

Meeting the Emergency Moment:

Key Takeaways from Delivering Remote
Municipal Financial Counseling Services

Introduction

Across the country, even in the best of times, Americans struggle with their finances – almost one in five American households have zero, or negative, net worth, and a quarter of families have no retirement savings. Almost 40% of American adults aren't able to cover a \$400 emergency. The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought these financial challenges into focus: [73% of Americans](#) say COVID-19 has reduced their family's income, with nearly half saying they would be without any income at all if they were unable to work because of illness. The financial effects of the pandemic will likely be felt by families with low incomes for years; as just one example, an estimated [28 million renter households](#) are in danger of eviction as a result of COVID-19.

Local governments are working to help their residents weather the health and financial impacts of the pandemic. In many cities and counties, that means deploying their Financial Empowerment Centers (FECs), which provide professional, one-on-one financial counseling as a public service. Local leaders were able to offer FEC financial counseling as a critical component of their emergency response infrastructure; the fact that this service already existed, and was embedded into the fabric of municipal anti-poverty efforts, meant that it could quickly pivot to meet new COVID-19 needs, including through offering remote financial counseling. This brief will describe how FEC partners identified the right technology; developed skills to deliver counseling remotely; messaged the availability of FEC services as part of their localities' COVID-19 response; and shared lessons learned with their FEC counterparts around the country.

The FEC Model

First piloted in New York City under Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in 2008, the Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund (CFE Fund) is working to replicate the FEC model in dozens of cities and counties across the country under its [FECPublic platform](#). There are currently 20 operational FECs, with 10 more in the planning phase working towards launch; existing FECs have worked with over 108,000 clients, helping them reduce individual debt by over \$150 million, and increasing their families' savings by more than \$23 million.



At the Financial Empowerment Centers, professionally-trained FEC counselors help consumers with low and moderate incomes manage their finances, pay down debt, increase savings, establish and build credit, and access safe and affordable mainstream banking products. At the core of the FEC model is the integration of counseling into other social services, including housing and foreclosure prevention, workforce development, prisoner reentry, benefits access, domestic violence services, and more. FEC counselors go through a rigorous training process, in accordance with the CFE Fund's [FEC Counselor Training Standards](#). In addition, counselors collect over 200 data points on the client's financial health and the impact of counseling in a centralized national database, FEC Boost Outcomes Tool (FECBOT); client progress is tracked across eight outcomes that measure meaningful financial behavior changes, such as reducing non-mortgage debt by 10% or opening a safe and affordable banking account.

As local leaders in FEC cities and counties know, local government is uniquely poised to play a critical role in addressing family financial security. Cities are touchpoints for people in need, controlling the funding, program entry and referral points, and policies that together can be harnessed to effect systemic change – including during an emergency like the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Local leaders have a mandate for citywide scale, as well as the on-the-ground relationships and accountability to do so consistently and with high quality. Government leaders also have powerful incentives to invest in these programs, both short and long term, since financially stable individuals and families are critical for a city's success. Research from [the Urban Institute](#) demonstrates that economically strong families are better able to weather economic shocks, contribute to and grow the local economy, and help their children succeed.

Pivoting to Meet The COVID-19 Crisis

As many city and county leaders found, the existing FEC infrastructure was a critical foundation for helping residents as they grappled with the financial impacts of COVID-19. The existence of this city- and county-led, data-driven, professional service, as well as its connections to other city and nonprofit programs, meant that there was already a trusted place to direct residents in need of intensive assistance with their finances. However, there were key considerations that had to be addressed to provide remote FEC financial counseling: the technological infrastructure; the way that counseling was delivered; and outreach and marketing about this critical available service. In addition, the CFE Fund and FEC partners created deliberate opportunities to learn from each other and share best practices on delivering FEC counseling during COVID-19.

Identifying the Right Technology for Clients

↳ **KEY TAKEAWAY:** *Setting up the platforms to deliver remote services was a critical first step; security, ease of use for both counselors and clients, and ability to support counseling functions like screen sharing were key considerations.*

The most immediate need was getting FECs set up with the technology and processes to operate remotely, including finding the right virtual platform and transforming the counseling infrastructure to support remote efforts. There were a number of important considerations in finding the right platform to leverage for virtual counseling. First, as counselors and clients often share important personal information, such as credit reports and bank statements, FECs had to consider which platforms provided end-to-end encryption and could best protect client information and data. In addition, it was important that the platform allow screen sharing; during in-person sessions, counselors and clients typically view documents and information together, so it was critical that the remote experience facilitated the same type of sharing. Finally, both counselors and clients have a range of familiarity and comfort with technology, so it was important to find multiple options that could work, depending on client and counselor need and capability. FECs most often used Zoom for video sessions or delivered counseling over the phone or using the WhatsApp app; clients were able to indicate their preference for a phone or video session on the newly-redesigned appointment form.

In addition, many elements of the counseling process needed to be changed to support remote counseling. For example, at the beginning of a regular in-person session, the client signs both a general consent form as well as a credit pull authorization. For remote counseling, these forms were available electronically via text or email, and clients could submit their signed forms electronically as well. Clients will also soon be able to sign outcome documentation forms electronically, which FEC partners (and the CFE Fund) use to document and verify that clients actually are achieving FEC outcomes. In addition, the CFE Fund added a new FEC outcome to track clients who were connected to a public support program (housing support, unemployment, direct financial assistance) due to the impact of COVID-19; the CFE Fund also added a new series of questions to FECBOT to track how a client is being impacted by COVID-19. Counselors also practiced sharing their screens to review documents with clients (like a credit report), and making three-way calls (for sessions when they might need to dial in a third party like a student loan servicer or an interpreter).

“We sent a pretty comprehensive email to everyone on how to download and install the app. We also included the phone number the counselors will be calling from so clients know to answer. Scamming is rampant and people don’t answer unknown calls because they think it’s a collector.”

—FEC Pittsburgh Manager

Of course, transitioning to remote counseling came with a number of challenges. Counselors and clients sometimes had spotty internet access, which made using a video platform difficult. If the remote session was the client’s first, this sometimes meant that much of their first appointment – their introduction to FEC services – was consumed by technology issues. In response, some FECs developed a FAQ document and instructions on downloading and using the technology, which they shared with clients before the session; other FECs equipped the staff member who schedules client appointments to share this information with clients. During the session, if there were technology issues, counselors reminded clients that they could schedule as many follow up sessions as they wanted and ensured that any issues were addressed so that the next session could focus solely on counseling. Many FEC partners set up practice sessions between counselors to familiarize themselves with the technology, develop language to walk clients through using the technology, and figure out how to guide clients through completing electronic forms.

Building Remote Relationships

↳ **KEY TAKEAWAY:** *Beyond the technology, the main difference with remote financial counseling was the need to virtually build a counselor–client relationship — often the foundation of a successful session. Counselors soon found that remote counseling required additional client management skills beyond what is needed for in-person counseling.*

In addition to getting comfortable in using the technology, counselors also had to adjust the way they built a relationship with their clients. The CFE Fund's [evaluation of the FEC model](#) found that the counselor-client relationship was a key driver of FEC outcomes; clients cited the open, empathetic, and normalizing approach that counselors took, as well as the encouragement and even partnership they felt from their counselor.

Establishing trust and rapport was more difficult during a phone or video session than at an in-person appointment. To build this trust, counselors focused on setting expectations from the beginning about what the session would entail, and describing how clients could prepare to get the most out of the session: clients needed to find a time and place that was quiet and as free of distractions as possible. Counselors reminded clients that counseling would be most helpful with their full attention, and took care to set expectations accordingly, without lecturing.

During the session itself, counselors also had to adjust their behavior to a virtual context. At the beginning of the session, counselors focused on trying to build a relationship, even though they were not in person with the client: they took time to get to know clients on a personal level, asking how clients were doing, how their children were, etc. As the session progressed, counselors also had to make sure they and the client were understanding each other - this was especially true for counseling sessions over the phone, when counselors and clients couldn't see faces or body language. Counselors had to pay close attention to clients' tone, as well as their own tone. Non-verbal cues that would ordinarily tell a counselor if a client understood the next steps, or if they were feeling uncomfortable or defensive, are impossible to see over the phone, and can be difficult to interpret even over video. Counselors had to be intentional, through verbal cues and pauses, to make sure the client comprehends the conversation and has space to talk, using questions like "How does that sound?" or "Do you have any questions or comments about that?" Finally, counseling requires clients to share extremely personal information about their finances with a near-stranger, which is even more difficult when the session is remote. Some clients had trouble sharing openly or expressing themselves over the phone or video, so counselors had to encourage them to open up. Counselors often dealt with this by pivoting the conversation to topics that clients would feel more comfortable with, to earn their trust and establish rapport, and only then would turn back to the financial counseling directly.

Counselor Self-Care

Providing financial counseling remotely, during a global pandemic, was challenging for counselors. First, counselors had to get used to working from home, which brought its own challenges: some counselors' home offices were not as conducive to working as their actual office; some counselors have children or other family members who need care or attention during the work day; and some counselors missed the rapport of working alongside their colleagues. In addition, COVID-19 meant that a larger proportion of clients than normal were experiencing a serious financial crisis, like a job loss or inability to pay rent. Counselors sometimes internalized their clients' feelings of stress and anxiety, compounded by the fact that some counselors themselves were dealing with the financial, health, and emotional impacts of the pandemic.

To address these challenges, counselors were encouraged to block personal time on their calendars to relax and recharge. Counselors were also encouraged to communicate with their managers when they needed a break, and to intentionally schedule time to stay engaged with colleagues. In addition, the CFE Fund also provided counselors with trainings on self-care and crisis management to equip them to remain mentally strong and have productive counseling sessions with clients in crisis.

Communicating the Availability of Remote FEC Services

↳ **KEY TAKEAWAY:** *FEC partners leveraged local communications channels to reach vulnerable populations and ensure that messages about FEC services were central to government and nonprofit partners' emergency response communications and service offerings.*

Mayors and local leaders quickly realized that FEC financial counseling could play a critical role as part of their municipal COVID response – and that residents, struggling with the financial impact of this crisis moment, needed to know that remote FEC services were available. As vulnerable residents lost their jobs or experienced a reduction in wages, the financial impact of COVID-19 was devastating; the FEC infrastructure was a resource that already existed and was embedded into municipal infrastructure, so it could immediately be deployed to help with new COVID-19 related needs. Local leaders spread the word about remote FEC services through a number of different channels, and FECs also crafted deliberate marketing strategies to spread the word.

FEC cities and counties leveraged their communications channels to ensure that residents knew about FEC services as a critical part of the locality’s emergency response efforts; they knew that resources for dealing with the financial impact of COVID-19 were almost as important for resources for dealing with the health impacts of COVID. Some cities sent out press releases or included talking points about the FECs in Mayoral addresses or speeches about COVID-19 resources. Others engaged with local media outlets, or used City social media channels to highlight how FECs could help residents struggling with their finances. The CFE Fund also created general talking points and messaging guidance on telling the story of how FECs could help residents during COVID, which partners customized based on specific financial issues and target populations in their communities. Messaging focused on the range of issues that FECs could help with during COVID, from stimulus payments to unemployment and rental assistance.

In addition, FECs reached out to partners and former clients to highlight the availability of remote services. FECs reached out to partners to share how clients could sign up for remote counseling; some FECs went further, hosting partner webinars to understand how organizations were impacted by COVID and how it might affect FEC referrals, share the availability of remote FEC sessions and detail how FECs could help clients, and ensure partners knew how to refer clients for remote sessions. Of course, some of the organizations who have strong referral partnerships with FECs are also struggling with the impact of COVID-19 and are not fully operational - as a result, they have been referring fewer clients than normal. In response, FECs are working to identify new partners and outreach methods to ensure a steady flow of clients. Some FECs also contacted past FEC clients, or used targeted social media advertising, to let them know about remote FEC services.

“We had a webinar series with our referral partners to give them up-to-date information because things were changing so quickly, such as new unemployment insurance information and new SNAP information, and share information about the virtual FEC. We used our financial knowledge not just for counseling but to put out into the community and share with our partners”

—Nashville FEC Manager

Learning From Each Other: The FEC Learning Community

↳ **KEY TAKEAWAY:** *Frequent, regularly scheduled meetings with FEC partners created feedback loops and facilitated opportunities to quickly uncover challenges and issues, brainstorm solutions, and identify mechanisms to quickly deliver support and provide updates.*

As the severity of the COVID pandemic – and the need to transition to remote financial counseling – became clear, FEC counselors and managers expressed interest in learning from their counterparts across the country. Despite the heavy workloads and increasing demand on their time as they pivoted all aspects of their program to remote service, partners underscored how valuable it was to have an ongoing opportunity to talk to and learn from each other, as well as share updates on relevant policies and resources related to COVID-19. Even in the early days of this quickly unfolding crisis, FEC partners so valued the opportunity to connect with each other that they opted to gather as a learning community every week; these meetings are still ongoing, albeit on a bi-weekly basis.

The CFE Fund created two tracks of learning community meetings: one for FEC nonprofit and local government managers, and one for FEC counselors. These meetings, conducted remotely via Zoom, provide a space for informal conversations on program updates and resources, as well as for more formal presentations on relevant new benefits and public policies. They also allowed participants to ask each other questions and share updates on their work. These learning community meetings were a critical opportunity for counselors and managers to get feedback and assistance in real time, both from their counterparts across the country who were doing similar work as well as from CFE Fund staff. They also allowed the CFE Fund to share relevant information from across its programmatic portfolio; for example, as the CFE Fund’s national Bank On initiative produced partner toolkit and resources on the importance of a safe banking account for direct deposit of stimulus payments and unemployment benefits, they were also shared with FEC partners.

Learning Community Topics



Manager meetings covered:

- best practices in remote counseling
- overviews of CARES Act funding and student loan repayment options
- tips for fully integrating FEC service within the citywide COVID-19 response
- an overview of consumer protection issues, including those related to COVID-19

Counselor meetings focused on:

- counseling clients in crisis moments
- the impact of COVID-19 related relief policies, like rent relief, on credit
- messaging the importance of banking access, including to receive stimulus payments
- counselor self-care

The CFE Fund also created opportunities to learn from FEC partners about the types of supports they needed as they pivoted to remote counseling. CFE staff established a Counselor Working Group to provide guidance on the ways that the CFE Fund could support counselors through trainings, knowledge sharing, and other resources. As one key resource, the CFE Fund created a FEC COVID-19 Response page in the national FEC database, and has been sharing a range of policy information, tip sheets, talking points, and other resources for partners. The CFE Fund also provided guidance on local policy areas FECs should examine (consumer protection, local rent/eviction moratorium policies, etc.)

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Thanks to the hard work of FEC partners across the country, FEC financial counseling services are fully integrated into city and county emergency response and recovery efforts. Residents in these localities have access to professional, one-on-one financial counseling as a free public service to help them manage the immediate financial impact of the COVID crisis – all from the safety of their home. One silver lining of the crisis has been the increased accessibility of services – offering counseling remotely has allowed clients who face barriers to in-person sessions to still receive these important services. Clients who are home-bound, have transportation barriers, are located far away from FEC locations, or are unavailable during normal business hours now have increased access to FEC services. Some FECs have also reported that their no-show rates, of clients who don't show up for an appointment, have drastically decreased, since clients find it much easier to access the session remotely (versus physically getting to a Center).

FEC partners are also thinking about how to manage the medium-term consequences of COVID, beyond the initial crisis moment – in the coming months, the impact of expiring rent and eviction moratoria, coupled with the likely end of expanded unemployment assistance and potential additional job losses, may lead to a wave of evictions across the country. The CFE Fund and FEC partners are already thinking about how counseling services can help residents and communities get ahead of a potential eviction crisis, as well as meet increased demand from residents newly needing FEC services.

The experience of FEC partners shows that municipally-led financial counseling is a critical component of emergency response infrastructure, and that FEC programs can be adapted to meet local context – even when that context is a global pandemic requiring significant changes in service delivery. Local governments across the country are leveraging the national Financial Empowerment Center movement to stabilize residents' financial lives and help them move through this pandemic to a stronger financial future.

Financial Navigators



As the CFE Fund looked to support FEC partners in expanding and pivoting FEC services, it became clear that cities and counties without an existing FEC infrastructure also needed assistance in rapidly deploying financial empowerment resources as part of their COVID-19 emergency response. In response, the CFE Fund launched a new Financial Navigators initiative, designed to help residents deal with the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through the provision of remote assistance in navigating critical financial issues and making referrals to other social services and resources. Trained Financial Navigators in more than 30 cities and counties will provide structured guidance over the phone that will help people strategize around support for disruptions to their income and other financial concerns. They will help residents triage financial issues, identify immediate action steps, and make referrals to other services. Additionally, as FECs began fielding a significant number of calls from clients with relatively straightforward questions, requiring only light-touch assistance and referrals to other supports, the CFE Fund added Financial Navigation capability (mainly, additional database functionality and a robust referral library) to FEC services as well. The CFE Fund looks forward to learning from the experiences of its Financial Navigator partners, and sharing lessons learned with the FEC learning community and broader financial empowerment field.



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