

Benefits Project Focus Group Summary

April 2023

In March through April 2023, a focus group and several one-on-one interviews were conducted. One-on-one interviews occurred with Benefits Project PILOT participants who were unable to attend the focus group session. Attempts were made to reach 15 PILOT participants who expressed interest, on their survey, to participate in a focus group. Nine (women of color) participated in either a follow-up focus group or one-on-one interview that addressed the following areas:

- Work experience
- Experience with applying for or receiving public benefits
- Experience with accessing resources in the community
- Ideas on how to improve the calculator

Work Experience

Three PILOT participants were employed, while 5 did not work. One PILOT participant declined to respond. One participant who did not work expressed she needed help finding a job, after applying for 2 jobs that did not hire her due to her criminal background. She shared that she has resorted to “boosting” to make ends meet.

Regarding workplace discrimination, one PILOT participant mentioned experiencing age discrimination, and another shared experiencing race discrimination. No formal complaint was made by either.

Experience with Applying for or Receiving Public Benefits

When comparing whether to have Monroe County Department of Human Services (MCDHS) staff conduct interviews over the phone or in-person as part of the public benefits application process, five PILOT participants shared that they preferred to have the interviews over the phone, 2 preferred face-to-face and 2 declined to respond. Comments made about the process were:

- A person’s transportation needs should be taken into consideration when conducting in-person interviews
- A dropbox should be available to allow an applicant to upload documents
- An electronic receipt should be given to indicate that an applicant dropped off completed applications (faxing documents is not viable)
- Improve customer service, including ensuring the applicant understand the request/documents to bring in (staffing shortage was acknowledged)

When asked to share what made the public benefits application process difficult and easier, the following comments were provided:

- Simplify application wording or questions (e.g. yes or no questions)
 - Address reading level/terminology/language or wording
- Shorten the application, in particular, the disability application
- Address long wait period for public benefits – suggest 30-day wait period
- Revise how money for families are budgeted, it is outdated (e.g. rent based on 1974 income calculations)

- Consider offering a trial period as a person transitions from SSDI to employment in a way that does not cut a person off of assistance, or offer [financial] help as they transition
- Improve customer service – extend phone line hours
- Working with same caseworker when recertifying makes it easier because he/she is familiar with an applicant's/recipient's case

One PILOT participant mentioned that people were scared to leave the system because change was hard. This person mentioned as an example: “if work 20 hours or more, MCDHS cuts a person’s benefits, tow a person’s car. Because of this, a person may lie to remain in the system”.

Four PILOT participants responded to the question “have you ever turned down work, a job promotion, or pay raise to maintain your benefits”. Comments were:

- 2 participants mentioned being turned down for a pay raise
- 1 participant shared that they turned down a pay raise to maintain Food Stamps
- 1 participant mentioned not wanting to move because she would lose her subsidized housing

No one reported experiencing a “benefits cliff”. However, one participant mentioned a potential cliff if she had moved to senior housing apartment, only to later find out that she cannot afford the cost of the apartment.

Experience with Accessing Resources in the Community

When asked about community resources that were either missing or needed to be increased, the following comments emerged:

- Need resources to address mice in the home/apartment
- Need resources to address “boosting”
- Need more mental health providers
- Need flexible hours for childcare for parents working non-traditional hours, medical daycare
- Need more accessible transportation, rides to MCDHS appointments
- Need affordable legal help
- Need health care
- Need to improve communication between MCDHS and SSDI
- Need programs specifically for youth
- Provide more help to elderly and disabled, especially given the cost of food (acknowledged extra Food Stamps provided during COVID that was no longer available)
 - Provide help to seniors around health benefits and utilities
- Provide community garden to help a person make ends meet (e.g. for food)
- Provide financial education and budgeting workshops – suggestion that the recreation centers, nonprofits and education institutions partner to address this matter
- Close the skills gap by providing training for people who do not have the credentials/provide tools to help people find jobs. Allow a person to build his/her resume through volunteering experiences, especially when he/she has a criminal record
- Need jobs for people with criminal backgrounds
- Provide help with security deposits
- Consider establishing a 24-hour shelter

- Consider nonprofits partnering with MCDHS to provide services to the community (acknowledge many community centers have closed)
 - North Marketview Heights area needs support

One PILOT participant shared that she moved back to Rochester because help was not available in Irondequoit to address poverty and needs of a single mother raising children.

One PILOT participant suggested that anonymous surveys be administered to obtain feedback/learn about needs people may have.

Ideas on How to Improve the Calculator

It was suggested to have the tool in multiple languages (e.g. Spanish, Nepali, languages of African refugees). It was also suggested that the tool use simpler language/wording.

Recommendations

As a result of the findings learned from the focus group/one-on-one interview follow-up, the following is recommended:

1. Expand the toolkit to include aforementioned resources not currently reflected in the document.
 - Expansion will align with 211.
2. Determine whether a list exists or can be created on employers that hire people with criminal backgrounds, and explore a way to promote the list across the community.
 - Consider adding this list to the toolkit.
3. Explore adding an “budget creation template option” to the calculator for those who may want to create a budget.
4. Incorporate calculator suggestions above into the next iteration/enhanced version of the tool.
5. Review comments shared above to explore whether or how best to address them. For example, explore how MCDHS/applicants can be supported with services/resources while awaiting notification of when (and how much) benefits will be given.