**1. HEADLINE**

**ARIZONA IMPROVES ACCESS TO RENT AND UTILITY ASSISTANCE**

**WILDFIRE LAUNCHES ARIZONA BENEFITS PORTAL TO HELP PEOPLE IN CRISIS**

**2. DATELINE + OVERVIEW**

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Today, Wildfire and a host of social service agencies came together to launch the Arizona Benefits Portal - ABP. The ABP helps people in fiscal crises more easily request and receive assistance funds, and enables provider organizations to process applications more efficiently. Access to these funds has been proven to reduce the vulnerability of households to eviction. In Arizona, these utility assistance funds protect those struggling to pay high electric bills in the extreme heat of summer.

**3. LEADERSHIP QUOTE**

“COVID-19 has left so many families vulnerable and increased their financial risk. Rent and utility assistance can prevent at-risk families from falling into crisis situations and the Greater Phoenix community is committed to helping as many people as we can,” said Cynthia Zwick, CEO of Wildfire. “The new Arizona Benefits Portal makes it easier and faster for people to receive the assistance they need. We’ve been trying to get this done for three years – the ABP will help Arizonians with the economic strain caused by COVID and with the high costs of utilities during the extreme heat of summer during and beyond COVID.”

**4. PROBLEM AND OPPORTUNITY**

Each year in Arizona, heat-related illnesses cause over 250 deaths and nearly 3,000 emergency room visits, according to the Arizona Department of Health Services. With over 100 days of 100 degree-plus temperatures, home air conditioning is essential to survival. Air conditioning comes at a cost, especially for low-income people and those experiencing financial strain from COVID-19. Arizona Public Service calculated in 2019 that 88,000 customers were behind in payments and owed more than $36 million. To help prevent heat-related deaths, Arizona utilities do not turn off electricity for lack of payment during the summer until October 15 when cooler days arrive. However, the utility costs are not waived, which will severely strain household finances later.

Inability to pay utilities is a leading indicator of housing evictions. With COVID-related unemployment, many experts fear there will be a significant increase in evictions. According to the Census Bureau, 30 percent of the 40 million US renters have little or no confidence in their ability to pay rent. To help prevent evictions during COVID, many states, including Arizona, put in place eviction moratoriums. Arizona’s moratorium ends on July 23rd. The Federal CARES Act provides funding for utility and rental assistance; the City of Phoenix alone received $20 million in these funds.

Distributing these funds quickly and accurately poses a significant logistical hurdle for organizations distributing and people seeking assistance. Before the launch of the Arizona Benefits Portal, accessing program funds required multiple phone calls and in-person visits with a case manager, and often resulted in the disappointment of finding that funds were no longer available. With the sharp increase in need caused by COVID-19, current processes are unable to meet the demand and ensure those in-need have safe access to assistance. Wildfire recognized the necessity for a customer-facing solution that applicants could access from any device at any time. Thus was born the ABP, which was built by Prefix Health Technologies([www.prefixhealth.com](http://www.prefixhealth.com)), an AWS Select Tier partner. Prefix engineers quickly configured their off-the-shelf eligibility platform to meet the specific needs of the utility and rental assistance use cases. “Prefix was built for just this kind of challenge - helping people with technology - fast”, said Steve Grant founder of Prefix.

**5. CUSTOMER QUOTE**

“The ABP is a game changer for all of us working to disburse assistance funds,” said Sara Sheets, a case manager at the Phoenix Community Development Corporation. “I spent most of my time reviewing documents instead of assisting customers. Now with the Arizona Benefits Portal, the documents are categorized and presented through a reviewer that allows me to complete them in a matter of minutes allowing me to spend more time providing the personal touch my customers need. Most importantly, our customers can access our programs online, submit the documents by taking a picture, and quickly receive confirmation of eligibility and account credits.”

**6. CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE**

The Arizona Benefits Portal allows residents and caseworkers to access program information and the assistance application from a computer or mobile device. Applicants enter the required information, add pictures of utility bills and identification, and then submit and track the request as it’s processed - all without having to wait on the phone or visit an office. Caseworkers spend less time collecting information and more time supporting high-need customers who require a high-touch approach. Wildfire surveyed case managers and end-users and they concurred that these tools would significantly improve the assistance distribution process. With one common software application, organizations providing assistance have the potential to collaborate in ways never before possible, to evaluate results and to model new solutions for families and individuals facing housing vulnerability.

**7. ACTION STATEMENT**

Wildfire collaborated with the City of Phoenix, the Garcia Family Foundation, Arizona State University (ASU), the Department of Economic Security, Maricopa County, Salt River Project, Arizona Public Service, Tucson Electric Power and a number of other organizations to develop the Arizona Benefits Portal. Prefix Health Technologies built the software to make it possible. To learn more about how you can access rental and utility assistance, please visit wildfireaz.org. To learn more about Prefix Health Technologies visit www.prefixhealth.com.

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