

**To:** Community Stakeholders of Southeastern Iowa

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**Subject:** Reducing Administrative Burdens for Families in Need

### **Executive Summary**

In the U.S., significant administrative burdens make accessing social services time-consuming, complex, and discouraging. In rural areas like Southeastern Iowa, these challenges are intensified by geographic isolation, limited digital access, and a lack of centralized service infrastructure.

In partnership with Pathfinders Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), this project focused on identifying strategies to reduce administrative burdens for residents in six southern Iowa counties: Davis, Keokuk, Jefferson, Mahaska, Wapello, and Van Buren. Pathfinders RC&D's mission to support sustainable rural communities and their established relationships with many community service providers made them an ideal collaborator for this effort.

The project had three main deliverables:

1. **Southeast Iowa Resource Finder (SIRF):** an electronic tool designed to streamline access to local social service providers and reduce the learning costs for individuals seeking assistance. While SIRF doesn't eliminate process steps, it can minimize them by helping users more quickly find the correct programs thus avoiding wasted time applying for services they don't qualify for or missing necessary documentation. The MPA Capstone team hosted a Zoom webinar for service providers to introduce this project and preview SIRF, inviting feedback before its publication.
2. **A standardized phone script for service providers:** a navigation guide to help frontline staff communicate more effectively with clients, identify their specific needs, and provide accurate, efficient referrals to the appropriate resources. It primarily addresses the psychological costs of administrative burden and secondarily helps reduce learning costs.
3. **Two surveys:** one survey designed for clients, and the other for service providers. Results will help identify the most pressing obstacles, gaining insight directly from those experiencing them.

Through these efforts, the project seeks to help Southeast Iowa's social service system be more accessible, coordinated, and client-centered, ultimately empowering individuals and families to obtain the support they need with fewer obstacles.

## Background

Administrative burdens are the obstacles individuals face when interacting with government programs and public services. These burdens can manifest in various forms, including learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs, all of which contribute to barriers in accessing essential services.<sup>1</sup>

In rural areas, such as the six core counties served by Pathfinders RC&D, administrative burdens are further compounded by geographic isolation, limited internet access, and reduced availability of in-person assistance.<sup>2</sup> Research indicates that these burdens disproportionately affect marginalized populations, including low-income families and rural communities, where administrative complexities can deter individuals from completing applications for public assistance programs.<sup>3</sup> The challenges faced by rural residents in navigating government programs are often more pronounced due to the scarcity of local service providers and inadequate outreach efforts

## Recommendations

The MPA Capstone Team's recommendations focus on three interrelated strategies aimed at reducing administrative burdens for individuals and families in Southeast Iowa: (1) widespread adoption and promotion of the Southeastern Iowa Resource Finder (SIRF) and navigation guide, (2) sustained maintenance of project deliverables through institutional partnerships, and (3) long-term investment in a cross-sector coalition structure to advance systemic change.

Digital tools like SIRF are designed to reduce learning costs by centralizing information about local service providers in a user-friendly and mobile-accessible format, helping individuals more efficiently identify programs for which they may be eligible.<sup>4</sup>

Sustaining the functionality and accuracy of SIRF is essential. Without regular updates and oversight, the tool could become outdated or misleading, ultimately reintroducing the administrative burdens the project aimed to eliminate. Continuing the partnership with IISC to fund a graduate assistantship can offer consistent, low-cost labor while contributing professional-level capacity in database management, public service coordination, and geospatial technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. P. (2018). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Linos, E., & Riesch, A. (2020). Bureaucratic barriers in rural America: Understanding administrative burdens outside urban centers. *Policy Studies Journal*, 48(3), 534–556.

<sup>3</sup> Currie, J. (2006). The take-up of social benefits. *Handbook of Public Economics*, 4, 1447-1483.

<sup>4</sup> Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. P. (2018). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Lastly, to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of administrative burden reduction efforts in Southeast Iowa, the MPA Capstone Team recommends that Pathfinders create and oversee a working coalition to continue initiatives to reduce the burdens faced by families in the community. This includes using the data collected by the MPA Capstone Team to identify additional barriers.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, these recommendations offer a sustainable, community-driven strategy to reduce administrative burdens and improve access to essential services. By leveraging digital tools like SIRF, building institutional partnerships such as the IISC graduate assistantship, and establishing a region-wide coalition, Pathfinders RC&D and its partners can help ensure that families spend less time navigating bureaucracy and more time accessing the support they need to thrive.