The Framework for
an Equitable COVID-19
Homelessness Response
#HousingEquity

Behind the Scenes

Designing Lived-Experience Input Sessions for the Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response

The Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response project is being collaboratively guided by the following partners:

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities • National Alliance to End Homelessness
National Innovation Service • National Healthcare for the Homeless Council
National Low Income Housing Coalition • Urban Institute
Barbara Poppe and associates • Matthew Doherty Consulting

Contents

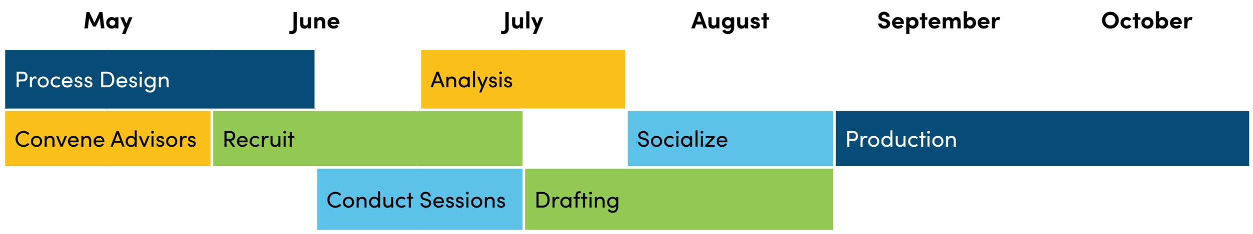
This document describes the process used to generate ideas amongst people with lived-experience of homelessness and housing instability for creating priorities in the midst of funding and policy changes associated with COVID-19. It can be used to inform other local or national processes designed to generate ideas and input within short timelines. The hope is that documents like these can illuminate both what is possible, what some of the challenges may be, and a few tips to help address those challenges.

Original Project Goal

Early in the nation's response to COVID-19, several things were happening at once in the homelessness response sector. Most relevant here is that local systems and community organizations were adapting to significant shifts needed to combat the public health crisis, while national organizations and the federal government were developing planning and implementation resources and guides to adapt quickly to a new environment. The Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response was developed in this context. Many national organizations and experts came together to craft guidance through the emerging crises and the input from people with lived expertise was needed early to situate any recommendations. NIS was tasked with bringing ideas from people with lived expertise into the Framework guidance.

Process Overview

The following is a description of the main elements of the process we used. From start to finish, the process lasted six months.



Process Design

- The project team formed an advisory group of approximately twenty service providers, advocates, and individuals with lived experience of homelessness to inform the design and execution of the project from communities across the country.
- The advisory group offered recommendations on strategies for recruiting people experiencing housing instability during the pandemic and guidance on how to tailor questions to the identities of specific sub-populations.

Recruit

- Recruitment primarily happened through the advisory group members, who offered connections to individuals experiencing housing instability.
- Many participants were recruited through service providers and their individual case managers that were connected to the project through the advisory group.
- Some additional participants were recruited from local and national lived-experience networks.

Conduct sessions

- NIS conducted ten listening sessions with people with shared marginalized identities. 55 people participated from across the country.
- Specific listening sessions were organized around the following communities: Asian American; Black;[1] Latinx; Native-Indigenous; Pacific Islander, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual

1 Asian Americans is a broad term describing a diaspora of people from many specific counties and cultures in Asia. The conversations did not tease out these differences, so they are not addressed here, but we want to recognize that variance of experience and ideas exist.

and Queer (LGBQ); Trans*;[2] People Living with Disabilities; People with Incarceration Histories; and People Involved with Public Systems.

- Sessions relied on semi-structured discussion questions and were conducted primarily in english. For the Asian American and Latinx sessions, NIS used translators and conducted bi-lingual sessions.

- Participants' consent was obtained and 90-minute listening sessions were conducted and recorded over Zoom, remotely.

- After the sessions, participants were compensated $20/hr for their time via check, cashapp or venmo.

Analyze

- NIS transcribed the audio from each session for synthesis.

- Analysis consisted of the identification of patterns and then themes within each sessions' data, and then comparing themes across sessions to arrive at a set of general themes.

Draft + Socialize

- After conducting the listening sessions, NIS created population-specific briefs to summarize the ideas of each of the ten communities and offer suggested actions that the homelessness response sector can take in response to the concerns and priorities raised by people who are being marginalized.

- The NIS team used an organizing frame for the content that allowed us to categorize the kinds of input we heard during the listening sessions.

- Within each category, we reflected the specific experiences we heard in the listening sessions alongside recommendations for what should be done. Where possible, the NIS team added specific technical and administrative content to supplement the recommendations.

- Before finalizing, NIS circulated drafts to the advisory group and policy experts for feedback on additional guidance that could be included to support the work.

Production

- NIS generated a number of videos and audio stories to accompany the briefs, and a website to host them.

2 Trans* is a term that is used to refer to both transgender identified individuals while also creating space for other gender-expansive identities people have who may not identify as explicitly transgender but often have similar experiences with gender-binary systems.

Challenges and Tips

Recruitment

Recruiting people experiencing homelessness to participate in research or design work is always challenging, given the physical precarity of being unhoused and the conditions people face. This was made more challenging during the pandemic, as traditional pathways for recruitment were unavailable. Shelters closed or were operating on limited hours, social workers didn't have direct access to their clients, and NIS staff couldn't physically travel to meet and convene with participants. Given the national coverage of this project, and the specific populations NIS was attempting to convene, recruitment was significantly resource intensive. The process was challenging, and the NIS team was still able to make it work; this is not an impossible task when there is investment and time. In this case, it took about ~40-60hrs of staff time across the month of June to establish relationships, prepare materials, communicate with participants, and send out reminders for them to attend.

Recruitment Tips

- Recruiting people experiencing homelessness for remote/virtual conversations requires established relationships or trusted intermediaries who can serve as connectors and can help ensure participation.

- Take time to build relationships with intermediaries (e.g. case workers, outreach workers, etc.) who work with people experiencing homelessness and be transparent about the goals of the research, compensation for participants, what will be done with their voices, and how it might benefit them to participate. Focus on building non-transactional relationships with intermediaries, which can require phone calls, email reminders, and sometimes late-night texts. Take care to ensure they have what they need to help recruit participants.

- Prepare recruitment tools, including digital and virtual flyers with information about the session, digital consent forms, and screener surveys to capture information about payment preferences, language, and identity.

- Participating in research is never a priority for front line staff or people experiencing homelessness, nor should it be. Research rarely leads to direct and near-term benefit for participants and marginalized communities are often fatigued from frequently being asked to participate in research projects.[1] Recognizing this is important, as the majority of people you reach out to will not respond or decline to participate in a research process. It takes a significant amount of patience and persistence to recruit both intermediaries and participants. Ensuring that you're shaping the research to provide value for those stakeholders is key, and it is valuable to be able to connect and

1 See "Why am I Always Being Researched?" for a guide on research equity

communicate policy and strategy changes back with the people who helped influence them.

- Provide flexible payment options that meet the needs of the participants, like digital/online peer-to-peer payment platforms and check, when conducting sessions remotely, be mindful not to use platforms that transfer fees to the participants where possible.

Conducting Sessions

Access to technology and the ability to get participants on a zoom call during a pandemic was a challenge. Additionally, virtual sessions limit the amount of rapport that you can develop with participants, sometimes making it challenging to garner trust and openness.

Facilitation Tips

- When possible, ensure that participants have multiple options to access the session, including phone or web link, and the ability to let the research team know if they need help accessing either.

- Intermediaries can often provide local work-arounds, such as meeting participants in a shelter space to lend a phone, helping them access public computers via a library, or through local service provider offices.

- When possible, try to use facilitators who share identities and/or experiences with the participants being researched. NIS's sessions are always racially explicit, and it helps facilitate more specific and genuine conversations about race when facilitators are BIPOC or from the same racial identities as participants.

- Make time for introductions - taking space to have participants introduce themselves is vital to rapport building and can go a long way in terms of setting up a safe space for conversation.

- For language accessibility, hire a translator or have a facilitator who can speak the primary language of the majority of participants.

Analysis and Drafting

Because these were time-limited circumstances, the project team didn't have the time or capacity to conduct traditional social scientific qualitative analyses with the research data. Additionally, due to time and resource constraints, the project team skipped a part of our typical process, which would be to reconvene and include participants in the analytical and drafting processes, to ensure that we had accurately represented the lived experiences of participants.

Analysis and Drafting Tips

- First, understand how you intend to process and analyze the data, what you're looking for and hope to yield. If you don't have trained analysts on your team, consider using some form of affinity clustering[2] for synthesis, which asks you to pull out patterns and key quotes to organize into themes and insights.

- Where possible, take the recommendations from the participants to their natural conclusion. Limit the amount of interpretation you do with participant voice, and try to surface their literal recommendations instead of layering in an assessment of their feasibility. This is often the most challenging part for system actors, practitioners, and leadership-- considering recommendations that may not immediately seem feasible to those who have been working in the sector and have not seen or been able to implement big-scale change. In the briefs, we used a simple categorization to communicate this, explaining content in categories of "What We Heard" and "What We Should Do."

- Where possible, share drafts of analysis and recommendations with participants. This can be done via email, one-on-one conversations, or group presentations, and is a vital step in ensuring that you've adequately represented their experiences and recommendations.

To see how all of this came together, visit Living the Values of Equity-Based Decision Making.

2 Affinity diagramming is a method from design research used to collaboratively generate themes