

# Re-design of National School Lunch Program Application

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**Organisation:** The US Office of Personnel Management (The Lab at OPM)

**Country:** United States

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** General public services

**Type:** Communication, Human Resources, Methods, Partnerships

**Launched in:** 2015

**Overall development time:** 1 year(s) 5 month(s)

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# Description

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The redesign of the application for the National School Lunch program as well as initiating a cultural transformation in that organization that involved introducing and applying human-centered design.

It was a partnership between government programs to build long-term capacity. Unlike hiring a consulting firm to bring in design skills, we worked with the partner to team then and then run the project with their involvement at every step of the way. We also leveraged other federal employees on short term assignments from different agencies to expand the impact of the learning that was involved in this project.

It is highly replicable, especially our approach to partnering with the agency to develop and apply their team's design capabilities. In fact after working with us, they undertook a similar project independently to design a digital version of the form. Since then, we have worked with a number of other agencies/programs in a similar way.

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## Why the innovation was developed

- A high rate of errors in the data collected through the application that left eligible students out of the program.
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## Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Enhance public trust, Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Improve service quality, Improve social equity, Improve user satisfaction

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## Main beneficiaries

Academia, Families, High-risk populations, Low-income groups, Young people

# Results

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## Efficiency

- The form itself was reduced from 5 pages to 1 front/back page. For a program that services 30 millions students daily, that's a huge savings of time to complete the application as well as data entry once it has been submitted. It's also a significant reduction in printing and mailing expense.
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## User satisfaction

- Simplifying the application makes it much less stressful and time consuming for parents while also increasing the likelihood that they will successfully enrol their children in the program.
- Parents we worked with were thrilled by the result- much easier, plain language, easier for them to feel confident they completed it successfully.

# Development

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## Design

Senior program staff from the Food and Nutrition Service came to us seeking our help. Their initial problem frame was then refined over the course of our research phase, which involved mid and lower level staff from their program plus members of our team., Senior program staff from the Food and Nutrition Service came to us seeking our help. Their initial problem frame was then refined over the course of our research phase, which involved mid and lower level staff from their program plus members of our team.

Design time: 4 month(s)

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## Testing

- We worked with trained designers to develop the prototype and then tested it through a series of usability tests working with parents and school staff to get their feedback.
- Before those parent-focused usability tests, it was also vetted by policy experts, lawyers and external advocacy groups.

Testing time: 2 month(s)

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## Implementation

### Tools used:

- We used design ethnography to do the research. We also developed a journey map to synthesize and communicate the research. Usability tests, including think-aloud testing, were used to test paper prototypes.

### Resources used:

- Staff, budget, partnerships between federal agencies and between federal agencies and local education entities (schools and non-profits)

Implementation time: 1 year(s)

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## Diffusion

- We refined our model for training partner agency staff and then involving them in the actual project work
- We have since replicated that model with partners at USAJOBS.gov, other OPM program offices and several initiatives at the US Dept. of Veterans Affairs.

Diffusion time: 1 year(s)

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## Challenges and solutions

- In the first stages of working with USDA, it was noted that everyone on the team identified a problem within the School Lunch Program: parental motivation, but what they identified was not the root of the problem: parental confusion caused by an overly complex form
  - Many times when a problem is presented, public managers leap straight to creating a proposed solution, rather than taking time and using direct access to citizens to identify why the problem exists.
  - While bringing design to public policy and management is a new practice in the government, the results are becoming quickly visible.
  - The FNS project has already produced results while driving fundamental change in how FNS public managers approach their work for the public.
  - More recently, the team has launched a public challenge to create a digital version of the form so parents can enter information directly into the automated system, eliminating the hand-entry that administrators are currently required to perform.
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## Partnerships

### Multiple partners

Civil Society, Other Public Sector

The Food and Nutrition Service at the US Department of Agriculture, staff at the US Dept. of Education, staff at Prince George's County School district, staff at several DC elementary schools that hosted usability tests., The Food and Nutrition Service at the US Department of Agriculture, staff at the US Dept. of Education, staff at Prince George's County School district, staff at several DC elementary schools that hosted usability tests.

Many of the partners were involved in running usability tests to test different versions of the new form with parents. They leveraged relationships to recruit parents, provided staff to help during testing days, and provided other resources such as translators. Staff at the US Department of Education also introduced us to local school officials. And the partnership between OPM and The FNS was one where our staff trained theirs and guided them

through the design process., Many of the partners were involved in running usability tests to test different versions of the new form with parents. They leveraged relationships to recruit parents, provided staff to help during testing days, and provided other resources such as translators. A DC-based education-focused nonprofit connected us to those schools. Staff at the US Department of Education also introduced us to local school officials. And the partnership between OPM and The FNS was one where our staff trained theirs and guided them through the design process.

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## Lessons Learned

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### Lessons Learned

- Through this engagement, the Lab learned how critical the mindset shift is in creating sustainable capability in design.
- The initial workshop delivered to the FNS team started this mindset shift, and the field work solidified it in direct experience.
- Project-based learning has been demonstrated in this and other Lab initiatives as a key method for building institutional capacity for design in the public sector.
- The Lab also learned the importance of developing a strong partnership with the public managers learning to apply design.
- Providing the workshop and then assuming the FNS team could execute independently would likely have produced less optimal results, jeopardizing not only the FNS objectives but also the Lab's goal of demonstrating the value of design in the public sector. By working side by side with the FNS from project scoping through implementation and evaluation, the Lab team was able to serve as an ongoing coach, and to provide real-time training into specific pieces of the design process that the team struggled with from time to time.

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