

## City kicks off behavioral science initiative through partnership

By Miranda Neubauer

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The city has partnered with a nonprofit to explore how small interventions grounded in behavioral science can improve the successes of a variety of city programs, including SNAP benefits, CUNY student retention and homeless prevention.

Ideas42, the nonprofit, previously played a key role connected with the White House [Social and Behavioral Sciences Team](#), which released a first report this past September, when President Obama also signed an [executive order](#) calling on federal agencies to apply behavioral science.

The approach is inspired by the concept of "nudges" popularized through a [book](#) by economist Richard Thaler and Harvard Law School professor and onetime White House official Cass Sunstein, that previously saw high-profile adoption within the [British government](#).

In March, Ideas42 officially launched a [Gov42 initiative](#) with philanthropic support to bring its approach to the city and state government level. Ideas42 had previously partnered with the NYPD and other agencies to conduct research on [crime hotspots](#) and to redesign the city's [summons forms](#) to make them more clear and including new behaviorally-informed language to prompt residents to show up for court or plead by mail, coupled with efforts to remind summons recipients of their court appearance with text messages and phone calls.

With the beginning of this year, New York City has launched its own behavioral design team within the Mayor's Office of Operations, under Matt Klein, executive director of the Center for Economic Opportunity and senior adviser for service innovation within Operations, and Ted Robertson, managing director of Ideas42. The Gov42 effort in New York City, the first at this scale on a city level, is funded by a two-year grant from the Arnold Foundation. As part of the effort, an Ideas42 representative has been sitting within the Office of Operations since the beginning of January.

"Increasingly we're seeing that behavioral science is being used in the design of .. interventions, and so we wanted to take advantage of that science and expertise to help drive the way that we do our work," Klein said.

He said the city sees the approach as potentially applicable in all areas where behavior is a factor, with a particular interest in drawing on the ideas to promote the administration's priority of equity, but also to improve internal government operations and broader agency engagement.

He said the resources of the New York City behavioral design team could be made available to any agency "where there might be a good applicable place for for these [approaches] to be brought to bear, where there's communications with the public, where there's information to be delivered and where importantly, and this is crucial, where we can measure the effectiveness of the test," he said. "For anything that we do, we're doing the random control trial experiment, looking at 'did a tweak that we made to a process or a letter or a form actually make the program operate more effectively, and if it did, can one scale that change to be universal, and if it did we'll move on to another experiment."

The aim is to conduct at least eighteen different projects over a year and a half, and possibly more if ideas come to mind. For the SNAP benefit, the project involves redesigning the form to make clear what the next actionable steps are for the applicant, Robertson said, as well as "to make clear upfront what the stakes are ... that if they don't get done they're actually eligible for benefits but they might lose them if they don't finish this form." The effort also includes adding visuals and sending reminders.

As part of homelessness prevention, the effort involves redesigned mailers to increase the number of people calling the city regarding benefits they can access to keep their housing as part of the Neighborhood Homelessness Prevention Outreach targeted at households at risk of homelessness.

For CUNY students, the project involves engaging and working with incoming students to reassure them that they belong with the goal of increasing persistence in later semesters as well as offering reminders to fill out the FAFSA financial aid form.

"On their face, the [interventions] are intuitive, but what I think we're excited about is the rigor with which we're applying these," Klein said, citing the commitment to drawing on evidence and growing government impact. "Instead of them getting a letter filled mostly with bureaucratic wording, it's been simplified, the formatting has been changed, it's taking advantage of the fear that we as humans have of losing something that we already have." As an example, the SNAP benefits literature will have notices such as "Don't lose your current benefits," he explained.

"These science-based tweaks are what we're interested in incorporating into the way that we in government regularly do our business," Klein said. "Not only is there an appetite on the agency level ... and not only is there communication and engagement with the public, but also there is a robust data stream that we can analyze, to know, did the letter [make] change, did the communication have a difference."

The city sees the project has a low-risk way to experiment with a new approach that could scale more broadly. Data collection from the college persistence effort has begun, and the new SNAP letter will go out in the coming month, and first results are expected in early fall.

"New York is in the lead in terms of cities in taking [this] concept and building a team out," Robertson said.

"[With] a centralized unit imitating low-cost pilots, New York is front of the pack," he said.