

Connecting Young Adults to Public Benefits and Tax Credits in North Carolina

Practical strategies from North Carolina community-based partners — and how a free digital screening tool is helping them connect with a hard-to-reach population.

The Need: Young Adults Face an Economic Mobility Gap

Too many young adults ages 18–24 lack the financial stability needed to pursue the opportunities — education, job training, career-building — that lead to long-term economic mobility. Three data points frame the challenge in North Carolina:

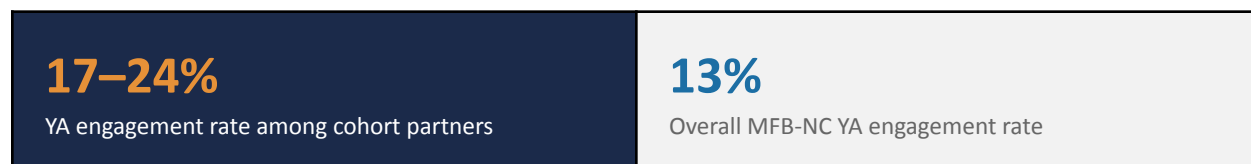


Public benefits like food assistance, Medicaid, tax credits, and childcare subsidies are designed to bridge this gap. They can provide the economic floor young adults need to focus on school or training rather than immediate survival. But young adults are harder to reach; they are more mobile, more likely to distrust government systems, and less likely to have an existing relationship with a benefits office.

A North Carolina Solution: MyFriendBen-NC

MyFriendBen-NC (MFB-NC) is a free, anonymous, online screener that connects North Carolina residents to 20+ public benefit programs and tax credits in about six minutes. It requires no Social Security number to start, stores no personal information, and provides each user with a personalized roadmap showing likely eligibility, estimated cash value, and how to apply.

A cohort of North Carolina community-based organizations has been using MFB-NC to connect young adults to benefits at rates well above average:



These organizations aren't running dedicated youth programs, so we wanted to know how they are so effective at connecting with a difficult-to-reach population.

What's Working: Practical Steps from North Carolina Partners

The strategies below come directly from North Carolina partners and are based on their experience using MFB-NC in their community. While these partners are not primarily youth-focused, their suggestions align with existing research on best practices for connecting young adults to public benefit programs.

1. Lead with privacy and confidentiality

Many youth want to connect to benefits but fear being overheard discussing Social Security numbers (SSNs), immigration status, or financial hardship; this is often the first barrier—not lack of interest. Opening every conversation with a clear statement that MFB-NC is anonymous and requires no SSN immediately removes this barrier.

"So one of the barriers we have when we're talking to people about MyFriendBen[-NC] is [them wondering] 'Do I need to bring my Social Security number that is reported somewhere?' So that's just one worry we have."

— Maria, Mi Familia Vota

Partners also move benefits conversations to private spaces during public events and use tablets to screen people one-on-one away from crowds. MFB-NC handles the eligibility complexity, which means staff members don't need to know every program rule; they just need to introduce the tool confidently and address confidentiality concerns on the spot.

2. Meet young adults where they already are and use trusted community messengers

Successful partners layer MFB-NC onto existing touchpoints rather than creating separate outreach programs:

- College campuses: Job and student org fairs, campus food or basic needs pantries, financial aid and admissions offices
- Service interactions: Community food pantries, community health clinics, digital literacy classes
- Community events: Share MFB-NC with community champions who are already trusted sources of information and resources
- Everyday trusted spaces: Barbershops, salons, faith communities, daycare centers

Sharing MFB-NC with other trusted community members — barbershops and hair salons, faith leaders, and student resource staff — to introduce the tool and how it can help people extends reach into spaces that formal outreach rarely penetrates. Young adults may be more ready to engage and follow through with screening and applications when benefits information comes from someone they already trust.

Framing matters as much as location: connecting benefits to a young person's goals — finishing school, finding stable housing, starting a job — works better than framing around hardship or need.

3. Follow up — and keep following up

Follow-through is the single most consistent challenge. Young adults frequently complete a screening but never submit an application. Here is how partners plan follow-up:

- Treat the relationship as ongoing — check in after initial contact, not just at the moment of screening
- Connect young people to other organizations that can help them with the application process if they can't navigate it on their own

From Screening to Application: Where Young Adults Get Stuck

The biggest barrier the screener can't solve: follow-up capacity

Participants acknowledged that while MFB-NC gives young adults a personalized roadmap, getting from that roadmap to actual benefit enrollment often requires a nudge, a reminder, or a hand through the application process.

Young adults in particular need support to ensure they complete benefits applications, but partners across the cohort identified capacity for follow-up as their single most pressing unmet need. Most organizations lack the staff capacity for relationship-building work that a screening tool alone cannot do: checking in after a screening, finding out whether someone applied, connecting them with another organization that can help them apply if needed, and making sure they actually accessed the program. Most organizations are absorbing this work without dedicated staffing or funding.

Want to Use MFB-NC in Your Work?

MFB-NC is free for both organizations and residents. Your organization can:

- Use the screener directly at bennc.org
- Request a unique referral link or QR code to track your organization's usage
- Embed the screener in your website or intake workflow
- Access training, partner support, and materials from Code the Dream at no cost

To get started, visit <https://bennc.org/partner-with-us/> or email us at myfriendben@codethedream.org.

Who contributed to this brief

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