

# Challenges and Opportunities for participatory democracy in digital spaces.



**Capital Europea  
de la Democràcia**



**Ajuntament de  
Barcelona**



**Pla Estratègic  
Metropolità  
de Barcelona**

# Agenda:

1. Decidim Evolution in NYC
2. The People's Money Outcomes
3. Challenges & Opportunities



# About the Civic Engagement Commission



NYC Voters established the CEC

- NYC Charter revision process led to a November 2018 ballot initiative
- The citywide PB program is now mandated in NYC's Charter

The CEC is the first democratically elected commission responsible for strengthening democracy by promoting inclusive civic participation for all New Yorkers.

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Areas of Focus:



**COMMUNITY  
BOARDS**



the **PEOPLE'S  
MONEY**



the **PEOPLE'S  
BUS**

# Setting up and piloting Decidim in NYC for the first time (2020 - 2022)

## Phase 1

During this stage the platform was set up in the city infrastructure, was launched with CEC programming, and was tested as a content management tool for diverse processes:

## Initiatives

- It's Our Money (Oct 2020 - Aug 2021)
- The People's Bus (2021)
- The Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity (TRIE) Coalition Meetings (2021)
- The People's Money (2021 - 2022)

## Challenges

### Administrative

- Procurement: Local NYC vendors didn't know enough of Decidim. We had to hire European companies.
- Legal approval for contract languages

### Technical

- Cybersecurity Compliance
- Single Sign In Integration

### Institutional

- Non-technical agency didn't have technical capacity to manage a digital service.

## Risks

- Higher Prices due to hiring constraints.
- Needed High Political Will
- limited knowledge to scope project properly.

# Leveraging the platform for other agencies and initiatives (2022)

## Phase 2

The platform was used to implement idea generation in partnership with City Council, for multiple council members and to collect ideas from City employees to support priority setting for the Adam's administration.

## Initiatives

- a. 15 City Councils the platform to support their idea generation efforts.
- b. NYC Speaks City Ideas (2022)

## Challenges

### Administrative

- More funding was required than originally estimated and both vendors and agency partners were stretched thin.

### Technical

- Evolving spam across input areas.
- Idea generation bugs.
- Language access issues: Machine translated vs in person translated.

### Institutional

- Non-technical capacity.
- Not set up to be a service provide for other agencies.
- Lack of content moderation staff

## Issues

- Lack of technical talent led to poorly managed contracts:
- High cost translation services.
- Lack of having production and testing environments for new features developed.
- Plenty of user feedback

# Customized Decidim for NYC Needs (2022 – Present)

## Phase 3

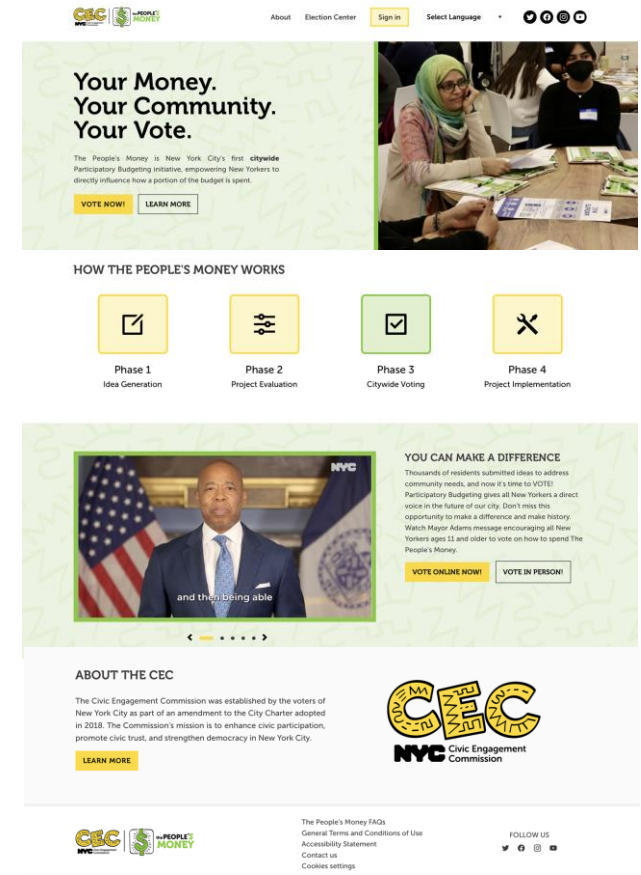
The Commission embarked in the process of redesigning the Decidim site specifically for The People's Money, the first citywide PB process which launched on 2023.

## Initiatives undertook

- NYC Commission Branding Effort
- UX/UI Audit of the participate site
- Accessibility Audit of the participate site
- User Research with Digidem Lab

## Goal

Inform people about the PB Process  
Make a baseline for online idea submissions



# Outcomes of The People's Money

# The People's Money! (2023 -2024)



**Phase 1: Idea Generation**



**Phase 2: Project Vetting and Development**



**Phase 3: Voting**



**Phase 4: Project Implementation And Evaluation**

## Cycle 1 Outcomes

### Participatory and Deliberative

82 community partners  
**12,334 New Yorkers**  
534 Sessions (1.5 - 2 hours)  
Overwhelmingly positive feedback

### Deliberative

5 Borough Assembly Committees  
**77 Participants**  
20 Sessions (14 hours)  
Representative Selection  
Vet through Objective Criteria

### Participatory

208,000 ballots cast

### Results and Reporting

46 projects  
44 Implementing partners selected



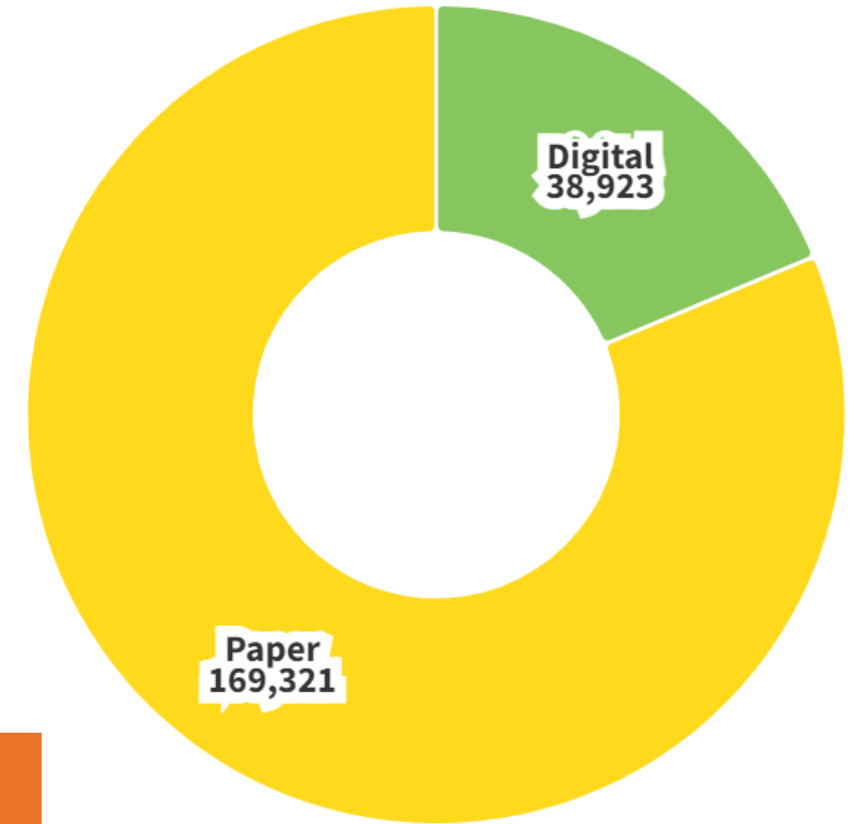
# Overview of Results

- **Voting Period**

- May 10 - June 25 (6.5 weeks)

- **Ballots Cast:**

- Total Ballots Cast: **208,244**
- Borough: **110,371**
  - 25,339 Digital
  - 85,032 Paper
- Neighborhood: **97,873**
  - 13,584 Digital
  - 84,289 Paper



## Fun Fact:

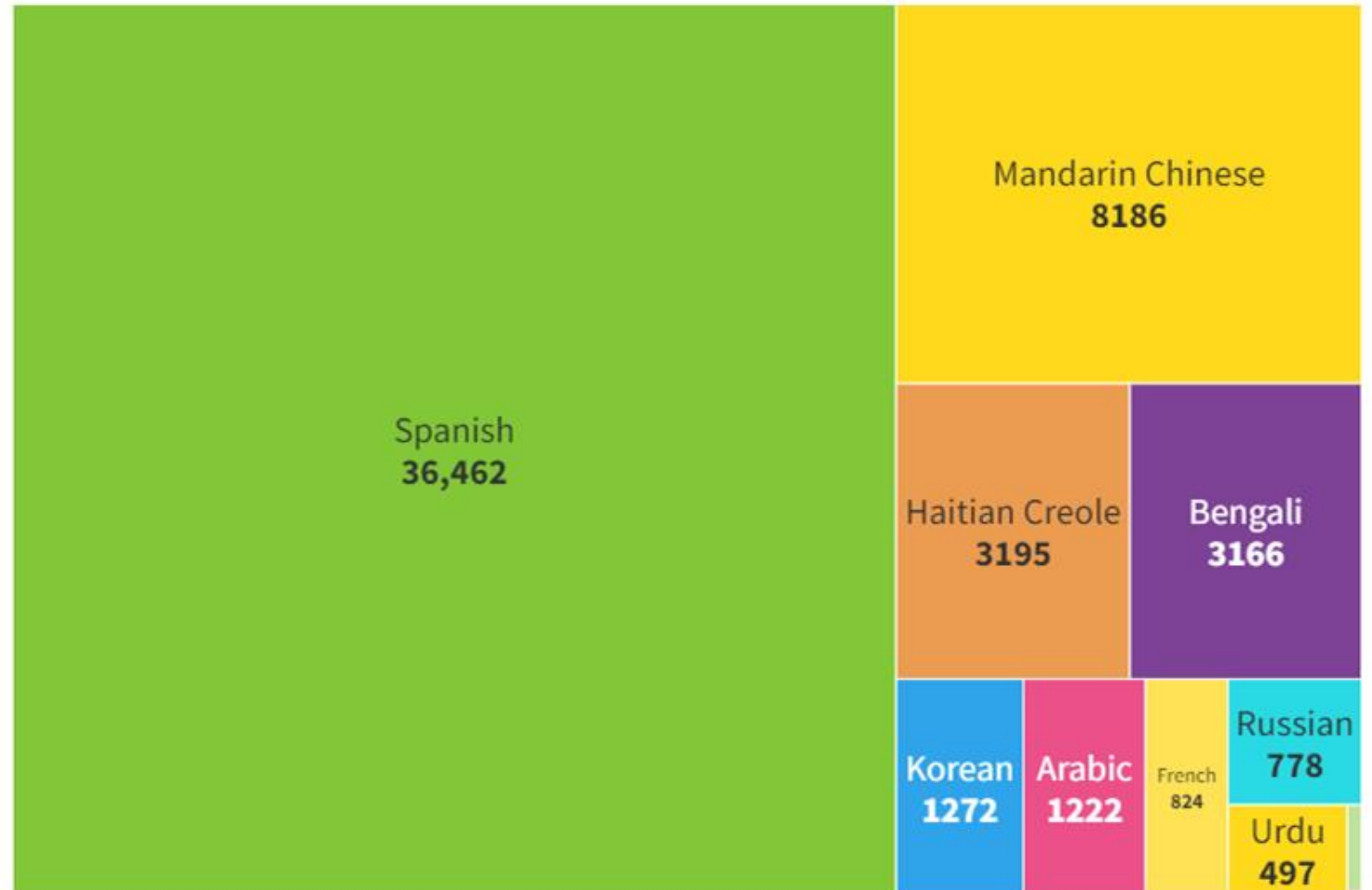
Last year we received a total of **29,000** TRIE Neighborhood ballots.

## Comparison to Other Cities

Area	Population	PB Voters	Participation Rate	Amount Allocated	Per person
Helsinki	658,864	47,064	8.10%	\$8,800,000	\$13.36
Vallejo, CA	117,798	8,922	7.57%	\$1,000,000	\$8.49
Paris	2,165,423	93,000	5.00%	\$99,587,500	\$45.99
Mexico City	21,919,000	1,095,950	5.00%	\$50,000,000	\$2.28
Barcelona	1,620,000	39,433	2.40%	\$29,876,250	\$18.44
Scotland	5,400,000	122,000	2.30%	\$3,417,174	\$0.63
NYC Council	5,440,000	118,308	2.20%	\$35,000,000	\$6.43
Greensboro, NC	294,395	3,961	1.30%	\$500,000	\$1.70
Montreal	1,762,494	20,000	1.10%	\$25,000,000	\$14.18
King County, WA	2,269,000	2,600	0.11%	\$11,300,000	\$4.98
<i>Note: Numbers represent most recent cycles for which data is available</i>					

# Languages

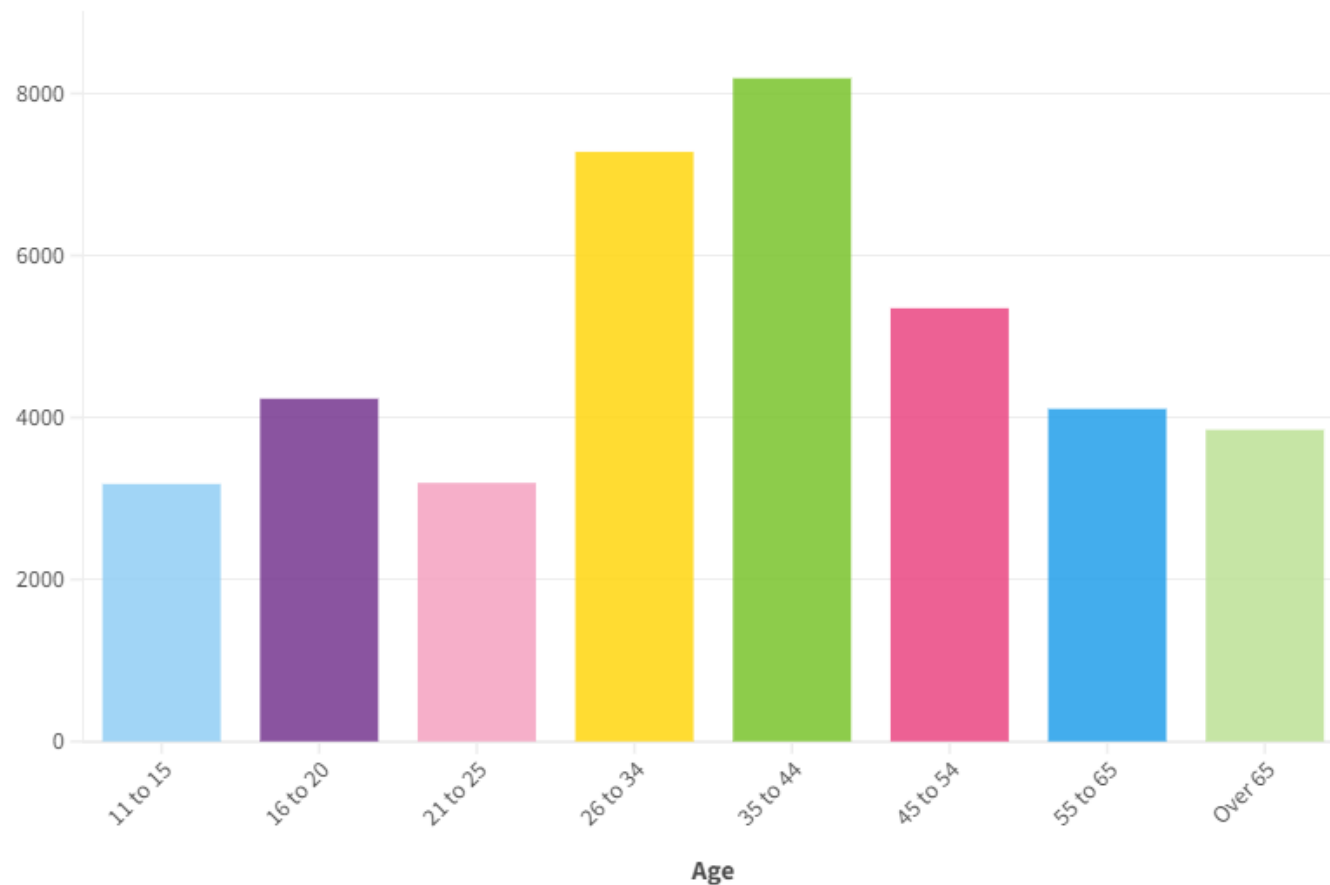
- Ballots were translated into **12 languages**
  - Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, Bengali, Haitian Creole, French, Russian, Yiddish, Korean, Urdu, Italian, and Polish
- In total, **61,787** ballots were cast in a language other than English.
- **19% (36,462)** of the total # of ballots were cast in **Spanish**.



# Age

- The group with the highest participation was **35-44 (21%)** year olds followed by **26-34 (18%)** year olds, and **45-54 (14%)** year olds.
- Youth between the ages of **11 and 15** made up around **8%** of participants.

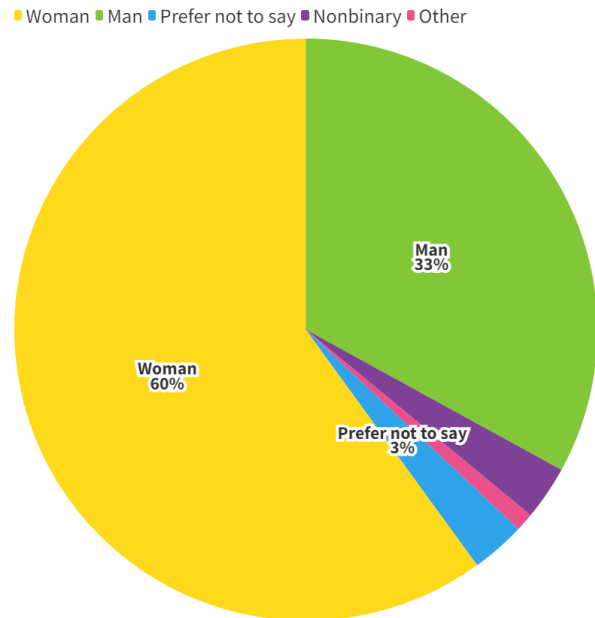
Number of Survey Respondents



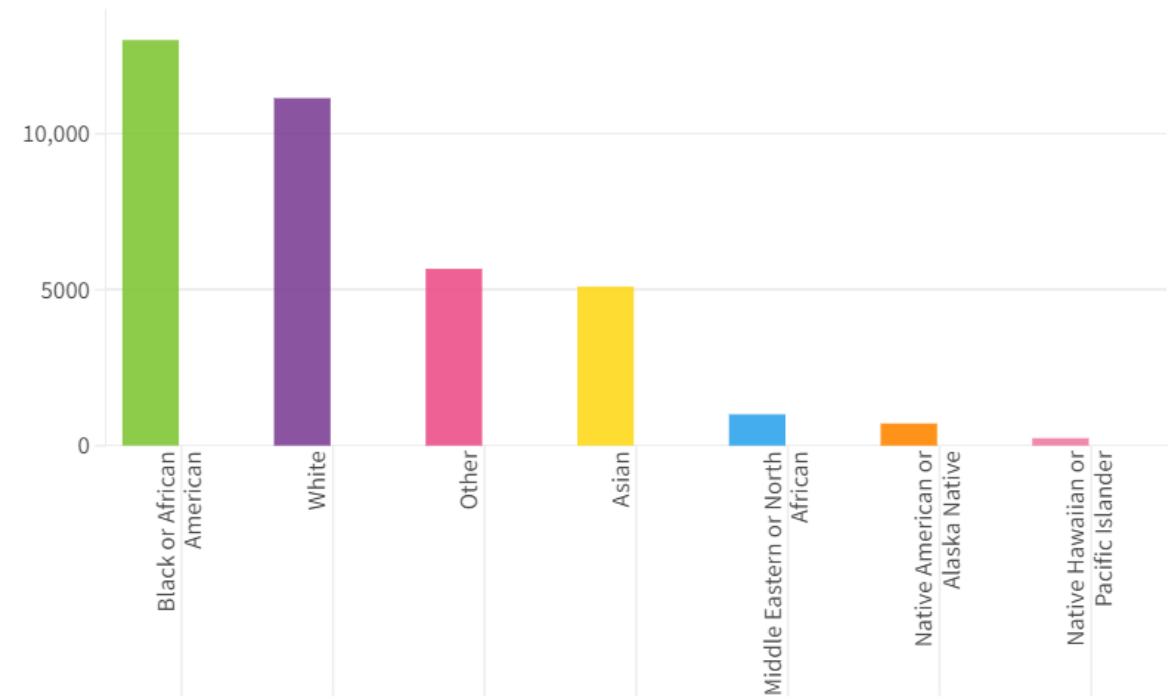
# Gender

- People who identified as **women made up 60% of participants.**

- 1,028 (3%) survey participants identified as **non-binary.**



Number of Survey Respondents



# Race

- **32%** of participants identified as **Black or African American**

- 28% identified as White and 18% as Asian.

# Funded Projects

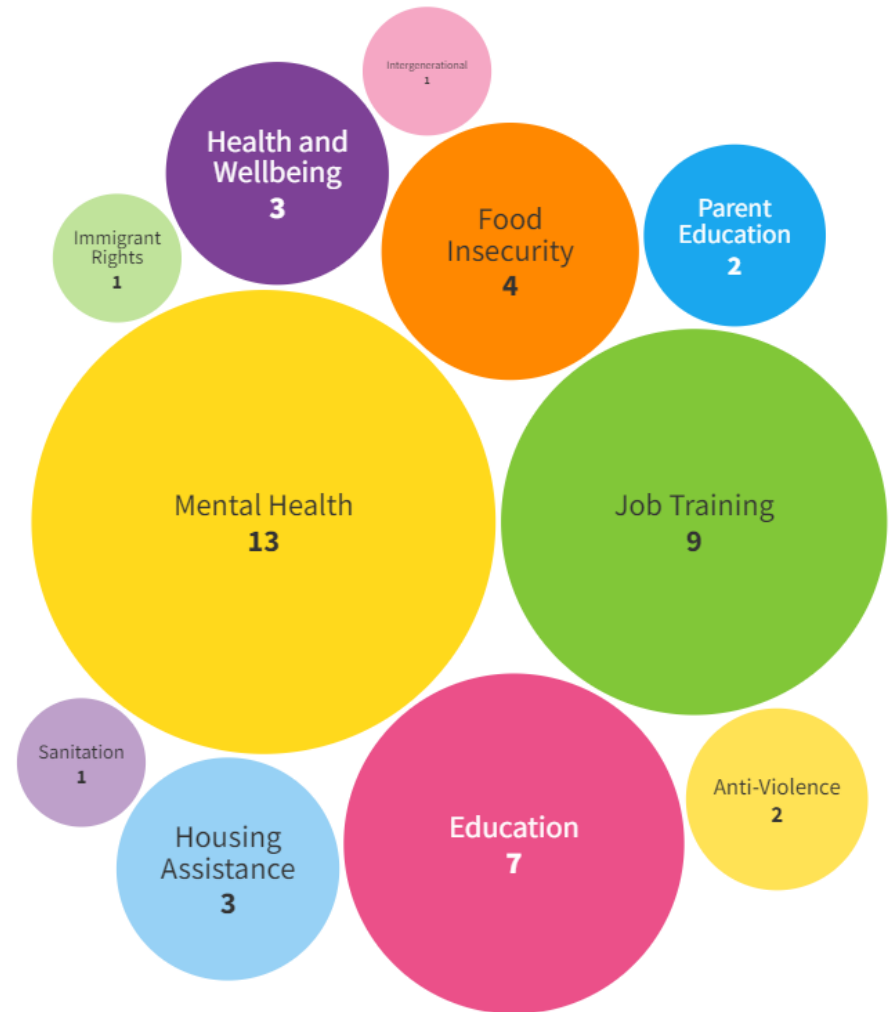
## 13 Borough Projects

Borough	# of Projects	Funding (per project)
Bronx	3	\$265,000
Brooklyn	4	\$250,000
Manhattan	2	\$262,500
Queens	3	\$280,000
Staten Island	1	\$177,000

## 33 \$50,000 Equity Neighborhood

### Program Focuses:

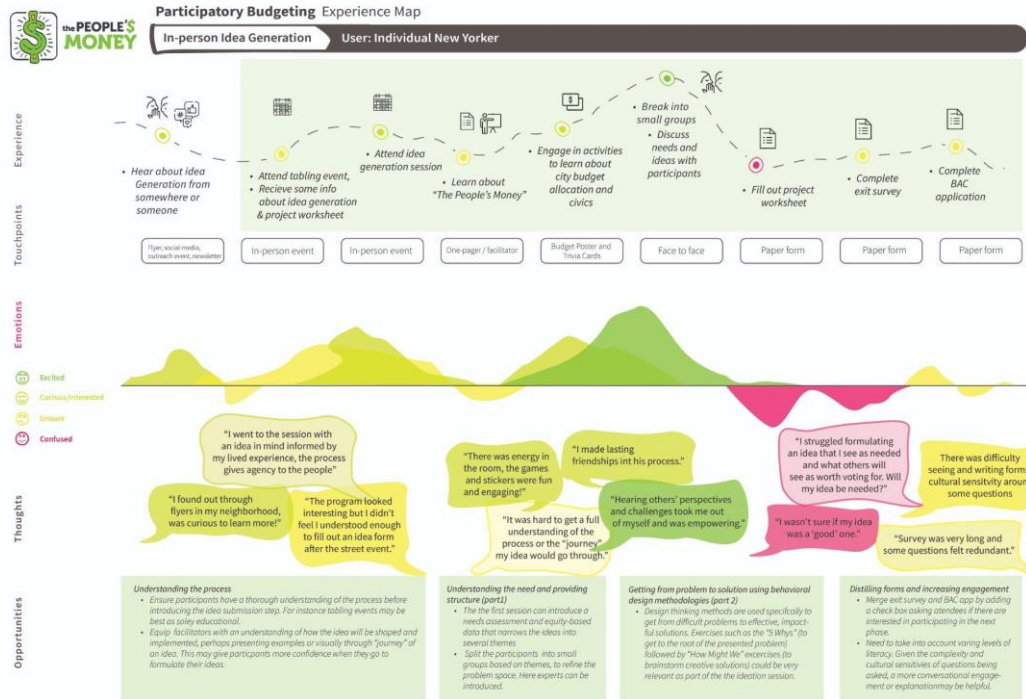
- Mental Health – 13
- Job Training – 9
- Education – 7
- Food Insecurity – 4
- Health and Well Being – 3
- Housing Assistance – 3
- Parent Education – 2
- Anti-Violence – 2
- Immigrant Rights – 1
- Sanitation – 1
- Intergenerational – 1



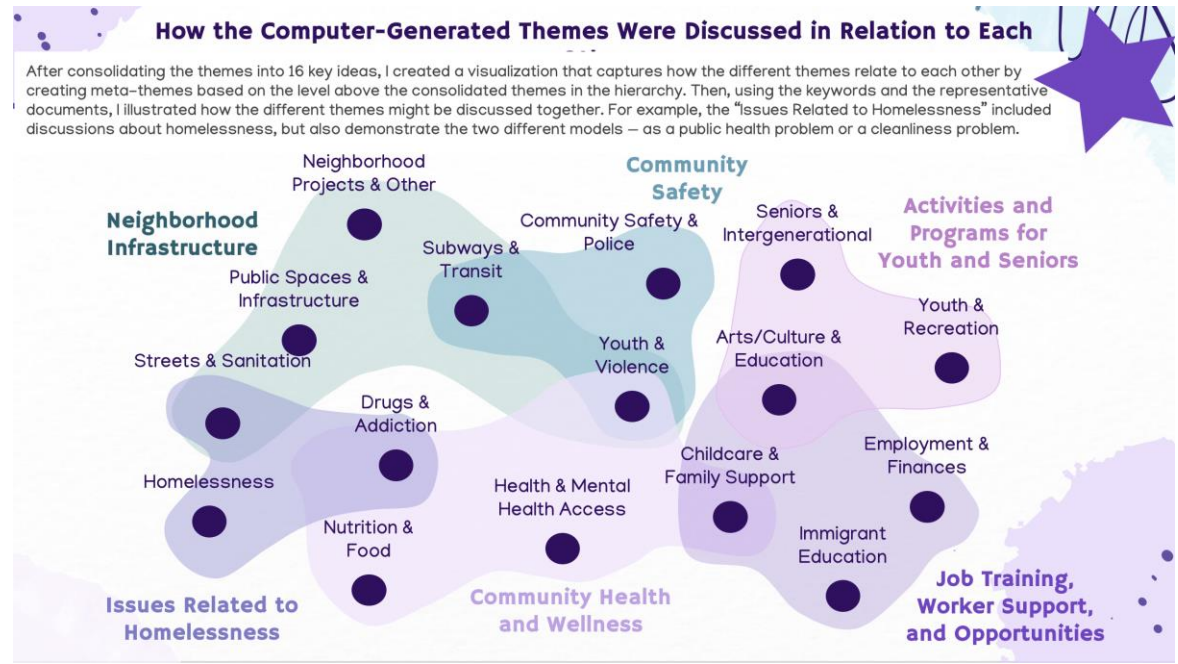
*\*16 projects' intended audience is youth, and 14 are intergenerational!*

# Iterative Improvements

## User Journey Mapping



## Idea Generation Data Analysis



# Lessons Learned



## Lessons Learned

- 1) There is **no one digital tool that works for all**, but you have to **start somewhere**.
- 2) Different audiences with different needs require different UIs **participatory democracy cannot look the same to all**.
- 3) Strong **in person strategies** should **always** be **available** to ensure diverse participation.
- 4) Non-technical agencies need to **develop technical capacity in-house**. We need to reimagine public service.
- 5) To build digital services is expensive, but the **success of the product shouldn't be compared with proprietary software** that is VC backed, and that has considerable more resources.

## Ongoing Challenges

- 1) SPAM has evolved to a degree that to prevent it we constantly need to ponder difficult trade-offs.
- 2) Machine translation is not good enough for NYC.
- 3) Digital Services require steady funding to be maintained. As government administration change it's important to build a narrative regarding public digital assets vs. the government in turn "branding/initiative".



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