

## Spotlight Brief

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# Unemployment Insurance Navigator Outreach and Engagement Strategies

Findings from Maine, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin



This spotlight brief is part of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office, that explores the implementation of [Unemployment Insurance \(UI\) Navigator grants](#), which seven states received in 2022. The DOL's Employment and Training Administration funded these three-year competitive grants, which are aimed at supporting efforts to promote equitable access to UI benefits, with American Rescue Plan Act funds. In summer and fall 2023, the study team conducted interviews with UI Navigator grantees and subgrantees during site visits to 5 of the 7 grantee states and with 20 select participants who received UI Navigator services. This brief is based on those interviews. Visit the [Navigator Evidence-Building Portfolio website](#) for additional information about the study's design and related publications. A full study report will be available in early 2025.

## Why are UI outreach and engagement strategies needed?

Research has shown that workers from historically marginalized populations, including some racial and ethnic groups, younger workers, and those with less educational attainment, are less likely than other populations to receive Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits when unemployed and that these disparities are primarily driven by differences in applications for benefits (Forsythe and Yang 2022). The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has made it a priority to ensure that all potential claimants have equitable access to the UI program and has encouraged and supported states in making program improvements to promote equitable program access (U.S. Department of Labor 2023). These improvements have included using plain language in communications,

providing more translation and language support, and making UI websites and claimant portals mobile-friendly (U.S. Department of Labor n.d.).

In addition to these UI administrative changes, several states have reported using UI Navigator grants to fund active and intentional outreach and engagement strategies to share information about the UI program and UI Navigation services to help mitigate several barriers to access their focal populations faced. According to interviewed Navigator staff, these barriers included: (1) lack of awareness of UI benefits or one's eligibility for them, (2) language barriers, (3) educational barriers, and (4) distrust of government. These barriers and other ways Navigators worked to overcome them are also described in companion UI Navigator spotlight briefs available on the [Navigator Evidence-Building Portfolio website](#).

## **Lack of awareness of UI program or potential benefit eligibility**

Some populations, such as immigrants, may not be aware of UI as a benefit program due to cultural differences. As of 2020, countries such as Mexico lacked public unemployment benefit programs, and other countries like Vietnam had only more recently adopted one (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2020; Park and Khue 2016). As one Maine UI Navigator staff person who serves a large population of African refugees and asylees said, “UI isn’t a culturally familiar or relevant resource [for this community].”

Other populations may know about UI, but not know that they are eligible for benefits. Studies have found this is a primary reason why less educated and some racial and ethnic groups in the United States are less likely to receive UI benefits (Gould-Werth and Shaefer 2012; Forsythe and Yang 2022). A UI Navigator staff person in Pennsylvania reported this was likely the case for her participants. She said that more people now know about UI after the COVID-19 pandemic, but they do not know they can apply for it or that they are eligible.

Five of 20 Navigator participants we spoke with described not knowing about UI before meeting with a Navigator. A sixth knew about the program, but not that she was potentially eligible. When asked what she learned from her Navigator about UI, she said: “Well, first and foremost, I didn’t know I could collect...because my other coworkers can’t collect. ... Since I am through a temporary agency, I can collect.”

## **Language barriers**

For some groups, language issues add to these informational barriers. Potential UI claimants may not know about or understand UI because there is limited, if any, information about the program available in the language they are most comfortable receiving complex information in or speaking and communicating. A Navigator staff person who serves a Vietnamese community in

Pennsylvania said it was hard even among the Navigator staff who speak Vietnamese to learn more about UI because all the information is only available in English. UI staff in New Mexico noted that there are dozens of tribal languages spoken throughout the state, making it difficult to translate all necessary UI program materials for potential claimants.

## **Educational barriers**

Navigator staff in several states noted that some of the populations they were aiming to serve also had little educational attainment, which can make reading and understanding UI communications in any language difficult. A Navigator staff person in Wisconsin noted that workers with low levels of education may be less confident in their ability to complete the UI application process and seek out UI Navigators for their program expertise. UI Navigators in New Mexico said that although UI materials are translated into Spanish, the level of technical detail and official program jargon make the materials difficult to understand for both English and Spanish speakers.

## **Distrust of government**

Other populations have had experiences that make them distrust government and therefore they are leery of applying for public benefits. State UI and Navigator staff in Maine cited this as a barrier to access for rural and tribal communities in the state. Oklahoma UI staff noted potential UI claimants were hesitant to put personal information in the UI online application due to fear of a breach of privacy or mismanagement of their data. Pennsylvania Navigator staff who serve a refugee population also sensed distrust of government was a common barrier to applying for or receiving benefits.



"Lack of trust in government. [Our community members are] here because of genocide and war. That's one of the main pieces.... [They are] afraid of being deported. Some community members say, we're grateful to be in America, so why make waves?"

Navigator staff serving refugees in Pennsylvania

## What strategies do UI Navigators use to reach and engage underrepresented groups?

UI Navigators in Maine, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin worked to address these barriers by serving as trusted messengers and by using various outreach strategies to best reach their populations of interest. These strategies included: (1) engaging potential claimants at community events, (2) using Facebook groups and Messenger, (3) sending mass text messages, and (4) conducting outreach to employers and at employment sites.

### Trusted messengers

UI Navigators most often worked for community-based organizations that were known and trusted in the community, or they were known and trusted community members themselves. For example, New Mexico hired community health workers with prior experience working in the communities they served. Maine partnered with immigrant-serving organizations, among others, that hired Navigators who were recent immigrants and had helped others settle into their new communities. Some Navigators reported that having this preestablished trust helped mitigate potential claimants' mistrust of government. State and Navigator staff shared that when outreach about UI is coming from these trusted organizations or people, potential claimants are more likely to listen to, believe in, and act on the information.



"In the Northern region [of New Mexico], [Navigators] are part of the tribal communities they serve. They have to be people the community knows and trusts very intimately due to a mistrust of government."

Navigator staff in New Mexico

### Community events

Navigators in all five states discussed in this brief attended events in the community to promote awareness of UI and Navigator services. In New Mexico, Navigators brought print materials in English and Spanish to existing community events. These materials explained the UI program, how to apply for benefits, and some of the eligibility criteria, among other topics. Navigators attended the events, set up a table or handed out information, and answered questions about the Navigator program and UI in general. Similarly in Oklahoma, the Navigator staffed a table in a grocery store to share information about UI regularly during the week as well as during special events hosted by the store, which served as a community resource center offering vaccine clinics, food and clothing drives, and outreach and engagement efforts to support the economic well-being of the local community in North Tulsa.

Navigators in Pennsylvania who served the Vietnamese community attended community events, such as celebrations at local temples, with flyers about UI. This provided opportunities to talk one-on-one with community members, in Vietnamese, about the UI program and about how they or someone they know might be eligible. Staff described aiming to build rapport with potential claimants to help communicate their message.



"[What has worked well is] our method of outreach, ...instead of doing passive outreach, going up to folks and initiating conversations. People seem engaged and interested in the information."

Navigator staff in Pennsylvania

### Facebook groups and Messenger

Navigators in Maine and Pennsylvania used Facebook to share information about UI and engage with potential claimants. In Maine, one Navigator managed a Facebook group of almost 3,000 members to share basic information about the Maine UI program and important updates, such as office closures and delays in benefits. The group was open to anyone, but Navigator staff viewed it as an effective strategy to reach rural populations, people with less technology know-how, and those who distrust government.



"[Facebook has] been one of the strategies used with folks less comfortable with digital literacy and rural Mainers. Facebook has become commonplace, and it's super accessible, light touch. If someone doesn't know where to go or trust state government, it feels more open and accessible."

Navigator staff in Maine

Navigator staff said the group's success in sharing information about UI and engaging potential claimants was in part due to the Navigator who ran the group being a trusted person in the community. New members to the group reached out to this Navigator using Facebook Messenger to ask for one-on-one support with UI issues.

At the time of our data collection, Navigators in Pennsylvania described planning to use Facebook to reach members of the Cambodian and Vietnamese communities in Philadelphia. These

Navigators planned to create short posts about UI and UI Navigator services on their Facebook pages in Khmer and Vietnamese. To help with educational barriers, the Navigators who served the Cambodian community planned to post their flyers on Facebook with audio of the Navigators reading the flyer's information in Khmer so potential claimants could hear the information if they could not read it. They also planned to send and receive Facebook Messenger audio messages in Khmer, which is a more accessible approach for those with language and educational barriers. Navigator staff said using Facebook for outreach was "critical" for their older focal population because it was the most familiar and easiest social media platform for them to use. Once they learned about UI and UI Navigator services, potential claimants could reach out to a Navigator for support filing a claim.

### Mass text messages

In southern Maine, the Navigator program used mass text messages, translated into multiple languages, to engage potential claimants and share UI information and resources. Navigators first used this approach to share information about UI and UI Navigator services with potential claimants affected by a large layoff who were mainly refugees and asylees from Africa and not fluent in English. The Navigators started collecting contact information and consent to be texted from these potential claimants when a large group sought Navigator services. Sending the text messages in several languages proved successful at engaging this group. The Navigators since then used texting to share information about UI, including reminders about recertifying for benefits, and related opportunities such as job trainings. They continued to grow their contact list during community outreach events and when potential claimants sought Navigator services. This strategy was particularly useful in Maine as state statute currently prohibits the agency itself from reaching out to claimants via text message.



"The texting has been a huge success...it's been good for sharing critical information in real time and doing it in a low-barrier, accessible way."

Navigator staff in Maine

## Outreach to employers and employment sites

In New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, Navigators conducted targeted outreach to employers and at employment sites to share information about UI Navigation and engage potential claimants. Navigators in New Mexico and Wisconsin reported conducting outreach events at farms, knowing the seasonal nature of agricultural employment cycles and the impending layoffs that followed each cycle. Some Navigators in Wisconsin also reached out to employers proactively to explain their services through presentations or providing written materials. This way, if staff became potential claimants, employers would know where to guide them. Similarly, one Navigator in Pennsylvania described coordinating with a large company that was laying off workers to distribute flyers about Navigator services to their employees.

Navigators in Maine, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin also reported reaching potential claimants at employment sites as part of Rapid Response events organized by their states' workforce agencies to help respond to large layoffs. The Navigators reported sharing information about Navigator services, some using brochures and flyers. Navigators at one Pennsylvania subgrantee also reported providing onsite Navigator support with filing UI claims during Rapid Response events using a mobile American Job Center.

## Practice implications

Initial findings from these five UI Navigator grantees suggest that in addition to DOL's and states' efforts to make UI systems more accessible, Navigators can play an important role in helping

populations learn about UI benefits. Other states may consider partnering with community organizations or hiring staff who are trusted in the community to help relay information to populations that might distrust government. Navigator staff also shared the importance of "meeting people where they are" with outreach, both physically, such as at community celebrations, markets, and job sites, and by using their preferred modes of communication and language. Finally, building connections with people one-on-one may help build trust and ensure people are hearing and digesting information about UI in the most meaningful way available to them.

## Citations

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### Suggested Citation and Study Overview

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**Navigators Evidence-Building Portfolio:** The UI Navigator study is part of the larger Navigators Evidence-Building Portfolio, a study funded by DOL to explore the potential of Navigators to improve outcomes and equity in workforce programs. Visit the Navigator Evidence-Building Portfolio [website](#) for additional information about the project and related publications.

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