

User Experience Design: Persona Research

Executive Summary, March 2021

Why user experience design?

The voice of the people we serve is critical to our work to improve experiences with our programs and services. User Experience (UX) Design is the process of creating meaningful and relevant experiences for users through design, usability, and function. UX Designers help project teams by applying methods and developing tools that carry the voice of the people we serve into all aspects of a project or initiative.

Through the Modernization Plan and our shared work to move toward integrated service delivery, MNIT, DHS and our partners have teamed up to engage communities and bring voices from many perspectives into projects to improve and simplify the experience. This work fosters understanding and application of human-centered design principles, and supports the overall human services person-centered approach.

One of the first outputs of this effort is a suite of personas, to be used for projects to improve how people experience human services access and delivery.

Persona development

A persona is a fictional narrative about a person that can demonstrate their wants, needs, values, and other elements of who they are, to represent a user type that might use a product or service in a similar way. Personas can be used throughout design and development of any experience, product or service, and can be useful for journey mapping, use case development, prototype development, and many other applications. Personas help to draw out aspects of a concept that might otherwise be hidden or hard to understand, and help challenge project teams to empathize with different user groups and center them in their work.

Personas are not a replacement for direct engagement with the communities we serve, but instead should be considered a complementary tool.

Methods

The DHS and county team that's working on the initial policy for and design of a new website, social needs tool, and self-service portal partnered with the MNIT Experience Strategy team to develop a strategy and approach, and contracted UX designers to assist with execution. Weaving in ongoing community engagement and research taking place concurrently across the project team, the UX designer conducted interviews with social service program participants, synthesized findings, and developed eight personas. The personas are intended to be

respectful of communities and interviewees, authentic, and reflective of our research. They are centered on the social determinants of health as a guiding design principle.

Interviews

DHS contacts, community organizations and county contacts assisted with interviewee recruitment. Confidential phone and web interviews were an hour long, and participants were compensated for their time. Twenty-seven interviews were completed, and participants included a cross-section of demographics and locations. At a high level, interviewees included:

- Families that earn as much as \$150,000 and as little as \$3,000
- People living in the arrowhead and in western Minnesota, as well as people in the metro area
- People that identify as African American, Native American, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino, and Asian, as well as white.

Findings

Below are some of the key findings of the interviews, which surfaced an extensive amount of information and insights.

- **Finding/accessing information:**
 - Generally, people look for information from county offices, and through their own social networks and communities. Inaccurate or conflicting information is a big issue, as are awkward processes. Staff knowledge at organizations and agencies can be limited.
 - People struggle to find a source of truth online; the internet isn't the first resource they turn to and it isn't a reliable source.
 - People don't often know what they are looking for or the breadth of their options, so it's hard to know what to ask for or how to decide.
 - Seen and unseen disabilities add complexity to the information search.
 - People searching for assistance are often in a state of urgency, distress or crisis.
 - There's stigma, trauma and shame associated with seeking services in many communities.
 - Adversarial relationships and mistrust between people and the government or service providers exist or can develop.
- **Technology access:**
 - While access to devices and internet is more widespread than it's ever been, it remains limited for some people and areas.
 - Further, inaccessible design and lacking digital literacy can be major barriers.
 - Account creation and access, including password changes and identity verification, create many issues for users.
- **Social needs tools, screenings:**
 - Every individual situation is unique, and screening and triage processes can leave little room for nuance. Participants might want a way to qualify or explain their responses.
 - Questions need to be worded carefully and simply.
- **What people would change with a magic wand:**

- Create a central point of intake and information.
- Everything should be easier.
- Communication should be clear and fast.
- Funding could be increased to create more dependable resources for people.
- Accessible design would help everyone, especially people with disabilities.

Recommendations

- Questions need to be brief and easy to answer.
- Password recovery and account security need to be simple and offer options.
- Data collection and use has to be communicated clearly and people need to understand their choices. Only collect critical information.
- Communities that have a history of broken trust and bad experience with government and/or human services should be a critical partner in developing new policies, processes and ways of doing things.
- Support people throughout accessing services and the path to exiting them, which can be difficult transitions.
- Plan to update tools ongoing, as we learn what works.
- Filtering, sorting, sharing, and saving are critical features.
- Partner with community organizations to engage, design, develop, launch and improve products and services.

Next steps

- The eight personas that have been created will continue to mature and change as we continue to engage, research and design.
- The eight personas don't include everyone; more personas will be developed and expanded.
- The User Experience Design practice at DHS, MNIT and partners will continue to grow, and more tools, methods and training will be made available.