

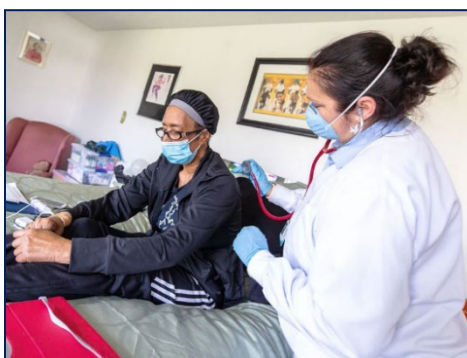
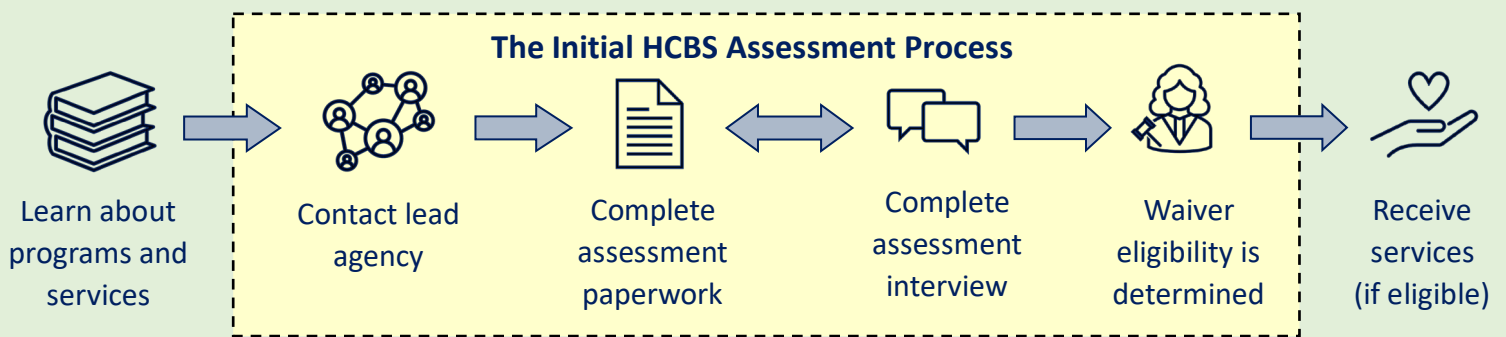
Making Waiver Services More Equitable for all Minnesotans: Findings from a Study on Racial and Ethnic Disparities

Waiver services, or home and community-based service (HCBS), fill a critical need when people need support to live in their community and have limited financial resources. Waiver services, such as personal care assistants, home delivered meals, and job supports, allow people to receive services and support where they live. This honors their preferences to remain in their homes or in community settings instead of in nursing facilities or other institutional settings.



To receive waiver services, individuals must first go through an “initial HCBS assessment” to determine their eligibility. During this assessment, individuals must meet a level of medical and financial need. The Minnesota Department of Human Services manages the waiver services programs and lead agencies coordinate the process to access waivers. A lead agency may be a county, Tribal Nation, or health plan.

Step-by-Step Process to Access Waiver Services



There are racial and ethnic disparities in the use of waiver programs. Some of these disparities may arise from inequitable barriers encountered during the initial HCBS assessment. NORC at the University of Chicago collaborated with the Minnesota Department of Human Services to evaluate this assessment process, focusing on the experiences of Somali, Hmong, Latinx, and U.S.-born Black Minnesotans. The study examined barriers, facilitators, and opportunities for improving equity in the initial HCBS assessment.

Interviews were conducted with lead agency staff and community members who have either undergone or supported someone through the initial HCBS assessment. Subject matter experts at DHS, leaders of community-based organizations providing waiver-related services, and a community advisory board (CAB) of individuals with lived experiences contributed to designing, executing, and analyzing the study.



What did we learn?

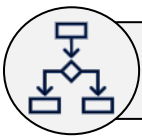
Findings from the study are organized according to the steps in the process of receiving waiver services. These findings have informed policy recommendations. These recommendations are categorized by the expected time required to implement [short-term (🕒), medium-term (🕒), or long-term (🕒)].



Learning about Waiver Services

Community members struggle to find information about waiver services because there is not enough clear information on HCBS, and the materials that are available can be complicated. As a result, they often turn to friends, family, and support groups to learn about these services.

Recommendation	Policy impact
Increase educational materials about HCBS	 DHS will share the need for more educational materials with teams working on developing these resources.
Engage community-based organizations to share information about HCBS	 DHS will share this need with teams and grant programs working to build community capacity to support older adults and people with disabilities.




The Initial HCBS Assessment Process

Community members had challenges completing required paperwork, describing the paperwork involved as “overwhelming” and “confusing.”




“I relied on [the case manager] from the beginning until the end, and with any questions that I had. He helped me with different referrals that I needed with my uncle.” - Community Member

They voiced frustrations that the process was long, complex, involved many different lead agency staff, and that they did not have access to hard copies or links of written materials to review at their own pace. However, those who had access to a case manager, or someone who helped guide them through each step, reported having more positive experiences.

Recommendation	Policy impact
Provide follow-up materials for individuals to review	 DHS will share the need for follow-up materials with teams that develop assessments and community-facing content.




Individuals with limited English proficiency face additional challenges and stigma. Lack of in-language materials and interpreters creates barriers for understanding and navigating the process. Some would prefer access to in-person support during the initial assessment process. Individuals also face cultural stigma around services related to requesting mental health services, sensitive tasks such as toileting, and child support. Cultural stigma can lead to distrust around sharing level of need, leading to an individual not receiving appropriate waiver services.

"[There is] high distrust among families but also a [critical] need for services... Families need and want help but sometimes need someone to help them overcome the initial distrust." - CAB Member

Recommendation	Policy Impact
Increase cultural competency for lead agency staff	 DHS will share the need for training for staff that interact with community members, including contractors, with lead agencies.
Increase the availability of non-English and plain language materials	 DHS will share the need with teams that develop materials, forms, and website content.
Increase access to in-person assessment options	 DHS will share the need for greater in-person options with lead agencies and work to build community capacity for this.

"Caps on caseloads would be great, or assessments... [current caseloads are] a huge complication for us...a lot of times we just feel like we're triaging." – Lead Agency Leader


Staff shortages and burnout limit lead agency capacity to respond to complete initial assessments in a timely manner, leading to delays and frustration among applicants. Lead agencies noted an increase in delays and less individualized attention for each community member due to staff shortages. Staff shortages are driven in part by an increase in the demand and need for services since the COVID-19 pandemic, related staff burnout, and high staff turnover.

Recommendation	Policy Impact
Introduce caseload management	 DHS will share the need for caseload management with teams working on case management strategies.
Provide additional time for lead agencies to complete the assessment process, to reduce staff burden	 DHS will explore policies that balance the need to support lead agency bandwidth and timely access to services.
Re-evaluate eligibility requirements	 DHS will share challenges around eligibility requirements with the federal Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, as they set financial eligibility thresholds.



Receiving Services

Provider shortages are a key barrier to receiving waiver services. Shortages cause additional challenges for meeting demand and need for services as well as community members' satisfaction with services. These shortages disproportionately affect community members who cannot find providers of the same race or ethnicity.

Recommendation	Policy Impact
Monitor the impact of Community First Services and Supports (CFSS)	 Starting October 1, 2024, DHS will implement CFSS, which provides flexibility for family members to serve as service providers. DHS will monitor the impact of the implementation of CFSS.

About the Study Team

This study was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago on behalf of the Minnesota Department of Human Services. NORC at the University of Chicago is an objective, nonpartisan research organization that delivers insights and analysis decision-makers trust. For more information about our study, please reference <https://www.norc.org/research/projects/evaluation-of-minnesota-s-hcbs-assessment-process.html>.