



Delivering Help and Hope with Synergex Assist in Morris County, NJ

Leadership within Morris County’s Office of Temporary Assistance (OTA) works to uphold the agency’s mission: “Marshal resources to assist our customers to reclaim self-sufficiency with respect and efficiency.”

Located about 30 miles west of New York City, Morris County covers 492 square miles and is home to more than a half-million citizens.¹ Morris County is part of the busy NYC metropolitan area and includes 39 municipalities and many commuter towns but no large cities.

Based in Morris Township, New Jersey, the OTA operates with a team of about 170 staff members, serving more than 300 customers daily. These are people who need temporary assistance and social services due to job or housing loss, food insecurity, illness, other personal circumstances, or cataclysmic events like fires or destructive storms.

Getting benefits to those in need faster and more efficiently isn’t just a Morris County problem or even just a New Jersey problem.

In February 2024, United States Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack issued a letter to 47 U.S. governors conveying concerns about how challenges in state administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are affecting American families. Underlining the urgency of the situation, the letter encouraged immediate state actions to improve program administration. This included considering options to streamline and simplify processes (e.g., reducing unnecessary paperwork) and investing in systems and staffing to support modern models and delivery systems.²

By embracing automation early on and taking a customer-first approach to technology, OTA’s benefits program is far ahead of the game. It has improved the quality of life for people in Morris County, one customer at a time.



¹ 2021 census

² Source: Agriculture Secretary Calls on states to Take Action to improve SNAP Administration for Families in Need, February 8, 2024

The Edge: One Stop Shopping for Benefits

The OTA team often meets customers at their lowest points. Thus, a key goal is to provide an empathetic, effective and efficient experience for each person OTA assists, leaving them equipped logistically, financially and emotionally to move forward. While the OTA's interim "product" is an individual customer case, the ultimate product is the promise to each customer who meets qualifications: Ready Benefit, or a quick turnaround on benefits, ideally within mandated timeframes.

Case creation is a thorough, intensive process that includes research, a qualifying interview, data collection and analysis (personal and historical data), benefits matching, and fraud check. OTA staff are organized and equipped to do interviews in person, by phone, or online when appropriate. All interviewers are extensively cross-trained in all available benefits programs, including General Assistance, SNAP (food stamps), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and social services (e.g., temporary housing). Program benefits are periodically changed or added, qualifications often change, and revisions are frequent to keep up with changing economic and social needs.

Customers coming into the office typically will first encounter a receptionist/service agent, who handles basic intake and needs requests, previous benefits snapshots, and identity validation. After the initial interview, customers meet privately with case workers, who confirm/analyze detailed intake information, conduct an in-depth interview, and check references. They also AI-screen red flags that might indicate fraud, assemble a recommended menu of benefits, run a budget, and secure approval for it from the state, collecting customer data and signatures on various documents along the way. There are letters, documents, and a permanent document trail of the case (accessible via search and retrieval from the state's archival database). It's an exacting, data-intensive, and sometimes stressful process — for both recipient and case worker.

The backbone of OTA since 2000 has been a commercial business software application called ABACUS One Stop Shopping, nicknamed AOSS. It assists government agencies with eligibility and monitoring of various assistance programs, turning benefits sourcing from a manual paper chase to a smooth, integrated, automated process.

AOSS and its sister application, ABACUS (Automated Budgeting and Claims Update Software), are both written in Synergy DBL, a modern business language based on Digital Equipment Corporation's DIBOL programming language and developed by Synergex International Corporation (Synergex). Synergex's extensive development platform, including a high-performance Indexed Sequential Access Method (ISAM) database, provides the foundation for AOSS and ABACUS. Both applications were built specifically for government businesses: the former to automate benefits case management and the latter to automate date archiving, search and retrieval, and fraud checking.

Originally the products of Unitronics Data Systems (UDS), a Digital Equipment Company (DEC) reseller/VAR, AOSS and ABACUS have been used by a large majority of New Jersey counties for years. Synergex acquired the two products in 2022 and has since provided stabilization, modernization, and extension under its new Synergex Assist product line of solutions for government.



Modernization on the Move

AOSS provides a lifeline between government services and citizens, smoothing the experience it offers by automating the intensive data collection, collation, updating and monitoring processes involved in getting critical benefits to residents.

AOSS enables case workers to quickly enter or update data on customers online, find and link to a broad choice of current benefits products, and assemble benefits packages and budgets for approval. This process also gives the case workers the ability to calculate budgets online, further expediting the benefits packages. Case workers can cross-reference their searches and research with other state systems, including uploading results from their investigations. With less time spent wrangling paper and locating benefits, case workers can provide the right benefits to customers with less time, less stress and fewer errors.


AOSS helps to drive Morris County OTA's operations. It provides a current view of customers and cases to authorized staff, who access the system by separate, secure user interfaces. OTA is thus always "on the case": from the receptionist who welcomes and intakes customers, to the interviewers who identify, verify and pre-qualify customers, to the experienced case workers who recommend and secure the benefits packages.

Although AOSS fronts an information-intensive process based on decades of paper documents, the application is digital and responsive. AOSS uses multi-view data displays, GUIs (graphical user interfaces), and point-and-click actions to simplify navigation, reduce data-entry errors, and streamline the user experience. Various printing options facilitate report production and the creation of benefits applications.

AOSS runs on Linux and is typically accessed from Windows desktops to enable mouse control and other GUI features. Clicking on the AOSS icon takes OTA staffers to a main AOSS page where they can easily navigate to find the latest and most optimal benefits and see work in progress (i.e., applications filed or in progress). For example, clicking on a TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) or food stamps benefit automatically brings up a screen and appropriate list of choices on that benefit.

Staffers benefit from ease of use, quick centralized access to case applications completed or in progress (for authorized users), and enhanced productivity and empowerment in serving their customers. Business benefits include:

Versatility: Although NJ's system requires the use of the Document Imaging Management System (DIMS) for scanning all key documents, AOSS also has a scanning and tagging ability. It quickly finds and "digests" any sources so OTA staff can create optimized solutions for any customer



AOSS provides a lifeline between government services and citizens, smoothing the experience it offers by automating the intensive data collection, collation, updating and monitoring processes involved in getting critical benefits to residents.

“
Morris County OTA
has realized
ongoing
efficiencies in
operations, going
from an estimated
270 staff in prior
years to 170 staff
today. With AOSS
software
institutionalized in
their operation,
Morris County can
do all paperwork
and budget
preparation faster
with fewer people.

Reliability: AOSS stores the high volume of client and benefit data in robust, high-performing ISAM databases. The application’s thorough error-reporting enables users to navigate the system when the unexpected happens, and in the occasional situation when users need extra help, Synergex’s help desk provides the leg up needed to keep things running smoothly.

Security: Administrators can specify access by role to certain areas of the application. This security layer is easily customized by IT administrators in terms of role, access permission, or level of access. And AOSS uses SSH (Security Shell) for secure network communication between the Windows and Linux systems.

Efficient Business for a Goodness Business

With the continued evolution and steady modernization of AOSS, Morris County OTA has realized ongoing efficiencies in operations, going from an estimated 270 staff in prior years to 170 staff today. With AOSS software institutionalized in their operation, Morris County can do all paperwork and budget preparation faster with fewer people.

The customer experience has also dramatically improved. Depending on the case, pre-AOSS it was not uncommon for the intake process to require four to five hours in the office, involving multiple staff members who were at the time not connected to AOSS. Today, with improved technology and broad AOSS connectivity, the process is closer to two or three hours — quite significant considering the complexity of some cases.

With AOSS and its dedicated OTA staff, Morris County has been ready for anything. For example: During the 2008/2009 recession, the building waiting area was jampacked with customers, with AOSS helping reduce the waiting time (and stress) significantly. Morris County was able to absorb the increased caseload more easily than if their operations were paper-based.

More recently: Upon reopening after the pandemic, and with many customers coming in multiple times, OTA connected screening interviewers into AOSS to successfully expedite the process, accommodate the volume, and get benefits into customers’ hands faster. (In both cases, OTA’s commitment to cross-training was a big asset.)



The Future: Meeting Customers Where They Live

A major goal for leadership in recent years has been to extend OTA's operation to customers and make its services more accessible. With Morris County's OTA location in Morris Township, N.J. (approximately five miles from the city of Morristown and not convenient to mass transit), it can be a challenge for some benefits recipients to get to interviews, costing them time and money. The OTA director and his team wanted to change that.

In 2019, OTA unveiled its Navigating Hope program, taking its benefits services on the road. Today, two vans, dubbed Navigating Hope 1 and Navigating Hope 2, create fully mobile service points for the community. Each van is equipped with full workstations just like those in the main office, from the full AOSS application right down to dual monitors, scanners, shredders, signature pads, and other technology. The vans connect to AOSS running on the Morris County servers via a VPN satellite connection. Equipped with full access to AOSS, the vans can go anywhere in the state where there is connectivity.

Beyond their regularly scheduled and advertised stops, the vans give Morris County OTA the ability to respond quickly to breaking emergencies, such as a large fire or destructive weather event affecting many people in a neighborhood.

Another important OTA program, the Morris County Reentry Program, includes a fully connected AOSS station and team member(s) inside the county jail. OTA staff take applications from those being released from incarceration, so they can walk out of jail with benefits like food stamps, temporary rental assistance, addiction services, and general assistance intact — with no gaps in support.

There is also a fully equipped OTA outstation in one county town connected to AOSS, a model that OTA is hoping to expand soon.

Meanwhile, OTA continues to work with Synergex to evolve its AOSS deployment, improve their users' experience, and add efficiencies.

“OTA continues to work with Synergex to evolve its AOSS deployment, improve their users' experience, and add efficiencies.”



The Road to the Future, with a Synergex Assist

As OTA continues to work with Synergex on modernizing AOSS (now Synergex Assist) for county government management, they see benefits beyond getting individuals and families back on their feet faster.

Hiring and training staff is paramount for OTA. The county calculates that it takes somewhere between six weeks to three months to fully train new staff. With AOSS training taking only two weeks, the rest of the time can be devoted to program and eligibility knowledge and learning how to interact with roughly 12 different computer systems.

With IT modernization, job content for OTA staff becomes richer and more rewarding: less paperwork, more face time working with customers, and improved promotion opportunities. Working with modern technology provides a better career path, attracting job candidates with meaningful work that includes the opportunity to acquire both professional skills and technology literacy.

With its technology-enabled one-stop shopping for all administered benefits and its community-outreach strategy, Morris County is better able to respond to the needs of their customers.

OTA staff and leadership recognize this is a powerful change. The model ensures that customers do not have to tell their story again and again to multiple people — something that can be frustrating, hard, and time-consuming. This creates a better experience for people coming through OTA's doors.

For more information pertaining to Morris County's experience with AOSS, please contact [Morris County Department of Human Services](mailto:synergy@synergex.com).

For more information about how Synergex Assist can help you enhance your county's benefit services, contact us today at synergy@synergex.com.

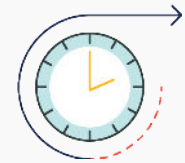
Synergex Assist can help you modernize and automate your benefit services.



Easy to learn and use



Comprehensive features



Reliable, fast data access



Secure



Backed by expert product support

Contact us to start your journey.

