

BeHeardPhilly: Voices to Data to Change

Nina Hoe 16 November 2016

Summary

BeHeardPhilly, affiliated with Temple University's Institute for Social Research, has enabled the City of Philadelphia to establish a new line of communication with residents, utilizing comprehensive surveys to assess resident feedback about topics such as traffic, utilities, and other public works. Despite early trepidation on the part of many survey respondents, many have embraced the opportunity to share their opinions in a forum they are confident will reach decision-makers, and BeHeardPhilly now boasts a database of over 8,000 residents. With platforms like BeHeardPhilly, Philadelphia is discovering, and applying to great effect, the power of data.

How does the public sector engage with its residents and collect data from individuals? Town hall meetings, in-person interviews and phone surveys are just a few of the ways governments have attempted to hear from their constituents. Historically, this has been a costly undertaking for most municipalities, and many public sector organizations have had to forego data collection.

In Philadelphia, many organizations that have been

fortunate to have a budget for research or evaluation have worked with the Institute for Survey Research (ISR) at Temple University to collect data from residents on a variety of social issues. ISR began to see that many departments within the city and local researchers had overlapping interests in terms of the people from and with whom they want to collect data and connect. Having contact with people in Philadelphia in all neighborhoods, ISR began to see patterns. At first, Philadelphians were standoffish and skeptical about “taking surveys”—apprehensive about sharing their personal information or thoughts. But then, after a few minutes of questions and establishing a rapport, respondents would inevitably let down their guards, start to feel comfortable, and then even empowered. The fact that someone, especially the City of Philadelphia, cared about what they had to say was powerful. It was not uncommon for initially resistant respondents to be volunteering their contact information by the end of the survey so that they could take future surveys. From this, the idea for BeHeardPhilly was born.

BeHeardPhilly is a citywide survey platform, owned and operate by Temple’s ISR, that allows all Philadelphia residents to share their voices and opinions with key decision-makers through survey-taking. It is designed to serve organizations in the public and social sectors by allowing them to engage with the public—hear their opinions, thoughts, suggestions, and perspectives in a time-efficient and cost-effective manner and overcome

many of the barriers to local data collection of the past.

Within the first year, BeHeardPhilly has recruited over 8,000 residents in Philadelphia and conducted surveys on behalf of the Philadelphia Streets Department, the Philadelphia Water Department, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, the Mayor's Office of Performance Management and the Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity, in addition to several local nonprofit organizations. Data collected through BeHeardPhilly has been and will be the foundation for improvements and innovations within city services.

The first city agency to use BeHeardPhilly was the Philadelphia Streets Department, which issued a request for proposals in late 2015 for a firm to conduct a study of Philadelphians' knowledge of traffic laws and behaviors. BeHeardPhilly was selected, and charged with surveying residents city-wide about their modes of transportation (walking, biking and driving), knowledge of traffic laws, and their actions and behaviors around the laws. A select group of survey respondents were also invited to participate in focus groups to better understand their experiences getting around in Philadelphia. One interesting finding that emerged from both the surveys and the focus groups was a lack of [knowledge of laws related to driver-cyclist interactions](#). For example, only 39% of those surveyed were aware that, by law, people riding bicycles are allowed to ride in the middle of the lane

as long as they are traveling in the same direction as traffic. In the focus groups, residents discussed that when they took their drivers' tests, rules about cyclists were not part of the exam, and then suggested ways to the Streets Department that drivers can be updated about new traffic laws.

Shortly after the traffic study, the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) commissioned BeHeardPhilly for two studies. The first survey was a comprehensive customer satisfaction survey, which invited every service recipient (resident of Philadelphia) and bill payer (resident or landlord) to share provide feedback to PWD on the elements of the services they provide. The second surveyed residents who had been affected by one of ten recently completed constructions projects throughout the city. This was a pretty incredible undertaking; not every municipal service company takes the time to engage residents and solicit feedback on their services.

The data from both surveys led to two key findings and implications for PWD. First, the data showed that many customers did not feel that PWD was communicating with them about important issues, and that when communication did occur, it was not in the way that they wanted it. Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents said they preferred to receive information from PWD by mail, as compared to more widely used methods like flyers. PWD made changes to their practices almost immediately by expanding the use of mail notices instead of flyers.

Anecdotally, Hailey Stern, Outreach Specialist and City Planner, reports an increase in meeting attendance for Green Stormwater Infrastructure projects where mail notifications have been sent.

First, the data showed that overall satisfaction with PWD was primarily driven by satisfaction with the bill-paying process and perception of bill accuracy. A key driver analysis revealed that 67% of overall satisfaction was explained by perceptions of the bill-paying experience. All customers, including those who were satisfied and unsatisfied, expressed confusion about and frustration with the fact that their water bills cannot be paid online or directly from a bank account. Many reported that, of all of their utilities and services, their water was the most difficult to pay. While plans to build a more comprehensive online system for bill paying is in development, PWD made the decision to merge the Water Revenue Service call center with the PWD call center in order to streamline for customers and improve customer service. "The survey helped validate that decision," reported Stern.

Then, in early fall, the City's Office of Performance Management hired BeHeardPhilly to conduct the 2016 Philadelphia Resident Survey, the City's first such survey since 2007. The purpose of the survey was to measure public opinion on the delivery of services such as garbage collection and street repairs, or the conditions of facilities such as parks and recreation centers, and to identify priorities among residents. "Philadelphians have never

been shy to voice their opinions about city services, but for too long the City has failed to use that feedback in a systemic way," said Mayor Kenney. "This resident survey is an important step in that direction." Mayor Kenney says the Philadelphia Resident Survey will take place annually, reflecting his commitment to engaging residents from every neighborhood in the City, and learning from them about how to make Philadelphia a better place to live.

And most recently, the Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity (CEO) used BeHeardPhilly to conduct the 2016 Empowerment and Opportunity Survey (EOS). The EOS was designed to help the City better understand some of the challenges faced by low-income residents of Philadelphia in efforts to provide residents with effective programs and services. The goal was to help combat poverty by assessing the needs of individuals, families and communities in Philadelphia. Survey findings are still being analyzed, but the results of this survey will help determine strategic priorities and guide policy and programming recommendations. The City plans to continue the Empowerment and Opportunity Survey each year, so that the outcomes of their efforts can be monitored over time.

In some cases, change does really happen overnight. BeHeardPhilly has been a vehicle for the City to gather data in the form of public opinion, and use that information to better understand the perspectives and needs of Philadelphians. Survey findings have informed

city programming and policy changes, and, at the same time, having the opportunity to participate in surveys and have their voices heard has empowered residents in new ways.

Nina Hoe, Ph.D. is Associate Director at ImpactED at the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to her work at Penn, she was Study Director at the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University where she directed the BeHeardPhilly project. She has extensive experience conducting research and evaluation in the areas of social impact, community engagement, education, public health, transportation, and criminology. Her areas of expertise include study and instrument design, public opinion research, in-person interviews and focus groups, program evaluation, data analytics and statistics, and project management. She has experience working with several large-scale, nationally representative data sets, and is proficient in STATA, Qualtrics, Tableau, AtlasTi, and ArcGIS. Nina hold a B.A. from Colorado College and an M.S.Ed. and Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Nina also serves on the Board of Friends of the Wissahickon and is an avid cyclist in the City. She can be reached at ninahoe@gmail.com.