



Understanding Disaster Survivors' Recovery Experience with the Federal Government

Research Plan — DRAFT

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PRE-DECISIONAL/DELIBERATIVE — NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

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This plan outlines the research activities that will be undertaken for CX Discovery: Recovering from a Disaster. Contents are as follows:

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Background

Project Context and Overview

Disasters impact the lives of Americans in intense and deeply challenging ways. The experience of recovering from a disaster requires that people attend to their families' most basic needs, maintain employment, and keep businesses afloat—all while navigating trauma, stress, and multiple bureaucratic processes. During these highly vulnerable moments, a clear, effective, and trauma-informed customer experience with the Federal Government is crucial.

Through this project, the Office of Management (OMB), in partnership with The Lab at the Office of Personnel Management (The Lab at OPM), Technology Transformation Services (TTS), and United States Digital Service (USDS) will use human-centered design to explore the stories, experiences, and challenges that disaster survivors, including housing-insecure populations, face when recovering from disasters. This project will build the Federal Government's capacity to use a human-centered approach to identify opportunities for service advancement, create cross-government connections, and complement traditional methods of quantitative and policy research.

Research Plan

The purpose of this document is to outline the research goals and methods, as well as the plan and tools for engaging participants to address the areas of inquiry. This document may be updated throughout the research process as insights develop.



Problem Statement and Research Goals

Problem Statement

Americans' lives are increasingly impacted by disasters each year. After a disaster, each survivor's recovery journey is different based on their pre-existing resources and socio-economic status, but what is constant is the shock, stress, and confusion the disaster wrecks on every survivor's life. Recovery processes tend to exacerbate already cumbersome processes. Survivors who experience housing insecurity before a disaster (e.g., experiencing homelessness, on a fixed income, or renting) are particularly vulnerable in the aftermath of a disaster. Small business owners have added worries around their colleagues' safety, damage to any physical inventories and/or locations, and the viability of their business operations. While handling their individual and family situations, they must also manage the recovery of their livelihoods, multiplying the various steps needed to recuperate and compounding any challenges within these processes.

The process for these survivors to receive federal government assistance is laden with barriers which prevent survivors from getting the support they need to recover and rebuild their life. This project seeks to learn directly from the lived experience of survivors, small business owners, local service providers, and organizations about the pressing gaps and opportunities needed to advance an equitable recovery experience.

What is learned through this research will inform the creation of a unified and effective experience for disaster survivors and small business owners who seek Federal disaster assistance, especially those from underserved communities.

This research will also help identify potential solution pathways to the Federal data sharing challenges that make it harder for small business owners who have experienced a disaster to obtain the aid that they need to recover quickly and without undue administrative burdens.

Research Goals and Outcomes

Research Goals for Survivors

1. Identify ways to improve the housing and social support service experience for disaster survivors (particularly those experiencing pre-



disaster housing instability) to enable a clear, trauma-informed recovery process.

2. Identify the pain points people have around applying for benefits (eg. retrieving records, enrollment) and opportunities to address them.
3. Develop guidance for communications and data sharing between federal agencies and disaster survivors that are survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and consistent with best practices in social work, helping federal agencies meet the needs of disaster survivors.
4. Identify the moments where the public is submitting personal information across different government programs, applying for disaster relief, and other assistance. What data they are sharing with each agency and where these may be duplicative.
5. Understand the end-to-end process, from disaster preparation through recovery, of how information and data is shared from the disaster survivors, across government agencies, programs, and other governments and organizations involved in the disaster recovery process.
6. Understand and assess existing infrastructure. Analyze and document the systems of record that are involved in service delivery, Examine the systems where records are stored and the technical and organizational capacity required to support digital sharing of records with other agencies
7. Assess how service providers define, evaluate, and measure successful household-level disaster recovery.
8. Identify future use cases where effective data sharing can improve the survivor experience.
9. Develop recommendations for improving the survivor experience when interacting with Federal, state and local governments, and other organizations incorporating feedback from end-users.
10. Identify challenges relevant agencies have receiving and processing personal records requests. Determine whether agency challenges are technical, organizational, and/or policy-related. Describe “back of house” processes agencies use to process records requests.
11. Identify challenges relevant agencies have collecting information for benefits administration. Determine whether agency challenges are technical, organizational, and/or policy-related.
12. Describe “back of house” processes agencies use to collect information for benefits administration.
13. Understand the end-to-end experience for small business owners surviving a disaster, including before, during, and after
14. Understand the emotional experience of small business owners who have survived a disaster
15. Understand how both small business owners and the organizations that support them define, evaluate, and measure successful small business recovery



16. Understand the breadth and availability of disaster services provided to small business owners by federal agencies; state, local and tribal governments; and partner organizations
17. Understand the relationships between federal agencies as it relates to small business owners during disasters and the recovery process
18. Understand the technology access and tools used by small businesses during and after a disaster
19. Identify the pain points small business owners have around applying for benefits (eg. retrieving records, enrollment) and opportunities to address them
20. Identify challenges relevant agencies have around collecting or sharing information, records, and data regarding small business owners

Research Outcomes

The research will inform the following deliverables:

- Service Blueprint(s)
 - Managing federal disaster assistance
- Personas
- Communication Audit and Guidance
- Report Deck with Findings and Recommendations
- Identify future use cases for cross-agency survivor data sharing
- Recommendations for improving survivor and small business owner experience
- Recommendations for further improvement to small business preparedness and recovery resources
- Identify potential products and solutions for the disaster life experience
- Develop guidance for product or program development, communications, and data sharing between federal agencies and small business owners that are survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and consistent with best practices in social work, helping federal agencies meet the needs of people who have experienced a disaster

Inquiry Areas

To meet our goals, we will conduct research to address following areas of inquiry, each of which contains a subset of related questions that the team will explore through research:

1. What does a successful, survivor-centered experience entail?
 - a. What are the key stages and milestones in the disaster life experience from survivors' / small business owners' point of view?



- b. What are the most challenging or successful aspects of the disaster life experience? Who is involved?
 - c. How does the recovery experience differ for various populations including housing-insecure audiences?
 - d. How does the disaster experience affect other important goals and concerns in people's lives?
 - e. How do survivors define their own successful recovery for their family/household? How does that compare with the federal definition?
 - f. How does the recovery experience differ for various business types?
 - g. How does the disaster experience affect other important goals and concerns regarding running a small business? How do those goals affect their personal life?
 2. What communication materials, information, and data sharing processes best address people's / small business owners' needs throughout the disaster life experience?
 - a. What key communication materials do survivors interact with at different stages in the recovery process?
 - b. How do people become aware of information about potential disasters? And through what channels?
 - c. What technologies and tools are involved in receiving and learning about assistance?
 - d. What are the access and technological barriers for people throughout the disaster life experience?
 - e. What are the gaps and opportunities for trauma-informed, 508 compliant, and inclusive communication best practices?
 - f. How does access or preference for communication change over the course of the disaster journey?
 - g. What channels and technologies do small business owners have access to throughout the disaster life experience? What is their preference?
 - h. How do small business owners learn about disaster assistance?
 - i. How does language and financial literacy play a role in their business operations? Does this impact their disaster experience?
 - j. In which ways are business operational practices influenced, informed, or changed by this life experience? Why or why not?
 3. What services, programs, or platforms best address people's / businesses' needs throughout the disaster experience?
 - a. What services and programs do survivors interact with at different stages in the recovery process?
 - b. What are some best practices or examples of seamless service delivery across service providers / levels of government?



- c. How do survivors become aware of services and programs they are eligible for?
- d. How do survivors choose which services and programs to seek out or not, and why are they awarded or denied services?
- e. How do they access the services and programs—Identify the types of tools and platforms do survivors interface with?
- f. What data and information is needed for program applications and what is shared to and between groups?
- g. How are programs and services experienced at the local-, state-, and NGO-level and by stakeholders other than federal agencies?
- h. Who do small business owners turn to for support in times of need? What do they look for?
- i. Which services, programs, and products do small business owners interact with across the disaster life experience? Why?
- j. How do small business owners access services and programs intended for small business owners? How do they decide which to apply for?
- k. What are small business owners' thoughts, opinions, and feelings about their support options for disaster recovery?
- l. What non-financial types of assistance would be most impactful to supporting small business owners in their recovery?

Methods

The team will combine research methods to address the areas of inquiry. Each method has benefits and constraints, but collectively will allow us to meet our research goals.

Our research methods may include:

- Desktop Research:
 - Review relevant papers, articles, podcasts, and videos, and actual communication materials about disaster preparedness, disaster recovery, federal assistance, and trauma-informed communications and service delivery.
 - Review government reports, presentations, and memos about disaster recovery and past and current initiatives to improve customer service for disaster survivors and small business owners.
- Semi-structured interviews:



- Conduct semi-structured interviews with:
 - Federal and state stakeholders specializing in disaster management
 - Front-line staff who provide support for disaster survivors and small business owners
 - Disaster survivors
 - Small business owners
- Observational studies:
 - Observe how participants interact, manage, utilize, or access certain recovery programs and/or communication materials (e.g. denial letter, individual assistance application, disaster loan application)
- Co-Design:
 - Engage with federal stakeholders to develop insights and ideate future strategies.
 - Engage with disaster survivors and/or front-line staff to prototype speculative communication materials (e.g. 1-pagers, brochures) and interfaces for data sharing and solutions for other opportunities identified through generative research sessions.
 - Mapping journeys, processes, and experiences from the public and agency perspectives.
- Others:
 - To be determined as needed

Stakeholder Engagement

In addition to these research methods, the team will seek out regular advisement through the following tactics:

Stakeholder Group	Engagement
Equitable Recovery Sub-Interagency Policy Committee (IPC)	Monthly Briefings
Recovery Support Function Leadership Group Senior Executives	Monthly Briefings
Subject Matter Experts from Participating Federal Agencies	Bi-weekly Agency Advisory Sessions



Synthesis

Data will be synthesized on a rolling basis during research to ensure that information is tracked efficiently and accurately. After each interview, Lead Interviewer and Notetaker record initial takeaways on Mural board. Notetaker will clean up notes, remove identifying information, and major takeaways and quotes will be transferred onto the Mural board. Takeaways and quotes will be clustered into meaningful themes.

Participants

The project team aims to engage the following participants in research, including via semi-structured interviews and co-design workshops. The team aims to engage between 50 and 90 participants, with at least one third of participants being survivors and approximately one third small business owners. The following table showcases the types of participants we're looking to engage.

Participant Criteria

Government Stakeholders

5-10 government stakeholders specializing in disaster management, potentially including but not limited to stakeholders from the following agencies:

- Environmental Protection Agency
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Government Accountability Office
- Dept. of Health and Human Services
- Dept. of Housing and Urban Development
- Dept. of Agriculture
- Small Business Administration
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- State/Local Housing/ Social Services
- State/Local Disaster Management Services

5-10 government employees specializing in small business support and/or disaster management. These could include but are not limited to:

- Call center staff
- Loan officers
- Policy teams
- Disaster response teams



Front-line Staff

10-15 front-line staff who serve disaster survivors, potentially including but not limited to:

- Disaster Legal Service Providers
- Community/Faith-Based Organization Disaster Service Provider Staff
- Social Workers/ Mental Healthcare Providers
- Homeless Shelter Managers
- Immigrant Organization Service Provider
- People responsible for training volunteers to do disaster recovery work

5 – 10 front line staff defined as those who directly support small business owners, particularly after disasters. These could include but are not limited to:

- Chambers of Commerce
- Non-profits related to supporting businesses
- Accountants
- Business Associations

Disaster Survivors

10-25 disaster survivors, potentially key stakeholder types (with some identities likely overlapping) including but not limited to:

- People experiencing pre-disaster homelessness
- Low-income renters
- Homeowners with fixed incomes
- Survivors who have been displaced for more than 18 months
- Survivors who have received Individual Assistance
- Survivors with disabilities
- Survivors with limited English proficiency
- Survivors who are a parents or guardians
- Survivors over the age 65
- Survivors born outside the US
- Survivors living in manufactured housing pre-disaster

Small Business Owners

10 – 20 small business owners who have experienced a disaster where their business is located, and including those who have and have not engaged in federal support programs.

Participant Recruitment



We will employ the following tailored recruitment methods for each participant types:

Government Stakeholders

The initial candidates of government stakeholders will be recruited through federal agency partners and existing working groups, including the Equitable Recovery Sub-IPC. From this initial pool, the team will use the snowball sampling method to engage additional government stakeholders, including stakeholders at the state and local level.

Front-Line Staff

The project team will use two tactics to recruit front-line staff participants. The first will be to use the snowball sampling method with government stakeholder participants, asking them to connect the project team to front-line staff in their networks. The second tactic will be to conduct cold outreach, via email and phone calls, to existing professional networks, nonprofits, and coalitions engaged in disaster survivor work. These networks may include front-line staff or people who can then connect the team with front-line staff they know.

Disaster Survivors & Small Business Owners

A multi-pronged recruitment approach will be used to ensure we recruit diverse groups of survivors and small business owners. This includes but is not limited to using a recruitment agency, social media outreach, posting flyers in service provider offices, and intercept interviews (if in-person engagement is pursued). Additionally, the team will reach out to case managers, legal service providers, local houses of worship, and community organizations that may be able to connect us to survivors.

Interview Procedures

Interview Roles

Each interview will have three roles:

- Interview Lead: facilitates the interview using the research guide
- Notetaker: Captures notes and key quotes, asks follow-up questions
- Observer: Capture key milestones of the recovery journey on a provided template



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Data Storage Protocol

Secure Contact List on Max.gov

- Contains: Participant name, contact information, and assigned Participant ID code

Interview Tracker on Max.gov

- Contains: Participant ID code (no other PII), interview scheduling information (date, interviewer, note taker)

Notetaker Template (for raw interview notes)

- Local Word document template for each notetaker to record raw notes
- Contains: Participant ID, Interviewer Name, Notetaker Name, Date
- Naming convention for notes: LE-Disaster_[InterviewType]_[participantID]
 - Example: LE-Disaster__GovernmentStakeholder_6.07
- Notetaker will strip their notes of Personally Identifiable Information (PII)

Synthesis Mural

- Following the interview, the notetaker will upload their notes (containing no PII) to Max.gov
- For up to 30 minutes after each interview, the interviewer and notetaker will collaboratively put key interview takeaways (quotes and observations) into the Mural.

Locations

The Team will conduct this primary research with U.S.-based participants.

Appendix: Definition of Key Terms

Abundance Mindset

An abundance mindset—being the opposite of a scarcity mindset—is a paradigm that focuses on the assets and potential opportunities of a situation, rather than the disadvantages or limits at hand. This project seeks to frame opportunities from this lens, emphasizing resources that can be leveraged and long-term change.

Allostatic Load



Allostatic load refers to the [cumulative burden of chronic stress and life events](#). When environmental challenges surpass a person's ability to cope with those stressors, allostatic overload occurs. The project will use this concept in understanding the environmental determinants of health at play for disaster survivors and to inform the types of research questions and activities pursued.

Disaster

For this project, “disaster” is defined as an event that is declared by the president to be a major disaster, as outlined in 42 U.S.C. 5170 of the Robert T. Stafford Act, as amended. These events are those that the President determines have caused damage of such severity that it is beyond the combined capabilities of state and local governments to respond. Over the last several years, there have been 61, 104, and 58 [major disaster declarations for 2019, 2020, and 2021](#), respectively.

Housing-Insecure Disaster Survivors

[More than 330 million Americans](#) at any moment may be impacted by a disaster. The experience of recovering from a disaster is particularly difficult for those with fewer resources—including time, money, and support networks—to rebound. For this project, the team will focus on housing-insecure disaster survivors as a critical user group of disaster support. Housing-insecure disaster survivors include:

- Persons experiencing pre-disaster homelessness,
- Low-income renters
- Homeowners with fixed incomes.

Human-Centered Design

This project will use a [human-centered design](#) approach, defined as a creative and strategic approach to solving complex problems. Human-centered design methods allow teams to rapidly generate and test new ideas while prioritizing people's needs, behaviors, and ways of thinking. Through human-centered design, we can improve products, services, and systems from the perspectives of the people who use them, which for this work, are disaster survivors.

Service Blueprint

A visualization of a process, typically for an end-user. It is often used to represent a service experience and includes key milestones, actions, emotional states, as well as other system and data flows. This a key



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deliverable of this work and will serve to visualize the disaster survivor experience.

Problem Statement

A problem statement is a concise description of the problem or issues a project seeks to address. It is a useful framework for centering discovery research on the end-users of the tool or service, their needs and desires, and the implications of not addressing the challenges at hand. A good problem statement steers away from proposing any solutions, rather, it sets forth the key question being asked of the discovery process. By virtue of the open-ended nature of human-centered design, it is possible for problem statements to evolve during the project.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Trauma-informed approaches to customer service involve integrating the principles of trauma-informed care into design and service delivery. This requires acknowledging how the design and delivery of services impact identity, worth, and dignity, and identifying ways to design for healing and wellbeing. A trauma-informed approach incorporates values of [safety, choice, collaboration, trust, and empowerment](#).

Because trauma is complex and specific to each person's experience, a trauma-informed approach must necessarily be specific to the context in question. There is no one-size-fits-all version. This project aims to take a trauma-informed approach to research activities and seeks to identify trauma-informed strategies for improving the disaster recovery experience.