

# Addressing Racial Equity Through Human-Centered Design

September 30, 2020



THE **LAB** @ DC

 GOVERNMENT OF THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
**MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR**

Over the past several months, many organizations have taken a critical look at racial equity in their work. Similarly, our applied social and data science research team—The Lab @ DC in the Executive Office of Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser—has asked, “Is our work propping up or [chipping away at racism?](#)”

As we discuss large structural changes to things like policing, housing, and education, we should also look at one seemingly small yet powerful way we can make government truly equitable: tackling government forms.

For the past three-plus years, our team has revised more than 50 city forms as part of Mayor Bowser’s commitment to make city services easier to use (The Lab @ DC, 2017). But putting human-centered design principles to work hasn’t just been about making forms less of a headache. This effort has been a small but important act of antiracism (The Lab @ DC, 2019).

If a racist policy is “any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups,” (Kendi, 2019), then we have to look critically at the explicit and implicit rules we set in our government programs and the outcomes they produce across racial groups. Many times, those rules first materialize in government forms. Seeking a driver’s license? Fill out the form. Want to enroll your child in school?

Fill out forms. Need food assistance? More forms. The paperwork may be universal, but the experience and outcomes are not.

When we fail to adopt a human-centered approach that recognizes the diverse needs of *all* our residents, the rules of engagement burden residents experiencing poverty or low literacy. And when those same residents are disproportionately Black—in D.C., Blacks are 44% of our population but 67% of those experiencing poverty—we fail to ensure racially equitable outcomes (Deloitte, Datawheel, & Hidalgo, 2020). Here are a few examples of existing inequities.

### **Burdening the Resident**

Accessing public benefits may be thought of as costless. But burden is introduced right in the act of applying. First, there may be comprehension barriers. The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) measures literacy on a 5-point scale—1 being the ability to comprehend something like a price tag; 3, a bus schedule; and 5, a complex tax form (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Most adults in the United States are at a level 2 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). If a form's questions and instructions don't achieve comprehension, residents may fill it out incorrectly or simply give up on completing it at all. There can also be submission challenges. Lack a printer or Internet access? That might slow you down. Required to submit the form in person but don't have paid time off, childcare, or a flexible travel budget? You'll be faced with some difficult trade-offs. When we make applying burdensome, we in effect restrict access to benefits our residents are entitled to.

### **Demanding Proof of “Deservingness”**

Attestations, notarization, documentation—the burden of proof is placed heavily on the applicant, and it's time-consuming. But worse is when the need for assistance is rooted in a trauma—for example, seeking temporary shelter after being evicted, requesting unemployment insurance after losing a job, applying for burial assistance after losing a loved one. For those who are financially secure, these experiences can be avoided with personal safety nets. But those without financial security are left to prove their need at the expense of their mental and emotional health.

### **Criminalizing and “Othering” the Resident**

“Incomplete applications will be rejected.” “Falsifying information may result in a fine or criminal penalties.” How many government forms start with this type of language? At a minimum, it's off-putting. For those who are already told their actions are suspect because of the color of their skin, these warnings can feel incriminating. Conflating need with criminal intent further reinforces that asking for services may not be worth the risk (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003).

We further dehumanize our residents when we label them by the services they seek (e.g., as a homeless person, food stamp recipient, or voucher holder). When we use these labels, we risk stigmatizing our residents for seeking assistance and put their personhood in second position.

So [how can we address these inequities](#)? If you are a psychological scientist in academia, contribute to the research that helps ground this work and commit to probing outcome measures by race. Most

government agencies don't have research capacity. Help by investigating the behavioral questions that can inform the design of the processes and paperwork that connect residents to government services.

A few broad questions to consider:

- How do we internalize written messages? Who is deterred from seeking service by a warning?
- How does tone (e.g., formal vs. conversational) impact comprehension?
- What are the individual costs of recounting a trauma? What methods of data collection minimize those costs?
- Where is the line between providing transparent information and imposing a cognitive burden?
- How do we provide instructions to increase compliance?
- How do we increase the number of individuals who meet deadlines?
- How many steps can we include in a process before we see attrition?
- Do we see faster completion times for services with digital applications versus paper ones?

For program managers, agency directors, or other decision-makers who work in governments or have partnerships with them, start by looking at the metrics. Is the program serving every person it's designed to serve? Are there some groups who aren't applying or who aren't getting through the process? Before thinking, "oh, they just don't want it (enough)," ask whether the paperwork and process are the problem.

Talk with residents. Ask them about their experiences with seeking a service. Watch them navigate the system. Map the process from beginning to end and see where burden can be reduced. By connecting with residents who haven't successfully navigated the process in the past, you can identify where they get stuck in the paperwork.

### **Minimize the Burden of Applying**

Write plainly. Eliminate jargon. Use conversational language. Writing at an eighth-grade level ensures that you reach roughly 80% of American adults (Readable, 2020). A readability calculator can assess your writing and help hold you accountable.

Establish agency agreements to securely share resident data like benefit enrollment, income and tax information, or even contact details. A government may function as dozens of distinct agencies, but to a resident, it's a single system that they've already shared information with. For renewals (e.g., annual school enrollment, social assistance programs, vehicle registration), prepopulate forms with the resident's most recent information to streamline a no-changes process.

Have some evening and weekend hours for services that must be done in person. For the rest, move forms online and make them mobile-friendly for those without access to a desktop.

### **Assume Residents Are Deserving**

For services that support residents experiencing a trauma, be judicious in what information you ask for. When you can verify something through shared agency data, do it. When you can't, be conscious of your language and, when possible, gather details through one-on-one conversations led by staff trained

in trauma-informed care.

### **Look Critically at Your Language**

Lead with a welcome, not a warning. Infuse your language with the assumption that residents are applying with real need. Save the legally required statements for the end and don't forget a "please" and "thank you." Finally, check that your language doesn't "other" residents, but instead puts their personhood first. If you need to refer to an individual by a general term, use words like "resident," "applicant," "client," or "customer."

A form is one place where governments get to say whether their residents are deserving or suspect. Each of these small tweaks can go a long way in making government services truly equitable.

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