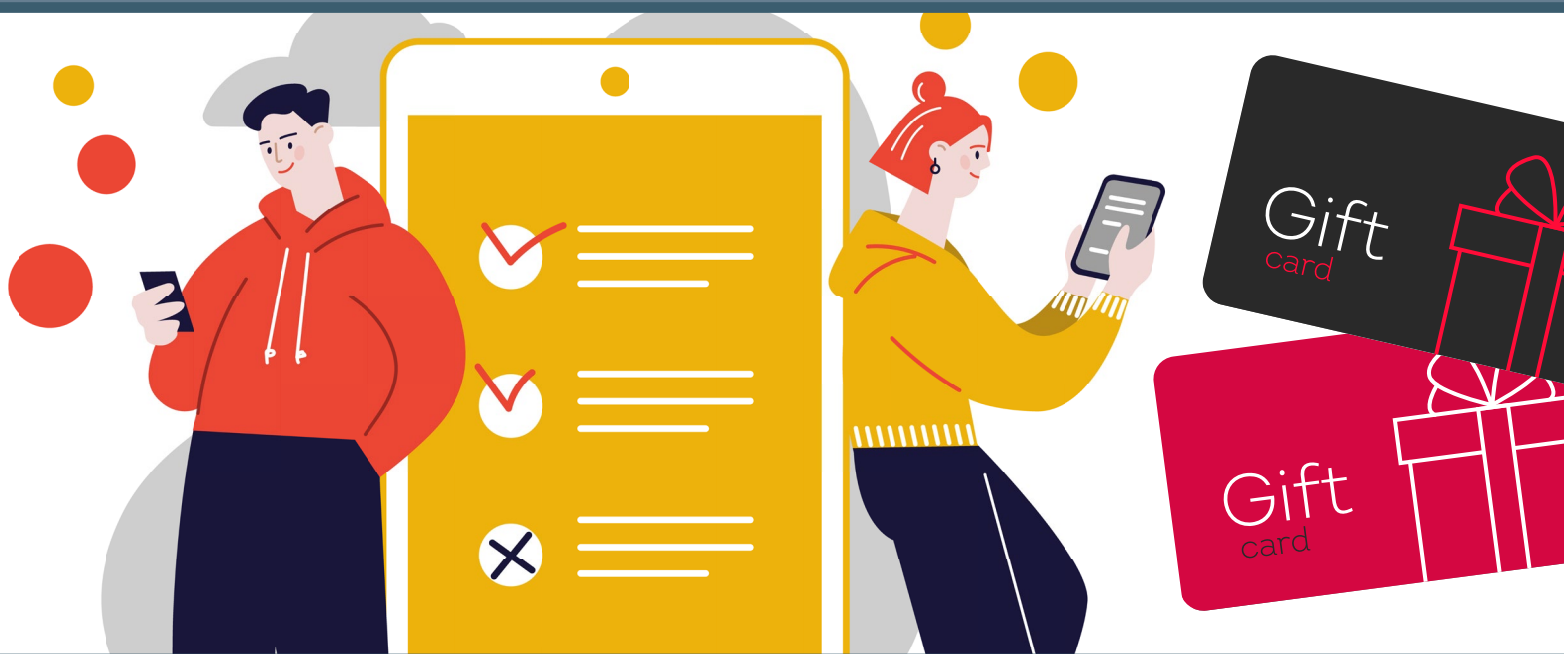


# DHS Client Incentive Program: Scaling Incentives to Increase Client Engagement



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## BACKGROUND

User feedback is a powerful tool for organizations to uncover the strengths and weaknesses of their products or services. In addition to feedback that users share via surveys or other activities, the continued use—or lack of use—of a product or service is a form of feedback. Combining these behavioral insights with stated preference insights creates opportunities for innovation, as the findings might otherwise go unnoticed by the staff responsible for design and management. For private sector companies, leveraging user feedback provides a competitive edge; for government agencies, it fosters greater trust by demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement in public services.

Collecting stated preference data requires time and resources from both staff and clients, and it can be challenging for organizations to reach the right audience and encourage participation. Recognizing these challenges and the value that client feedback brings to improving its programs and services, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) established an incentive program to increase engagement. DHS funds a breadth of services delivered by nearly 500 contracted providers to over 200,000 people per year. This report discusses the challenges of—and solutions to—scaling monetary incentives at large organizations and provides summary statistics about DHS's incentive program.

## INTRODUCTION

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) collects feedback from community members who use DHS and DHS-funded programs in a variety of ways: regular roundtables/cabinets (e.g., Children's Cabinet);<sup>1</sup> social media (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn); the Director's Action Line (DAL);<sup>2</sup> and Allegheny Engage.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, DHS expanded its public engagement strategy to include SMS text messaging (texting), a tool that is convenient for recipients and allows DHS to scale-up communication and data collection with its clients and other Allegheny County residents.<sup>4</sup> In 2024, DHS furthered its commitment to using client feedback by adding "Ensure Quality" as the fifth of the overarching goals that guide the Department and its partners in effectively serving the community, i.e., "Meeting our mission requires knowing if people are getting quality service...and fixing things when they are not."<sup>5</sup>

While DHS strives to make feedback-sharing accessible and low-barrier, engaging with these activities is not always a high priority for clients. With some services, people can be hesitant to share feedback due to a lack of trust or fear of retaliation. For example, when asked to share feedback with DHS's child welfare office, clients may fear that their feedback will be used against them in their current case or future interactions with child welfare. Clients may also hesitate to provide feedback because they are skeptical about their opinions having an impact, especially in government systems where reform can be stymied by bureaucracy. Perhaps the biggest barrier to providing feedback is the time required to participate.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Services/Human-Services-DHS/DHS-Advisory-Boards/Childrens-Cabinet>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Services/Human-Services-DHS/Directors-Action-Line-DAL>

<sup>3</sup> <https://engage.alleghenycounty.us/en/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/2023/05/25/using-sms-text-messaging-to-inform-engage-and-communicate-with-residents/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/2024/05/13/dhs-goals-and-key-initiatives-2024/>

In recent years, organizations have recognized the value of community-partnered research and the costs to those who participate. As such, it is standard practice to compensate participants for their time and expertise from their lived experience.<sup>6, 7</sup> This is especially the case with qualitative research methods that require a high level of involvement, such as co-designing programs, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. There are even publicly available tools that help researchers calculate fair compensation.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

In addition to qualitative research methods characterized by high-involvement activities with a relatively small number of participants, DHS regularly administers broad-scale research surveys that gather data not available through administrative records stored in Allegheny County's data warehouse.<sup>11</sup> These surveys typically take between one and 15 minutes to complete and are distributed to thousands of people. Combining survey data with administrative data about program utilization helps DHS comprehensively evaluate programs in ways that would not be possible with only one of the data sources. As with all survey research, non-response bias can decrease confidence in the results. DHS takes many steps to increase response rates, using clear language, timely reminders and other behavioral nudges, and providing monetary incentives. Providing monetary incentives is a reliable strategy for increasing survey participation,<sup>12</sup> and it is particularly effective in attracting socially disadvantaged groups that are hard to reach.<sup>13</sup> Since DHS clients are generally in a lower income bracket and many human service needs result from poverty, offering financial compensation, albeit a small amount, is also aligned with DHS's mission of increasing economic security.

DHS offers a breadth of services to more than 200,000 people per year through its partnerships with nearly 500 contracted providers. It is critical that the organization has scalable technologies and business processes that support incentive payments. This public report discusses DHS's approach to tackling this challenge and provides summary analytics about the program.

Making this report public is important for several reasons. First, it can be used as a resource for other jurisdictions that are interested in launching or scaling their own incentive programs or want to benchmark their current performance. Second, it demonstrates transparency to Allegheny County residents about DHS's incentive strategy and how providing small incentives translates into valuable insights for research and service quality. Finally, it establishes trust among people who are invited to participate in incentivized activities, assuring them that the incentives are not a scam and that the program is thoughtfully designed.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.chcs.org/media/Engaging-Community-Members-A-Guide-to-Equitable-Compensation\\_101723.pdf](https://www.chcs.org/media/Engaging-Community-Members-A-Guide-to-Equitable-Compensation_101723.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Equitable%20Compensation%20for%20Community%20Engagement%20Guidebook.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://nationalhealthcouncil.org/access-the-fmv-calculator/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://cyschcnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Standard-of-Compensation-2021-Partners.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://ontariocaregiver.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Should-money-come-into-it.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://analytics.alleghenycounty.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/24-ACDHS-Q3-Datawarehouse.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Abdelazeem, B., Hamdallah, A., Rizk, M. A., Abbas, K. S., El-Shahat, N. A., Manasrah, N., ... & Eltobgy, M. (2023). Does usage of monetary incentive impact the involvement in surveys? A systematic review and meta-analysis of 46 randomized controlled trials. *PLoS one*, 18(1), e0279128.

<sup>13</sup> Bonevski, B., Randell, M., Paul, C., Chapman, K., Twyman, L., Bryant, J., ... & Hughes, C. (2014). Reaching the hard-to-reach: a systematic review of strategies for improving health and medical research with socially disadvantaged groups. *BMC medical research methodology*, 14, 1-29.

## **MONETARY INCENTIVES AT SCALE: A LOGISTICAL CHALLENGE**

Organizations typically use gift cards for incentives instead of cash or direct deposit. Gift cards are an accessible and trusted form of payment, and they do not require collecting sensitive banking information that may deter participation in the incentivized activity. Additionally, gift cards can feel more like a reward or treat, increasing the perceived value of the incentive. No matter the payment method, using monetary incentives to encourage participation can be logistically challenging for organizations. From a monitoring and compliance standpoint there are several necessary requirements that strain staff resources, such as verifying that participants meet the eligibility criteria, that participants are not providing feedback more than once and that each transaction is documented. Additionally, with physical gift cards, staff must manage a gift card inventory of various brands and amounts because the incentive amount can vary based on activity. While digital gift cards require less administrative effort overall, they present their own unique challenges. Recipients may lose the digital gift card in their email or not understand how to use it, setting off a series of customer service interactions.

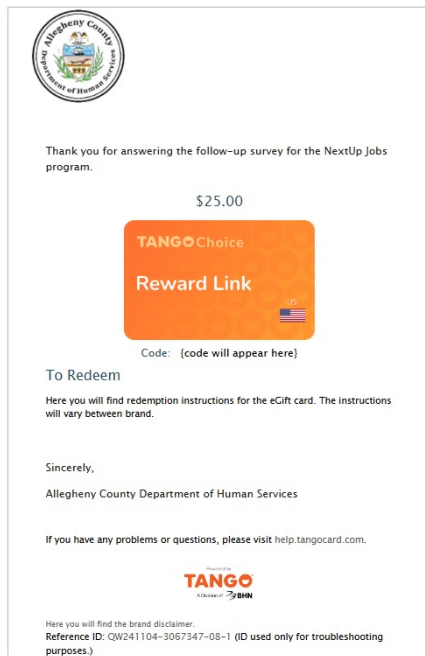
Even sourcing gift cards presents administrative challenges. Before the innovations discussed here, staff members had to either apply for a cash advance from human resources or purchase gift cards with their own money and submit an invoice for reimbursement; both processes can take several weeks and hamper DHS's ability to scale incentives to more programs and clients. This process also required staff to precisely predict how many people would engage in feedback activities. If participation wasn't as high as expected, the staff member would be left with extra gift cards or need to figure out a way to return the leftover cash advance to human resources. If more data were needed, staff would have to start the sourcing process over, which would delay data collection.

DHS has a centralized team, Client Experience (CX) Analytics, responsible for collecting, analyzing and reporting data about clients' experiences with DHS and DHS-funded service providers. Seeing the value of incentives for feedback, the CX Analytics team sought to create a scalable business process to manage client incentives. Where it used to require hours of staff time to manage incentives for dozens of people, it now takes minutes of staff time to manage incentives for thousands.

## CREATING A SEAMLESS, SCALABLE BUSINESS PROCESS

In Fall 2022, DHS invested in two key partnerships that have enabled the Department to expand its use of incentives. First, an online service called Tango Card<sup>14</sup> provides a user-friendly interface for staff to process digital gift card payments that are sent to participants through email (**Figure 1**).

**FIGURE 1: Example of the email a client will receive with digital gift card.**



These digital gift cards are highly customizable, instant and secure. Recipients can redeem their gift card from hundreds of brands, such as Amazon, Target, Walmart, Visa or Mastercard.<sup>15</sup> Tracking features allow staff to see if and when the incentive has been redeemed and quickly re-issue the incentive if a recipient deletes or cannot find the email. The platform also offers integration with other technologies to automatically process incentives after qualifying participation. This allows DHS staff members to build workflows that use API (Application Programming Interface) connections between the survey software<sup>16</sup> and the gift card platform. Once a person finishes an online survey, they are instantly sent an email with their gift card. For all surveys that use incentives, DHS has a set of internal procedures that prevent fraud.

The second key partnership involves an expanded relationship with Allegheny Family Network, a provider with an existing DHS contract. Rather than requiring DHS staff to deposit gift card funding upfront, the provider makes periodic, larger deposits into a gift card bank account. DHS staff meet with the provider monthly to generate an invoice based on the previous month's spending, then make approximate projections for future spending and, if needed, the provider replenishes the account.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.tangocard.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.tangocard.com/reward-catalog>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.qualtrics.com/>

While the vast majority of gift card transactions are now digital, DHS still maintains a small inventory of physical gift cards for in-person activities for clients who may have difficulty accessing a digital gift card.

### DHS INCENTIVE SPENDING — BY THE NUMBERS

DHS's investments into building a scalable business process to manage incentive payments has resulted in collecting more client feedback and human subjects research than ever before. Staff members can easily manage incentives for several data collection projects concurrently. Some projects have fully automated incentives that pay clients immediately after completing the activity and require only periodic monitoring. From 2020 to 2023, the number of clients who were given a gift card for participation increased by nearly one order of magnitude each year (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Incentive Spending by Year

YEAR	INCENTIVIZED DATA COLLECTION PROJECTS	UNIQUE CLIENTS PAID	GIFT CARDS PAID	TOTAL AMOUNT OF INCENTIVES PAID
2020	1	1	1	\$25
2021	2	96	98	\$2,325
2022	2	1,350	1,353	\$4,920
2023	20	9,479	22,275	\$271,865
2024	24	11,665	15,323	\$216,275

Compensation for the completion of surveys accounts for most of DHS's incentive spending. Over the past five years, \$460,745 was spent on surveys, \$2,790 was spent on semi-structured qualitative interviews, \$3,540 was spent on focus groups and \$625 was spent on advisory councils (Table 2).<sup>17</sup>

TABLE 2: Incentive Spending by Data Collection Method

DATA COLLECTION METHOD	TOTAL INCENTIVES PAID	AVERAGE TRANSACTION	MINIMUM TRANSACTION	MAXIMUM TRANSACTION
Surveys	\$460,745	\$12.69	\$1	\$100
Other Methods <sup>18</sup>	\$25,288	\$12.75	\$1	\$200
Focus Groups	\$3,540	\$37.52	\$25	\$50
Semi-Structured Interviews	\$2,790	\$47.29	\$10	\$50
Advisory Councils	\$625	\$29.76	\$25	\$75

<sup>17</sup> Advisory councils are a group of stakeholders and community members that provide feedback to DHS on services or to help shape the planning processes for future services: <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Services/Human-Services-DHS/DHS-Advisory-Boards>

<sup>18</sup> Other methods include in-person workshops, the Hello Baby Family Council, client personal stories or other miscellaneous client feedback collection methods.

## IMPACT OF INCENTIVES ON ENGAGEMENT

Increasing response rates in community research is important because it leads to more representative and reliable data. While it may be possible to identify the entire population eligible to participate in a research activity, it is not always feasible nor a smart use of resources to get every person to respond. Understanding the extent to which incentives impact client participation can help DHS calibrate incentive amounts for the most efficient and effective use of available funds. Beyond the incentive amount, there are many factors that can influence an individual's willingness to participate in an activity, including the individual's interest in the topic, the length of time required, the amount of perceived effort and whether participation is in-person or online. These various factors make it difficult to precisely estimate the marginal impact of each additional dollar in incentives. Highlighting a few data collection projects, however, illustrates how participation rates change when incentives are offered.

### Example 1: No incentive versus a small incentive

With massive increases in the global prevalence of anxiety and depression,<sup>19</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased consumer demand for outpatient mental health services. Because this increased demand was not accompanied by a matching increase in the supply of service providers, it became notoriously difficult for people to gain access to mental healthcare, and wait times skyrocketed. In 2023, DHS conducted a survey to explore the client experience of searching for and finding outpatient mental health appointments. Survey participants were people who had their first appointment in the past five years, and the results helped DHS better understand where bottlenecks occurred in the system to create targeted reform.

The survey included 8–10 questions and was administered entirely through text message. The study team did not initially offer an incentive for this approximately two-minute survey, but after seeing a response rate of only around 6%, the team decided to include a \$5 incentive. This small incentive immediately increased the survey response rate to 10%, a relative increase of 66%.

### Example 2: Small incentive versus slightly larger incentive

The Allegheny County Discounted Fares Pilot was a pilot program that assessed the impact of providing free or discounted transit fares on the lives of low-income residents. The pilot began in November 2022 and finished in June 2024. The evaluation included six different incentivized forms of active data collection: a baseline survey, a six-month follow-up survey, an 11-month follow-up survey, a 15-month follow-up survey, periodic travel diaries and periodic GPS surveys. The insights from these data—combined with administrative data about transit card usage—helped inform the permanent implementation of the program, now called Allegheny Go.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> WHO. (2022). Mental Health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact. *World Health Organization: Scientific Brief*, 2(March), 1–11.

<sup>20</sup> <https://discountedfares.alleghenycounty.us/>

The response rates to the six-month follow-up survey reveal the impact of providing a small incentive versus a slightly larger incentive. Eligible survey-takers were invited to complete a 15-minute survey and were randomly incentivized with either a \$10 or a \$20 digital gift card. The response rate for the \$10 group was 32.5% and the response rate for the \$20 group was 36.6%, a relative increase of 13%. We observed a similar (although muted) pattern with the “travel diaries,” another incentivized survey in which people answered five questions every few days about where they had traveled the previous day. People were randomly assigned either a \$1 or a \$2 incentive for each travel diary they completed. Those in the \$1 group had a response rate of 59%, whereas those in the \$2 group had a response rate of 63.5%.<sup>21</sup>

### Example 3: Varying large incentives for a high-effort, in-person activity

Investing in workforce development aligns with DHS’s mission of increasing economic security. NextUp Jobs was an experimental program that tested the impact of an online job search tool on users’ employment and earning outcomes. This program had four different incentivized projects: a baseline survey, an endline survey, website engagement and in-person workshops. The in-person workshops took about one hour and were held in a computer lab in downtown Pittsburgh.

Recognizing the time and effort required to participate, the study team offered a generous incentive for the in-person workshops, starting at \$50. However, after seeing a low sign-up rate and a low attendance rate with the \$50 incentive, the study team decided to increase the incentive to \$100 and even to \$200 for individuals who had not yet been invited to participate in the study. Table 3 shows how the sign-up rate and attendance rate varied between the different incentive amounts. The \$100 incentive nearly doubled the sign-up rate and increased the attendance rate to four times that of the \$50 incentive. There appeared to be diminishing returns beyond the \$100 incentive, as sign-up and attendance rates were similar between this group and the \$200 incentive group.

**TABLE 3: Sign-Up and Attendance Rates for NextUp Jobs Workshops, by Incentive Amount**

INCENTIVE AMOUNT	SIGN-UP RATE (SIGN-UPS / TOTAL INVITATIONS)	ATTENDANCE RATE (ATTENDEES / TOTAL INVITATIONS)
\$50	6.1%	1.7%
\$100	11.8%	7%
\$200	12%	7.3%

<sup>21</sup> Chizeck, S. & Mbonu, O. “The Role of the ‘Fare’ in Welfare: Public Transportation Subsidies and their Effects on Low-Income Households.” September 2024.



These specific examples provide insight into the demand elasticities and possible ceiling effects for incentives in controlled, experimental environments. In our case, demand elasticities operated like a volume dial: we adjusted incentive levels incrementally to measure relative shifts in participation behaviors. However, at some point we observed a ceiling. No matter how much more we amplified incentives, we didn't detect proportional boosts in client engagement or feedback, signaling that we reached the limits of client responsiveness.

Understanding these elasticities makes data collection more efficient, as staff can more accurately estimate project timelines and the resources needed to reach the desired sample size. For example, consider a hypothetical scenario in which DHS wanted to administer a 5-minute survey to 100 people, where the total population with qualifying program involvement (according to administrative records in the data warehouse) was 500 people. Unless this cohort was particularly engaged with the DHS program of interest, we would not expect only text message recruitment with a \$5 incentive to be enough to yield a 20% response rate. Without knowledge of the elasticities shared in the earlier examples, one might assume that the next step would be to increase the incentive and then determine the amount of the increase. However, data from our examples indicate diminishing returns in response rates, thus it is unlikely that incentives alone would be enough to reach the desired sample size. Before beginning data collection, the study team should consider other options like adjusting the research design, expanding the eligible cohort, or using additional data collection strategies.

### **GIFT CARD REDEMPTIONS AND BRAND PREFERENCES**

Digital gift cards have several advantages discussed earlier in this report, but some individuals might face challenges using them. To address this concern, we email DHS contact information and specific instructions about how to redeem the gift card<sup>22</sup> to all digital gift card recipients. However, this support might be insufficient if people lack the necessary technology or have low technological literacy.

One way to measure the accessibility of the gift cards is to look at redemption data. Redemption occurs when a recipient opens the email with their gift card and selects the brand for which they would like to use it. Data about spending the redeemed gift card, which occurs further downstream, are not available. For example, the data will show the date that a recipient chooses to redeem their \$10 gift card for Starbucks but will not show when they used it at the coffee shop.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.tangocard.com/redeem-your-rewards>

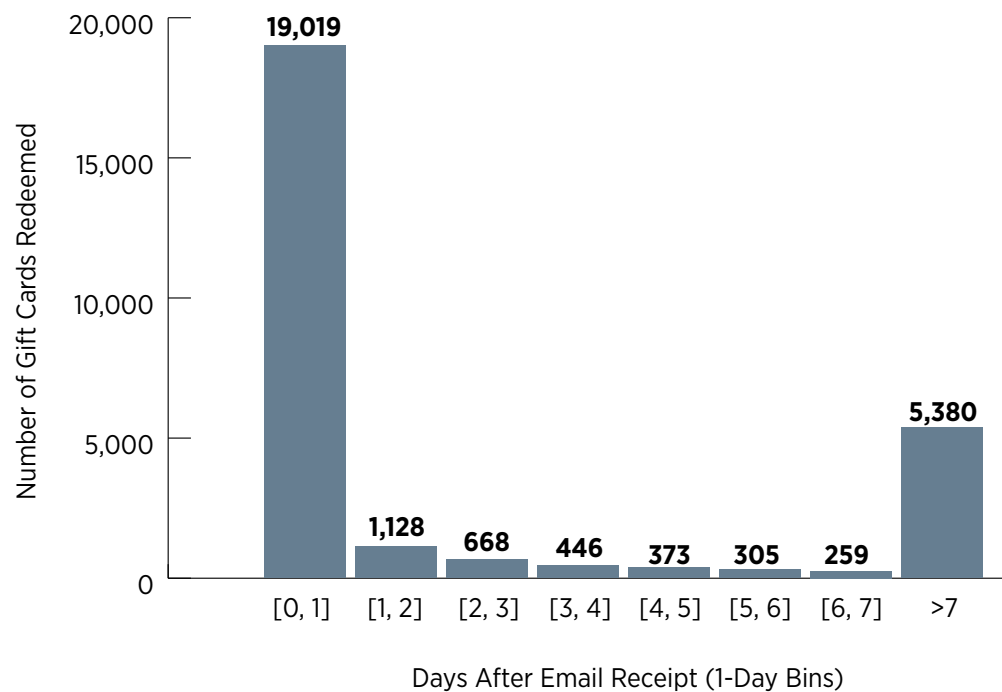
Overall, 64% of gift cards sent have been redeemed. This does not necessarily mean that 36% of recipients do not know how to access their gift cards, because the amount of the gift card largely influences whether a person redeems it. While only 21% of \$5 or less gift cards are redeemed, 91% of \$30 or more gift cards are redeemed (**Table 4**). These data suggest that perceived payoff predicts gift card redemption, rather than factors like technological literacy or other accessibility barriers.

**TABLE 4: Non-Redeemed Digital Gift Cards**

GIFT CARD AMOUNT	# GIFT CARDS SENT	# GIFT CARDS REDEEMED	% REDEEMED
\$5 and under	8,163	1,711	21%
\$6-\$9	4,903	2,456	50%
\$10-19	18,877	13,645	72%
\$20-29	10,609	8,972	85%
\$30+	871	794	91%
All gift cards	43,423	27,578	64%

DHS is currently exploring ways to increase redemption rates, including sending automated reminders to recipients who have not redeemed their gift cards. Conditional on a gift card being redeemed, the data show that 80% (n=22,198) of people redeem within the first seven days of receiving the gift card email, with the large majority redeeming within 24 hours (**Figure 2**). To shorten the length of time to redemption, the automated reminder can be sent one to two days after the initial gift card email.

**FIGURE 2: Time to Redemption After Gift Card Receipt.**



Unused gift cards are common,<sup>23</sup> and what organizations can do with the remaining balance depends on the type of gift card. DHS's digital gift cards can be redeemed at any time; they do not expire,<sup>24</sup> and the vendor does not allow for returned, cancelled or refunded orders once the reward email has been sent.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing the value in recovering unredeemed gift cards, the vendor offers a specific program that credits the unused value back to the customer's account.<sup>26</sup> This program charges a small fee of \$0.25 per gift card and returns 75% of the unclaimed value if the recipient does not redeem the gift card after 90 days. As a result of this analysis, DHS has started processing gift cards with the new program and will recoup unclaimed gift cards.

Digital gift card recipients can redeem their gift card for one of over 200 different brands. This allows recipients to choose what type of gift card they want or need in the moment, such as food, clothing, transportation or leisure. This feature seems to be useful for recipients, as the digital gift cards have been redeemed for 154 unique brands. **Table 5** summarizes the most frequently redeemed brands. Amazon accounts for 29%, followed by Mastercard and Visa with slightly more than 9% each.

**TABLE 5: Top 10 Digital Gift Cards**

BRAND	TOTAL REDEMPTIONS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
Amazon	8,210	29.8%
Mastercard	2,631	9.5%
Visa	2,546	9.2%
Target	2,080	7.5%
Walmart	1,651	6.0%
Starbucks	1,533	5.6%
DoorDash	1,200	4.4%
Google Play	717	2.6%
Uber	472	1.7%
Dunkin	464	1.7%

Client preferences for digital gift cards are used to inform what brands of physical gift cards to keep in the DHS inventory. Although Amazon is most preferred among digital gift card recipients, physical gift card recipients have different preferences, most likely because physical gift cards are used in data collection activities where participants have lower digital access. DHS currently offers three different brands of physical gift cards: Target, Visa and Giant Eagle (a grocery store chain in Allegheny County).

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bankrate.com/credit-cards/news/gift-cards-survey/#the-value-has-grown>

<sup>24</sup> <https://help.tangocard.com/s/article/Do-Reward-Link-expire>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.tangocard.com/promo-link>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.tangocard.com/legal/terms-of-service>

## CONCLUSION AND LOOKING FORWARD

This report describes DHS's approach to using monetary incentives to increase client participation vis-a-vis feedback giving and research. Offering incentives increases participation rates, and higher participation rates lead to a more representative dataset to inform public policy decisions. Incentivizing these activities fosters public trust through two feedback loops: first, a small transaction where DHS shows it values client feedback by offering and immediately paying an incentive, and second, by DHS demonstrating that it uses that feedback to improve services.

With nearly 500 contracted providers and over 200,000 people served every year, it is critical to have scalable business processes to support incentive payments. In addition to the partnerships that improved our ability to efficiently pay incentives at scale, we developed an internal monitoring dashboard that tracks incentive analytics in real time. This dashboard summarizes incentives all the way down to the recipient level; future work will explore how to customize incentives to further satisfy client preferences and maximize engagement.

While the upfront cost of providing incentives is an additional expense, the insights from these data will lead to long-term savings. Companies regularly incentivize customers to provide feedback and use these data to strengthen relationships with high-value existing customers and quickly remedy issues with their business. While DHS may have different goals than a for-profit company, client feedback helps DHS and its providers identify what services are working well, learn how services could be improved, understand what spending is wasteful, and recognize what isn't meeting clients' needs.

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