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Reflections on Practice: 2011–2020

PUBLIC POLICY LAB

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REFLECTING ON FIFTEEN YEARS

The Public Policy Lab (PPL) is a nonprofit innovation lab that works in partnership with government agencies, providers of public services, and members of the public. Since 2011, PPL has applied human-centered research, design, and evaluation methods to the challenges faced by low-income and marginalized Americans.

Over the past fifteen years, we've learned many lessons about designing public services and policies across the country. This publication features six essays written by PPL staff, as part of our Fifteen Years of PPL (PPL15) series. Each one reflects on an influential project in our history from 2011 to 2020. (A second publication, Reflecting on Practice: 2021–2026, will cover our more recent work.) These essays center on a range of themes: dreaming, connection, power, scale, value, and influence.

Along with the essays, we hosted events to spark further conversation around the themes with fellow practitioners in government, civic design, technology, and academia. Links to recordings of these events are included at the end of select essays.

DREAMING AS PRACTICE

Is Dreaming Still Dreaming If Your Dream Keeps Coming True?

By Chelsea Mauldin

Last summer, I attended the Creative Bureaucracy Festival in Berlin, and someone asked me, “Is the Public Policy Lab the longest-running government innovation lab in the world?” I pointed to our respected colleagues at TACSI or at La 27e Région[1] as the likelier holder of that title, but the question suggested new problems to consider: If innovation is the process of using information from the world as it is to invent something new and useful for a world we prefer, what has PPL learned about how to dream of transformation, even as we've been progressively weathered by political friction, bureaucratic timescales, funding shortfalls, and our own errors of judgment and execution? What has fifteen years of practice taught us about skills and approaches to innovation, sure, but also how to conceive of innovation itself? (Yes, my fellow nerds, the ontology, in addition to the epistemology.)

> What has fifteen years of practice taught us about skills and approaches to innovation, sure, but also how to conceive of innovation itself?

That's the oblique topic of this post, as well as eleven more that we'll post across 2026, our 15th anniversary year. My colleagues will share behind-the-scenes details of some of PPL's most interesting projects, but more importantly, they'll consider what those projects mean—what they suggest about the use of creative invention to support our democratic project.

1. TACSI is The Australian Centre for Social Innovation. La 27e Region is based in Paris. Founded in the early 2010s, both organizations are pioneers in the field and longtime friends of PPL.

2. Sylvia Harris was a pioneering civic designer and strategist and one of the co-founders of PPL.

THE DREAM WE DIDN'T FULLY SEE YET

Where we are now was not obvious from where we started. In the summer of 2008, I had lunch with Sylvia Harris.[2] We'd remained in touch since working together on a project at the Design Trust for Public Space, and now Sylvia had an urgent insight: “Barack Obama is going to win this election,” she said, “and the design community is not getting ready.”

As the creative director for the 2000 Census for the U.S. Census Bureau, Sylvia had seen how thoughtful design could support crucial American public services—and she'd observed how different administrations had varying levels of awareness (or interest) around using design for the public good. “George Bush took office, and the phone stopped ringing!” she laughed.

Over the following months, Sylvia and her friend and former business partner, David Gibson, organized a recurring meeting with a number of New York City designers under the mantle of Design for Democracy, a long-running initiative of the AIGA, the professional organization for design. We began exploring ways to demonstrate the value of strategic design to the incoming administration. In May 2009, as fallout from the financial crisis continued, we created a speculative redesign of the so-called “Schumer box”[3] for credit-card disclosures; published in the New York Times[4] as an op-ed, it made the case for better communications design as a form of consumer protection.

Shortly after publication, an administrator at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) reached out to see if we had thoughts on how the agency could make it easier for beneficiaries to choose a Medicare plan. We provided what may have been the first human-centered design guidance that CMS had received and subsequently joined an effort to redesign the Medicare Summary Notice (MSN), the quarterly explanation of benefits sent to thirty-five million–plus original Medicare beneficiaries. Our dream of doing public interest design was now occurring at scale, even though we were still operating as an ad-hoc band of do-gooders.

WHAT BECAME CLEAR

By mid-2010, as I worked with Sylvia and her team, as well as with David and his staff at Two Twelve on redesigning the MSN, several things became evident:

- If one of the most important service-delivery agencies of the federal government operated with essentially zero human-centered service design, then nearly every other government agency in the United States must be in the same boat. Indeed, in 2010, no one we met at public agencies had heard of “service design,” let alone wanted it.
- If we were going to convince the agencies of the nation that they needed design, we couldn't continue to provide it as an informal collective or as an initiative of a professional association—we needed a new public-interest entity, one that could both enter into agreements to make things and also advocate for a new approach to the design and delivery of services.
- Better communications or better user experience wouldn't be enough; what we were reaching toward was a human-centered approach to policymaking itself, one grounded in the lived experiences of the public. And so the name of our nascent nonprofit organization became the Public Policy Lab. “That will get the policy folks to take our calls!” Sylvia crowed. Plus I loved that our acronym would be PPL, for the PeoPLe (a brand Easter egg, like the arrow in the FedEx logo).

3. The Schumer box, a standard disclosure of a credit card's interest rates and fees, is named after Senator Chuck Schumer, who sponsored the legislation requiring it.

4. Read the article, “Healthy Credit,” published in 2009 on the NYTimes website.

↓ PPL co-founder Sylvia Harris leads a workshop with Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services staff in Baltimore.

↑ A PPL staff member works on an audit of Medicare communications.

To launch a new organization with no funding in a highly regulated market with no demand for our services—readers, in retrospect, it seems foolhardy. What made us think we could do this? It helped that I was somewhat desperate: I'd reached the limits of my then-role running a community-based organization, I wanted a job that flexibly accommodated my responsibilities as a parent of young children, and I wanted to do ambitious service-design work that capitalized on my interests in policy and system design. No one was offering me this dream job. It wasn't clear that the job I wanted even existed in the United States.

Crucially, I'd run a nonprofit previously, and I was the child and spouse of small-business owners. No one close to me believed I had to take a job if I could *make* one. Meanwhile, Sylvia and David were themselves entrepreneurs; they had co-founded Two Twelve after graduating from Yale's design program in the mid-1970s, and Sylvia later launched her own practice. Both of them knew it was possible to build an organization from scratch.

We also saw a major opportunity: The Medicare project showed us that although there was no widespread uptake of human-centered service design in government, government partners were ready to adopt new approaches. The challenges we saw were systemic, not cosmetic, and addressing them would require building something durable enough to work across agencies and political cycles. The landscape was ripe for innovative intervention. In January 2011, I left my job, updated my LinkedIn, and filed incorporation papers with the state of New York.

DREAMING AS AN ONGOING PRACTICE

This conviction, that the creation of something new is not just desirable, but entirely plausible (and even manageable), is a keystone of the Public Policy Lab's successful innovation process. Over time, we've proved that transformative solutions don't spring from optimism alone. They emerge through dedicated practice: by paying close attention to where systems fail people, by testing small ideas before scaling them, by learning from missteps, and by surrounding ourselves with partners who are willing to imagine something better and stay with the work long enough to build it. After fifteen years as executive director of Public Policy Lab, I've come to see innovation as a continuously improvable craft, the product of a regular practice that requires us to repeatedly rekindle a spark of delight and strangeness, even when conditions make that feel unrealistic.

To do this work in the public interest, with and for our neighbors and fellow citizens, we have to make our dreams shareable. We have to invite others into the belief that public systems can be designed differently and better. Public-interest innovation is, at its core, a collective capacity to dream and build a more humane social compact. In the posts that follow this one throughout our anniversary year, my colleagues and I will return to that idea, reflecting on the projects that shaped us and the lessons they offer for anyone still willing to dream—and to practice making those dreams real.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Following the publication of this essay, we hosted a conversation on dreaming as practice. The panel included PPL executive director Chelsea Mauldin; Sha Hwang of Nava PBC; and Hillary Hartley, formerly of US Digital Response—three leaders who have each launched and sustained innovation practices inside and alongside public systems. Panelists shared their perspectives on what it takes to turn early visions into durable work, how imagination coexists with rigor, and how innovation evolves over the long arc of practice. Scan the QR code to watch the recording.

GOOD TOOLS AREN'T ENOUGH

How Trust Drives Public Service Delivery and Innovation

By Andrew Eickmann

In 2012, my supervisor at the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) asked me to lead an "innovation initiative" with the Public Policy Lab (PPL) and the DESIS Lab at Parsons.[1] I wasn't sure what this would entail, or even what PPL—a startup still in its infancy—was all about. "They're designers," she told me. "They help agencies rethink services. Just trust me—we're going to learn a lot."

A few months later, I found myself in a South Bronx computer lab watching residents navigate NYC Housing Connect, HPD's online platform for the affordable housing lottery. We were testing prototype materials designed by PPL to help applicants prepare for the housing lottery. But our co-design participants kept raising deeper doubts: "They're only showing me brand new apartments. I could never afford that!" Or, "I've tried applying before, but the interview process killed me. It's just too complicated."

What became clear to me was that New Yorkers didn't just need better informational tools. They needed to believe that success in the housing lottery was possible, and that these apartments really had been built with them in mind.

Over the following months, the project team launched four lottery-improvement pilots.[2] For one pilot, we created a set of informational tools that provided step-by-step instructions to apply for the lottery. These materials addressed a real need and were downloaded more than three hundred fifty thousand times—yet fewer than half of applicants actually used them. Clear information alone was not enough.

The real barrier was trust. In a high-cost city like New York, there are far fewer available subsidized apartments than there are eligible residents in need. Securing housing through a city-run lottery requires a bit of irrational optimism and trust in an under-resourced system. And in communities with a long history of feeling misled by government officials, that trust is rightfully scarce.

The pilot that ultimately had the greatest impact was the one initially considered too risky: PPL fellows proposed training community-based organizations as "housing ambassadors" to distribute HPD's new tools and provide one-on-one application

1. The Parsons Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Lab (DESIS Lab) is an action research laboratory founded at The New School in New York City.

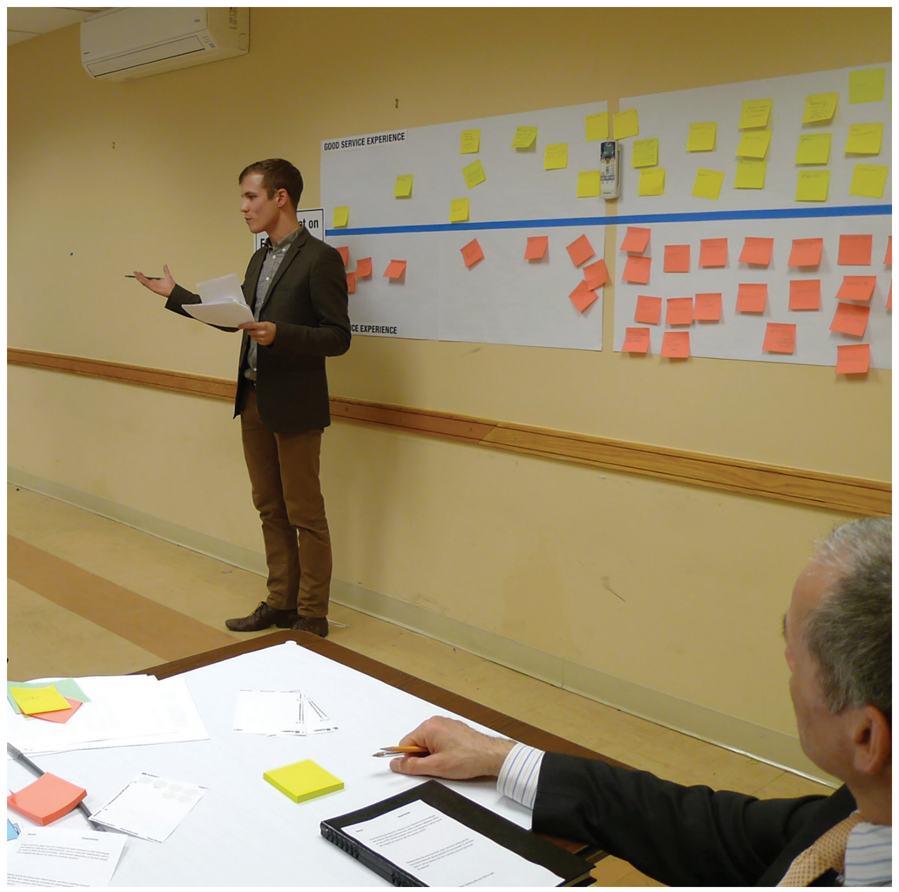
2. To read more about this project, Public and Collaborative Housing Services, visit publicpolicylab.org/projects.

assistance in their communities. The idea was simple—building trust with applicants would require human relationships. HPD staff couldn't offer individualized help to clients without risking the appearance of bias in a lottery process. Community partners, however, were already trusted neighbors and experienced housing counselors. They could provide information and the human connection residents needed while maintaining the integrity of the system.

Initially, HPD supervisors balked at the idea. What if Housing Ambassadors conveyed incorrect information? What if the program created an appearance of favoritism? And what about the workload of maintaining community partnerships? I remember one conversation with a senior supervisor as the pilots were set to launch: "We love the informational tools—they look great. But we're going to pause on the Ambassadors pilot. I'm hearing a lot of concerns about risks to the agency."

What overcame these concerns was an argument about the purpose of a pilot. We weren't proposing an immediate citywide launch of the Ambassadors program, just a small, controlled experiment with four organizations that HPD already knew well. Scaling decisions would come later, guided by evidence from the pilot. This argument, coupled with a detailed implementation plan, began to sway the skeptics.

↓ A PPL staff member facilitates a journey mapping exercise with staff at HPD.



In the end, HPD took a leap of faith. In 2014, four community organizations became pilot Housing Ambassadors, the human bridge between the agency and housing applicants. One of those four original organizations, Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH),[3] offered housing counseling in English and Spanish at its office in Bushwick, Brooklyn. CUFFH staffers hosted regular affordable housing workshops and used HPD's new informational materials to help neighbors understand and navigate the lottery application process. As Ambassadors, they reviewed clients' housing applications and required documents, and also shared resources for financial empowerment, credit repair, and legal support. Importantly, they provided clients encouragement rooted in real success stories.

The role of community-based Housing Ambassadors wasn't just technical support; it was relational. They made the housing system feel accessible and trustworthy. They were neighbors and fellow residents, but with HPD's training, materials, and backing. Our informational tools provided clarity, but the Housing Ambassadors provided trust—the ingredient that made residents willing to engage in the first place.

Twelve years later, the network of Housing Ambassadors has grown from four pilot organizations to more than fifty sites operating across all five boroughs, with all original partners still involved. Expanding the network required HPD to evolve too. The agency added dedicated staff to coordinate the Ambassadors in a role that looks more like community organizing than traditional government compliance. And throughout, HPD maintained its willingness to trust external partners to help deliver essential services.

"The primary resource required for implementing this proposal is human."—Designing Services for Housing, p.58

At the start of this project, my HPD supervisor encouraged me to take a leap of faith: "Just trust me—we're going to learn a lot." When I reflect on the work now, I see two lessons that still inform how I think about public sector innovation.

3. Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH) is a grassroots advocacy organization based in Brooklyn. Rooted in faith and community spaces, CUFFH provides affordable housing services and social resources.

"The primary resource required for implementing this proposal is human."

— Public and Collaborative: Designing Services for Housing

↑ This quote is featured in the PPL report *Public and Collaborative: Designing Services for Housing*. To read the report, visit publicpolicylab.org/resources.

First, effective service delivery is inherently human. Digital tools and clear information do matter, but they rarely succeed on their own—especially in systems marked by scarcity and historical distrust. People need encouragement, reassurance, and relationships to navigate complex services.

Second, creating those human connections requires agencies to take calculated risks. Public institutions are structured to minimize failure, which often leads to protecting the status quo even when it isn't working. Many promising new approaches don't stall because they lack impact; they stall because agencies struggle to sustain the risk and trust they require. Yet small, controlled experiments can actually reduce long-term risk. They let agencies test new approaches, build evidence, and expand reach through partnerships that multiply capacity beyond city staff.

The humans behind government services—not just the frontline providers delivering the service, but also the agency managers making strategic decisions—determine whether innovations succeed. The Ambassadors program succeeded because HPD was willing to trust partners and invest in relationships it didn't fully control. That decision made it possible to embed human connection into a complex public service and ultimately to deliver better information and outcomes for residents.

Innovation in government isn't just about new materials. The tools provide information. The agency takes the risk. And human relationships turn services into something residents can believe in.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Following the publication of this essay, we hosted a conversation on the role of human connection in public-sector innovation with PPL senior principal Andrew Eickmann; Emily Osgood of New York City's Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development; and Yasmin Fodil of Code for America. The panelists explored themes of risk and trust when working in public systems. Scan the QR code to watch a recording.

NEW VIEW OF CONSENT

How We've Leveled Up Our Consent Processes Over the Years

By Chelsea Mauldin
Foreword by Judy Park Lee

We first published "New View of Consent" in 2021. In it, we describe how a project on jail overcrowding in Louisville, Kentucky,[1] prompted us to improve our informed consent processes to more effectively mitigate power inequality in our relationships with research participants.

All the practices we feature—including offering fair compensation, using plain language in consent forms, and maximizing participant control over their data—are still things we do today. That said, a lot has changed in the five years since we published this article. We've continued to interrogate and tinker with our approach—not only around consent, but also how we think about the role of research and power.

One area we've been reflecting on is the impact of our research data. We spend months speaking with people and collecting their experiences, only for all of that information to sit in proprietary project databases. Different organizations research the same topics and people, generating duplicative data and reducing the public's trust in the efficacy of research. To challenge this, we started building civic data platforms where these rich stories can be made public, available to be used for policy innovation, research, and advocacy. Our first platform, The People Say,[2] features firsthand insights from older adults and caregivers across the country on the issues most important to them, as well as feedback from experts on policies affecting older adults.

This new approach—of making our research public—means informed consent is an ever more critical anchor of our practice. We need to be explicit with participants about how we will use and share their data. We also need to give participants the ability to review and decide what gets shared with the public. Overall, our hope is that this shift toward openness offers participants even greater agency. Rather than filtering their experiences through our interpretive lens and limiting their impact to one project, we allow their stories to be accessed directly by decision-makers to inform how policies and services are designed.

In addition to architecting civic data platforms, we've also been busy making and sharing resources[3] on how to conduct equitable research and shift power within systems, including:

1. To read more about this project, Investigating Links Between Opioids & Jail, visit publicpolicylab.org/projects.

2. To read more about this project, The People Say, visit thepeoplesay.org.

3. To view these resources and many more, visit publicpolicylab.org/resources.

↑ A PPL staff member visits jail facilities in Louisville, Kentucky, and conducts research with justice-involved people, corrections staff, and treatment community members.

- *Presenting a tutorial on assessing and addressing power dynamics in research and design projects;*
- *Delivering a workshop to public servants about preparing for research with the public;*
- *Publishing a zine on the Layer Cake, our theory of how government services are delivered as layers of people and power;*
- *Holding a webinar on how to set up research operations systems; and*
- *Leading a conversation on the risks of using AI tools in human-centered design research.*

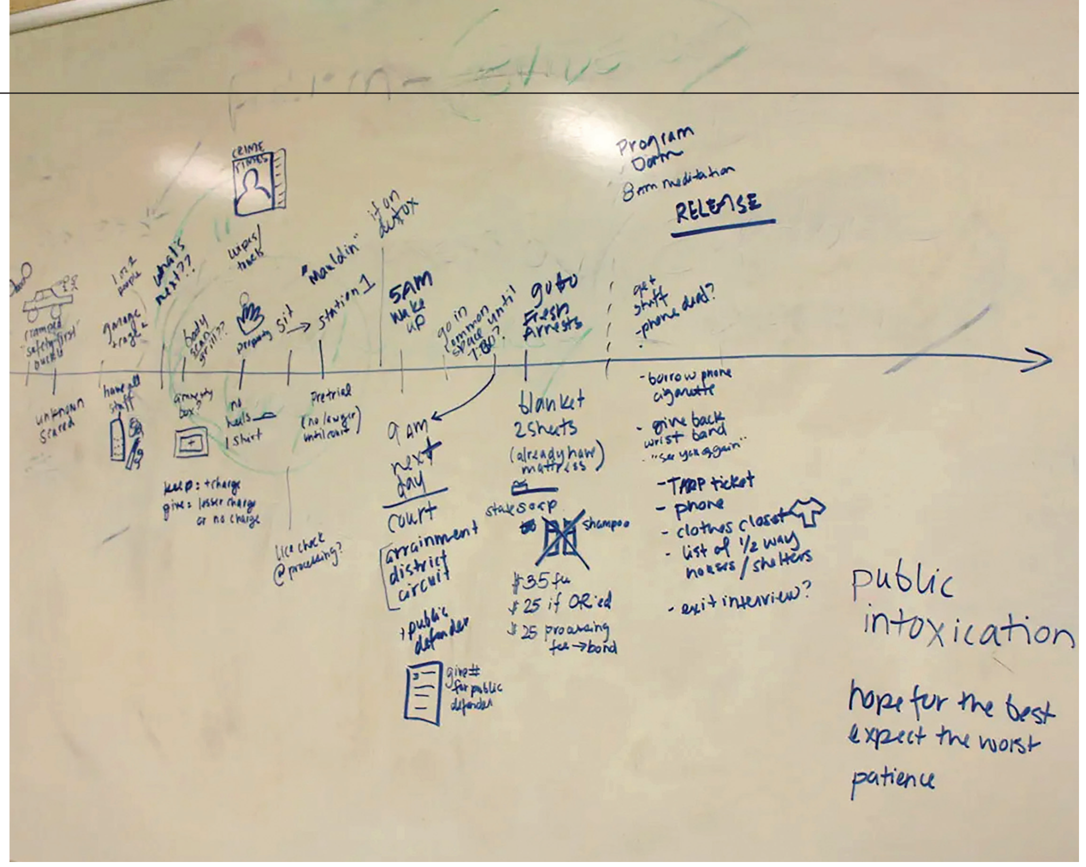
Though it's been over a decade since the Louisville project, the questions we asked ourselves remain evergreen, and we are excited to see what new questions and directions will arise in the future.

In the course of Public Policy Lab's work, we conduct research and co-design with members of the public, learning from them in order to fuel our work and improve public systems. This kind of research always runs the risk of being extractive, of allowing "experts" to sample the life experiences of "respondents" and spin up a shiny deliverable, rather than generating results that speak to the needs and preferences of participants.

So, as ethical practitioners, we look for ways to mitigate power inequality in our research relationships. One key tool is our process for seeking informed participant consent. Our goal is to empower individuals to understand the benefits (and harms) of participating in research with us and to enable them to exert control over what we can (and can't) do with the information they share.

This post is about how we first realized our consent processes were insufficient — and how we've upped our game since then. It also describes seven questions that inform our consent practices:

- Are you offering participants fair compensation for their time?
- Are you conducting the consent process in plain language?
- Are you maximizing participants' control over their data?
- Have you made it clear to participants that the research is not confidential?



Jailed participants use a mock journey map to share their experiences with the system without disclosing their personal information. →

- Are you collecting as little personally identifiable information as possible?
- Have you been explicit about any potential harms?
- Are you prepared to provide resources if people are having problems?

We hope all design researchers will ask at least these questions of their own processes for seeking informed consent. Read on for how we arrived at these key questions and where we still want to go from here.

RETHINKING CONSENT

A major turning point in our consent practices came about in 2015, when we conducted research on jail overcrowding in Louisville, Kentucky.[4]

4. This piece builds on another essay by PPL, "Good Intent is Not Enough." We'd recommend reading that piece first so you have context for this story.

The first time that a few members of PPL's team visited our government partners in Louisville, we also went to see the city's main jail, expecting only to tour the facility and meet its leadership staff. During our walk-through, the jail director surprised us with a question that set in motion our forever project around consent: "'Well, do you want to meet with some people?"

We wanted to, but we were not prepared — creating the research plan was something we'd planned to do when we got back to New York! Standing in a cinder-block meeting room sandwiched between the jail's dorms, the team had a quick huddle. We weren't certain the people we'd be speaking with could meaningfully consent to participate in research since they were not in jail voluntarily. We also didn't know the legal ramifications of collecting data about participants' experiences. Could PPL's research notes be subpoenaed?

Jail staff suggested we could use the jail's standard consent form, but when the team looked it over, we saw it didn't describe jailed research participants' risks or protect their rights. Like most commercial consent forms, this document's job was to say, "Whatever you say today, you can't get mad at us later." (Honestly, it wasn't even that much worse than PPL's standard consent form at the time.)

Because we were not confident that we could appropriately seek consent from the jailed people with whom we'd be working, we created a quick workaround: We would ask them to sign the jail's consent form, but also request that they not share any information specific to their personal stories or charges.

The jail agreed to let us work with the jailed people without staff present. After staff brought several jailed people to the meeting room, our design fellow Jen Thibault and director Chelsea Mauldin explained the project. We asked if they'd help us understand what would happen if one of our design team got arrested in Louisville.

"What have I been arrested for?" Chelsea asked the participants. "For public intoxication!" they replied. "Of course," Chelsea said. "What happens to me next?"

From there, participants walked Chelsea through the process of being brought to the jail, booked into the facility, going to court, and ultimately being released. Jen captured Chelsea's arrest story on a whiteboard on one wall of the meeting room. By using role-play, we were able to create space for participants to share their knowledge of these processes without asking them to disclose personal information.

TOWARD A PARTICIPANT-CENTERED CONSENT

Back in New York, we knew we had work to do to prepare for our next trip to Louisville, when our whole research team would be present and we'd certainly be returning to the jail. We'd asked PPL research fellow Kate Krontiris to join the project specifically because she had prior experience working with the criminal-justice system. She led the team in developing a new consent process designed to protect and empower our jailed participants.

First, we researched getting a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health (NIH)[5] to protect identifiable research information from forced or compelled disclosure, but we did not meet the eligibility criteria. This meant we could not guarantee confidentiality to participants in the (admittedly unlikely) event that the jail, a prosecutor, or other law enforcement subpoenaed our notes.

As a result, we maintained the practice of asking our participants to not disclose anything they didn't want this jail or prosecutors to know — and avoiding lines of questioning that dealt with crime. We also strengthened the part of our consent form about disclosing the potential harms that a participant might experience from engaging with us. We wanted to do everything we could to make sure they knew what they were signing up for.

This included telling participants that they didn't have to participate at all. It was impossible for us to be sure that our "volunteer" participants truly wanted to be there with us, so we told them we'd be happy to just hang out in the interview room with us for their allotted time, talking about sports or pets or the weather. The jail didn't have to know if they answered our questions or not.

In the end we interviewed fourteen jailed people and thirteen members of the jail staff. They generously provided us with invaluable information about conditions and needs inside the jail and in the community. We tried to repay their trust by collecting that information without any personally identifiable information — and by using it to advocate for changes in the jail system.

SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR INFORMED CONSENT IN DESIGN RESEARCH

Since 2015, we've redesigned that original Louisville consent process at least a dozen times. We've come to understand the act of seeking consent as being at the core of our professional practice. As we wrote in our previous post, "consent offers researchers, designers, and policymakers a real-life tool to center agency, dignity, and honesty in the policy-design process."

> We've come to understand the act of seeking consent as being at the core of our professional practice.

5. Certificates of Confidentiality are issued by NIH and other HHS agencies to protect identifiable research information from forced disclosure. When conducting Federal research protected by the certificate, researchers cannot, without the consent of the participant, disclose identifying information to any court or other person not connected with the research.

Consent for clinical research (for human trials of a new vaccine, for example) generally includes these key elements:

- a statement that the project involves research and participation is voluntary;
- a summary of the research project, including goals, length of participation, and expected activities; and
- the risks and benefits of participation;
- an explanation of confidentiality; and
- alternatives to participation or an opportunity to withdraw.

PPL follows these same principles in our consent processes. While our design-research plans do not always require review by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), we believe that design research should always strive for the highest ethical standards, even when it's not subject to the same institutional scrutiny.

In addition, we've also developed a set of key values and questions around consent that speak specifically to the type of research we conduct (qualitative, driven by human stories) and who we often conduct it with (members of marginalized communities who have good reason to be suspicious of researchers). We ask these seven questions of our research teams — and we think you should, too.

1. Are you offering participants fair compensation for their time?

Time is valuable, especially for our lower-income participants, who may be missing an opportunity for wages by taking the time to speak with us. And the task that we're asking them to undertake with us — sharing the stuff of their lives, their personal stories, sometimes traumatic ones, so that our work can benefit — it's not trivial or always easy. The least we can do, at a material level, is to offer compensation for their time.

We traditionally have provided research stipends to members of the public in the form of physical gift cards, often for a local drugstore chain. We provide the gift card at the beginning of the conversation, to avoid any suggestion that the stipend may be withheld until we can gauge the participant's "performance."

In shifting to remote research in 2020, we began to use a digital platform to buy, track, and manage incentives. Because rewards come in the form of gift cards, Visa cards, or cash, participants are able to exercise more choice in how they'll be recognized for their time. Typically we offer $15 rewards for engagements of less than half an hour, and provide $25 for engagements between thirty minutes and one hour.[6]

6. Most of our research interviews tend to run for a full hour so that we have enough time to conduct an in-depth conversation with the participant. For an hour-long engagement, we pay participants $50.

PPL is occasionally reimbursed for participant stipends by our project partners, but when we don't receive reimbursement, we still provide the compensation. It's a cost of doing our jobs well.

2. Are you conducting the consent process in plain language?

More than 30% of adults in America have low-literacy skills in English.[7] To make our consent form easy to understand, it's written in a question-and-answer format and at an eighth-grade reading level. (We ask our researchers to use a Flesch-Kincaid reading scale tool — built-in to Microsoft Word and also available online — to verify that the reading level is simple enough.)

7. This statistic is from a U.S. Department of Education report, *Adult Literacy in the United States*, which was published in 2019.

Plain language won't help people who have significant literacy or vision challenges, however. And people have pride — they generally don't like to share when it's hard for them to read. That's why PPL researchers also verbally step participants through each section of the consent form. When we expect that participants in an upcoming research session may not speak English as their primary language, we seek to bring translated consent materials and/or a researcher who can translate the consent process.

When conducting research remotely, our researchers email a digital-survey version of the consent form to participants, but they are clear that the form does not need to be filled out in advance of our session. The beginning of each research session is dedicated to speaking through the consent form and double-checking that those who have already filled it out have understood what they consented to.

3. Are you maximizing participants' control over their data?

Rather than asking people to wholly participate in our process or not, we ask participants to opt in to different ways of their story being documented.

Through a series of yes/no questions, participants tell us if we can take notes, audio record, directly quote them, take photographs and video where their faces cannot be seen, and/or take photographs and videos where their faces can be seen. This granular approach gives participants the ability to "toggle" on or off gradations of consent as we work together.

At PPL, we also think that our participants have the right to change their minds. We clearly state that they are welcome to stop the session at any time, for any reason. At the end of each session, we allocate a little time to give the participant the opportunity to review what they had consented to and whether they wish to withdraw any of their data.

We also show respondents the photos that we've taken of them and ask them if there are any photos they want us to delete. In remote engagements, this includes screenshots. No one wants to be forever captured as the person with a funny bit of hair sticking up!

After all that, we leave participants with our contact information, so that they can get in touch to revoke their consent after even we've gone, if they so choose.

4. Have you made clear that the research is not confidential?

A primary privacy challenge in our job as qualitative researchers is that we are collecting data about individuals' personal stories — and then sharing them with people who run the systems those individuals use or work in. We often cannot maintain the rich humanity of a participant's experiences if we totally strip a story of its context. As long as we retain elements of context, there is a slight possibility that we may make participants recognizable to individuals who know them personally.

Further, the pool of potential respondents we're speaking with may be known to people in authority, because they may have given us permission to conduct research at certain sites. Therefore, we make a point of explaining that we cannot promise total *confidentiality*, meaning that no one will ever know that an individual may have participated in our research.

We've run into situations where a partner's legal team (perhaps more used to human research in the form of totally de-identified quantitative surveys) wants our consent form to promise confidentiality. But knowing that, as an organization, PPL can't guarantee this level of total privacy gives us clarity in these conversations and the ability to direct partners toward the ways we avoid collecting and sharing personally identifiable information.

5. Are you collecting as little personally identifiable information as possible?

Personally identifiable information (PII) is the term researchers (and lawyers) use for names, dates of birth, Social Security numbers, addresses, and other data points that make a person uniquely identifiable. We do everything in our power to minimize the personally identifiable information we collect about our participants, while learning and knowing as much as possible about their stories.

We avoid asking for or documenting PII, and when we're converting raw research data — notes, recordings, transcripts, text responses — into distilled quotes, stories, or insights, we try to remove identifying information that a respondent may have included. The less PII we collect, the less we have to protect, and the more confident we can be that our respondents will remain anonymous, meaning that their identity will not be explicitly linked to our products.

Whether working remotely or in-person, we store our consent forms — which are the only place where we collect a participant's name and email or phone number — separately from the stories and materials that we collect from them. This means paper consent forms are stored in a lockbox away from project content, and digital consent is collected in an application that's separate from the tools we use for storing project data. Instead of linking data points to a name, we have a protocol for creating a unique code for each participant. We use this code on everything from the interview notes and stimuli used in research sessions to our data repository.

↑ A PPL staff member conducts research with a member of corrections staff.

6. Have you been explicit about any potential harms?

When seeking consent from participants, we explicitly disclose the possible harms of participating in a research project with us. Usually these harms are limited to the potential for someone to know that a respondent spoke with us (see above), but we've also described, for example, how our research could trigger unwelcome memories or emotions (as in our mental health research) or create legal exposure (as in our jail project, above).

Similarly, we disclose that our commitment to privacy is not absolute: if a research participant tells us that they are being hurt or that they are planning to hurt someone else, we will try to notify someone who can help. While we are not mandated reporters (professionals who are legally required to file a report when abuse is observed or suspected), we are human. We have an ethical duty to intervene if we think someone is in danger.

(Frankly, this topic could be its own blog post: the circumstances that led us to this practice, the effects on our researchers of parsing other people's trauma, PPL's internal reporting processes, the challenges of finding a safe and appropriate person to disclose to, etc…)

7. Are you prepared to provide resources if people are having problems?

While reports of ongoing danger are thankfully rare, we do often hear painful stories of the human cost of service-delivery problems. As outside-the-system researchers, it's generally not appropriate or effective for us to intervene or assist with individual social-service cases. But while we may not be able to help personally, we do come prepared with contact info for someone who can.

We design our hard-copy consent form in a way that allows participants to keep the first page. This page explains the project, what the participant will be asked to do, and provides information about their rights. The document also includes contact details for resources like mental health crisis lines, an agency ombudsperson, or other providers who can help if a participant is struggling.

In the course of conducting research, if we hear a respondent describe challenges for which we know they could get help, we remind them at the end of the session that the form has helpful contacts. Of course, we also include contact information for our team, so that participants can reach out to ask us questions later.

CONTINUING THIS "FOREVER PROJECT"

The work of improving our processes for informed participation is far from done. We're still not satisfied with our methods for sharing the products of our research with participants, for example, and our pandemic shift to remote collaboration has created new questions around access and privacy that are not yet resolved.

More fundamentally, the process of research remains unequal: we, the professional research and design team, will go off and make things informed by participants' stories. For those things, we will earn money and have access to power that exceeds what we currently offer to participants. We're continuing to explore how to better distribute the value our research generates.

Our minimum responsibility is to ensure that our research participants can make meaningful and informed choices to share their stories and selves. We make every effort to reduce harm, but we also respect the right of our adult respondents to choose disclosure. Some people want their stories heard. They are proud to share their face, their voice, and the details of their experience when they think it will be of value. We can support that openness just as much as we seek to protect others' desire for anonymity.

In any case, once a participant has said how they want to participate in our research — given the clearly-stated risks and rewards — then it's our job to fulfill the trust that they have placed in us.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

As part of our PPL15 series, we hosted a conversation on the importance of accountability in public-sector work with PPL executive director, Chelsea Mauldin; Amira Boland of New America; Rachael Dietkus of Social Workers Who Design; and Terrance Smith of Johns Hopkins University. These practitioners reflected on the realities of working within complex systems, and what it takes to build more equitable, trust-centered relationships with the communities designers aim to serve. Scan the QR code to watch a recording.

NO SHORTCUTS TO SCALE

The Slow, Hard Work of Systems Change

By Judy Park Lee

When I graduated from college, I longed—as many bright-eyed graduates do—to have an impact on the world. Not just any impact, but a measurably large one.

My first job, as a housing policy analyst, felt aligned with these ambitions of impact at scale. If I could change *policy*, I could affect the fate of entire sectors and nations. I could change the rules of the game. Energized by this idea, I dutifully spent hours researching the housing ecosystems of different countries and making policy recommendations to help stimulate more affordable housing production in those countries. These recommendations had the potential to impact millions of people—that is, if anyone read and fully digested the implications of my eighty-page reports.

This was absolutely critical work. Yet, at times, it could be maddeningly abstract. Holed up in my cubicle, I felt disconnected from the people who were affected by the policies we proposed. What was their lived experience? How did these policies get translated into tangible services that met people's real needs?

Those questions set me down a path that, years later, in 2019, led to my fellowship at the Public Policy Lab. When I started at PPL, I had a vague sense of what "service design" involved, but not much practical experience doing it. My first project was with the NYC Department of Education (DOE), which aimed to transform NYC's community schools[1] into neighborhood hubs where families could get connected to public benefits like SNAP and housing vouchers. Our brief was to develop a "benefits access" program model and set of tools that were scalable across all community schools in NYC (at that time, there were nearly two hundred fifty community schools, now there are over four hundred). For me, it was a crash course in service design, at the end of which I learned useful strategies for designing services at scale.

1. Community schools are New York City public schools that partner with community-based organizations to provide students and families access to critical programs and services like healthcare, mentoring, and expanded learning programs.

MAKING THE TREK

We started out by doing what we do in every PPL project: going and talking to people. After selecting a representative list of a couple dozen schools with our agency partners, we spent the next few months visiting all of them.

Getting to many of these schools required quite the trek; some days, we'd traverse multiple boroughs. But as taxing as it was, our visits revealed things that we wouldn't have otherwise seen—such as the parent coordinator who, as we walked down the hallway together, had multiple parents stop to hug her and ask questions, or the coordinator who heaved a thick binder onto his desk, laughing, when we asked him how he kept track of resources for families. He added, "Most of it is relationships I have already, so I know exactly who to call. I don't really refer to this anymore."

Over the course of the project, we talked to over two hundred people, including school directors, staff, and families. We could have talked to fewer people, or sent out surveys, or even conducted remote interviews. But we would have missed out on valuable contextual information—such as the persistent follow-up and cultivation of trust needed to work with families—that impacted our design decisions.

Crucially, these in-person visits also allowed us to build key relationships. Administrators who were difficult to chase down over email ended up being open and generous with their time when we showed up. They were quicker to respond when we reached out to them later on the project. It wasn't mandatory for schools to participate in this project, or even to implement what we made at the end of it, so these relationships were all the more essential to getting buy-in. Not only that, but once people were engaged, they became internal champions for the work within their schools.

2. Desire paths are informal trails created by pedestrians, indicating their preferred route from one point to another. These paths may be taken over established routes for different reasons, including efficiency, avoidance, and delight.

BUILDING ON WHAT'S ALREADY THERE

When our team first received the project brief, we imagined designing an innovative model that revolutionized how schools approached benefits access. But when we visited the schools, we saw that they were already doing the work, cobbling together what time and resources they had to help families. Parent coordinators were accompanying families to their benefits appointments, teachers were flagging needs they noticed among their students, and directors were holding benefits fairs with local organizations. Some schools had more dedicated resources and organized systems than others, but all of them were connecting families to benefits in one way or another.

What they needed was not so much a new model, but rather, ways to coordinate and support their existing work. To do that, we collected the best practices we saw among schools and used them to design adaptable templates. We also created planning and evaluation tools that helped staff align their disparate responsibilities. We then knit all of these together in a clear, simple strategy that echoed what was already being done on the ground. Our goal was to help school staff see benefits access as a collaborative and proactive effort, rather than siloed and reactive.

This wasn't the radical transformation we expected to make. However, by layering onto existing workflows, roles, and tools—helping people do what they were already doing better—there was a stronger chance that our changes would be adopted by staff and result in immediate impact. This incremental approach isn't always the right choice; when the existing system remains ineffective over time, or actively harms users, a sweeping overhaul may be needed. But, in other cases, the most effective way to change the system may be activating the infrastructure that's already there, formalizing desire paths[2]

that have already been forged, and finding the right leverage points[3] to trigger meaningful shifts in people's mental models.

3. Donella Meadows, author of *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, defines leverage points as "places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything."

DESIGNING ADAPTABLE RECIPES

The challenge of this project was developing a model that could encompass the work of all NYC community schools, while remaining useful for any individual school's unique needs. If we prioritized universality, the model would become too generic. If we focused too much on meeting specific needs, we'd end up with narrow or highly-specialized interventions that couldn't scale.

> While change can happen in one fell swoop, such seismic events are often the result of many people working in small ways, together, over time, to set the conditions for their arrival.

Our approach to this tension—which we've used in multiple projects over the years—was to design an overarching program model and pair it with a flexible toolkit. The program model would prescribe the fundamental steps required to achieve the goal or outcome, while the toolkit would offer tools, methods, templates, and other resources to execute these steps. To further encourage adoption, we outlined different iterations of the model that schools could choose from, depending on their staff capacity and community needs.

Ultimately, the goal was to encourage a self-sustaining community of practice: individual organizations adapting the model, sharing successful strategies, uploading their own templates, helping each other troubleshoot issues, and coming up with solutions together. The ideal interaction would be something like what happens within the comments section of a New York Times (NYT) Cooking recipe. A writer publishes an original recipe born out of their research, and readers offer their own "notes" on that recipe, including everything from ingredient substitutions to alternative cooking methods to other interesting digressions.[4] The risk is that people may deviate from

4. See the Instagram account, @newyorktimescooking-comments, for a curated archive of the wild and curious sentiments shared in the NYT Cooking comment section.

↓ A PPL team arrives at a community school to conduct research interviews.

the initial script—which NYT readers are notorious for—but opening this kind of space for experimentation can also lead to entirely new ideas and techniques.

THE WORK OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Since working on the benefits access project, PPL has designed policies and services at even larger scales, including simplifying tenant applications[5] for the nation's largest subsidized housing programs and proposing federal policies[6] to better support families in childbirth and early childhood. These subsequent projects have added new scaling strategies to our playbook and helped us crystallize a framework for systems change in government, which we call the Public Policy Layer Cake[7]. In it, we posit that systems change requires building products that transform the work of government staff and their interactions with members of the public at multiple layers. As designers, engaging in that work calls for a certain kind of mental agility—the capacity to continuously zoom in and out, to think expansively while drilling down, and to translate many diverging goals into useful products.

5. To read more about this project, National Common Application for Subsidized Housing, visit publicpolicylab.org/projects.

6. To read more about this project, Federal Programs for Key Life Experiences, visit publicpolicylab.org/projects.

7. To learn more about the Public Policy Layer Cake, visit publicpolicylab.org/resources/layer-cake-zine.

Personally, in the last decade or so since starting my career, my thoughts about scale have grown more complicated. Does having an impact mean reaching the largest number of people? Or is it better to aim for a deeper, more transformative outcome in a local setting? And, in a time when the dedication to scale verges on axiomatic, is it really necessary or useful to scale everything?

While these questions remain open, what I know for sure is that there are no shortcuts—at least when it comes to changing the systems that deliver essential public services. This venture requires intensely relational work: observing and listening to people, building trust, negotiating common ground, maneuvering constraints, and facilitating collective action. This work takes time and it can't be supplanted by non-human agents. And while change can happen in one fell swoop, such seismic events are often the result of many people working in small ways, together, over time, to set the conditions for their arrival.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Following the publication of this essay, we hosted a conversation on scaling innovations in the public sector with PPL research director, Judy Park Lee; Jimmy Chen of Propel; Sophia Heller of the New York City Administration for Children's Services; and Jamer Hunt of Parsons School of Design. Together, they reflected on what it means to design for scale and discussed a range of different approaches across government, technology, and complex systems. Scan the QR code to watch the recording.

A PPL staff member speaks to a community school staff member during a pilot to test out benefits materials. ➔

MEASURING THE UNMEASURABLE

Design, Democracy, and the Limits of Outcome Metrics

By Chelsea Mauldin

STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF CLAIM

Imagine you're a veteran of the U.S. military. During your past deployments, you had experiences with danger, violence, or death that have had a lasting effect on your wellbeing and your everyday activities. After years of encouragement from your family and buddies, you've decided to apply to the VA—the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs—for disability compensation for the mental-health effects of those in-service traumatic events. Now you have to fill out a form to justify your claim by describing what you experienced.

When the Public Policy Lab began a collaboration with the VA Center for Innovation (VACI) in 2015, that form[1] asked veterans to detail any "stressful incidents," list any citations or medals they'd received because of the incidents, and also provide the name, rank, and date of injury or death of any servicepeople injured or killed during the incidents. A veteran told me it felt like he was being asked to capitalize on the death of his friends to get help. Other veterans and their family members told us how filling out the form triggered flashbacks and other mental-health crises. A PDF was a source of felt and moral harm.

Our team at PPL learned about Form 21-0781 while leading research on how the VA could best support veterans who were experiencing significant mental-health challenges.[2] At the time, an average of twenty-two veterans per day were dying by suicide, and VACI leadership was committed to providing better help. Over the course of a year, we conducted in-person research with veterans and family members in five states; spoke with experts and frontline staff at VA hospitals, veteran-service organizations (VSOs), and academic institutions; and worked closely with a passionate, dedicated team at VA headquarters. We produced a set of recommendations across three timeframes: quick wins, pilot projects, and system transformations. (One of the "quick wins" we proposed was to redesign Form 21-0781.) You can read the report here.

Then the project was over. The veterans we spoke with had expressed appreciation for being heard. VA staff had engaged in a new kind of human-centered, design-driven inquiry. Our partners had received our work and promised to carry it forward. At that moment in 2016, what was the value of PPL's work? And how would we demonstrate it?

1. Form 21-0781, the revision from August 2014, was also known as the Statement in Support of Claim for Service Connection for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

2. To learn more about this project, Veteran Access to Mental Health Services, visit publicpolicylab.org/projects.

> "There is only one thing that seems discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all [people] have become equally superfluous."

—Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

TIMES, VALUES, SOCIETY, BODIES

"There is only one thing that seems discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all [people] have become equally superfluous."—Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

This blog post is about measurement of value. This is not just an abstract question: Philanthropic funders, whom we rely on to cover a portion of our staff's pay, sometimes ask that PPL make a quantitative case for a project's future successful impact. We typically undersatisfy them. We can promise certain outputs ("deliverables" is the inelegant term of art), and we can (sometimes) estimate the potential number of users of those outputs. But I'm deeply reluctant for PPL to predict what outcome, what value those users interacting with those outputs will generate.

What's the problem? Why don't we want to propose metrics, then measure them?

First, the timelines. Neither philanthropies nor governments will generally tolerate the Public Policy Lab (or an external evaluator) spending five or ten years capturing the effects of our interventions before reporting outcomes. They want up-front statements about the expected scale of impact and timely reporting on completion. But the meaningful ripples from our work—or from any work to change a complex policy-delivery system—are unpredictable and take years to spread, a factor that econometricians refer to as "lag."

Second, the preferred values. David Graeber reminded us that 'value' is slippery business—simultaneously meaning and measurement. I am not opposed to the collection of evidence—PPL's teams dedicate significant resources to data collection. The request for metrics, however, is a mainly request for numbers about how much time or money will be saved or spent. I don't believe that the utilitarian signifiers of market economics should be used to define public value in a democracy. But dignity, equality, and freedom do resist the easy quantification of minutes or dollars.

Third, the attitude toward social reality—what legal scholar Megan Stevenson has called the "engineer's view" of the structure of the social world:[3] that social change can be technologically determined, tested, and measured. In fact, as Stevenson demonstrates, fifty years of randomized controlled trials of social-policy interventions shows this is largely a myth. Institutional processes resist change, effect cascades are rare, and context dependence limits replication.

This is absolutely true of PPL's work: Recall the personal, political, and material multiplicity of the public-service environments in which we operate, with hundreds of thousands or millions of staff and beneficiaries, each inhabiting their own circumstances. We conduct real-world pilots and formative evaluations of our work all the time; we see, recurrently, that the real social world resists any honest claims that PPL can engineer interventions that provably overcome reversion to status quo, perform identically in different environments, and generate predictable outcomes. Claims of that kind also run contrary to what, as human-centered practitioners, we observe and celebrate: the non-replicable particularity of each individual's context-specific experience.

Ultimately, standard approaches to measurement ask for aggregations of reality, abstracted from how that reality is lived in specific human bodies. But one veteran's experience of Form 21-0781 is not an average veteran's experience: It is that particular person's regret or anger or grief. Those feelings are neither wrong nor superfluous—they're accurate and meaningful, as well as variable, subjective, and temporary. That is the nature of human experience: We feel what we feel when we feel it. Until we're replaced by robots, citizens of democracies must reasonably demand that definitions of successful policy delivery respect that the public is alive, in flesh.

> Standard approaches to measurement ask for aggregations of reality, abstracted from how that reality is lived in specific human bodies.

What fifteen years of design practice in policy arenas has taught us is that the demand for stable, quantified, machine-readable outcomes is not a demand for truth—it is a values-based demand for a representation of reality that is legible to funders or administrators. This demand systematically distorts what happens when governance meets time and democratic values and social scale and a human body.

2,322,925 UNHAPPY MINUTES SAVED!

The win was not quick. In 2017 and 2021, the VA released new versions of Form 21-0781. Some design changes were made, but veterans were still asked to describe how they saw people killed or injured. Not until March 2024 did a further revision introduce new language and remove the request for descriptions of harm. The form also now acknowledges the difficulty of detailing trauma, saying, "While providing this information may be difficult, this information may help identify evidence to support your claim."

I don't know if PPL's recommendations in 2016 influenced the changes made in 2024; certainly, we are not the only people who've worked with or at the VA who knew the old form was causing harm. And what no one knows—it is unknowable—is how much veterans suffered because of the form before 2024. Even how much the individual feelings of the veterans who've received the post-2024 form diverge from what they would have felt if they had been given the old form, that also is not meaningfully quantifiable.

I could craft a numbers story: the number of times that form has been submitted since it was redesigned, multiplied by the official estimate from the Office of Management and Budget of how many fewer minutes it takes to fill out the 2024 form (supposedly twenty-five minutes less than the 2014 version!), then tell you X millions of presumably unhappy minutes were saved.[4] But that population-level measurement would not tell you anything about the effect of the design change on

3. Stevenson expands on this idea in her article, "Cause, Effect, and the Structure of the Social World," which was published in 2023 in the *Boston University Law Review.*

4. Actually, I tried to do this math. The VA doesn't release numbers of downloads or submissions of specific claims forms, but in fiscal year 2025 (October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025), 92,917 new claims for PTSD were approved. So more than two million minutes were purportedly saved in that year alone.

↑ A PPL team visits a VA medical center in Kansas to conduct research.

each person and their loved ones, which is what actually matters.

There's a further lagging impact of PPL's engagement with the VA: how we helped change not just a form, but an agency. We'd previously worked with VACI as an advisor on the agency's very first effort at applying human-centered design, a 2014 project that came to be known as Toward a Veteran-Centered VA. That led to the mental-health project, and as that work wrapped up in late 2015, we joined a start-up team of external consultants supporting the launch of the first dedicated "customer" experience office in the federal government, the Veterans Experience Office (VEO), and the development of the VA Welcome Kit—efforts we captured in another public-access report.

Subsequently, the VEO's efforts to improve service delivery have been tied to survey results showing increased veteran trust in the VA. In August 2025, almost exactly ten years after the VEO project began, the U.S. Congress passed the Improving Veterans' Experience Act, which "requires that the VEO and a chief veterans' experience officer be in place, that there are sufficient staff and resources necessary for CX initiatives, that the VA secretary be advised about the accuracy and helpfulness of consumer-facing VA materials… and about opportunities to improve the VA's customer service," as former VEO executive Lee Becker explains.[5]

I could pitch a story about how our pioneering nonprofit organization helped launch a revolution in the way the VA serves veterans, ultimately leading to federal legislation requiring an ongoing commitment to improving veterans' experiences. But the real credit is much more distributed, and the real story is ongoing: Thousands of veterans have generously shared their experiences and insights. Thousands of professionals—both at the VA and outside organizations—have worked to create a more veteran-centered approach to policy delivery. That work is now felt, to an unknown and unknowable degree, by VA staff and millions of veterans. That work continues and will never be done.

So too with PPL's practice. Our job requires that we continuously develop our craft, and our craft is the design of policies and services that help people live more satisfying and meaningful lives. My hope is not that we become better at generating metrics over the next fifteen years, but that we become ever more skillful at deploying thoughtful, human-centered attempts to deliver value.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

As part of our PPL15 series, we hosted a conversation on the limits of measurement and evaluation when assessing the impact of public-sector interventions. PPL executive director Chelsea Mauldin and other practitioners reflected on the tension between funders and administrators' demand for quantified outcomes and the embodied experience of humans. Scan the QR code to watch a recording of the discussion.

5. Read Lee Becker's article, "What codifying the Veterans Experience Office into law means for CX in government," which was published in 2025, on the Federal News Network.

THE HUMANITY OF CHANGE-MAKING

Supporting Government Partners Through the Discomfort of Change

By John Buckley

As a nonprofit that partners with governments to improve the lived experiences of our shared clients—the American public—we often find ourselves pushing against rigid government systems. That can be an uncomfortable role.

Government agencies typically hire vendors to do a very specific thing: analyze a dataset, run a survey, produce a report. Their procurement systems are designed for clear scopes with familiar methods that lead to predictable outputs.

But much of our work sits in a different space. We are often contracted to identify novel ways of addressing systemic or operational challenges. We conduct discovery research to help understand complex systems in order to design interventions—such as new workflows, products, or programs—that are not always obvious before the project begins.

For program officers and procurement specialists, this can be a complete paradigm shift. Fixed government processes have numerous benefits, not least risk reduction and processing efficiencies. Reimagining systems in collaboration with other agencies, departments, stakeholders, contracted providers, staff, and service users exposes institutions to risk—which can result in uncertainty and stress for government partners.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

There has been a seismic growth in awareness and acceptance of applying design methodologies to solve systemic public service challenges over the fifteen years of PPL's existence. The idea of involving communities and frontline staff in the redesign of public systems has become commonplace. Where my colleagues and I would once speak about "why" it is important to do this work, we now communicate "how" to do it.

But even with this growing acceptance, we continue to influence those in positions of power: sometimes advocating for including other key system stakeholders in our partnerships; sometimes pushing for deeper engagement with service users and frontline staff; sometimes introducing research methods that center participants' stories alongside administrative data analysis; and sometimes advocating for interventions that shift power toward the people most affected by policy decisions.

Additionally, as a public-service nonprofit, our mission is to improve public services for as many people as possible. Therefore, unlike private companies, we seek to ensure learnings and outputs from our projects with individual cities and states are made available to any other jurisdictions that could benefit from the work. Those of you with experience in government procurement can imagine the challenges this novel goal poses during the contracting process!

All of these changes to the status quo require the agreement and support of partners who can bend those rigid government systems. Therefore, before we pick up the pen to design interventions, we need to bring our partners along to ensure the right conditions are in place.

EVALUATING ALTERNATIVE WORK SCHEDULES

One project, early in my time here at PPL, helped us understand just how important it is to be thoughtful when introducing new mindsets and ways of working to our partners.

In 2020, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)[1] engaged PPL to evaluate a change to the work schedules of its caretaker workforce. Caretakers clean and maintain NYCHA's buildings and grounds across hundreds of properties. For many years, most worked a traditional daytime schedule. NYCHA had recently introduced staggered shifts so caretakers could be present in the early morning and late evening—something residents had long requested. After this new "alternative work schedule" had been in place for some time, the agency wanted to better understand how it was functioning.

When NYCHA solicited proposals for this evaluation, they requested three components: statistical analysis of administrative data, a time-and-motion study[2] of caretaker tasks, and qualitative interviews with staff and residents.

It was a thoughtful scope. But as we got to better understand their ambitions for the work, we saw opportunities to add nuance. For example, time-and-motion studies are often most effective in environments where tasks are standardized, such as in manufacturing plants or distribution centers. Caretaker work is very different. The size of a property, the number of residents, the condition of the grounds, and even the weather can shape how a given task unfolds. So, we suggested a few adjustments.

First, instead of conducting interviews and observing tasks separately, we proposed ride-along interviews where we could speak with caretakers while accompanying them during their shifts. This would help us understand the context behind the tasks we were observing and allow conversations to arise more organically, which was important because morale and accountability were believed to be key challenges.

Second, on learning that a key goal of our evaluation and recommendations was to align NYCHA leadership on a shared understanding and direction, we suggested documenting portions of the fieldwork through photos, audio, and video. We believed storytelling through rich multimedia could ensure that the realities of caretaker work didn't get lost in spreadsheets or transcripts.

Our proposal to not center the time-and-motion studies and to record video and

1. NYCHA is the largest public housing authority in North America. Its goal is to provide decent, affordable housing for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers. As of 2023, NYCHA housed one in sixteen New Yorkers.

2. A time-and-motion study is a business efficiency technique that combines a "time study" (measuring how long a task takes) with "motion study" (analyzing the movements used). By breaking down tasks into measurable steps, organizations can eliminate unnecessary actions, optimize workflows, and reduce costs.

↓ A PPL researcher observes a NYCHA caretaker during a shift.

↑ NYCHA caretakers maintain their buildings and grounds across hundreds of properties.

audio clips of the caretakers' work was met with mixed feelings within NYCHA. Given that we were first-time collaborators, we had not yet earned the full trust of our government partners. Additionally, these changes required further approvals of our consent forms and other administrative tasks for our partners. Large public entities face significant privacy concerns when collecting recordings of staff and residents, and NYCHA could not take our proposed approach lightly. But after persistence on our part to demonstrate the benefits of this approach, and a genuine openness to try new things on the part of our NYCHA partners, we were able to combine several complementary lenses. We:

- analyzed administrative data to identify overtime patterns across the workforce;
- conducted time-and-motion observations to document how tasks unfolded in practice;
- interviewed caretakers as they moved through buildings and any outdoor spaces; and
- documented the work environment through photos, audio, and video.

Ultimately, this broader research approach was effective. NYCHA leaders, upon seeing the multimedia research outputs backed up by quantitative analysis, appreciated the limitations of the time-and-motion study, understood the behavioral and relational effects of the new work schedule, and were ultimately convinced to act on our key recommendations. Given the hard push we made for leaning into the qualitative arguments, my colleagues and I let out a sigh of relief that we had made the right call in those planning stages.

The project ultimately taught me a great deal about what it takes to bring partners through change. Our process disrupted their expectations and anticipated ways of working, and they had been navigating uncertainty throughout the project. Looking across other projects, we began to realize that this experience was not unique to our partners at NYCHA.

SUPPORTING OUR PARTNERS' EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

During a team debrief after the project, we realized that while the design process is familiar and safe for us, our approach had made our partners uneasy, especially given the high stakes of the work. They eventually came around to our methods, but only after going through a journey of different emotions.

Looking across our projects, we saw that new partners often move through a recognizable, predictable emotional arc: Excitement at kickoff turns to overwhelm as we engage their staff and service users. Then, a wave of relief hits when we identify suitable interventions. We realized how important it was to help our partners move through that uncertainty while continuing to focus on our core design brief.

Since then, we've built several practices to address the points in the process that may feel uncomfortable for our partners:

- Our proposals now include expectation-setting language that outlines our approach of exploring project challenges with multiple lenses, the anticipated staff time required to support the design-research process, the importance of storytelling to ensure the participants' voices are heard in the halls of power, and our preference to make learnings and outputs available for other jurisdictions. Setting these expectations upfront provides clarity to our partners.
- We provide our PPL project teams with partner-facing materials that help new partners anticipate potential challenges and emotions they might experience during the project. These resources have two benefits: they help partners see those moments as part of the journey rather than a sign that something has gone wrong, and they build our partners' general capacity in, and understanding of, the human-centered design process.
- We've doubled down on capturing photo, audio, and video documentation during our research. We name this practice in proposals, share examples of multimedia outputs with partners, and ask participants whether they consent to us collecting this data and sharing it publicly to inform broader policymaking. When participants agree, we use these clips to raise their voices to decision-makers.[3]

3. An example of this approach is The People Say, an online research platform where policymakers and practitioners can hear from older adults navigating public systems.

INFLUENCING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

It is incumbent on those who seek to drive change to recognize that the approaches we are championing are often at odds with normal government ways of doing things. The humans who do the important daily work of government bring different expectations, constraints, and ways of understanding change. This means that earning trust, generating buy-in, translating jargon, and helping them navigate uncertainty are central parts of our work.

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It is not easy for an external nonprofit partner to push large public institutions to try something new. Government systems are built around established processes and familiar tools, often for good reasons. But some of our greatest value-add has been when we can bring a fresh perspective to an open-minded partner. It is in those situations, where we can influence both institutional culture and service delivery, that our organization makes its biggest impacts.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

As part of the PPL15 series, we hosted an in-person conversation at our PPL Midwest office in Chicago on influencing change in the public sector. Panelists Abigail Sullivan of the City of Chicago's Office of the Mayor, Alan Brouilette of the Office of the Illinois State Treasurer (formerly of 18F), and PPL executive director Chelsea Mauldin were joined by moderator John Buckley, PPL Midwest practice director, to explore the themes of power, risk, and small 'p' politics.

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