Methodology

Data Context and Limitations

The findings presented are derived from qualitative data focus group data conducted across five Mississippi cities. These insights serve as an early indicator of participant experiences and emerging barriers to accessing public benefits.

A statewide survey, designed to capture broader quantitative representation, is currently underway. Survey data is anticipated to be available March 2026 and will be used to validate, expand, and refine the trends identified through the focus group analysis. As such, the results included here should be interpreted as a precursor, establishing an initial baseline that will be enhanced with forthcoming quantitative evidence.

Defining Barrier Issues

Barriers were grouped into 13 distinct issues across key access dimensions:

- Application and Access Barriers
- Communication and Service Quality Issues
- Eligibility and Income Thresholds
- Systemic Inefficiencies

These 13 issues form the standardized comparison framework for all cities.

Assigning Severity Scores

Each city was scored per issue using 0-2 severity scale:

Score	Meaning	Interpretation Criteria
0	No barrier	Not mentioned
1	Moderate Barrier	Difficulty experienced but not severe or widespread
2	Severe Barrier	Pervasive, systemic, or compounding hardship documented

Scoring was based on strength of language used in participant feedback (e.g. “week or months with no states updates”, “system failures”, “preventing access”)

Calculating Barrier Severity Totals

Each city received a barrier severity total:

Barrier Total = Sum of severity across all issues

Maximum Possible Score:

13 Issues x 2 severity = 26

Note: Severity weights were assigned using participant language intensity.

Convert to Barrier Percentage

This represents how many barriers the city experiences relative to the maximum:

Barrier Percentage = Severity ÷ Maximum Possible Severity (26)

Higher percentage = worse access.

Converting to Access Performance Percentage

To make the index intuitive (higher=better), the score is inverted:

Access Performance Score = 1 – Barrier Total

Ranking Cities

Cities were sorted highest to lowest based on Access Performance Score.

Example (percentages are rounded):

City	Access Performance %	Rank
Gulfport	42%	1
Greenville	35%	2
Hattiesburg	35%	2
Natchez	27%	3
Jackson	19%	4

Interpretation

Higher scores reflect greater access equity, indicating that fewer or less severe barriers to public benefits.

Lower scores highlight cities where:

- Systemic challenges are concentrated
- Modernization and staffing investment may be highly impactful

Specific policy recommendations can be found in the focus group report.