

Using behavioral science to increase program enrollment

With evidence from the previous pilots in hand, Seattle offered residents the option to self-certify their income in March, confident it would boost enrollment. And it has done just that, providing financial relief to those in need during an unprecedented crisis.

- What Works Cities

THE NEED

Seattle's Utility Discount Program (UDP) offers income-eligible residential customers significant discounts on their Seattle City Light (SCL) and Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) bills. Despite years of active promotion and marketing by its administering departments - SCL, SPU, and the Human Services Department - UDP remained at below 50% enrollment. The departments approached the Innovation & Performance team (IP) to explore ways in which data could be better leveraged to increase enrollment among all eligible households, particularly those with the lowest incomes most in need.

OUR APPROACH

Together with our department partners, IP developed behaviorally-informed application materials which enabled households to self-certify their income levels. Using a randomized controlled trial (RCT), we tested the materials' impact on program uptake in a self-certification pilot which permitted eligible residents to sign a short form attesting to their household income rather than requiring the submission of income documentation.

THE RESULTS

The RCT demonstrated that the self-certification offer was 6x as effective as marketing alone, a level of impact that could increase UDP enrollment by an additional ~7,500 households across the service area. Based on these initial findings, the city was evaluating options to scale this practice and roll it out as part of its official program in 2020.

This work enabled a rapid roll-out of the approach as part of the City's COVID-19 response. The idea was to allow a limited number of randomly selected households in lower-income areas to enroll in the UDP by *only attesting to* qualifying household information (e.g. household size, income) through a "fast track" application form. Analysis from Round 1 shows that the self-certification "fast-track" form, combined with mailing, is 8x more effective than the status quo method. In addition, the fast-track form enabled the City to enroll over 8,000 new households into the UDP program between March and September 2020.

READ MORE

How Data-Driven Cities Respond Swiftly and Effectively to COVID-19:

<https://whatworkscities.medium.com/how-data-driven-cities-respond-swiftly-and-effectively-to-covid-19-4de7a96d53e3>

DEPARTMENT PARTNER

Human Services Department

Seattle City Light

Seattle Public Utilities

PROJECT DURATION

2019

IMPACT

Increased marketing efficacy by 6x in a RCT

KEY DEPARTMENT CONTACTS

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