

BETTER NOTICES FOR THE PEOPLE

FOUR TIPS to make public-
benefits notices **CLEAR,**
ACCESSIBLE, and **EFFICIENT**

**PUBLIC
POLICY
LAB**

CLARITY IS A PUBLIC GOOD

Government communications aren't neutral — they shape how agencies relate to the public and help or hinder the delivery of public value. At the Public Policy Lab, we redesign communications to improve accessibility, clarity, and efficiency for staff and clients, ensuring content is legally compliant and written in plain language.

We started small, working with individual agencies to test and refine solutions before scaling what works. In New York City, we redesigned affordable housing forms for a city-wide voucher program, then worked with HUD to convert them into tenant-friendly templates that are now available to 3,000+ public housing agencies serving nearly 5 million Americans.

Now, we're applying this model to SNAP notices. In partnership with the Arizona Department of Economic Security, we redesigned more than 130 notices to improve clarity for clients and efficiency for staff — a process that required hundreds of hours of manual analysis and user testing.

Building on our learnings about good notice design, we're developing CLARA, an AI-assisted tool that analyzes notices, flags policy and plain-language issues, and guides teams in producing clearer, compliant notices.

In this zine, you'll find four tips to design better notices, along with real-world examples from our recent projects.

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR PROJECTS → publicpolicylab.org/projects

Tip 1

PRIORITIZE ACTION & AGENCY

Opt for action-oriented phrases that empower clients to remedy their situation. Punitive language can discourage clients from reading further, even when options remain.

Tip 2

PROVIDE EXAMPLES

Use real client scenarios to create clear mental images and reduce interpretation. Cutting out guesswork and lightening clients' cognitive load leads to improved response accuracy.

IN PRACTICE

We Didn't Get the Information We Needed from You

ACTION NEEDED	DEADLINE
Please send us the information requested below	MM/DD/YYYY

Dear John,

We denied your renewal application because you didn't give us the information we requested.

However, you can send us the information now to regain your benefits.

You need to report these changes by the 10th of the month after the change happens. For example, if a change happens in June, you need to report it to us by July 10.

Tip 1 in Practice

When redesigning denial notices, we found that many clients saw the bold "Notice of Denial" header and stopped reading, missing their chance to regain benefits. We changed the header to center the reason behind the decision and give clients a clear path to act.

Tip 2 in Practice

In user tests, clients struggled with deadlines described as general time windows, so we added theoretical time frames. Even when systems can't display exact dates, concrete examples make timing rules easier to understand.

Tip 3

DEFINE YOUR TERMS

Ideally, notices only use familiar, everyday words, but when legal or technical terms are required, define them in plain language on first use. Clearer understanding leads to more informed responses.

Tip 4

ANTICIPATE COMPLEXITY

Notices should reflect the realities of the people using them. When forms assume overly simple situations, clients must fit complex lives into rigid fields, making people feel unseen and leading to inaccurate data.

IN PRACTICE

The changes only apply to the head of household. (Note: head of household is the person who submitted your application).

Employment Income

1. Parent or caregiver's name:

--	--	--

2. Additional parent or caregiver's name:

--	--	--

Tip 3 in Practice

During research, we found that many clients misunderstood "head of household," leading to incorrect answers. We added a clarifying note to improve understanding and data accuracy.

Tip 4 in Practice

Our research found that many households had multiple caregivers, often with multiple jobs, but forms allowed only one income source. We added numerous caregiver tables with multiple entries per caregiver so clients can report income accurately and see their reality reflected.

The Public Policy Lab (PPL) is a non-profit innovation lab that works in partnership with government agencies, public service providers, and members of the public.

→ Learn more about **CLARA**, our AI-assisted notice improvement tool at publicpolicylab.org/projects/CLARA

GET IN TOUCH

publicpolicylab.org

info@publicpolicylab.org

[@publicpolicylab](https://twitter.com/publicpolicylab)

