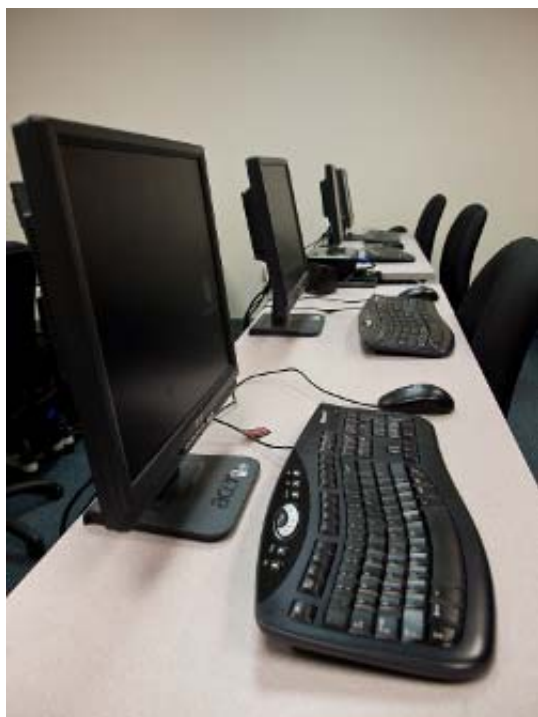




The Shriver Brief

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Single Stop USA Receives Grant to Expand Use of High Technology for Low-Income Americans



All too often, the news about low-income people and technology is bad. Low-income communities trail the rest of the country in their [ability to access the internet](#). As a result, low-income Americans have less access to information, job opportunities, and public services than other citizens. Moreover, the bureaucracies that have an impact on low-income Americans' lives—namely, the city, state, and federal agencies that distribute public benefits—usually lack the most current technological innovations, and efforts to modernize program administration are frequently delayed. In New York, for example, the New York City Housing Authority's recent [attempt to modernize](#) by installing a new \$36 million computer system has been plagued by delay and lost information. Additionally, some attempts to modernize public benefits administration have unintended adverse consequences for certain populations. As Cary LaCheen wrote in [a recent Clearinghouse Review article](#), many public benefits agencies are using call centers to interact with clients in an effort to reduce face-to-face time and streamline operations. Unfortunately, this efficiency comes at a cost for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, who face multiple barriers when they try to communicate remotely with benefits agencies.

Against this dispiriting backdrop, Single Stop USA's successful use of technology to benefit low-income Americans is especially welcome. [Single Stop USA](#), which recently received a [\\$1.1 million grant](#) from the White House Social Innovation Fund, began in New York City as a project of the Robin Hood

Foundation. Single Stop USA uses its revolutionary benefits enrollment network, or "[BEN](#)," to help low-income people understand the public benefits maze and make sure that they are receiving all of the assistance for which they are eligible.

BEN is proprietary software that Single Stop USA counselors access over the internet on their office computers. After Single Stop USA counselors are trained to use the BEN technology, they are placed in local organizations such as hospitals, churches, public defenders' offices, and community colleges. When clients go to these organizations to meet with their attorneys, go to class, or get check-ups, they can also meet with Single Stop USA counselors. The counselors interview the clients, enter some basic information into BEN, and then provide the clients with information about city, state, and federal benefits that they are entitled to receive. Finally, the counselors either guide clients through the benefits application process or provide the clients with referrals to service providers who will help them, free of charge. BEN is constantly being revised and updated; just in time for tax season, BEN now has a "tax tab" that can provide clients with free tax preparation. This is particularly essential for low-income clients, many of whom think that they do not need to file income taxes when, in fact, there are often credits that they are eligible for, such as child care credits and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Until recently, Single Stop USA's work has focused on New York and California, but the White House Social Innovation Fund Grant will help it to expand nationwide. The BEN concept is well-suited for nationwide expansion, because the software can be

custom-designed for every organization that Single Stop USA partners with and work with the particular array of state and local services available to clients in a given location. The White House grant is designed to help Single Stop USA with its efforts in community colleges, on which Single Stop USA plans to focus as it continues to grow. Community colleges are an ideal location for the Single Stop USA model, because the benefits that students receive from a Single Stop USA consultation can help them on multiple fronts. Obviously, students who meet with Single Stop USA counselors get immediate assistance with their taxes and benefits. Improved benefits and tax returns also help the students achieve their long-term goal: higher-paying jobs.

Single Stop USA is not the only organization using technology to benefit low-income Americans. Indeed, Pine Tree Legal Assistance in Portland, Maine, recently launched [Stateside Legal](#). Stateside Legal acts much like Single Stop USA's benefits calculator, but for U.S. military veterans. Any veteran can go to Stateside Legal, enter some basic personal information, and receive legal information about state and federal programs he or she might be eligible for, as well as general information regarding foreclosure, consumer debt problems, and health diagnoses common to veterans. Veterans can also use the site to find an attorney, if necessary. Stateside Legal has [already received about 79,000 page views](#) since its launch in November 2010. Stateside Legal received a \$300,000 grant from the [Legal Services Corporation's Technology Initiative Grants Program](#), which "promotes full access and high-quality legal representation through the use of technology." In fact, the Technology Initiative Grants Program funds many noteworthy uses of technology on behalf of America's poor, including [I-Can! E-File](#), a free electronic tax-filing system that helps low-income Americans file for the Earned Income Tax Credit. The I-Can! program has 560 partners in 49 states.

As more and more organizations follow the example set by Single Stop USA, and the Technology Initiative Grants Program's grantees, hopefully we will begin reading more headlines about advocates successfully using technology to close the [income gap](#) and fewer headlines about the dearth of innovative technologies available to low-income Americans.

Editor's Note: The Editorial Team of Clearinghouse Review: Journal of Poverty Law and Policy would like to know more about how legal aid and other public interest law advocates use technology to stay informed. [Please respond to our brief online survey by May 6, 2011.](#)

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