

Learning from Those with Life Experience:

Client Voices in the Understanding the Value of Centralized Services Study

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Understanding the Value of Centralized Services (VOCS) is a research study that explored the advantages, disadvantages, and costs of providing multiple social services in one physical location. Providing services in one location is also called “centralizing services.” Specifically, the study explored how centralized community resource centers provide services and how clients receive those services. These centralized community resource centers are brick-and-mortar locations where people can apply for or receive multiple services and benefits including those funded by the federal government. This brief is for clients of the centralized community resource centers who shared information with the study team. It describes how the study team included clients’ voices in the study.

How clients informed the study design

In July 2021, the study team hosted a one-hour video discussion to learn from people who had experience accessing services at centralized community resource centers. The team wanted to use these insights to inform the study design. The team asked the study experts and other leaders of centralized community resource centers who had participated in earlier study design meetings to refer clients for the discussion.

During the meeting, seven clients shared how they got services and the challenges they faced getting those services. They also explained how they would like to receive the information that would come out of the study. Here are the key insights they shared:

The research firm MEF Associates and its partner Mathematica conducted Understanding the Value of Centralized Services. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, funded the study. The study team visited three centralized community resource centers across the country:

Blackfeet Manpower One-Stop Center in Browning, Montana

Neighborhood Place in Louisville, Kentucky

Wayne Metro Community Action Agency in Detroit, Michigan

This brief explains how clients who have experience receiving centralized services informed the design of the study. It also summarizes what clients shared in three focus groups. The study team led these focus groups during site visits to three centralized community resource centers between March and April 2022.

The study team thanks all of the clients who shared information with the study team.

- **A key benefit of centralized community resource centers is a single point of contact (commonly referred to as case managers or service coordinators).** Case managers can help clients find services they need. Clients said that they liked having a case manager who knew their story and understood their needs. The case managers also knew the variety of services available and could help their clients get services to address the challenges they faced.

“It makes it easier knowing you only have to talk to one person. You don’t have to worry about talking to somebody from each department that you need help

“I had a family service coordinator since we started with the Early Head Start program...She was really good about like if we needed help with our electric bill. Here is what you need to do. Here is how I can help you. She really lays it out in easy steps...It makes it easier knowing you have someone you can count on that is going to be there to help you throughout the process.”

- **The shift to virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic was hard for some clients who were used to getting services in person.** Some clients said they found it challenging to navigate online services and activities that they previously got in person. They said they did not understand all the services that were available and were not sure if their applications were received or being processed.

- **Clients value staff with similar life experiences.** Clients valued staff with backgrounds and life experiences common to their own. They believed staff with these experiences could better serve them.

- **Clients like when staff in centralized community resource centers treat them with dignity and respect.** Clients said that all staff within a centralized community resource center should receive training on how to treat people with respect and dignity. Clients said that staff should also understand the communities that they serve. Some clients noted times when they had felt staff talked down to them, which had a negative effect on their entire service experience.

“They need to have training for everyone—here is how you need to treat the families. Here is how you need to make the family feel comfortable. Because if the family isn’t feeling comfortable, they are not going to come back and ask for help. Then you have a family that is suffering that could be helped.”

- **Clients wanted additional outreach and education about the services centralized community resource centers offer.** Most clients said they initially went to the centralized community resource center for a single service and only later discovered that multiple services were available in a single location. Clients said they wanted information about available services up front because it would have helped them get more services sooner and reduce travel to get services.

“I didn’t know how much assistance there was and how much they could help. It would be helpful to know that upfront rather than when I got there. Advertisements, email or social media would have been helpful.”

The study team listened to clients' input. The team then used this feedback in the design of the VOCS study in the following ways:

- **The study team made plans to ask new questions, or emphasize certain topics, during site visits to three centralized community resource centers.** In response to the information clients provided, the study team placed greater emphasis on certain questions. First, the study team asked how partner agencies in the centralized community resource centers understood the needs of their clients. Second, the team asked about the ways staff showed respect to clients. The study team also asked staff about the strengths of the communities they serve. Finally, the team asked how staff use client feedback in designing and improving services. The study team asked similar questions in the focus groups with clients. Specifically, the team asked how center staff help clients meet and overcome challenges in getting services, including virtual services.
- **The study team developed this short brief to share what clients said and how it was used.** The study team wrote this brief to show clients who provided their time and knowledge that their input is valuable. The study team also wanted to show how it used the input. The team made this brief short and used bullet points because clients said this would be a good way to share information with them.

“The main information should be short, sweet, and to the point. Use bullets.”

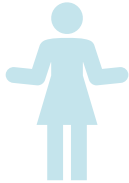
Centering clients by including their voices in the study site visits

Each of the three centralized community resource centers visited for this study operates in a distinct community. They all provide services in a single location, but each uses a different approach and provides a different mix of services. For this study, staff at each of the centralized community resource centers invited clients to attend focus groups to share their experiences getting services. The study team led the discussions and took notes. Each of the three focus groups included five to seven clients. Most of the focus group clients identified as female. Almost half of the clients identified as Black or African American, and about 40 percent identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Clients who participated in the focus groups shared many of the same insights as clients who participated in the study design meeting. As the quotes below show, focus group clients liked being able to get services at a single location and liked feeling respected by staff from their community. However, they would have appreciated more access to transportation and other supports.

Focus group clients liked getting multiple services at a single location and/or coordinated by one person.

"...not only is it a one stop shop, they could advise you from there as to what programs are going on and who to call."



"[I like] 'having the information all be with one person and the multiple services.'"

"A lot of people don't [know], are not aware of, that they can actually go into a place like that and get some of the types of services."



Focus group clients felt respected and that the staff hear them.

"[They] didn't make me feel embarrassed about being on the program. They're just helping me out."

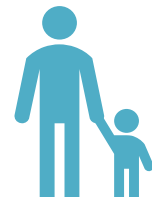


"Their service is good, they're so empathetic and they really put their heart into it and they're working very, very hard to get things turned around as quickly as they can for you."



Focus groups clients liked when staff at centralized community resource centers were part of their community.

"It really holds the community together, especially the working class when they're out of work or young people that are trying to find a new direction. [Staff] put their lives together. They do an excellent job."



"[They] are more convenient and down to earth. They understand the circumstances."



Incorporating the voices and expertise of clients is important for informing all phases of research design and activities. The VOCS study benefited from hearing and using clients' contributions. This process ensured that the study's findings included the people most affected by centralized services. Clients' feedback also helped the team make the findings useful to people who are considering how to improve or begin centralizing services in their own communities.

More information about the study and the study's final report is available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/understanding-value-centralized-services>.

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