



Building RESEA Program Evidence by Understanding Participants' Experiences

David Kaz and Melanie Ward (Abt Associates)

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Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) programs are designed to assist unemployed workers who are receiving Unemployment Insurance (UI) in finding employment. RESEA participants can have valuable insights into how well the program is working. **Participant experience research** allows states and evaluators to learn about the program through the perspectives of participants, such as on which RESEA services they find more and less useful, which services they find easy or difficult to access or navigate, and which services they might experience differently based on their demographic characteristics. These unique insights arising from participants' direct experience can help states to develop a more robust picture of their RESEA programs and to identify ways to improve them.

This brief is designed to help states develop methods to understand and draw on participant experience to promote innovation, effectiveness, and equity within their RESEA programs. To support states in documenting and using participants' experiences in their RESEA programs, this brief will answer the following questions:

- (1) What is participant experience research?
- (2) What is the value of participant experience research in promoting innovation, effectiveness, and equity in RESEA service delivery?
- (3) How can states and evaluators integrate participant experience research into ongoing evidence-building activities to enhance their learning about their RESEA programs?
- (4) What are the methods states and evaluators can use to obtain useful information about participant experience in RESEA?

The brief concludes with some Action Steps for states to take to implement participant experience research. Appendix A provides a companion guide to one important method of participant experience research: *customer journey mapping*.

2. Participant Experience Research and Its Value to Improving Effectiveness and Equity in RESEA Program Services

Participant experience research entails collecting and analyzing information about the **experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of participants**. These data can provide a deeper understanding of processes that effect personal experiences, individual perceptions, and patterns of human behavior that are often difficult to quantify. Research methods and data collection to gather participants' experience can involve conducting surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups to gather information directly from participants or observing participants engaging in the program (e.g., during their meetings with RESEA staff). The research affords the **participants themselves** an opportunity to explain their unique experiences and perspectives at different points of the RESEA program. For example, participants can respond to questions such as:

- What were you thinking or feeling when you were first notified that you had been selected for participation in RESEA services?
- How would you rate your experience using the online scheduling system to schedule a RESEA orientation meeting? What suggestions do you have for making this system easier to use, if any?
- Did you understand the reemployment service options that were available to you, based on your meetings with RESEA staff?

Understanding the perspective of your participants can:

Provide insights into which services to emphasize, based on which services participants find most or least useful. For example, RESEA participants might report that one-on-one meetings with case managers to develop reemployment plans are more helpful than group orientation meetings.

Provide insights into how to improve access to services, based on how participants understand information conveyed to them about the program, or which services they find most or least difficult to navigate. For example, RESEA participants might report that they have not well understood the reemployment service options that were explained to them, or that available meeting times with case managers conflicted with other obligations.

Enhance program equity and improve customization through insights into how participants from different backgrounds experience services and barriers to accessing and navigating services. For example, compared to participants residing in urban areas, RESEA participants in rural areas might more frequently report having limited access to internet and a computer, and that made it difficult for them to attend virtual meetings.

Improve service delivery through a customer-focused lens on how and where service delivery departs from what is intended. For example, RESEA participants residing in a particular geographic area might report not receiving a key follow-up communication from a case manager, when this service is a standard feature of the state's RESEA program design and is being provided in other locations.

Box 1. How Participant Experience Research Can Enhance RESEA Program Equity

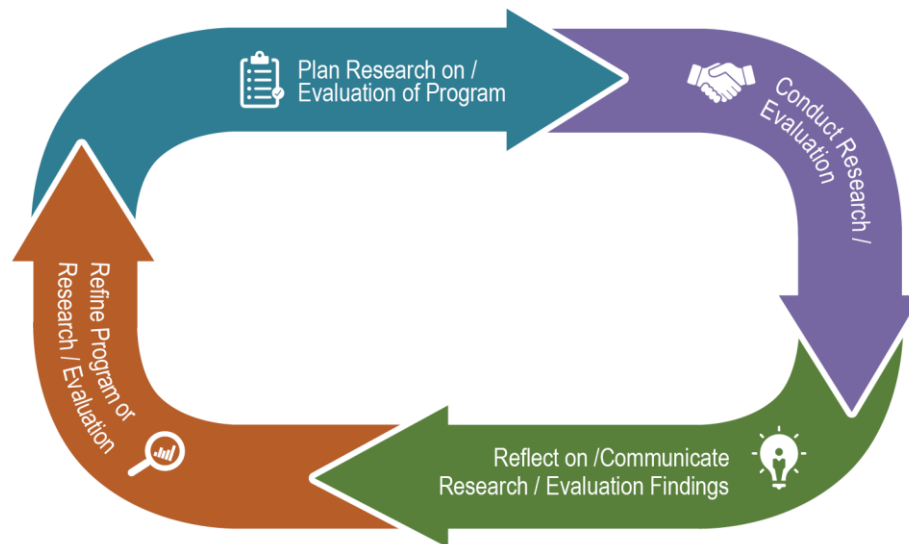
Sheds light on disparities in your RESEA program and why they exist. Disparities reflect inequities that systematically disadvantage certain communities and can be challenging to understand and explain with outcome-level data alone. Participant experience research can help evaluators dig deeper to understand why some groups experience worse or better outcomes than others. Social, historical, and cultural context shape participant experiences and outcomes, and your initial program design might not account for this context. Social determinants such as access to safe and affordable housing; access to quality health care; food security; neighborhood safety; and the physical environment can influence whether, how, and to what extent intended program outcomes are seen among all participants. Furthermore, communities who are marginalized by race, gender, disability status, or other social identities could also face discrimination, stigma, and everyday stressors that strongly influence their perceptions of and participation in your program.

Engages the communities served by your RESEA program in your evidence-building activities. Community-engaged ("participatory") research can enhance equity both within the evaluation process and in program outcomes. Community engagement means collaborating with groups of people who are often most affected by a program or problem of interest, who can provide unique expertise based on their lived and frontline experience. Groups might include current or former RESEA participants, members of community-based organizations that serve RESEA participants, staff who deliver RESEA services or related/adjacent services, and others. Community engagement offers opportunities to work collaboratively with those who have been historically excluded from evaluative and decision-making processes (e.g., planning, design, data collection, analysis, interpretation).

3. Integrating Participant Experience Research into the Cycle of Learning & Doing

Capturing data on the experience of participants in your RESEA program can be a valuable component of a *Cycle of Learning and Doing* (see Exhibit 1). In this cycle, your RESEA program evaluation—and other types of evidence-building activities you might conduct—support program innovations, improvements, and learning. And what you improve or learn about your RESEA program can also be the subject of future evaluation and evidence-building activities.

Exhibit 1. U.S. Department of Labor's Cycle of Learning and Doing



Participant experience research can be integrated into different parts of the *Cycle of Learning and Doing*:

It can help you better **plan for a future RESEA program evaluation** by informing your learning goals,¹ research questions, and evaluation design.

It can form a key part of an **implementation study**² of your RESEA program. An implementation study helps analyze “what happened and why” by examining your program’s design, implementation context, administration, and operational processes. It answers questions about the extent to which your program operates as planned and/or reaches the intended target population(s) with intended services.

Implementation studies can examine program implementation from the perspective of participants by including participant experience research.

It can be sequenced or combined with an **impact or outcome evaluation** of your RESEA program to provide important context for interpreting findings, such as patterns identified in quantitative data analysis. Participant experience research can provide a more detailed, nuanced understanding of how a program or component, including new innovations, is working from the participant perspective.

² *Learning goals* specify the general areas in which your state agency is interested in generating knowledge and insight about your RESEA program’s services, activities, and/or processes.

¹ For additional information on RESEA implementation studies, see Trutko, J., Nightingale, D., Trutko, A., & Copson, E. (2023). *Implementation studies*. RESEA Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office. Abt Associates.

It can help you directly **identify potential refinements or innovations** to your RESEA program, as well as provide feedback on any refinements or innovations identified through evaluation or other evidence-building activities that you have implemented or plan to implement.

4. Methods to Discover Information about Participant Experience

Multiple data collection methods are available to document and learn from participants' experiences. These include methods based on current evaluation questions and design, using quantitative,³ qualitative,⁴ or both⁵ (mixed) methods. The sections below describe these specific data collection methods.

A. Quantitative and Qualitative Methods for Collecting Participant Data

Data directly from participants can be collected in several ways:

- **Surveys:** Survey methods involve collecting information from a sample of participants through their responses to a questionnaire or other instrument.⁶ Survey research can use quantitative strategies (such as closed-ended questions with numerically rated items), qualitative strategies (open-ended questions), or both.
- **One-on-One Interviews:** Interviews are used to gather information directly from individual participants, using a set of predetermined questions to guide the discussion. Interviews can be used to collect rich data about participants' experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about particular situations or ideas.
- **Focus Groups:** Focus groups are used to gather information from individuals participating in a group setting. Focus groups are ideal when insights about a group's collective perceptions or experiences are valuable, rather than a single participant's. In a focus group, study teams can understand differences and similarities in experiences and perceptions by capturing discussion and reactions among participants with different perspectives. Focus groups can be conducted by a moderator using predetermined interview questions for participants to answer or using a script to prompt group discussion. The size, number, and content of focus groups should be discussed in depth among study teams.⁷
- **Direct Observation:** Direct observation is a method of gathering information where the object of study (a RESEA participant) is observed within a particular situation (engaged in one or more discreet aspects of RESEA services, such as a one-on-one meeting with a case manager). Observation must be done without intervening or altering the environment, to ensure the data gathered is valid. Data obtained from direct observation can help study teams understand program operations, staff-client interactions, and other program components in real-time settings.⁸

³ A quantitative study involves collecting numerical data to answer a research question, and typically involves the use of closed-ended (including multiple-choice) questions on a survey or questionnaire.

⁴ A qualitative study involves collecting descriptive or narrative data from interviews, focus groups, observation, document analysis, or other methods. Question formats are open-ended.

⁵ A mixed-methods study uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection in the same study (e.g., a survey and a focus group).

⁶ Check, J., & Schutt, R. K. (2012). *Research methods in education*. Sage.

⁷ Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). Focus group interviewing. In K. Newcomer, H. Hatry, & J. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (pp. 506-534). Jossey-Bass.

⁸ Martinson, K., & O'Brien, C. (2015). Conducting case studies. In K. Newcomer, H. Hatry, & J. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (pp. 177-196). Jossey-Bass.

- **Customer Journey Mapping:** A customer journey map (CJM) helps to visualize how participants flow through RESEA program services by mapping the steps they take in this journey. A CJM takes the participant perspective to gather information on how diverse participants might experience each of these steps on a deeper level (the Appendix shows how to create a CJM and offers a RESEA-specific example).⁹

Box 2. Selecting Participants for Participant Experience Research

For participant surveys, interviews, focus groups, and direct observation, state agencies or their evaluators will have to consider which participants will be included, why it is important to include them in the study, and how they will be recruited to participate. Evaluators might choose to use a statistical sampling method (such as random sampling) or purposive sampling (i.e., based on specific criteria) to select which sites (e.g., Workforce Development Board or American Job Center offices) and participants to include in the study. Using a statistical sampling strategy can help to increase the likelihood that the data collected from the study sample are representative of the larger group about which the study would like to draw conclusions.

B. Mixed-Methods Approaches

Participant experience research that involves both quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., a survey and focus groups) is a **mixed-methods** approach, offering unique opportunities to integrate and synthesize information from multiple sources. Mixed-methods study designs can help generate a more comprehensive understanding of participant experiences, compared to one method alone. As shown in the exhibits in this section, quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in different sequences:¹⁰

- **Explanatory Sequential Design:** As shown in Exhibit 2, one approach is to start with quantitative data collection and use findings to inform the approach to collecting qualitative data. This design can be useful when the study team is interested in explaining trends seen in quantitative data that require further detail or context to understand.

***Example:** Based on an analysis of quantitative RESEA program administrative data, disparities in attendance rates across certain participant demographics are found. These findings can be used to determine which participants to recruit for interviews or focus groups, and to develop questions tailored to learn more about the experiences of participants from specific subpopulations.*

Exhibit 2. Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Design



- **Exploratory Sequential Design:** As shown in Exhibit 3, another approach is to begin with qualitative data collection and use results to inform the development of a quantitative instrument or

⁹ Marquez, J. J., Downey, A., & Clement, R. (2015). Walking a mile in the user's shoes: Customer journey mapping as a method to understanding the user experience. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, 20(3-4), 135-150.

¹⁰ Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

data collection approach. This design can help the study team decide how to design new quantitative tools, such as a survey, or adapt existing ones, to best answer their evaluation questions.¹⁰

Example: The study team uses RESEA participant experience data from semi-structured interviews to determine appropriate questions to incorporate in a survey. Findings from interview data also help them make decisions about whom to invite to complete the survey and how to recruit and provide appropriate incentives to participants who face barriers to participation.

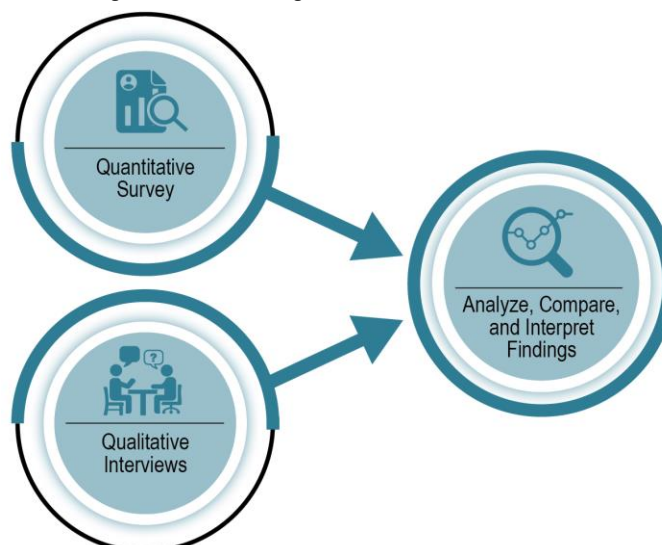
Exhibit 3. Mixed-Methods Exploratory Sequential Design



- **Convergent Parallel Design:** As shown in Exhibit 4, quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis can be conducted simultaneously, followed by comparing and interpreting collective findings. This design is useful when the information is available from different, but complementary data sources. The goal of the convergent parallel design is often corroboration and validation. This approach can be useful for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data sources separately and merging the results following analysis. The results can be compared to interpret the ways that they converge and diverge, leading to a more complete understanding of the program outcomes.¹¹

Example: RESEA participant experience data from a survey is compared with data collected via semi-structured interviews with frontline staff who work with RESEA participants. The study team synthesizes findings across the two sources to examine whether findings about frontline staff experiences confirm or diverge from those of participants.

Exhibit 4. Mixed-Methods Convergent Parallel Design



¹¹ Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). Choosing a mixed methods design. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2, 53-106.

Mixed-methods approaches can also help advance equity throughout the evaluation process and can be a strong complement to community-engaged evaluation discussed earlier in this resource (see Box 1). Perspectives and expertise from communities facing inequities (e.g., from qualitative interviews) have the potential to inform the development of data collection tools and approaches (e.g., survey instruments) to collect more meaningful information about participant experiences among populations who face unique challenges.

5. Action Steps

As discussed, participant experience research can be integrated into different parts of your evidence-building activities to provide you with key insights into your RESEA program. Exhibit 5 presents some action steps to consider for accomplishing this based on where you are in your *RESEA Cycle of Learning and Doing*.

Exhibit 5. Action Steps for Integrating Participant Experience Research into a RESEA Cycle of Learning and Doing

If your state is...		Consider...
	Developing learning goals or broad research questions for a future RESEA evaluation or other evidence-building activities	✓ Consulting American Job Center staff to explore what you might wish to learn from participants to inform the development of your learning goals. ✓ Whether and what type of participant experience research helps address any of your learning goals or research questions. ✓ Including this research in your RESEA evaluation Statement of Work.
	Designing or conducting a RESEA implementation or outcome evaluation	✓ Whether and what type of participant experience research can deepen the knowledge you plan to gain in your evaluation. For example, can a customer journey map help you better understand whether a certain service delivery strategy is being implemented consistently as planned? Can a focus group provide context for why a certain outcome is not being achieved? ✓ If developing a Statement of Work and/or Request for Quote/Proposals for an independent evaluator, including language to ensure the evaluator has the expertise to conduct participant experience research and integrates outcome evaluation into their evaluation plan.
	Designing or conducting a RESEA impact evaluation	✓ Whether and what type of participant experience research can deepen the knowledge you plan to gain in your evaluation. For example, can a participant survey provide valuable context on why a certain service delivery strategy is demonstrating a strong positive impact. ✓ If developing a Statement of Work/Request for Quote for an independent evaluator, including language to ensure the evaluator has the expertise to conduct participant experience research and integrates impact evaluation into their evaluation plan.
	Designing or implementing a new RESEA program innovation or strategy	✓ Whether participant experience research can inform the design of the new strategy. ✓ If the strategy is already implemented, whether participant experience research can provide an indication of how well it is working and could be further refined prior to doing a full-scale evaluation of it.

In sum, capturing data on the experience of participants in your RESEA program can provide valuable evidence to promote innovation, effectiveness, and equity within your program. Giving participants themselves the opportunity to directly share their individual experiences interacting with your RESEA services provides new insights into the processes and patterns of human behavior that could be affecting how well these services are working and guide how they might be improved. These insights might be difficult to gain through other forms of research. Participant experience research can also serve to enhance equity within your RESEA program, both by helping to identify disparities in program services and why they exist and by engaging the community in your evidence-building activities. Participant research is adaptable to various methods and uses. It can be integrated into different parts of a *Cycle of Learning and Doing*, complementing or helping to explain evaluation findings; shaping the learning goals and research questions that will be addressed in future evaluations and other evidence-building activities; and illuminating specific program challenges and their potential solutions.

6. Additional RESEA Resources and Evaluation Technical Assistance

State agencies' evaluations of their RESEA interventions are integral to expanding the evidence base of effective service delivery strategies. This brief is part of a series developed to serve as a reference tool for states planning, launching, and carrying out evaluations of their RESEA programs.

Suggested citation: Kaz, D., & Ward, M. (2023). *Building RESEA Program Evidence by Understanding Participants' Experiences*. RESEA Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office. Abt Associates.

Additional Resources and Information

DOL's RESEA Helpline: RESEA@abtassoc.com

Additional RESEA evaluation technical assistance resources are available here:

https://rc.workforcegps.org/resources/2019/07/30/17/32/RESEA_Evaluation_Evidence_Resources

Study reports, publications, and other materials are available here:

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/RESEA-Evidence-Building-Implementation-Study>

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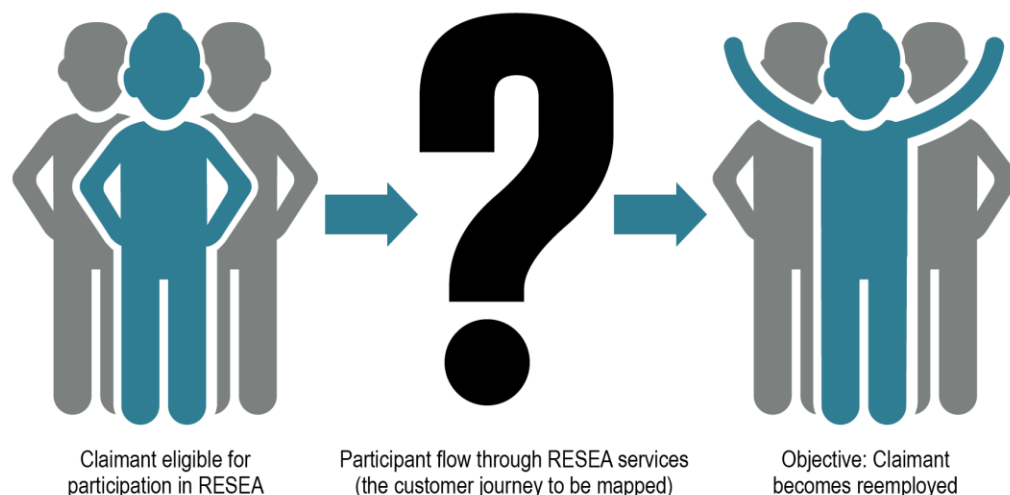
Appendix A – Customer Journey Mapping Tool¹²

What Is a Customer Journey Map?

A **customer journey map (CJM)** is a tool that can help you visualize how your participants flow through your RESEA program services by mapping the steps they take in this journey. It uses the **participant perspective** to help you understand how diverse participants might experience each of these steps on a deeper level. There are many types of CJMs, but a typical tool is offered below (Exhibit 7). As shown, a completed CJM will provide you with a valuable picture of your program’s **touch points**—the steps in your RESEA program’s service flow with which participants interact—when these touch points occur chronologically, how the typical participant (persona) might be experiencing them, and what your staff are doing to support them.

RESEA program participants can face multiple challenges on their journey from eligibility and selection for RESEA participation all the way to reemployment (Exhibit 6). A CJM can help fill in the blanks of a RESEA participant’s journey, providing your state with a fuller picture of where in your program these challenges lie and what the potential causes and solutions might be.

Exhibit 6. Customer Journey Mapping in RESEA



A CJM can help you:

- Identify where specifically your RESEA services might be confusing or not working well for participants, and why.
- Identify where and potentially why, as a result, participants might not be taking intended steps, affecting their ability to achieve positive outcomes.
- Develop information about behaviors and decision-making at different program steps.

CJM is based on **human-centered design**, a process used to design programs and services that centers the needs of, and builds empathy for, the people for whom the services are designed.

¹² This tool has been developed from an amalgam of multiple customer journey mapping approaches and resources, with particular credit given to the approach developed by the [Center for Applied Behavioral Science at MDRC](#).

Customer Journey Mapping for RESEA: Step-by-Step

There are many different types of CJM processes and tools. Set out below is a typical CJM process and tool. A RESEA-specific example is used to illustrate how these work.

Step 1: Create a Customer Journey Mapping Team

Determine who will be involved in the process of creating your CJM. Consider selecting staff with different perspectives on your RESEA program to join your team, including those who have direct experience with different points in the part of the customer journey that you are mapping, including frontline staff, supervisors, and partners. Consider involving at least one RESEA program participant in the exercise: their lived experience makes your process and CJM more insightful and equitable. Once identified, your team will work together to complete the remaining steps.

Step 2: Narrowing Your CJM's Area of Focus Through Information Gathering

Your CJM could include a participant's entire journey through your RESEA program services beginning with selection. Alternatively, you might choose to focus your CJM on a specific area where data or observation indicates one or more key challenges exist. How do you choose where to focus?

- (1) *Information Gathering:* A first step could be gathering existing information to identify program challenges, with a focus on those that might have feasible and impactful solutions. This gathering might involve discussions with frontline staff and participants to learn about specific challenges in the implementation process or about challenges faced by certain participant communities or subgroups. The team might also look at attendance and participation rates in the RESEA program and in referral services. Your examination might reveal a challenge such as ***too few assigned claimants are showing up to their initial individual meeting with their RESEA case manager.*** You might wish to focus your CJM on just this aspect of the customer journey, as in the example.

Step 3: Create a Persona (Optional)

A persona is a fictional “person” who embodies the characteristics of your RESEA program's typical participant. Creating personas aids in the process of mapping by helping your team be mindful of participants' life circumstances and how these might influence their thoughts, feelings, and decisions as they interact with each program service step. Consider creating more than one persona to account for diversity among participants. With your team, spend time giving your persona(s) a name and describing their demographic characteristics, financial situation, work history, career interests, etc. What are their relevant goals and challenges? In the example in Exhibit 7, the persona “Jane” has been created and inserted into the CJM.

Step 4: Create Your Customer Journey Map

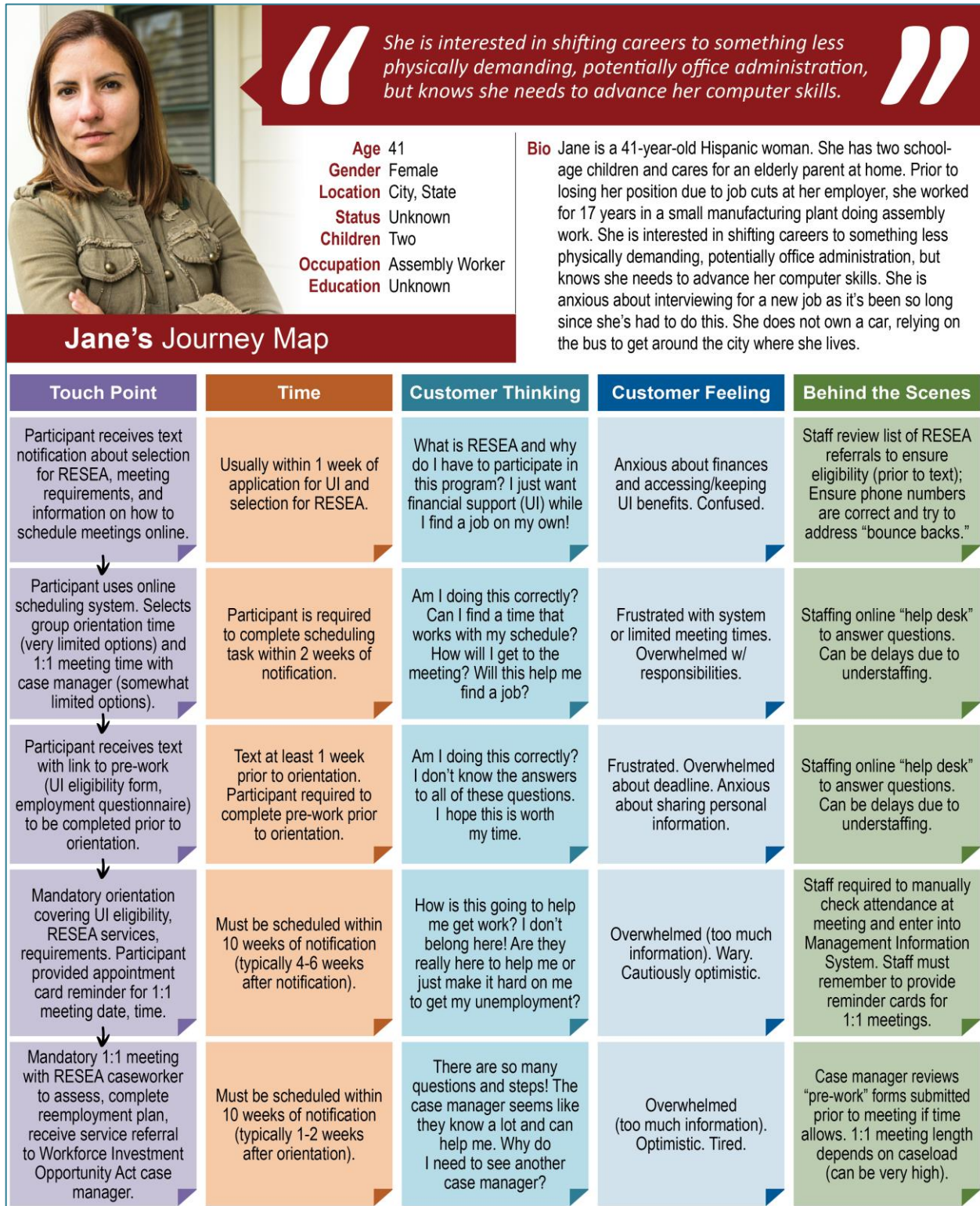
- (1) *Set Up and Logistics:* Customer journey mapping can be done in person or virtually. For an in-person process, you will need a whiteboard or posterboard, sticky notes, and colored markers/pens. For a virtual process, you will need a virtual workspace such as [Miro](#), [Mural](#), WebEx, or Microsoft Teams and video conference technology. If using a persona, add it to your whiteboard/posterboard (real or virtual) to start your map, or otherwise ensure it is readily available to your team to reference during the mapping process.
- (2) *Identify and Arrange Touch Points in Your Customer's Journey:* A typical CJM includes a chronological depiction of each step where a participant interacts with the program—or “touch

point”—in the service flow (within the part of the customer journey you are examining). For example, a touch point might be a text that the RESEA participant receives from a specific program staff, a meeting with a specific program staff, etc. With your team, brainstorm a list of program touch points. Try to define each touch point as narrowly and specifically as possible (What happens now? Next? Next?). Write each touch point on a sticky note.

Place the touch point notes in chronological order, such as along the left edge of your whiteboard or posterboard. Sequence the touch points in the order the participant experiences them, from top to bottom. Next, for each touch point, write down on a sticky note when (“time”) in the service flow that touch point occurs (e.g., a RESEA participant might receive a text about their selection for the program within one week of application for Unemployment Insurance). Place each time sticky note on your whiteboard next to the corresponding touch point sticky note.

- (3) *Identify What Your Participant Is Thinking and Feeling at Each Touch Point.* For each touch point, write down what the participant is thinking and feeling on separate sticky notes. Add a thinking and feeling sticky note next to each time sticky note. The participant’s thoughts and feelings should reflect their experience moving through each touch point, (e.g., “I don’t understand this” or “I’m anxious about these requirements”).
- (4) *Behind the Scenes: Identify the Staff/Procedures Involved at Each Touch Point.* For every touch point, write down on a sticky note the actions or procedures that staff must perform for that touch point to happen. In other words, what are the steps happening in the background (e.g., “Enter participant into MIS system”)? Place each sticky note after the thinking and feeling sticky note for that touch point.
- (5) *Prioritize Touch Points for Further Exploration.* Review the touch points and customer thoughts/feelings on the CJM. With your team, rate each touch point in the process as an area of high, medium, or low customer satisfaction. A low rating, indicating a touch point where the participant is particularly frustrated or confused, might be an area you prioritize for developing and evaluating a solution. Ratings can also help you prioritize areas where you want to gather additional information, via evaluation or other evidence-building activities, to better understand what is happening and why.

Exhibit 7. Sample RESEA Customer Journey Map



What's Next? Making Productive Use of Your CJM

Customer journey mapping is a process that can support your state's RESEA Cycle of Learning and Doing in several ways. Three key uses of a CJM include helping your state to:

- (1) Identify Program Improvements to Implement and Test:** By helping you understand the specific points in your RESEA program service flow where participants are frustrated or confused and where processes are not working effectively or efficiently, customer journey mapping can raise challenges that might have readily identifiable solutions. In the CJM above, for example, you might decide to try to ensure participants can schedule orientations and one-on-one meetings back-to-back to shorten the overall journey and reduce the time and transportation burden on participants. These “low-hanging fruit” solutions can be designed, implemented, and assessed to see how well they work, then further refined and improved.
- (2) Deepen Insights From an Implementation Evaluation:** As with other participant experience research, developing a CJM can be a valuable part of an implementation evaluation of your RESEA program by providing a participant perspective on whether your program, or specific components of your program, are being implemented as intended. In the CJM above, for example, you might learn that though your intent was to provide all participants with timely support to complete their meeting pre-work, in reality this support is spotty and often delayed, likely leading to less productive meetings or, in some cases, participants getting frustrated with the process and not showing up to meetings.
- (3) Focus Your Future Program Evaluation:** Creating a CJM can help your state more sharply focus on the participant experience that you wish to better understand through additional research on or evaluation of your RESEA program. If you wish to conduct additional participant experience research (e.g., surveys, interviews), a CJM can help you to determine which participants you will approach, the particular aspects or steps of your RESEA program you will ask them about, and the specific questions you will ask them. More broadly, a CJM can support your state to develop learning goals or high-level research questions that will guide a future RESEA program evaluation. The model CJM above, for example, might lead to questions such as:
 - Would reducing the number of steps leading up to the required meetings increase meeting attendance, and how could this be best accomplished?
 - Would significantly simplifying pre-work forms lead to increases in meeting attendance and/or rates of form completion?