



How TANF Programs Adapted to the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Innovative strategies for service delivery and promoting
staff and participant wellbeing**

April 5, 2022



What you can expect



Highlights: Technology and service innovations;
Strategies to promote wellbeing and reduce stress



Spotlights: Voices from the TANF field



Your experiences and ideas: We want to hear
from you and your communities



Spotlight speakers



Andrea Barnum
Human Services Programs Manager
Arapahoe/Douglas Works!
Centennial, CO



Kataney Couamin
Director
Workforce Operations
Philadelphia Works, Inc.
Philadelphia, PA



Your experiences and ideas:
Join us in the chat!





Where our data come from

/ Virtual learning community groups

- Insights gleaned from nearly 100 virtual discussion groups
- Representation from 6 states (CA, CO, MI, PA, OH, VT)
- Peer-led and focused on key challenges faced early in the pandemic
- Held late spring – early fall 2020

/ Seven-part survey series¹

- 965 total responses from 18 states
- Overrepresentation of responses from California and Colorado
- Fielded February-March 2021

/ Individualized evaluation support

- Project SPARK-sponsored TA to select states and localities
- Stories and experiences shared by staff teams through the course of these research-practice partnerships



Highlights:

Technology and service innovations
in TANF programs



Streamlining the program experience with technology



Coaching, case management, and employment/training through on online platforms



Use existing, freely available online resources to support education and training activities



Record short, personalized videos and send them to participants



Convert key documentation into a completely electronic, virtual process



Bridging the digital divide



Directly provide computers and/or internet access to participants using existing support services or unused incentives



Increase the use of SMS text and instant messaging (through social media)



Data Dive

- 33%** of respondents' agencies offered tech trainings for participants
- 31%** of respondents' agencies offered computers or laptops to participants
- 22%** of respondents' agencies purchased new technology for participants
- 15%** of respondents' agencies paid for participants' internet/WiFi hotspot

n=127 TANF program administrators and staff survey fielded in February 2021



Reframing participant engagement and accountability

“ We went from *all or nothing* to *start with something* ”



Experiment with different messaging to participants about program expectations and engagement



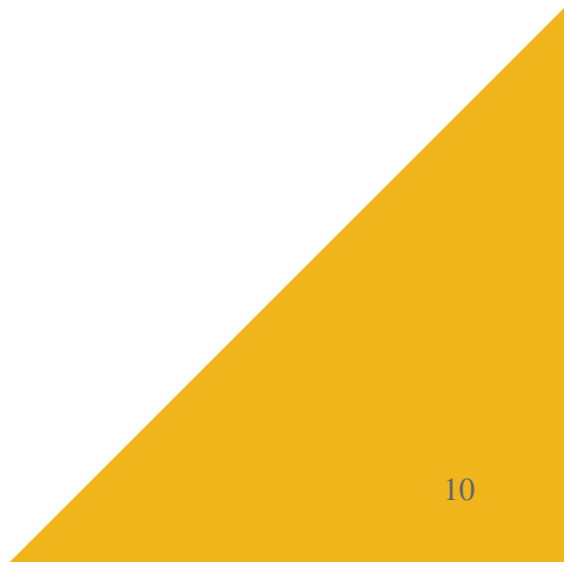
Reevaluate the types of activities that participants can engage in



Continue to track and require countable hours for participants, but revise approaches to reengagement and conciliation



Spotlight: Arapahoe/Douglas Works!





Your experiences and ideas:
Join us in the chat!





Highlights:

Strategies to promote wellbeing and reduce stress





Reduce stress and promote wellbeing



Create flexibility

- Flexible office hours
- Self-scheduling for appointments
- Easier to cure sanctions
- Remote/virtual meeting options



Provide a safe environment

- Reconfigure office space
- Mask, vaccination requirements
- Protective shields
- Limitations on the number of people and meetings

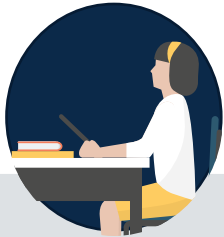


Prioritize self-care

- Time for mindfulness at work and home
- Focusing on wellbeing during regular supervision
- Encouraging time off and boundaries with working hours while at home



Reduce stress and promote wellbeing (continued)



Regular check-ins

- Supervisors routinely check in with staff one-on-one and in team settings
- Regular stress and wellbeing questionnaire
- Staff goal-setting



Cultivate community

- Repurpose staff meetings to focus solely on community-building
- Use interactive tools (live polling or *MURAL*)
- Intentionally schedule, host social activities



Talk honestly about DEI

- Discuss microaggressions in the workplace
- Discuss the history and ongoing oppression of people of color
- Explore adaptations to program services to address inequities



Spotlight: Philadelphia Works, Inc.





Your experiences and ideas:
Join us in the chat!





Be sure to check out the briefs!



Project SPARK page on the OPRE website

OPRE **Mathematica.**
Progress Together

Pandemic-Era Innovations for the Future of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs

How Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs transformed traditional practice to meet new challenges, and where TANF programs can go from here

Jonathan McCay and Ellen Bart

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the way TANF programs operate in unprecedented ways. This brief has two purposes:

1. To capture some of the adaptations and innovations that programs designed to meet the rapidly evolving circumstances of the pandemic, and
2. To highlight promising practices and pose design questions for programs to explore, refine, and possibly test as next steps.

Throughout the pandemic, Mathematica collected data from TANF programs to understand the challenges they faced, the innovations they developed, and the promising strategies that were emerging. We drew on two primary sources for these data. First, we documented the experiences and topics described during virtual learning community groups with state and local TANF program leaders and staff held between May and September 2020. Second, we conducted seven web-based surveys with TANF program leaders and staff between January and March 2021, addressing topics such as office safety and reopening, use of technology, staff and participant well-being, and performance and accountability, among others (Office of Management and Budget control #0970-0531; see Box 1). Mathematica collected this information and developed this brief under Project SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research Knowledge), funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The perfect storm: A catalyst for change

The public health restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted TANF and workforce agencies to significantly change their service delivery models. State or local guidelines largely

Box 1. Where our data come from

Mathematica fielded seven surveys to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs with which we were engaged in technical assistance, those who were part of an existing learning community, and individuals who had signed up for a distribution list related to support during the pandemic. We collected 965 responses across all seven surveys, including responses from 18 states. Respondents were generally managers, supervisors, or direct service staff in TANF programs. About 63 percent of all responses (n = 612) were from staff located throughout California and 10 percent (n = 92) were from staff located throughout Colorado. This heavy clustering within two states owes to two factors: (1) Mathematica's available distribution list for the survey included more than 600 contacts within California, far exceeding any other states, and (2) personnel at the state level in Colorado disseminated the survey to county personnel on several occasions. Mathematica wishes to thank the American Public Human Services Association for their help disseminating the surveys. **4**

DECEMBER 2021 > mathematica.org 1

OPRE **Mathematica.**
Progress Together

Supporting Mental Wellness for Program Staff and Participants: Strategies for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Leaders

Michelle K. Derr

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other human services programs faced unprecedented challenges managing the COVID-19 global pandemic. They were tasked with serving America's most vulnerable families as they navigated difficult economic circumstances and public health risks. Across the United States, researchers documented high rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress as a result of the pandemic, particularly during the early months (Akkin et al. in press; Jewell et al. 2020). One panel survey completed in June 2020 found that 40 percent of adults were struggling with mental health or substance use (Czeisler et al. 2020).

The pandemic took its toll on state and local TANF program staff, in addition to families. Staff were managing the complex needs of families with low incomes, while adapting to their own circumstances as they shifted from providing services in person to serving people remotely. They were juggling work and family responsibilities and managing the stress and anxiety of an uncertain future. Racial violence and unrest compounded the challenges of managing COVID-19. Many staff of color experienced an intensified layer of stress and fear. They were showing signs of stress, including lack of focus, fatigue, agitation, and a sense of hopelessness (see Box 1). In response to these crises, TANF leaders adapted in new and innovative ways to support staff and families.

In this brief, we capture how TANF programs adapted to promote staff and participant wellness

and the innovative adaptations that leaders might consider adopting or sustaining moving forward. Although TANF programs implemented many of these adaptations in response to the pandemic, the lessons and practices may be valuable strategies to address persistent stress and trauma and improve staff and participant well-being beyond the end of the public health emergency. The benefits of adopting strategies that promote wellness among staff and participants include improved staff morale, reduction in staff turnover, and higher quality interactions between program leaders and staff and program staff and participants (McGarrigle and Walsh 2011).

Box 1. Survey on TANF program staff general well-being

In a sample of 128 TANF staff within six states (California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Vermont):

- 62 percent said they felt confident in their ability to handle personal problems
- 43 percent said they felt things were going their way
- 47 percent said they sometimes felt they were unable to control the important things in life. Another 24 percent said they felt that way very or fairly often
- 23 percent said they felt like they could not overcome difficulties very or fairly often
- Their top concerns were: safety of family and friends (62 percent), managing work and family life (53 percent), and effectively serving customers remotely (36 percent) **4**

As of February 2021

MARCH 2022 > mathematica.org 1



Acknowledgements

Support for this webinar is provided by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under contract HHSP233201500035I/75P00119F37043, also known as Project SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research and Knowledge).

Thank you to our project monitors, Amelie Hecht and Emily Ross, for their guidance and partnership in this work.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this webinar do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The mention of third-party applications and products throughout this presentation does not in any way constitute an endorsement or claim about efficacy from the aforementioned agencies, Mathematica, or The Adjacent Possible.