

Summary

As of May 15, 2023, the U.S. Department of Labor has approved equity grants to forty-one (41) states and jurisdictions. States are continuing to use a diverse slate of strategies to promote equitable access to unemployment compensation programs. Improving services to claimants and expanding access to services by improving technology or implementing new technology are primary areas of focus for most projects, with a core theme of resolving access barriers for underserved populations.

Promoting Equitable Access to Unemployment Compensation Programs: Overview of State Equity Grants

Quantitative Overview of Approved Grants

As of May 15, 2023, The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has approved equity grants to 41 states and jurisdictions. In almost all instances, states are funding multiple projects with one grant, and as a result, the 41 states will implement 164 different projects designed to promote equitable access to unemployment compensation programs. In designing their projects, states had broad flexibility to develop state-specific strategies to promote equitable access within their jurisdiction. The AIR team reviewed and analyzed grant proposals and identified the following for each project:

- project topic, both primary and secondary,
- target populations, and
- languages other than English used in the projects.

States are addressing equitable program access comprehensively through diverse strategies, including an increasing focus on leveraging human-centered design and behavioral insights to identify key opportunities for systems improvement. In some instances, these strategies were also part of broader solutions to address operational, programmatic, or technological issues in UI programs. **Projects address technology improvements and claimant communication linked to underlying equity barriers for specific populations.** Technology improvements are directly focused on improving the customer experience and include messaging systems that create mobile alerts to claimants with necessary actions and graphic based claimant dashboards showing claim status on the claims filing, continued claims, and protests/appeals processes. Communication improvements being implemented include virtual ‘new claimant orientation’ seminars conducted via Teams or Zoom, and videos being used as instructional guides on important program components such as filing a claim, identity verification and weekly certification.

Exhibit 1 lists the seven primary project topics that surfaced in the proposals.

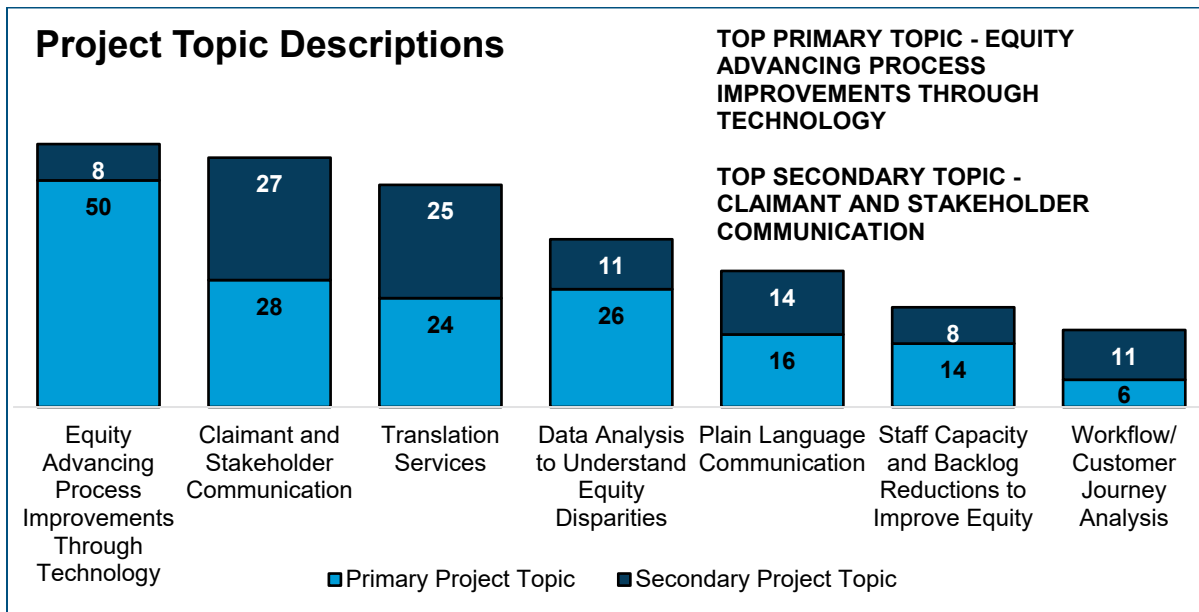
Exhibit 1. Primary Project Topics in Proposals

The team identified seven primary project topics across the 42 proposals:

- Equity-Advancing Process Improvements Through Technology
- Claimant Communications and Claimant Outreach
- Translation Services
- Data Analysis to Understand Equity Disparities
- Plain Language Communication
- Staff Capacity and Backlog Reductions to Improve Equity
- Workflow/Customer Journey Analysis

The **most common areas of focus** for state equity projects were equity-advancing process improvements through technology, equitable access through claimant and stakeholder communication, and data analysis to understand equity disparities. The chart in Exhibit 2 identifies the number of projects that address each topic as either a primary or secondary area of focus.¹

Exhibit 2. Project Topic Descriptions and Count

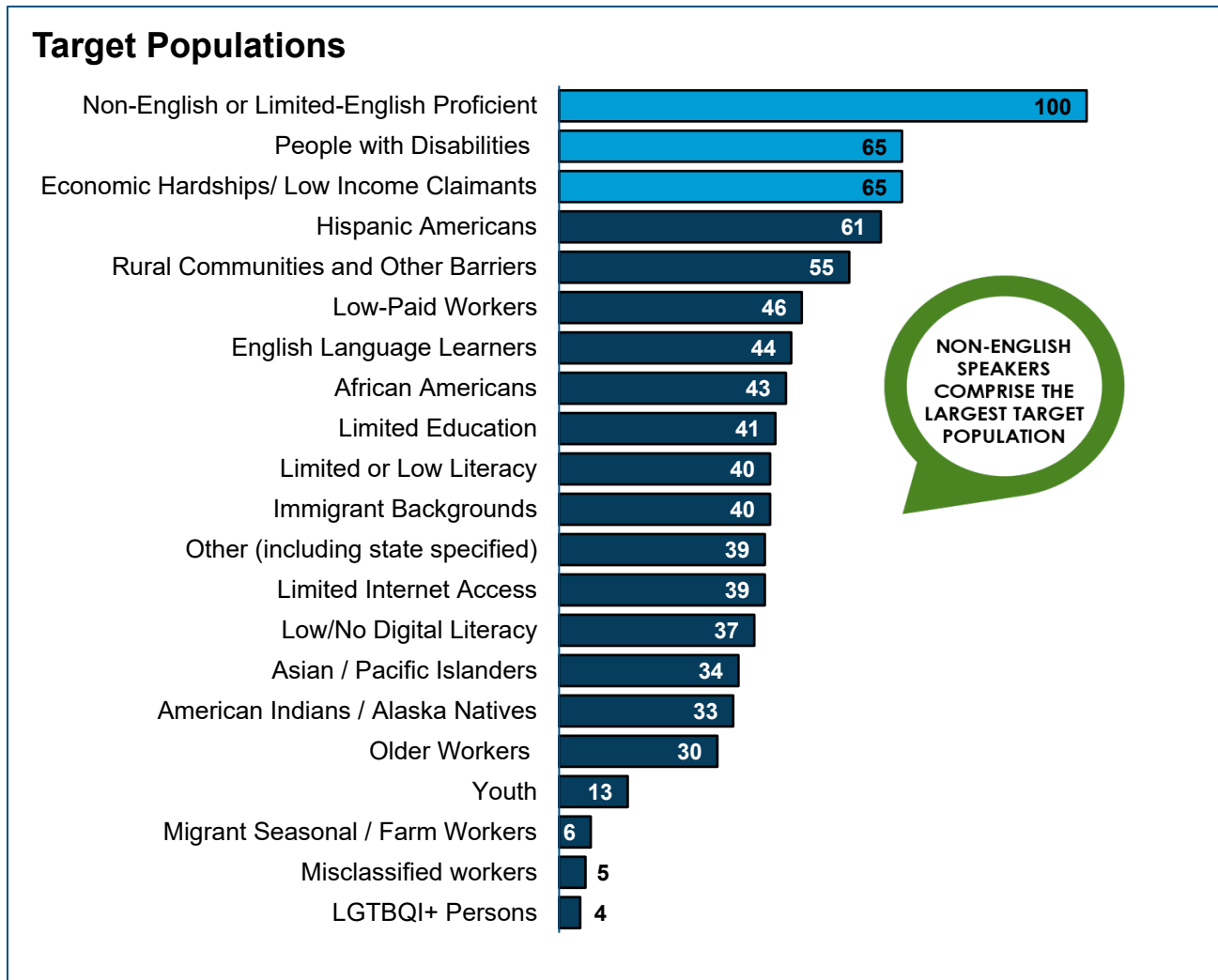


¹ The AIR team reviewed grant proposals from 42 states and jurisdictions involving 164 different projects.

Projects target a wide range of underserved populations. Our review focused on identifying the target populations for each state equity project. Across all states, projects identified seventeen common classifications of underserved populations and eleven other state-specific populations. **The top three populations addressed by the projects are Individuals who are Non-English or Limited-English Proficient, People with Disabilities, and Low-Income Claimants or with Economic Hardships.**

The chart in Exhibit 3 below identifies the list of target populations and the number of projects focusing on each population.

Exhibit 3. Target Population and Project Count



States plan to use equity grants to expand the use of translation services. While only forty-seven (47) projects (out of 164) identified translation services as their primary or secondary topic, our review revealed that 35 states and 1 jurisdiction mentioned the use of a language other than English in their projects. **A great diversity of languages was mentioned.** The team identified thirty-nine (39) unique languages that states will address in their projects. **The predominant language mentioned was Spanish, although several projects also include Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean.**

As states are recognizing the intersectional challenges of multiple barriers for individuals who are part of more than one target population, and states are implementing multiple projects that, when combined, result in a more comprehensive approach to address barriers to expand and improve program access. States are improving program accessibility by expanding their existing language capabilities or implementing new language platforms that integrate into the various access points through which claimants engage, including call center telephony, online and mobile systems, message portal applications, and American Job Centers.

Overview of States' Work Specific to Topics

State projects varied in scope, project type, and focus. Overarching themes from our analysis continue to be the expansion and improvement of services to claimants through combining improvements in technology and business processes. While states are focusing on analyzing demographic data, their projects include more sophisticated data analysis that involves the development of analytics tools that can enable monitoring and tracking metrics for identified underserved populations throughout the claim cycle.

States are combining plain language communication efforts with customer journey analysis, making technological improvements to mobile applications, and expanding language capabilities to online systems and telephony systems. Some states proposed increasing staff capacity and improving access by deploying mobile units to underserved areas within their state, while other states are creating job positions that have bi-lingual requirements to evaluate current program communications and processes and to identify potential equitable access barriers.

Examples of state projects in each project topic area are described below.

Equity Advancing Process Improvements Through Technology

In addition to streamlining specific functional processes such as claim filing and certification, states are also addressing equity barriers by improving and expanding their technical infrastructures to provide easier access to UI services via mobile devices. Additionally, states are incorporating self-scheduling capabilities, implementing dynamic and responsive fact finding as well as incorporating the ability to upload pictures related to their claim, which will facilitate the ease in providing documents needed in the identify verification or adjudication process. The focus on technology projects continues to address equitable barriers in the various agencies facing public applications and communication points.

Streamlining User Experience

- Increasing self-service functionality for claimants to include straightforward, simple questions, improved navigation through system screens, and built-in questionnaires based on claimant responses to improve the timeliness of eligibility determinations.
- Implementing a customer appointment self-scheduler for eligibility reviews and reemployment services, including accessing services at local/regional job fairs and eligibility assessments.
- Increasing the functionality of the mobile application to provide claimants the ability to:
 - schedule meetings with adjudicators.
 - view or complete action items that will facilitate determining eligibility or payment of their weekly claim.
 - view the status of their appeal.
 - view monetary details regarding their claim.
 - view issue details.
 - view child support summary information and dependent information.
- Updating the fact-finding process that will result in a simplified, easy to understand process tailored to the claimant through dynamic and responsive questions based upon a claimant's answers to previous questions (mobile device friendly and available in English and Spanish).
- Identifying possible “problem points” in applications by tracking claimant exit from application and capturing the device type used to access the application. The data can be used to identify areas for improving claimant services, including services for underserved populations.
- Developing an automated chatbot to provide people with real-time assistance while filing their initial claim.
- Allowing users to upload pictures of a document from their mobile device, to attach to their claim within the UI Benefits solution.
- Developing a messaging system that creates mobile alerts to claimants regarding necessary actions related to their claim.
- Adding features to the claimant dashboard incorporating graphics and succinct language regarding the claim status while the same information is sent to staff via the staff portal. If more detailed instructions for claimants are needed, they are provided via an embedded link.
- Designing an interactive communications platform incorporating all the tools claimants and employers use, including the contact center, online portal, IVR, Chatbot, Live Chat/Screen Share, Email, Text, and USPS Correspondence.

Addressing Inequity and Accessibility Issues

- Expanding program access for underserved populations by enhancing the functionality of mobile applications to allow text messages and emails to be sent to claimants, to facilitate call scheduling and other reminders.
- Updating claimant facing screens by improving navigation, incorporating the plain language, and increasing the intuitive level of the user interface to increase claimant understanding for marginalized and underserved communities.

- Procuring technology contractor to design a new human centered system developed using agile processes.
- Outfitting American Job Centers (AJCs) with a hardware and software that will allow claimants to connect via video chat in Microsoft Teams with an experienced agent in any part of the state.
- Modernizing the online functionality of the UI system by incorporating a multiple language platform within the claim filing system for all customer facing screens, including a secure online messaging system.
- Enhancing telephony functionality by incorporating multiple languages into the online system.
- Updating the contact center operations by implementing an Artificial Intelligence (AI) voice driven menu solution to improve the customer experience.
- Modifying the technical infrastructure to support integration of interactive language translation software, including both static and real time translation capabilities.
- Upgrading correspondence generating software to support multiple languages.
- Implementing fact finding software that allows questions and responses in the claimants' preferred languages during the adjudication process.
- Creating an off-line application to better serve claimants historically underserved, marginalized, or adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality at times of severe weather. The off-line application will be available in: WIOA Workforce Areas, American Job Centers, agency mobile units, state agency partners and secondary education partners and nonprofits partners as well as union halls, and private employers to reach a broader audience.

Enhancing Data Analysis and Reporting

- Building demographic data analysis capacity after system modernization by incorporating additional demographic data elements in the claim intake process.
- Creating a single reporting tool by combining data from multiple platforms (benefits management, phone system, public website, employer wage reporting system); using combined data to analyze claimant outcomes.
- Developing business analytics tool to monitor and track changes in outcomes for individuals in specific demographic categories in functional areas in the claim cycle; Claims Intake, Payment of weekly Benefits, Identity Verification, Non-Monetary, Monetary, Appeals, Unreported Earnings, Overpayments, Work Search Audits, Eligibility Reviews, RESEA, Job Fair Disqualifications.
- Analyzing timeliness data for population groups with UI system to identify disparities; using findings to develop strategies to remove barriers and drive staff training curriculum.
- Evaluating customer journey using data-driven models to identify areas of inequity; developing and presenting visualizations of data; making recommendations for UI business and system improvements.

Claimant Communications

Improvements in claimant communications fall into three sub categories: improvements that result in real time updates, such as claimant dashboards accessible via smartphone and providing automated notifications to claimants informing them about their claim status; improvements to make the claims process easier by creating a virtual ‘new claimant orientation’ seminar by subject matter experts on claims filing, continued claims, and protests/appeals processes; and language support by implementing a telecommunications solution that would connect a claimant via video conferencing with a UI contact center agent.

Real Time Updates

- Improving access by implementing claimant dashboard accessibility via smartphone to provide information on their claim throughout the claim cycle, as well as benefit payments, messages, and correspondence.
- Establishing automated notifications via text and email to claimants informing them of their claim status and key milestones.
- Incorporating text messaging to communicate more effectively with claimants.

Making Claims Process Easier

- Rewriting UI program rules with a focus on streamlining language to make them easier for diverse audiences to understand.
- Creating a virtual ‘new claimant orientation’ seminar, conducted via Teams or Zoom, by subject matter experts on the claims filing, continued claims, and protests/appeals processes.
- Developing videos to be used as instructional guides for the unemployment program on various program components, File Claim, ID Verification, File Weekly Certifications, Benefit Calculations, Non-Monetary Issues, Payment Options, Work Search, Appeals, Self-Employment Assistance Program and Benefit Payment Control that will be loaded to social media and agency websites.

Language Support

- Removing language barriers by implementing a telecommunications solution that will allow claimants to call, chat or communicate via video conferencing with a UI contact center agent, regardless of language.
- Gathering data on language preference from UI claimants, capturing this data in the initial claimant record to trigger automatic translation requests and identifying the need for translation services for these claimants.

Customer Outreach

- Providing mobile outreach activities by procuring mobile units, with many equipped to process UI claims and payments.

- Navigator staff, in some instances bilingual staff, are using mobile units to eliminate access barriers for traditionally vulnerable, underserved populations.
- Mobile units allow staff to reach the claimants where they are located, many living a significant distance from agency facility, and/or with limited broadband access.
- Conducting surveys with existing or previous customers to identify underserved populations and increasing partnerships with community-based organizations serving those target populations.
- Conducting user research to identify website content most frequently accessed by users; identifying a website redesign that will make this content easier to find.
- Determining the best communication methods to target populations and increasing agency presence through community outreach and engagement efforts.
- Offering grant funding to community-based organizations to identify opportunities to increase education and outreach and equitable access through focus groups and user testing.
- Implementing a comprehensive outreach plan focused on underserved and hard to reach populations and aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of UI programs.

Translation Services

States are starting to look at incorporating translation services more comprehensively through the UI customer journey and throughout their technical infrastructure. The expanded use of translation services is seen in the use of other languages in instructional videos, customer facing web pages and mobile screens, and phone system scripts. **More states are beginning to look at more comprehensive translation tools to integrate into their communication and technology infrastructure.** Some projects are also translating websites and claimant communications into several languages.

- Procuring and implementing a language translation tool and services to translate languages at multiple communication points interfacing with the UI agency, such as:
 - Unemployment Help website.
 - Unemployment IVR (Interactive Voice Response) automated phone system.
 - Unemployment Voice Bot used to assist claimants in filing weekly claims as well as checking status.
 - Unemployment Chat Bot used to answer frequently asked questions via chat.
 - Unemployment Live chat to interact with contact center agents with two-way translation via chat.
- Translating all Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) and Eligibility Review related screens into Spanish.
- Translating mobile application screens into Spanish to improve navigability.
- Upgrading online systems to display claimant screens in additional languages.
- Creating short instructional videos, in English and Spanish, to explain common UI services.
- Expanding the functionality of the online Benefits system to incorporate most encountered languages used by limited English individuals accessing the UI services.

Data Analysis to Understand Equity Disparities

Data analysis projects included in the proposals typically involve analyzing data points from the customer journey or **analyzing large data populations to understand and identify equity disparities. States are creating equity focused dashboards that identify, organize, analyze, and present claimant demographic characteristics in the context of claims processing performance.** One state is **digitizing and analyzing youth worker data in context with underserved UI populations and identifying outreach strategies for youth workers to inform them about the UI program.**

- Identifying administrative process issues and improvements that would eliminate obstacles to program access by utilizing data from equity focused data reports.
- Implementing geocoding of claimant addresses to allow for better evaluation of internal data and targeted outreach.
- Through engagement with U.S. DOL Equity Data Partnership, completing an assessment that will provide demographic or geographic characteristics of people who apply for, receive, or who are denied UI. An analysis of denial of initial eligibility and ongoing eligibility by demographic or geography attributes will also be completed.
- Expanding data analytic capacity to generate quarterly equity related reports with UI demographic data that identifies: 1) likelihood to file; 2) payment timeliness; and 3) exhaustion of benefits. This information will be used to create an outreach effort with advocacy groups.
- Examining administrative data to determine how it can be paired with publicly available data (e.g., LMI (Labor Market Information), Census, BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics), LEHD (Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics) to draw meaningful and actionable conclusions about UI access delineated by demographic, geographic and other differentiating information (such as reciprocity rate, application rate, nonseparation issues per week claimed, denial rates, non-monetary determination timeliness, appeal and reversal rates and denied claim accuracy).
- Making improvements in data structures to analyze demographic information (such as race/ethnicity, sex, age, and disability status for claims, adjudication, appeals and payment outcomes).
- Creating Equity Analytics Dashboard for program analysis and administration purposes to look at claimant participation at various stages of claim filing status (such as initial claims, fact finding, adjudication, appeals, weekly certification, monetary protests, and identifying elapsed times for releasing payment and determining eligibility).
- Analyzing demographic UI data to determine variances between the UI claimant populations and the general labor force specifically focuses on appeal backlog and overpayment populations.
- Developing dynamic reports using UI claims data to produce detailed information on time lapse from the date of the new initial claim to certification and identify inequitable delays in certification. Certifications beyond the normal threshold will generate a survey emailed to claimants to gather information about the customer experience.
- Digitizing and analyzing archival youth worker related data to identify how youth workers may intersect

with other communities underserved by the UI program. This analysis will provide the following:

- Ability to compare youth worker data with wage records to identify any patterns of under the table cash payments.
 - Identify potential patterns of monetary ineligibility.
 - Identify whether youth workers have filed wage claims.
 - Identify root cause of the several types of UI ineligibility among youth workers.
 - Outcomes will inform better marketing and outreach campaigns focused on youth workers to inform them on the UI program.
- Establishing an administrator responsible for analyzing data analytics to identify populations potentially underserved and generating a quarterly report on findings.

Plain Language

The **use of plain language** in UI informational materials as well as claimant facing application screens to provide **UI program information in a more accessible format is a consistent primary focus of many equity projects**. Additionally, this functions as one of the approaches used to address UI program accessibility in certain states. The use of plain language is being seen in all types of paper, electronic, and digital communication. The **use of behavioral insights and human centered design is also being paired with plain language to result in program communications that are understandable and easy to navigate for all populations accessing the UI program**.

- Simplifying and improving vital UI communication materials in paper, electronic, or digital format using plain language, behavioral insights, and human centered design.
- Simplifying fact-finding experience for claimants by creating dynamic and responsive questions using plain language, driven by a decision tree within the Information Technology (IT) system, to tailor the fact-finding experience to the individual claimant.
- Revising claimant facing screens in the UI benefits application using plain language and re-deploying them for easier use by claimants.
- Revising phone system scripts using plain language and redeploying them for easier use by claimants.
- Creating web chat scripts using plain language.
- Implementing plain language on the system generated claimant-facing communications including reminders, educational materials and claimant-specific eligibility documents and forms to enhance customer service and minimize claimant confusion.

Staff Capacity and Backlog Reductions to Improve Equity - Customer Service Improvements Through Tactical Staffing

States are **creating specific units focused on providing equitable program access for underserved populations**, adding new positions to address backlogged work in specific functional areas, and expanding UI service in job center locations. **States are increasing bi-lingual staff to focus on evaluating current program communications and processes to identify potential equitable access barriers and make recommendations.**

- Creating new staff positions focused on increasing responsiveness to customers with barriers, helping claimants navigate the claims process, and conducting outreach to target populations.
- Hiring claimant liaisons for specific geographic locations with high concentrations of target populations within a state. Liaisons will collaborate closely with community organizations aligned with specific groups to identify community barriers and provide solutions.
- Increasing staffing to address appeals backlogs. One state's project will be looking at quarterly appeals specific metrics, timeliness metrics, average case age and wait time for a hearing for each targeted demographic group.
- Creating a business unit focusing on equitable access for UI claimants.
- Adding UI staff to local job centers to improve customer service.
- Hiring Spanish speaking staff for call centers and training interviewers to serve Spanish speaking claimants more effectively.
- Hiring bilingual staff to work directly with claims representatives in assisting claimants with language barriers as well as evaluate current adjudication and appeals program processes to identify potential equitable access issues.

Workflow/Customer Journey Analysis

States are **analyzing workflow and the customer journey to identify potential barriers to accessing the UI program effectively.** The use of Human-centered design and behavioral insights is expanding into more states.

- Using equity data reports, train service delivery staff to interpret reports and review administrative processes for potential improvements.
- Using behavioral insights and plain language to identify, develop, and implement improvements to the equitable provision of benefits.
- Using Human Centered Design (HCD) best practices and behavioral insights to improve the digital experience of claimants
 - Studying the customer journey while engaging with the UI system to identify areas of inequity.
 - Reviewing current workflow and queue process of monetary determinations that need additional work; implementing changes to resolve monetary determinations more efficiently.
 - Performing a customer journey analysis that will include a customer service quality evaluation (including a review of all communications and letters).
 - Evaluating the appeals customer journey to include the current appeals environment, processes, and practices.

DOL continues to award additional equity grants to states. As additional state equity projects are approved, the mix of project topics, target populations, and languages continues to diversify. The **use of technology for major system upgrades**, such as improving web applications or claimant facing screens and committing an entire grant **to address equity barriers in a states' technology infrastructure**, is a new trend from earlier approved equity grants. States are also **investing in modernizing telephony and online and mobile applications by integrating multiple language platforms at various customer entry points to provide equitable access to limited English-speaking claimants**. In addition, more states are **pursuing projects involving equity related data analysis** that involve reviewing detailed claim, eligibility, and exhaustion data. In addition to **improving data structures, creating Equity Analytics Dashboards, states are using UI operational data to identify variances in service levels within underserved populations in specific functional UI processes**. Some states are taking a more comprehensive approach to customer outreach by using equity funds to **create customer outreach plans incorporating community-based organizations** that represent the underserved populations. States are continuing to expand their understanding and focus on providing more equitable access to the UI program.