

Designing a Client Survey Using Behavioral Best Practices

ideas **42**



Helping tenant protection and homelessness prevention programs collect actionable client feedback

As thousands of New Yorkers faced job loss and economic strains due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many residents turned to government assistance programs to stay afloat. Unfortunately, previously established programs have not been able to serve all New Yorkers in need of help. The FASTEN program, short for “Funds and Services for Tenants Experiencing Need” and part of the Project Parachute initiative in New York City, aimed to help close that gap by providing eviction prevention services and funds to unserved and underserved communities. In addition to providing a lifeline to everyone it helped, this program represents an opportunity for service providers to build relationships with a previously difficult-to-reach community. ideas42’s NYC Behavioral Design Center partnered with Enterprise Community Partners, a national affordable housing non-profit administering FASTEN, to develop a longitudinal survey and implementation recommendations that would help these providers continue to support this community.

Summary

The Funds and Services for Tenants Experiencing Need (FASTEN) program was designed to deliver eviction prevention services—including financial assistance to cover rent and other expenses, help relocating, and financial counseling—to individuals who have traditionally been unserved or underserved by existing resources. These individuals are typically undocumented or shadow economy workers, meaning they are not formally employed. FASTEN also offers more flexible and rapid support than most similar programs. FASTEN was created in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and is independently managed by Enterprise Community Partners, a national affordable housing non-profit, and delivered in collaboration with seven community-based organizations experienced with providing services to tenants at risk of eviction through [New York City’s Homebase program](#).

Since the program is meant to serve people who are traditionally ineligible for similar services, the FASTEN program has provided the first opportunity for many clients to receive this kind of support from a direct service provider. Likewise, this was the first time the seven direct service non-profits implementing FASTEN had worked directly and systematically with these communities to deliver this level and type of support. Enterprise Community Partners wanted to take advantage of the opportunity this new program created to learn more about the community, their needs, and how non-profit programs could better serve them.

Highlights

- ▶ Enterprise undertook to survey recipients of FASTEN services to inform future service delivery to underserved communities.
- ▶ Transparency and other trust-building strategies are key to receiving useful feedback from program participants.
- ▶ Establishing best practices for conducting surveys allows for quality feedback across a number of service providers.

Because this was a unique opportunity to gather and share insights about serving a hard-to-reach, vulnerable population, Enterprise also wanted to collect insights from clients after they received services and their cases closed: How did the program impact them? How could it be improved? What other needs could they use help with? Recognizing that this population would be more reluctant than most to respond to surveys, Enterprise partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to design a survey that would maximize responses from clients and help inform current and future work.

Understanding staff-client relationships

To inform how we designed the survey, we spoke with staff and clients at two of the FASTEN direct service providers, CAMBA and BronxWorks. Our goal in these conversations was to understand how to best design and implement the surveys to make the process manageable for staff and clients as well as useful to the agencies. We also wanted to understand what clients would and would not feel comfortable sharing in a survey.

Many clients were excited about the opportunity to help organizations that had helped them so much, and felt comfortable sharing the kind of information Enterprise needed. The types of information asked for in the survey included sharing how they heard about the program (which would help the nonprofits understand how to reach this community in the future), how the program impacted the client (so Enterprise could continue to advocate for the program) and ideas for how to improve or expand the program (so the program could continuously adapt to the needs of this new community).

However, many FASTEN clients are undocumented immigrants and understandably incredibly cautious about sharing information. Thus, many indicated they would only feel comfortable sharing information with their case manager, who they trusted. They also noted that they would be wary of the survey and less likely to continue answering questions if they were asked to repeat information they had previously shared with their case managers. The interviews made clear that the survey should be conducted over the phone by a client's case manager.

Case managers emphasized the importance of fostering client trust. In the first few months of the FASTEN program, they quickly developed best practices to build that trust. A key strategy: Being upfront and transparent about who they are, why they are asking for each piece of information, and where that information will be stored. Such best practices would also be valuable in conducting the surveys.

Based on conversations with case managers, we decided to create a survey that would be conducted over the phone so we asked clients how long they would be willing to stay on the phone to complete a survey, which guided how many questions we should include. We also learned more about staff's daily work, which informed our thinking about how to integrate this survey into their workflow and reduce hassles.

Survey design

When thinking about survey design, it's easy to focus on writing survey questions: What information do we need to collect? What response options should we offer for each question? Equally important are the decisions about how to implement and conduct the survey, and user testing design choices. For example: what hassles will staff face when conducting the survey, and how can we reduce or eliminate them? What concerns might clients have and how can we address those upfront? Behavioral design offers valuable insights and strategies to inform these decisions.

Drawing on the insights gained from our interviews and behavioral design best practices, we worked with Enterprise, CAMBA and BronxWorks to draft a survey that aimed to collect data that would be useful to all parties, be manageable for staff to collect, and feel comfortable for clients. Staff at CAMBA and BronxWorks served as user testers to help us refine the survey questions and administration protocol and develop written implementation guidance for all seven direct service providers in the FASTEN program who would use it. Since we were not able to user test the survey with all seven providers, the implementation guidance was designed to be clear but flexible, so each provider could identify the best way to implement the survey within their own contexts.

In developing the survey and the implementation guidance, we incorporated several best practices that we would recommend to any service providers designing client surveys, including:

- ▶ **Set expectations about surveys early.** If you plan to ask clients to fill out surveys after a program is over, take time before the program ends to let them know about the survey and explain why it is important for your organization and to improving future services for them and/or other clients.
- ▶ **Be clear and transparent about the survey's goals and how clients' data will be used.** As case managers from CAMBA and BronxWorks highlighted, it's critical to be upfront about this information. Understanding the purpose of the survey can motivate clients to participate. Additionally, understanding what kind of information will be asked of them, whether the survey is anonymous, and how their data will be stored and used can help clients feel comfortable enough to participate.
- ▶ **Reduce how much information you ask of clients.** Any time you are planning to ask a client a question, check whether the information is already recorded in your systems, or if a staff member has the information in their notes, before asking the client.
- ▶ **Ask sensitive personal questions—particularly those that could make respondents feel uncomfortable or stigmatized—last.** It's important to build rapport before asking people sensitive questions. Additionally, asking a personal or potentially discomfoting question early in the survey could influence people's responses to later questions. Throughout the survey, consider how earlier questions might affect respondents' subsequent answers.

- ▶ **For longer surveys, or particularly busy respondents, assume clients may not be able to answer all the questions in one sitting.** In these cases, we suggest three strategies. First, starting by prioritizing the questions. Once you have a list of the most critical questions to ask, organize the prioritized questions based on how easy or sensitive the questions are. The ones that are easiest to answer should be asked first. Second, create opportunities for respondents to stop part way through (e.g. “I have a few more questions for you, do you have 10 more minutes?”). Third and relatedly, make the surveys flexible. If a client has to drop off the call, design the surveys so client responses can be submitted even if incomplete. This may require including “dropped off” as a multiple-choice answer for each question, or giving the person filling out the survey for the client a way to end the survey early. Another form of flexibility to consider is allowing clients to finish responding later. This requires setting the survey up so that respondents can skip ahead to where they left off, rather than re-answering questions.
- ▶ **Find ways to compensate your clients for their time,** whether through a small gift card, the opportunity to enter a raffle, or by offering additional help or services as part of or following the survey.

Even a well-designed survey would struggle to make an impact if staff aren’t able to incorporate it in their work, so we also provided Enterprise with recommendations for how to support providers’ surveying efforts to maximize the amount of feedback and impact data collected. Many of our recommendations leveraged strategies to support staff and managers like providing reminders to call clients, [backstops](#) and clear and achievable deadlines to complete batches of surveys, as well as tracking progress.

We also highlighted the importance of actively engaging staff in reviewing and interpreting the data to keep them motivated to continue conducting the survey over time, despite the press of other priorities and responsibilities.

Early insights

The seven direct service providers have begun implementing the survey with clients whose cases have closed; and Enterprise staff are speaking with them regularly to provide support. In the first few months of the survey, these conversations have revealed:

- ▶ The key challenge provider programs face is having staff capacity to conduct the surveys, especially as new government programs compete for their time. A few months after providers began implementing the survey, they also started rolling out [NY’s Emergency Rental Assistance Program \(ERAP\)](#), which also provides economic relief to undocumented New Yorkers. Rolling out a new program like this takes a lot of work.
- ▶ The flexibility built into the survey has been crucial, as most clients are not able to complete the survey in one sitting.

There is an ongoing need for FASTEN and other eviction prevention services as the pandemic continues to evolve, and many legal protections expire. While programs like [NY's Emergency Rental Assistance Program](#) begin to provide economic relief to undocumented New Yorkers, as well as others, FASTEN offers more flexible support that continues to fill gaps in the available public resources.

Building client feedback into program design and strategic decisions [is critical](#) to ensuring organizations meet their clients' needs and equip them to navigate challenging circumstances. We anticipate that the survey data will be useful to FASTEN providers and others as they work to support all low-income tenants and protect them from eviction and homelessness. In addition, the insights about conducting surveys are also applicable and adaptable for other organizations seeking client feedback to inform program design.

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