

OCT 2023

# Unlocking Opportunities for Increased Enrollment at The Door

The NYC Behavioral Design Team partnered with The Door, a youth services organization with youth center facilities in Manhattan and the Bronx, to understand and overcome the behavioral barriers young people face when enrolling in its services. Through our research, we discovered that young people often struggle to enroll due to incomplete information, chronic scarcity, and hassles in the enrollment process. To address these challenges, we created a suite of intake resources that connect youth to services more quickly. A three-month qualitative pilot found that the designs were helpful and easy to use, but reminders and additional staff-facing support are needed to improve implementation.

## Problem

The Door is a multiservice youth center (and [Criminal Justice Investment Initiative Youth Opportunity Hub](#) initiative from 2017-2023) in lower Manhattan and the south Bronx that has been providing comprehensive housing, health, mental health, education, employment, arts, legal, and recreational services to young people from across New York City since 1972. Connecting young people to programming at The Door is essential to ensuring participants have access to the resources and support they need to reach their potential and achieve their goals.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, less than one-third of young people who sign up as members at The Door do not enroll in any of the organization's specific programs and services (e.g., mental health counseling), though they may informally take part in various onsite offerings that don't require enrollment (e.g., daily community dinner; accessing the food pantry, onsite laundry, and showers; hanging out in The Door's communal spaces). Why do many members express interest but then not enroll?

In collaboration with CUNY's Institute of State and Local Governance, the NYC Behavioral Design Team—run by the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity and ideas42—partnered with The Door to understand the behavioral barriers that young people face when enrolling in services, and to design a set of solutions to help connect these youth to targeted services more quickly.

## Highlights

- *Hundreds of young people sign up as members of The Door—a comprehensive New York youth center—to access the agency's free services, but then do not move on to enroll in any of the specific programs.*
- *Through interviews with staff at The Door and young New Yorkers, we learned that lack of salience, incomplete information, and hassles derail people from enrolling.*
- *We explored three new resources to help young people overcome these barriers and enroll. We found that well-timed and concise information showed promise for connecting people to important services.*

From November 2021 to February 2022, the Behavioral Design Team conducted multiple rounds of in-depth interviews with The Door staff (including intake counselors and program staff), active participants, and young people that disengaged before using any services.

During our interviews, we learned that The Door, advertised as a “one-stop shop” for young people, provides nearly 100 unique services. Our conversations with staff revealed that each program operates independently with distinct onboarding procedures, criteria, and communication methods. Additionally, there is no centralized place to locate each program’s policies and procedures. This decentralized approach can pose difficulties for intake counselors tasked with matching youth to appropriate services.

Furthermore, interviews revealed that young people experienced difficulties enrolling for various reasons, including:

- 1. The reasons for youth to share information during membership intake were not salient to them.** Young people do not share complete personal information with intake counselors because, at the moment of the decision, they do not perceive relevant consequences of not sharing. This gap makes it challenging for intake counselors to match young people with the most appropriate services.
- 2. Young people are presented with too many choices.** When presented with The Door’s full list of services, young people experience choice overload, often finding it challenging to select which services they need or are interested in. Furthermore, young people are not given the help or information they need to select from The Door’s programming.
- 3. Some young people experience chronic scarcity, meaning that basic necessities (such as time, money, housing, and food) are perpetually inadequate or unstable.** This often leads to tunneling, or a hyperfocus on their most immediate needs. Consequently, young people may reprioritize activities that help them meet their more pressing needs, which can result in them missing out on beneficial services offered by The Door.
- 4. Information to help young people find fitting programs is not salient during introductory interactions.** Our interviews revealed that intake counselors do not provide all of the information young people need to determine whether a program fits their schedule or individual circumstances during their intake conversations. It is only later, once young people have started the enrollment process, that they are provided these details. Often, young people realize that a program is not a suitable fit only after they begin the enrollment process.
- 5. Young people face hassles in the enrollment process.** Young people defer enrolling in programs because The Door’s enrollment processes include hassles that lead some people to procrastinate or prioritize other activities.

## Solutions

Equipped with these insights, the BDT created a series of resources to assist young people during their initial membership sign-up process. Ultimately, we hoped these would increase the number of young people who successfully enroll in programming.

**The pre-intake sheet (top)** provides a comprehensive guide to program options and behavioral barriers. Its goal is to help narrow down service choices and strengthen youth’s intention to enroll. The sheet is distributed before the intake conversation and contains a robust list of The Door’s services. In addition, the guide’s introductory text helps prepare young people to be more forthcoming in the intake conversation by explaining the rationale and importance of sharing information about themselves.

**The post-intake planning guide (bottom)** builds upon the pre-intake sheet by summarizing the talking points discussed during the intake conversation. It outlines actionable next steps to encourage follow-through and ensure successful enrollment.

Lastly, the BDT developed a **service repository**. This internal, staff-facing guide provides intake counselors with the most up-to-date information on all of The Door’s programs. The BDT created this design in response to staff’s feedback that there is no centralized resource where they could learn about all of The Door’s programs. Updated quarterly through a simple Google form, the repository collects and organizes information describing what programs are offered at The Door, when they are offered, what steps are required to enroll, whom to contact for more information, and other helpful information to facilitate successful matching and enrollment.

## Results

The BDT conducted a three-month pilot with staff and participants in The Door’s SoHo location to determine the feasibility, desirability, and potential impact of new designs on participant engagement. The team observed and interviewed The Door staff and participants to understand how they used the resources and to gather feedback. The BDT also analyzed administrative data to assess the impact of the new resources on enrollment and participation rates.

## PRE-INTAKE SHEET

## POST-INTAKE PLANNING GUIDE

In general, the interventions implemented in 2022 did not increase enrollment compared to previous years. However, the organization’s enrollment rates have been affected by COVID-related factors since 2020, resulting in highly variable annual enrollment rates and making it challenging to establish a reliable baseline. As a result, we mainly relied on qualitative evaluation methods in our analysis.

Our qualitative analysis revealed that the pre-intake sheet was helpful and easy to use, communicating to young people that The Door was a welcoming place and helping them identify programs of interest. While the post-intake planning sheet was also valuable and easy to use, staff did not use it consistently. Finally, we found that although many staff had requested a resource like the service repository, low response rates for the Google form that populates the repository limited its usability.

Overall, people told us the designs were helpful and easy to navigate, but there is room to improve how they are used. To further refine and scale the designs, the BDT recommended continuing use of the pre-intake sheet, building in reminders to support staff to more consistently use the post-intake planning guide, and experimenting with reminders and incentives to encourage staff to complete the Google form for the service repository. The Door plans to continue to refine and use these designs to support enrollment.

## Takeaways

This project highlights the value of clear communication and information sharing. By providing participants with well-timed and concise information about available programs and the necessary steps to enroll, we can help match young people—especially those experiencing chronic scarcity—with the programs that best serve them, and help them persist through enrollment. With continued efforts to improve enrollment processes, we can better engage and support youth to participate in the services that best meet their needs and help them thrive.