
Executive Summary:

Peer-led Community Navigation in East Harlem - *An evaluation of the Community Navigators Program at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College*



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partners for meaningful change

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Introduction

The Community Navigators Program was launched in 2017 by the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College and is overseen by the City University of New York's Institute for State and Local Governance, as part of the Manhattan District Attorney Office's (DANY's) Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII). It operates with the stated purpose of

developing a network of trained community navigators to identify individuals disconnected from services and helping them locate, connect, engage, and stay involved with services they need to meet and achieve their goals.

The program is located in the East Harlem community of New York City and is designed to address the immediate needs of community residents by:

- ✓ Helping participants identify their strengths and develop an action plan for success,
- ✓ Connecting participants to services,
- ✓ Empowering participants to advocate on their own behalf,
- ✓ Building the capacity of service providers within East Harlem to meet community needs,
- ✓ Offering economic empowerment and training for community navigators, and
- ✓ Supporting stronger communities overall.

In 2020, DANY selected Metis Associates to undertake an intensive process evaluation of the Community Navigators Program. Guided by a set of research questions, Metis researchers partnered closely with program staff to understand and capture the Community Navigators Program's design, implementation, and best practices. Metis integrated data from a broad array of primary and secondary sources including program documentation; interviews with program stakeholders, leadership, staff, participants, and representatives of community partners; selected case notes; and program and administrative data recorded through December 2020.

Program Overview

The Community Navigators Program deploys peer navigators hired from within the community to work with a caseload of approximately 20 community residents with whom they share lived experiences. They provide a combination of referrals and high-touch coaching to clients through a trauma-informed, client-centered, and social-work grounded approach, with oversight from MSW-level social work supervisors. The program is led by a program director and a principal investigator, further supported by a program-funded coordinator and data and information technology administrator, and is fully housed within the Silberman School of Social Work. Support and training for peer navigators is a critical element of the program model. Navigators participate in an in-depth orientation, which covers social work and navigation strategies, facilitated introductions to community partners and stakeholders, training in outreach techniques, background on East Harlem and needs of populations served by the program, and extensive role-playing facilitated by social work supervisors. After this orientation, navigators receive supervisory support through weekly case reviews and meetings, professional development, and peer learning, as well as ongoing in-house and external training to further expertise and specialization in areas of personal interest.

Program participants are recruited into the program through one of four primary strategies: direct community outreach, co-location of navigators at community sites, referrals through robustly cultivated community partnerships, and self-referrals from current participants and community members. Once enrolled in the program, participants work closely with their peer navigator to identify their goals and develop an action plan. Navigators work with program participants on an iterative basis, making referrals and providing coaching until participants are both attached to services and confident in their own ability to seek out and connect with service providers independently. Once a participant's initially-identified goals have been attained or they are no longer actively engaging with their navigator, their cases are closed, yet are welcome and encouraged to return to the program as new needs arise.

From the program's start in 2016 through December 31, 2020,¹ over 1,680 individuals were enrolled as participants. Within this time period, the average participant was most likely to be 21 years of age or older (78% of participants), female (65% of participants) and Latinx (46% of participants) or Black (44% of participants). Consistent with program's articulated focus, slightly more than half of participants (53%) were disconnected from the service sector (defined as not having been enrolled in a program or receiving services) within six months of program enrollment, and approximately a quarter of participants reported having experienced crime (27%) or interacted with criminal justice system at some point (24%).

Participants generally entered the program with one to three overarching goals, which coalesced around three major needs: **employment** (39% of participants presented with this need), **housing** (36%), and **education** (34%). Additional needs commonly identified upon enrollment in the program included registration for government benefits (19%), obtaining government ID and other forms of documentation (13%), youth programming (11%), and counseling (7%).

¹ This represents the timeframe for the program and administrative data provided to Metis Associates by the Community Navigators Program.

Program Implementation

Program outreach and engagement

The Community Navigators Program is predicated on the idea that individuals should voluntarily engage with the program, making outreach and recruitment an especially critical element of the program design. Yet, because of the program's intention to serve individuals who are otherwise disconnected from the service community and/or have barriers that prevent their independent pursuit of services, recruitment is also challenging. Within this context, the development of trust on four scales — between the *program* and the *community at-large*, the *program* and *community organizations*, *navigators* and *community organizations*, and *navigators* and *participants* — was identified as the most important feature of the approach to outreach and recruitment.

The approach includes four key strategies to recruit participants, often using a combination of strategies at once to overcome the inherent challenges with each individual strategy. These strategies are: **direct community outreach**, **co-location of navigators at community sites**, **referrals through community partnerships**, and **self-referrals**. Each strategy is summarized below.

Direct community outreach

Navigators recruit participants “on the street,” at community events, and through personal connections—often using a “zoned approach” or a designated geographic area to work within.

- ❖ **Benefits:** Leverages credibility of peer navigators and can be carried out independently from any community partnerships.
- ❖ **Challenges:** Navigators are responsible for recruiting their own caseloads. Lesser ability to intentionally focus on target populations.

Co-location of navigators at community sites

Navigators are given physical space and resources within community partner organizations and receive access to partner's clients.

- ❖ **Benefits:** Navigators gain critical space and resources unavailable directly through the program, and partnerships are strengthened through navigators' on-site presence. Warm-handoffs are common, increasing the likelihood that individuals engage with the Community Navigators Program.
- ❖ **Challenges:** Significant risk of on-site navigators taking on extra responsibilities on behalf of co-location partners. Assignment of cases to the navigation team is based on navigators' co-location instead of interest and expertise.

Referrals through community partnerships

Referrals are made by partner staff either by informing their clients of the program or informing navigators of potential participants. They often utilized an online referral form to facilitate this process.

- ❖ **Benefits:** Navigators gain access to potential participants, program visibility is increased, and likelihood of participation among those contacted is significantly increased. When facilitated by a warm hand-off, credibility and trust is transferred from the community partner to the Community Navigators Program.
- ❖ **Challenges:** Unique nuances within the partnership can lead to misunderstandings around the program scope and purpose.

Self-referrals

The Community Navigators Program operated a physical space, which allowed for residents to “walk-in” and meet with a navigator to “self-refer” themselves for participation.

- ❖ **Benefits:** A low-stakes strategy, which increases the program’s openness to the community and has the potential to enhance residents’ perception of the program.
- ❖ **Challenges:** Self-referred individuals were not found to have higher rates of engagement in the program, despite the proactive nature of their initial involvement.

The Community Navigators Program has also developed a referral pathway with the NYPD’s Youth Coordinating Officers, which although a later addition to the program model, was found through the evaluation to be effective. According to an interviewed stakeholder with the NYPD, Youth Coordinating Officers often do not have internal resources to provide referrals directly to young people who are at risk of criminal justice involvement or “being victimized.” In response, the Community Navigators Program developed a carefully-tailored online form with input and approval from the NYPD’s legal team to provide navigators the minimal information necessary to make initial contact with potential participants. (And, in turn, the Community Navigators Program intentionally limits the information shared with precinct officers to help preserve the confidentiality of those served.)

Relationship building and the peer model

Once participants are recruited and enrolled in the navigator program, effective participant-navigator relationships play a necessary role to help participants engage in the program, participate in honest goal-setting activities, gain trust to pursue offered opportunities and referrals, remain engaged in the program during delays and difficult circumstances, and build confidence and self-advocacy skills. In developing relationships with navigators, participants most valued:

- ✓ face-to-face and video-based interactions, which fostered familiarity within the relationship, and
- ✓ frequent and flexible modes of communication, combining in-person/video, phone, text, and email, depending on the specific nature of the interaction.

Furthermore, the peer model was found to be critical to the Community Navigators Program’s success. The use of peer navigators was cited as the primary reason that navigators were able to truly understand participants’ needs and connect with them in an effective manner. A set of shared lived experiences was found to directly inform the qualities of an effective relationship, such as honesty and a sense of authenticity. For example, participants reported being able to speak to and interact with navigators without worrying about how they presented themselves because of these shared identities. And, as a result of their peer nature, navigators were more likely to be viewed by participants as “real people” with their own interests and “struggles” and not as mere extensions of a service provider. Participants were put at ease by the intentional positioning of navigators as equal partners instead of “figures of authority,” which was also facilitated by the peer nature of the relationship.

The understanding, however, of who constitutes a peer varied greatly across the program and among program stakeholders. For some, being a “peer” required a similarity in outward characteristics (e.g., race and gender presentation) but for most, being a “peer” was understood as being able to draw on similar experiences, interests, or goals as their own. Specifically, as peers, navigators generally focused on the broader importance of understanding what it was like to live in marginalized communities without easy access to social services and/or what it is like to experience New York as a Black or Brown community member.

I don’t have to have been on welfare to know that in NYC going through the welfare system is a dehumanizing experience. I don’t have to have lived that to know that. I may have a friend or a family member, or maybe my mom went through that, maybe my mom went through it in her upbringing. This is just an example... but the point is it’s not just about lived experiences. It’s that people [navigators] enter spaces with empathy about people’s [participants] situations. That is what I think is so vital.
(Community Navigator)

Core program services

Navigator activities critical to achieving participant outcomes fall into three categories:

- ✓ Collaborative **goal-setting**
- ✓ Provision of concrete **referrals**, service opportunities, and recommendations
- ✓ **Coaching** and accompaniment

Navigators are responsible for collecting basic background information about participants, including their precipitating reasons for joining the Community Navigators Program (intake). After that, navigators work collaboratively with participants to identify their long-term goals (assessment) and develop an action plan for reaching them (goal setting). This goal-setting process is critical to the program’s success, as it guides

all subsequent work undertaken by both the participant and the navigator. While participants sometimes know what their goals are, they often need the help of a navigator to create a sequence of steps that will help them achieve their longer-term aims.

Navigators provide participants with referrals based on their goals and particular challenges. Since program inception, approximately two thirds of participants (68%) received at least one referral, with 29% of participants receiving two or more. Once a referral is made by a navigator, participants have the choice whether or not to pursue the opportunity. Overall, 86% of referrals were successfully utilized by participants, and 90% of participants utilized at least one referral offered to them.² Overall, referrals closely aligned, as expected, with participants' goals at intake. Referrals in support of employment, housing, and education were most prevalent and together made up almost two thirds of the referrals provided through the program. Referrals were also found to be utilized at similar rates across topic areas.

Another key service provided by navigators is actively coaching participants in how best to interact with service providers and community programs through frequent communications, ranging from brief text messages to extended in-person sessions. For most participants, navigators also provide accompaniment, which ranges from providing an in-person presence while a participant obtains services (e.g., joining the participant during a visit to an HRA office) to providing simultaneous coaching when participants reach out to service providers by phone or email (e.g., remaining on the phone with a participant while they ask to speak with a manager when an initial service request was denied). A review of program data indicates that two fifths of participants (41%) received coaching from a navigator while enrolled in the Community Navigators Program, and 16% of participants received virtual or in-person accompaniment.

The length of time that participants remained enrolled in the program varied greatly, with just over half of the participants (54%) exiting within 90 days of their first interaction with navigator and 20% remaining in the program for more than 180 days. Length of enrollment depended on a complex combination of factors including the approach taken by the assigned navigator, the participants' needs and competing priorities, and the timelines imposed by external service providers.

Characteristics of effective navigators

Effective navigators were found to embody five central characteristics—they are:

- ✓ judgment free,
- ✓ fearless at approaching new individuals,
- ✓ empathetic,
- ✓ credible, and
- ✓ excellent communicators.

² Total referrals utilized are based on the number of referrals for which utilization data was available (N = 2,418). For an additional 199 referrals, information was either unavailable or the referral remained pending as of December 2020.

Training and support for navigators

The Community Navigators Program emphasizes and centers training for navigators as a core element of its program design. Navigators are provided a robust initial training, which is followed by ongoing professional development and support. Most importantly, the program accounts for the complexity of hiring and deploying peers as navigators by supporting navigators' emotional health, as well as providing opportunities to develop and refine job-specific skills. Furthermore, the program's training approach is designed to complement the program's focus on hiring individuals with shared lived experience over individuals with traditionally defined workplace skills. This support is anchored by commitments to:

- ✓ Using social work practices
- ✓ Encouraging navigators to specialize and gain expertise depending on their interests
- ✓ Supporting navigators' own emotional and physical health and safety
- ✓ Increasing navigators' self-sufficiency
- ✓ Creating a culture of peer support among the navigation team

You can hear it in all their voices when [navigators] describe what they do day-to-day... motivation and support and energy and passion.... It is exactly the right move to go out there and find these highly motivated individuals. But then on top of that, we think very seriously about the economic empowerment piece of [this program]. Because the experiential learning matched with that ongoing learning journey that's offered by the program is second to none. Which, I hope, makes [navigators] highly marketable if [they are] thinking about moving on from the program. *(Program Stakeholder)*

The evaluation found that the Community Navigators Program was positioned, at all times, as a workforce development program, and decisions around the provision of training and support most often accounted for both the immediate benefits to the program's implementation and the long-term benefits for navigators' future career interests.

Program Outcomes

Participant outcomes

The Community Navigators Program is designed to achieve two types of participant outcomes. Participants are expected to **exit the program with their immediate needs met**, as detailed in the action plans, and with an **increased ability to pursue services independently** by clarifying their own goals, identifying appropriate opportunities, and obtaining the services that they need.

61% of participants exited the program with a positive outcome, with 37% of those exiting having been linked to providers for all identified needs and 24% of exiting participants having been linked to providers for some identified needs.

The evaluation found that navigators are adept at sequencing participants' goals to ensure that functional needs such as access to food, medical care, and housing are immediately addressed. The long-term impact of addressing these immediate challenges first was described by navigators as "astronomical" within the context of the deep-rooted challenges facing residents. Participants also described a reduction in stress and anxiety as a result of working with their navigators, which led to increased hope, optimism, and perseverance concerning the future. Participants consistently described the Community Navigators Program as placing them on the pathway towards greater success, often with significant positive outcomes for their loved ones and family members. The long-term outcomes expected by participants as a result of completing the program coalesced around several core achievements: gaining independence and self-empowerment ("finally feeling free"), gaining a sense of stability, and gaining the necessary skills to obtain future opportunities. In totality, participants described having their "barriers removed."

The Community Navigators Program was found to be well equipped to serve all eligible populations. In addition, the program model encourages navigators to research and explore referral opportunities on a case-by-case basis, which lends the necessary flexibility for the program to accommodate a participant with any combination of needs. As a result, and because of the program's focus on building capacity of participants to seek out services independently, the program was understood by those interviewed to bring the most benefit to those with the least social capital or pre-existing experience obtaining the help they need (a population described by one navigator as those who "feel the most marginalized and oppressed"). In fact, a review of case outcomes revealed that participants entering the program disconnected from the service sector (defined as six months without any program participation or receipt of services) were more likely to exit successfully linked to providers for all identified needs. Specifically, 71% of participants disconnected from services upon intake exited the program with a positive connection compared to only 56% of participants who were not disconnected from services upon intake.

Positive participant outcomes were also found to be directly associated with receipt of coaching and accompaniment by a navigator. In fact, 78% of participants exited the program with a connection to a social service provider after accompaniment compared to only 57% of participants who were not accompanied by a navigator. Similarly, participants who received coaching were also more likely to exit the program with a connection to a social service provider compared to those who did not receive coaching.

Service sector outcomes

The Community Navigators Program has the potential to impact the service sector within and outside of East Harlem in several ways. First, the program, following its pilot phase described in this report, was intended to begin shifting the outreach and intake practices of service providers, thereby reducing the structural and systemic barriers faced by community residents seeking services. Second, the program was also intended to support broader efforts by community groups and other

It's a really fantastic program and is really indispensable for us as a partner. There are so many barriers to accessing services in East Harlem, and also in areas around the city. So being able to support that really is so important for people. I couldn't speak more highly of the program and the services they provide.
(Community Partner)

CJII grantees to dismantle barriers between organizations, thereby leading to greater cohesion among related service providers in East Harlem.

Findings indicate that the Community Navigators Program achieved some initial success at attaining these service sector outcomes, and was most successful in impacting organizations that partnered with the program on outreach and recruitment of participants (rather than organizations to which program participants were only referred). Through partnership, organizations gained:

- ✓ Access to expertise;
- ✓ An ability to provide case management to their participants;
- ✓ An expanded capacity to provide one-on-one support;
- ✓ An infusion of social work perspectives into organizational programming; and
- ✓ Concrete service connections for participants.

Partnership also led organizations to understand the importance of:

- ✓ supporting access to benefits for their own participants;
- ✓ enhanced intake procedures to better identify their participants' needs and challenges;
- ✓ increasing staff knowledge around the range of issues participants face; and
- ✓ creating capacity for staff to make their own referrals and service connections.

Navigator outcomes

In addition to serving the needs of residents in East Harlem, the Community Navigators Program was intentionally designed by DANY to be a workforce development initiative for community residents of East Harlem, and navigators and program leaders generally described this goal as being achieved. Specifically, the program was considered a "great stepping stone" for navigators and a "nice place to get their feet wet." Navigators noted that the program offered them "formal recognition" and compensation for the work that they often were already doing. Navigators also reported that the program was a "safe" opportunity to learn skills due to the supportive atmosphere created by the program director and supervisors.

Adjustments to program design resulting from COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is an immeasurable crisis for New York City that has devastated communities, residents, and transformed the social service sector. The harm to individuals has accrued unequally, with communities such as East Harlem shouldering a greater burden as the pandemic exacerbated preexisting inequalities and caused further challenges to individuals seeking services.

Yet, the Community Navigators Program has remained operational throughout the pandemic, pivoting as necessary to provide continuity of services to participants and community residents. In fact, the Community Navigators Program was described as even more important during the height of the crisis, due to the difficulties that individuals faced. Furthermore, the program's core strategy remained effective during the pandemic: navigators were able to cultivate and maintain relationships with participants despite a lack of in-person interactions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Community Navigators Program is a robust demonstration of how peer navigation can be utilized to address the needs of community residents otherwise disconnected from the service sector. At the center of the program model is the navigator-peer relationship, through which navigators are able to coach community residents and provide them with referrals to relevant programs. The Community Navigators Program is equally profound in its focus on hiring individuals based on their lived experience and providing professional development accordingly, with the ultimate goal of empowering the navigator staff as well as the program's participants. Evaluation findings suggest that the Community Navigators Program has been able to transform the manner in which workplace qualifications are considered to the effect of hiring the best possible team of staff to work with community residents. Finally, the Community Navigators Program has been able to pilot, and show convincing evidence, on the comparative merits of several outreach techniques, with the most successful being the development of strong community partnerships. Here too, evaluation findings also show where the Community Navigators Program could be improved: primarily around the creation of partnerships with service providers accepting referrals, through which the Community Navigators Program could better achieve its goal of impacting the service sector more broadly.

Recommendations for enhancing the Community Navigators Program

1. Increase service-sector outcomes by enhancing the process for making referrals to nonprofit organizations and agencies.
2. Increase transparency and involvement of participants during the process of researching and identifying potential opportunities and referrals.
3. Increase support for navigators' own growth through structured mentorship, goal-setting, and partnership with external organizations.
4. Re-envision the process for participant deactivation to increase intentionality, transparency for participants, and satisfaction of both participants and navigators.

Recommendation for the expansion or replication of the program model

We strongly recommend that the Community Navigators Program model be considered for replication and expansion. Overall there was an abundance of interest in increasing the geographic scope of the program and few downsides were voiced, apart from the difficulty of managing navigator caseloads. which could be addressed through an expansion the program workforce. Furthermore, the elements of the program design which may have most interfered with an expansion—such as the place-based focus on East Harlem—were less critical in actuality. An expansion beyond East Harlem is feasible if lived experience remains privileged during the hiring process, and the rigorous level of training and ongoing support developed through the Community Navigators Program is maintained. In the event of the program's replication or expansion, we make the following recommendations:

1. Retain the core tenets of the Community Navigators Program model.
2. Provide ample support for navigators to ensure that navigators' own goals are met.

3. Consider the balance between warm-handoffs and the ease of online referral mechanisms when determining how best to recruit participants.
4. Develop formal relationships with city agencies and better utilize agency contacts to ensure that participants have better access to municipal services.
5. Improve ability for the Community Navigators Program to support participants facing language-related barriers to accessing services.
6. Continue to provide navigators with the necessary resources to build strong relationships with their assigned participants.