

Embedding Service Design in New York City Government: Lessons Learned

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Anybody operating in the city level of government? All federal? Even though I will be talking about lessons learned at the city scale, it is applicable to any scale of government. Anybody familiar with the term "service design"? Good. My talk today, the theme of it is talking about how we at the Studio have embedded service design within New York City government. I will end with lessons learned in our one year of life.

The way I will break it down is explaining a little more about our context. Where we sit and how we operate and what core values are. What we are calling Civic Service Design and what that means. How we have gone about embedding this throughout the city government or trying to fulfill that mission. As I mentioned, lessons learned, then I want to leave time for questions that I didn't cover.

Jumping right into it. Who are we? Why do we exist? What do we care about? We have a complicated name, as most government agencies do. We call ourselves the Service Design Studio but we are embedded within the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity. Technically we are the design team within the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity. We use that interchangeably with the Service Design Studio. The Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (or NYC Opportunity, for short) has been around for several administrations and has a lot of different evolutions. The core value is we create and promote evidence-based programs by working with city agencies and we install and run new innovative methods, all with the goal of reducing poverty and increasing equity within the city.

We are one team. We are an eight-person team within a 70 person office. We draw on the expertise of all the other departments within the NYC Opportunity. Just to call out a few, we have a poverty research unit that creates new data and has created a special metric for the city of New York to measure our poverty rate given our special context. We also have a special program and evaluation team that consults with agencies to not only prop up new programs, but run rigorous evaluations of them to build an evidence base of what works for poverty reduction. Even though we are a small team of eight, we draw on all of these resources in all of our projects.

Why is poverty a major focus that needs to happen in one of the richest cities in the world? It's important that we message that our team is committed to thinking about the needs low income New Yorkers. Almost half of our population can be classified as low income. New York gets a lot of national press coverage for soaring rental rates, high cost of living, but we in this office understand that it is not equitably distributed. It is critical for government agencies to focus on delivering essential services to people that can't pay their way out of them. Poverty reduction and equity promotion is the name of our game. The way we take on projects. I will get into this more in detail. When we talk about service design, we are talking about, if you look at it from a city government perspective, New York City government puts on so many different services.

We are in the business of service delivery. Any government is. That ranges from trash collection to the subway system, in partnership with the State. When we are focusing on services, we are more focusing on these essential services that low income New Yorkers and others require for their livelihood.

We also recognize as an office that often times these services can be confusing and convoluted and difficult to access. For example, to receive cash assistance, you might have a case manager that helps you with a job readiness program through a different agency. Those two case managers might not talk to each other. They might schedule appointments for you that you have no availability to change right on top of each other. One office might be in the Bronx and the other might be in lower Manhattan. It makes it hard and gets you in the cycle of needing to meet requirements and taking your focus away from being able to find meaningful career pathways or meet the other needs that you could be meeting if you weren't on this wheel of keeping up with your benefits. We believe that if you focus on the experience of accessing the social services or any government service, you are going to be able to make these things more efficient for the people that utilize them. That is where we are coming from with wanting to bring service design into this mix.

Similarly, but on a different scale, the point I just made was the front stage, how do these play out between frontline staff and citizens? On the backstage, on our stage of it all as public servants, we found the people we work with often feel encumbered by the processes that regulate the way they are able to work rather than empowered by them. They feel led by process rather than them leading the process. Taking these insights together, we decided that a new brand of service design needed to be brought into the public sector that acknowledges these constraints and understands the special context.

We call it Civic Service Design. This is a strong brand we created when we launched in 2017. It is no different than traditional service design, except it acknowledges these government constraints. This is a long definition you can read for yourselves. It's important to stress that Civic Service Design is an amalgamation of UX design, human-centered design, or design thinking. With a little bit of agile and lean and business process thrown in together. The idea is to gather inputs from people on the ground from services being delivered and how to take those inputs and turn them into meaningful change and improvements for the way services are designed and delivered. We spend a lot of time stressing to our coworkers in government that this type of design is not necessarily about how things look. It's more about how things work, the process of it all. As a caveat, visuals are important as well. We strive to create a high-quality brand for everything that we do. When you communicate visually, you are able to communicate effectively.

Getting into what Civic Service Design is a little more, we feel traditional program development often starts with a Mayoral or Commissioner mandate and funnels down over the course of months or years, to be rolled out as fully-funded, implementable programs, to be put on the users in the frontline staff that deliver it rather than having them and their input feed it from the ground up. Instead of flipping the pyramid on its head, we feel Civic Service Design is more of a circle. It enables the core users and stakeholders that you need to learn from to be at the center. But it also encourages us to be iterative and understand that everything could be

better. We can always be improving. These feedback loops that you establish should be permanent. They should not just be project-based. The way our Civic Service Design is carried out is in this vehicle, I guess, that we call the tools and tactics. That's a set of -- it is our process in written form. It goes through every stage of the design process and it gives helpful tips and tricks and kind of describes what you are doing. The tools and tactics are available online for free. They are totally open source. We encourage you to take them and remix them. They also exist as a field guide in a binder. I would've brought some but I didn't want to carry them on the train. You can access all of them online.

To get into more specifics here, these icons are the phases of the Tools and Tactics of our Civic Service design process. It starts with 'Set the Stage' where we encourage people to do desk research, to understand precedents that are out there, moving onto user research, and I am giving a brief overview, I am sure you already know this so I don't need to get into too many details. Doing user research in the form of design research interviews or focus groups, then we get into how to synthesize all of that information with your team and identify the themes and patterns to then take those patterns and ideate on them. A big part of what we talk about with city employees is the concept of prototyping. It is different than pilot. It is something that enables you to fail without any sort of consequences. It's a good thing to fail and learn what works and doesn't and try things out in the prototyping phase. Then moving on to focus on impact, where we try to help people build out metrics for testing prototypes and understanding: so you found a prototype that sticks, how do you scale that up?

All of this is in service to making sure that city services meet what we call our design principles. We think every single city program service or project should be created with the people who use and deliver them; accessible to every single person; prototyped rigorously; equitably distributed; and tested and evaluated for effectiveness and impact. This is a set of guidelines we use that we ground-test everything with, or use as guideposts for us.

New York is gigantic, our city government is gigantic. Nothing compared to the federal government. So I am saying that to the wrong audience. It's 300,000 people sorted out through 125-plus agencies and offices. Our service design studio is a tiny team of eight. It's impossible for us to be able to consult with their work with every civil servant and so we have organized our operations to help us be the most effective and to build the capacity of people to take this work on themselves.

Before I get into how we built that all, I thought it would be important to give an overview of what our government looks like and how we run. This is not official. It's meant for illustrative purposes only. Importantly, the people of New York elect a Mayor. We are very mayoral-heavy city. Our Mayor appoints the First Deputy Mayor and all the Deputy Mayors that oversee city agencies. We sit right under the Deputy Mayor level. As a Mayor's Office, we act as an advisor, as a consultant, and also at times an enforcer of different principles and priorities that are set by the mayor. Our position is strategic. It allows us to be an oversight entity with the agencies that carry out direct services to New Yorkers.

How are we doing this? How do we operationalize our culture to be as effective as we can be? I mentioned this briefly, but we organize our work in two buckets. The first is building the

capacity of city employees to take on design work on their own. Oftentimes we are seeing people are already doing this and we are giving it legitimacy calling it a process and adding some structure to it. The second bucket is doing the actual work. In addition to doing capacity-building activities, we also take on projects. I will get into that later.

The first capacity-building work stream that we have are Tools and Tactics in Action workshop. This is a workshop we hold every six weeks. It is capped at about 20 people. We encourage people to sign up with their teams because we think it is pretty effective if people are able to brainstorm and understand these things with a buddy and go back and advocate that this is the way we should be working. The workshops are a half-day long. We start off by giving people a prompt saying, “You now work for the Department of Moving Services and your Commissioner told you, ‘You need to create a new program that makes it easier for people to move.’” That's the kind of ambiguous directives we sometimes get in government. It enables people to walk through every step of the process and understand how to use those tools to tease out the ambiguity of it all and create an actual service at the end. For the second half of the morning we have people come with a specific challenge that we walk them through a couple steps and get them ready to do a first round of user research. Tools and Tactics in Action, as it is named, it makes sense that it is based off of our tools and tactics. I will talk you through three of our offerings. The fourth is the undercurrent to them all and that's our methodology, our Tools and Tactics.

Our Civic Design Forum is our next capacity-building activity. Civic Design Forum we run with our UX team and our information technology agency, called Do It. That team works with agencies to do traditional UX work and as consultants on building digital projects. We have partnered with them to create our own community of practice that is in-person. We meet every other month. We host workshops that are light-touch, like training opportunities around UX or human-centered design. We also use these forms for us to prototype new offerings, so before we launched the workshop series we prototyped it several times with this group. We also always intentionally build in 30 to 45 minutes of networking time for people to meet each other and understand there is somebody that is like-minded like me at a different agency and maybe we can connect on this project. We have about 50 to 75 people come to each one of these. We have a mailing list of about 800. It's very popular. There is a lot of enthusiasm for this way of working and we are happy to make those connections.

Last is our Office Hours program. This is an excuse for us to set aside four hours. It's not an excuse; it's a core part of what we do. Four hours of every week to be an open door for anybody wanting to learn about services design or wanting to ask us specific questions about specific projects they might be working on, and it enables us to do a light-touch consulting with a lot of different people. To date we have had nearly 200 of these Office Hours. We are seeing now a lot of people come in for repeat appointments to build off of what they have learned before. We intentionally catch up with people and try to follow up with them via email to see how things are going after we meet with them. This is the favorite part of my week. It is very exciting to see all these people come in and be interested and hear about the cool projects everybody is doing that we wouldn't have otherwise known about. To facilitate connections to one another as well.

On the other side of the Venn diagram I showed you is our doing-the-work side. This is for our projects we take on. We call them Designing for Opportunity projects. They are not a typical consulting-client relationship. These are deep partnerships that we take on with agencies to effect some kind of change that they would like to see over the course of six to twelve months. So far we have taken on three of these projects and I am going to give a brief intro to each one.

The first one that launched around February, 2018, was our Shelter Enhancements project. This was in partnership with the Department of Homeless Services. It came to us via a request from our Deputy Mayor. What we did throughout this project was try to understand how the process of moving shelters or just simply being in shelters, how the city could identify practices that we could change to make sure we are operating in a trauma-informed manner. This project ended with a report that is confidential and internal for both the Deputy Mayor and DHS. It also, we are excited to say, led to some culture change within the agency to think about trauma-informed care throughout all that they do. They were already trauma-informed but this was something that amplified that to a lot of different departments and made it more of a leadership mandate.

Our second project came to us through an open call that we ran in January of 2018. We put out an application that asked people to apply to work with us for six to 12 months. We got fifteen applications even though we had only been open for two months at that point, from I believe nine different agencies and we ended up selecting the Administration for Children's Services, our child welfare organization, to take on the Pathways to Prevention project. This project is wrapping [up] in October. We just concluded prototyping and have created a set of materials for the agency to field test on their own in between now and then. I could talk about these projects for 45 minutes so we can talk about it more in the question-and-answer session.

Lastly a project that we launched two months ago that also came as a request from our Leadership is focused on the experience of women in Rikers Island. There is one female facility on Rikers Island. The female prison population is the fastest-growing population of any in the city. We are trying to look at how the city might take a gender responsive approach to creating reentry plans for women that acknowledges special constraints that women have in experiencing incarceration and especially going home. There is a lot more stigma around a woman being in jail than a man. We are trying to focus on how we can adopt city practices so they can reenter the communities in a strong and stable way.

I want to go back and clarify that all of the capacity-building activities I mentioned, those are agnostic to any sort of challenge somebody might be working on, not necessarily focused on innovation and equity. We have an open door policy. Whoever wants to sign up for these, we are happy to spread these methodologies to them. Our Design for Opportunity projects must be focused on the promotion of equity or the reduction of poverty, just to give context.

Jumping into lessons learned: I have 10 for you. There are a lot more. I will run through them all and I would love to have a couple questions for the audience because we are still trying to refine our own processes and understand how we might be working better.

The first lesson learned is that service design energizes city employees. We found that people leave our office hours saying that was “like attending a therapy session. I have some clarity on

why things might not be working, and on some next steps that seem feasible and easy for me rather than just approaching these very complex tangles of problems and trying to do it all at once.” Service Design allows people to look at it from the 30,000 foot view. It also allows people to understand and reinforce why they got into government in the first place. We are all in the business of not profit-making, but of helping people, and providing essential services to people for free. Our Pathways to Prevention partner said they felt that going through this project with us enabled them to focus in on helping families and children, which sometimes gets lost in the muddling through of it all.

A lesson for us internally is that it is important to follow that energy and listen to it and develop offerings that are informed by the feedback that we get in Office Hours and in Workshops and in projects. And also embrace what people are doing and celebrate what people are doing. The best way that you can follow that energy is to measure your ambiguous offerings. It is hard to do. We are still trying to crack the nut of how to measure the outcomes and effectiveness of a design process. The private sector is starting to release reports around that but it's difficult when you work in an evidence-based agency to talk about outcomes when you're talking about something as kind of messy as a design process: you can't tie direct outcomes to a new way of working. We have hired an external firm that is conducting an evaluation of our offerings and talking to all of our partners and participants to try to add some metrics to it. We also keep extensive metrics of all our Office Hours appointments to understand: What people are coming in for? Who is coming in for a repeat? How many agencies have we seen? How many unique visits have we gotten? Which tools and tactics do we talk about in these sessions? It's been helpful for us to focus in on what works and leave behind what doesn't.

Our Office Hours program: we had about 185 of these appointments, this is just a sample of the metrics, seen 28% of agencies that exist in city government. We have seen over 300 employees and we also had office hours with 26 other government [employees]. I saw Jacqueline Stetson might be on the line. We had an office hour yesterday and we met through this community practice. I love that all this is happening and we are able to facilitate these connections. We have had office hours with people all the world, in Palau, Thailand, Taiwan and as close by as Rhode Island and the Port Authority. It has been great not only for us not only to share what we are doing with them but to refine our model from input from these teams as well.

Our Office Hours: I mentioned we analyze and look at what we are learning from people. Quite often we have synthesis sessions and keep extensive notes for each one of them. I thought it might be interesting for this audience to know what people are coming in for. I would say the number one thing that we talk about is: What is prototyping? How do you prototype a policy change? How do you take something that is so verbal and thought-heavy and test it out with people, not just with New Yorkers but your own staff to understand what works and what doesn't, to build these protocols. Another thing we talk about too is building new digital products. We have a whole digital products team in our office. It came to that Office Hour. We have to distinguish that there is a lot of conflation between service design and what we practice. With UX design, it holds a lot of similar principles and policies, but I think the difference is we are solution-agnostic. We have people coming in and say I want to build this new app and sometimes we walked them backwards and say is that what is needed? There is absolutely a

need for transitioning from legacy technologies to new media and ways to help people who want to interact with government, but we are careful to say that's not always the case.

I will let you read these for yourself but the last one I want to highlight is we coach people and help them write user research protocols. It has been really interesting to see how what we call paper tiger barriers get eroded when we start talking about user research. A lot of people come in with the assumption their legal department would totally squash any user research, but that is not the case. It's a low-stakes thing when you are talking about, 'How could we do better?'

Lastly, on this point, celebrating the people that practice design is critical to what we do on our website, nyc.gov/service-design. We have profiles of who we call design champions. These are people that have come to office hours or participated in any other offering and taken what they have learned and ran with it. Also people that are re-designers that operate in government that we want to highlight and amplify because they are lone rangers. We are just now figuring out how to hire this expertise so we want to let other budding designers know you can come into government and it will be fun and meaningful.

Lesson number three, swag seems frivolous but it is an extremely effective way to get people to know who you are and to want to come talk to you. The map I presented of all the people we touch with Office Hours is because we have a visual and inviting brand that looks different than anything in government—I'm convinced that's why. That is how people first hear of us. At every Office Hour week of people not only the toolkits but also postcards and posters and they hang them up in their cubicles and it starts a word-of-mouth chain. It gets more people to come visit us. Since we've launched we have distributed 600 of these field guides and about 150 of the binders. I want to also say we are following our own advice of iterating and we are in the process of redoing our entire website and our Tools and Tactics to make them more actionable, more accessible based on the feedback we have gotten from people. These are about to change. I just got a shipment of 800 more field guides because they are so popular, people love to take them.

That being said, toolkits aren't enough. There is a proliferation of toolkits for this "design process" from every sector. Our revised Tools and Tactics, we are just building off all of the amazing resources that are out there from the private sector and public sector, with their permission, of course. We feel very strongly that we must couple toolkits with one-on-one attention with hands-on experience, all of the things that help people bring what they are reading to life; otherwise it seems overwhelming.

Number five, government time is a lot different than design time. We all came into this office feeling very used to rapid schedules and sprints. We still hold true to that method. We have to acknowledge that things move a little bit slower and build that into our process but also learn from why things move slower. For example, with our project with the Administration for Children's Services, we spent about four months waiting for approval to do research with the families that are within the child welfare system. That was what it was, but we improved our process for the next time.

Number six, design is a collaborative sport. We have an expertise in design methods but all of our project partners have a deep institutional knowledge and a deep subject matter expertise of the areas they are operating in. Our projects are only successful if we weigh them both the same and transfer each other's expertise. I came into the Women in Rikers project, for example, with a limited understanding of the criminal justice system and now I feel as if I know it very well. I also would hope my partners at MOCJ, the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, would say they know the design process really well. Those cross connections are very critical.

This is similar to the last lesson learned: Experience is the best teacher to build the capacity of people to do design work. At the beginning of our projects, we would have user research sprints that we did collaboratively. We would have synthesis sessions that we did collaboratively, but then we would go back to our office (they called it like going back to Oz behind the curtain) and come to the next meeting with personas and journey maps and tools of the trade that we didn't walk people through how to make them. It's not rocket science, it's easy to do, but we just needed to be more transparent and show them and let them build them themselves.

Eight, this is critical for anything, not just design in government. Soliciting feedback from people that utilize social services is critical. We often talk around issues instead of reinforcing the trauma of being in the criminal justice system or the child welfare system. We want to provide research methods that probe at these issues without talking to them directly. We take a trauma-informed approach with whatever project we are doing. I think it is important to say that when you take the time to think about it this way, it builds a lot more trust with the people you are researching with and enables them to be open and honest.

People are used to government coming at them and marketing rather than asking for feedback. I thought this quote from one of our service provider partners at the Pathways to Prevention project illustrated it nicely. She also went on to say when you're not at the table you are often on the menu. I think a lot of people feel that way when dealing with city government. When you are able to be open and transparent and incorporate feedback and be an active listener it goes miles in helping you to shape the best programs that you can.

Nine: big problems, smaller scope. Government services are extremely complex, interwoven, interconnected. There are so many different rabbit holes you could go down in your research. We have made that mistake in projects and we have learned that we must hold true to a scope. Always revisit it and refine it when it's needed. But you need to develop the active skill of learning how to prioritize what's important but more importantly, prioritize what is not and stick to your scope.

Lastly, hand-off is hard. It's hard to have these deep partnerships with agencies in our projects and then all of a sudden have it end. We are still figuring out the best method to hand projects off to have people continue to work in this iterative way while we are able to step away. It goes into the fact that prototypes are never finished. By definition. We can get lost in our own rabbit holes of making them perfect and wanting to test it again and refine the language of this one sentence. That is not worth it. We need to understand how to step back and hand the baton over to our agency partners. Luckily, because we are an internal resource, we are always here and free. We are able to be on call. That gives us a benefit and an edge over private contracts for

doing this type of work. We could be better at scoping what that hand-off looks like and making it more effective for everybody involved. I would love to get feedback from the audience either now or throughout this morning if anybody has insights on how to do that effectively or on any of the lessons learned that we are obviously still working on. That is it. I went overtime a little bit. We don't have too much time for questions. This is my contact information if you want to reach out. I can open it up, if anybody has questions.

Your last point to hand-off is hard and feedback on that, I recently run some sizeable service design projects in the federal government. The hand-off was especially hard. As you say, the prototype is never finished and there is another team doing the [Inaudible] contracts involved in that. Even finger-pointing of what is the next step-- there's another team that goes behind the curtain, Oz-fashion, to do what they do. To your topics, one and two, energizing the employees and how the energy has been helpful within the hand-off. It works with the energized employees who have not been involved in the [Inaudible] of their work are telling their leadership and socializing the ways to handle how we amplify the energy where we can. That had a way of reaching the top of the agency which then made the hand-off smoother.

Can you repeat the question?

I don't know if there was a question. It was more advice.

Let's see if I fully grasp everything. The hand-off is tough, validated that, even at the federal scale, but if you successfully run a project, you will successfully energize your partners on it. Then pass it up the chain of, "We should be working this way. Look at these new deliverables we just got. It's exciting to continue that work." Is that accurate?

Yes. Thank you.

[Indiscernible - low volume]

How was the relationship between [Indiscernible - low volume]

In the federal government, where most service delivery is digital, how do you incorporate the design focus while working with UX designers? Before the studio formally launched, we basically created a proof-of-concept by running a project called Access NYC. It was an online benefit screener to allow people to understand and enter vital stats and get a readout of what public benefits they were eligible for. The only people on staff at that time were designers. The prompt was to build something digital. What they did to couple the two was did user research around building a digital product, but then saw this would work a lot better if people had somebody filling in the screen for them and describing what came out and providing the warm hand-off to the next steps. The service design team was able to look and say, "Who can we partner within city government who does this outreach that would give, that would provide the hand-off and give an in-person contact, in addition to this handy printout of the benefits they're trying to access?" We piloted a partnership with a group called the Public Engagement Unit within the Mayor's Office within City Hall. That still exists today. It has been extraordinarily

effective for them to have Access as a part of their toolkit and have people talk to them to get into Access. Maybe we can talk outside. Thank you, everybody, for your time.

[Applause]