

# Evaluation Summary Report: Emergency Financial Relief Microgrants Program for Survivors of Domestic and Gender-Based Violence

May 2021

## Abstract

This report provides a summary of an evaluation conducted by the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV) on the emergency financial relief program for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. The program was a first-of-its-kind initiative that responded to the acute and unique needs of survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in New York City. The program, which launched in June 2020, delivered microgrants based on need, and incorporated best practices from other successful flexible funding models, building upon existing City investments for domestic and gender-based violence (DV/GBV) survivors by opening a new stream of funds. As the program launched, the ENDGBV Research and Evaluation Team designed and implemented a process evaluation that utilized a mixed-methods approach that included the collection and review of both qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sources.

The program provided 377 clients with grants that averaged \$1,243.37. The program disbursed a total of \$468,750.00. Almost all of the program's clients were female, 90% were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), 95% of clients made less than \$40,000 annually, 83% of all clients having two or more people in the household and 65% of clients were immigrants. The program struggled with the high number of grant applications, but was able to improve management of that flow through increased staffing, lengthening the anticipated timeframe to disburse funds while encouraging providers to flag urgent need requests and incorporating a reimbursement model that allowed providers to fulfill needs of their clients and receive reimbursement from the microgrant program at a later date. While providing a relatively small amount of assistance, clients and service providers reported the program improved grant recipients' financial situation (40% of clients and providers), while 40% of service providers reported that the program helped their client(s) remain housed or cover rent and 37% reported that the microgrant improved their clients' financial stability and/or lightened their financial burden in some way. The program also had impacts beyond improved financial condition. Forty-eight (48%) of clients reported feeling safer since participating in the microgrant program, while 44% of clients reported that their children felt safer. The program also appears to have improved the mental health of clients, with 46% of clients reporting that their mental health had improved.

The ENDGBV Research and Evaluation team is continuing outreach to program participants to collect additional information on the impact of the program. All evaluation activities will be completed by the end of July 2021.

If you have any questions about the evaluation, please contact the evaluator, Kaitlin Holmes, at [KHolmes@endgbv.nyc.gov](mailto:KHolmes@endgbv.nyc.gov).

## Program Background

On May 21, 2020, to provide funding for immediate safety, economic, and housing needs exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a new emergency financial relief program for survivors of DV/GBV. Through a contract with Sanctuary for Families (SFF), ENDGBV leveraged the City's network of service providers to distribute funds directly to survivors in need. Funding for the program was provided by the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City's COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund.

Aligned with the City's efforts to help the most vulnerable New Yorkers during the COVID-19 pandemic, this first-of-its-kind initiative responded to the acute and unique needs of survivors of DV/GBV. The program delivered microgrants based on need, and followed evidence-based flexible funding models that have emerged as powerful economic empowerment tools which are particularly helpful in mitigating risk factors for survivors of DV/GBV.<sup>1</sup> The program incorporated best practices from other successful flexible funding models, building upon existing City investments for DV/GBV survivors by opening a new stream of funds. The microgrant model enabled service providers to apply directly with SFF for funds ranging in value on behalf of survivors.

The program launched on June 15, 2020 with the stated goal to serve 312 families with an average disbursement of \$1,500.00 per client. The program received 693 distinct requests for grants and was able to fund an average disbursement of \$1,243.37 per client and a total disbursement of \$468,750.00 to 377 distinct clients, exceeding its initial goal. The microgrant program provided emergency funding to DV/GBV survivors from communities that are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic - 90% were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and 95% of clients made less than \$40,000 annually. Clients and service providers reported the program had positive impact on survivors' mental health and overall wellbeing, and more secure financial and housing situations, as well as contributing to their children's feelings of safety and overall wellbeing.

Key impacts determined by the evaluation's interviews, focus groups, and surveys:

- 46% of microgrant recipients reported that their mental health had improved since receiving the microgrant.
- 48% of microgrant recipients reported feeling safer since participating in the program.
- 45% of microgrant recipients reported that their children felt safer since participating in the program.
- 40% of service providers reported that the microgrant helped their client(s) cover rent or maintain stable housing.
- 37% of service providers reported that the microgrant improved their client's financial stability and/or eased their financial burdens.

In addition to the significant demand for microgrants for survivors of DV/GBV evidenced by the overwhelming number of applications submitted for this program, information collected during the evaluation suggests an ongoing need for flexible funding programs in New York City.

## Program Overview

Through a contract with SFF, the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV) leveraged the City's network of service providers to distribute funds to directly support survivors in need. Service providers completed applications with their clients and submitted the applications to SFF. The Program Director for the program reviewed applications for completeness and accuracy, and worked with service providers to correct and/or complete applications via email. After an application was approved by the program's Program Director, it was sent to the Program Coordinator to disburse approved funds. The Program Coordinator disbursed the microgrant in one of the following ways:

- 1) request a check through SFF's Finance Department to be sent to vendors on a client's behalf (e.g., mailing a check to a landlord for rent).
- 2) use SFF's program-specific credit card to purchase items online (e.g., applicant included hyperlinks to purchase the requested items).
- 3) request a reimbursement check be sent to an organization through SFF's Finance Department (starting in late August, some organizations opted for the reimbursement method,<sup>i</sup> in which the organization would purchase the items for their clients and subsequently be reimbursed by the program).

The program was initially designed to disburse grants to the clients within three weeks, however, upon launching the program received more applications than it anticipated -- 137 applications in June 2020 and 418 in July 2020. As a result, the time to distribute the microgrant grew from 62 days to 95 days. In early July 2020, due to the large volume of requests received, a \$1,500.00 per client cap was instituted to ensure that funds would be available to a larger number of applicants. To address the volume of requests and the delays in disbursing funds, in late July 2020 service providers were informed of the adjusted timeline for disbursing the funds to six weeks. Recognizing that some client requests were more acute and urgent, program staff remained in contact with providers to flag urgent cases needing to be expedited.

## Program Demographics

Administrative data and Client Pre-Surveys show that the microgrant program reached and served a diverse group of clients that were often facing significant financial, housing, and other barriers before entering the program.

### Client Demographics

- 90% of clients were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC):<sup>iii</sup>
  - 40% Latina/Latino/Latinx
  - 32% Black
  - 13% Asian
  - 10% White
  - 3% Middle Eastern
  - 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native/Native American
- 95% of clients made less than \$40K annually, with 83% of all clients having two or more people in the household.
- 65% of clients were immigrants.
- 97% of clients identified as female.
  - Nine clients identified as male, two clients identified as transgender, and two clients identified as non-binary.

### Financial and Housing Situations

Upon entering the program, many clients reported in the Client Pre-Survey that they were currently facing significant financial and housing barriers, and had often experienced these barriers in the past:

- 83.9% (47 of 56 respondents) were unable to cover all their bills/expenses before receiving the microgrant.
- 62.5% (35 of 56 respondents) were experiencing unemployment before receiving the microgrant.
- 81.5% (44 of 54 respondents) faced one or more financial barrier in the past.<sup>iv</sup>

## Summary of Funds Disbursed

The program gave an average disbursement of \$1,243.37 per client and a total disbursement of \$468,750.00 to 377 distinct clients, exceeding the program's starting goal to serve 312 distinct families with an average disbursement of \$1,500.00. The most significant microgrant spending category by total amount was rent (32.2%), followed by technology (29.8%), and furniture/housing items (13.4%):

Summary of Funds Disbursed					
Financial Purpose	Amount	% of Total	Financial Purpose	Amount	% of Total
Rent	\$150,882.07	32.19%	Emergency Housing (Short Stay)	\$6,110.81	1.30%
Technology	\$139,505.26	29.76%	Moving & Storage	\$5,011.94	1.07%
Furniture/Housing Items	\$62,919.05	13.42%	Mortgage	\$4,874.35	1.04%
Food & Personal Care Items	\$20,335.62	4.34%	Medical	\$3,613.86	0.77%
Utilities	\$17,981.06	3.84%	Transportation	\$3,600.98	0.77%
Clothing	\$16,947.00	3.62%	Security Deposit & Brokers' Fees	\$2,425.00	0.52%
Other Grant Assistance <sup>v</sup>	\$13,212.65	2.82%	Child Care	\$1,500.00	0.32%
Education	\$11,058.57	2.36%	Phone	\$1,400.00	0.30%
Children's Items	\$7,371.78	1.57%	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$468,750.00</b>	

## Program Challenges

The program encountered unforeseen circumstances leading to necessary changes in the program's implementation, an extended application timeline, and delays in payment of the funds. The evaluation revealed challenges around processing and payment delays, which were attributed to the application volume and overwhelmed program staff, challenges with the disbursement methods, and the need for a mechanism to pause new applications. In addition, operational barriers (e.g., the inability to save or edit an application), a perceived lack of information about program changes and updates (i.e., implementation of a \$1,500.00 cap to reach more clients), and perceived insufficient communication between providers and staff regarding application submission, review and approval. By late August, the program faced an estimated three-month backlog of approved applications and an additional 11-month backlog on applications to be reviewed.

Many of these challenges were addressed during the program. The following outlines the key changes implemented to address these challenges:

1. *Increased Staffing and Resources:* As the program began accepting applications, the demand for the program, communication required between SFF staff and service providers to review applications, and the ability to quickly purchase items became overwhelming for SFF staff to handle. To address these issues:
  - a. July 2020, three ENDGBV staff began to provide part-time, in-kind support to the program, communicating with service providers to review applications and update orders.
  - b. September 2020, the SFF Program Coordinator was increased to full-time.
  - c. October 2020 with additional funding, SFF hired a part-time Purchasing Assistant to help support the program.
2. *Lengthening the Anticipated Fund Disbursement Timeline:* While the program did not anticipate the high concentrated volume of applications or the need for a mechanism to regulate the influx of applications, thus the anticipated disbursement time for clients to receive their grant was extended from 3-weeks to 6-weeks.
  - a. *Identifying Urgent Needs:* To ensure that expending the disbursement timeline did not negatively impact high-risk clients, the program established a system to identify urgent needs. Recognizing that some client requests were more time-sensitive than others, the program expedited urgent client needs. Providers were responsible for flagging urgent need cases for the program to prioritize review of those applications.
3. *Implementing a Reimbursement Option:* In August 2020, a reimbursement method was implemented for organizations that chose to participate in this option, which allowed the organizations to pay for their clients' items and receive reimbursement from the program later. SFF staff indicated that switching to the reimbursement method sped up the funding disbursement process to survivors and reduced the communications required between program staff, service providers, and survivors about application errors or other issues (i.e., an item being sold out online or an item delivery issue). It should be noted that the reimbursement model proved to be a challenge for some organizations that did not have the financial capacity to pay for their clients' grant while waiting for reimbursement.

Shortly after launching, the program requested to start using gift cards to provide funds to clients. However, New York City Comptroller procurement rules require receipts to provide a proper accounting of how microgrant funds were spent. SFF, based on experience with challenges associated with attempting to collect receipts from clients, determined that they did not want to risk adversely impacting SFF or any service providers that were unable to provide receipts for clients and ruled out gift cards as a viable disbursement method.



## Key Program Outcomes

The microgrant program provided emergency funding to survivors from communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and, according to testimony from service providers and clients, had a positive impact on clients' mental health and overall wellbeing, giving them a sense of feeling valued by and included in their communities, and more secure financial and housing situations. It also contributed to their children's feelings of safety and overall wellbeing. Service providers reported an ongoing and long term need for flexible funding and other financial and housing supports for survivors of GBV. The majority of clients and service providers who participated in the evaluation expressed feelings of gratitude for the program launching during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing critical assistance when other sources of support and resources for financial independence and safety became inaccessible or disappeared completely.

As the program launched, the ENDGBV Research and Evaluation Team designed and implemented a process evaluation that utilized a mixed-methods approach that included the collection and review of both qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sources. Quantitative data inputs included administrative data from SFF, the contracted provider that implemented the program, as well as results from an Advocate/Service Provider survey, a Client Pre-Survey, and two Client Follow-up Surveys. Qualitative data inputs included observations and discussions during weekly check-ins with SFF and ENDGBV staff, interviews with SFF and ENDGBV staff, focus groups with service providers, and open-text fields from the Advocate/Service Provider and Client surveys. The ENDGBV Research & Evaluation team is continuing outreach to program participants to collect additional information on the impact of the program.

The following provides an overview of impacts determined by the evaluation's interviews, focus groups, and surveys:

### **Clients and service providers reported that the microgrant had a positive impact on clients' mental health, overall wellbeing, and sense of feeling valued by and included in their communities.**

- Clients reported the following improvements after receiving the microgrant:
  - 50.0% (13 of 26) reported that their feeling valued by and included in their communities.
  - 47.8% (11 of 23) reported feeling safer since participating in the microgrant program.
  - 46.2% (12 of 26) reported that their mental health had improved.
- 42.9% (15 of 35) of service providers reported that the microgrant had a positive emotional or mental health impact on their clients.

**Clients and service providers reported that the microgrant had a positive impact on clients' financial and housing situations:**

- In the Client Pre-Survey, 83.9% (47 of 56) of respondents reported that they were unable to cover all their bills/expenses before receiving the microgrant. In the Client One-Month Follow-up Survey, fewer clients (65.2%, or 15 of 23) respondents reported being unable to cover all their bills/expenses.
- In the Client Follow-up Survey, 40.9% (9 respondents) indicated that the microgrant had improved their financial situation.
- In the Advocate/Service Provider Survey, 40.0% (14 of 35) reported that the microgrant helped their client(s) remain housed or cover rent. Another 37.1% (13 of 35) of service providers reported that the microgrant improved their clients' financial stability and/or lightened their financial burden in some way.<sup>vi</sup>

**Clients and service providers also reported positive impacts on clients' children since receiving the microgrant:**

- 35% (7 of 20) of clients reported in the Client One-Month Follow-up Survey that their children's feelings of wellbeing improved since receiving the microgrant.<sup>vii</sup>
- 44.4% (8 of 18) of clients reported in the Client One-Month Follow-up Survey that their children felt safer since participating in the microgrant program.<sup>viii</sup>
- In the Advocate/Service Provider Survey, when asked to "describe the impact microgrants have had on your clients (e.g., anecdote about the microgrant's impact on your client's wellbeing)," 17.1% (6 of 35) of respondents described a positive impact microgrants had on their client's children.



## Evaluation Findings

The evaluation found that some adjustments should be made to program structure and implementation for future programs to enhance program efficiency, improve communication and transparency, and increase the speed of fund disbursement.

### *Establish Program Requirements/Structure Prior to Launch of Program*

As noted in this report, while the program assisted almost 380 clients and improved the financial, safety and mental condition of many clients, the unforeseen volume of requests led to necessary changes in the program's implementation, an extended application timeline, and delays in payment of the funds. Based on the identified continued need for similar programs, ENDGBV should consider the following in developing further programming:

- Strengthen operational guidelines for the program and provide clear and consistent messaging to service providers (i.e., funding caps, allowable uses).
- Develop a way to communicate program eligibility requirements and application process clearly, such as a frequently asked questions or a program one pager, to clients and service providers.

### *Streamline Program and Application Process*

The evaluation determined that the current program was hampered by an application process that required too much communication between the program administrator (SFF), the service providers and the client. Because the applicant was removed from direct communication with SFF, who was reviewing and approving the application, any application questions automatically slowed the application approval process. To increase the efficiency of the program, and to allow it to achieve the goal of quick approval and disbursement, future microgrant programs should be designed to reduce the distance between the grant applicant and grant approver, allowing the grant applicant to communicate directly with the program reviewing and approving the grant application rather than through their case manager.

The use of technology can also create an efficient application process by building an online application platform that includes a save/edit function, provides application status and payment status updates, and is in multiple languages. The application platform should be accessible by service providers and clients.

### *Increase Speed of Grant Disbursement*

In order to disburse funds as efficiently and quickly as possible, ENDGBV should consider:

- Identifying mechanisms to regulate the influx of applications (accounting for organization size) based on staff capacity.

In developing sustainable microgrant program models, mechanisms that would allow quicker disbursement of funds to clients – such as using gift cards or pre-paid debit cards, or other more direct payments to clients that would allow for quicker disbursement of funds – should be explored. As a first step, ENDGBV should collaborate with other City agencies that have implemented flexible funding programs to determine best practices to increase disbursement. Explore current pathways for microgrant funding in local, state and federal government and identify opportunities to align efforts.

## Conclusion

While the program provided what may be viewed as a minimal level of financial support, clients and service providers reported the program improved grant recipients' financial situation, helped their client(s) remain housed or cover rent and improved their clients' financial stability and/or lightened their financial burden in some way. The program also had impacts beyond improved financial condition, with clients reporting an increased feeling of safety for themselves and their children. Clients also reported improved mental health after receiving a microgrant.

## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Cris M. Sullivan, Heather D. Bomsta, and Margaret A. Hacskaylo, "Flexible Funding as a Promising Strategy to Prevent Homelessness for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34, no. 14 (2019): 3017-3033. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516664318>; Sullivan, Bomsta, and Hacskaylo, "Flexible Funding as a Promising Strategy to Prevent Homelessness for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence," 3017-3033; Stephanie Rose Montesanti, "The role of structural and interpersonal violence in the lives of women: a conceptual shift in prevention of gender-based violence," *BMC Women's Health* 15, no. 93 (2015): <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-015-0247-5>; Andrew Gibbs, Jessica Jacobson, and Alice Kerr Wilson, "A global comprehensive review of economic interventions to prevent intimate partner violence and HIV risk behaviours," *Global Health Action* 10, no. 2 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2017.1290427>; Lyungai Mbilinyi, "The Washington State Domestic Violence Housing First Program: Cohort 2 Agencies Final Evaluation Report," February 2015, Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Seattle WA, [https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/DVHF\\_FinalEvaluation.pdf](https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/DVHF_FinalEvaluation.pdf) and "The Domestic Violence Housing First Approach," Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, last accessed April 16, 2021, <https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-DVHF-Approach-updated-definitions-two-pager.pdf>.
- <sup>ii</sup> According to one service provider during a focus group, one organization that opted for the reimbursement method was unable to purchase items as they had planned, due to the organization's monthly credit card limit; this resulted in at least one client making purchases themselves to await the program to reimburse the organization, which would then reimburse them by turn. One service provider whose organization opted into the reimbursement method shared that the process became even lengthier for their clients, as the organization had to sort through their applications to determine which could be switched to a bulk technology order. Neither of these outcomes were the intent of the program when it offered the reimbursement method to select organizations as an alternate option.
- <sup>iii</sup> Fifteen clients did not disclose their race/ethnicity and are not included in the 90% figure, nor chart.
- <sup>iv</sup> E.g., eviction history, criminal record, or unemployment.
- <sup>v</sup> "Other Grant Assistance" (totaling \$13,212.65): (1) \$6,300.00 was used for costs or fees associated with clients' legal cases (e.g., retainers for private attorneys, cost of supervised visitation to court-appointed agency, cost of "Certificate of Good Standing" from NYPD for a client's VAWA application, and other related legal documents and fees), (2) \$6,370.56 was used for household appliances/utility-related expenses (e.g., specific type of air conditioner due to structure of client's apartment/building, client having a child with medical conditions worsened by the heat, utility arrears), (3) \$369.00 was used for a specialized pair of glasses due to the client's medical condition and (4) \$173.09 was used for overdue property taxes.
- <sup>vi</sup> 35 service providers responded to this question. Some of their open-ended responses to this question included multiple major themes. Therefore, the sum of the number of responses containing each theme does not equal 35.
- <sup>vii</sup> 5 "N/A" responses were not included in this graph or calculations.
- <sup>viii</sup> 5 "N/A" responses were not included in this graph or calculations.

