

# The ATLANTIC Philanthropies

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## Ensuring That Vital Resources for the Poor Aren't "Left on the Table"



Helping vulnerable and disadvantaged people to make lasting changes in their living conditions is at the core of Atlantic's mission, and in every country in which we work there is significant and sometimes – as in the United States – growing inequality.

The persistence of poverty, and its deeper concentration in some quarters, like farmworkers in South Africa and older people in Northern Ireland, has defied easy solutions, and involves a long struggle on multiple fronts. But one approach that has proved promising, and to which Atlantic has made a significant commitment in several countries, is to help poor and marginalized families and individuals obtain access to government benefits to which they are already entitled.

In South Africa, there is a comparatively comprehensive social safety net, but uptake of benefits is often slow because those most in need are not aware of what they are entitled to, local and provincial governments lack sufficient capacity, and corruption in the delivery system often blocks access to grants.

The Atlantic grantees are legal advice offices in rural areas – the [Centre for Criminal Justice](#) (CCJ) in KwaZulu Natal, the [Legal Aid Clinic](#) in Grahamstown, and [The Black Sash](#) – which provide advice to poor people on accessing income support grants, and take provincial governments to court to force them to meet delivery obligations, sometimes including back payments.

From 2004-2006 CCJ advised 28,000 clients and successfully resolved 20,000 cases, generating RND 4 million (more than US \$500,000) in claims, a significant injection of capital in a very impoverished area. The client base has more than doubled.

In Northern Ireland, Atlantic supports [Access to Benefits](#) (A2B), a countrywide initiative in both the public and private sectors to increase the number of low-income and disadvantaged older Northern Ireland residents receiving the social and medical service benefits to which they are entitled. In Northern Ireland up to 40 percent of households have social security as their main source of income and the number of people of pensionable age is projected to increase from 266,000 in 2002 to 313,000 by 2017. As many as 30% of those older people who are eligible for key benefits are not claiming them.

Access to Benefits has been closely engaged with Northern Ireland Government departments, with a representative of the Social Security Agency taking a seat on the project co-ordinating committee. Over the four-year period covered by the Atlantic grant, A2B anticipates screening approximately 24,000 older people in Northern Ireland and in the process identify approximately 4,800 new benefit recipients and return an estimated £5.1 million (more than US\$ 10 million) in additional benefits by the end of the development period.

The initial phase of the initiative has been undertaken by a partnership of four organisations (Advice NI, [Age Concern](#), Citizens' Advice Bureau and [Help the Aged](#)) together with the [Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action](#) and the [Interactive Ageing Network](#).

In the United States, Atlantic is supporting a pilot programme launched by our colleague philanthropy [The Robin Hood Foundation](#). [Single Stop](#), which is now based in 60 host sites across New York City, offers tax advice and financial, legal and other counseling to 70,000 households with incomes below 200% of the poverty level – approximately \$41,000 a year for a family of four. Such assistance promotes family stability and job security, increases disposable income and improves the long-term educational and health prospects of poor children and families. The work underway now will replicate Single Stop across the country.

According to a McKinsey and Company analysis, 75% of people screened for tax credits in community centers and other Single Stop sites received an average of \$1,800. Benefits counseling produced an average of \$5,000 per family, and those screened for legal counseling got \$1-2,000 in in-kind cash and supports. McKinsey estimates that within five years of national replication, Single Stop USA could assist one million households a year and deliver benefits and tax refunds worth \$2 billion to as many as 450,000 households.

Our grant is supported by the work of Atlantic's advocacy grantees, the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#), the [Campaign for Community Change](#), the [Food Research and Action Center](#), and the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) – recognized authorities in benefits access work. In the first two years, Single Stop USA will be launched in Atlantic-supported [Integrated Services in Schools](#) sites in middle schools in Albuquerque, Laguna Pueblo and Las Cruces, New Mexico.

And that potential \$2 billion in services is just a start, as Elisabeth Mason, the CEO of Single Stop USA, puts it starkly, and well.

"The estimate is that \$65 billion worth of benefits and tax rebates available to poor people is not used, it is simply left on the table," Mason says. "If we could overcome the barriers the poor face every day – confusion and the fear of government among them – that money would help 10 million families get out of poverty."

"It's crystal clear -- that's why these programmes are so important."

With the work of Single Stop, A2B and our South African colleagues, money on the table can become food on the table, helping families along the path to financial stability and success.

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