

## **Interview with Commissioner Carole Johnson, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Human Services**

So data is a really important part of what we do. We're obviously the Department of Human Services so the human part is really important to us as well and the needs and stories of the way people are experiencing our services matter but data really helps us inform our decision-making and really help us drive prioritization so for example last year for the first time in probably a decade we significantly increased child care center payment rates that was informed both by the fact that we had the resources to be able to do it but also because when you look we looked at the data our team was able to identify that the way we were paying for child care services we were actually bundling infant and toddler services into one rate when in fact the staffing ratios for infants are higher you need more staff to care for infants and so as a result you actually should be paying more because you need more staff for those services and we shouldn't have one rate for infants and toddlers we should have separate rates and so in setting new rates we were able to also break out the categories that we were paying in and the data there made a big difference to us and being able to identify where our challenge was and then think about how we were going to allocate new money in ways that deliver the best possible outcomes so it significantly changed how we're paying child care centers which means that families who depend on our resources to help them afford child care have more options and more access to affordable childcare because now we have updated the rates that we're willing to pay and so that should help encourage more centers to take children who depend on our subsidy so it's really interesting to us to think about how people approach our programs and so for example if we run the division of aging services and aging services runs a number of programs that help support older residents in our state and maintaining their independence and having affordable health care so we provide subsidies there to support prescription drug costs we help people with the cost of utility services we help people with some of the home and community-based services that they need to be able to stay in their community and not have to go into a nursing home those kinds of services what we realize by looking at where our numbers were for each of those various programs was that in fact we were making people come in and apply separately for all of those different programs and asking them the same questions with some frequency and so here's a place where both data and Technology mattered to us once we had a common technology platform for aging services program and we're able to sort of simplify our technology we were able to put all those applications together into one simplified application online that allows us to now help older residents in our state come in one door ask for that assistance with one set of information we're able to help them if they qualify for prescription drug assistance we're able to help folks with their Medicare premiums we're able to help them with utility assistance we're able to do a whole host of things because we've simplified the application and we have seen substantial increase in our applications now because it's a simpler way to deliver services the online application is called NJ save it's our one-stop stop resource online for older residents to get access to all the services that they might be eligible for and it recently won a National Innovation Award because it was just a really smart way for our team to think about how to put services at the fingertips of people who need them so the trial of Human Services is the largest state agency we provide affordable health care assistance through Medicaid we provide food

assistance we provide childcare assistance services for individuals who have mental health and addiction services needs aging services for those with disabilities a whole range of services are available in the state of New Jersey and we're fortunate to have that but what's really important is not just to have those services on the books but for people to have access to them and so innovation and thinking creatively about how to deliver services in a timely way when people are in need and how to make sure people know what's available to them when they need that assistance really important to us and so we're always challenging ourselves to think creatively about how to make technology and to make those additional tools as readily available to people and then to use that technology on our and to make sure we're getting services to people as quickly as possible so one of the other things that we've done as a department is really help. create an easier front door for people to come in and identify the kinds of. things that might be useful to them the. kinds of services our department might be able to assist them with sometimes it's hard because we offer a number of programs in partnership with the federal government and federal rules might have different eligibility requirements for different programs so it's not the case that if you meet one set of eligibility for one program you're eligible for all so it complicates things a little bit so. we've tried to simplify that by creating a single front door which we call in J helps which is a place to put some simple information in where we can pre-screen you to be able to say okay. based on this preliminary information it looks like you are probably eligible for a Medicaid program you may be eligible for our food assistance program it's a. way to try to sort of shortcut the process a little bit and give people a. sense of what they may be eligible for because once you come in and do the full. application we might need a little more. information from you we might need some paperwork and that can sometimes deter people from going through the process so we wanted to give people so I mean the early indication of what they're likely eligibility is I think is very important to governor Murphy that our administration is doing everything possible to be as consumer-facing as possible meaning the people of New Jersey depend on us for a variety of critical services and we need to make sure that we are ready and able and have the tools available to help people when they need it and that's important to the governor it's important to me as the Commissioner and we've made that a priority across our department