



Behavioral design for **GOVERNMENT COVID-19 RESPONSE**

- **The spread of COVID-19 and its economic fallout has limited access to basic resources for people across the US.**

Many restaurants and countless small businesses are closed; employees are out of work and newly navigating social safety net programs (unemployment claims are at an **all-time high**) or working double time to meet the need for take-out orders and additional requirements for sanitizing workspaces. Public agencies have had to **modify and reduce service**, while facing rapidly increasing demand for essential services. And, most if not all leisure activities, from sports leagues to artist collectives—typical outlets for mental health and stress relief—are cancelled unless they can pivot to digital.

This confluence of events creates a new context of scarcity—or a chronic lack of key resources (e.g. food, money, health, wellness)—for people across the US and the government agencies and staff who serve them. On top of that, our mental energy is focused on the continuous need to stay up-to-date with rapidly evolving COVID-19 guidelines and policy changes. Both residents and public servants may be feeling stretched thin across such shifting responsibilities—both at home and for work.

We know from behavioral science that this **experience of scarcity affects cognitive functioning** in predictable and damaging ways. When faced with limited resources, people unconsciously “tunnel” or intensely focus on the most pressing problem at hand, while neglecting other demands. This intense focus can be helpful in the short term, but is counterproductive for tasks that are important yet not urgent—such as planning for the future, practicing health and wellness, and supporting child development.



Why use a scarcity lens when designing a government response to COVID-19?

Households living in poverty experience scarcity more frequently and more acutely than most, and the context of COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate their situations. Family members working in front-line essential services are more exposed to health risks. Many essential services are run by low- and moderate-income residents, including: elder and childcare, janitorial services, automotive repair, laundromats, shipping and delivery services, convenience stores, gas stations, kitchen staff, skilled trades, transportation workers, and many others. Residents living with low incomes also continue to rely on public transit and child care services and may live in close quarters with other tenants, further exposing these households to the stress and risk of getting infected.

People living in poverty experience acute financial impacts if they get sick or are unexpectedly put out of work. Many residents may not qualify for federally covered sick leave and worry about the cost of hospitalization or other health services related to contracting the virus, with little financial runway left if they're unexpectedly put out of work. Any forgone income may result in inability to pay for critical services, like rent and utilities, loan repayment, and child support.

With schools fully transitioned to online learning in many cities nationwide, parents with low incomes face additional barriers to accommodating distance learning. Families without access to the internet and/or technology for online learning will face new hurdles to staying up on classes and assignments. Many students' development will be subject to their parents' availability to support new learning styles and ability to arrange for child care. And students throughout the country rely on the school system for **three healthy meals per day**.

Government employees are experiencing added scarcity, too. Many will face some financial impact as a result of COVID-19, due to the economic downturn or more acutely through a family member who is temporarily out of work. There are also increased concerns about health risks to children and family members if they have to work outside

the home. Such circumstances understandably leave employees with fewer temporal, cognitive, and financial resources to stay focused and productive at work.

These examples demonstrate the emerging need for expertise in designing government services for chronic scarcity as society adapts to a new way of life.

Three Ways to Apply Behavioral Design to Program Adaptation and Design

Government agencies serving their residents during the COVID-19 pandemic have a number of tools at their disposal: public funding, talented and committed

staff, connections to goods and services from local organizations, and valuable know-how. Below are three recommendations to add to that “toolkit.”



RECOMMENDATION 1: Cut the costs

Families with low incomes already face **significant costs associated with maintaining eligibility for programs** like food support or health insurance. As resources become more scarce and accessing services in-person becomes riskier, it will be crucial to cut the costs of accessing essential services by relaxing or eliminating the temporal and cognitive costs associated with application and eligibility processes.

For employees, agency leadership can cut the costs of what it takes to do a good job—by making updated guidelines succinct, clear, and building relationships across teams—to help agencies function as smoothly as possible in the midst of crisis response.



EXAMPLE: **Presumptive eligibility**

In many states, clients must appear in-person with documentation to prove they meet income eligibility requirements for essential benefits programs like cash assistance and unemployment. This increases costs (and risks) by requiring people to travel to a job center after procuring documentation that may require a visit to a former employer. In a moment like the COVID crisis, the federal government could allow states and cities to set up presumptive eligibility guidelines for new applicants to an wide array for benefits like some do for Medicaid. Put simply, we should be trying to quickly approve everyone who is eligible.



RECOMMENDATION 2: Create slack

Living with limited resources of any kind is risky and unforgiving. Any unexpected shock, like losing employment due to layoffs or dealing with a sick family member, can throw everything off track. Wherever possible, government programs should create slack for residents by providing more of a cushion to support those experiencing unexpected shocks due to COVID-19.

Public agencies can create slack for their employees by being unconditionally generous with additional or unlimited sick leave, “giving time back” to staff by shifting non-essential tasks off their plates, and establishing safeguards that reduce the likelihood of preventable errors, through increased automation or timely reminders.



EXAMPLE: **Waive renewal requirements and extend eligibility**

Currently, hundreds of thousands of people every month are required to fill out **lengthy forms** to recertify their eligibility for programs (e.g. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Unemployment Assistance). With attention focused on new shocks—a sick family member, temporary unemployment, children learning from home, just to name a few—it will be easy to forget simple administrative tasks like benefits renewal or filing unemployment claims. While the **federal ABAWD time limit suspension** is a good first step, cities and states should explore additional opportunities to waive paperwork requirements and to automatically extend clients’ eligibility for social programs. We have to ensure that small missteps—like failing to submit a form—don’t keep eligible families from getting crucial assistance.

Note: Cities should also advocate to simply give cash directly to households. Mechanisms such as means testing and IRS filing should not get in the way of getting cash into people’s hands as quickly as possible.



RECOMMENDATION 3: Reframe and empower

Poverty also affects families in a less visible way, by shaping their understanding of who they are, how they fit into society, and what's possible for their future and their families' futures. De-stigmatizing people's need for government help is key in this crisis moment. By promoting positive interactions between agencies and resident, and putting decision making back in the hands of families we can improve short- and long-term outcomes.

Government employees experience less visible effects of COVID-19 through a growing sense of disempowerment—in terms of where they can go, how they live, and what they can control. This may threaten employee morale and productivity. Agencies can rebuild employees' sense of agency, even through something as simple as intentional language for COVID-19 guidance. For example, rather than use negatively-framed "Don't do Y," which emphasizes what employees can't do, using affirmative "Do X" emphasizes some control.



EXAMPLE: **Treat front-line, essential employees as the experts.**

Essential workers keep key services running, even though many find it impossible to follow healthy distancing guidelines. These workers—often low- and moderate-income—keep our country afloat. Our governments can treat these essential workers as experts, drawing from their experiences to generate healthy guidelines that are realistic for those who cannot distance. Since these essential workers are developing new expertise from the frontlines of the crisis, public servants should create channels to gather their expert feedback. By learning from essential workers' lived experience, we adapt public services to better serve all residents.

NEED TO ADAPT YOUR PROGRAM IN LIGHT OF COVID-19?

We are here to help.

Our economic justice team is supporting COVID response for public agencies in [New York](#), [California](#), [Texas](#), and [elsewhere](#). We are offering consultations for public and [non-profit](#) agencies in New York City to support program adaptation to meet the emerging needs of residents and employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Get in touch with our economic justice team to find out how we can help: anthony@ideas42.org.

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