



With & For: How Human-Centered Design Is Addressing Citizenship Barriers

Robiel Abraha: Hi, and welcome to Upstream. I'm Robiel Abraha, evaluation officer at Houston Endowment, and I'll be your host. Before we dive in today's conversation, I wanted to start off by sharing a story that really captures the essence of today's episode. So back in 2023, one of our guests, Jannette Diep, executive director of BPSOS, was participating in community listening sessions with some of the immigrant families that the organization serves.

During that conversation, one woman shared that she's been taking classes to help her prepare for the civics exam that's required to become a US citizen. But getting through the class wasn't easy. Because she didn't have a reliable car, she relied on Uber for every trip, so she was spending upwards of \$30 for each round-trip ride to her class.

This story shocked Jannette and her team. The families that BPSOS serve are often working families, many of whom are working hourly wages. So spending \$30 for each class is a significant financial burden, but it also reveals something powerful. People are really willing to sac- make huge sacrifices to become US citizens.

So for Jannette and her team, this conversation raised an important question: What are other barriers could clients potentially be facing that they don't know about already? And so it prompted her and her organization to rethink what they can do to listen to clients better, identify challenges earlier, and address them as soon as possible.

So that moment is just one example of what you'll hear about in this episode about the Greater Houston Citizenship Project. This was a multi-year project centered around this concept called human-centered design. And human-centered design really is geared towards a pretty simple but powerful question: How do community organizations listen to their clients better and design solutions with them and not just for them?

And so today's conversation will explore what human-centered design actually looks like in practice, how it helped residents in Houston area go through the citizenship journey, and what lessons this project offers to nonprofits, funders, and community organizations across Texas and beyond. To unpack that, I'm joined by a fantastic group of guests.

First is my colleague Gislaine Williams, who's Houston Endowment's civic engagement program officer. Gislaine really leads all the work that happens here at the foundation around naturalization. We're also joined by Jannette Diep, who is the executive director of BPSOS. BPSOS is an immigrant-serving organization here in Houston that serves a large swath of



groups here, but mostly the Vietnamese population, and has been a critical partner in the Greater Houston Citizenship Project.

We're also joined by KaNeesha Allen, who is the community collaboration lead at Dalberg Design. Dalberg Design is a global design firm, and they helped really facilitate and lead the human-centered design process for this project. And last but certainly not least, we have Lindsay Hansen, who's the principal and co-owner of Grassroot Solution.

And Lindsay and her team served as the project's evaluation partner. So I wanted to thank you all for being here, and of course, I wanted to also thank everyone for tuning in today. We have more than 175 people watching live. So if you're one of them, we also want you to be part of this conversation. So please feel free to use the Q&A feature to submit questions throughout, and we'll do our best at the end to answer as many questions as possible. So to begin this conversation, I wanted to start off with an icebreaker, and I wanted to add a human element to this since we're talking about human-centered design.

And I wanted each of you to share something personal about what brought you into this work. So we'll start off with you, Jannette.

Jannette Diep: Sure. I'm really fortunate to do this work today, basically because I'm serving the immigrant community. And my, my family and I immigrated to United States as refugees four years after the fall of Saigon.

And so I saw the struggles that my parents. And as a young child, I was probably five or six, and I wanted to be able to learn English as fast as I could to kinda help them, because accessing resources was really quite difficult. And I see that very similar to today. When immigrants are arriving into the country, they really struggle trying to learn the language, they struggle to access resources and it's just much harder for those who have more barriers that they have to overcome in order to do that.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. I wanted to also invite KaNeesha in to share her story.

W. KaNeesha Allen: Yes. Thank you. For me, this work is deeply personal. My grandmother, my maternal grand-paternal grandmother lived in Hugo, Oklahoma in Choctaw Nation. And in 1939, she gave birth to my father with the help of a well-known midwife who was also of the Choctaw Nation.

And she passed down to my father, and then my father passed down along to me and my other siblings, that none of us are free until we're all free. And so I believe that truly in my heart and service into this work, behind every application is a person, is a family, is a history, is a legacy, and the hope for something more connected explicitly to freedom.

And just being a service to this work, I feel like is a continuation of that leg- and that our, all of our freedoms are connected.



Robiel Abraha: Awesome. Wanted to pass it off to Lindsay to share her story as well.

Lindsay Hanson: Thanks, Robiel. When I was asked to consider a moment that illustrates why this work matters to me so much personally, I thought about outside my polling location, and the act of joining my neighbors to exercise my right really makes my heart beat a little bit faster every time.

And I believe that at its most potent I really hope that evaluation can facilitate the kind of learning that enables people who are eligible to fully participate in civic life and enjoy the dignity the agency, and the self-determination that comes with the full rights and benefits of citizenship

Robiel Abraha: And Gislaine?

Gislaine Williams: So this work for me is also really deeply personal. Like Jannette, I'm an immigrant myself, and I came to the US when I was a, a young girl with my parents. They wanted to come here to have a better life and give me, educational opportunities that I just would not have had in my home country.

I went through the naturalization process and know how difficult it is, and I feel really honored to be able to support people who are going on that path now. And then I think, a big driver for me is also just the fact that, my parents sacrificed a lot to, to get us here. They're both public servants and have done a lot to really serve the community.

And so I'm proud to be able to just, build on that legacy and yeah, find other ways to serve and use my role as best as I can to really support other people.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. Thank you, Gislaine, and thank you all for sharing those personal stories. So for me, I'll add my personal story. This project was meaningful because like so many of the folks who shared before, I'm also an immigrant who came here and is a naturalized citizen, and so are most of my family members.

And this was especially powerful because in 2022, my mom actually became the most recent person in our family to become a citizen, and so she'd been here for almost 30 years and was just, taking her time to figure out how to navigate this path. And so as I listened to the stories that have, that come out, came out of the Greater Houston Citizenship Project, I know each person's journey is different, but I think there was a lot of things that echoed similar to my mother's experience about the challenge of figuring out when you have the time to study, to prepare to take that journey and the, and how m- how much nervousness there is in that process.

So I think this project was really powerful in that way. So to get us off, I-- the first question I wanted to ask was to Gislaine. There are so many challenges that the immigrant community



faces in Houston, and so what made Houston Endowment kind of hone in on this question of citizenship and naturalization?

Gislaine Williams: We knew that we could make a really big impact if we focused on citizenship. So right now, we have about three hundred and sixty thousand people in Greater Houston who are eligible to become citizens, but only about ten percent of them naturalize each year. And so that means there's ninety percent of those, three hundred and sixty thousand who are not taking that step and aren't able to access the full rights and benefits of citizenship.

And we know how important citizenship is, both for individuals and for our community as a whole. For individuals, the research shows us that citizenship means higher rates of homeownership, it means higher salaries. And so when you have more and more people becoming citizens, that's a really big boost to our local economy as well.

And in fact, the data shows that if we had, a hundred percent of the eligible people actually become citizens, our economy the wage growth would equal out to nine hundred and fifty-eight million dollars, which is a massive number and means a lot, especially now, when so many of our community members are having financial challenges.

And so we knew this was an area where we can make a big difference if we were able to, partner with our nonprofit community and really go in and address some of these challenges that eligible to naturalize residents were facing. And so in twenty twenty-three we launched the project.

We launched the Greater Houston Citizenship Project in partnership with Dalberg Design, Wellspring Consulting, and of course, our evaluation partners at Grassroots Solutions and a number of other amazing partners, including BPSOS and other community organizations that have been on the ground.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. And one of the things that we wanted to talk about in this project was this concept of human-centered design. What made you all decide that's the approach you wanted to take rather than, some folks might use reports from think tanks like Migration Policy Institute to understand the challenges?

What did you hope to learn with a human-centered design approach?

Gislaine Williams: Yeah, we did have really great data from Migration Policy Institute, which in their most recent report they showcased the eligible to naturalize community here in Houston. Talked about where they were coming from, how long they've been here.

And in that report, it actually showcased that about 40% of the eligible to naturalize community has been in Houston and has been living in the US for more than 20 years. So those are long-term residents, again, that do not have access to the full rights and benefits of



citizenship. We also have national research that identified some of the common challenges to naturalization.

There's demographic profiles from University of Southern California that we've looked at, and we have used all of that data to inform our strategy and our grant-making. And I know our nonprofit partners have also used a lot of that data to really refine their strategies. But we also recognize that data was limited.

That data was not showcasing and illustrating people's lived experiences. And especially, and in particular, the eligible to naturalize community here in Houston, which we know is very diverse has unique experiences, unique challenges. And so we really thought it was important to go straight to the community.

Robiel Abraha: And as, as Gislaine mentioned, for those who aren't familiar with the Greater Houston Citizenship Project, I wanted to take a minute to give you a sense of the scale of the project. So as Jasleen mentioned, the heart of this project was really about listening to community. So over the course of the project, the team engaged over 500 community members across Greater Houston.

And because Houston is such a diverse city, there was a deliberate effort to include voices from many different communities. So they were engaging residents with roots in Mexico, Vietnam, El Salvador, South Korea, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, just to name a few. But the project, as we mentioned, wasn't just about understanding the challenges people have and they face in their path to citizenship, but it was also about involving the community members in the design of the solution.

So the team really made a lot of efforts and hosted about 59 community co-design and research sessions. So these sessions were designed to bring together both the lived experience of those who are eligible to naturalize, as well as the nonprofit expertise that we have in Greater Houston. So those sessions brought together 165 local residents as well as 73 nonprofit and staff leaders who all had expertise in immigration law, policy, and community services.

Many of them included folks like BPSOS. And together, these groups made sure that whatever programs were designed were really tailored for the Houston community and community-driven. And the outcome of these sessions was the development of several community-based pilot programs. And so during the six months that these pilot programs were implemented, they helped more than 350 eligible Houston residents start and move on along that journey to become US citizen.

But in addition to those community pilots, the project also launched a community and media outreach campaign that was in multiple different languages. And one of the coolest strategies of that media campaign was actually using social media influencers to connect Houston's immigrant communities with key citizenship information and resources.



So we learned in those sessions that to reach new audiences, you had to meet people where they are, and increasingly that's becoming social media. And so I wanted to give you kind of that high-level overview of the project, and as you can hear, it's very large and complex, and there were so many moving parts.

So I guess the question I had to Gislaine is given the scale and the complexity of this work, what did implementation look like, and what made investing that much time and effort worth it?

Gislaine Williams: Yeah it was a significant investment, in terms of time and just commitment from our team and our partners.

But it was really worth it in the end. We knew that we were tackling a pretty large and complex problem, and so we knew that we really needed to think beyond our traditional funding model and come up with a new approach that really centered the community and centered, again, their lived experiences.

And one of our core beliefs at the foundation is that the people closest to the problems are really closest to the solutions. And so we wanted to create this forum for them to be able to shape some of the programs and services that are meant to serve them. And so this project really provided that unique opportunity for us to literally sit across the table from community members, have these deep conversations about what was going on in their lives, the barriers they were facing, and then actually co-design some of these solutions.

And so it was a great opportunity really for the community to lead this process. And I think, one of the most meaningful outcomes too is just the relationships that were built along the way. It was time intensive, and it was because we were investing and really building those relationships, building trust and you got to see that.

There was a lot of trust that was built, among our different partners, between the community members and our nonprofit organizations. And I think especially now, what we're seeing with a lot of fear increasing within the immigrant community, having that trust is just really important for community members to continue to feel safe and confident, that they can go out to these partners and still continue to access these resources.

And so yes, a lot of time was spent but the relationships that grew out of it were really amazing. The collaboration that grew out of it continues to expand and grow. And I think having the ability to have that community buy-in so early and continue to grow that throughout the process has meant or has helped these programs really continue to expand and continue on well beyond the project.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome So I wanted to invite KaNeesha now, because I know Dalberg Design was really helping to design this process of human-centered design. So for those who don't know what human-centered design is, could you talk a little bit about what this process looked like?



W. KaNeesha Allen: Yeah, absolutely, and Gislaine summed it up.

She really did. In short, Dalberg Design's approach to human-centered design or community-centered design ultimately brings the people most affected by an issue, by a problem, directly into the process, right? So instead of starting with a predetermined solution with community members that were involved throughout the two years, we listened together.

We learned together. We tested ideas together. Together, we adjusted along the way. The community members' experiences, perspectives and feedback really helped shape how we better understood problems and challenges and then what the eventual co-creation And so yeah, shout out to all of the Dalberg and Wellspring team members who couldn't be here.

Robiel Abraha: It was a huge team effort. And so Jannette, I know you've worked in the Houston area for a long time helping the immigrant community. Could you talk about what it was like for you as a community-based organization to be a part of this kind of human-centered design pr- process and what you learned through that?

Jannette Diep: Absolutely. I think that's probably one of the most exciting moment for us, is being able to really understand our community better, right? We think we know our community and we make assumptions. But I think having that opportunity to actually listen to them was something that was I guess very profound because there were a lot of things that were shared in these sessions that we really didn't know about.

And I think one of the things was just we weren't sure if they were willing to really share anything because with a community that comes from like a, a background where, you, there are certain things that shou- you shouldn't say. Or what is it that can I really say? And a lot of times they will keep things to themselves.

But then trying to really explain to them, the reasoning behind wanting to hear from them is because it's really for us to be able to serve the community better. And I think that was very helpful to us being able to have that opportunity to have the community right there, in the session and hearing from them all of the responses they had was something that for us, we were also learning too

Robiel Abraha: And can you talk a little bit about, from these community listening sessions, anything that you learned that was a surprise or new and how that impacted the different ways that you wanted to do your services?

Jannette Diep: Yeah, sure. I think one of the things was really being able to provide the assistance not only the application process. To them it was for them it was a difficult journey. You would think that, you do the application, you bring your, provide us with the information, the documents.



But, we have to realize that immigrants, one of the things is that they don't have a way of accessing a lot of their documents. And they need that support, which is something we really w- why would someone need support to retrieve these documents? But realizing that a lot of these documents are very hard to retrieve, and we have to really sit down and brainstorm with them what are the different ways that they are able to retrieve these documents.

So support is needed along the way. To them it's quite a journey. It's not a simple thing as just applying. It's just really isn't. There's a lot of information on that form that is needed, information that, of course, they're not gonna remember. And so they need that support.

I think the other thing that we learn also is the learning, them learning that new language, right? Was not as simple, right? They're like if you were living in the country and you're expected to learn language, in six months, would you be able to do it? Absolutely not. There's, and so they're saying, "We need time. We need that support. We need extra resources." And so hearing that from them and having the opportunity to really talk to the teachers and stuff, that you're gonna have to really sit down with your students because they all learn very differently.

You have students that come with a degree from their country. Maybe they're doctors, engineers. But then you have students who may only have first or second grade level of schooling, and that's all they have, so they have no idea how to study or how to be even a student. And so that's some of the things that we kinda took for granted is that everyone are coming, are enrolling to the class with different background, English level that are very different, and the support is going to be a whole lot different.

And so that was very helpful to kinda hear that from them, that the support is needed, and expecting them to learn English overnight is not going to happen. It's going to have to be a long process.

Robiel Abraha: Yeah, so essentially what I'm hearing is that the, the citizenship is a journey, and it requires tailored approaches to support folks throughout that whole journey.

And part of that is making sure that the services we provide are really tailored to the community. And I think one of the things that the project had to really make sure that the work was very community-centered was this idea of having a citizenship advisory committee. So I wanted to ask Gislaine about what that CAC, that citizenship advisory committee looked like and kinda how it's structured, and what do you think it contributed to this project?

Gislaine Williams: Yeah, the CAC was with us throughout the whole project. So our Citizenship Advisory Committee was made up of 14 community leaders, and they were really tasked with informing the project throughout the way and really informing the key decision points throughout the whole project. These were leaders from the community.

We wanted to make sure there were different, diverse perspectives, and so they were leaders across different sectors. We had, healthcare represented, the business community, the



nonprofit space. We had leaders who were coming from immigrant backgrounds themselves and could really provide that perspective.

Some who were native-born Americans and provided that perspective. And then we were also really intentional, and this was something guided by Dalberg Design really, is making sure that we had people who, were people who had experience serving on these kinds of boards before.

So maybe they're on boards of large nonprofits already or they've been part of these kinds of committees. And then we also wanted to have people that maybe had not had that opportunity yet, but they were grassroots leaders. They had really strong expertise and networks that could really inform the project.

And so we were glad to have this very diverse group, and they were really committed. The group grew really close. Many of the members talked about it like it was a family.

And they really did ask some important questions throughout the project. We had community or the CAC members asking us or recognizing when maybe certain communities were being left out of the conversation or talking about the nuances of the Eastern African community versus Western African community.

We also had members who brought up things very early on about recognizing that when we talk about immigration, that it can be a pretty emotional process. And so there, several members brought up the issue around, bringing in a trauma-informed approach when we do this work and we're listening to community members.

And so they brought up a lot of really, I think critical points and perspectives that really strengthened the project, I think, throughout the whole journey.

Robiel Abraha: Yeah. So I know we've talked a lot about kind of the process of doing the community feedback and making sure this work was community-rooted, and I wanted to pivot to start talking about the actual pilot programs that were designed.

And so I wanted to ask, how did we narrow down to these dozens ideas and stuff you heard about and the community listened to, how do you d- how did you narrow down to the three pilots that ended up eventually being the ones that were implemented?

Gislaine Williams: The, the pilots, we had a lot of ideas through the community co-design sessions, a lot of ideas, programs that came up.

And I think for me, it was interesting also to see that some of them were actually programs that were already out in the community, but people clearly didn't know that those were available. But from those, initial co-design sessions with community members, I think the



Dalberg design team and Wellspring really started to see some clear patterns some similar concepts and models that were coming out.

And we actually tested some of those with the Citizenship Advisory Committee, with other nonprofit partners, our teams, really to look at which of these programs and models one, were different from what was already in existence or feasible in terms of, could our nonprofit partners carry these out?

And then also we're, we were looking at concepts that were adaptable to different communities because, as, as we've already talked about, we have a really diverse community in Houston, and so how can you create a program that's easily adaptable depending on, you know, the, the cultural aspects of that community or maybe the age the mode that you're implementing this program, either virtual or in person?

And so through all of that, there was a lot of a discussion, a lot of back and forth and I think, it took everybody's input but we were able to land on those three pilot programs.

Robiel Abraha: And I know you mentioned this word adaptable and making sure that the pilots were adaptable, and so I know one thing that came out of the community listening sessions was the fact that, there was no one-size-fits-a-approach to this because there were different archetypes that you all identified.

And I wanted to invite KaNeesha to talk about what are these archetypes that you learned, and how did that impact the implementation program?

W. KaNeesha Allen: That's a great question. So the five archetypes came out of essentially what we heard throughout the community research. As we listened to different community members talk about, their experiences navigating the citizenship process, we began to see patterns, as Gislaine mentioned and different themes around their needs concerns, motivations and barriers that were faced.

And so the archetypes gave us a way to organize these themes. And so the archetypes don't necessarily represent one person. They represent a combination of people's experience. And the archetypes essentially became really im- important obviously throughout the development of the programs that were piloted, but especially when we began to think about outreach.

We knew that there had to be multiple messages, right, and folks to be able to see themselves represented. And so there couldn't be, like, this one-size-fit-all approach. And so the archetypes really helped us think more intentionally about who we were trying to reach, what information they needed or requested and what might be helpful, for them to take their next steps within the citizenship application process.

Robiel Abraha: And so I also wanted to invite Jannette, 'cause I know you were a key partner in the implementation of these pilots. So from your experience and BPSOS'



experience, how did implementing these pilots, whether it was a support circle or the navigator program, look like for your team?

Jannette Diep: Actually just like I mentioned earlier, the some of the things that we were doing, we didn't really realize that we were doing it.

But I think what helped with this project was I mentioned earlier where clients were saying that they needed that extra support. 'Cause a lot of times you would say, "Okay, go home and find these documents," and then we don't see them till five years later. "I got the documents now." We're like, "Five years later?"

And so that navigator part was really so essential. When we had the navigator actually help the client to retrieve those documents, because a lot of times the reason why the client came back five years later is because they had no idea where they were supposed to go to even retrieve the documents.

And we didn't really think we're like, "We're there to support you, and so when you get the documents we'll help you apply." But the navigator in this project, what they did was actually walk them through the process. "Okay, so you need your what is it? Your divorce decree.

Where were you married?" "Was it back in your country? Was it in this country?" And so it was walking them through it, talking them through it. And the navigator would meet them a few more times, and eventually they retrieved the document. And so within that month, that client was able to submit the application because that navigator really stuck with them to walk them along the way.

So I think that was the one piece that we really didn't think about, was that we should have walked them along the way and helped them figure out where should I get these documents? How do I retrieve them? Whether it was to figure out where their tickets were, then you go to the DMV, and you can actually go through.

And then we would help them call the DMV, get the documents, and now they have everything that they need. And so n- navigator was one of the component that was so important in this project. And it really taught us, and we learned a lot realizing that Just like in the sessions, their community members were saying that we need support along the way.

And we're like what support do you need along the way?" And so hearing that and remembering that, and, we said, "Navigator, we're gonna have to support them along the way." I know it's a process. I know it's a lot of the time that you're gonna spend. But I think that's the only way that we can get their documents, so they can submit it in, in the timely manner that they want to submit the application.

The other part was the, the s- the circle. Although we have monthly citizenship workshops and we do have the Q&A sessions but with the circle, we realized that there were additional



information that we never thought about presenting, to the audience by asking them the questions, by what other questions or concerns that they may have or what they wanted us to cover in the Q&A session instead of just providing with the eligibility that information.

And so we got them to be more engaged. They asked their questions. And then we also implemented the circle in our classes, which is something we never did. Because the circle before when we had it on this project was that a lot of the community members were hesitant to apply because there were many, questions that they had and they felt that, they didn't know who to ask, or they felt that if they ask the teacher's gonna say, "We're gonna need to make an appointment."

And so there was I guess, barriers that we never thought about. And so during those circle sessions that we had under the project, we realized that they really had a lot of questions. Even we had seniors who didn't wanna take that next step because they felt that they even though they took a class for a year, they still felt they didn't have that confident.

And we were able to learn why didn't you have that confident? And it was, once again, that support along the way that they needed. They needed that extra tutoring. And so that's when we started providing was that extra tutoring for our seniors who felt that they... Because there weren't, they didn't, they weren't eligible to take it in their own language.

They had to take it in English. And so that's why it took them a while to even submit the application, and others just had really questions about their eligibility itself. And so from those circle sessions, we decided to implement it also in our classes. We would ask the teacher "Give us, one day out of your class for us to come in and just sit with some of the students who really wanted to be able to ask some of the questions that were a concern to them."

And so that was what was really important to us was that we expanded upon what we thought we did well, but we could have done so much better. And so this project has really helped us realize that.

Robiel Abraha: Yeah, I appreciate hearing that. There, there seems to be a lot of learning that happened throughout this project which is really exciting 'cause that's always the goal, to help us think better and do better.

And so part of that learning was actually having an entire evaluation component to this project. So wanted to ask, Gislaine, when you all were thinking about designing this project, what were you hoping to get out of the evaluation component, and what did you hope to learn with that?

Gislaine Williams: I mentioned earlier, that this was a new approach for us, and so we knew it wouldn't make sense to have the traditional evaluation where, it comes at the end of this two-year-long process, and you look back to see what worked, what didn't work.



We knew it would be a lot more meaningful to actually embed the evaluation throughout the process so we could learn along the way, have those rapid feedback loops, make adjustments if we needed to, to make sure that the project was on track. And I think we also were able to use the evaluation process as a way to keep us accountable to the community, to make sure that we were sticking to those principles that we outlined at the very start of the project and that we were trying to meet those goals.

Grassroots Solutions was an excellent partner for us, and I think they also matched the spirit of the project and became really close partners with our citizenship advisory committee, the nonprofit partners in the field, the community members. And so they also put, I think or prioritized relationship building as part of their evaluation process, which I think was unique for many of us in terms of working with evaluators.

And so yeah, it was just a really helpful process, I think, throughout to have that learning piece.

Robiel Abraha: Absolutely. And Lindsay, I wanted to invite you into the conversation to talk more about what Grassroots Solution set out to do with this evaluation design and how it evolved over time.

Lindsay Hanson: Yeah. Building on what Gislaine shared, I think I would emphasize things that others have said.

This project was new, right? And supporting learning and adjustments was really the focus of evaluation activities, and being able to do that on an ongoing basis meant that what we were trying to answer and what different people were trying to learn wasn't the same at the beginning, at the midpoint, and at the end.

And so to put this in clearer terms, at the beginning, a lot of what we were interested in assessing was around project design. And, KaNeesha spoke to, the community research and initial co-design process. And so what we were looking at is, really our North Star for that was thinking about, what will it take to actually find interventions that directly address community needs and desires around naturalization.

And which ways of partnerships were actually more or less successful. So I think a lot of what we were interested in, the way that we were thinking about measurement and data collection and analysis at that point was around, tracking partners' experiences like yours.

How did your experience and others really reflect the values that Gislaine mentioned at the outset? We were also looking at changes in knowledge. So I think even early on in the project, what were ways in which people's experience of being a part of that research process was actually giving them access to more information about citizenship services.



And then also, I think, one of the things and Gislaine hit on this, there was an appetite to also understand how were relationships changing and so that affected the way that we approached data collection, analysis, what kinds of things mattered to measure. So we were looking at how were relationships between and among Houston Endowment and, the partners involved in actually leading the human-centered design process, and the experience of community partners, how were those strengthening?

How were they changing? What did those connections look like through engagement in the community research and co-design experience? And then I think, also we were looking at, how well did ideas that were coming forward actually reflecting the input of community organizations and community members.

So again, it was in that way there was also an accountability mechanism, right? To see, hey, this is what we're setting out to do. This is an assumption we have about this approach being able to do this, but are we actually achieving that? So that was the first phase of the work, and then we shifted from there, in, in more focus on, okay, so then what does it actually take to increase, naturalization rates?

And so the data collection, the analysis, the approach to evaluation became more about, all right who participated in these pilot programs? Also, what do we see in terms of the forms that are submitted? Are people actually doing citizenship interviews, for example? But then also, again, we didn't lose sight of the other more qualitative things that mattered, like what's the experience of working together, or how well-supported are facilitators and navigators in these pilot programs so that they're able to deliver the resources and tools in a way that ensure the most, uptake and usefulness among the eligible residents that you were all aiming to serve.

And then I think toward the end of our work together, our sort of lens shifted. So I guess I would say there were things that we tracked at different points that were short-term, but then there were also things that we were tracking over time, right? At the end to be able to answer, all right, so what's-- which, intervention showed the most promise?

And also what were the concrete results in terms of what happened? But then also, how well were certain barriers addressed and how likely are organizations, like Jannette's to continue to be involved in this work? So I'll pause there and hopefully that answers your question well.

Robiel Abraha: absolutely. So it sounds like there were essentially two big questions we had with the evaluation. One was about whether the pilot programs that we designed actually helped more folks become naturalized citizen. Did it actually address the barriers? And the second big question is this concept of doing a human-centered design approach, what did we learn?

Was it worthwhile? What challenges and opportunities came about? And so I know there's so much to unpack with those two questions, so I wanted to give Lindsay an opportunity to just share at a high level what stood out most from the evaluation report. I know it, it was, there



was a lot of insights that you all drew on, but is there anything that you, a couple things you think that stood out?

Lindsay Hanson: Yeah, I'm trying now to summarize our, what, 100 pages of things we shared with all of you and but I think in all seriousness, I think a couple of kind of high-level things that, I would note is that, all three of the pilot programs made, significant progress toward the goals that were set at the beginning of the implementation period, which was not a given, right?

So I think again, there, there wasn't necessarily an understanding of exactly what would happen from that. So the fact that, there were, progress toward goals across all of those is really meaningful. And certainly when we triangulated our impression of that information with inputs from others who are independent to this, they're, to get kind of a normative sense of how big a deal was this, they said this is a big deal.

But then I think the kind of other really big thing that speaks to your question about this approach versus coming at this in a different way was that we saw evidence that the network of organizations and individuals was stronger at the end of the project than it was at the beginning, and that there was a greater appetite to continue to do the work, to figure out how to integrate it.

Jannette, you spoke to this into your programming in different ways. We also heard that organizations- saw their work differently. So there were ways in which, they provided concrete examples of actually engaging in their programmatic activities differently by virtue of being a part of this, which seems especially, significant.

I will also say that, I wouldn't be doing my job as an evaluator if I was all rosy. I think also those relationships helped to create the co-ownership that was necessary to make adaptations and to adjust to some of the challenges that came up during the implementation of the pilot programs.

I'll pause there.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. Wanted to invite anyone else to if you were thinking about the evaluation findings or learnings you had, if that kind of reflected that as well

W. KaNeesha Allen: Yeah, I'd like to, to, to just double down on a little bit of what Lindsay just said in terms of all of the partners that were involved just really having a tighter collaborative kinship, right?

Throughout the two-year process and toward the end. Myself having had the honor and privilege to work in the immigrant and refugee ecosystem in Houston for a very long time now, for roughly about 12, 13 years, what I've noticed is that, and I think maybe Jannette can



attest to this, is that many of the agencies and the organizations unintentionally and without malice, have worked very siloed, right?

Because everybody's laser focused on doing their work, right? In in, in very good ways and serving specific communities and needs to be served. But what we saw so brilliantly just blossom throughout this project was that folks were like, "Yeah, I may have seen you at this coalition meeting or this convention or this conference," and everybody knows everyone because it's a, it's I say it's a big small world.

So everybody knows everyone and have, has worked together in different ways. But through this project specifically, folks, I think, were, I don't know, reintroduced to a different way to collaborate without competition with congruence, with alignment. Yeah, and I think that led to a lasting impact of the continuation of these partners continuing to work together beyond this project.

So definitely what Lindsay said, that I think folks just realize a different way, right, to really, truly be partners. But through that partnership, I really feel like there's a kinship. So there's a deeper and more intimate level, of working together. So whether it's on a larger scale or even in trios, a lot of our partners are working in trios to do work.

For example, Community Family Centers, Living Hope, Wheelchair Association, and SEDES are doing really great work together as a result of this project. So that's just a, a little bit of an example of how these partners are just continuing.

Robiel Abraha: And so I know Lindsay mentioned that beyond the outcomes for the individual residents who were eligible to naturalize that went through this process during the pilot, some of the biggest lessons were, as, as you all mentioned, the kind of the partnerships and the way that nonprofits now operate differently.

I wanted to invite Jannette to talk about, BPSOS and your experience in this process. Are there any new ways that you all are partnering with other folks or doing your work differently that you wanna highlight and talk about?

Jannette Diep: Yeah, sure. I think that is probably one of the biggest thing that came out of the project was that collaboration piece was really, like KaNeesha mentioned, re-introducing ourselves to each other.

We knew of each other's work somehow because of meetings and conferences, but didn't really, you know sit down and really learn about each other's programming and the community that we serve. I think one of the things is that we realized that all of the community members that we serve all have similar challenges and although we have different history.



But one of the things that we wanna be able to do is really learn how to work collaboratively to support our community, because there are certain areas of expertise or gaps that each one of us have. We're unable to really do the work on our own. Like silos, like Keneshia mentioned.

Working together, has been has been very productive, and we learn from each other also. And we continue to collaborate even beyond the project because we found that there were some, areas that the organization has expertise in, and so we're able to meet, discuss.

And for instance, organizations like CFC, we would go, to the organization and do a mini workshop with their community and really help and train and provide resources and information so that, they would have that confidence to be able to serve their community.

Because if you realize that Houston is large, it's huge. And so that's the reasoning behind the collaborative pieces because because it's so spread out, these organizations are in these different pockets that needs to serve that specific community. But because they lack that certain area of expertise other organization will have to come in, fill that gap, provide that training, provide that resources and that support.

And I think that's the reason why, that partnership and that collaboration continues because, we found, a common bond with each other.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. So I wanted to, ask a question to Gislaine. Hearing what we heard from the, the different partners about the level of collaboration that happened in the ecosystem and the relationships and the partnerships and what came out of the evaluation, what would you tell other funders who are weighing whether to invest in a human-centered design process?

Like what are you learning? What are you hearing that you would share?

Gislaine Williams: Yeah, I think I would just strongly encourage funders to think about this approach and integrate human-centered design, community-centered design as much as possible. And it doesn't have to be at the scale that we did it.

Our project was two years long. It covered a lot of different neighborhoods, diverse communities. You can scale it up or down as you like. But I think as you heard today that the project and this approach really was able to come up with stronger programs and services that better address the needs of the community and really met them where they are.

But it also brought up, brought forward so many new collaborations and built the capacity of nonprofit organizations, like BPSOS, to integrate these human-centered design principles into the work. We're seeing these collaborations and these trios also start new innovations and start their own new pilot projects.



So these are things that we didn't think were gonna happen at the onset of the project. But because the process was so invested in providing that space for collaboration really investing in the relationships that I think now we get to see how these partnerships can continue in the long term.

And I think as funders, what we want is that long-term impact, and so really investing in relationships and that trust-building is such a key element of that.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. Okay, so I wanna make sure we leave enough time for Q&A questions from the audience. So we have a couple that I'll talk through.

One of the questions was just curious in asking folks what was the most surprising barrier that residents identified during the human-centered design process about wanting to become citizens? This is an open question to anyone who heard anything in the community listening o

Gislaine Williams: I can start. I think for, for me, it was clear from the listening sessions that I attended and we heard about is, people, it's not a lack of interest.

People are committed to this country. They're, they've been here for a long time. They have families here. But for a lot of people, it was that confidence that Jannette was talking about, that they do speak English. They know the processes here and again are an integral part of the community.

But there is just that lack of confidence and fear, just that, that anxiety because, as many of us who have gone through the process, it is a very high stakes application and interview. And so there is a lot riding on it and so people I think just had a lot of anxiety.

And I think through the, the Support Circle program and the Navigator program, it really addressed that specific issue around really building people's confidence levels and really feeling like they could do it with the support from the navigators and the different organizations

W. KaNeesha Allen: Yeah, and I would add to that I don't know if that there was maybe just one significant barrier or one larger barrier, but I think a theme that kept showing up throughout the, the different intervals of the research process was that, and I think this can speak to a lot of different things, but folks, generally speaking, don't know what they don't know, right? There's so much information about the citizenship application process.

There are so many different sources. There, there's oftentimes, incorrect information. And so I think what we heard, specifically with the navigator pilot is that, folks may have heard from this source or this agency but then going, to a different agency or working specifically with a navigator through this program learned that an answer to a question that they had was answered in a completely different way, right?



And just, coming in with m- maybe ideas or, previous information and then realizing like, "Oh, that, that's not what I thought it was," so I think that information piece.

Robiel Abraha: Another question that came through was looking ahead, so Jannette, you mentioned that there's still some collaboration happening.

So what is, post the project now, what are some work that's happening related to this?

Jannette Diep: Actually, one of the things that we learned during the project was that although many are eligible to apply for citizenship we found that, that legal service, the legal services gap was huge.

Because, behind applying for citizenship, you have to make sure, that you meet your moral character. And so there, there are some eligibility on that side. So that's why many, are unable to really seek that legal help because it, it costs. If you were to go to an attorney, it does cost a lot of money.

And so with nonprofits who provide, the legal services or the workshop for free, it gives the, the opportunity for community members to really ask those legal questions that they may have. Those could be questions that may be the reason why they're not applying. And so during our project, we realized that because many organizations don't really have that capacity to have a legal service provider on board and so we wanted to be able to con- figure out what is it that we can do to fill in that gap and provide support to, their clients and students to answer some of those legal questions.

So that's what we've been working on is to really figure out how are we able to support our partner organizations with that legal services gap. And so that's what we're working on now.

Robiel Abraha: And so I know there's so many other questions that people had and other things we wanted to dive into.

But unfortunately an hour can go by faster than you think. But the good news is that part of this work we recognized that we wanted to make sure that we are capturing and celebrating and documenting all the lessons we learned throughout this entire initiative. So wanted to share that w- we're excited to announce that we're launching a whole report on this human-centered design initiative.

It's called With and For, and we actually have a physical copy here right off the press. We also have a digital version available on our website at houstonendowment.org. What this report will do, it'll tell, it'll take you throughout the entire journey of this project, starting from the listening sessions to the co-design sessions and going into the pilots and what we learned.



You'll get a behind-the-scenes look at what this process both taught us and the broader Greater Houston community. And I also wanted to invite Gislaine to share if there are any other resources that folks can for, find on our website related to this as well.

Gislaine Williams: Yeah, we have a lot of great resources. We have the report, we have the evaluation and learning brief from Grassroots Solutions.

We have toolkits, for nonprofit organizations, for anybody interested in citizenship funders and others who are interested in just the approach that we took and wanna learn from it.

Robiel Abraha: Awesome. And so with that, I wanted to make sure I thanked everyone, Gislaine, Jannette, Lindsey, and KaNeesha.

Thank you all for being here and thank you for this great conversation and being part of this impactful work. And so for all of you, until next time, I'm Robiel Abraha, and this is Upstream.

Voice over: Upstream is a production of Houston Endowment. We're a private foundation established in 1937 by Jesse H. Jones and his wife, Mary Gibbs Jones, to improve the quality of life for everyone in Greater Houston