

OES EVIDENCE BRIEF:

Reducing administrative burden in pandemic relief and economic recovery programs

Administrative burdens include the time, psychological, and other costs that can be incurred when interacting with the government. To maximize the impact of American Rescue Plan (ARP) investments, programs pursued innovative strategies to reduce burden for eligible people. These strategies included conducting new outreach and streamlining applications and intake processes. We partnered with federal agencies to complete a [portfolio of evaluations](#), including six on the effectiveness of several burden reduction methods.

Reducing learning costs

People eligible for assistance may not know about programs or how to apply. Programs used outreach such as mailers to share information with potential recipients. We found that some outreach was effective while some was not.

- [A randomized evaluation](#) with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Minnesota's Department of Human Services found that sending emails and text messages to child care providers eligible for Child Care Stabilization Base Grants (CCSBG) increased awards by 3.8 percentage points.
- [A meta-analysis with](#) HHS found that multiple outreach strategies providing information to people eligible for health insurance coverage through the Affordable Care Act Health Insurance Marketplace increased the rate of enrollment by close to one percentage point.
- [A randomized evaluation](#) with the Department of the Treasury (Treasury) and the Idaho Housing and Finance Association found strong evidence that mailing postcards to homeowners at risk of or in foreclosure did not increase the number of applications to the Homeowner Assistance Fund (HAF).

Reducing compliance costs

Complicated application or intake processes create barriers. One way to simplify, encouraged by Treasury in the Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program, is a "[fact-specific proxy](#)." This allowed programs to use reasonable proxy data, such as the average incomes in the household's geographic area, to verify an applicant's income eligibility. We partnered with Treasury to learn that using a fact-specific proxy made getting assistance faster and more likely for program-eligible individuals facing housing instability.

- In Virginia's ERA program, applicants were not required to provide income documentation if their self-certified income and the median income in their ZIP code both fell below the eligibility threshold. [Our evaluation](#) with Virginia's Department of Housing and Community Development found that this flexibility increased approval rates by 11 percentage points and reduced application processing times by two weeks.
- [A second evaluation](#) with the Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC) found that allowing application reviewers to use median income in an applicant's ZIP code as a proxy to verify household income increased the approval rate by between 7.5 and 13.2 percentage points. We found that the proxy was equally effective for applicants who identified as people of color, lived in rural areas, or had extremely low incomes. Additionally, the use of a proxy did not compromise KHC's ability to detect fraudulent applications and allowed the allocation of staff time to other quality assurance efforts to mitigate improper payments and improve program effectiveness.



Combining the reduction of learning, compliance, and/or psychological costs

In addition to learning and compliance costs, there can also be psychological costs such as anxiety and distrust. Some programs piloted strategies that target reducing more than one type of burden simultaneously. We found these combination approaches are effective, and can be more effective than only targeting learning costs.

- Combining calls with text and email outreach to eligible child care providers increased funding awards by 5.2 percentage points. This strategy was particularly effective among providers with no prior awards. Among these providers, outreach that included calling increased awards by 12.4 percentage points – [an effect five times larger](#) than outreach by text and email alone. This suggests that calls with a staff member may be needed to address misconceptions about a grant or application process for providers who are less familiar with a program.
- Strategies that combined information with active support via phone call were [about four times more effective](#) at increasing Health Insurance Marketplace enrollment than those that only provided information.

Embedding evaluation into program implementation allowed agencies to make real-time adjustments based on what was effective. For example, Idaho's HAF program decided not to move forward with scaling up the postcard and instead [redirected approximately \\$25,000](#) to fund English and Spanish language billboards targeting eligible homeowners in rural areas.

Taken together, this portfolio of studies shows that reducing burden can be effective at increasing awareness of, and access to, assistance for Americans across a range of policy areas and geographies. These learnings are applicable even as funding for ARP programs winds down, as some places are continuing programs. For example, many jurisdictions are [continuing forms of ERA](#), and after the success of CCSBG the Minnesota legislature created the [Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program](#). These insights can be applied across programs in the future to improve the government's delivery of critical benefits and services to the people who need them the most.