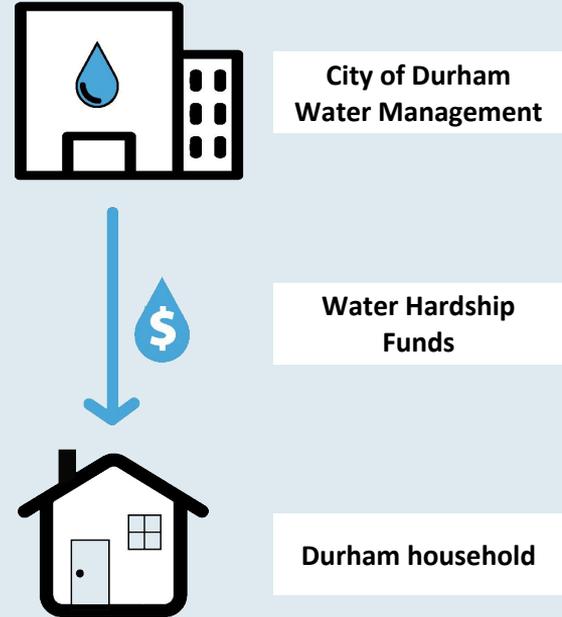


Improving the Water Hardship Fund process for Durham residents and staff

What is the Water Hardship Fund (WHF)?

Every month, there are Durham households struggling to keep their water on. In response to this problem, the City of Durham developed a fund to assist these residents pay their water bill. The City of Durham's Water Management (WM) administers the fund, and works with Durham County's Department of Social Services (DSS) to get money into the accounts of those who need it.





DISCOVER

Understand the landscape of the current challenge, observing processes, learning from stakeholders and uncovering unmet needs.



DESIGN

Use insights to **create and test solutions**, incorporating input and ideas from the people who use and administer the service.



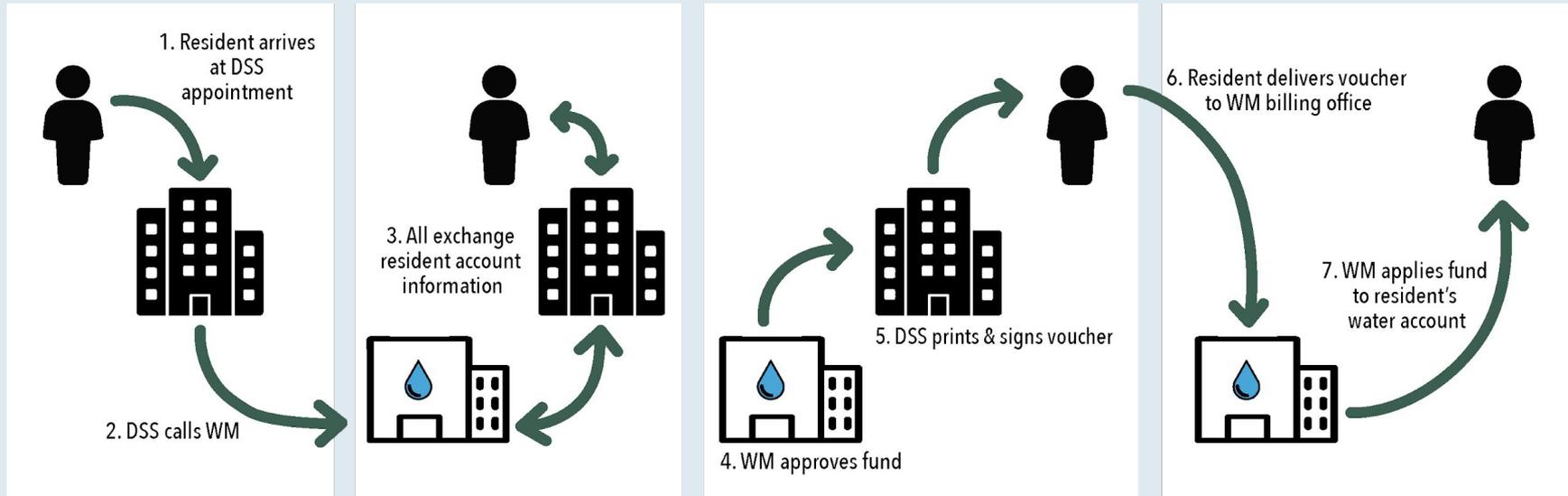
DELIVER

Work with stakeholders to **implement and track continuous improvement**, making necessary improvements along the way.

DISCOVER → DESIGN → DELIVER

The Challenge

While the \$150,000 fund helped many residents, it remained underutilized; meanwhile, households continued to be in jeopardy of their water being cut off. Residents who did access the fund went through a number of steps. Not only was this a challenging process for the resident, it was time- and resource-intensive for the staff involved in administering the fund.



DISCOVER → DESIGN → DELIVER

The Process

The Process Improvement team observed the process in real time as residents accessed the Water Hardship Fund from start to finish. Then they sat down with key staff from DSS and Water Management to better understand their specific experiences, challenges and ideas around the WHF process. All stakeholders could now see and respond to the process mapped out in its entirety for the first time.

“I took off work to come [to this appointment].”

— Durham resident
accessing the WHF

“Sometimes we’ll be on hold for 40 minutes [for a Customer Billing representative].”

— DSS Service Representative

“Access is the biggest challenge. I believe that some customers are hesitant to go through DSS to apply for the WHF.”

— Utility Finance Manager, DWM

How might we make the Water Hardship Fund more accessible to Durham residents and easier for staff to administer?

DISCOVER → DESIGN → DELIVER



The Process Improvement team reached out to the City Attorney's Office to address concerns that emerged around changing the process, and discovered that certain parts of the current process weren't legally required. Then they brought in the City's Technology Solutions department (TS) to explore the feasibility of technical solutions.



Once it was confirmed that the City could process WHF applications without the need for a third party, the team decided to test out a web-based form that residents could fill out directly from home. TS quickly developed a form that included new questions to better understand the context of each applicant's hardship.

City of Durham - Water Hardship Fund

Are you struggling to pay your water bill? The City would like to help through the Water Hardship Fund. The Fund is part of a program administered by the Durham County Department of Social Services to help residents pay their past-due water bills. It cannot be used for penalties and fees. Through a simple online process, you can apply for up to \$240 in assistance per year if you are having a documented hardship, have past-due bills, and are in danger of having your water cut off. If you think you might qualify, please complete the Water Hardship Fund application form. If contacted, you may be asked to provide identification, proof of income, a copy of your water bill, and other information.

Name on Water Bill:*

Your Name:*

Address on Water Bill:*

Account Number on Water Bill:*

Primary Phone Number:*

Email Address:*

What is causing the hardship you are currently experiencing? (Select all that apply)*

- Unexpected high bill due to a leak
- Unemployment / Job loss
- Personal or Family illness
- Unexpected / Emergency Expenses
- Other

Is the hardship temporary or ongoing?*

What is your current water status?*

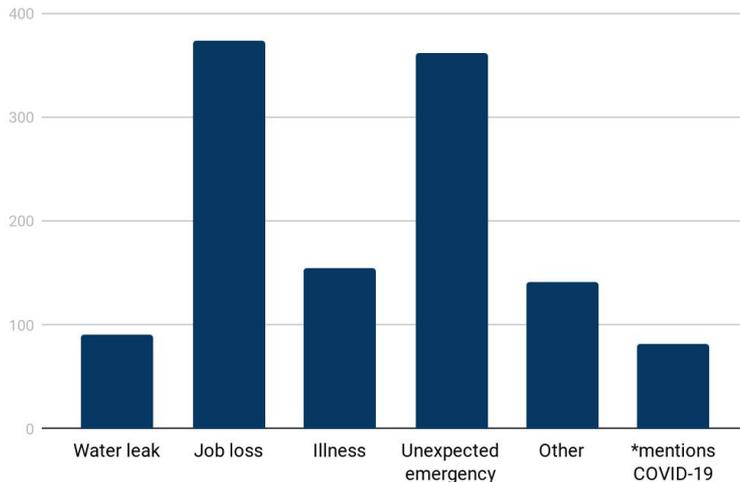
- Turned Off
- Past Due and in Jeopardy of being turned off

What is your current balance due?*

DISCOVER → DESIGN → DELIVER

With COVID-19 just beginning to impact the larger community, the team wasted no time in publishing a digital form on the Water Management website in April 2020. By the close of the fiscal year, July 1, the funds had been fully utilized and more requests continue coming.

Reasons mentioned for WHF request



Responses of September 2020.

*Responses that included Covid-19 were optional

“I just don't know how I'll be able to pay the almost \$600 bill due on May 28th.”

— Durham resident accessing the WHF

“I'm having to take care of grandkids during the pandemic, and I'm on a fixed income.”

— Durham resident accessing the WHF

HOW DOES OPI DEFINE SUCCESS?

Purpose Statement: The Office of Performance and Innovation (OPI) contributes to enhancing the quality of life in Durham by helping City of Durham departments maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of their work by providing support, consulting, and skill building in the areas of strategic planning, innovation, process improvement, and program design and evaluation.

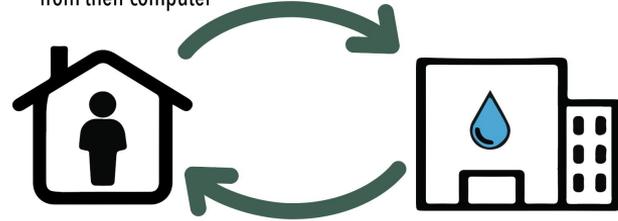
SUCCESS SO FAR

“I can’t believe how easy this process was. We have so many other forms that we would love to automate like this that would make our work so much easier.”

I am very satisfied with this solution, and the most valuable thing is the increased use of the funds. While I know COVID-19 has had an impact on need, customers are being served much faster using this new process.”

— Utility Finance Manager, DWM

1. Resident applies for WHF from their computer



2. If approved, WHF is applied to resident's account and the resident is notified via email

** Resident still has option to access fund via DSS*

Customer satisfaction

This process relieves a burden from Water Management, the Department of Social Services, and the residents they serve.

Increased Accessibility and Utilization

Residents now have more options to access this form and meet their needs. This has proven to be particularly important during COVID-19.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

1. **Identify and bring in all stakeholders early on** to understand multiple perspectives of a complex problem, prioritizing those who experience the challenge firsthand.
2. **Map out the current process** alongside the stakeholders in charge of each step.
3. **Listen** for the needs, concerns and ideas from the parties involved.
4. **Facilitate conversations** with relevant departments to answer questions and relieve concerns.
5. **Build the solution** with the key stakeholders, and leave the solution in the hands of its owner.
6. Continue to **check in and support** as needed.