Designing new online tools for accessing services: What matters to Minnesotans

In 2020-21, Minnesota residents told the Minnesota Department of Human Services and Wilder Research what it's like for them to find and access human services and programs. Through this research, we captured key themes that can be used to create new online tools that allow people to access the help they want in ways that work for them.

Many communities provided input, including those with specific racial, ethnic, and cultural identities; LGBT+ identities; disability communities; veteran communities; metro, rural, and greater Minnesota communities; communities by age; and immigrant and refugee communities.

Data collection included

🔍 Analysis of existing data about Minnesota's communities

📋 A survey of more than 2,000 Minnesotans

💬 Interviews with 48 individuals who spoke to the needs and preferences of specific communities in Minnesota

> "Services are so siloed… [Clients will say], 'I can't. This is just too much for me. I don't understand all of this.' The system is hard and complicated."
> – Interviewee

The key themes in this summary represent findings from many different people with many different identities and backgrounds. It is important to note there were differences between different groups. More information about these similarities and differences can be found in the full reports.

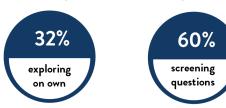💡 [Learn more about DHS's integrated service delivery efforts](#)   📖 [Read the full reports detailing the project's findings](#)

What did we learn?

People want:

▶ Easy navigation

❓ The option to both explore resources on their own and answer brief and targeted screening questions to help guide them to resources[2]

32% exploring on own

60% screening questions

▧ Multiple ways to know where to go in the tools, such as tabs, a site map, and a menu[1,2]

▶ A limited number of "clicks" to get to key information[1,2]

> "It would be nice to be able to say to whoever we're working with, that there's one site that if they're looking for something, this is the place to go. You ought to be able to find some help doing that. I think it's a really good idea."
> – Interviewee

Balance convenience and usefulness with confidentiality and information privacy concerns.

- Include the option to save usernames[2]

- Provide the option for people to both create an account that saves their history and personal information and the ability to use the tool anonymously[1, 2]

Survey respondents who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color generally reported feeling less comfortable sharing personal information with DHS. While this project didn't explore the reasons for this, institutional racism rooted in policies and programs has harmed these communities and systematically fostered distrust
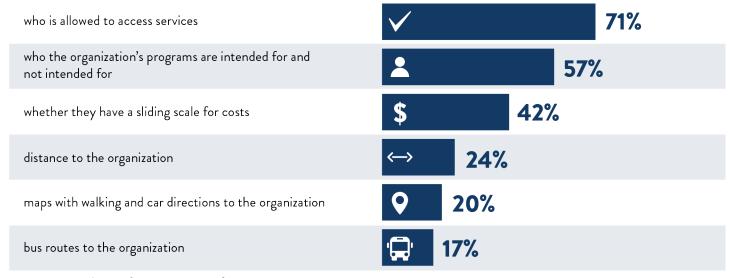
The information provided needs to be relevant and useful.

- Provide personalized recommendations and information that can address the varying needs of multiple family members[1, 2]

- Provide useful and actionable information that avoids redundancy[1, 2]

- Ensure information provided in the referral is up-to-date and accurate[1]

Some survey respondents said the following types of information would be helpful to know about a service or program:
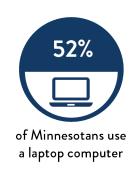
who is allowed to access services	71%
who the organization's programs are intended for and not intended for	57%
whether they have a sliding scale for costs	42%
distance to the organization	24%
maps with walking and car directions to the organization	20%
bus routes to the organization	17%

Source: interviews[1], survey[2], secondary data[3]

The tools need to meet the needs of all Minnesotans.

- Ensure the tools are culturally responsive [1]

- Offer the option to access the tools in multiple languages, ideally with the ability to switch between them [1,2]

- Use simple, concise language [1,2]

- Provide an option for large font [1,2]

- Consider assistive technology and have accommodations for all disabilities (e.g., audio-only option, screen reader compatible, closed captioning on videos) [1,2]

- Ensure people can access the tool using a smartphone, tablet, or a computer [1,2]

73%
of Minnesotans
use a smartphone

52%
of Minnesotans use
a laptop computer

- Ensure the website loads quickly on mobile devices and with slow internet [2]

- Provide options for people to access information offline [1]

- Provide a phone application (or "app") [1,2]

84%
were somewhat or very
likely to try an app

16%
were unlikely or would
not try an app

According to survey results, an app may be most helpful for people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color; are younger; or have lower levels of education

The most commonly spoken languages in Minnesota are English; Spanish; Somali, Oromo, and other Cushitic languages; Hmong; Chinese; and Vietnamese [3]

85% of Minnesotans use the internet [3]

Minnesotans living in rural areas are generally less likely to have access to broadband internet or any type of device [3]

Source: interviews [1], survey [2], secondary data [3]

Consider the crucial role of one-on-one assistance.

39%

would prefer to receive live help over the phone

54%

would prefer live support via online chat

According to survey results, more than half of adults age 45 or older preferred phone support, and most people who identify as LGBT+ preferred online chat.

- Assist with website performance issues[1, 2]

- Help explain content[1, 2]

- Provide translation and culturally relevant support in a person's preferred language[1, 2]

- Allow people without internet or a device to access the information included in the tools[1, 2]

- Assist people who aren't familiar with using the technology needed to access the tools[1, 2]

- Make tools easily used by professionals or other trusted individuals on the behalf of someone else[1, 2]

What's Next?

DHS will continue collecting input and engaging communities to ensure the tools will meet the needs of all Minnesotans. Specifically, study participants suggested:

- Engaging with and encouraging tool use among providers and community organizations[1, 2]

- Conducting targeted outreach to specific communities[1,]

- Publicizing the tools well, including using social media and advertising in local media and "where people are"[1, 2]

- Prioritizing and leveraging word of mouth[1,]

- Collecting feedback from people who have used the tools to identify areas for improvement[1]