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NYC
Department of
Education

SYNCED SERVICES

Innovating Service Coordination Between
Agencies that Serve Students Living in
Temporary Housing.

Phase 1: Research & Concept Development

Synced Services documents a project undertaken by the NYC Department of Education, five sister agencies, and the Public Policy Lab, a nonprofit innovation team for government. Support was provided by Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation.

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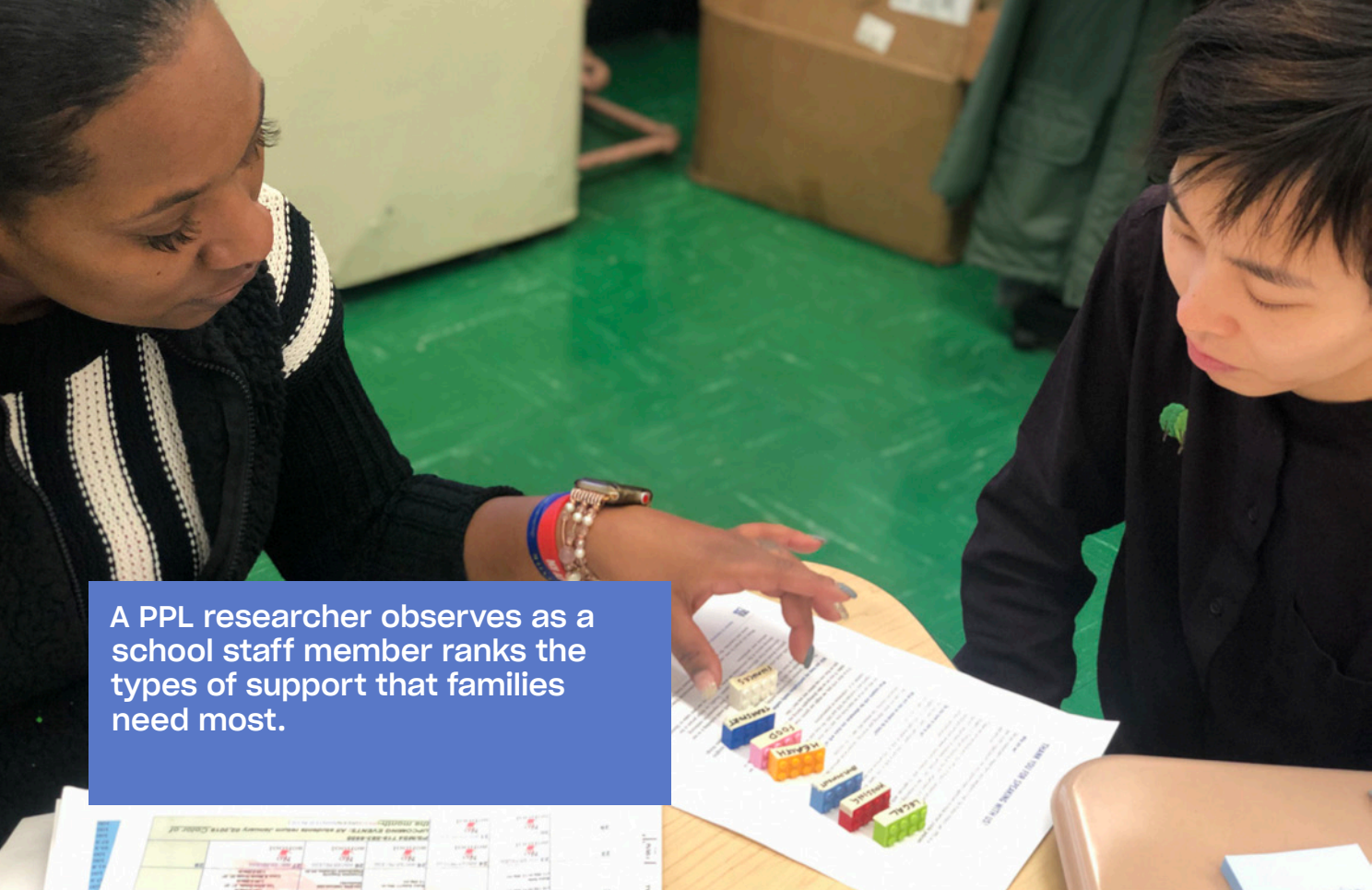
SYNCED SERVICES

Innovating Service Coordination Between New York City Agencies That Serve Students Living in Temporary Housing

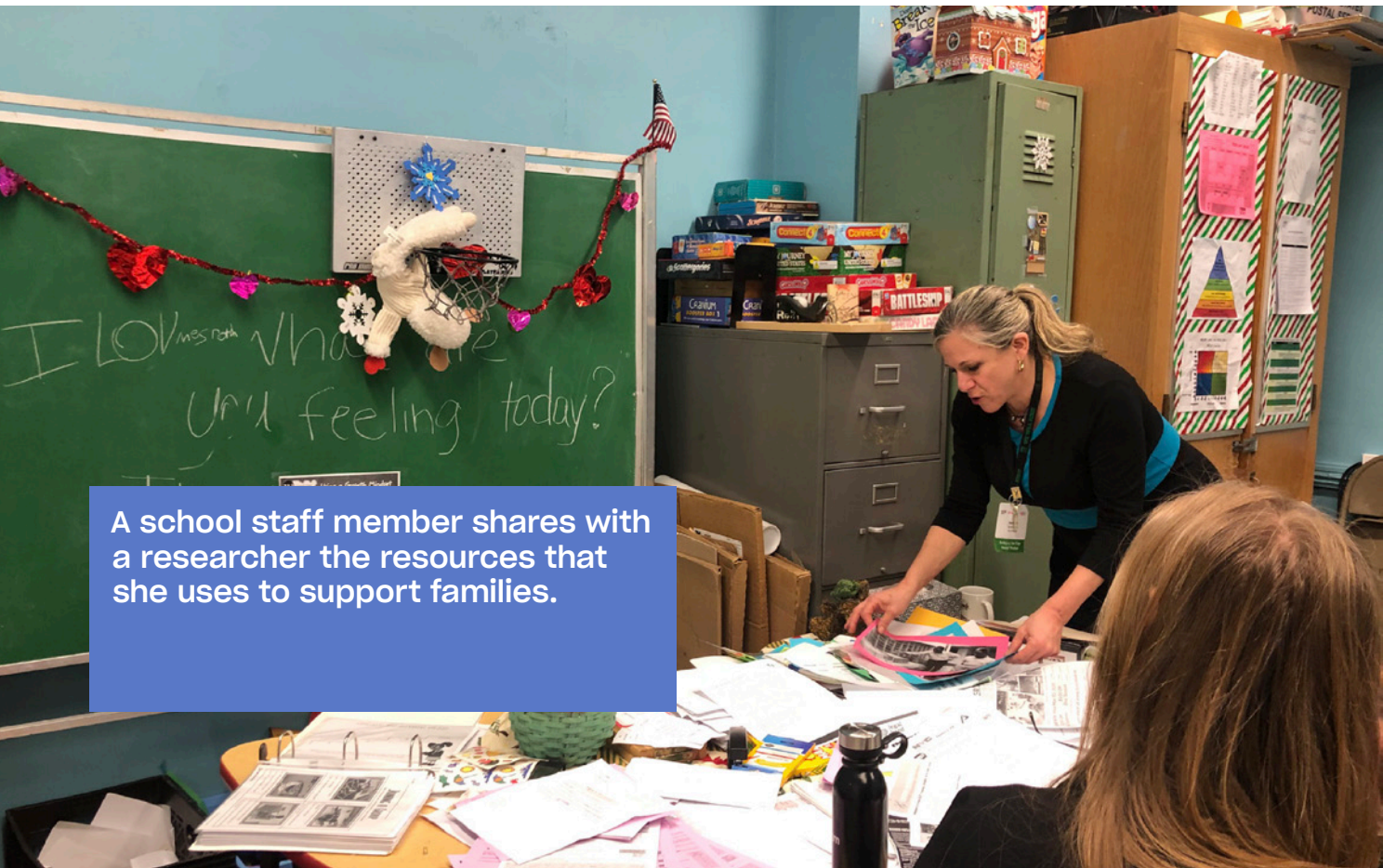
Phase 1: Research, Digital Tool Development & Future Concepting

Prepared for





A PPL researcher observes as a school staff member ranks the types of support that families need most.



A school staff member shares with a researcher the resources that she uses to support families.

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Agency staff members map the programs and services that their agency provides to temporarily housed students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Synced Services aimed to improve collaboration and communication between New York City public agencies that serve students living in temporary housing. Our goal was to reduce the burden of interacting with multiple agencies on temporarily housed families, with the ultimate intention of students having better access to education and stronger academic achievements.

This report documents the first phase of Synced Services work, during which we developed a suite of digital tools to assist families and the staff in accessing support services. We also documented research findings related to family needs and inter-agency collaboration and identified a set of potential Phase 2 projects to advance Synced Services' aims.

Project Background

The NYC Department of Education (DOE) and the Public Policy Lab (PPL) have observed that families of temporarily housed students deal with complex demands from multiple public agencies (and their community-based organization [CBO] providers), creating burden and inefficiency for both families and frontline staff.

We came to believe that agencies often lack clear insights into other agencies' roles and capacities, leading to gaps and overlaps in activities. We suspected that the cognitive, emotional, financial, and time demands of uncoordinated interactions contribute to poor family outcomes, from difficulties in securing permanent housing to school absenteeism.

Project Hypothesis & Scope

In launching Synced Services, we began from the hypothesis that families, agency staff, and other frontline providers would benefit from a clear understanding of the overlapping social-service systems that families are navigating, as well as tools to track and improve their system interactions.

“Schools and CBO’s need to play together to deliver services, but don’t always have much empathy for each other or appreciate the importance of collaborating.”

— AGENCY STAFF MEMBER

We designed the project to explore that hypothesis and to develop a set of responsive new tools, solutions, processes, and future recommendations, originally scoped as:

- **Agency Coordination Tools**
To help agency staff understand and collaborate with sister agency/provider teams.
- **What to Expect Materials**
To help families navigate multiple agencies' requirements.
- **Coordinated Process-Change Guidance**
To help leadership of multiple agencies identify achievable system improvements.

Participating Agencies



Project Stakeholders

At the project's outset, PPL and the DOE's Office of Students in Temporary Housing established partnerships with five other sister agencies that support insecurely housed families. This group convened multiple times to provide input as the project progressed, along with participation from the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity and the Children's Cabinet. We also identified more than a dozen schools, homeless shelters, and community centers that serve families in temporary housing, and we engaged frontline staff and family members there to participate in the project.

Project Activities

To validate the project hypothesis, PPL first led a range of human-centered research activities with agency leaders and managers, frontline staff, and temporarily housed families. We also assessed existing communications and tools produced by the City of New York and used by families in temporary housing. Based on this research and analysis, we identified stakeholders' key service-synchronization needs, as described in Section 3 of this report, **Research Findings**.

Drawing upon the insights we synthesized from our fieldwork data, we then co-designed and tested tools with and for families and frontline staff. Finally, we worked with agency partners to develop implementation plans for using the new tools and to identify opportunities to continue and extend the Synced Services initiative.

Project Outcomes

Our scoped ‘what to expect materials’ and ‘agency coordination tools’ emerged from co-design as a web-based guide and survey tool:

“Before this, it was impossible to imagine that these things could happen.”

— AGENCY STAFF MEMBER

“I tried to do it on my own but... You don’t really know much about it. It’s better when you have people surrounding you that can help you.”

— STH PARENT

“At PATH, when they’re doing intake, they should give you something like this. They’re really rushed at PATH, so this could be something helpful.”

— FRONTLINE STAFF

- **The Benefits Survey**

This digital questionnaire allows DOE staff to ascertain a family’s needs and begin connecting families to other agency services.

- **The Benefits Navigator**

Families can use this responsive website guide to orient themselves to a landscape of useful resources and benefits.

Section 1, **Synced Services Tools**, details the tools and an interaction model describing how to use them for a holistic service experience. The six agencies will use the provided leadership and staff guidance (included in the **Appendices**) to implement the tools with their teams.

What Comes Next

To support ongoing ‘coordinated process change,’ the project team defined and prioritized Phase 2 service and policy design projects to address further opportunities for system-wide service coordination:

- **Collaboration Squad**

All sister agencies have been invited by the DOE to join an ongoing Synced Services capacity-building and governance effort.

- **Resource Hub**

This proposed neighborhood-level partnership model will bring school, shelter, agency, and library staff together to coordinate services for homeless students on a local level.

- **Fair Fi**

Leveraging the 250,000+ tablets DOE provided for remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic, Fair Fi will seek to end the digital divide for homeless students and provide family access to multiple agency services and providers at home.

PPL is collaborating with the DOE to launch the Phase 2 projects, described further in Section 2, **Future Projects**.

SYNCED SERVICES TOOLS

The Synced Services tools were designed with temporarily housed parents and the frontline staff who support them. The tools address challenges that both parents and staff experience with quickly gaining access to useful information. The Benefits Survey is an outreach tool that DOE frontline staff can use to understand a family's needs and coordinate services for them. The Benefits Navigator is a website that families can visit to become familiar with all of the City resources that support students in temporary housing and their families, and feel informed about the next steps they need to take to access them.

Benefits Survey

“Capturing information in one place that is digital, rather than physical – that part alone is the real benefit...That would be really, really helpful.”

– FRONTLINE STAFF

“[Parents] might be too proud to ask for things, but if it’s laid out there and they ask for things I think it might make them more comfortable”

– FRONTLINE STAFF

Research showed that families had to find their own way to services, in part because staff had no quick, non-intrusive way to identify family needs for support and referrals. This gap was intensified by the pandemic shift to remote service delivery. In response, we co-created a lightweight digital tool with families and school staff, designed to build on school staff’s trust relationship with families and their coordination role with sister agencies. Components include:

- **Digital Survey Form Template**

Customizable by school staff, the survey template prioritizes ease of use and family agency. Families can share needs, on their own time and from their mobile phone, and specify who can receive their responses. Staff gain efficiencies by conducting online outreach and get explicit permission to connect families to staff at City agencies with relevant services.

- **Frontline Staff One-Pager Implementation Guide**

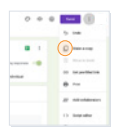
This one-pager provides school frontline staff with directions on how to prepare, send, and manage the survey.

- **Agency Leadership Implementation Guide**

The leadership guidance outlines key implementation activities, including introducing the tool, onboarding staff, conducting outreach, distributing materials, and establishing maintenance systems.

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDES

See **Appendices** for guidance documents for frontline staff and agency leadership.

NVC Benefits Survey	Frontline Staff User Guide
<p>What is the Benefits Survey?</p> <p>The Benefits Survey is a digital version of the survey in the Benefits Access Toolkit (https://bit.ly/38z8L1D). It has been updated to help school staff support temporarily housed students with greater ease. In this improved version, you can quickly review their responses, understand their needs, connect them to services, and refer them to staff at other City agencies.</p> <p>How can I use the Benefits Survey?</p> <p>The Benefits Survey is primarily for DOE staff who work with students living in temporary housing. You can use it in the following ways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For outreach: If you think a family is experiencing housing instability, send them your school's Benefits Survey link to identify changes in their housing status and level of service need. A parent can fill it out in just 2 to 3 minutes. • For remote and in-person needs assessment: Use the survey at the beginning and middle of the school year to facilitate conversations about families' service and resource needs. • For cross-agency referrals: The survey allows families to choose which City agency or provider staff they want you to share their survey results with. 	<p>How do I implement the survey at my school?</p> <p>Your Regional Manager will onboard you to the survey during your cohort meeting. They will walk you through the steps below.</p> <p>STEP 1</p> <p>Determine who at your school will be managing the Benefits Survey. This would usually be the STH Liaison, Community Coordinator, or Bridging the Gap Social Worker.</p> <p>STEP 2</p> <p>Create a copy of the master survey template. Locate the survey template (TEMPLATE: Benefits Survey) at https://bit.ly/38z8L1D. Please do not edit this template. Then, make your own copy by going to More > Make a Copy. Be sure to name it after your school!</p> 

The Benefits Toolkit was designed with temporarily housed parents and frontline staff in a collaboration between the NYC Departments of Education, Health & Mental Hygiene, Human Services, Youth & Childhood Development, Human Resources Administration, Administration for Children's Services, and the Public Policy Lab. In-depth research overview here. Support was provided by Deutsche Bank American Foundations.

NVC Benefits Survey	Implementation Guidance
<p>IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE</p> 	
<p>1. INTRODUCE</p> <p>Promote Benefits Survey to Operational Managers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announce in Regional Managers monthly meeting. See provided template. <p>Promote Benefits Survey to Field Staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each Regional Manager introduces the Benefits Survey in an email to their cohort. See provided template. • Announce in STH field staff WhatsApp group. See sample message. 	
<p>2. ONBOARD</p> <p>Train Regional Managers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train Regional Managers in onboarding their cohort during monthly meeting. <p>Train STH Field Staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Managers train their cohort during their weekly meeting. 	

The Benefits Toolkit was designed with temporarily housed parents and frontline staff in a collaboration between the NYC Departments of Education, Health & Mental Hygiene, Human Services, Youth & Childhood Development, Human Resources Administration, Administration for Children's Services, and the Public Policy Lab. In-depth research overview here. Support was provided by Deutsche Bank American Foundations.

DIGITAL SURVEY FORM TEMPLATE

Excerpts from
the survey

Allows frontline staff
to customize the tool
to fit their school.

NYC | Benefits Survey

++[INSERT SCHOOL NAME]++

Dear parent/guardian,

This survey helps us know which services to connect you to.

Here are some things to know before starting:

1. Your survey responses will only be shared with ++[SCHOOL STAFF MEMBER NAME(S)]++.
2. At the end of the survey, you can give permission (or not!) to share your information with other staff at the school or at other City agencies.
3. You and your child will not be discriminated against based on any information you give.
4. The survey takes about 2 to 3 minutes to complete.

Please provide your email address so that you can receive a copy of your responses.

* Required

Digitizes and streamlines
existing workflows for
collecting a family's housing
status and needs information.

(2/3) Tell us about your current housing situation.

Why do we ask? If you're living in temporary housing, you may be eligible for additional resources. Your information will help us connect you to the right services. We DO NOT need any documentation about your living arrangement.

Has your address changed in the last 6 months? *

If your address has changed, make sure you contact the school to update your records.

- Yes
- No

Helps staff provide targeted
referrals to sister agency
resources, so as to support
a holistic service experience.

(3/3) Let us know how we can help.

May we share your responses with other city staff who may be able to help you and your family. Tell us your preferences below. *

Check all that apply.

- Please don't share my responses with anyone else.
- School ++[INSERT SCHOOL STAFF THAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED]++
- School Nurse
- Youth Drop-In Center Case Worker
- Shelter DOE Liaison/Family Assistant

Benefits Navigator

“This [guide] is really self-explanatory.”

— STH PARENT

“I like to have tips from someone who has been through it.”

— STH PARENT

“If I’m looking for these services, it gets straight to the point.”

— STH PARENT

Families told us during research that they struggled to consolidate benefits information or were heavily dependent on a single staff member for guidance. This tool simplifies complex information to help families identify useful resources on their own; it’s designed for families at all stages of housing instability, whether at-risk of homelessness or on the journey to rehousing. Components include:

- **Online Benefits Guide**

A mobile-and-print-friendly website that orients users to the landscape of services, benefits, and resources for temporarily housed families in New York City.

- **Frontline Staff One-Pager Implementation Guide**

The one-pager for agency and provider frontline staff explains what the Benefits Navigator is, and how it can be used to support outreach, intake, and staff self-education about resources.

- **Agency Leadership Implementation Guide**

Leadership guidance includes an email template and poster for promoting the guide internally, as well as to partners and providers; coordinated training recommendations; and a strategy for content updates.

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDES

See **Appendices** for guidance documents for frontline staff and agency leadership.

NYC Benefits Navigator	Frontline Staff User Guide
<p>What is the Benefits Navigator?</p> <p>The Benefits Navigator is an online guide to services and resources for New York City families experiencing housing instability. The Benefits Navigator answers the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I get emergency housing help? • What does “temporarily housed” mean? • Does housing status change my child’s schooling? • Can I change my child’s school or get transportation? • What are the top 10 resources for homeless families? • What public benefits are available to me? • Which City agencies can help my family? <p>How can I use the Benefits Navigator?</p> <p>Do you work in a shelter, school, youth drop-in center, HRA Service Center, Family Enrichment Center, at PATH, or in another job where you help temporarily housed families? Here’s how to use the Benefits Navigator online guide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For outreach: If you think a family is experiencing housing instability, send them to the Benefits Navigator so that they know their rights and can seek support. • For intake: Walk families through the Benefits Navigator when you’re discussing resources they can use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For self-education: Explore the Benefits Navigator on your own or with colleagues. Many staff find it helpful to see all the resources available to temporarily housed families in one place! <p>What’s the best way to share the Benefits Navigator?</p> <p>Share the link to the guide with families. The Benefits Navigator website is designed for use on mobile phones and also on computers.</p> <p>Here’s some sample language: Benefits Navigator (www.benefitsnavigator.nyc.gov) is an online guide to services and resources for New York City families experiencing housing instability.</p> <p>We also recommend that you print out and display the Benefits Navigator poster in your service locations for families to learn about the guide.</p>

NYC Benefits Navigator	Implementation Guidance									
<p>To successfully implement the Benefits Navigator and Benefits Survey, frontline staff need support from their agency leadership. Once frontline staff have been introduced and trained on the tool, then they can help families use it, as well.</p> <p>The implementation guidance below outlines how leadership can introduce, endorse, distribute, and maintain the tool. Each recommended activity includes who is responsible for that activity and when the activity should be conducted.</p> <p>IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE</p>	<p>1. INTRODUCE</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Activity</th> <th>Who</th> <th>When</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Promote Benefits Navigator Internally</td> <td>Agency program administrators</td> <td>Month 1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Promote Benefits Navigator to Partners and Providers</td> <td>Agency partnerships teams</td> <td>Month 1</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Activity	Who	When	Promote Benefits Navigator Internally	Agency program administrators	Month 1	Promote Benefits Navigator to Partners and Providers	Agency partnerships teams	Month 1
Activity	Who	When								
Promote Benefits Navigator Internally	Agency program administrators	Month 1								
Promote Benefits Navigator to Partners and Providers	Agency partnerships teams	Month 1								

ONLINE BENEFITS GUIDE

Excerpts from the landing page

NYC | Benefits Navigator [Benefits](#) [Agencies](#) [Staff Info](#)

English

This guide to navigating New York City's public services was created with and for families of students living in temporary housing or experiencing homelessness.

Find answers to common questions below:

- [How do I get emergency housing help?](#)
- [What does 'temporarily housed' mean?](#)
- [Does housing status change my child's schooling?](#)
- [Can I change my child's school or get transportation?](#)
- [What are the top 8 resources for homeless families?](#)
- [What public benefits are available to me?](#)
- [Which City agencies can help my family?](#)
- [What documents do I need to get benefits?](#)

Orients families to the range of NYC agency services and benefits.

Helps families organize their documents.

Directs families to the most useful STH tools and resources.

What are the top 8 resources for homeless families?

We asked New York City families who have experienced homelessness to rank the services they found most useful when entering shelter or temporary housing. Here are their top eight resources:

- Access NYC →**
See if you're eligible for 30+ citywide programs.
- Access HRA →**
Apply for SNAP, Cash Assistance, Medicaid, and more.
- FoodHelp NYC →**
Find a local food pantry.
- NYC Well →**
Connect to self-care and mental health resources.
- SafeLink Wireless →**
See if you're eligible for a free cell phone and service.

Provides pragmatic advice and tips.

Parent Tips

"There's a lot of power in photography. I take photos of all of my applications to avoid a 'he said, she said' situation."
—Rosa, mother of 1

"Every [paperwork] that I get from welfare, from the shelter, from the school, I put in a folder away from the kids. If it's not in documentation, it never happened."
—Iris, mother of 2

FUTURE PROJECTS

Synced Service's fieldwork findings and workshops yielded innovative strategic opportunities to improve service coordination, which lay beyond this project's scope of work. These opportunities were developed into draft project proposals and subject to rounds of refinement and prioritization with the sister agencies. The outcome of this process was three proposed human-centered policy and service design projects, which advance Synced Services goals: a governance model for ongoing agency collaboration that supports capacity-building, a localized resource distribution model that leverages libraries, and a model for Citywide service delivery through tablets. Each project is driven by a collaboration between the DOE, one or more sister agencies, and PPL.

Collaboration Squad

The Need

The range of City programs and services that agencies provide for students in temporary housing is incredibly vast. It is challenging for frontline staff and operational managers to build and maintain a working knowledge of this complex landscape. Families also need agency staff to share a consistent view of how the City can support them, so that they receive a comprehensive level of service. However, there has been no mechanism for the type of programmatic alignment that could support this scale of cross-agency professional development and knowledge-sharing. A program of this kind could close service gaps by equipping staff with the expertise they need to refer families across agency boundaries.

“It would build an understanding and awareness of the ecosystem to better support families”

— AGENCY LEADERSHIP

The Immediate Opportunity

For the last year, Synced Services has acted as a meaningful convening mechanism for six city agencies. Formalizing these relationships will enable this collaboration to continue and advance sister agencies’ mission to support temporarily housed students and their families.

Project Goal

This project will design and test an approach for cross-agency staff capacity-building that supports the implementation of Synced Services’ tools, fosters collaboration between sister agency staff, and empowers staff to navigate family benefit programs.

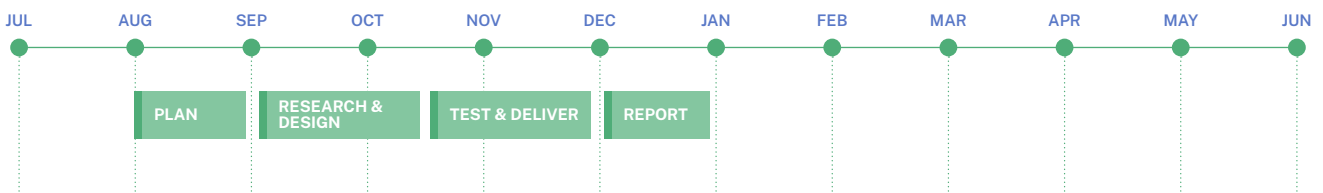
Deliverables

- Cross-agency capacity-building approach
- Training session facilitation guides

Key Project Activities

- Design capacity-building approach so that frontline staff can be jointly trained on Synced Services tools
- Convene monthly cross-agency leadership coordination meetings
- Inform FairFi and Resource Hub projects
- Facilitate sharing of City-wide initiatives that impact students in temporary housing and their families

COLLABORATION SQUAD | Proposed timeline



Resource Hub

The Need

Families turn to their schools, shelters, and libraries to gather resources that can support them through housing instability. In some instances, schools and libraries have self-organized to share programming and resources. Some Family Enrichment Centers and shelters have established successful partnerships with libraries. Yet, there is currently no shared service model that enables staff at schools, shelters, and libraries to coordinate their service delivery around the population of homeless students they share at a neighborhood level. This service model would increase families' access to valuable local resources, while providers and schools gain more efficient mechanisms for offering support.

“I like this idea. It seems achievable because libraries are already doing a lot of this work... And they're very local and community anchors already.”

— AGENCY LEADERSHIP

The Immediate Opportunity

The pandemic has disrupted life for students across the city. Connecting school, shelter, and library staff to assess community needs and coordinate service delivery will create stronger supports for students at the local level.

Project Goal

Resource Hub will design and test a partnership model for school, shelter, and library staff in a given neighborhood to plan and serve local homeless students together.

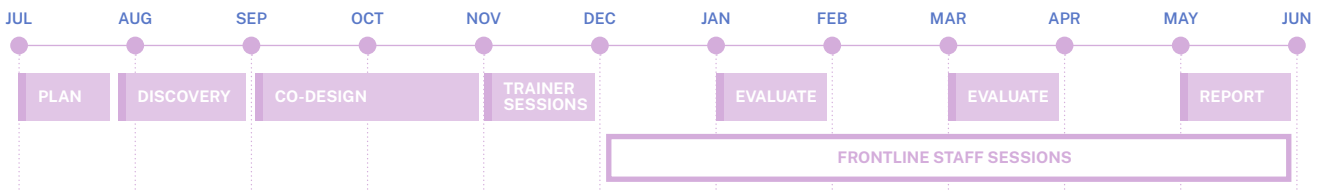
Deliverables

- Partnership model based on the school-year calendar for schools, shelters, and libraries to collaboratively serve local homeless students
- Materials to support staff planning, collaborative servicing, and outreach
- An implementation guide for scaling and operating the program City-wide, across DOE schools and NYC library systems

Key Project Activities

- Select schools, shelters, and libraries to participate in the project based on risk level of local student population
- Research stakeholder needs
- Design collaboration model and associated planning materials for rapid testing
- Field test collaboration model and materials with staff
- Create implementation guide for scaling across the city

RESOURCE HUB | Proposed timeline



FairFi

The Need

A significant number of homeless students and their families live without an internet-enabled tablet or computer. This puts them at a huge disadvantage in a world shifting towards online education and public service delivery. Besides slipping behind in tech-literacy, families struggle with tasks that should not be a challenge, such as accessing the information that agencies provide online, managing their documents, and completing agency requirements. Students' academic outcomes are also impacted by the lack of access to commonly used applications and online educational resources. Providing devices would not only address these challenges, but also give agencies a new touchpoint through which to offer families Citywide support.

“Young people were so happy to receive an iPad. It was like an investment in them... It was such an empowerment. It meant a lot to them – it really did.”

— AGENCY LEADERSHIP

The Immediate Opportunity

As the pandemic shifted learning online, the Department of Education responded to digital educational inequality by distributing hundreds of thousands of iPads to at-risk students. Crucial to the educational achievement of homeless students, these devices also are now serving as valuable service touch points between students, their families, and multiple City agencies.

Project Goal

FairFi will leverage DOE's pandemic-response iPad program to design a model for multi-agency use of City-provided devices — and make a case for keeping network-enabled digital devices in the hands of homeless students.

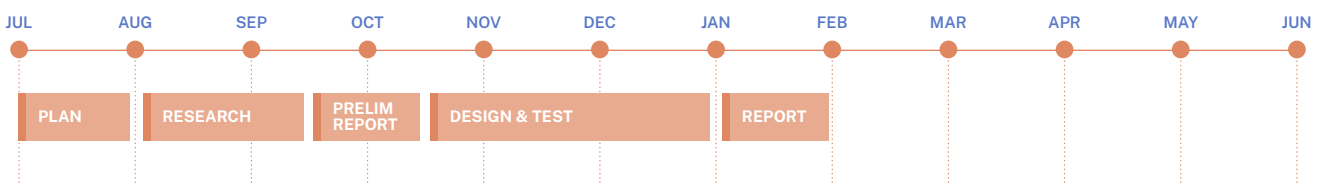
Deliverables

- Example iPad with apps and services to support families in accessing City services
- Tools for families and staff to use and troubleshoot devices
- Policy recommendations for device distribution and use as a multi-agency service channel

Key Project Activities

- Research the needs of students in receiving and using devices for virtual learning
- Research how devices can help students and families access cross-agency services
- Research to understand staff needs around interacting with students and families to use digital devices
- Design a device experience for students that includes useful apps, bookmarks, tips, and more
- Design staff training materials and programs
- Create policy recommendations for the use of network-enabled devices post-pandemic

FAIRFI | Proposed timeline



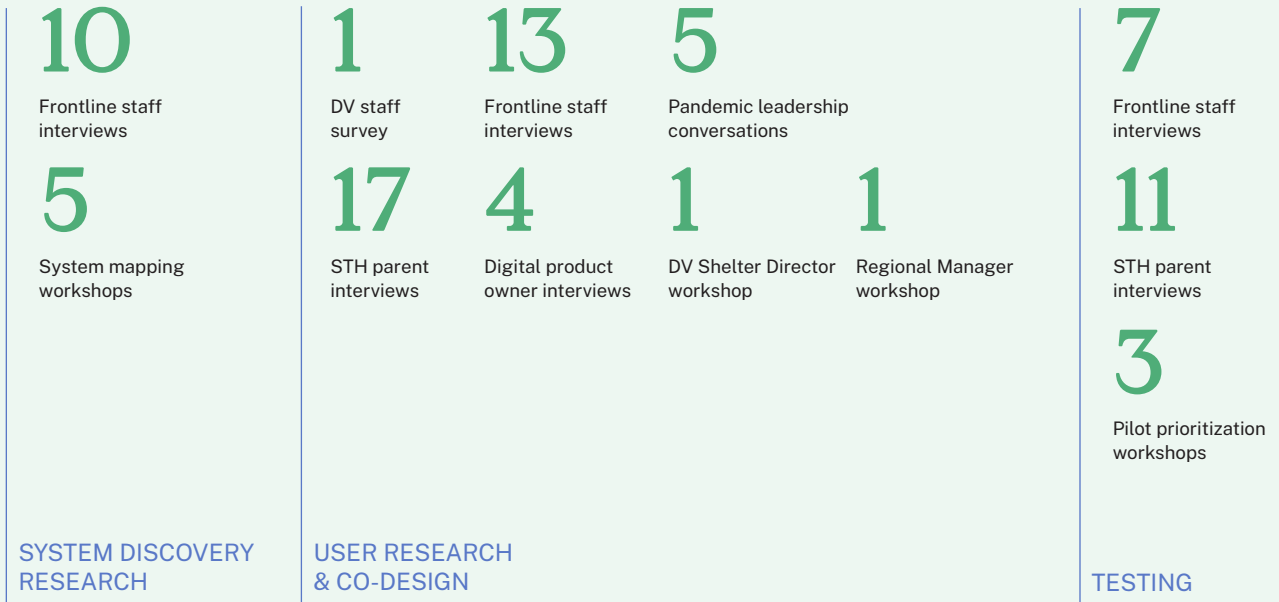
RESEARCH FINDINGS

To generate input for our design work we customized research approaches that would yield data to inform the development of each deliverable type.

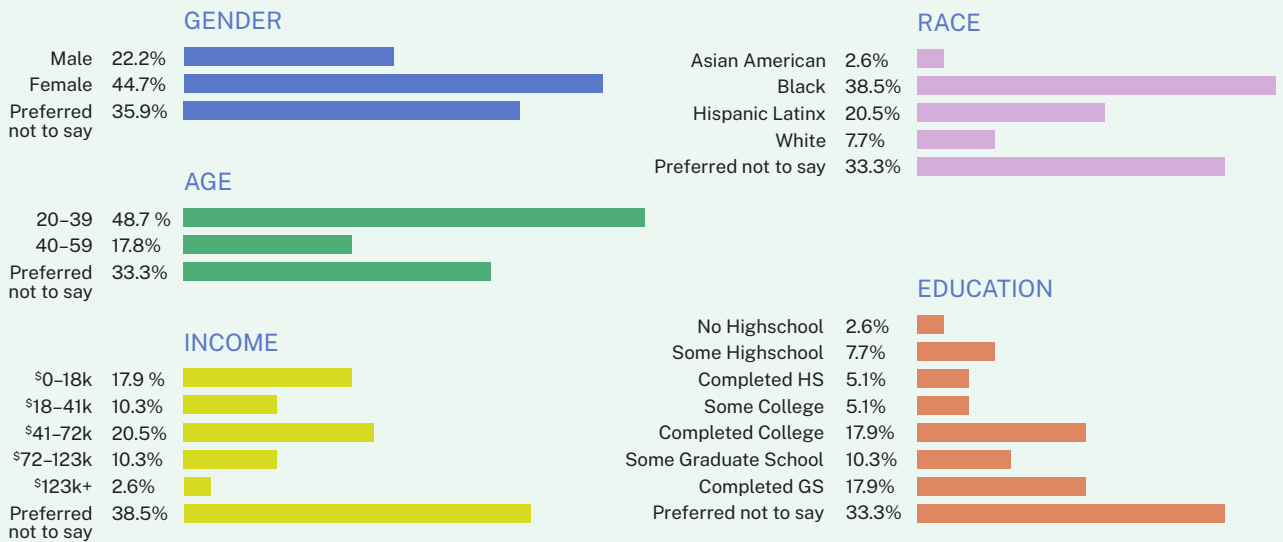
The fieldwork addressed four areas of investigation:

- How do families of at-risk students served by the STH Office interact with public agency staff, and how do duplicative, competing, or conflicting demands affect both staff and student's educational outcomes?
- What information is captured in the interactions between agencies and families, and how can agencies streamline information requests to relieve families of burden?
- What existing tools and communications are available to families and staff, and how might they be improved?
- What allows some staff and families to be 'positive deviants' who more effectively navigate complex system requirements?

FIELDWORK ACTIVITIES | 154 total hours



RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



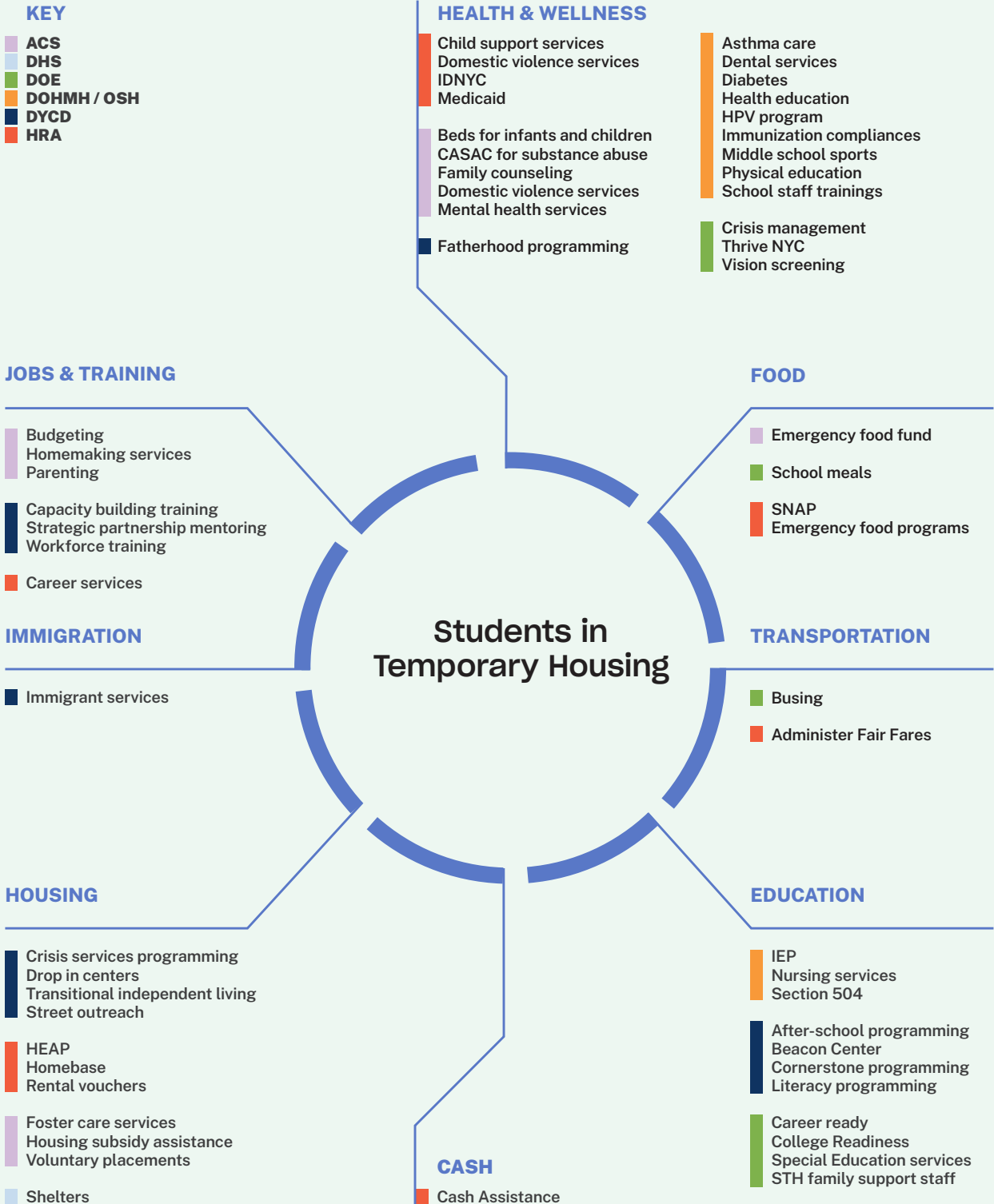
Family Needs

To identify the family needs that would inform the design of the what to expect materials, PPL conducted fieldwork with parents and frontline staff at shelters, schools, and provider organizations around New York City from mid-January to mid-April, 2020. The team mapped the services families were currently using, how they were being accessed, and desired improvements for those experiences. With frontline staff PPL documented approaches to supporting STH families, including conducting needs assessments, resource management, and collaborating with other frontline staff.

“The library is my
best friend.”

—STH PARENT

- **Service literacy:** need a clear understanding of how to access and use a breadth of programs and services.
- **Advocacy:** need help navigating resources and locating assistance as they require it.
- **Emotional security:** need trauma-informed service provision that anticipates poor mental health.
- **Slack:** need additional time and resources that reduce daily pressures and requirement completion.



Agency Staff Needs

“Some shelter staff take a personal interest in the family and advocate for them. That plays a big role in how families access our services.”

—AGENCY STAFF MEMBER

“Anytime we need to get informed consent, it’s not great, particularly for STH families. Their lives are chaotic.”

—AGENCY STAFF MEMBER

To understand what needs the agency coordination tools should support, PPL conducted systems mapping workshops with the sister agencies, comprising participation from 24 different agency staff. In these workshops PPL mapped the range of programs and services each agency provides for the STH population, cross-agency processes for delivering them, as well as related challenges, bright spots, and new ideas for improving service provision.

- **A unified mission:** to overcome historical silos, agencies need more than programs — they need a shared obsession with keeping at-risk children in school.
- **Agile protocols:** need political dexterity and standardized procedures to manage successful service delivery to vulnerable families.
- **Shepherds:** need frontline staff to shepherd families across agency borders.
- **Consent:** need a way to help families feel empowered when giving consent.

Agency Leadership Needs

To define agency leadership’s aspirations for process-change guidance, we conducted a series of interviews with each agency’s representatives in the leadership group. At this time, New York City had just entered its quarantine and our partners were rapidly transforming their services to support remote family support. These pandemic-related conversations were critical for evaluating the extent to which our pre-COVID findings still held, and revealing emerging best practices, ‘silver linings’, and ongoing challenges.

“We work in silos.”

—AGENCY STAFF MEMBER

“The crisis is redefining how... agencies deliver services.”

—AGENCY STAFF MEMBER

- **Online servicing:** need to keep service delivery online, where possible.
- **Bottleneck reduction:** need to relax requirements beyond the crisis period.
- **Collaboration:** need to maintain heightened collaboration between agencies and providers.
- **Proactive processes:** need to sustain recent waves of innovation and creativity to support new ways of working.

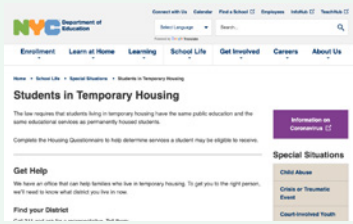
WHITESPACE DIAGRAM | STH tool landscape

POPULATION SPECIFICITY

Students in Temporary Housing

Homeless New Yorkers

Low-Income New Yorkers



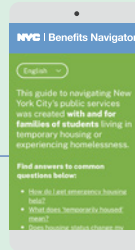
STH Homepage



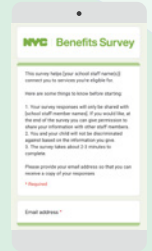
ACS Connect Me



NYC 311

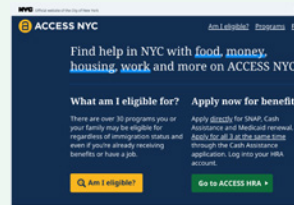


Benefits Navigator



Benefits Survey

Benefits Access Strategy & Toolkit



Access NYC

Service Directory

'What to Expect' Service Guide

Service Eligibility

LEVEL OF INTERACTION

Digital Tool Assessment

KEY

- OUR DELIVERABLES
- NYC RESOURCES
- PAST PPL PROJECTS



Family Assistant Intake Tool



Access HRA

Service Enrollment

Along with conducting agency systems mapping, fieldwork with frontline staff and families, and agency leadership conversations, PPL conducted an appraisal of various City digital tools that families already have access to for support. This appraisal enabled us to identify the specific service gaps that the tools needed to fill.

This appraisal found that in terms of population specificity, there was no resource specifically designed to support students in temporary housing and their families. When evaluating the goals of the tools, PPL found either general directory tools or very specific benefits assessment and enrollment tools, however nothing that served the middle ground – helping families orient within the landscape of services with pragmatic advice. In addition, there was no easy way for families to quickly share their needs with frontline staff. The most closely aligned tool was the Benefits Access Strategy and Toolkit, therefore we ensured that the Benefits Survey was positioned to complement it.

“We’ve been hearing from families about how much they appreciate check-ins and engagement. It’d be great to be able to build trusting relationships with families that will hopefully be useful for them.”

— FRONTLINE STAFF

APPENDICES

Included in the Appendices is guidance designed to help the sister agencies with successful implementation of the Benefits Survey and Benefits Navigator. There is step-by-step implementation guidance for agency leadership, as well as user guides for frontline staff.

NYC | Benefits Survey

Frontline Staff User Guide

What is the Benefits Survey?

The *Benefits Survey* is a digital version of the survey in the *Benefits Access Toolkit* [<https://bit.ly/3p78Lt1>]. It has been updated to help school staff support temporarily housed students with greater ease. In this improved version, you can quickly review their responses, understand their needs, connect them to services, and refer them to staff at other City agencies.

How can I use the *Benefits Survey*?

The *Benefits Survey* is primarily for DOE staff who work with students living in temporary housing. You can use it in the following ways.

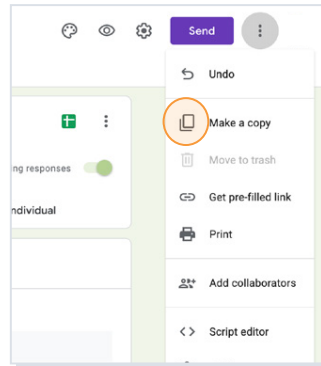
- **For outreach:** If you think a family is experiencing housing instability, send them your school's *Benefits Survey* link to identify changes in their housing status and level of service need. A parent can fill it out in just 2 to 3 minutes.
- **For remote and in-person needs assessment:** Use the survey at the beginning and middle of the school year to facilitate conversations about families' service and resource needs.
- **For cross-agency referrals:** The survey allows families to choose which City agency or provider staff they want you to share their survey results with.

How do I implement the survey at my school?

Your Regional Manager will onboard you to the survey during your cohort meeting. They will walk you through the steps below:

STEP 1
Determine who at your school will be managing the *Benefits Survey*. This would usually be the STH Liaison, Community Coordinator, or Bridging the Gap Social Worker.

STEP 2
Create a copy of the master survey template. Locate the survey template ('TEMPLATE - Benefits Survey') at [<https://bit.ly/2GzHXzZ>]. Please **do not edit** this template. Then, make your own copy by going to **More > Make a Copy**. Be sure to name it after your school!



The *Benefits Navigator* was designed with temporarily housed parents and frontline staff, in a collaboration between the NYC Departments of Education, Health & Mental Hygiene, Homeless Services, Youth & Childhood Development, Human Resources Administration, Administration for Children's Services, and the Public Policy Lab, a nonprofit innovation team. Support was provided by Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation.

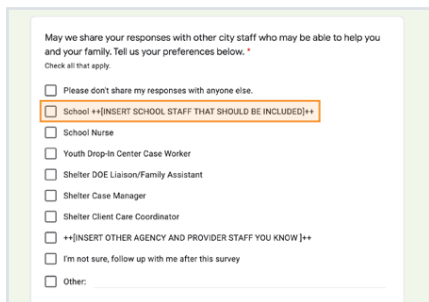
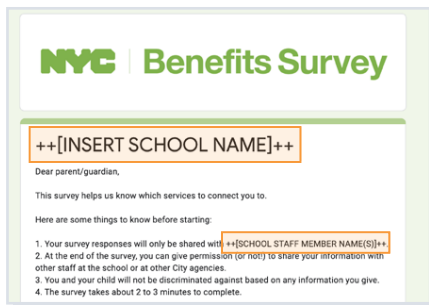
NYC | Benefits Survey

Frontline Staff User Guide

STEP 3

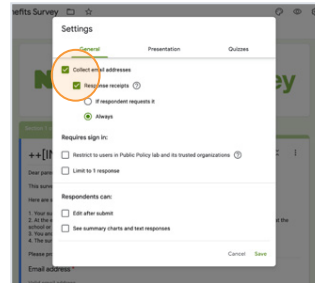
Customize the survey language so that it's about your school. Update the information in the following 3 areas of the survey as indicated by ++[Text]++:

- Section 1:** Insert your school name.
- Section 1:** Insert the school staff names that will have access to the survey responses.
- Section 5:** Insert the staff roles at your school, local services, city agencies that are relevant to the families at your school.



STEP 4

Ensure the survey will email the parent a copy of their response. Go to Settings > General > Make sure 'Collect email addresses' and 'Response receipts' are checked.



STEP 5

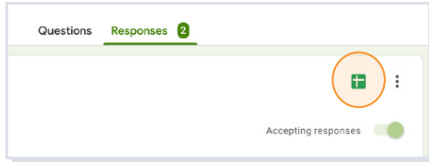
Send the survey! Click on the **Send** button at the top right of the survey. This will generate a survey link that you can email or text message to the parent.



STEP 6

Review the survey results. Click on the **'Responses'** tab to see individual parent responses. You can also click **'Create Spreadsheet'** to export the results to a csv file.

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Note: If you receive a response that shows a change in housing status, don't forget to ask the parent to fill out your school's *Housing Questionnaire*, so that ATS can be updated.

STEP 7

Connect the family to resources, benefits, and services. After you have reviewed a parent's response, schedule a conversation to understand their needs in more detail and make referrals. You can also point them towards the *Benefits Navigator* [benefitsnavigator.cityofnewyork.us], an online guide to services, benefits, and resources for New York City families experiencing housing instability. Visit the **Staff Info** page in *Benefits Navigator* for more information about how you can use it.

STEP 8

Refer the family to other relevant agency and provider staff. In the survey, the parent has an option to share their survey response with other staff who may be supporting them. If they request your support with this, be sure to confirm the parent's contact information before sharing their survey response.

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What is the Benefits Navigator?

The *Benefits Navigator* is an online guide to services and resources for New York City families experiencing housing instability. The *Benefits Navigator* answers the following questions:

- How do I get emergency housing help?
- What does 'temporarily housed' mean?
- Does housing status change my child's schooling?
- Can I change my child's school or get transportation?
- What are the top 8 resources for homeless families?
- What public benefits are available to me?
- Which City agencies can help my family?

How can I use the *Benefits Navigator*?

Do you work in a shelter, school, youth drop-in center, HRA Service Center, Family Enrichment Center, at PATH, or in another job where you help temporarily housed families? Here's how to use the *Benefits Navigator* online guide:

- **For outreach:** If you think a family is experiencing housing instability, send them to the *Benefits Navigator* so that they know their rights and can seek support.
- **For intake:** Walk families through the *Benefits Navigator* when you're discussing resources they can use.

- **For self-education:** Explore the *Benefits Navigator* on your own or with colleagues. Many staff find it helpful to see all the resources available to temporarily housed families in one place!

What's the best way to share the *Benefits Navigator*?

Share the link to the guide with families. The *Benefits Navigator* website is designed for use on mobile phones and also on computers.

Here's some sample language: *Benefits Navigator* [www.benefitsnavigator.cityofnewyork.us] is an online guide to services and resources for New York City families experiencing housing instability.

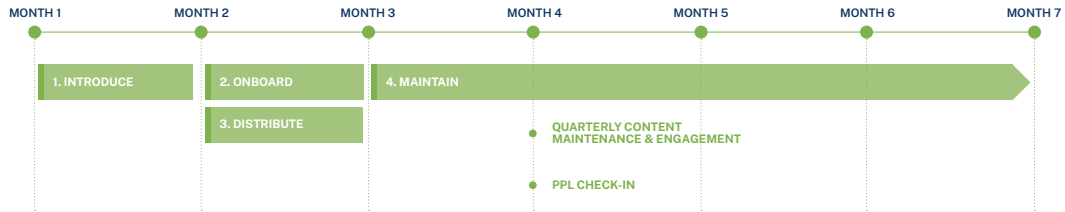
We also recommend that you print out and display the *Benefits Navigator* poster in your service locations for families to learn about the guide.

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NYC | Benefits Survey

Implementation Guidance

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE



1. INTRODUCE

Promote *Benefits Survey* to Operational Managers

- Announce in Regional Managers monthly meeting. See provided template.

Who

STH Office

When

Month 1

Promote *Benefits Survey* to Field Staff

- Each Regional Manager introduces the *Benefits Survey* in an email to their cohort. See provided template.
- Announce in STH field staff WhatsApp group. See sample message.

Who

Regional Managers

When

Month 1

2. ONBOARD

Train Regional Managers

- Train Regional Managers in onboarding their cohort during monthly meeting.

Who

STH Office

When

Month 2

Train STH Field Staff

- Regional Managers train their cohort during their weekly meeting.

Who

Regional Managers

When

Month 2

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NYC | Benefits Survey

Implementation Guidance

3. DISTRIBUTE

Post Benefits Survey download link on OCS website

- Post *Benefits Survey* download link on OCS website.

Who

STH Office

When

Month 2

Send Survey to Parents at Key Moments of Engagement

- School staff share survey with parents at intake, quarterly, and when they're aware that a family's circumstances may have changed.

Who

STH school field staff

When

Month 2

4. MAINTAIN

Create Opportunities to Refine Tool Use

- Dedicate time in cohort meetings to share emerging best practices around tool use and to troubleshoot.

Who

Regional Managers and STH field staff

When

Quarterly

Gather Feedback

- Send a brief survey through the field staff WhatsApp group to gather feedback about tool use.

Who

STH Office

When

Month 3

Drive Engagement

- Send a brief message to field staff through the WhatsApp group, which encourages tool use.

Who

STH Office

When

Quarterly

Evaluation

- PPL facilitates check-in calls with the STH Office at 3, 6, and 12 months after delivery. The calls aim to evaluate how tool implementation is evolving and provide support with troubleshooting.

Who

PPL

When

Month 4,
Month 7,
Month 13

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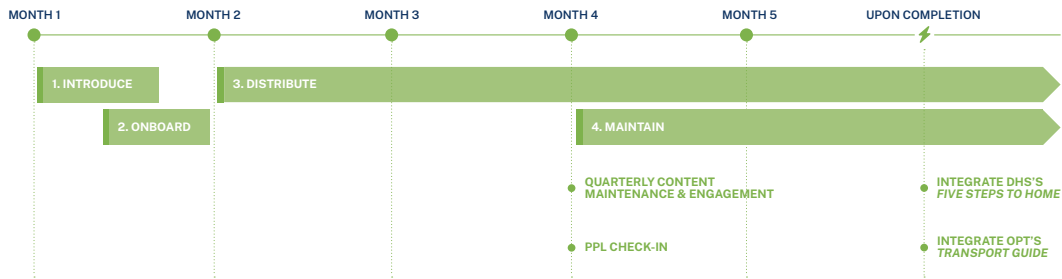
NYC | Benefits Navigator

Implementation Guidance

To successfully implement the *Benefits Navigator* and *Benefits Survey*, frontline staff need support from their agency leadership. Once frontline staff have been introduced and trained on the tool, then they can help families use it, as well.

The implementation guidance below outlines how leadership can introduce, onboard, distribute, and maintain the tools. Each recommended activity includes who is responsible for that activity and when the activity should be conducted.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE



1. INTRODUCE

Promote Benefits Navigator Internally

- Announce in internal communications to operational and frontline staff. See provided template.

Who

Agency program administrators

When

Month 1

Promote Benefits Navigator to Partners and Providers

- Announce in external communications to partners and providers. See provided template.

Who

Agency partnerships teams

When

Month 1

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NYC | Benefits Navigator

Implementation Guidance

2. ONBOARD

Conduct Light Trainings

- Work with agency leadership and professional development team to determine how the *Benefits Navigator* can support current frontline/field staff workflows.
- Offer a light training to frontline/field staff about tool use for self-education and supporting families, such as during a cohort meeting, a provider Town Hall, or added to already-scheduled professional development activities e.g. webinars.

Who

Agency professional development teams

When

Month 1

3. DISTRIBUTE

Place *Benefits Navigator* Posters in Physical Environments (See Provided Poster)

- **DHS** can place posters in PATH, shelter noticeboards, and frontline staff offices.
- **DOE** can place posters in schools, STH field staff offices, and at parent events.
- **DYCD** can place posters at youth drop-in centers.
- **HRA** can place posters in Service Centers and DV shelters.
- **ACS** can place posters in Family Enrichment Centers.
- **OSH** can place posters in nurse offices.
- **Branch libraries** can place posters on noticeboards.

Who

All agencies and their partners or providers

When

From Month 2

Raise Public Awareness Through Social Media

- Announce tool launch on social media, e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. See provided social media image.

Who

Communications teams at sister agencies, NYC Opportunity, and providers

When

From Month 2

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NYC | Benefits Navigator

Implementation Guidance

4. MAINTAIN

Share Content Updates

- Provide STH Office with updated content when programs or services change.

Who

All agencies

When

Quarterly

Manage Content Updates

- Gather content updates from sister agencies.
- Update content on site.

Who

DOE

When

Ongoing

Evaluation

- PPL facilitates check-in calls with agencies at 3, 6, and 12 months after delivery. The calls aim to evaluate how tool implementation is evolving and provide support with troubleshooting.

Who

PPL

When

Month 4,
Month 7,
Month 13

Integrate OPT's *Transport Guide*

- Add *Transport Guide* under 'Can I change my child's school or get transportation?' and to 'Which City agencies can help my family' section on the 'DOE' page.

Who

DOE

When

Upon completion
of *Transport Guide*

Integrate DHS's *Five Steps to Home*

- Integrate *Five Steps to Home* content to 'Which City agencies can help my family' section on the 'DHS' page.

Who

DHS

When

Upon completion of
Five Steps to Home

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Acknowledgments

Temporarily Housed New Yorkers

This project is only possible because of the New York City parents and guardians who generously shared their experiences and insights with the project team. We include their contributions anonymously. We offer them our sincere thanks.

Frontline Staff

Family assistants, Bridging the Gap social workers, regional managers, client care coordinators, community coordinators, shelter directors, and youth drop-in center staff provided invaluable time, assistance, and wisdom. Participating organizations included:

Shelters

Albermarle Residence
Bushwick VOA
Jamaica Family Residence
Harlem Family Residence
Liberty Avenue Residence
Samaritan Village
West Farms Family Residence
WIN Family Residence

Schools

PS/MS 4
PS 138
PS 21
Riverdale Avenue School

Youth Drop-in Center

Sheltering Arms

New York City Agencies

Sincere thanks to the many staff from DOE's sister agencies who attended design sessions and provided project leadership, fieldwork support, and ongoing feedback on our Synced Services tools.

NYC Administration for Children's Services
NYC Department of Homeless Services
NYC Department of Health & Mental Hygiene
NYC Department of Youth & Community Development
NYC Human Resources Administration
NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity

NYC DOE Office of Students in Temporary Housing

Corrine Christison, Policy & Partnerships Coordinator
Michael Hickey, Executive Director
Erin Lester, Director of Policy, Operations & Partnerships

Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation

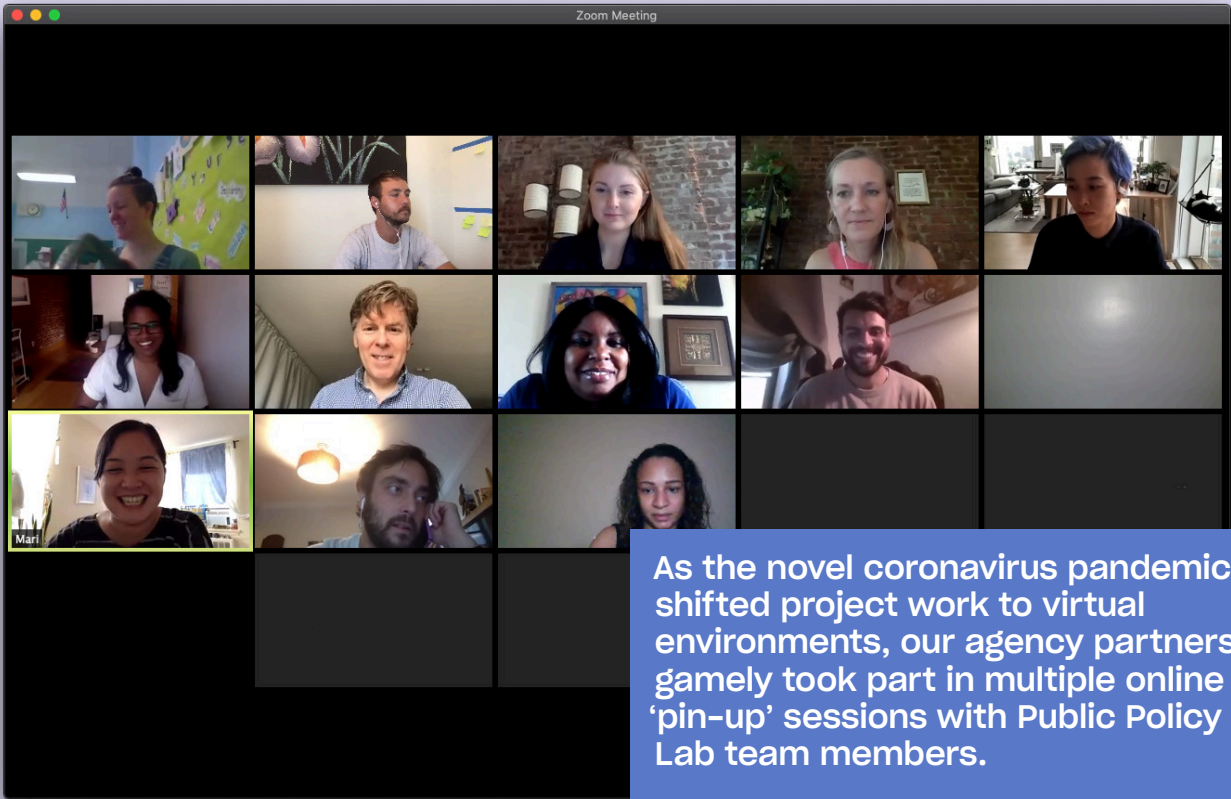
Alessandra DiGiusto
Executive Director, Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation,
and Head of Corporate Social Responsibility Americas
Karen Kwiatek
Corporate Social Responsibility Project Manager

Public Policy Lab

Kanna Atarashi, Design Strategist
John Buckley, Design Strategist
Shanti Mathew, Deputy Director
Chelsea Mauldin, Executive Director
Natalia Radywyl, Research & Evaluation Director
Petey Routzahn, Design Fellow
Natalie Sims, Design Director
Stephanie Yim, Design Fellow



This project would not be possible without thoughtful parents like this dad, seen here sharing with a PPL researcher how he interacts with multiple agency services throughout the week.



As the novel coronavirus pandemic shifted project work to virtual environments, our agency partners gamely took part in multiple online 'pin-up' sessions with Public Policy Lab team members.

PUBLIC POLICY LAB

Of New York City's 1.1 million public school students, more than 114,000 live in shelters and unstable housing over the course of the school year. These students' families experience substantial challenges when navigating New York City's complex social service system, affecting children's educational outcomes and undermining family progress in finding permanent housing.

This report documents a project conducted by the Public Policy Lab and the **NYC Department of Education** to improve service coordination for families of students living in temporary housing. The outcomes include research findings related to family and agency needs, mobile-friendly digital tools that help families navigate multiple agencies' services and to help staff understand family needs and collaborate with sister agency/provider teams, and a series of project recommendations for further systemic transformation.

All of this work was designed with temporarily housed parents and frontline staff, in a collaboration between:



Deutsche Bank