



GREATER HOUSTON CITIZENSHIP PROJECT LEARNING BRIEF¹



HOUSTONENDOWMENT.ORG

¹ This Learning Brief is adapted from findings presented in *Evaluation of the Greater Houston Citizenship Project Report* by Lindsay Hanson, Suzanne del Rosario, and Devon Ysaguirre of Grassroots Solutions (April 2026).

INTRODUCTION



For the past decade, Houston Endowment has invested in a network of nonprofit legal and community organizations supporting immigrants on the pathway to citizenship. Greater Houston is home to approximately 360,000 lawful permanent residents who are eligible to naturalize, yet only about 34,700 became U.S. citizens in 2023. Thus, many eligible residents continue to miss out on the economic, civic, and social benefits of citizenship, including higher earning potential, homeownership, voting rights, and greater freedom to travel.

To address this gap, Houston Endowment launched the Greater Houston Citizenship Project (GHCP) in 2023. Using a human-centered design (HCD) approach, the GHCP sought to better understand the barriers facing eligible-to-naturalize (ETN) residents and, together with residents and community partners, co-design and test interventions that could be refined and scaled across the region. The learnings from this experience demonstrated that the greatest value of HCD extended beyond the pilot programs themselves. GHCP not only helped 351 residents take meaningful steps toward citizenship but also *strengthened Houston's citizenship ecosystem* by building nonprofit capacity, deepening cross-sector collaboration, and fostering a level of community ownership that can help sustain this work moving forward.

Several key lessons emerged from the initiative:

- Involving residents and community organizations in designing the pilots led to solutions that better met community needs and were highly valued by participants.
- Providing training, coaching, and practical tools enabled nonprofits to build the skills and capacity needed to continue offering citizenship services after the project ended.
- Although building trust and collaboration required significant time and effort, it was essential to strengthening partnerships and improving coordination across organizations.
- The project also demonstrated the value of continuously incorporating feedback to improve services and enable nonprofits to adapt to evolving challenges in their local communities.

PROJECT PARTNERS AND GOVERNANCE

Beginning in December 2023, GHCP brought together the following partners to guide the initiative from design through implementation:

Houston Endowment	Served as the funder, convener, and strategic partner.
Dalberg Design and Wellspring Consulting	Led the HCD process from research and co-design to prototyping, partner coordination, and pilot implementation.
The Citizenship Advisory Committee (CAC)	A 14-member cross-sector group of nonprofit and civic leaders, served as the initiative’s community governance body.
Community Research and Implementation Partners	Houston-area nonprofits who recruited participants, facilitated community engagement, implemented pilots, and helped tailor solutions to local communities.
Grassroots Solutions	Served as the evaluation and learning partner, generating insights to guide project design, implementation, and sustainability.

Together, these partners combined strategic leadership, design expertise, and trusted community relationships to drive GHCP’s success.



Leaders share out the successes of the communications pilot and influencer campaigns.

“Unity and collaboration are essential to supporting our community members more effectively and safely. With multiple organizations working together in layers of support, we trust that our shared dedication and care for the community will help us navigate these challenges and continue moving forward, even during difficult times.”

— Community Partner

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN PROCESS

The initiative followed a four-phase, HCD process that moved from research and relationship building to co-design, pilot implementation, and evaluation.

- **Discovery and Planning:** Partners aligned on goals, roles, and implementation while conducting landscape research to understand barriers to naturalization, identify existing resources, and assess promising practices.
- **Community Research and Co-Design:** ETN residents from five focus neighborhoods participated in interviews, workshops, and other engagement activities to identify challenges, shape solutions, and inform pilot strategies.
- **Pilot Implementation:** The following complimentary pilots were launched:
 - » Community Pilots, Capacity-Building Pilot, and Communications Pilot. The Community Pilots included Citizenship Support Circles, a five-session cohort-based curriculum designed to prepare eligible residents for the naturalization process, and the Navigator Program, which provided individualized guidance and one-on-one support.
 - » Capacity-Building Pilot trained Community Facilitators and Navigators (CF&Ns) to lead the Support Circles and implement the Navigator Program.
 - » Communications Pilot developed outreach materials and implemented a campaign to recruit participants, raise awareness, and connect eligible residents with available resources.
- **Evaluation and Sustainability:** The partnership evaluated pilot outcomes, documented lessons learned, and developed tools and guidance on how to sustain and scale successful approaches in Greater Houston and beyond.



The Citizenship Advisory Committee served as the initiative's community governance body.

"This project had a huge impact on our organization, pushing us as a team to rethink what we are doing and how to improve our services to the community ..."

— Community Partner

PROJECT LEARNINGS

Providing training, coaching, and practical tools enabled nonprofits to build the skills and capacity needed to continue offering citizenship services after the project ended.

Community partners were integral to GHCP's success, helping shape the curriculum, materials, outreach strategies, training, and service delivery while continuously refining these approaches based on participant feedback. GHCP supported this work by providing practical tools, resources, and training. Training was especially important, with 80% of community partners identifying the facilitator training, train-the-trainer curriculum, and facilitation guides as the resources that best prepared them to sustain citizenship programming.

Following the training, CF&Ns reported greater knowledge of the naturalization process and increased confidence in supporting participants. Achieving these outcomes required ongoing adaptation, as GHCP leaders refined trainings and delivery based on partner feedback and evolving needs. Nearly all community partners interviewed during implementation (94%) reported that the initiative changed how their organizations operated, delivered services, or prioritized citizenship programming, citing expanded naturalization classes, stronger outreach, greater organizational self-sufficiency, and increased commitment to citizenship services. These findings demonstrate that building organizational capacity through a HCD approach requires flexible funding, dedicated staff time, and ongoing technical assistance.

Although building trust and collaboration required significant time and effort, it was essential to strengthening partnerships and improving coordination across organizations.

Rather than working independently, organizations increasingly coordinated their efforts by recruiting participants together, aligning outreach strategies, sharing legal resources and expertise, making referrals, and observing one another's citizenship workshops. During the pilots, 75% of CF&Ns collaborated with other organizations in Houston's citizenship ecosystem, and by the end of the initiative, 96% of pilot partners reported they were likely or very likely to continue those partnerships beyond the initiative. Achieving this level of collaboration required a significant investment of time and intentional relationship building. Houston Endowment, Dalberg, and Wellspring worked to build trust, create buy-in, and establish shared ways of working, while the CAC played a critical role in ensuring the process remained collaborative and connecting GHCP partners with trusted community organizations that had often been absent from similar efforts. Aligning expectations, developing referral processes, and creating shared decision-making structures slowed implementation, particularly during the early stages of the project, but partners consistently viewed the time spent building trust, establishing shared processes, and strengthening relationships as worthwhile because it improved coordination throughout the pilots and created a foundation for sustained collaboration across Houston's citizenship ecosystem beyond the initiative.

“Staff members gained awareness and understanding of issues they had not previously considered, and as an organization, we now have a clearer picture of the challenges connected to citizenship work. Even team members whose roles are not directly related to citizenship services now understand the importance of this work and have become more supportive and engaged.”

— Pilot Partner



Jannette Diep, Executive Director, BPSOS-Houston

The project also demonstrated the value of continuously incorporating feedback to improve services and enable nonprofits to adapt to evolving challenges in their local communities.

ETN residents participated in interviews, workshops, prototype testing, and ongoing feedback sessions, while community partners helped refine recruitment, training, curricula, outreach, and implementation as new challenges emerged. The CAC further reinforced this shared leadership by ensuring community perspectives informed key decisions throughout the project. This collaborative approach resulted in strong ownership, with more than half of partners reporting substantial influence over implementation decisions and 85% of CAC members saying their feedback was extensively incorporated. This sense of ownership also supported sustainability. By the end of the initiative, several organizations had committed to continuing the Navigator and Citizenship Support Circles models, and most partners expected to sustain key pilot activities. While adapting implementation to local contexts required additional coordination and technical assistance and reduced standardization across sites, the increased flexibility fostered stronger community ownership, making the tradeoff worthwhile.

Involving residents and community organizations in designing the pilots led to solutions that better met community needs and were highly valued by participants.

During the six-month pilot period, the program helped 351 ETN residents begin their journey toward citizenship. By the end of the pilot, 99% of participants reported being satisfied with the program, and survey respondents

reported that their motivation and likelihood of applying for naturalization increased by 10%. Among the pilots, the Citizenship Support Circles produced the strongest outcomes. Participants in this model reported greater increases in motivation to naturalize and completed more key preparation steps toward citizenship than participants in the Navigator Program. These outcomes reflected the iterative HCD process because partners continuously refined the curriculum, facilitation, scheduling, and outreach strategies in response to participant feedback. The pilots also highlighted an important tradeoff in that the approaches that produced the strongest outcomes were also the most resource-intensive. CF&Ns reported that individualized, high-touch support helped participants overcome logistical, legal, and personal barriers but required substantial staff time and organizational capacity. These findings suggest that using HCD to address complex challenges requires balancing intensive individualized support with broader outreach, making it important to identify an appropriate balance between highly effective interventions and approaches that can be scaled more efficiently.

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The Citizenship Advisory Committee reinforced shared leadership with community organizations and ETN residents.

CONCLUSION

Overall, GHCP shows that the value of HCD extends beyond the interventions it produces. Co-design strengthened organizational capacity, built lasting partnerships, and fostered community ownership, helping organizations sustain and adapt promising approaches over time. Achieving these outcomes requires a community-centered mindset, intentional investments in time and capacity building, flexibility during implementation, and a commitment to continuous learning. These lessons offer the following practical guidance for organizations seeking to apply HCD to address complex community challenges.

- **Invest in the process, not just the program.** Allocate sufficient time and resources for community engagement, co-design, iterative learning, facilitation, and adaptation, recognizing these activities as essential to achieving sustainable outcomes.
- **Position community organizations and residents as decision-makers.** Engage those closest to the issue throughout design, implementation, and refinement to build ownership, strengthen trust, and ensure solutions reflect community priorities.
- **Build organizational capacity alongside implementation.** Pair program funding with investments in staff training, technical assistance, peer learning, and infrastructure so organizations can sustain and adapt successful approaches beyond the initial funding period.
- **Treat collaboration as core infrastructure.** Invest in convening partners, strengthening referral networks, and supporting ongoing knowledge sharing to improve service coordination and build long-term community capacity.
- **Design for learning and adaptation.** Build flexibility into implementation, use continuous feedback to refine approaches, and view course corrections as an expected part of innovation rather than a sign of failure.
- **Plan for sustainability from the outset.** Develop strategies early for how promising approaches, partnerships, and leadership will continue after the initial investment through bridge funding, train-the-trainer models, integration into existing services, or communities of practice.
- **Measure systems-level outcomes alongside participant outcomes.** Evaluate success not only by program results but also by strengthened organizational capacity, cross-sector collaboration, community ownership, and the ability to sustain and scale effective approaches.



Harris County Public Library celebrates participants' completion of ESL courses.