

# Reactions to Harris County COVID-19 Relief Fund

*How can we design an emergency relief fund that distributes dollars efficiently and equitably during a pandemic that triggered stay-at-home orders and mass unemployment?*



## Context

From May through August of 2020, Connective supported distribution of \$30 million to roughly 22,000 vulnerable residents facing financial hardship during the pandemic through the Harris County COVID-19 Relief Fund (HCCRF), administered by the Greater Houston Community Foundation. We, alongside our partners, had 75 days to distribute the funds. Though the pressure of the ambitious timeline made every minute precious, Connective knew that getting seeker input on the program strategy and process was crucial to seizing the opportunity presented by this direct assistance fund. The Connective team prioritized holding focus groups with Harris County residents affected by COVID-19. We focused the interviews on program messaging, program communications and website design, and the application process. Invaluable insights came out of that work, which informed the final program design.



## Method

# Does This Work for You?: User Testing Through Focus Groups

### 6 Focus Groups

- Each for 45 minutes
- 12 total participants

### Multiple Languages

- Three focus groups in English
- Two focus groups in Spanish
- One focus group in Vietnamese

### Intentionally Selected Participants

- All participants in need of financial assistance during COVID-19
- From different neighborhoods in Houston

### Why We Did Focus Groups

This sprint was organized and conducted in the span of a week. Focus groups were conducted over two days. Insights were synthesized and relayed to the HCCRF program organizers in real time, promptly resulting in several key changes to the program messaging and application process.

### What Was the Harris County COVID-19 Relief Fund?

In response to skyrocketing levels of unemployment in the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak, on May 19, 2020, Harris County Commissioners Court approved \$30 million to establish the Harris County COVID-19 Relief Fund (HCCRF). The purpose of the fund was to provide short-term emergency economic relief directly to 20,000+ vulnerable residents facing financial hardship during the pandemic. The County engaged the Greater Houston Community Foundation (GHCF) to administer the fund.

GHCF had 75 days to distribute the funding. They employed a hub-and-spoke model, in which they centrally administered the program but distributed the client management by funding 44 different

community-based organizations with track records of working with vulnerable communities.

GHCF subcontracted Connective to provide strategic consulting services, administer the intake and application process, and provide the central database for agencies to process applicants.

The public intake portion of the funding was \$15 million, intended to serve approximately 11,000 households. GHCF and Connective knew there was far more need in the community than funds available. However, the intent was to design a process that provided access to vulnerable communities and was fair in its approach.

## How Words And Reactions Led to Action

1. There is a high need for transparency at all points of the process, from the selection process for nonprofits to the selection process of recipients.
  - “ What if my application didn’t go through? Will participants get a confirmation number or some notification about their successful submission?
  - “ I don’t mind if you keep my information so you can update me about future resources. But if you don’t have or know of any resources, don’t keep me hanging. Just be upfront and take me out of your database.
  - “ It’s in your interest to be as transparent as you can. In my neighborhood, people fill in the gaps of a story themselves.
  - “ I would like to see stats on how those funds are being used. No one knows where the JJ Watt money went, and this could be another one of those instances.

### INSIGHT 31

People have a lack of trust in government and nonprofit programs due to previous experiences. Transparency, even and especially when programs are complex, builds trust and allows program organizers to drive the narrative of the program.

2. Initially, we prioritized simplicity when explaining the process. We assumed that people didn’t want to get bogged down in the details of how the back end of the program, including the selection lottery, worked. However, we heard that this made people skeptical and signaled a lack of accountability. So we adjusted the language on the application and website to provide transparency around recipient selection and open communication with applicants about where they are in the pipeline.
3. One of the hypotheses of the HCCRF organizers was that applicants would have a strong preference for which service provider they got assistance from. While a few people stated that they did, the majority of people were focused on being matched to any provider that would help them. They want to know that the service providers selected can and will help.
  - “ If I’m in need, I don’t care who helps me.
  - “ I haven’t been in this situation before. I’m not sure of what nonprofits are out there, so I don’t have a preference about which nonprofit helps me.

4. We saw that, despite the high need, there is a high sensitivity to fairness and a need to ensure that everyone in need gets help.

“ I know there are other people in more need than me. And I would be perfectly fine if you picked them over me. I understand. But I want to know your process of selecting people to ensure the neediest get help.

5. Another hypothesis of the HCCRF organizers was that people would be hesitant to share their data and sign data agreements to enable nonprofits to talk to each other. However, no one in our interviews expressed this concern. Some people acknowledged that sharing data allows for efficiency and an easier customer experience. Most people were focused on receiving help and being treated with respect rather than protecting their data.

## INSIGHT 32

Seekers may deprioritize data privacy and protection when they need immediate financial support. As such, there is an opportunity to have data and privacy advocates on all program teams — those who will champion data rights even when the seeker may deprioritize it.

6. Because of COVID-19, there are many first-time seekers who need support. These people haven't navigated the system before, and they may come with stereotypical biases.

“ I am worried that because I don't know what it's like to seek nonprofit support or how to fill out nonprofit applications and I don't know many nonprofits, I will be at a disadvantage. Others who have more experience will be easily able to navigate this.

7. From our experience, we know that assistance programs get flooded with hundreds of thousands of applicants very quickly. We didn't want HCCRF to be another program that receives hundreds of thousands of applicants we couldn't serve. As such, we decided to keep the program open for only 12 hours, from 8am to 8pm. However, upon talking to people, we realized that this limited window only created more stress. And we didn't want people to undergo additional stress on top of what they are already experiencing due to COVID-19. So the organizers decided to keep the application open for another day, giving people more time to fill it out.

“ 8am to 8pm feels like this is going to be another powerball lottery or Black Friday sales-like chaos. Those with true needs will be left behind. Even one or two extra days would make this much less stressful!

“ I am worried about the Wi-Fi not working or the website crashing. Or if I am on the phone, I am worried about long holds, like calling 211 for food stamps and they ask you to stay on hold for 3 hours. I am worried about something dire coming up for my family during the 8am–8pm window and being unable to fill out the application.