



The Governor's Office of FOUNDATION LIAISON

A partnership between the
State of Michigan and the
Council of Michigan Foundations

Bridging Government and Philanthropy to Improve Benefits Access for Michigan's Families

Michigan's nonpartisan Office of Foundation Liaison (OFL) was created in 2003 at the suggestion of Michigan philanthropic leaders. The Office — the first of its kind in the nation — works to foster partnerships between state government agencies and philanthropic organizations that are likely to result in policy and programmatic reforms to improve the lives of children and families in Michigan. Since its inception, OFL has brokered more than \$150 million in foundation investments for initiatives to increase Michigan's economic competitiveness through reforms in P-20 education, economic and workforce development, health, and land use.

OFL works within three priority issue areas: prenatal to postsecondary education, workforce development, and health. An important, systems-change program that spanned across these areas was the Michigan Benefit Access Initiative (MBAI). Through MBAI, OFL helped bridge the divide between government and philanthropy, ensuring both sectors worked together to improve benefits access for Michigan's families.

Michigan's Great Recession and the Great Needs of Michigan Families

Michigan was hit especially hard during the 2007 to 2009 recession. Across the state, many residents lost their jobs and had difficulty providing for their families. To find relief, many of these residents turned to the state for resources to keep them afloat through the recession's toughest periods.

However, the state was not prepared to support such an influx of struggling Michigan families using its current benefits access processes. What's more, Michigan families themselves found it difficult to navigate these processes as each type of benefit, from unemployment to health assistance, had different eligibility requirements and their own lengthy applications. Michigan's benefits access system at that time was in desperate need of an

overhaul to adequately support state agencies and the state's struggling families.

In response to the benefits access challenge facing Michigan, then-Governor Granholm took on the ambitious task of finding a solution to streamline the benefits access process. Under the Granholm Administration, a system called Helping Hands was developed that served as an online platform where Michigan residents could discover what types of benefits they could apply for and which specific department they needed to contact to do so.

Two Separate, Competing Systems Become One Stronger Solution

Helping Hands was a step in the right direction and a quick fix during an especially difficult time, but the state knew it needed to do better by Michigan's families and streamline the benefits eligibility, application, and case management process. Following Helping Hands, the state heavily invested in a new online system called Bridges that brought together previously siloed state departments to create a common benefits eligibility determination system.

In 2009, the then-Department of Human Services (DHS) began to develop an improved system called MI Bridges that would build off the advancements in the previous system and allow Michigan residents to better manage their case and apply for benefits online using a single application form. As DHS worked on MI Bridges, the nonprofit sector was simultaneously looking for a solution to Michigan's still cumbersome benefits access process. With a market study completed and a technology vendor selected, the Michigan Association of United Ways (MAUW) and its nonprofit partners were set to embark on a parallel course of creating an improved benefits access and outreach system for Michigan.

The two competing efforts living in the government and nonprofit sectors soon came to OFL's attention. OFL understood that at the heart of the benefits access issue was helping Michigan's most vulnerable residents and saw that the two separate systems would do them more harm than good.

OFL, functioning as a bridge between the philanthropic and government worlds, encouraged MAUW, MAUW nonprofit partners, and state agencies, including the DHS, the Department of Community Health, and the Department of Management and Information Technology, to come together and discuss what they were working on and how they could collaborate.

After many meetings and education sessions, including an OFL-arranged trip to Ohio to see their newly adopted third-party benefits access system, the Michigan Benefit Access Initiative (MBAI) was formed. MBAI brought together state agencies, MAUW, and MAUW nonprofit partners with the aim of creating the best possible benefits access system for Michigan that would be owned by the state and supported by MAUW and its nonprofit partners through the development and training of community partners.

OFL played an integral role in MBAI by providing an open and welcoming table during meetings and ensuring each MBAI participant was accountable to their work goals and stayed true to the core mission of helping Michigan families through a better benefits access portal. In addition, OFL served as an educator and provided foundations with key information about MBAI's work that ended up motivating the Open Society Foundations, the Kellogg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, Consumers Energy Foundation, DTE Energy Foundation, the C.S. Mott Foundation, the McGregor Fund, the Ford Foundation, and the Max and Marjorie Fisher Foundation to provide significant support for the new system's development.

Thanks to OFL's strategic early intervention, the creation of two separate, competing systems was halted in favor of a stronger system that leveraged the unique resources of both the state and the philanthropic community.

Building on Past Work for Continued Future Improvement

At the end of the Granholm Administration, the new benefits access portal was not yet finished. Thankfully, the incoming Snyder Administration saw the importance of refining benefits access and took immediate ownership of the project following an OFL-arranged status meeting with key partners.

OFL's Key Roles in Improving Benefits Access for Michigan's Families

- ▶ Connecting public and private partners to education opportunities
- ▶ Bridging public and private sectors to tackle a complicated state system
- ▶ Keeping government and philanthropic partners connected, accountable, and on mission
- ▶ Educating and inspiring funding partners about opportunities to leverage resources with the state

The new Administration built upon MBAI's past work and rolled out the Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) model that has brought the 211 database into the MI Bridges platform, streamlined and condensed the benefits application (down to 20 pages from the original 65), and created a call center to provide specific, nuanced support to Michigan's residents.

As the ISD model was created, OFL kept the philanthropic sector informed, showing foundations how their partnership with the state had paid off and how their investments were backing an incredible systems-change effort that would improve the lives of countless Michigan families.

Each step along the benefits access improvement process was necessary for the next one to occur. OFL's strategic convening, facilitation, and relationship-building work combined with MBAI's unique public-private partnership paved the way for Michigan's current benefits access model that has impressed other states who are now looking to replicate it.

