Human Services Practice Brief

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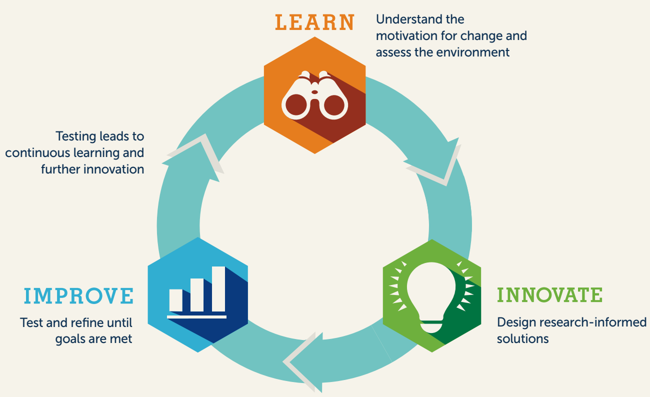
Putting Paper to Work: How Rethinking Forms Can Put People First and Improve Engagement in Human Services Programs

Picture this. It's been several months since you hurt your back lifting a patient at the assisted living facility where you used to work. You quit that job and haven't been able to find something less demanding on your body. Your savings have long since run out, and even though you told yourself you wouldn't, you have no other choice but to seek public assistance. An eligibility worker tells you to report to the employment services program on a certain day—but doesn't tell you much more than that. You find yourself sitting in a room with 25 other people, spending almost two hours writing down the same personal information on form after form. You have no chance to discuss your situation or your goals.

Now suppose you are a case manager assigned to work with this customer. You were hired three months ago and received little training, learning mostly on the job by shadowing other case managers. A senior case manager told you which forms customers had to complete and what boxes they had to check to meet program rules. You asked why you had to use so many forms and were told it had always been done that way, and that's what the state required. You spend hours entering the same information into two different systems—first the case management database, then the state system. You never even use some of the required forms customers already completed and end up creating your own forms to gather the information you need to do your job.

The customer and staff experiences described above are, unfortunately, all too common in human services programs. This brief provides recommendations on how programs can improve their customers' experiences by reducing the burden of paperwork and procedures while continuing to meet program requirements. Much of the information is based on our experience working with Philadelphia Works Inc. (PWI), the administering workforce development board for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded services in Philadelphia. TANF- and WIOA-funded employment services are provided by five organizations through four PA CareerLink® centers, which serve about 40,000 customers per year. PWI is leading a customer-focused redesign of its TANF program; streamlining paperwork is one component of this initiative. Other aspects of the redesign include adapting vocational training programs to include adult literacy; expanding flexibility in program requirements around completing high school equivalency; and adopting a goal-achievement coaching model for client service delivery. Many of the changes made to paperwork and business processes were designed to support these efforts by simplifying and making the processes associated with program rules and requirements more efficient.[1]

Figure 1. The LI² Framework



This brief builds on three foundations for innovation described in a companion brief: reduce complexity of processes, simplify paperwork, and promote customer-focused culture. We used the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) framework—a series of evidence-informed program improvement activities enabled by collaboration between practitioners and researchers—to learn about how information is collected and used; innovate to eliminate, redesign, and streamline paperwork; and improve processes through iterative, small-scale pilot testing (Figure 1).[2,3]

Learn about information collection and use

The first step involves learning about what paperwork exists, how customers and staff use it, and what program requirements it is designed to meet.

Develop a visual for the customer and paperwork flow. Mapping the customer experience helps identify handoffs, bottlenecks, inefficiencies, and redundancies. List all the steps in the process, who performs them, and what happens after each step. In Philadelphia, this mapping revealed that, in some cases, customers had to meet with many different job specialists, each of whom focused on a different industry. Some of the job specialists had unique forms for customers to complete, putting the burden on customers to write down the same information over and over.

Gather information to understand procedures. Look at procedures from staff and customer perspectives to grasp the processes and identify opportunities for improvement. For example, we observed staff at all levels in all locations, which revealed differences in how they used existing forms and created new ones. When we observed customers, we found that customers were often not engaged in the services, perhaps because they spent hours completing paperwork. Pretending to be a customer for the day was the most informative activity; by doing this, we personally experienced the frustration and boredom caused by aspects of processes and paperwork, as well as bright spots in service delivery on which to build.

Inventory and assess program requirements. Take stock of all existing paperwork—even the paperwork everyone thinks is required for one reason or another—to identify the forms that are truly needed for program requirements and those that can be streamlined or eliminated. We found that customers had to complete forms during orientation that were not relevant for the majority of them. For example, everyone had to complete an authorization form for a background check that only customers interested in becoming child care providers would need. All customers had to sign a half dozen policy acknowledgment forms when one blanket agreement would have

Learn

- Interview staff at all levels (case managers, supervisors, administrators)
- Observe staff and customers
- Review documents
- Pretend to be a customer for the day

sufficed. Some forms that program leadership and staff thought were needed to meet state and federal TANF program requirements were not needed at all.

We used the initial groupings below to make a determination about what to do with the forms. Tracking down program requirements and uses of each form can take time. Prioritize those that seem to impose the most customer or staff burden for streamlining or elimination.

- **Keep:** the form in its original format is required by the state, funding agency, or service provider and cannot be modified.
- **Streamline:** the form is not required by any party, but staff do use the information collected on the form. In these cases, consider combining with other forms that collect similar information.
- **Eliminate:** the form is not required by any party, and staff do not use the information collected on the form.

Innovate to revise and streamline

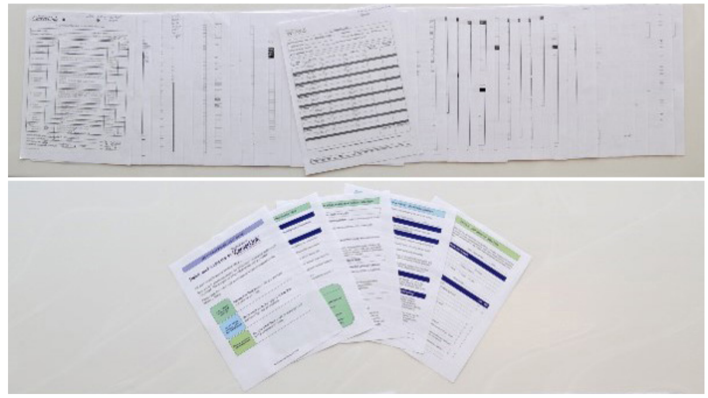
The next step involves reviewing paperwork with a people-focused perspective. Identify *small but meaningful* changes to reduce burden and improve the customer and staff experience.

Collaborate with staff at all levels. Paperwork redesign should be a group effort and include leadership and frontline staff. The process will likely require multiple meetings and prototypes because each group will apply a different lens, depending on their position and responsibilities. Newly designed forms may result in changes to procedures, so it is important to also explore those potential changes.

Innovate

- Identify small, meaningful changes
- Use research-informed design principles
- Collaborate with program staff
- Check for compliance with program requirements

Figure 2. Streamlining paperwork: before and after



Make decisions. Dig into the forms that you categorized as "streamline" to identify common items that can be combined into one form and eliminated from others. Ultimately, we eliminated or streamlined more than half of the paperwork customers completed, reducing the time customers spent completing forms from about 1 hour and 40 minutes to 20 minutes (Figure 2). This freed up customer time to better engage in program activities right away and freed up staff time from processing paperwork so they could engage with customers, explain services, and learn about customers' goals.

Use plain language and consistent formatting. User-friendly documents include terms that are clear and easy to understand. Uniform layouts and fonts yield well-organized, readable documents. Figure 3 shows how we applied these principles to one of the customer enrollment forms. We used a consistent look and feel by putting important information in the same place on each form and using 10- or 12-point font and white space to improve legibility. We made sure that instructions clearly stated what customers had to do and did not include unnecessary words. Finally, we included space for a customer ID number, instead of Social Security number, to identify customers' forms while protecting their privacy.

Review newly designed forms carefully. Important information can sometimes be eliminated inadvertently in a redesign. For example, after streamlining customer enrollment paperwork, we needed to restore some fields to collect required information for the state management information system.

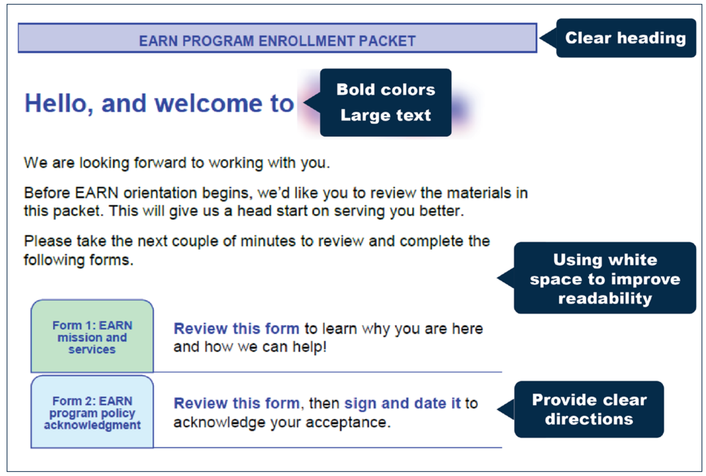
Improve the experience

After developing the innovation, implement the change on a small scale and collect data to measure whether it is addressing the problems identified. Use the suggestions below to refine the process and address challenges until it meets your needs.

Develop concrete guidance and training for program staff. Changing paperwork might seem easy to do, but small changes can have ripple effects that end up substantially changing staff responsibilities. We developed reference materials and a related training for staff who complete and process paperwork. This included information on how and when to complete each form and which staff were responsible for ensuring the accuracy of information collected.

Design a road test. In our example, we used an iterative learning process called a "road test" to implement the new paperwork and procedures on a small scale, when it is easier to catch and correct mistakes. A good road test lets innovations "fail fast" in a contained setting so refinements can be implemented before scale-up. It should be short enough and small enough to limit a program's exposure and the number of people impacted if something doesn't go as planned. This step allows staff a chance to correct course quickly based on the information collected. We conducted a road test in one of the four locations offering employment services in our example site.

Figure 3. Example of a redesigned form



Develop a road test plan with clear learning objectives. A successful road test is anchored in a concrete, clear plan developed collaboratively by all stakeholders. A road test's learning objectives often focus on strengthening implementation of a new process or procedure. They often include determining whether any attitudinal and behavioral changes we anticipated happening are actually occurring—because only then will we see changes in the outcomes of interest. For example, we wanted to reduce the time customers spent completing and staff spent processing paperwork. Doing this would require that customers and staff buy into the new process and adjust their behavior (that is, using the new paperwork) accordingly. The learning objectives for the road test in our example site covered three aspects of implementation:

- **Process:** Did staff follow the new procedures?
- **Response:** Did customers complete the new paperwork?
- **Time:** Was the new paperwork processed quickly?

Improve

- Road test on a small scale before broader rollout
- Collect data on implementation
- Suggest changes
- Provide ongoing support

Develop a data collection and analysis approach. It's important to develop a data collection and analysis plan to gather feedback throughout the road test: what information will you collect, from whom? And how will you analyze that information? We used multiple methods—observations of customers and staff, short surveys, case file audits, and interviews with staff at all levels—over multiple points in time to understand implementation of the new paperwork. In our example site, we used a structured set of interview questions and observation checklists to assess whether staff and customers adhered to the new procedures. We organized the information collected through these various modes into themes to identify key takeaways and needed refinements. The road test lasted two weeks.

Modify and refine as needed. Road tests are iterative, and it may take more than one to get implementation right. Use the findings from the preceding road test to adjust and strengthen the innovation itself and its implementation for the next road test. After the first two weeks of our road test, we shared results with frontline staff and leadership and brainstormed options for moving forward. One change was to develop clearer guidance about which paperwork to use after learning that some staff had stopped using some of the old forms, which we had designated to "Keep." Then, we did another two-week road test with the modified guidance in place.

Manage change. Stakeholder buy-in and commitment to implementing the innovation is essential. The collaboration at the heart of the Learn, Innovate, Improve framework will go a long way to building this. In addition, strong communication is essential. For example, we developed a communications strategy that proactively informed staff about upcoming changes, to gain their buy-in and avoid surprises. The strategy included informing staff through at least one verbal and one written message because people receive and interpret information in different ways. More complicated or significant changes may require additional communication and conversations with those affected to set the stage for change.

Prepare for scale-up. Iterative improvements during the road test provide a foundation for scale-up. After the example site was satisfied with the implementation of the new paperwork, we trained staff in the other three locations on the new paperwork and associated processes. Drawing from road test findings, this training was more detailed than the road test training and provided clear guidance for all staff on what strong implementation looked like.

Provide ongoing monitoring and support. Program improvement is iterative and ongoing. Continue to do observations, audit case files, collect feedback, and coach staff one-on-one. If a form is not useful or not working, go back to the Learn stage to figure out why and proceed from there.

Looking forward

Reducing paperwork and procedural burdens can enhance the customer experience and improve efficiency. Using a framework such as LI² allowed Philadelphia to systematically diagnose problems, streamline operations, and refine new processes while continuing to meet program requirements. They reduced the number of forms customers completed, giving customers more time to engage in meaningful activities. Reducing paperwork also saved staff many hours that could instead be invested in providing direct assistance to customers. In time, the program anticipates their efforts to proactively address business process challenges should lead to better programmatic outcomes and better outcomes for customers.

Project IMPROVE is an innovative technical assistance project supported by the Office of Family Assistance. Under this project, Mathematica uses the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) framework in partnership with state and local TANF programs to design and test innovative employment-focused practices.

For more information about Project IMPROVE contact Michelle Derr at mderr@mathematica-mpr.com.

Endnotes

[1] For more information on these efforts, please visit https://www.mathematica.org/commentary/to-help-philadelphias-workforce-this-nonprofit-had-to-take-a-look-at-itself-first

[2] Mastri, Annalisa, Brittany English, and Scott Baumgartner. "Foundations for Innovation: How Three Human Services Programs Laid the Groundwork for Sustainable Change." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, 2019.

[3] Derr, Michelle, Ann Person, and Jonathan McCay. "Learn, Innovate, Improve: Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives." OPRE Report #2017-108. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2017.

[4] McCay, Jonathan, Michelle Derr, and Ann Person. "Using a 'Road Test' to Improve Human Services Programs. OPRE Report #2017-107. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2017.