

Identifying and Addressing Compassion Fatigue Within TANF Programs



A Guide for Managers

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PeerTA provides evidence-informed training and technical assistance to state, local and tribal TANF programs and their partners. PeerTA also facilitates the sharing of timely and practical information on innovative practices, emerging challenges and opportunities, and application of lessons learned to the broader TANF field. To learn more about the PeerTA network and the available resources, publications, and tools, please visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/>. To make a request for technical assistance, please visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/technical-assistance>.





Compassion Fatigue

Administrators and supervisors who support staff within the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program recognize compassion as an essential and finite resource. It is one of the most critical assets to the human services sector; therefore, it must be protected and preserved.

TANF staff who are repeatedly exposed to the trauma of others in their work are at risk of developing compassion fatigue (CF). It is important that TANF administrators and supervisors know how to recognize and respond to CF symptoms. CF is preventable and treatable; however, if unaddressed, the symptoms can result in problems with mental and physical health, strained personal relationships, and poor work performance.¹

Research indicates that CF is made up of two main components: burnout and secondary traumatic stress.² Those experiencing burnout often feel like no matter what they do, they are not effective. Thus, working toward positive change with clients becomes elusive, if not impossible. Signs of secondary traumatic stress, a more severe symptom of CF, can present in TANF staff as a sense of being haunted by the troubles that are seen and heard from others and not being able to make them go away, or the feeling that others' trauma is theirs.

CF may manifest differently based on staff and regional characteristics. For example, female practitioners are more likely than male practitioners to suffer from CF, as are practitioners working in rural settings without peer support and access to resources. Also, locations with severe drought like California, or where frequent catastrophic weather events occur, like New Orleans, compound trauma and stressors that make daily living and work

in TANF more challenging. Staff also carry their own experiences of trauma or may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and there may be incidents where staff are exposed to stories or information that trigger memories or feelings of their previous traumatic experiences.³

TANF administrators play an important role in preventing and mitigating the impacts of CF among staff. Administrators should promote an organizational culture that is responsive to the effects of repeated exposure to trauma and stress that comes with working with survivors, as well as provide a supportive environment for employees to address such effects both during and outside of work.⁴

Two Components of Compassion Fatigue

What Staff Might be Feeling

1

BURNOUT

- Nothing will help their clients
- Tired
- Apathy
- Disconnected
- Cynical
- Frustrated

2

SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

- Fear in situations that otherwise would not be frightening
- Excessive worry that something bad will happen
- Easily startled — feeling “jumpy”
- Heart racing, shortness of breath, tension headaches

See SAMHSA's [Understanding Compassion Fatigue](#) for more information about CF components.





The Business Case to Identify and Address Compassion Fatigue in TANF Staff

There is substantial research that supports the business case for leadership to pay attention to the health and well-being of staff at all levels within TANF agencies. An engaged and satisfied TANF workforce that holds a positive attitude toward the agency is associated with improved outcomes, professional productivity, lower turnover rates, improved customer experience, stronger outcomes, and a feeling of safety.⁵

Researchers from Google's Project Aristotle found that the most significant factor in high-performing teams is psychological safety, or "a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up." In other words, the high-performing teams were compassionate.⁶

Developing and supporting compassionate TANF programs can improve staff's ability to take their time to learn about the needs of their clients, co-create strength-based self-sufficiency/employment plans, and ultimately help individuals and families receiving TANF secure economic independence.

CF Can Diminish Creativity in Favor of Compliance in TANF Programs

Cognitive responses to CF can be observed in staff as lowered concentration, apathy, and preoccupation with trauma, but can also be observed in how they interact with TANF clients.

One example of a creative approach from Anna Tekippe from the Center for Work, Education, and Employment in Denver, CO, is below.

"Rules can create safety, especially when TANF staff are exhausted and overwhelmed; it is easy to fall into a rigidity. In those times it might be easier at that point to ask 'where is your timesheet' than to think about 'what are some ways we can think about getting your timesheet completed and turned in' or 'how can we think about creative reminders for timesheets.'"





Recognizing the Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue in TANF Staff

The ways in which compassion fatigue manifests vary by person, and understanding the contributing factors is often a personal journey.⁷

Recognizing the factors that lead to CF and fostering a culture of care and mutual respect within the TANF agency are paramount to the health of staff and to the engagement and support of TANF clients.⁸

These symptoms can manifest in different ways, including negative impact on job performance, personal behavior, job satisfaction, and most of all, a sense of numbness, distancing, and difficulty providing an appropriate level of care to TANF clients and others.

Additionally, CF experiences and triggers can depend on a person's background and life experiences. Characteristics such as racial identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, trauma history, and socioeconomic status can interact in unique ways that influence how client experiences are perceived, and even how CF is expressed.

Understanding the Resources and Providing TANF Staff with Space to Use Them

TANF staff interested in deepening their knowledge of their personal symptoms are encouraged to integrate assessments into their routines and workflows. TANF leadership can support this by using staff meetings and other opportunities to discuss and normalize conversations about tools and resource utilization.

[Evidence-based Tools for Staff](#)

[Compassion Satisfaction/Fatigue Self-Test for Helpers](#)

[Professional Quality of Life Measure](#)





5 Ways to Promote Compassion Satisfaction

What is Compassion Satisfaction?

Compassion satisfaction is the sense of fulfillment and other positive feelings one has about the work they do based on feelings of hope, strength, and resilience. In the TANF context, this fulfillment comes from helping individuals and families move from public assistance to economic independence.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for CF, but several studies show that reconnecting to meaning in work can mitigate the effects of compassion fatigue.⁹ The opportunity to help others — to be empathic — is what draws many TANF service providers to this life-changing work. Reconnecting with the sense of purpose that brought staff to the work in the first place, coupled with strategies to manage feelings of distress, can help alleviate CF.

TANF program leadership can implement strategies to promote a more compassionate TANF office culture and mitigate the symptoms of CF.¹⁰

1) Create Trauma-Informed Approaches with TANF Clients and Staff

The use of trauma-informed approaches that focus on both client and staff strengths and goals can promote compassion satisfaction. TANF leaders can start with a commitment

to trauma-informed principles and policies; create an infrastructure to initiate, support, and guide changes; and involve key stakeholders in those changes, including staff and clients with lived experiences.

Building a Trauma-Informed TANF Program: An Evaluative Toolkit

TANF administrators can assess how current policies and procedures may contribute to compassion fatigue among staff. This toolkit provides more information on trauma-informed service delivery as well as assessments for evaluating current policies and rules.



2) Develop Goal-Centered Assessments and Self-Sufficiency Plans

While having clients share their traumatic experiences may help build a deeper understanding of their overall history, it may inadvertently retraumatize and contribute to CF among staff. Instead, staff can use more goal-centered practices that prioritize the immediate needs of clients. An empathy-driven curiosity to understand goals, strengths, talents, and the choices that clients make when interacting with the staff and the program's benefits and services can set the stage for a more efficient and effective path toward economic mobility.

TANF administrators who are interested in building goal-centered assessment and

Five approaches to client-centered coaching

- Family-Centered Coaching, 2016
- Goal4it!®, 2016
- Human Services Coaching Framework, 2014
- My Goals for Employment Success, 2017
- Mobility Mentoring, 2009

coaching practices into their program can review and compare five different models that have been developed and refined over the last several years. Each of the models promote strength-based assessment practices, incremental steps to goal development and attainment, and individual approaches to addressing and resolving barriers.¹¹

The **Ohio Department of Job and Family Services** has moved to a case management approach that focuses on future goals rather than past traumas to reduce the negative impacts of recounting trauma for both case managers and clients. The Department is also training case managers in mental health first aid to help staff better understand potential triggers for themselves and clients and to feel more comfortable making mental health referrals.

Source: OFA PeerTA Podcast “Combatting Compassion Fatigue” (2021). Washington, DC: Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-peerta-podcast-episode-2-combatting-compassion/id1444245603?i=1000537179872>

3) Promote Opportunities for Group Support

TANF staff have varying degrees of discretion over decisions regarding benefit and service provision for TANF clients. Many staff can decide types and amounts of supportive services, when to initiate adverse action (sanctions and case closures), when and where to refer individuals who are in crisis, and how to manage a wide range of challenges that TANF clients must overcome to become independent. This level of discretion can become taxing for staff to exercise on their own and can contribute to CF.

TANF leaders can help staff by creating time and space for both formal and informal case staffing and debriefs. This time can help staff process traumatic material with supervisors and peers and create an infrastructure for staff to help each other with complex situations, paperwork, or emergency backup.¹²

4) Design a Safe and Comfortable Work Environment for Staff

It can be challenging to show up fully at work when anxiety, stress, and other symptoms of CF are present – and if the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it is that there is power in a flexible workplace. When feasible, giving staff the option of mixed remote and in-person workspaces can offer interpersonal benefits as well as mental health breaks.

When the office environment is the only option due to the nature of the work, TANF leaders can create places for staff to decompress, such as a comfort room with relaxing colors, calming activities like writing or drawing, comfortable chairs or recliners, and soft music. These wellness spaces give staff a place to decompress and focus on personal wellness and to express themselves (alone or with a colleague).

Even small changes, such as decorated workspaces, can provide staff comfort and relaxation as they process and reflect.¹³ Regularly providing or co-creating resources for TANF staff to practice self-care is another way to help mitigate the impact of the fatigue that often occurs without staff ever knowing it.

5) Ensure Trustworthy and Compassionate Supervision That Creates a Relationship in which Staff Feel Safe in Expressing Fears and Concerns

Compassion is a practice. Set time and space to have regular one-on-one check-in meetings with staff. This can be a time to process traumatic interactions and normalize the personal effects they might have.¹⁴ Supervisors and staff can mitigate CF by creating compassion charters in TANF organizations.

Compassion charters can be developed during a series of staff meetings. Begin with a discussion and agreement of compassion values:

- Compassion is a universal human practice.
- Central to compassion is the act of treating others as we wish to be treated if we were in their situation.
- Compassion is action that alleviates suffering in others and assumes one's presence with those who suffer.
- Compassion is not selective — every human being deserves justice, equity, and respect, and we should not act or speak in ways that deny others these basic human rights regardless of who they are or what they express to us.
- Compassion places others' needs and learning first, knowing that we are all interdependent and connected.¹⁵

Once you have discussed and agreed upon values, take the next steps to create a Positive Staff Culture Charter.

TANF administrators play a critical role in creating an infrastructure of care to support staff both on the job and outside of work. Interviews with TANF clients highlight how critical client and staff relationships are to engagement in training and work and how these relationships grow and help support clients to persist in the TANF program when barriers develop along the way.¹⁶ Building compassion satisfaction empowers TANF staff and promotes positive interactions and support to TANF clients to succeed.

In addition to the ideas for how leaders can co-create compassion charters above, Anna Tekippe with the **Center for Work, Education, and Employment** in Denver suggests a new conversational norm in TANF agencies. Instead of asking your staff or work colleague how they are doing, ask how the work is impacting them. This conversation gives life and meaning to experiences and helps coworkers and staff understand and respond to those experiences more fully.

Source: OFA PeerTA Podcast "Combatting Compassion Fatigue" (2021). Washington, DC: Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-peerta-podcast-episode-2-combatting-compassion/id1444245603?i=1000537179872>

Compassion Resource Station

The Resource Link	The Reason
<u>Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project</u>	High levels of compassion fatigue can be managed with several authentic, sustainable strategies. This site has numerous resources for caregivers working in many professions. The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project also offers original training materials, workbooks, and texts.
<u>Understanding Compassion Fatigue Within TANF Programs: A Guide for Staff</u>	The demands of your role as a TANF administrator or manager do not insulate you from experiencing CF. Learn more by listening to PeerTA's companion podcast.
<u>Thrive Global</u>	Includes cutting-edge behavior change technology and tools that will help people live and work with less stress, more productivity, and greater well-being.
<u>Compassion Resilience Toolkit</u>	The content of this toolkit has been strongly informed by research and best practices related to resilience, positive psychology, compassion fatigue, organizational psychology, and mindfulness.
<u>Self-Care Toolkit</u>	This toolkit, developed by psychologist Shawn Goldberg, provides simple ways to reduce tension and guides readers through ways to decrease their vulnerability to compassion fatigue.
<u>Your Healthiest Self: Wellness Toolkits</u>	The National Institutes of Health offers a collection of toolkits to help support overall well-being.

End Notes

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