

REGIONAL BRIEF:

WASHINGTON

Financial Capability Services in the time of COVID



AUTHORS

Hallie Lienhardt

Assistant Director, Center for Financial Security
University of Wisconsin-Madison

J. Michael Collins

Faculty Director, Center for Financial Security
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Molly Gallagher

Project Assistant, Center for Financial Security
University of Wisconsin-Madison

EDITORS

Karen Murrell

Project Manager, Asset Funders Network (AFN)

Jennifer Farland

Communications Strategist, Asset Funders Network (AFN)

Annika Little

Managing Director, Asset Funders Network (AFN)

CASE STUDY ORGANIZATIONS

Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE)

David Vincent, Chief Program Officer

Warm Springs Community Action Team

Leah Guliasi, IDA Program Manager and Artisans' Co-op Project
Manager

United Way of Southeast Louisiana

Chiquita Lattimore, Vice President of Financial Capability

Financial Health Pathways

Lourdes G. Zuniga, Executive Director

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REGIONAL BRIEF

WASHINGTON Financial Capability and Asset Building Services in the time of COVID: Focus Group and Survey Findings

BACKGROUND & METHODS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on families and communities, forcing many services to transition from in-person to online activities. This rapid shift expanded the limits of how technology can reach a broader range of people, but also raised important questions about access and equity. The Asset Funders Network (AFN) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Financial Security (CFS) set out to better understand the transition to remote services among financial capability and asset building (FCAB) programs during this critical time through a series of regional focus groups and a nationally distributed survey, which focused in on six states or regions across the nation. FCAB programs include services such as financial education, counseling, coaching, emergency assistance, benefits navigation, housing supports, workforce development, and related services.

Input was collected from a focus group of six financial service providers based in Washington, and state-specific data was analyzed from the national survey. This brief synthesizes findings from the focus group and Washington survey data to share what strategies have succeeded, recognize challenges, and build recommendations that best represent the context of financial services in Washington.

CENTRAL FINDINGS

- Organizations have been flexible and innovative in the ways they connect with clients.
- Some organizations find that the shift to virtual services has allowed them to reach more people. However, the digital divide continues to be a barrier for many populations.
- Practitioners are mixed about whether historically underserved communities have been better able to access financial capability services during the pandemic.
- Many practitioners find that it is more difficult to connect with people and build trust over virtual platforms.

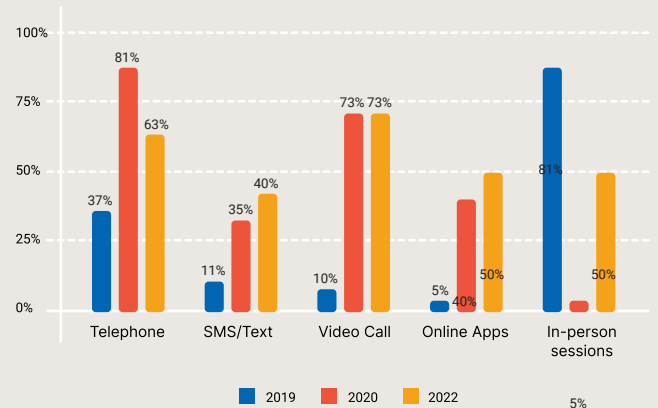


KEY FINDINGS: SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Providing flexible, straight forward, and easy to access financial capability services has been crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. Washington-based providers discussed how their financial services have relaxed requirements by waiving certain participation parameters, accepting digital signatures, and not requiring SSNs or citizenship. Service providers are innovative in the modes through which they connect with clients, such as expanding to platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger that allow for opportunities to engage in ways people find more comfortable. Service providers have opted for shorter, more frequent sessions, rather than the long, multi-day sessions, which were normal before the pandemic.

Many Washington-based organizations have found that by providing virtual services they can reach a larger population, because it allows them to connect with people from a larger geographic area and to be more flexible in meeting times. Virtual services work well for people who are busy, such as single parents and those with multiple jobs, and for people who do not have reliable access to transportation, such as those living in rural areas or those with issues of mobility. One practitioner noted that they have seen more engagement from clients with mental health challenges because they feel more comfortable participating from their own home. Practitioners also noted that when they are on a call with clients, more family members engage with the service than with in-person sessions. More than three quarters of Washington-based respondents said that before the pandemic they primarily engaged with clients in person, but shifted the majority of their services to video call, text, or phone services in 2020. Going forward, most practitioners expect to continue using phone and video call as their primary means to engage with clients (Figure 1).

Figure 1. At least one-quarter of clients served by mode

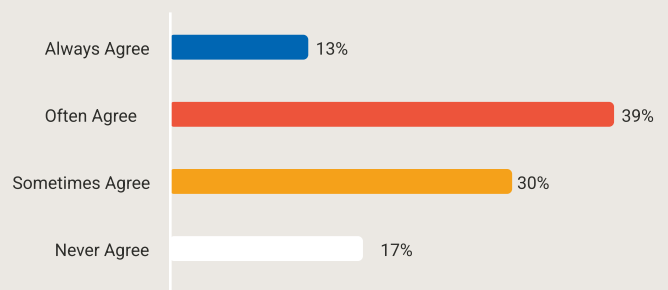


Source: FCAB Providers Survey 2022

Some practitioners feel that their services have become more equitable during the pandemic. In response to the racial reckoning that has taken place in the U.S. over the past couple years, organizations have made an effort to analyze data through a BIPOC lens and to understand who is being served by their agency. They use this to inform program design and service delivery. Most Washington-based survey respondents sometimes, often, or always agree that their financial capability and asset building programs have become more inclusive and equitable since the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2). Further, most survey respondents reported they sometimes, often, or always agree that their organization has a greater focus on reducing barriers to financial capability assets and building programs for people of color than it did two years ago.

Figure 2. Inclusivity & Equity of Services since Pandemic

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, our financial capability and asset building programs have become more inclusive and equitable in terms of populations served



Source: FCAB Providers Survey 2022

KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES

The shift to virtual services during the pandemic has created several challenges for Washington-based providers and their clients, particularly in how the shift has exacerbated the **digital divide**. Digital literacy is a significant barrier for accessing online services, particularly for older adults. Many programs do not have substantial technical support to offer their clients. Staff, too, are not always comfortable with technology and need more support around using virtual platforms and engaging with participants online.

Limited access to technology has been a barrier for many populations during the pandemic, specifically for individuals and families who are rural or non-native English speakers. Some people do not have broadband access and have limited access to devices to participate in virtual services. Smart phones work for some services, but clients are not able to access certain content on smaller screens, such as Power-Point slides that are shared by their financial counselors or coaches.

Washington practitioners feel that virtual services can compromise the impact of financial interventions. One practitioner noted that some conversations and problem-solving strategies have worked well online, but real skill building is better in person. It is difficult to build trust with clients over virtual services. Programs that are designed for particular vulnerable populations rely on face-to-face interactions to build trust. Finally, certain incentives are lost with remote services, such as building relationships with other participants in a program or socializing with food provided at in-person classes.



CONSIDERATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Providing funds toward devices and hotspots can alleviate challenges around the digital divide. Additionally, funding toward digital learning would help organizations hire someone who can provide staff and participants with digital support.
- It is important for organizations to have the right virtual platform for service delivery. Platforms should be engaging and innovative, yet still accessible to those experiencing digital barriers.
- Language barriers are a challenge for many. Practitioners recommend having staff from various countries of origin that speak multiple languages and are familiar with other cultures who can help build trust.
- Providing programs that fit with the community's culture and are designed with community input will incentivize people from the community to get involved.
- Receiving unrestricted, flexible funding would give organizations a chance to pivot easily and quickly. Organizations need room to pilot, test, fail, and reiterate.
- Providing funds toward system coordination would help build out programs tied to evidence-based practices and culturally responsive content, as well as integrate those practices across systems. This would help to influence larger scale change across programs and beyond.
- Developing methods to leverage and distribute institutional knowledge would help alleviate the issues caused by staff turnover. One possible option would be to cross-train service providers in multiple roles, such as financial counselors, so fewer referral points are necessary.

To learn more about FCAB services during the COVID-19 pandemic in other regions, please check out these related [AFN regional briefs](#).

