

INNOVATION IN ACTION

HOW EVICTION DIVERSION IN JP COURT SUPPORTS HARRIS COUNTY RESIDENTS

REFLECTIONS FROM A LOCAL
PILOT PROGRAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eviction is a profoundly challenging experience that upends lives, pushing individuals and families into a cycle of poverty. Thousands of families nationwide, including Houston and Harris County, face this challenge annually due to soaring rents, stagnant incomes, and insufficient affordable housing. Before the pandemic, eviction rates in Houston were among the nation's highest. Eviction filings surged even further in 2022, surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 109-171% [1]. Evictions also disproportionately impact communities of color, pushing them deeper into poverty, disrupting children's education, and perpetuating systemic injustices.

Solutions to complex problems require innovative approaches. In early 2023, as COVID-19-related assistance dwindled, Connective, a Houston-based nonprofit working to transform social services, started exploring what a coordinated infrastructure to serve tenants at risk of eviction could look like.

In Connective's experience, single intake processes that triage client needs and refer them to relevant social services in a coordinated way have improved the efficiency of how social services and resources are delivered - particularly during crises. This coordinated approach highlights and resolves gaps and, ultimately, improves outcomes for the target population.

Building on this experience, Connective convened social service providers, housing advocates, and government and court representatives working in this space over the last year to investigate what a coordinated approach to eviction intervention could look like, specifically triaging tenants at risk of eviction into various resources, like rental assistance, legal aid services, and rehousing resources.

The result was an eviction diversion pilot program, in partnership with The Alliance and select Harris County eviction courts that included multi-sector and wraparound support for tenants at risk of eviction or already in the eviction pipeline.

INSIGHT SUMMARY

- Eviction diversion in court is a necessary investment to reduce housing instability: In-court interventions, such as legal representation and assistance coordination, create positive outcomes for evicted tenants when they are at the most risk of homelessness.
- Judge engagement is critical to the success of eviction diversion interventions: Engaging and getting buy-in from JP judges is essential for the implementation and sustainability of these efforts.
- Empathy can transform the eviction court experience: Centering the tenant's experience allows eviction diversion efforts to be intentional in addressing existing pain points. Wayfinding and the availability of a dedicated navigator or facilitator role in court can significantly reduce tenant stress and improve navigation of the court building and the eviction process.
- Warm referrals work: Proactively connecting and triaging tenants into support services they are likely eligible for is more effective than only providing information about what may be available.
- Financial assistance is key: COVID-19-based rental assistance programs proved to be a gateway to additional services. Direct financial assistance should be a cornerstone of eviction diversion efforts.
- Tenants experiencing multiple or repeated evictions would benefit the most from in-court eviction diversion interventions. From April 2021 to June 2023, 31% of the eviction docket had a previous eviction, 39% from the same property and 69% with multiple evictions from different properties.

This report highlights the potential impact court interventions can have in our community and provides insights and recommendations to inform future eviction diversion efforts in Harris County.

EVICTIONS IN HOUSTON

Like many other cities in the United States, Houston continues to face a growing eviction problem that threatens the stability and well-being of more than half of its residents. Eviction is the civil process by which a landlord may legally remove a tenant from their rental property. This may occur when the tenant stops paying rent or when the terms of the lease are breached. The numbers are staggering:

- In 2019, Houston eviction rates were amongst the highest in the country, with over 64,255 eviction cases filed in Harris County.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 47% of all renter households in Harris County paid more than 30% of their income toward housing-related expenses and Houston ranked third in evictions in the United States. [2]
- In 2022, the number of eviction filings approached 80,000 in Harris County, third third-highest increase in the US, exceeding pre-pandemic historical averages. [1]
- The monthly eviction filings in 2022 were 109%-171% higher than 2018-2019 averages. [1]

Landlords, especially small business or small-holding landlords, struggle to understand and keep up with the assistance available that keeps their tenants housed and pays the bills. During the CDC Eviction Moratorium (active from September 4, 2020, until August 26, 2021), landlords in Harris County expressed uncertainty about their financial future. We found that many of these landlords seek resources for their tenants, and often they are willing to make agreements to keep them housed.

Eviction disproportionately affects communities of color, with 75% of eviction filings in Harris County against Black and Hispanic renters who are more likely to experience systemic racism and discrimination in the housing market, and it disrupts children's education and social networks due to frequent moves, resulting in long-term consequences for their future success.

FIGURE 1: EVICTIONS INCREASED 163% AFTER THE LOCAL AND CDC ORDER MORATORIA EXPIRED

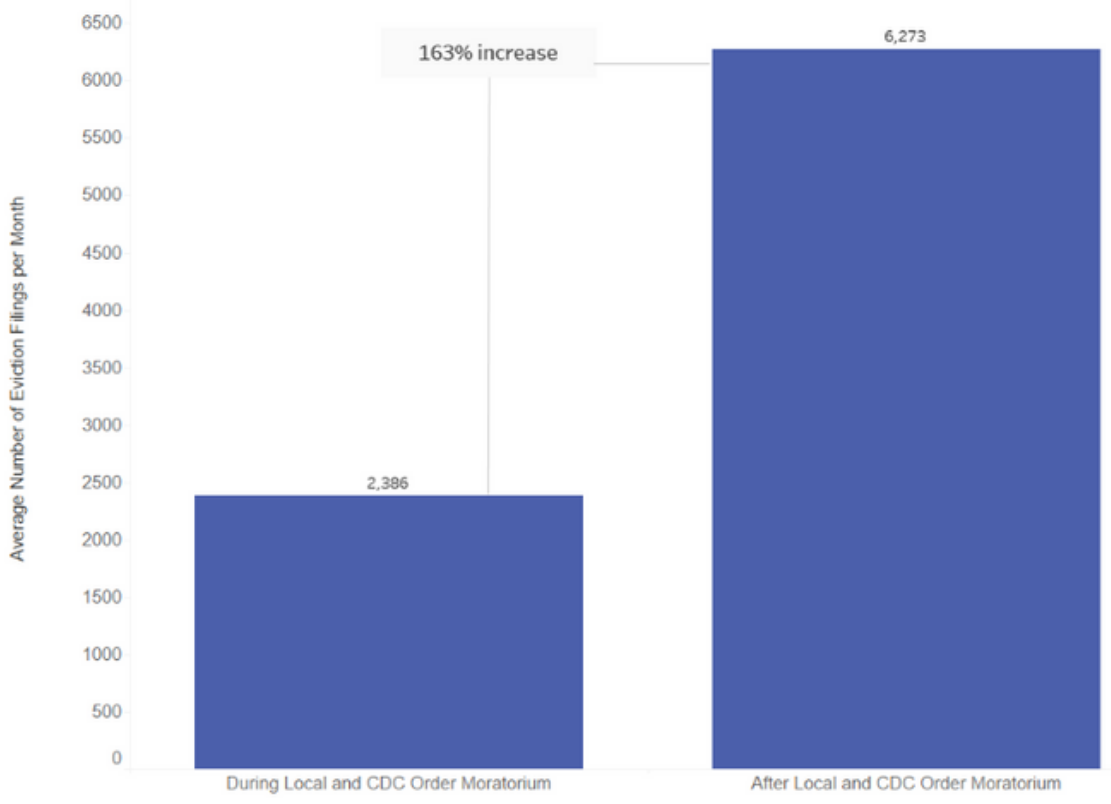
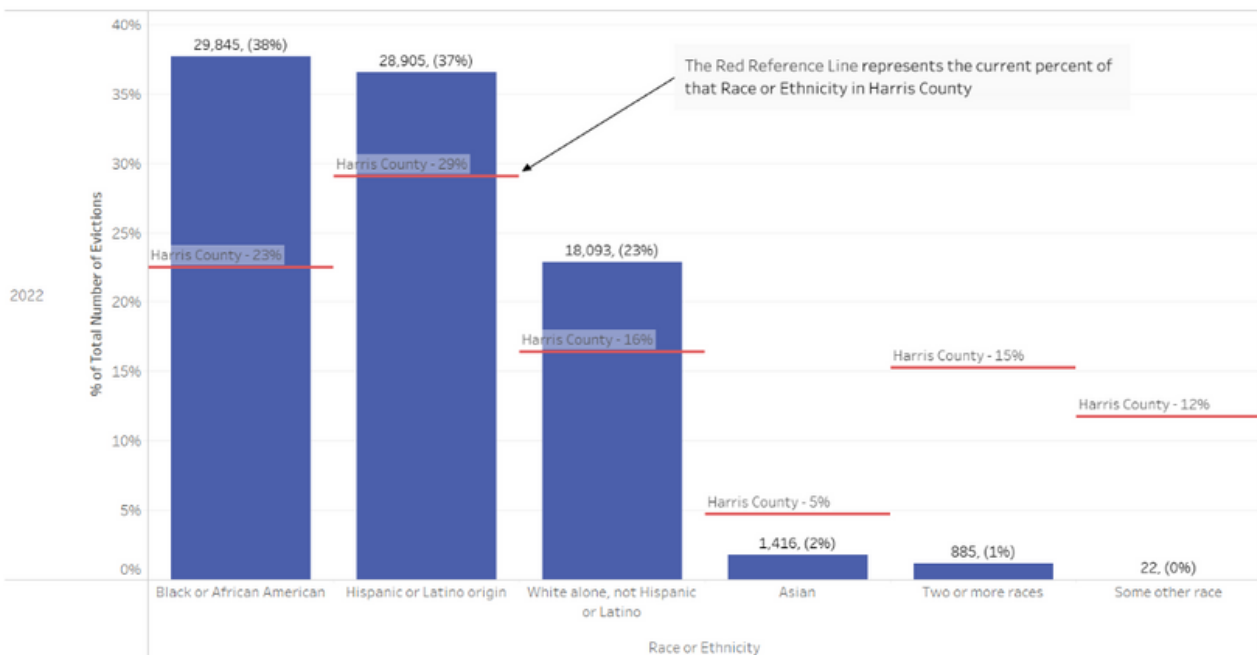


FIGURE 2: EVICTION FILINGS IN 2022 COMPARED TO HARRIS COUNTY RENTER POPULATION



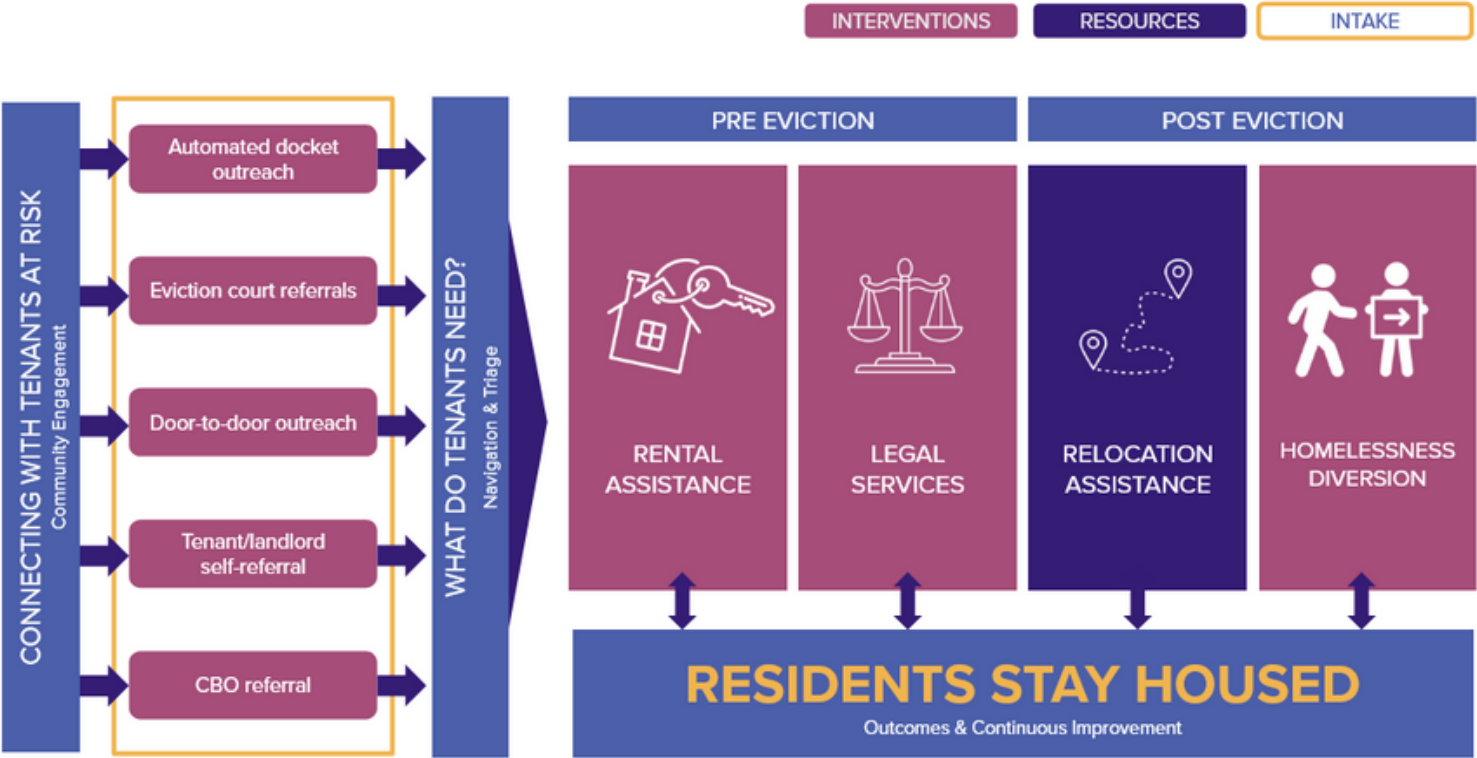
Despite this dire situation, Harris County does not have a coordinated approach to eviction intervention. As COVID-19-related assistance winds down, Connective knows this is the moment to explore what a coordinated infrastructure to serve tenants at risk of eviction could look like. We have seen repeatedly that single intake processes that triage client needs and refer them to relevant social services significantly improve the efficiency of these systems. This coordinated approach highlights and resolves gaps and, ultimately, improves outcomes for the target population.

For example, after Hurricane Harvey, Connective’s common application and coordination system (Harvey Home Connect [3]) more than doubled the percentage of clients who received home repair assistance. Furthermore, Connective saw the success of a coordinated single intake approach to rental assistance with the City of Houston, Harris County, BakerRipley, Catholic Charities, and The Alliance. The U.S. Treasury Department praised this approach as a national success in July 2021 [4].

Building on these experiences, Connective convened social service providers, housing advocates, and government and court representatives working in this space over the last year, to investigate possible approaches to triaging tenants at risk of eviction into various resources, like rental assistance, legal aid services, and rehousing resources.



FIGURE 3: CONNECTIVE’S VISION FOR COORDINATED EVICTION INTERVENTION MEASURES



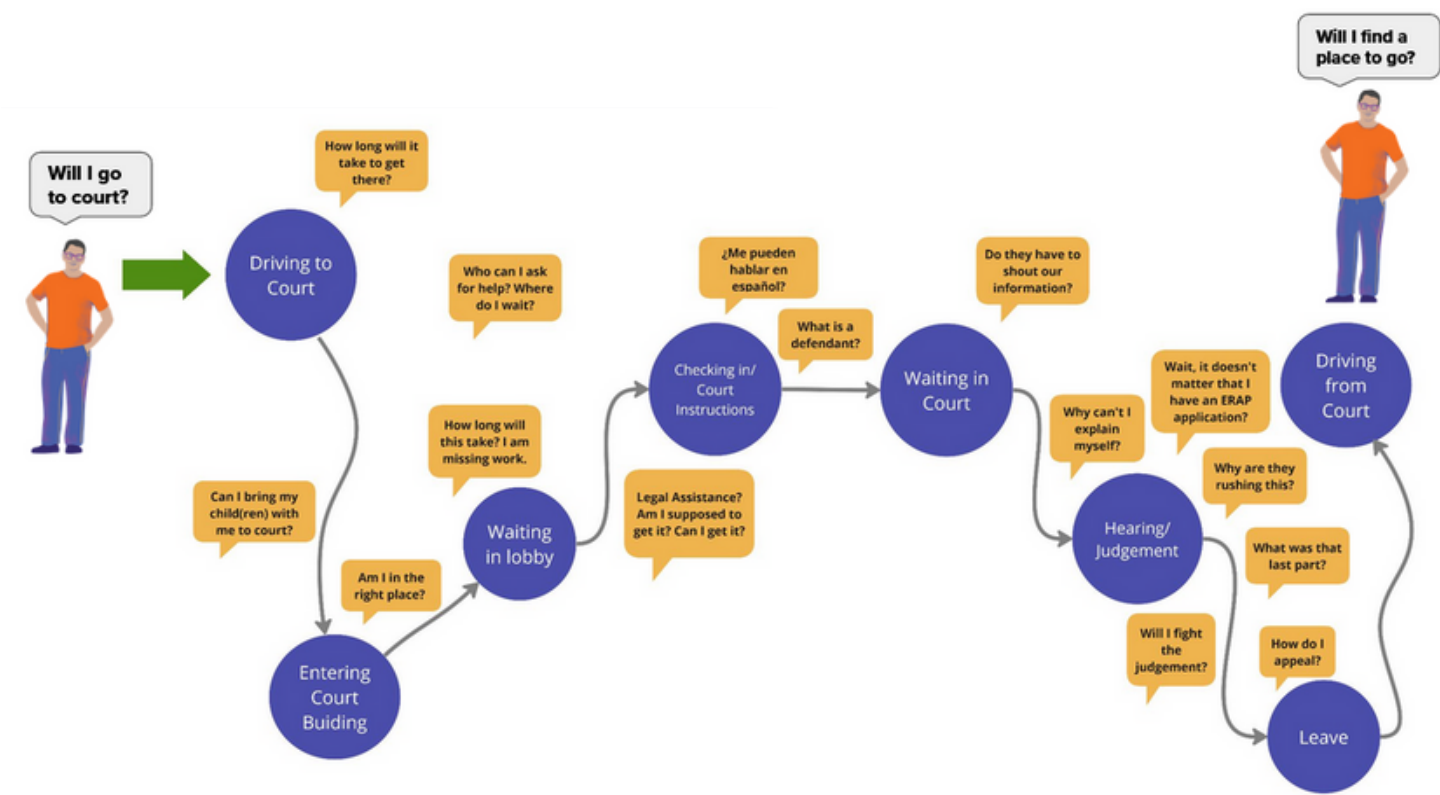
As we worked with stakeholders in these areas and observed how eviction courts operated in Harris County, we learned that access, coordination, and triage to eviction diversion interventions are cumbersome without navigation support and a collective action approach.

Our team decided to investigate what filling this gap could look like in Harris County—starting with Eviction Courts.

UNDERSTANDING EVICTION COURT

Connective began observing eviction court proceedings in September 2022 to better understand the experience of defendants and legal representation providers before, during, and after docket hearings. Connective staff documented the court experience, including traveling to and from the courthouse, accessing the correct court, and finding their specific case hearing location. Connective's team also analyzed who was showing up to court for hearings, how providers were engaging or not engaging defendants and plaintiffs, how the physical court space contributed to the court experience and other perceptions.

Our results showed a court experience that is arduous for tenants and creates many pain points along their court journey:

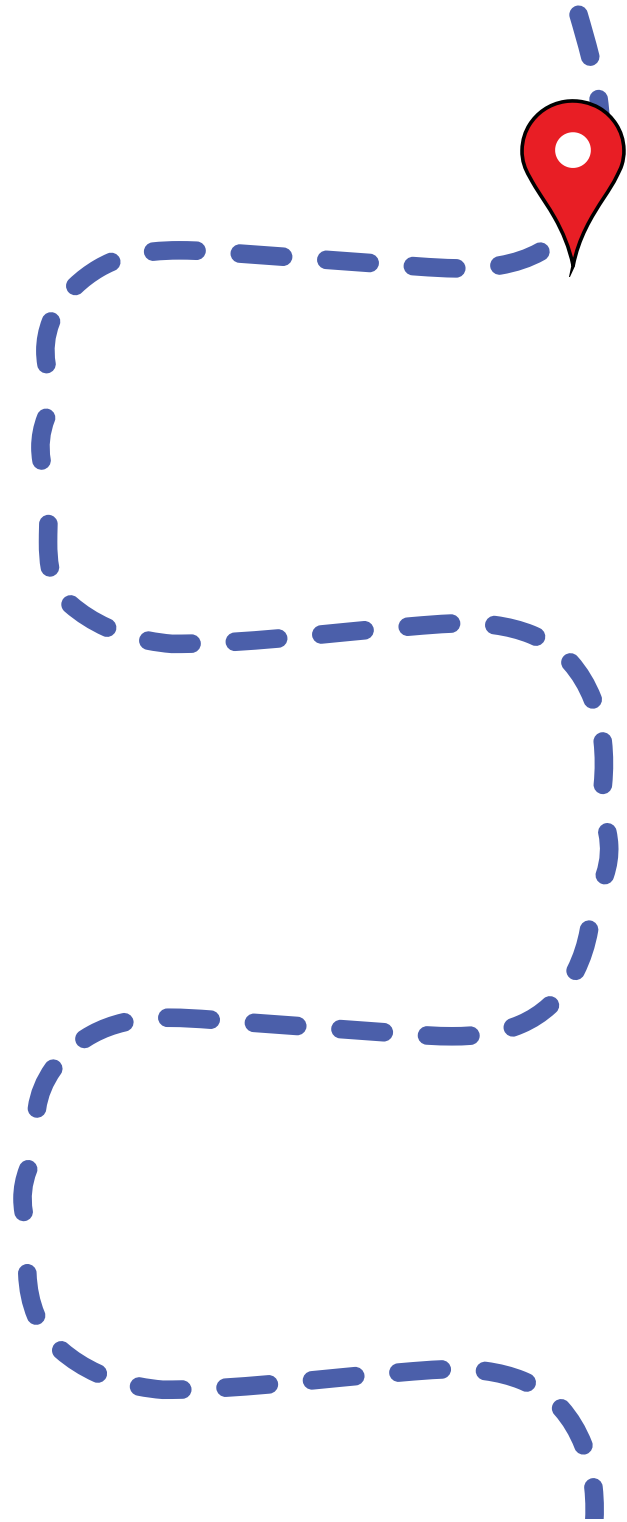


Prepared by the Connective team based on Justice of the Peace court observations from September 2022 - April 2023.

THE NOTICE

The tenant receives a notice to vacate a few days before the legal eviction filing. Once a legal eviction is filed, the tenant must decide if and how they will attend the court date. A tenant may:

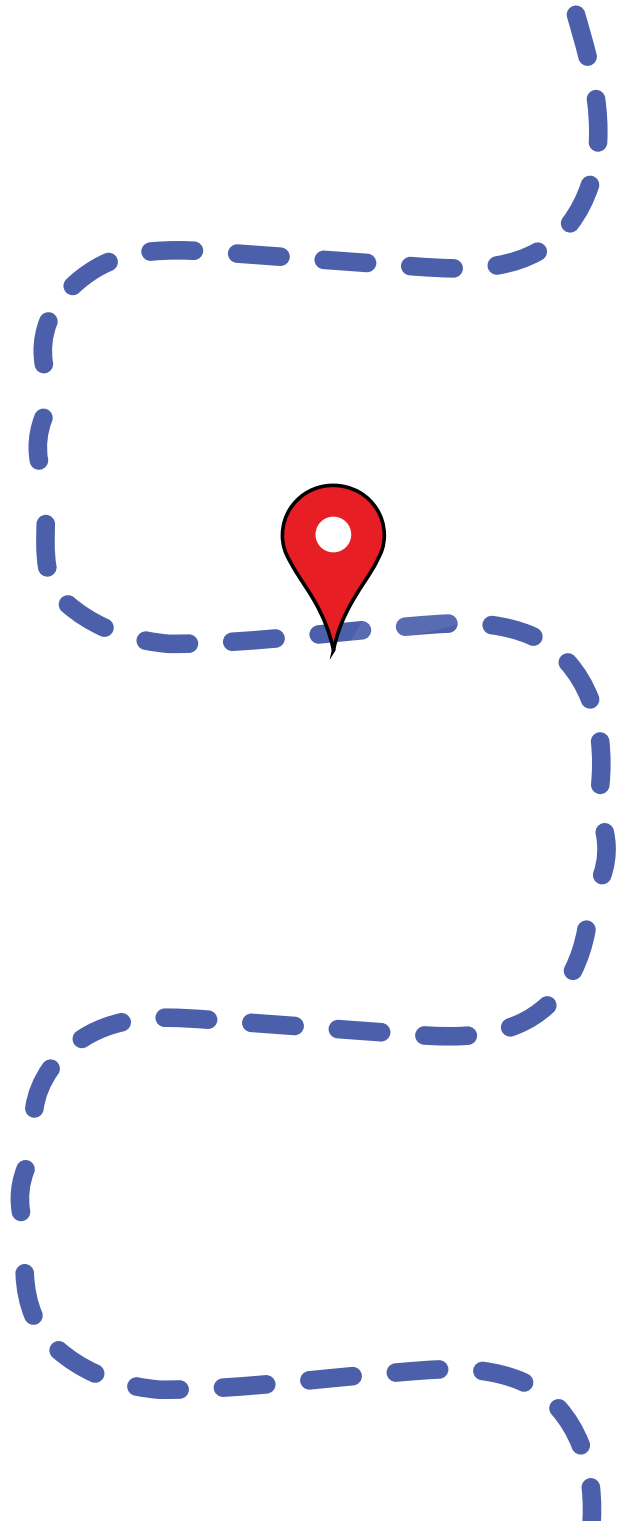
- Have limited knowledge about the eviction process and tenant rights.
- Have a limited understanding of the importance of showing up on the eviction court date.
- Be confused by the eviction process, as there is limited information on what to expect or how long the hearing will take. (this is especially true for tenants facing eviction for the first time.)
- Be unsure of who to ask for guidance on what they should do and how to prepare.
- Be unable to take time off of work or plan childcare.



THE COURT

The tenant arrives at the court building and navigates their way to the courtroom holding the eviction docket. The clerk's staff confirms attendance orally and provides instructions in English. Tenants wait for their case to be heard; depending on how long the docket is this wait could take hours. A tenant may experience:

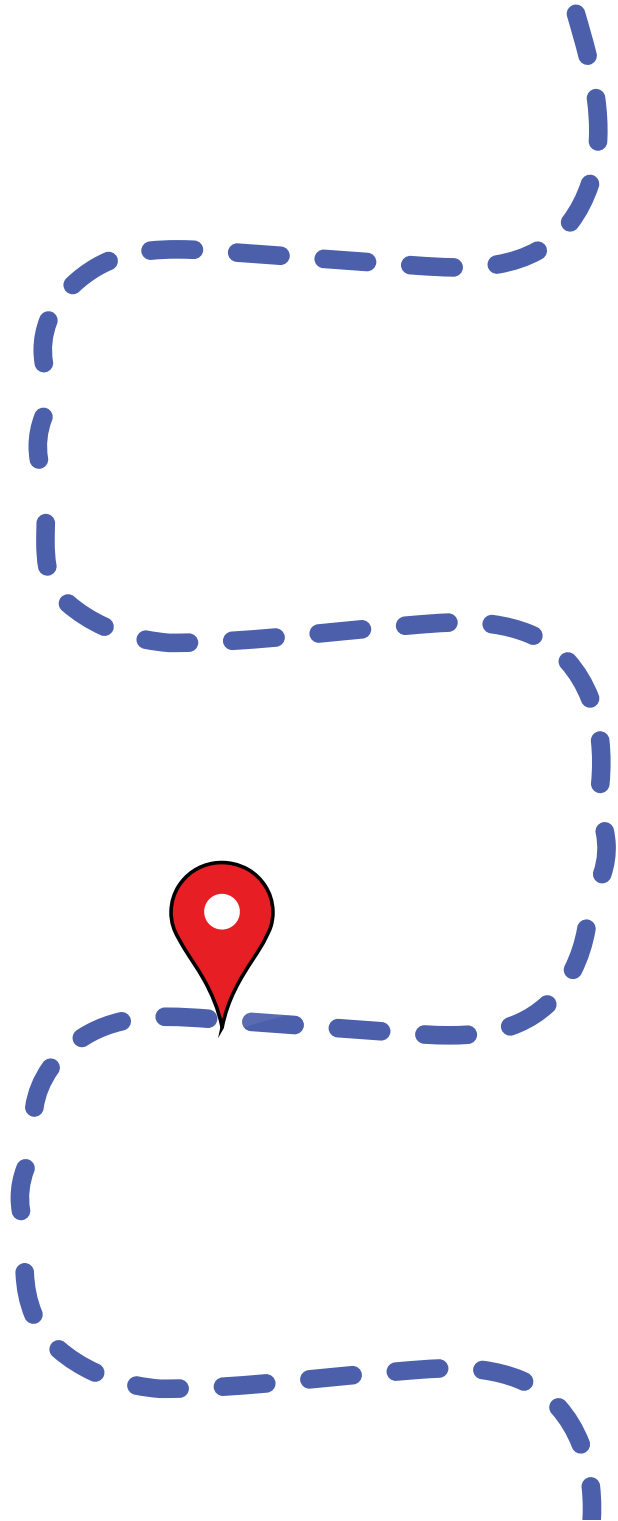
- Difficulty finding parking, and depending on the court, paying for parking.
- A lack of or limited signage/wayfinding; making it difficult to know which courtroom the tenant is supposed to be in. If there is signage it may only be in English. Tenants may feel lost without guidance on where to go and what to do.
- Limited seating in some courts; this can be an additional pain point for older adults, mothers with children, or those who can't stand for long periods of time.
- Language barriers - both in the language spoken and the use of technical jargon.
- Unawareness about their right to request a translator or accessible disability modification services.



THE HEARING

The tenant is called up for their hearing by name in English. If they do not respond quickly enough, it is assumed that they are not present for court, and they will automatically lose the case. If the tenant attends virtually, they remain muted until their case is called. If the docket is large, the case may be heard for as few as 90 seconds [5]. A tenant may:

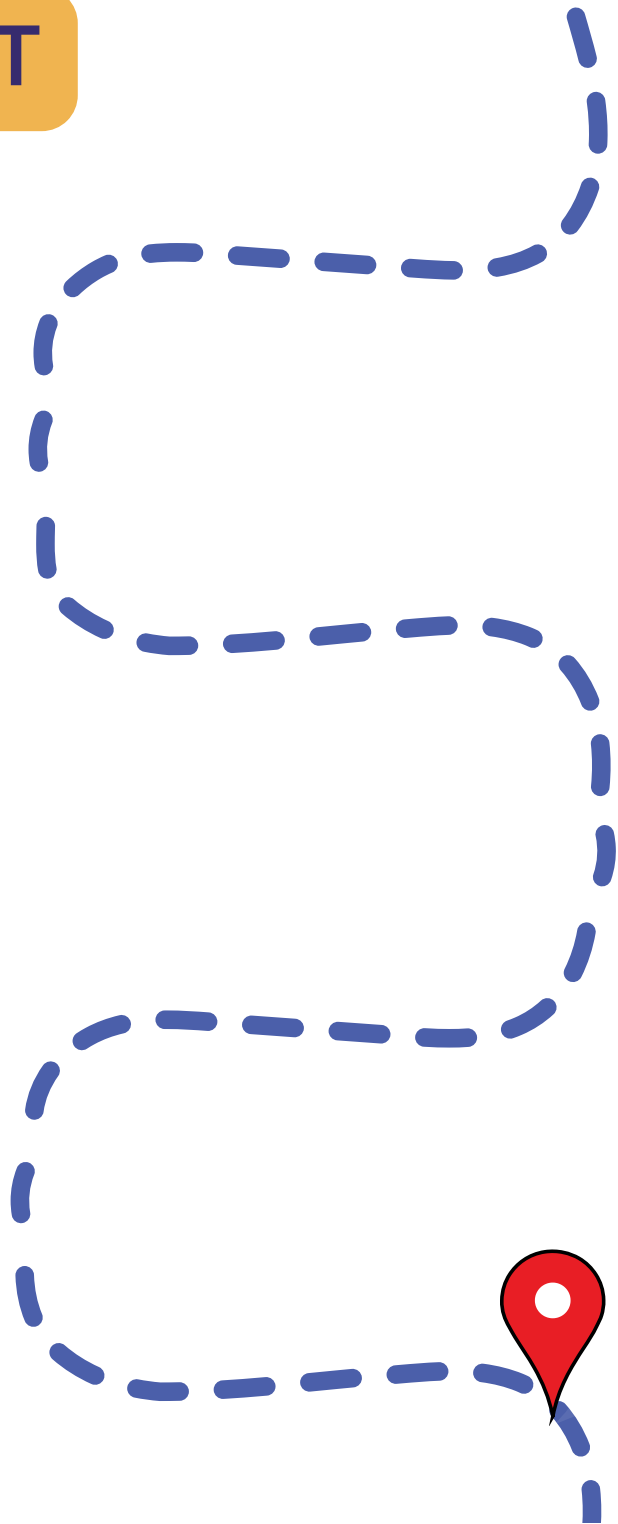
- Think that a pending rental assistance application protects them from eviction, only to realize it depends on the judge
- Be overwhelmed by which documentation is needed during the hearing
- May not have space to advocate during the hearing. Some judges take a Yes/No answer approach to the hearing
- Have limited time to explain their case and unique circumstances, or be provided information about appeals only after a judgment is given.



THE JUDGEMENT

The tenant leaves the courtroom with their eviction judgment. Most tenants leave the court right after their hearing. A tenant may:

- Face a lack of resources available to them following a judgment. For example: If they have to vacate their property, they may not know where to find temporary housing after vacating
- Face a lack of information regarding their rights. For example: They may be aware of an appeal option but don't know how to complete it
- Be unable to appeal a judgment because they cannot pay the court costs
- Be confused by technical jargon such as “pauper affidavit” which allows them to prove their inability to pay in order to appeal



Although there is variance and overlap in tenants' experiences, they largely followed the same process. Unnecessary struggles plagued their court journey, rooted in a court system that is not people-centered.

Based on these observations, Connective identified four tenant types (or personas) at court. Personas are aggregate profiles that represent typical people throughout the court process.



THE NON-ENGLISH SPEAKER

This tenant faces language barriers, from the moment they entered the court building until they leave the hearing. The Court's signage, clerk's check-in and instructions are presented only in English. More likely than not, they can't understand the process, find assistance, or avoid/delay their eviction.

THE ONE LOOKING FOR GUIDANCE

This tenant is following instructions. Their citation said they had to show up to court and they did. Many of these tenants are facing eviction for the first time. They may already have self-evicted or reconciled their debts. They may look to the judge for guidance on how to stay housed/what to do if evicted, only to realize that the judge cannot support them in that way.



THE ONE THAT FEELS PREPARED

This tenant has been looking for options and information throughout the court process. They have a rental assistance application, show up to court with their documents, and try to negotiate in court. Some advocate removing eviction from their record. They may have the ability to cure their debt and may have a previous eviction experience. Some may look for help in court after their judgment.

THE NO-SHOW

The majority of the Docket defendants are no-shows. We did not speak to or observe the no-shows. Still, we hypothesize that these tenants are not showing up to court for several reasons: They are unable to miss work, they don't have access to reliable transportation or child-care, they may live in a mixed-status household and feel intimidated by the court, or they may self-evict before the court hearing.



IN-COURT NAVIGATION AS AN EVICTION DIVERSION STRATEGY

During COVID-19, the federal government allocated over \$380M towards rental assistance under two administrations, overseeing hundreds of nationwide programs. Resource navigators became a promising practice used by those managing the funds that had also been seen helpful in other eviction diversion efforts. Navigators in eviction court can play various roles in eviction prevention and diversion, including:



Supporting outreach efforts to identify tenants in need, providing them with relevant information and warm referrals, or supporting their applications for assistance.



Working with tenants and landlords to encourage participation in assistance programs, such as emergency rental assistance or mediation services.



Staffing tenant resource hotlines and providing navigation services over the phone.



Providing court-based assistance to tenants before and after court hearings.

The White House has touted navigation as a promising practice used by those managing the funds

"When people asked me how I would have reformed the legislation differently (referring to Emergency Rental Assistance Programs during COVID), I would have had a set aside for the navigator role, and seeing people implementing it is terrific."

- Gene Sperling, Senior Advisor to President Biden and Coordinator of the American Rescue Plan Implementation

Several national programs have implemented eviction diversion interventions in court:



Ramsey County Housing Court Clinic in Minnesota provides tenants with valuable resources before and during their court hearings, such as social services, rental assistance, and legal aid. Vice President of the Family Housing Fund Colleen Ebinger noted, “It’s critical that resources are available at housing court. It’s the last thing that stands between someone being able to remain in their housing and losing their housing.” [6] Since the program launched in 2018, Ramsey County reported an 18% drop in eviction judgments, double the number of eviction cases expunged from tenants’ records, an increase in settlements between tenants and landlords, and a reduction in time spent by the court in pretrial hearings by one hour per week of court time [7]. The program is now expanding to neighboring Anoka and Dakota Counties following the success in Ramsey.



Franklin County, Ohio’s Self-Help Program uses navigators in Eviction Court as guides for tenants and landlords through a forum of responsive support services, including legal aid, mediation services, and social workers. These navigators train with social workers to learn de-escalation tactics to provide equal access to justice and information before the court hearing. The navigator gains more information about the specific case and refers the client to the correct resource. The social worker assesses the next steps for a tenant based on their specific needs and enrolls them in various resources. Social workers also work with landlords to divert tenants at high risk of eviction into various resources.

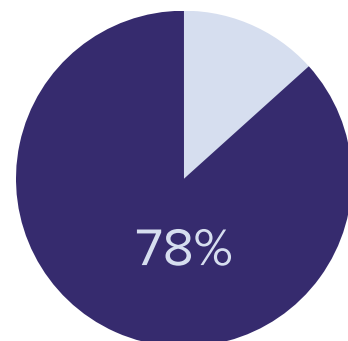
PILOTING IN-COURT NAVIGATION IN HARRIS COUNTY

Drawing inspiration from these successful programs and our research on local eviction courts, Connective partnered with [The Alliance](#) and select JP courts to pilot an In-court Eviction Navigation Program in Harris County. The goal of this pilot was to inform long-term in-court eviction diversion efforts and support coordination of and referrals to wrap-around services, such as financial assistance, legal aid, and rehousing assistance (See the Appendix for pilot overview and methodology).



Two in-court eviction navigators were placed in six different Harris County JP Courts [8] to help people navigate the eviction trial process, gain access to local resources that could address their unique needs, and understand their next steps. Additionally, navigators worked with landlords to enroll them in the Rental Assistance program, share information about resources available to tenants, and provide options for out-of-court settlements or eviction case resets. Over the three months that data was documented during the pilot, the two navigators made 106 court visits and assisted over 248 people in gaining access to resources on their eviction date.

78% PERCENT OF THESE TENANTS WERE CONTACTED ONE MONTH FOLLOWING THEIR COURT EXPERIENCE TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE OUTCOMES OF THEIR EXPERIENCE COMPARED TO THEIR PEERS WHO DID NOT RECEIVE NAVIGATION SERVICES [9].



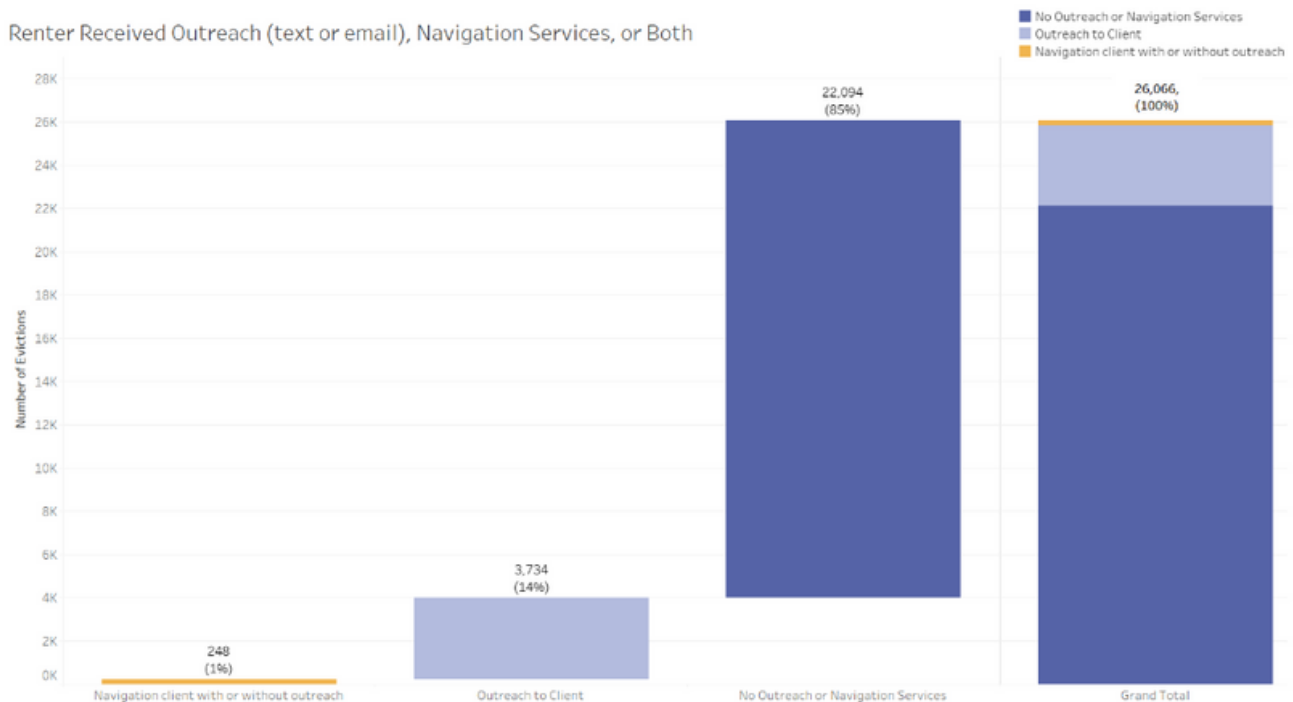
HOW EVICTION NAVIGATORS CHANGED COURT

Connective and the eviction diversion navigators, staffed by The Alliance, were tasked with identifying and addressing the common pain points in the eviction court experience from beginning to end.

BEFORE COURT:

Fifteen percent of tenants in the eviction docket were contacted by Connective [10] through text and email to share vital information about evictions, such as the importance of showing up to court, being early to access additional resources in the court, information on how to appeal, and more.

FIGURE 4: 15% OF ALL RENTERS ON THE EVICTION DOCKET RECEIVED OUTREACH AND/OR NAVIGATION SERVICES



DURING COURT:

Eviction navigators saw greater success triaging tenants in courts that provided them visibility and a permanent physical space.

In participating courts, navigators set up a help desk in the court lobby 30 minutes to an hour before the eviction docket began. They wore purple shirts that read “Ask me for Help” in bold text and set up a large banner describing what court navigators could do to assist landlords and tenants. This visibility and clarity were important because tenants and landlords often assumed that navigators were court employees and didn’t necessarily understand the breadth and depth of services they offered. While tenants and landlords waited in the lobby for hearings to begin, navigators proactively approached them, introduced themselves, and provided a brief overview of the services they could provide.



Navigators Jackie Lopez (left) working with a tenant at Precinct 7, Place 2, and Daniel Perez Garcia (right) attending Precinct 2, Place 2's eviction docket.

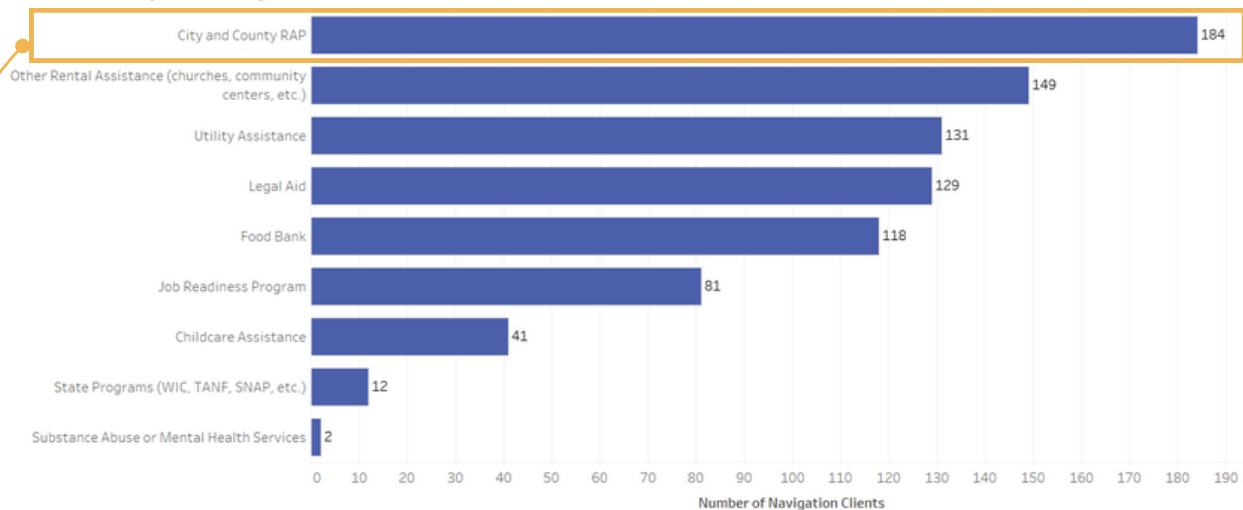
Eviction diversion navigators also:

 <p>Provided practical information about the eviction process.</p>	 <p>Helped tenants gain access to available social services such as housing services, rental assistance, job training, and legal aid.</p>	 <p>Discussed with tenants the next steps after a judgment has been issued, including available legal aid for appeals & referrals to rehousing assistance.</p>	 <p>Checked on the status of current rental assistance applications. When the rental assistance program re-opened, they served as intake nodes for the program at court.</p>
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Navigators received basic training in case management models and basic mediation skills to facilitate conversations between tenants and landlords (thanks to the collaboration with the UH Law Center’s Mediation Clinic). Although they had a general workflow designed to support clients, they often customized this process based on the specific and unique needs of the tenant. Navigators would often begin their engagement with a tenant by asking them what they wanted. Did they want to remain housed? Did they want to leave the property and find new housing? Were they looking for legal representation? These questions would inform which resources and information the navigator would share.

FIGURE 5: NAVIGATORS REFERRED CLIENTS TO A WIDE VARIETY OF SERVICES

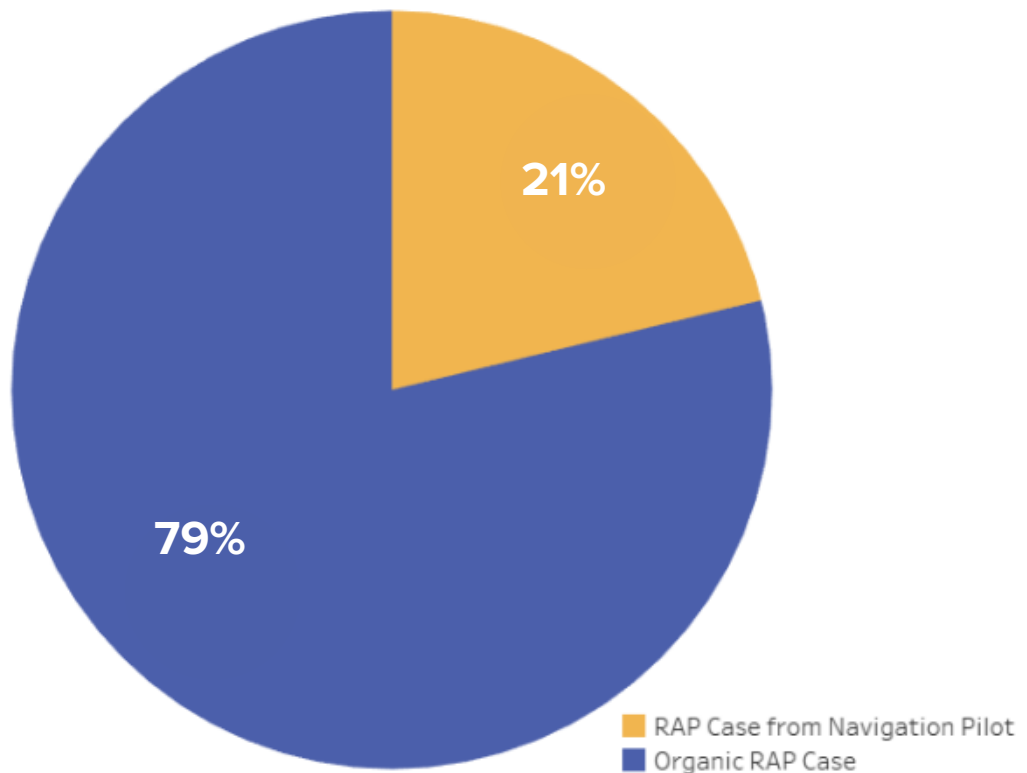
Referrals made by the Navigator to the Client



Rental assistance was the most effective referral resource for navigators. They referred 75% of cases to the Houston Harris County Eviction Intervention Program, which provides assistance to tenants facing eviction.

As shown below, 21% of total rental assistance cases for the Houston-Harris County program came from navigators during the months of their operation. In a final focus group, navigators listed rental assistance as the top incentive in their toolkit to successfully engage tenants and landlords in the navigation program, which referred them to other community resources: “RAP and landlord buy-in is most critical for this program to work.”

FIGURE 6: 21% OF RENTAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM APPLICATIONS ORIGINATED FROM THE NAVIGATION PILOT



Navigators were sometimes invited into the courtroom to testify whether a landlord and tenant client had a rental assistance application. Navigators often spent more time with tenants providing basic eviction proceedings information, diverting them to legal resources, and guiding them through the eviction court, where rulings in 2023 have favored landlords 99 to 1.

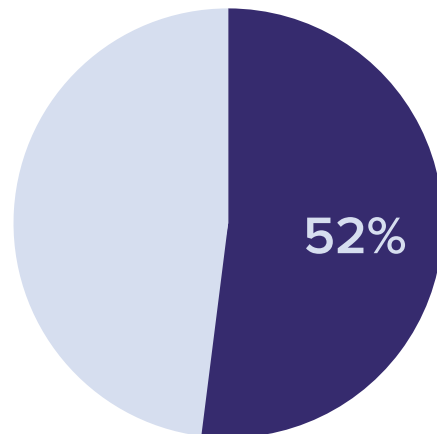
“It wasn’t planned, we became sort of in-court advocates for tenants. It was helpful to level out the power dynamics that exist.”

- *Eviction navigator*

Navigators were also valuable in getting tenants into legal aid resources when present in court. If they were present, the navigator would escort the tenant to the legal aid’s table; if not, the navigator would provide information on how to contact local legal aid organizations. Eviction Diversion Navigators would also share appeal information flyers developed by Lone Star Legal Aid's team if a legal aid organization was not available in the court on that day [11].

Other referrals included job readiness programs, continuing education programs, utility assistance, childcare assistance programs, state programs such as WIC, SNAP, TANF, urgent need programs (food banks, shelters, homelessness diversion programs), domestic violence or sexual assault support services, and substance abuse or mental health services [16]. Navigators took the time to discuss these various options and resources at each tenant’s pace.

THE PROGRAM REFERRED 52% OF NAVIGATION CLIENTS TO LEGAL AID, WHO PROVIDED ADVICE AND COUNSEL.



Navigators took time to discuss various options and resources at each tenant's pace. Tenants often had elevated emotional states, and navigators made space to listen to and understand their specific situation.

Empathy from navigators was important in courts where tenants had limited opportunities to share their side of the story during court hearings [12].



Navigators also worked with landlords, finding that communication with the landlord and tenant was the most effective strategy to get the parties to agree to a resolution. As part of the navigation process, navigators would speak with landlords to share available resources they could share with their tenants. They also enrolled landlords in the Houston-Harris Rental Assistance Program, a necessary step in ensuring tenants are approved for funding [13].



“A (landlord) didn't want to work with the Rental Assistance Program, but after I talked to her, she was willing to wait on the [rental assistance] application [to be processed].”

- Jackie Lopez, eviction navigator



The waiting period for resources can add significant stress to all the parties involved in the eviction process, as landlords and tenants have no guarantee they will be approved for assistance while rent arrears continue to add up. Navigators reassured landlords and provided information on case processing times for resources. They also elevated specific cases if the resource was not processing them promptly. This warm touch was critical to gain the landlords' trust as the Rental Assistance program processed cases.

AFTER COURT:

Navigators would ask their clients to come back after the eviction case judgment to discuss post-eviction referrals and options. It is important to note that navigators naturally became a point of reference for tenants after court as they sought to regain their housing stability. Navigators also became a resource for landlords who were looking for resources that could assist their tenants. Navigators would keep in touch with tenants and landlords and follow up with them on the next steps for referral programs.



Relationship and trust building with the tenant and landlord was important to carry out navigation services effectively. Because tenants saw navigators as a trusted resource, a few clients returned after their court date for further support.

A month after their initial engagement with navigators, 193 (78%) tenants received a follow-up survey to understand their situation following the pilot and their experiences with it. 20 (10%) tenants responded to this outreach. Upon post-pilot reflection, we recognize that following up a week after the eviction judgment would have yielded better results in reconnecting with these tenants. Navigators were scheduled for court presence based on eviction docket size and whether or not other supplemental resources, such as legal aid, were present in the court that day. However, it became clear that the court's needs far outweighed the pilot's resources.



248

tenants served in the pilot

6,839

monthly eviction filings

There were only two navigators available for the six JP Courts participating in this program.

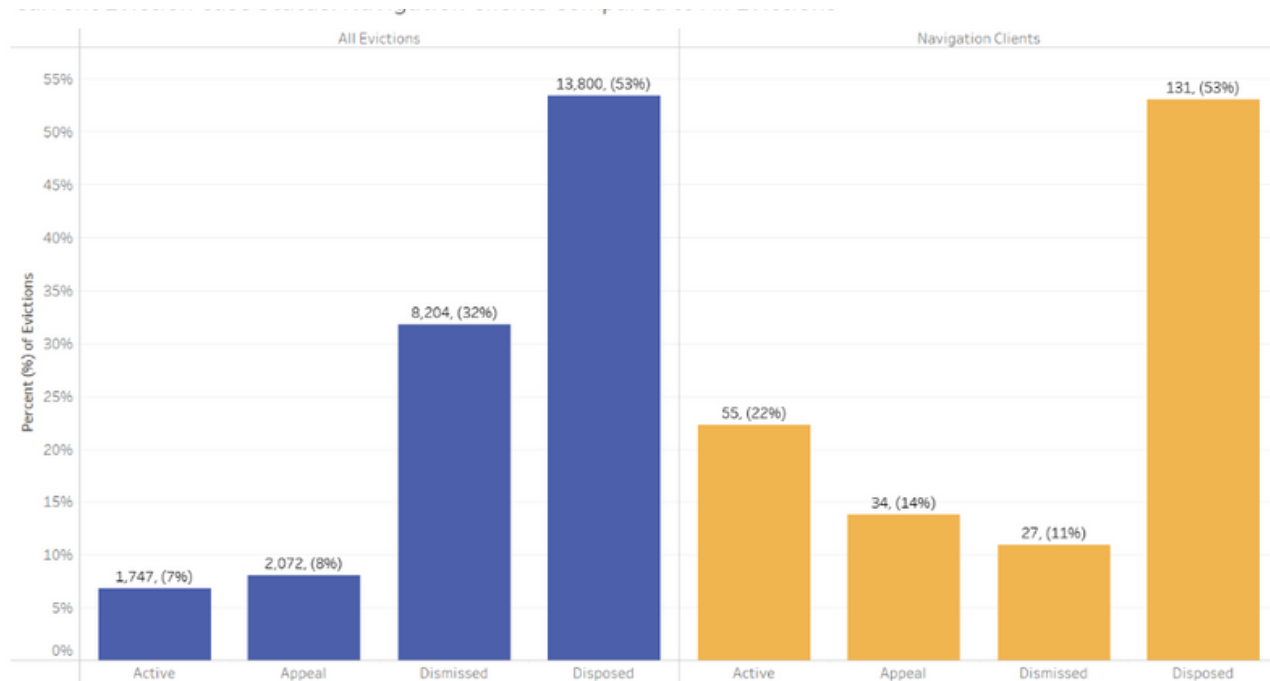
It is recommended that each court have a minimum of one navigator per docket in order to successfully triage clients into resources.

PILOT OUTCOMES

Navigators began documenting their interactions in court on February 6, 2023 and completed their documentation efforts on April 28, 2023. The outcomes of the navigation pilot follow these 248 clients to better understand the impact of this pilot program on their eviction court experience.

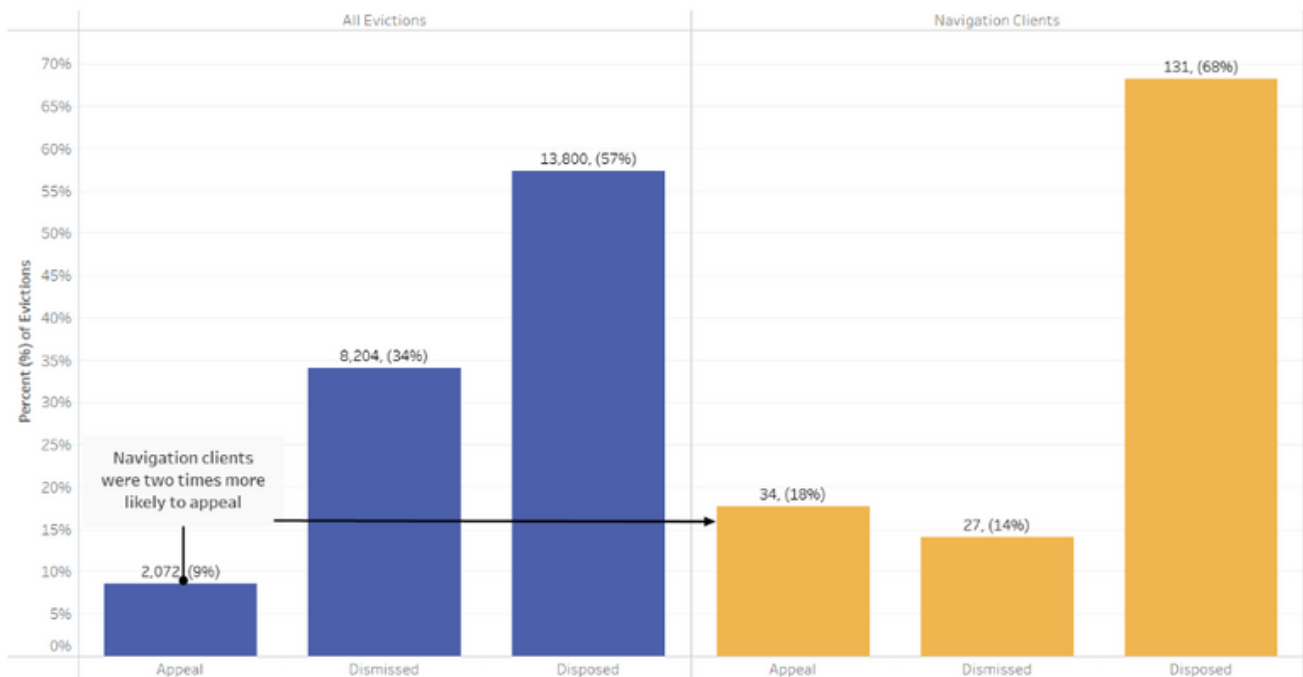
As an eviction case can take up to six months to close, a complete set of outcome data for navigation clients was not known at the time of evaluation. The figure below shows that 22% of navigation client eviction cases were still pending, whereas only 7% of total cases from this same time period were active. One hypothesis is that some of the navigator-assisted cases may have received a reset or abatement, leading to extended ‘active’ time. However, given the limited publicly available court docket data, it is not possible to make this statement with certainty.

FIGURE 7: AS OF MAY 2023, 21% OF NAVIGATION CASES ARE STILL ACTIVE



Furthermore, when comparing only closed eviction cases, the figure below shows that 17% of navigation cases were appealed compared to 9% of all eviction cases. Navigation clients were nearly two times more likely to appeal their case, possibly because of their access to legal representation in court, education about court processes and proceedings, and the support of navigators.

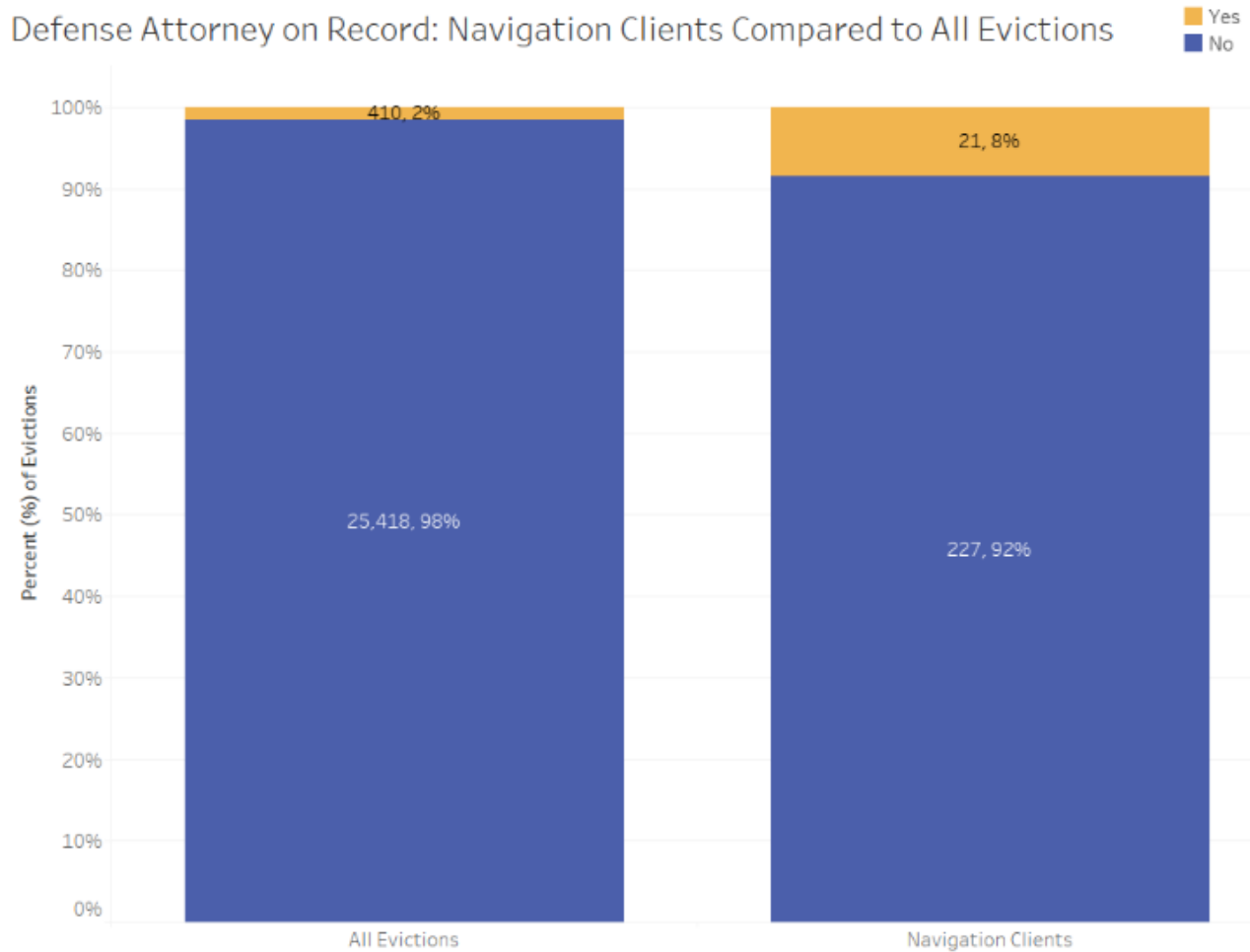
FIGURE 8: NAVIGATION CLIENTS WERE TWICE AS LIKELY TO APPEAL THEIR CASE COMPARED TO OTHER TENANTS ON THE EVICTION DOCKET



Another area where navigation clients significantly differed from all other evictions was defense attorney representation. In 2022, only 2% of all eviction cases had a defense attorney on record, and as the figure below shows, only 2% of all evictions during the pilot had a defense attorney, in line with the average from the year prior.

However, 8% of navigation clients had a defense attorney on file, likely due to the availability of legal aid organizations in the participating courts and interactions with the navigators.

FIGURE 9: EIGHT PERCENT OF NAVIGATION CLIENTS HAD A DEFENSE ATTORNEY ON THE RECORD COMPARED TO 2% OF ALL EVICTIONS

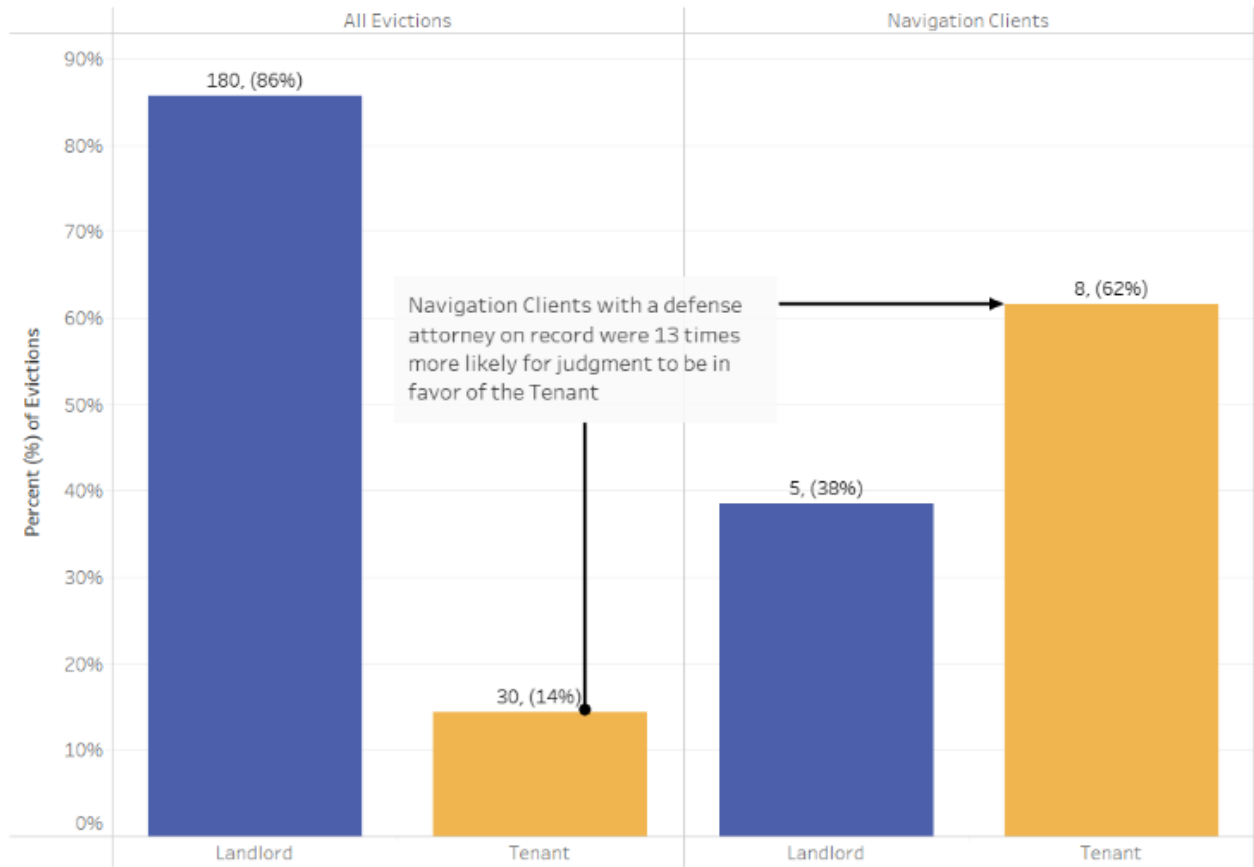


Having a defense attorney makes an immense difference in the outcome of an eviction case. A study by the Dallas Eviction Advocacy Center found when a tenant has legal representation they are much more likely to win their case [14]. This was also true for the navigation pilot, as navigation clients with a defense attorney on the record were 13 times more likely to have their eviction case ruled in their favor.



Navigation clients with a defense attorney on the record were 13 times more likely to have their eviction case ruled in their favor.

FIGURE 10: NAVIGATION CLIENTS WHO HAD A DEFENSE ATTORNEY WERE 13 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO HAVE A FAVORABLE JUDGEMENT

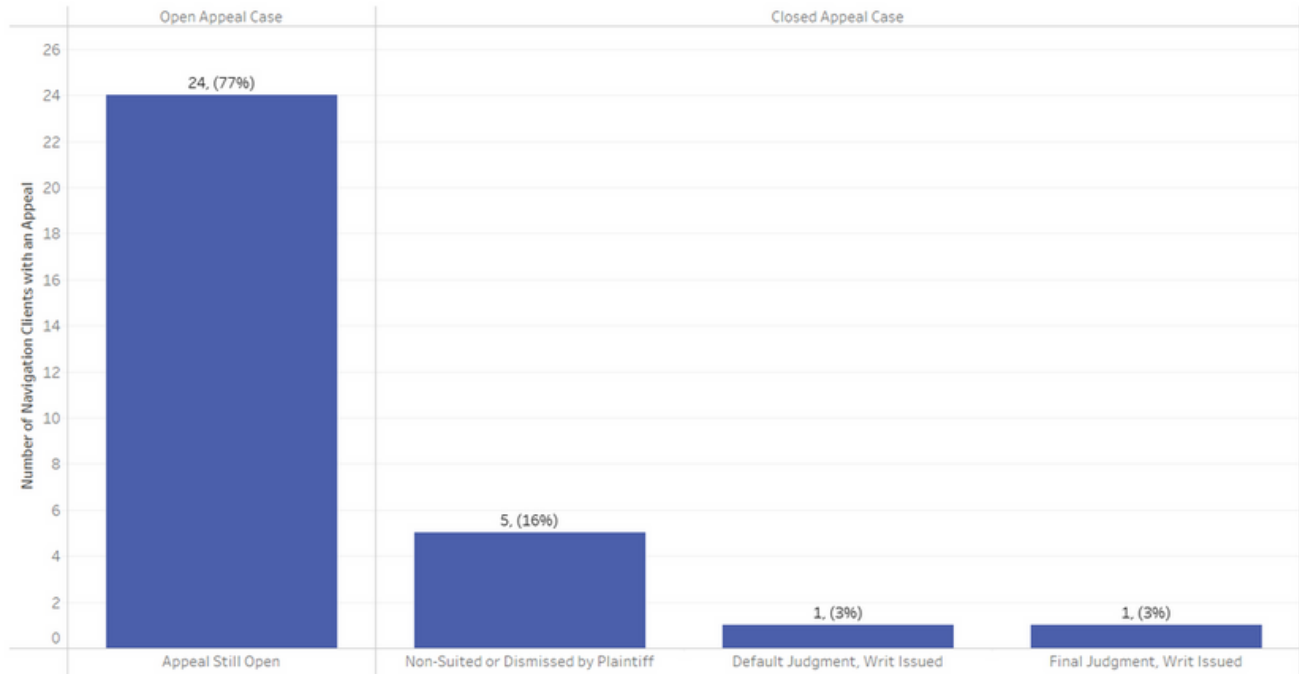


One of the most important topics the navigators discussed with tenants was the next steps after a court judgment, including available legal aid for appeals and rehousing assistance. As shown in Figure 14, navigation clients were two times more likely to appeal their case when compared to the whole eviction population for the same period. While most (77%) of the navigation clients’ appeal cases are still open, 16% have been dismissed by the landlord (Figure 10).

A 2022 STUDY FOUND THAT “**TWO-THIRDS** OF HARRIS COUNTY TENANTS WHO APPEAL EVICTION DECISIONS AGAINST THEM TO COUNTY COURT HAVE THE EVICTION DISMISSED.” [15]



FIGURE 11: NAVIGATION CLIENTS WHO APPEAL THEIR EVICTION: 77% OF APPELLATE CASES ARE STILL OPEN, AND 16% HAVE BEEN DISMISSED BY THE LANDLORD



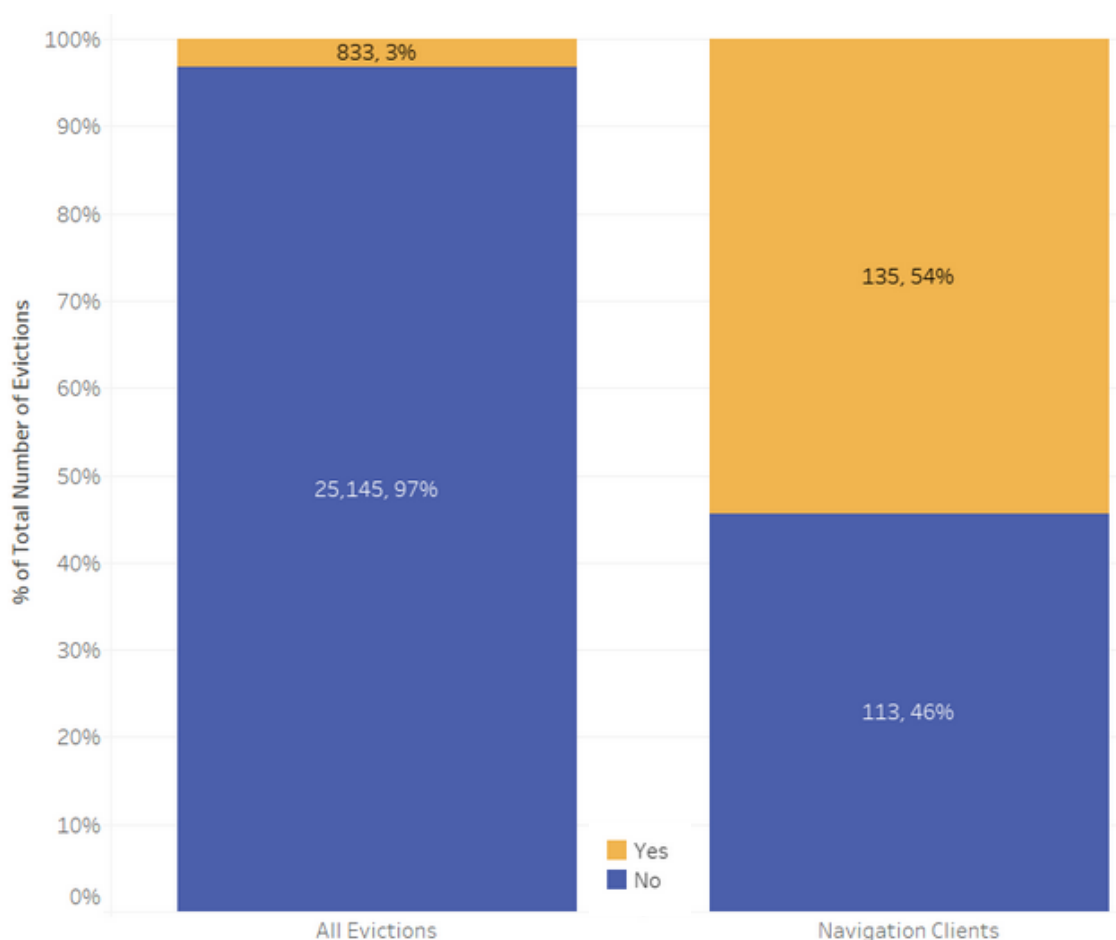
Another referral made by the navigators was for the Coalition for the Homeless' Homelessness Diversion or Prevention programs. Eighty-nine percent of navigation client with a Coalition case participated in their Homelessness Prevention Program.

18 OUT OF 37 REFERRED CLIENTS PARTICIPATED IN COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS' DIVERSION OR PREVENTION PROGRAMS.



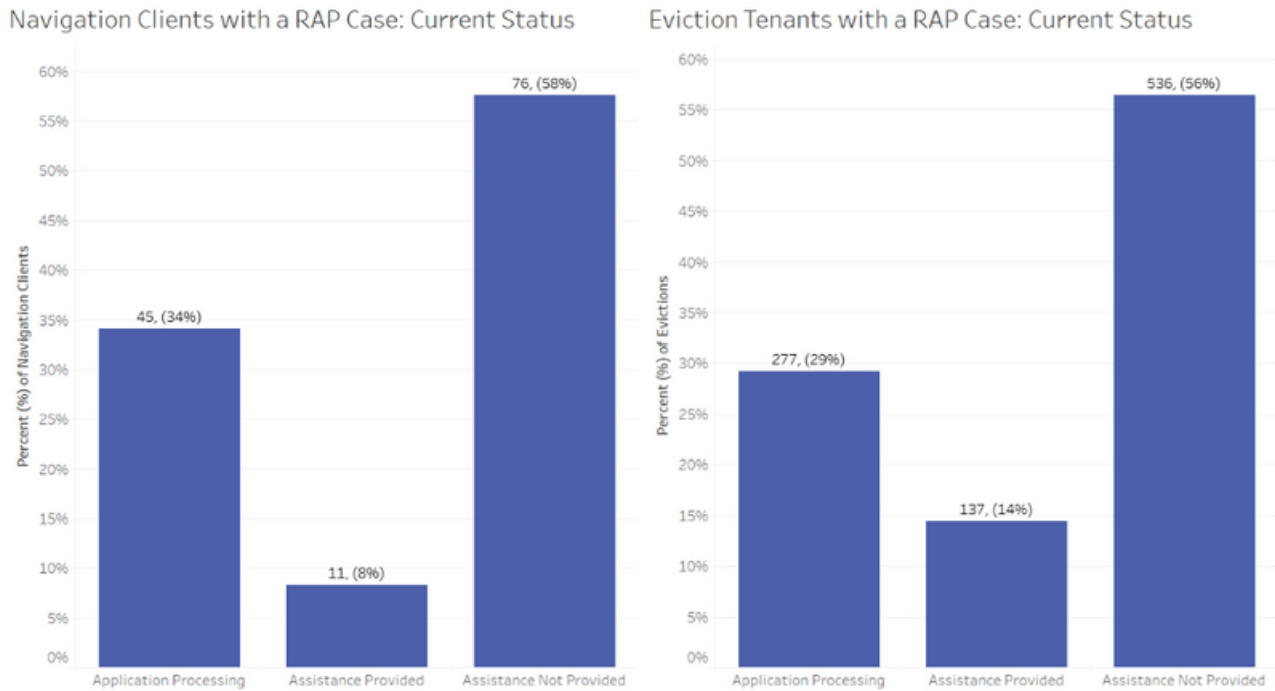
As discussed previously, navigators also assisted their clients with rental assistance applications. Navigators assisted in many ways, such as identifying relevant information from existing rental assistance applications to be provided during the hearing, assisting the tenant with beginning the application for rental assistance or making a referral for the tenant to complete the application later. Incredibly, 53% of navigation clients applied for rental assistance compared to just 4% for all eviction tenants.

FIGURE 12: 53% OF NAVIGATION CLIENTS HAD A RENTAL ASSISTANCE CASE COMPARED TO 3% OF ALL EVICTION TENANTS

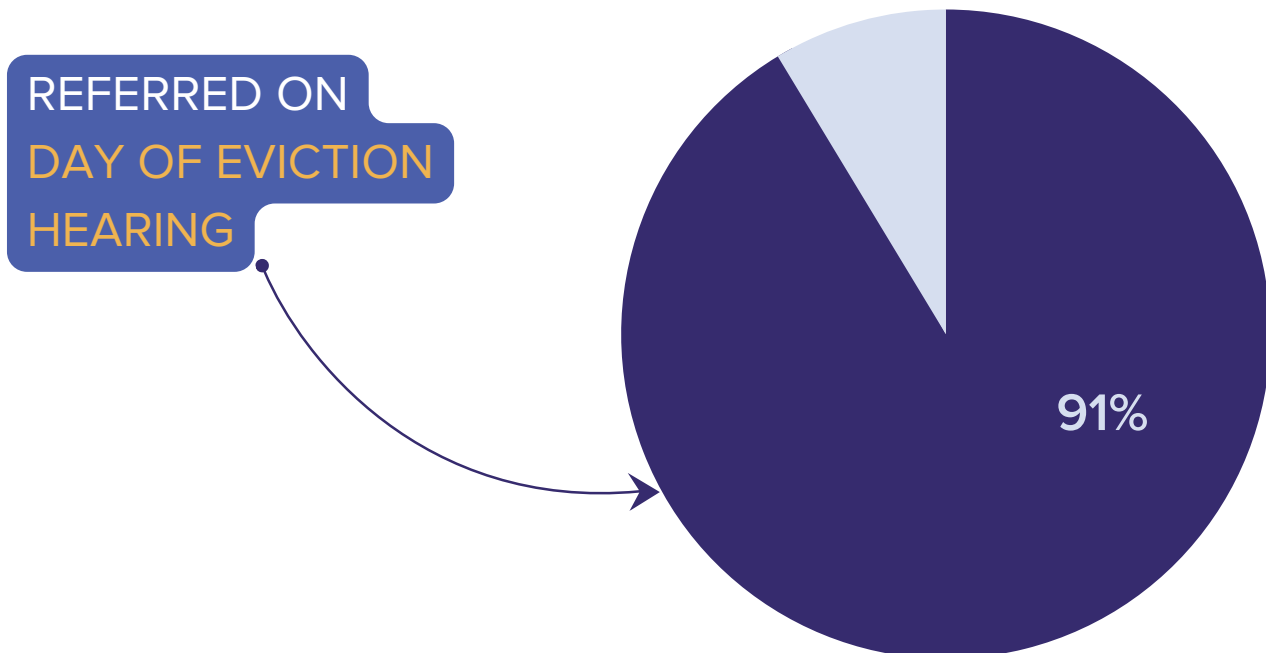


However, only 9% of clients actually received assistance compared to 14% of eviction tenants. This is likely because navigators who assisted in applying did so on the day of the eviction hearing. Depending on the judgment that day, there would not have been enough time to process the assistance application. Flexible emergency cash assistance could be considered instead.

FIGURE 13: 9% OF NAVIGATION CLIENTS HAVE RECEIVED RENTAL ASSISTANCE TO DATE COMPARED TO 14% OF ALL EVICTION CLIENTS



Of the 127 (53%) navigation clients who had a rental assistance application, 116 were referred to rental assistance by the navigator on the day of their eviction hearing.

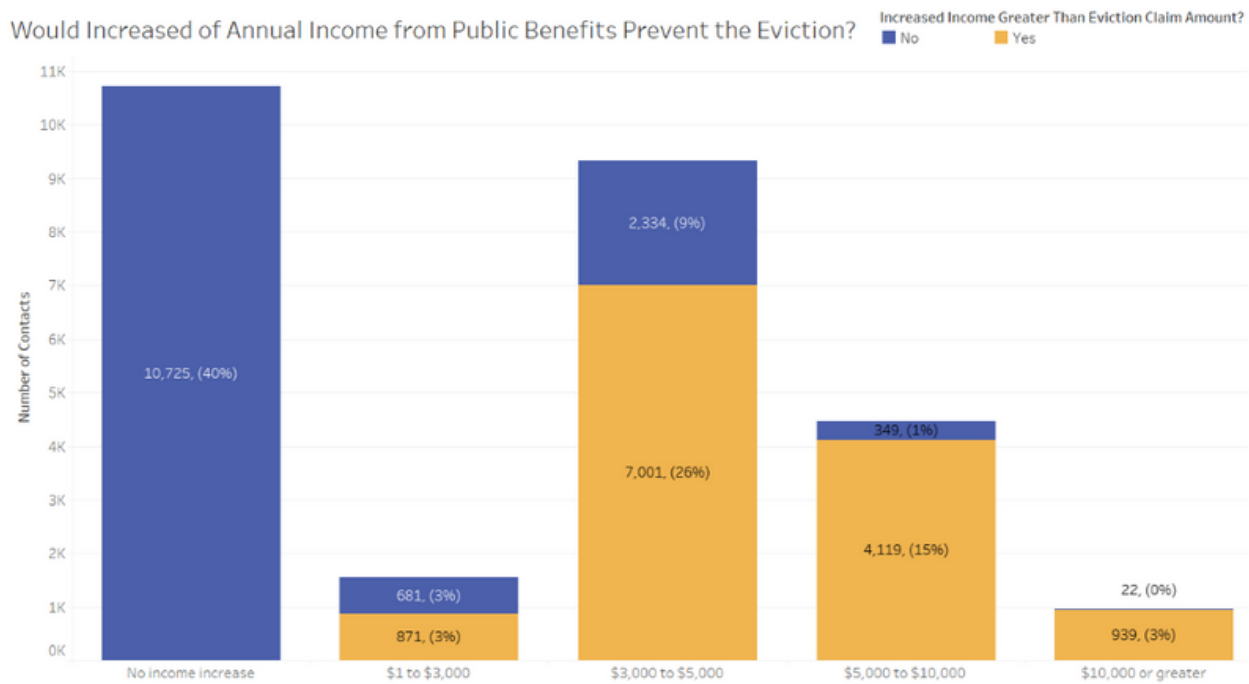


For some tenants, eviction is the last stop before they enter an overburdened homeless system. Our data shows that if tenants had anywhere from \$3,000 to \$5,000 in assistance or income support, they would avoid their eviction completely.



If a tenant receives additional annual income via public benefits, they are more likely to avoid eviction entirely, stay housed, and build economic stability.

FIGURE 14: 47% OF DOCKET CONTACTS WOULD HAVE PREVENTED THEIR EVICTION IF THEY HAD RECEIVED ADDITIONAL INCOME VIA INCREASED PUBLIC BENEFITS ACCESS



Eviction intervention is a necessary stop-gap measure, but housing stability should continue to be the collective goal.

CASE STUDY: PRECINCT 1, PLACE 2

JUDGE STEVEN DUBLE

JP Precinct 1, Place 2 hosted navigators during the entire pilot period, and together, Connective and Judge Duble’s team coordinated interventions that navigators could fit into or support.

Historically, under previous court leadership, Precinct 1, Place 2 had already hosted legal aid and mediation services in court. Judge Duble was interested in bringing additional interventions that supported his long-term goal of transforming this court into a point of connection to a wide range of legal and supportive services, and the pilot provided an opportunity to kick off these efforts. Connective began discussions with Judge Duble before he started his term in January 2023.

Under the leadership of Judge Steve Duble, Precinct 1, Place 2 strives to make eviction court responsive to tenant and community needs:

“

“Evictions harm tenants, landlords, and our community as a whole. As Matthew Desmond writes, ‘Eviction is a cause, not just a condition, of poverty.’ Eviction Diversion creates win-win scenarios for tenants and landlords. I am committed to working with County leaders to transform JP 1-2 into a point of connection to a wide range of legal and supportive services. We are building upon existing programs and innovating to avoid unnecessary evictions and reduce the harm of evictions that do happen. We will be a model progressive court leading the way in Harris County and the state. Keep an eye out for us.”

- Judge Duble during his investiture, April 2023

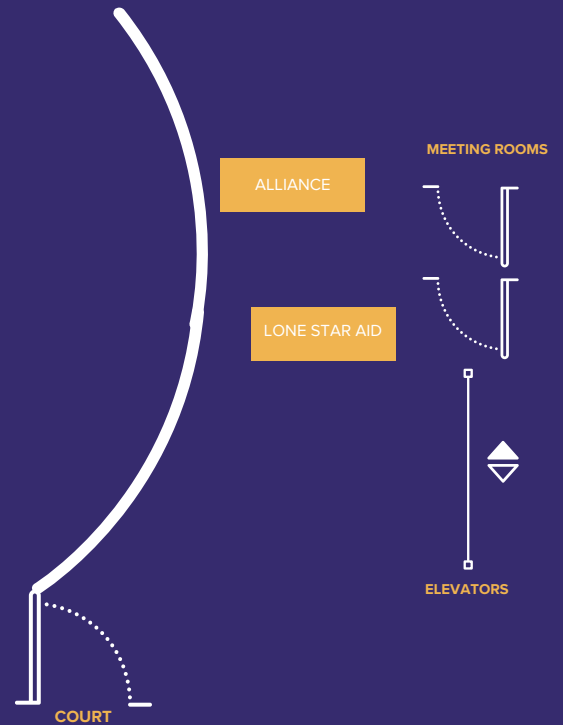
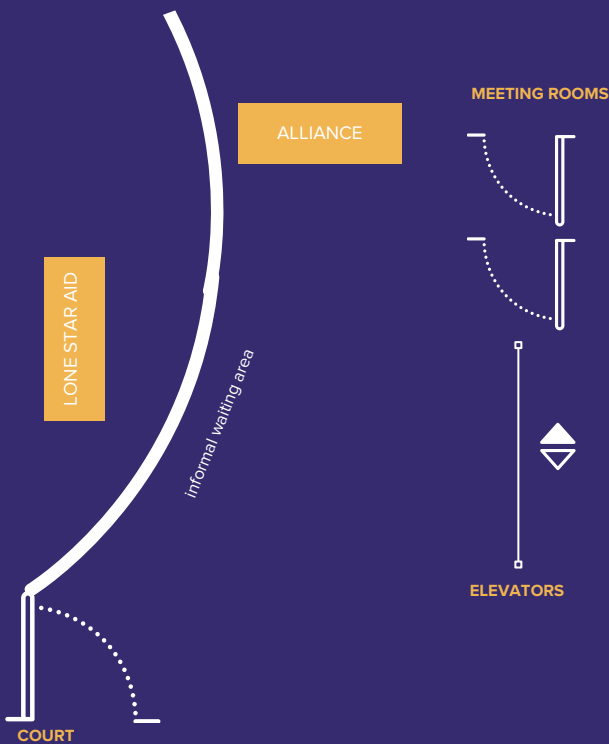
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Before navigators started visiting his court regularly, the Connective team worked with Judge Duble and his team to evaluate how to improve the court experience, taking into consideration the pain points we observed at this and other courts in Harris County (see pages 06-11 as a reference of these pain points). Connective provided communications, wayfinding, and spatial configuration recommendations, including:

- Updating website content and proposing adjustments that support tenants' understanding of the eviction and court process before showing up to court
- Suggesting minor reorganizations to the layout of the space to allow service providers to be located in the same area
- Designing court wayfinding/educational signage
- Establishing a “Resource Hub” in court where supplemental printed materials would be available, as well as access to computers and printers

BEFORE

AFTER



Soon after, Judge Duble’s team established a shared space for service organizations that provided more visibility to tenants. This area offered dedicated service provider tables, a sitting waiting area for tenants or landlords waiting to speak with providers, and access to meeting rooms where providers can have private conversations with their clients.



Once shared space was established, several interventions started to play out:

COURT CHECK-IN AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Alliance and other service providers had the opportunity to introduce themselves to plaintiffs and defendants at the top of the eviction docket. Judge Duble allowed tenants and landlords an opportunity to speak to navigators about rent relief and to consult with the legal aid representative before proceeding with their hearing. Judge Duble would start the docket with an overview of the eviction process (including the Notice to Vacate, appeal deadline, writ of possession, and the Constable’s execution of the writ). He urged the parties to do their best to avoid the necessity of forcible removal of the tenants. Judge Duble also suggested that the parties consider a settlement agreement and provided a settlement agreement form they can work with. He also reminded them to visit the providers' tables to discuss available resources and services, and provided a list of resources.

RESOURCE NAVIGATION AND IN-COURT SERVICES

The court set up dedicated service provider tables and private mediation rooms that allow providers to connect to tenants before and after their hearings. The private rooms continue to provide tenants with a safe space to discuss their cases with legal providers and prepare for on-the-spot representation. They also could be used for tenant-landlord mediation when needed.



Navigators, Service Providers, and Court Staff at work, 2023

SETTLEMENT AGREEMENTS

Judge Duble saw this settlement agreement between plaintiffs and defendants as a win-win-win option for everyone involved because:

- Parties have the opportunity to negotiate a move-out date and debt forgiveness.
- The court reduces the number of cases heard in court that day.
- It allows the parties to avoid tenants from becoming unhoused.

Prior to the July 1, 2023 expiration of the Texas Supreme Court Emergency Order, rent relief applications or compliance with a settlement agreement allowed the court to seal the Court's eviction records, reducing long-term negative impacts on tenants.

Following the expiration of the Texas Supreme Court Emergency Order on July 1, 2023, Judge Duble continues to urge the parties to apply for rent relief and advises them to apply to the Houston-Harris Rent Relief Program which is processing applications on approximately a **35 day turnaround**. The Judge urges the parties to consider agreeing to resetting their hearing for several weeks to allow time for the application to be processed. Alternatively, the Judge suggests that the landlord consider agreeing to hold off on seeking a writ of possession for a few weeks to allow time for processing the rent relief application.

APPEALS & POST-HEARING REFERRALS

Navigators provided information about how to appeal an eviction judgment and refer tenants to local housing assistance programs. Judge Duble implemented a new policy in February 2023 prohibiting the issuance of a writ of possession where an appeal has been perfected by the tenant filing a Statement of Inability to Pay. Following a 2022 holding by Dallas County Court at Law No. 5, Judge Duble instituted the policy because it is unconstitutional to allow a writ of possession to issue when a tenant has perfected an appeal by filing an inability to pay.

Service provider visibility within the JP Court 1-2 allowed tenants and landlords to engage in direct conversations with providers who offered guidance on a range of topics, including housing rights, financial assistance, and social services. This accessible and immediate connection to resources empowered tenants to make informed decisions, explore available options, and take proactive steps toward stability, such as appealing their case judgment or engaging with settlement options.

Judge Duble, along with his colleague Judge Dolores Lozano in Precinct 2, Place 2 were recently awarded an Eviction Diversion Facilitator Grant from the National Center for State Courts. Both Judges will be utilizing the results of the Connective Court Navigation Pilot to inform the ongoing work of eviction diversion in their courts.

CASE STUDY: PRECINCT 7, PLACE 1

JUDGE WANDA ADAMS

Under Judge Wanda Adams' leadership, Precinct 7, Place 1 significantly increased tenant supports in court by inviting community partners to provide direct services. At the time of publishing, the court offered various services under an initiative called “Beyond the Bench, Hope after Eviction.” The goal of this initiative is to provide tenants with resources and services that address the economic stability of the tenant, the outcome of this eviction, and avoid a similar situation down the road. Judge Adams described this initiative as a *lifeline to residents in a moment of crisis*. Recognizing that eviction can have far-reaching consequences, the court's collaboration with local organizations facilitates referrals to community colleges, job training programs, no-cost medical clinics, and wraparound services.

By inviting community partners into the eviction court setting, the Judge and her staff noticed the myriad challenges faced by tenants during the coronavirus pandemic and connected them to a community support network.

“

“We were trying to do everything virtually. In the camera, we could see everything: their homes, kids running around with no diapers, no electricity or furniture.”

- Judge Adams, speaking about the use of Zoom for court hearings

”

Judge Adams realized that eviction court was an opportunity to intervene and connect folks to resources to help them gain stability. The collaboration between the court and community partners allows tenants to tap into resources that can help them secure stable housing in the future.

Through access to community college programs, tenants can develop new skills and enhance their employability, opening doors to better job prospects and economic stability. Moreover, job training initiatives allow tenants to gain expertise in various fields, enabling them to find sustainable employment even after eviction.

As a result of the campaign, 31 tenants have been enrolled in the CACE TRIO program at Houston Community College, which connects students to job referrals, GED programs, and academic and financial aid counseling. Three tenants have enrolled in the Baylor College of Medicine Health Care Training Program, with the first graduating in June 2023. Four tenants have graduated from technical training programs such as forklifting and welding through Civic Heart Community Services. By addressing the root causes of eviction and investing in the potential of tenants, this progressive approach sought to break the cycle of housing instability. It recognizes that eviction should not be a dead end but rather a turning point, empowering individuals with an opportunity to rebuild their lives.

“

“We help that parent get to the next rung on the ladder. But you know, although our role is to help that parent, they often have children watching. The average family we see facing eviction has 2.5 children. They are watching their parent reach the next step on the ladder, and if they see it done, they believe that they can do it, too. If those parents become successful, the entire family is successful.”

- Judge Adams, in conversation with Connective on the importance of eviction diversion programs in court

”

“EVERYONE NEEDS A VALERIE”

The Need for an Eviction Diversion Coordinator in Court

“Everyone needs a Valerie,” Judge Wanda Adams remarked in reflection of her project. Valerie Atara had been working in the community for over 20 years. Although her official role in the court was an Administrative Clerk, she unofficially operated the project by coordinating with various community-based organizations (CBOs), communicating with tenants and landlords, and being a warm referral point for clients.



On Mondays, Valerie coordinated with CBOs and established a rotation of resources for eviction court. She indicated the importance of having CBO representatives in court that were signing clients up for resources on the spot and having relationships with those CBOs to ensure that the referral was made successfully. Valerie spent Wednesday mornings surveying the crowd listening to people's stories, and directing tenants and landlords to various resources based on their needs.

“Many (tenants) are a nervous wreck and can’t even put two sentences together. And I say that if I can make you laugh, you can survive this. Conversations calm them down, and once they smile, I know they are open to resources. Then, they are receptive and can engage with those resources.”

- Valerie

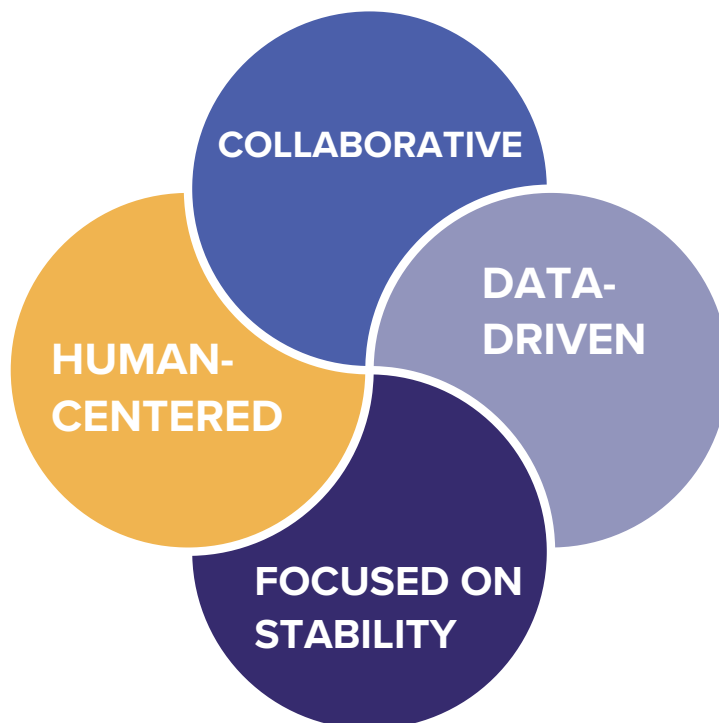
Valerie and Judge Wanda Adams had landlords come into the court lobby requesting resources for their tenants. They built relationships with some apartment complexes, which then posted information about eviction diversion resources in their buildings. Furthermore, “Beyond the Bench, Hope After Eviction” campaign has expanded its reach beyond the court lobby by setting up tables at large community churches a few times a year. The aim was to share information upstream and prevent evictions from occurring before they are legally filed.

This case study illustrates that an in-court coordinator serving as the central point for tenants to receive various resources can be a successful model for future in-court eviction diversion programs that incorporate resource navigation.



KEY FINDINGS

Successful eviction diversion interventions at court are:



Interventions that have been shaped and continuously informed by the human experience are more effective than those that don't. By redefining the courtroom space and incorporating services that address the immediate needs of tenants, such as legal aid, referral coordinators or resource navigators, and service providers, the courts are responsive to tenants' needs in this process.

Data tracking and monitoring program outcomes is essential to understand the impact these interventions have and to ensure their continued improvement.

To create effective eviction diversion efforts, communities must prioritize wraparound, holistic care that aims to help tenants either remain housed and reduce their risk of a repeated eviction or rebuild their lives post-eviction and secure stable housing in the future. The goal of eviction diversion must be to break the cycle of housing instability.

Through partnerships with resource navigators, the courts, and service providers such as rental assistance and legal services, the program was able to provide tenants with comprehensive support. This level of coordination is necessary to facilitate effective navigation and triage services.

PROGRAM & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The main goal of this pilot program was to inform future eviction diversion interventions, such as resource navigation supports, in Harris County JP Courts. The following recommendations were informed by the pilot insights and the experiences of participating stakeholders before, during, and after the pilot. The audience for these recommendations include Harris County JP Courts and Harris County Elected Officials. Other local government departments, service providers addressing housing instability issues, and housing advocates may also find these recommendations useful.

Long-term financial support is needed to move the needle in addressing the Harris County eviction crisis. Overall, Harris County should empower eviction courts with sustainable operational funding that will encourage innovation in eviction diversion interventions. This was a common theme elevated by local courts and stakeholders.

Harris County should also standardize a minimum level of operation that upholds equity for county residents. Living in one precinct over the other should not dictate drastic changes in the eviction court experience and its outcomes.

Each court will need support and encouragement in adjusting its annual budget requests to invest in these recommendations. Harris County JP Courts and electeds should consider the following when designing and implementing local eviction diversion and resource navigation programs:



Invest in upstream, targeted eviction docket outreach.

Contact tenants on the eviction docket via email, text, and/or mail ahead of their court date to provide the information they need to prepare for their hearing. This may include information about the eviction process, the importance of showing up to court (including arriving early), what resources are available at court, and information about how to appeal.

JP courts may not be allowed by law to provide this information directly, but they are able to provide a list of resources to organizations or government agencies that can. For example, a tenant could receive a flyer with important information upon receiving their eviction citation. They could opt-in to text and email reminders (via QR code or a web link) to enable them receiving eviction diversion information from a third party. Look at best practices in other jurisdictions. For example, the NYC Mayor's Office to Protect Tenants sends mailers weekly to any tenant who has a new eviction case against them in Housing Court.



Improve the customer service experience at JP courts and make it easier for tenants to navigate court buildings and processes.

Wayfinding is the use of signage and information design to guide or help occupants navigate a space. Courts are high-stress spaces with tough-to-understand processes and jargon. Effective wayfinding is critical in ensuring that all parties can access justice fairly. These information interventions should be available in multiple languages representative of the court's district population.

- Language barriers are currently one of the biggest pain points in the court navigation experience. Multi-lingual court staff or professional interpreters should be available at all times in the court for those that need it.
- The majority of tenants on the docket won't show up to court. We can assume additional barriers exist for tenants to better participate in court eviction proceedings. COVID-19 showed the court's capabilities to provide remote participation, and this option should be standardized across all JP courts.
- If social services are available in court, specific wayfinding elements should be designed to help visitors understand the available resources and how to locate them.
- See Connective's wayfinding recommendations for JP Court 1-2 in the appendix as a reference.



Fund an in-court eviction diversion coordinator or facilitator to serve as a liaison to community-based social service organizations and local government departments that provide direct services in the community.

These services should be inclusive of legal services, financial assistance, short-term case management or housing counseling, landlord-tenant resolution services, and financial coaching or job placement services.



Identify a community-based organization partner that can collaborate with the eviction diversion coordinator to fill the resource navigation/tenant advocate role that The Alliance’s navigators had provided during this pilot.

Navigators or “Tenant Advocates” have either case management, social work, or health work backgrounds and should be equipped with intake and case management tools that enable warm referrals, prompt follow-ups (about a week after contact), and data collection for the continued improvement of service delivery in court.



Incentivize in-court referrals and live enrollments to community resources and the placement of social services providers in court.

This could look like partnering with organizations that already receive philanthropic funding to provide eviction diversion services, public benefits enrollment, and economic mobility services OR providing additional funding to these service providers as an incentive to regularly offer services at JP courts.



Enhance system-wide data collection and reporting in JP Courts, both with court case outcomes and the documentation of outcomes of site-specific eviction interventions.

An effort to standardize data collection across all JP courts is a pressing challenge to inform operational efficiencies and provide insights to local partners throughout the lifecycle of an eviction case. To strengthen our local data collection and reporting, the following recommendations should be implemented:

- The Office of Court Administration should standardize the reporting of dispositions and judgment data across all courts, as there are differences between how courts report them currently, and judgment data is often not a true indication of the case outcome. For example, there is no way of knowing if a case received a settlement agreement, if the case was heard again because the settlement agreement was not followed through, or which default dispositions were heard in court vs. no-shows. Additionally, although we know who the judgment was in favor of, there is not much else reported on related to the specifics of the case.
- JP Courts should collect and report on-the-spot attorney representation consistently. This will help Harris County understand the impact of public investments in legal representation in court.
- JP courts and other stakeholders would benefit from having a global view of eviction data, including the demographics of the docket: How many households with children? Who needs interpretation or special accommodations during their court hearing day? How many repeated evictions are we seeing this week? A system-wide view of local eviction data will help us better understand the effects evictions are having in our community.
- The development of a single, shared intake form and shared digital case management tools for social service providers visiting courts, this would improve agency-to-agency referrals and reporting of eviction diversion outcomes.



Standardize the use of settlement agreements across JP courts.

Settlement agreements, when facilitated by the court, can offer a win-win-win opportunity if all parties are well informed of the options they have. For example, the court reduces the number of cases heard in a docket, the landlord and the tenant negotiate payment plans or move out days, which then results in the case dismissal avoiding an eviction judgment in the tenant's record.



Expand community engagement and public education efforts that support eviction prevention and diversion.

Public education campaigns that target cost-burden and housing unstable residents and engage landlords as nodes of information for tenants, are necessary to increase awareness about the legal eviction process, tenants rights, and available wrap-around services. Locally Texas Housers, January Advisors, AFL-CIO, and the Eviction Defense Coalition have been working to fill this gap.



Programmatic Eviction Diversion interventions, including legal and rental assistance, are more effective when paired with policy regulations, such as tenant protections or rental market regulations, as seen during the beginning of the COVID pandemic across the State and some local jurisdictions [17].

Consider advocating for policy measures such as:

- Tenants Protections Laws to address issues such as housing discrimination, “no-fault” evictions, uninhabitable conditions, annual rent increases, lease termination processes, late fees, the use of a “tenants black-list”, among others.
- Sealing of Eviction Records Law, to automatically seal eviction records after three years to mitigate the effects of evictions and prevent housing discriminatory practices. Eviction records can keep tenants from accessing housing opportunities and can have a negative impact on their credit history for up to seven years.

- Right to Counsel Law or Ordinances to provide defendants across the State with a lawyer to assist in their defense when they don't have the means to pay for an attorney.
- Rising rents and stagnant wages are at the center of the eviction crisis. Removing barriers to affordable housing and economic opportunity would reduce existing economic pressures on very low-income Harris County residents.
 - Advocate for Inclusionary Zoning in local jurisdictions to increase the availability of affordable housing. Typically, Inclusionary Zoning would require a percentage of new housing units (usually 15-20%) to be allocated to low to moderate-income households. This would support local jurisdictions in addressing the current gap of units for very low-income families in our community.
 - Advocate for increased access to Public Benefits by reducing eligibility, application, and recertification barriers.
 - Advocate for the increase of the minimum wage in the State of Texas.



Consider a one-year planning process, that pilot some or all of the above interventions concurrently in a minimum of three courts.

CONCLUSION

Evictions are often a result of systemic racism, historical disinvestment in affordable housing, gentrification, and income inequality. While in-court eviction diversion navigation programs won't solve these issues overnight, they're crucial in supporting and empowering tenants as they seek housing stability. For some, it is the last eviction intervention opportunity before entering an overburdened homeless diversion system. Essential interventions will require policy support, significant funding increases, and approval and cooperation from JP courts and local elected officials. Nonetheless, strengthening navigation and triage infrastructure benefits both tenants at imminent risk of eviction and the social service agencies that are working around the clock to keep tenants housed.

The pilot program provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of in-court eviction interventions and their impact on housing stability for tenants at risk of homelessness. These lessons learned are crucial for informing future policy and programming in Harris County and serve as a foundation for establishing longer-term interventions.

The Importance of Permanent Infrastructure in Eviction Courts: The presence of social services in eviction courts is instrumental in providing timely and relevant support to tenants. Using JP courts as a central node of economic and housing stability supports can establish a stronger response to the local eviction crisis.

Eviction navigators as Tenant Advocates and Resource Connectors: Navigators played a tenant advocate role and helped leveling the power dynamics in court. They ensured tenants had access to eviction process information and when available legal representation. Navigators attended court hearings and connected tenants with available resources in real time, meeting them where they are. This approach facilitated a more holistic and comprehensive support system for tenants, addressing immediate housing needs and also other underlying issues contributing to their vulnerability.

Data Collection and Evaluation: The pilot emphasized the need for better eviction case data collection and evaluation to measure performance and outcomes. Working with the courts to establish data-sharing and referral management processes across courts is critical to gain further insight into effectiveness.

The goal of in-court eviction interventions is not necessarily to keep a tenant in the same housing unit but to allow time to find new housing, connect them to resources that help them stay housed, and alleviate both economic hardships and the long-term effects of eviction. Given the impact of housing instability on individuals, children, and their families [18], it is crucial to consider how adequate support services, financial assistance, landlord-tenant mediation, and access to information regarding the eviction process could help prevent many evictions.

While Eviction Diversion Navigation resources aim to prevent homelessness, the long-term goal is to decrease the number of tenants repeatedly entering eviction court due to a lack of support services. Although we may not solve all the problems that lead to eviction or increase likelihood of eviction, every small step toward empowering at-risk tenants is a step in the right direction.

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APPENDIX

The appendix includes reference documents used during the implementation of the pilot, additional information about the pilot's methodology, and successes and shortcomings of the pilot.

PILOT DESCRIPTION

This pilot's goal aimed to strengthen eviction diversion navigation in Harris County Courts and support coordination of and referrals to wrap-around services, such as financial assistance, legal aid, and rehousing assistance. The goal of the pilot was to inform long-term eviction diversion navigation and triage in Harris County.

PILOT PARTNERS & ROLES

Connective

- Provided funding for pilot program
- Led strategy, oversight, and data collection of pilot program
- Provided and managed Connective Portal
- Coordinated design sessions, weekly check-ins, and reporting

The Alliance

- Staffed two full-time eviction diversion navigators to help eligible tenants navigate JP court buildings and processes
- Connected eligible tenants to third-party resources, including but not limited to legal aid, public benefits programs, and transportation assistance
- Managed casework and interactions with tenants and landlords through the Connective Portal
- Met weekly with Connective to review data and make adjustments

Select Justice of the Peace Courts

- Hosted eviction diversion navigators and adjusted processes to support it.

PILOT ACTIVITIES

Connective coordinated all pilot activities, including providing the Connective Portal for all data entry, case management, and reporting.

Eviction diversion navigators supported tenants through the court eviction process and navigating social services resources by:

- Provided practical information to tenants, like guidance about the eviction trial process and helping them find their way in court.
- Where possible, eviction diversion navigators guided tenants and landlords through potential agreements via:
 - Court Settlement
 - Applying for rental assistance or checking on rental assistance status
 - Orienting defendants about next steps after judgment, for example provide information about appeals
 - Referring tenants into other social services and/or available housing resources post-eviction

METHODOLOGY

Recognizing the need for navigation and triage services in the eviction diversion space, Connective engaged The Alliance to explore what an expanded In-Court Navigation pilot would look like.

The Alliance had placed case managers in JP Courts to help triage tenants facing eviction into the Houston-Harris County Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). Connective recognized their presence in court as an untapped opportunity and began a partnership to expand their services beyond rental assistance by providing referrals to legal aid, homelessness diversion programs, job readiness and education, and social services. Connective also wanted to develop the technology infrastructure to measure these efforts to better understand the impacts they would have on the community.

Following two months of research and planning, implementation was as follows:

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE
NAVIGATION	Case management model & casenotes training	Pre- and post-court workflow adjustment	Court assignment methodology added	Mediation training		
HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN	Court observations Navigator design sessions	Court and navigator observations	Navigator observations T-shirts provided to navigators	Navigator observations Banner provided to navigators	Project retrospectives and recommendation report research	
TECHNOLOGY	Begin client data collection (manual)	Digital client data collection system launched	Navigator casenotes portal launched Navigator casenotes v2 portal launched	Referral elevation process launched for rental assistance		

January: Pilot Program Set Up, Kick-Off Meeting, and Design Sessions

In January, eviction diversion navigators were placed in court and told to conduct their regular ERAP activities as Connective observed their interactions with tenants and landlords. Their everyday activities at this time were to check rental assistance applications and update tenants, landlords, and judges on the status of rental assistance. Connective’s team continued to observe court proceedings and document the perceived unmet needs of tenants. Connective also led design sessions with the eviction diversion navigators and Courts to more deeply understand the service gaps and how eviction diversion navigators could best fill them.

February: Trial Period

In the first week of February, Connective and the navigators initiated a data collection process. Eviction diversion navigators were provided with a sheet showing that day's docket list and information on tenants who had rental assistance applications. They manually recorded their interactions by documenting the resources utilized, individuals spoken to, and other case-relevant notes. By early February, the pilot team finalized the updated navigation workflow, which included additional plugs into resources beyond rental assistance. Connective continuously assessed and improved this workflow through weekly co-design sessions with the eviction diversion navigator. Connective then took this process and digitized it through a form link. Navigators accessed a single digital form that walked them through the designed workflow, and they would input data on the interaction as they conversed with the tenant. (*e.g.: did you provide the tenant with a flyer on Appeal information? Y/N*)

March: Trial Period

By the beginning of March, Connective had connected this digital notetaking sheet with a CRM system portal. In the portal, navigators could search for docket information, fill out interaction case notes, and check on the status of a rental assistance application. These interactions were connected under one contact, which was helpful for client tracking. An advantage of having eviction diversion navigators in a single portal system along with the rental assistance information was that they could elevate cases or update contact information for tenants and landlords, which in turn helped to process the rental assistance cases more efficiently. By this point, the pilot team was operating on a regular court schedule. The pilot's primary partnership was with Precinct 1, Place 2; therefore, navigators had court placement on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Other courts in rotation included Precinct 2, Place 1 and 2, Precinct 7 Place 1 and 2, and Precinct 5, Place 2. Both Precinct 5, Place 2, and Precinct 2, Place 2 were new court partnerships that began in March.

April: Implement Improvements

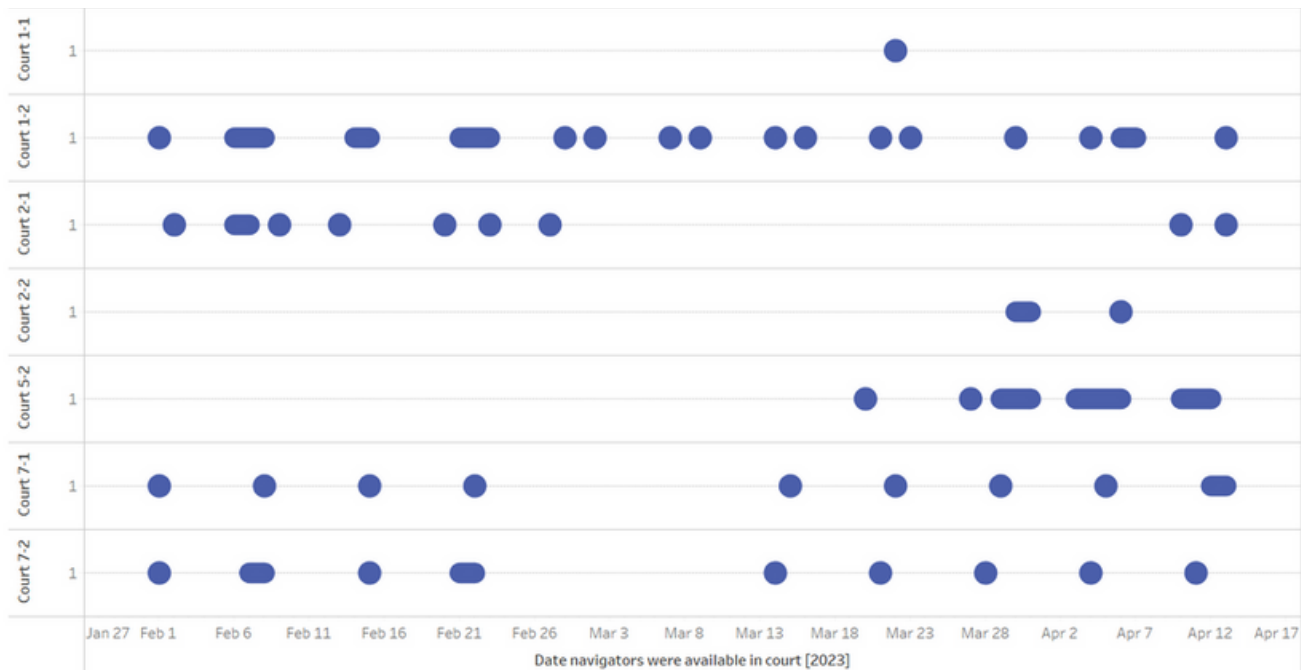
The pilot was operating at full capacity, with an online data collection portal, a regular court schedule, and all six court partnerships in place. Eviction diversion navigators also had the opportunity to receive mediation training from the UH Law Center's Mediation Clinic. Given that the navigators were intuitively checking and

correcting rental assistance applications, Connective created a more formal process for navigators to elevate high-priority cases to the Rental Assistance agency partners.

May - July: Pulling Insights and Recommendations

Upon formally closing the pilot program, Connective engaged the navigators and Courts in retrospective meetings to understand the results and develop a final report. Connective then began collecting all the findings and research to compile this report.

FIGURE 15: NAVIGATOR PLACEMENT FEBRUARY 1 - APRIL 30, 2023



PILOT TOOLS

Case Management Training

Connective provided eviction diversion navigators with two workflows to assist in triaging clients, one before court, and one after court. The navigators would introduce themselves to tenants, landlords, and legal representatives waiting in the court lobby. They read over a standard script to explain what services they could assist with, who they could assist, and that all resources were free to access. They would then walk

through a standard workflow and customize it according to the specific needs expressed by the client. To assist tenants and landlords in reaching a win-win outcome, eviction diversion navigators also received mediation training focused on managing power dynamics and building negotiation skills.

Data Collection Form

Navigators completed a manual data collection form and submitted it to the Connective team for the first month of the pilot. After this, they completed a digital data collection form modeled after their navigation workflow.

Navigation Intake Form Questionnaire:

Court Precinct and Place:

Client Name:

Phone number:

Email address:

Preferred Language:

- English • Spanish • Vietnamese • Chinese • Other

Spoke to...

- Tenant • Landlord • Bot

Does this tenant have a RAP application?

- Yes • No • N/A

Did this tenant have a TRR application that they needed to check?

- Yes • No

What other referrals did you make for this client? (check all that apply)

- Other rental assistance options (churches, community centers, etc.) • Job readiness • Childcare • Utility assistance • Food bank • State Programs (WIC, TANF, SNAP, etc.) • Domestic Violence or Sexual Assault Support • Substance Abuse or Mental Health Services

Did you refer this client to Coalition for the Homeless?

- Yes • No • N/A

Shared information about settlements?

- Yes • No

Did you send the tenant over to the legal aid table?

- I sent them to the legal aid table • This tenant received representation in court • Both • Not interested • N/A

Did you share information on what an appeal is?

- Yes • No • N/A

Notes/Additional information



PILOT STRENGTHS

In-court navigators played a crucial role by delving deeper into each case and providing quality referrals to a range of resources. They also shared information about available resources with eligible individuals who may have been unaware of them or unsure how to access them. Connective established communication channels between eviction diversion navigators and these resources, allowing navigators to prioritize high-priority cases and ensure that no case was lost in the intake pipeline. Although there is room for process improvements, the value of a coordinated approach when sharing resources and available assistance cannot be overstated.

Secondly, a technology and data infrastructure enabled us to collect and monitor relevant processes, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the eviction diversion landscape. Through qualitative and quantitative observations, we gained insights into our program's successes and failures, allowing us to adapt and pivot as needed. The agility of our design process proved critical, as it was through the team's hands-on experience within the community that we learned our most valuable lessons and identified critical gaps. The ability to monitor and respond to evolving community needs using an iterative approach is essential for the success of a program like this, especially considering that both the needs of the community and the resources available are constantly fluctuating. For example, rental assistance only began accepting applications three months into this pilot.

Lastly, establishing a physical presence within the court system proved valuable, enabling the pilot team to build strong relationships and garner buy-in from key stakeholders, including the court, tenants, and landlords. This buy-in fostered cooperation between tenants and landlords for mutually beneficial outcomes. Navigators reported that some landlords began referring their tenants to the program, seeking eviction diversion resources before their court dates. Additionally, court staff proactively introduced the eviction diversion navigators and their services to individuals before their hearings. In one specific instance, Precinct 1, Place 2 created dedicated space during hearings for tenants and landlords to access resources before the court heard their cases.

This level of collaboration and relationship-building underscores the significance of collective community action in this line of work.

PILOT WEAKNESSES

While the pilot project has successfully identified future policy and program recommendations informed by this project and the collective work in this space since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge the key limitations of this endeavor and reflect on areas where the pilot could have made improvements. Connective sees the following gaps in the project:

Firstly, the pilot duration was very short, spanning only four months of operation in the courts with eviction diversion navigators. Due to this limited time frame, Connective adopted an iterative approach and implemented process improvements gradually. Although navigators were present in court for four months, they were functioning at an optimal capacity for only a month and a half. This time constraint represents the primary shortcoming of the pilot.

Unfortunately, four months is insufficient to fully comprehend the intricacies and factors contributing to a successful Eviction Diversion or In-court Resource Navigation program in the Harris County courts. Nevertheless, this pilot experience provided valuable insights previously unanticipated in the planning and design process.

Connective's analysis shows that although in-court resource navigation services were beneficial, a more comprehensive level of case management would have been more effective in this context.

The eviction diversion navigators primarily served as resource experts for tenants appearing in court without the capacity to provide extensive follow-up support and ensure enrollment in the recommended resources. It would have been ideal for the eviction diversion navigators to follow up with the clients a week later with a phone call to ensure that the clients had everything that they needed following the initial touchpoint.

Furthermore, the eviction diversion navigators solely facilitated live referrals for rental assistance and legal aid. In future program designs, Connective believes that conducting live enrollments for most to all resources the navigators were referring clients to would yield better outcomes. This approach aligns with a compassionate and responsive methodology, recognizing that expecting tenants to enroll independently in programs immediately after receiving eviction judgment news is unrealistic.

A recurring obstacle the pilot encountered was the limited and overwhelmed infrastructure of eviction diversion programs in Harris County. Navigators expressed frustration when they found that various social services rejected their clients due to insufficient funds or stringent eligibility requirements. Some clients felt lost in the process and did not receive timely updates on the status of their assistance applications.

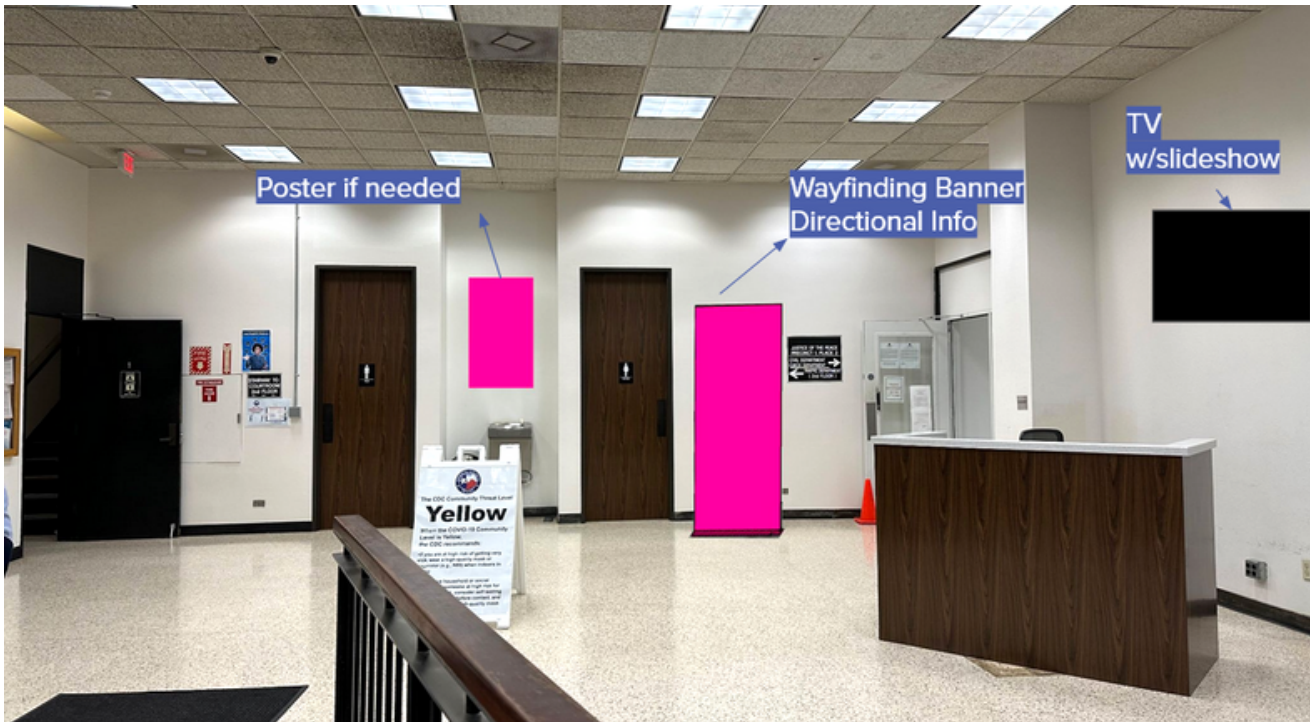
In Eviction Diversion efforts, establishing trust with both tenants and landlords is crucial for achieving win-win solutions. However, the credibility of navigators diminished when the resources they referenced failed to deliver to the clients.

Lastly, although this pilot was possible with the engagement of navigators from an experienced and trusted CBO, coordinating between the CBO and the court posed significant challenges. Navigators were not always fully informed about each specific court's proceedings; similarly, the courts expressed a desire for greater direct coordination with CBOs. For future designs, we recommend that courts have a dedicated resource navigator or eviction diversion facilitator embedded within the court system to serve as a liaison between community service programs and the court.

WAYFINDING PROPOSAL FOR P1-P2

Based on our Court observations, Connective provided discrete spatial and wayfinding recommendations to improve the spatial navigation of court and the eviction process experience for those scheduled for a hearing. See below the draft proposal for Justice of the Peace Court Precinct 1 - Place 2.

P1-P2 wayfinding suggestions for main lobby

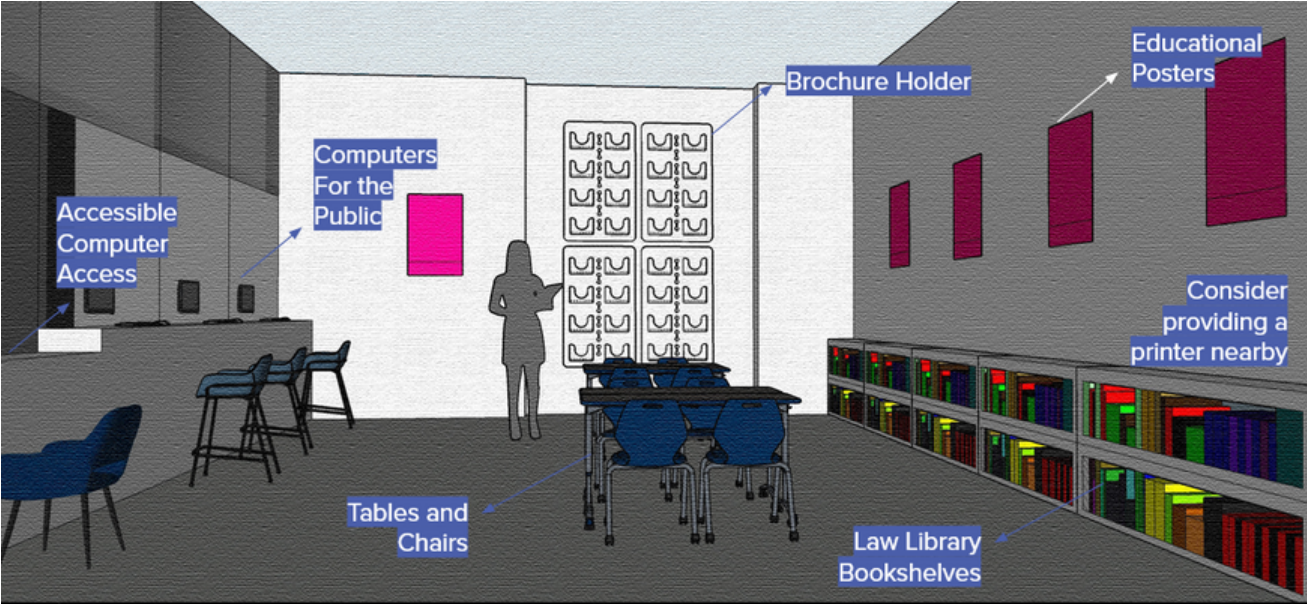


P1-P2 wayfinding suggestions for first floor

BEFORE



AFTER

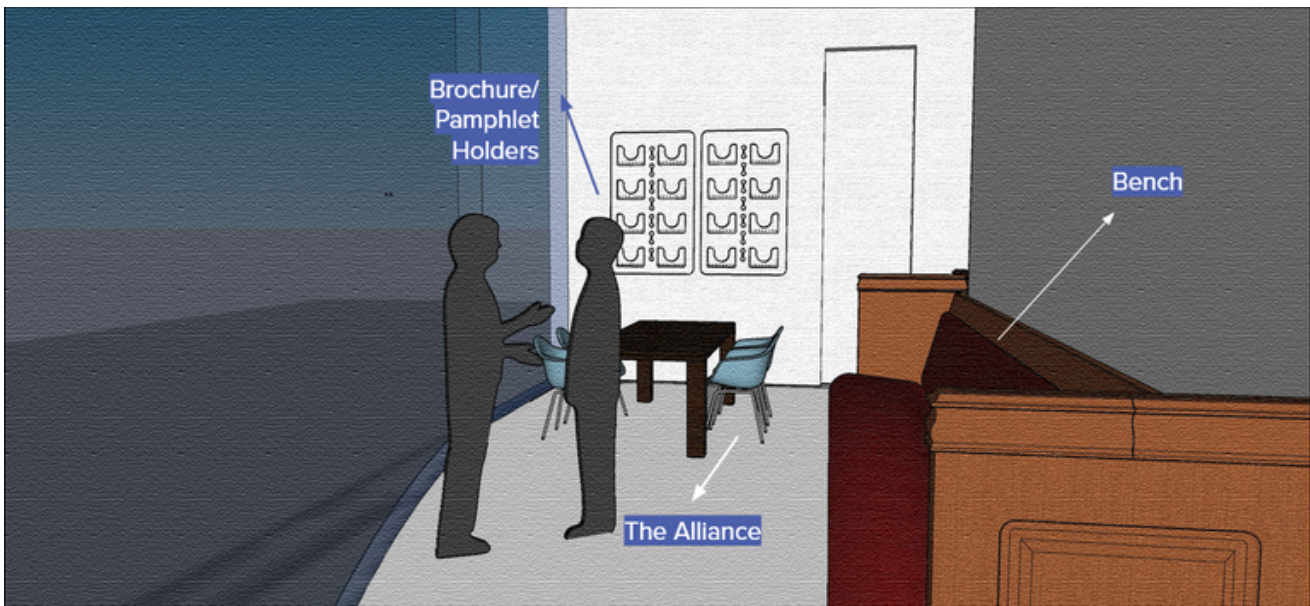
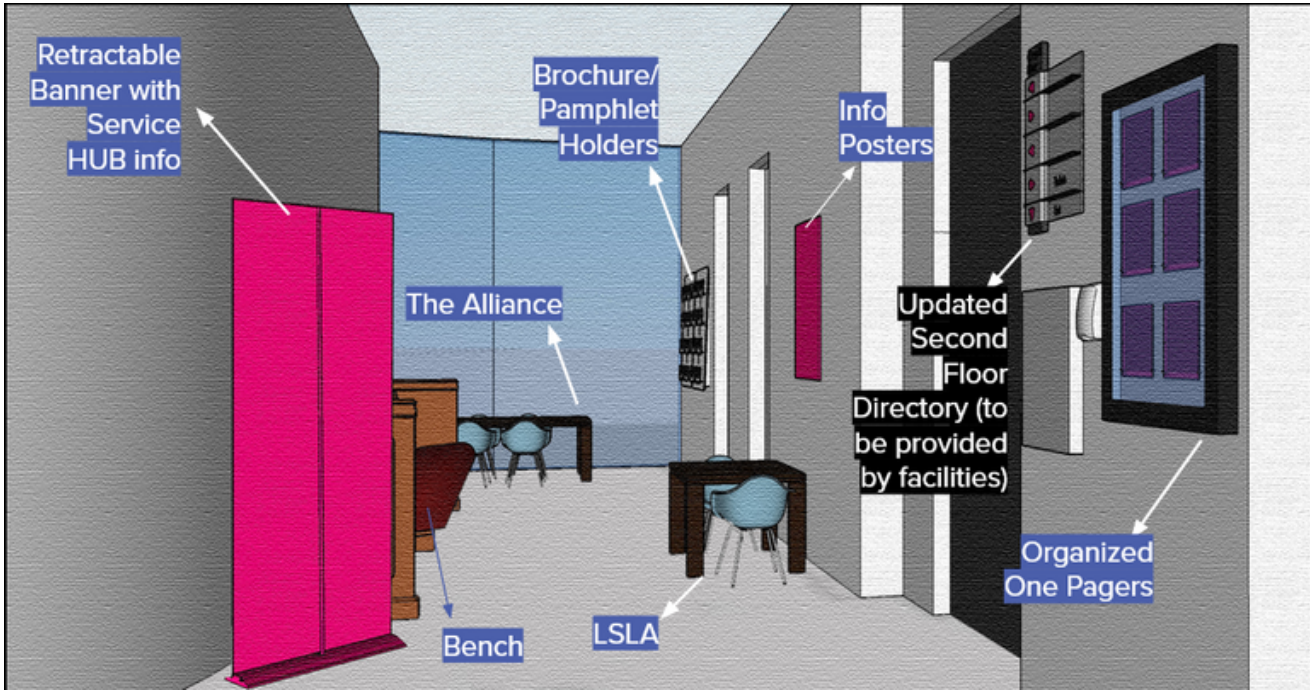


P1-P2 wayfinding suggestions for second floor

BEFORE



AFTER

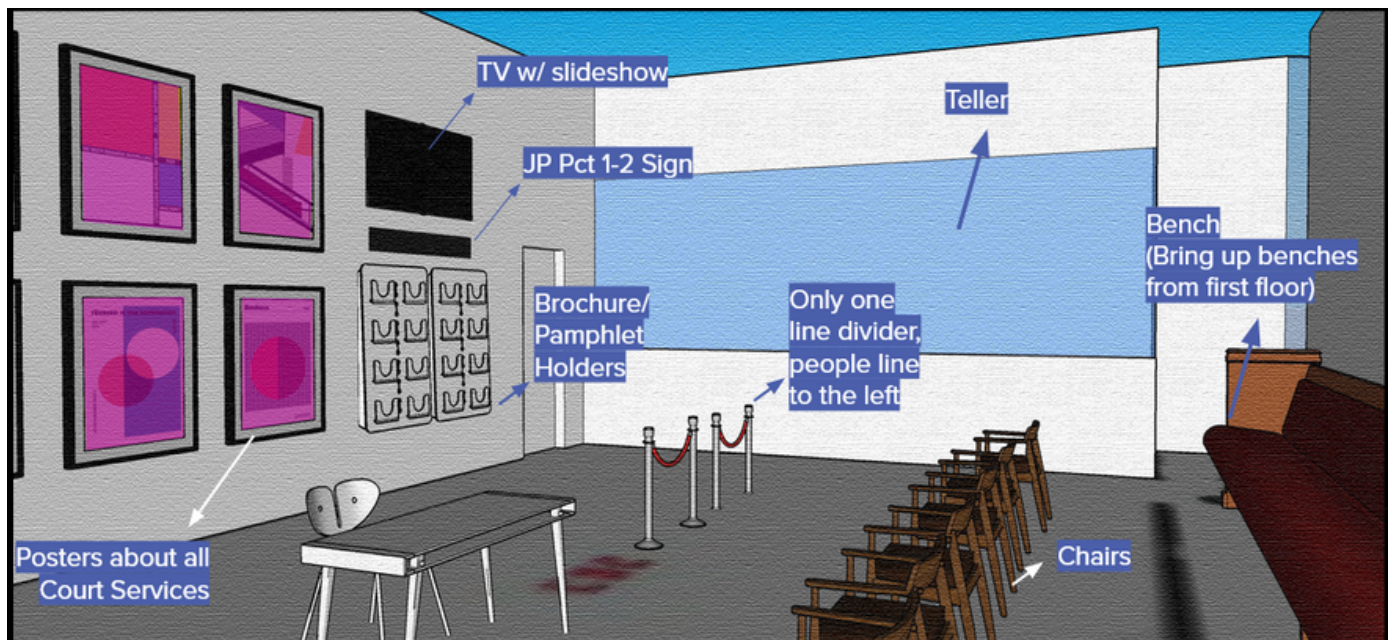


P1-P2 wayfinding suggestions for second floor waiting area and check-in

BEFORE



AFTER



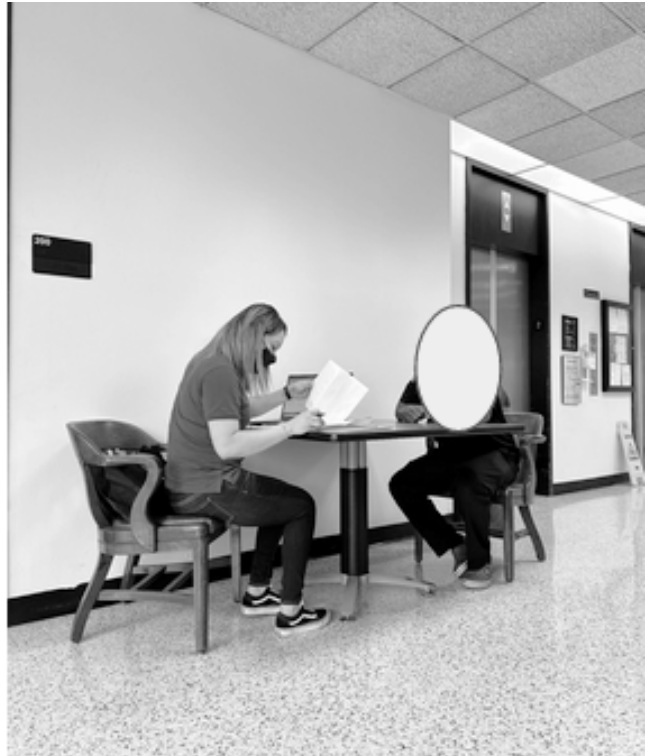
BEFORE



AFTER



Below: Navigators, Service Providers, and Court staff during the pilot program.

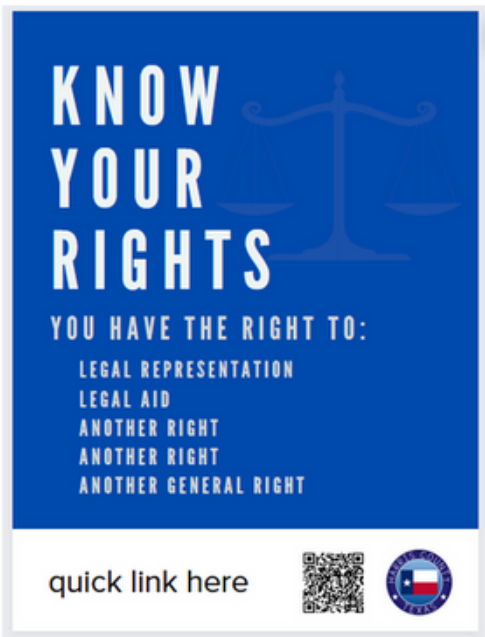


Materials for first and second floor resource hubs:



- Wall-Mounted
- Variety of shapes and sizes, most common is 3x3 or 4x4
- Spec Dimensions: 21.25"H x 18"W
- Slot holds 8.5x11 document
- Usually plastic or acrylic
- Durable and widely available
- Approximately \$150-300/each

We suggest having these at: the resource hub, in the providers area, one on each room and on the second floor lobby area



- Wall-Mounted
- Variety of sizes, colors, materials
- Standard poster Dimensions: 36"H x 24"W
- Can buy inexpensive frames to protect
- Approximately \$25-30/each to print aside from optional frame costs

Materials for courtroom signs:



- Retractable vinyl banner
- Indoor or outdoor vinyl
- 2.5 ft x 6 ft approximately
- Stand sold separately depending on banner style
- Full-color and fully customizable with original design
- Approximately \$120-150/each
- Stand sold separately



- Wall-Mounted
- Variety of sizes, colors
- Spec Dimensions: normally 2"H x 8"W
- Durable and widely available
- Approximately \$20-30/each depending on material and bevelment
- Customizable Text

We suggest one for each courtroom!



- Ceiling-mounted
- Variety of sizes, colors- limited to space size
- Spec Dimensions: limited to available space size
- Approximately \$90-100 each depending on material and bevelment
- Customizable Text
- Budget alternative: foamcore board, heavy study string and ceiling hooks

We suggest this above the main courtroom entrance off of the 2nd floor elevator (after the curved wall):



connective