

LESSONS FROM THE J-PAL STATE AND LOCAL INNOVATION INITIATIVE

Case Study: Rochester



How can a randomized evaluation be designed to address service providers' concerns?

When a program lacks resources to serve everyone who is eligible, random assignment can be a fair way to allocate limited slots and a rigorous way to evaluate the program's impact. With a new program, however, it can be difficult to predict whether or not there will be more eligible people than slots available. Likewise, with social service programs that use rolling enrollment, it is not feasible to do the entire recruitment at once to know with certainty that the program has more eligible applicants than slots available. The valuation of the Bridges to Success program in Rochester illustrates how service providers and researchers can navigate uncertainty around program enrollment and ensure that the evaluation does not reduce the number of people who would have otherwise received services.

The [Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative](#) (RMAPI), the City of Rochester, [Action for a Better Community](#), the [Catholic Family Center](#), and the [Community Place of Greater Rochester](#) are currently piloting [Bridges to Success](#), an innovative adult mentor/navigator program that aims to help residents in high-poverty neighborhoods of Rochester overcome barriers to self sufficiency. Professional navigators will help program participants set and achieve specific goals related to family and financial stability, health, and employment through coaching and referrals to an established network of service providers. At the same time, employment and dependent liaisons will support career-readiness and effective parenting, respectively.

To measure the impact of Bridges to Success, City officials and service providers in Rochester partnered with the [Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities](#) (LEO) at the University of Notre Dame and J-PAL North America to conduct a randomized evaluation. Researchers Bill Evans (University of Notre Dame), Javier Espinosa (Rochester Institute of Technology), and David Phillips (University of Notre Dame) are leading the evaluation.

The service providers expected that the number of people who would be eligible for the program would be greater than the number of people who could be served during the pilot period. However, they also recognized that other social services had been underutilized in the past and were wary that the program may not enroll enough individuals. If too few people enrolled, assigning individuals to a control group could deny residents access to a potentially beneficial program that still had available slots. Meanwhile, over-recruiting could create the feeling that social service providers were drumming up interest from the community only to let down the people they could not serve. The researchers stressed that they did not want to deny services if there was room to serve more people in the Bridges to Success program. To ensure that everyone would receive some form of assistance even if they were not assigned to Bridges to Success, individuals in the control group would receive a warm hand-off to existing social service providers.

The research team and service providers agreed that the study should not compromise service delivery and developed a contingency plan. In order to test whether the program would be underutilized, the service providers would pilot the program with a small fraction of the study sample before launching a full evaluation. Judging by the rate of intake to the program, the size of the target population, and the number of spots remaining in the program, the research team would be able to determine whether or not there would be enough demand to fill the program slots and have a control group. If enrollment trends in the pilot suggested that there would not be enough enrolled participants, the program team could reexamine eligibility and geographical target areas to ensure that services would not be denied due to the research. In the unlikely event that not all of the program slots could be filled, the research team had a further contingency of randomly offering the program to people in the control group to fill the remaining program slots. These contingencies were designed to ensure that the evaluation would not proceed if having a control group would require leaving program slots unfilled.

To read more about lessons from the State and Local Innovation Initiative, see: bit.ly/2fvG7j6

To ensure that enough people participated while still serving the appropriate residents, J-PAL North America, LEO, the City of Rochester, and the service providers considered how they might expand the number of eligible individuals. In initial designs, applicants to the program needed to have annual wages of no more than 175 percent of the federal poverty level, have a stated desire to maintain full-time employment, be a head of household able to work (i.e., not receiving disability benefits), and have a high school diploma or GED. However, service providers identified many people who seemed well positioned to succeed in the Bridges to Success program despite lacking a diploma or GED. The research team and service providers adjusted the eligibility criteria so that it was not necessary to have a high school diploma or GED in order to participate. Removing this eligibility criteria would allow the program to serve more individuals likely to benefit without compromising the program's targeting.

One potential concern about denial of service related to the need for Bridges to Success to operate distinctly from a concurrent intervention implemented by the Catholic Family Center called the [Family Independence Initiative](#). Like Bridges to Success, the Family Independence Initiative aims to help individuals achieve self-sufficiency, but it uses peer networks rather than mentor/navigators. If individuals assigned to the control group in the Bridges to Success evaluation participated in the Family Independence Initiative at higher rates than individuals assigned to the treatment group, it might be difficult to interpret the results of the evaluation. Imagine, for example, that everyone in the control group enrolled in the Family Independence Initiative. In that scenario, the evaluation would capture the relative effectiveness of the two programs, rather than the effectiveness of Bridges to Success relative to the status quo. In response to these concerns, participation in each program would be closely monitored to avoid overlap that could muddle the results of the evaluation.

Clear communication through weekly calls helped the research team and multiple service providers to develop a contingency plan, reconsider eligibility criteria, and plan to implement two different interventions separately. Additionally, having a research partner on the ground (Javier Espinosa, Rochester Institute of Technology) helped the research team stay abreast of progress and participate in meetings with service providers. The Catholic Family Center acted as the key point of contact to coordinate with the service providers. Clear and frequent communication helped solidify trust between all the parties involved, building on the strong coalition of agencies and the City of Rochester and clarifying shared priorities across the research team and implementing partners. With program enrollment underway and consensus on how to address challenges that arise during implementation, this coalition looks forward to increasing the value of the study by working to link administrative data to calculate return on investment.