

Helping Ohio Citizens Transition the Benefits Cliff

*A collaborative design sprint with
Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services*



In July 2020, we partnered with the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services (ODJFS) to better understand the first-hand experience of Ohioans transitioning off benefits.

Ohio

Department of
Job and Family Services

THE PROBLEM

The goal of this work was to focus on the monetary loss of benefits but also to focus on the behavior and experience of those with lived experience to establish the appropriate supports and services to ensure individuals can move toward economic independence. The benefits cliff is the decrease in public assistance benefits that occurs when earnings or income increase.

Higher wages often force individuals to experience something known as the “benefits cliff.” The higher wages, even if it’s \$1-2 an hour more, can result in increased income, but lost benefit eligibility. When experiencing this cliff, the increase in income is not enough to cover the loss in childcare, health, or food benefits. ([Source: Forbes](#)) We partnered with ODJFS to determine how they might better support Ohioans to plan, survive, and even flourish when losing benefit eligibility.

THE APPROACH

The design team was led by Heather Tsavaris and included Tania Anaissie, Malliron Hodges, and Susie Wise. In addition, we had ODJFS policy staff, Franklin County Jobs and Family Services staff, and people who were currently or had previously been benefits recipients.

We spent the design week interviewing current and former benefits recipients to understand their experience. We then co-created and tested solutions that might ease the transition off of benefits.

THE IMPACT

During the interviews we heard the following themes:

- **Shame** – *I never wanted to apply for benefits.*
- **Being Invisible** – *I felt unseen.*
- **Need Support** – *I don’t have a support network and need to maintain my dignity.*
- **Start Sooner** – *Once I reach the cliff, it’s too late to change behavior.*

To combat the concerns the design team co-created several prototypes to test. They included:

- **Compassion Counts:** train staff in empathy and trauma to meet the client where they are, build trust, and provide support to move the individual to economic independence.
- **Care Team:** puts the client at the center of collaborative care with benefits support, life skills, peer mentorship, financial literacy, and stability (mentally and financially).
- **Benefits Calculator:** the calculator and accompanying training will be developed by a third-party vendor to provide a safe way for clients, caseworkers, and community partners to understand the impact of decisions and changes to allow preparation prior to the change occurring.
- **Top-Up Funding:** provides one-time episodic support for those transitioning off benefits who experience a life circumstance that without support could put them back on benefits, such as car repairs, rent, uniforms, etc.

ODJFS embarked on a six-county pilot to further test the prototypes in 2021 and will continue this work into 2022.

The Columbus Foundation
1234 East Broad Street
Columbus, Ohio 43205-1453

614/251-4000

contactus@columbusfoundation.org

2021