access
Texas Health and Human Services Commission
(512) 919-5730
Liz.garbutt@hhsc.state.tx.us

The addition of user-friendly online alternatives to applying for and renewing benefits, updating personal information, and getting information on the status of benefits can add a welcome new capacity to Texas' eligibility systems. CPPP supports the continued availability of in-person help at HHSC eligibility offices, and continued state investment in marketing, outreach and application assistance statewide. At this time, it appears that HHSC assumes that investments in those areas will not be reduced. This is an important factor, as it means that the new online systems will extend the capacity of the system at a time when more resources to help are badly needed.

For More Information

For more information or to request an interview, please contact Brian Stephens at stephens@cphp.org or 512.320.0222, ext. 112.

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