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## Leveraging America's Social & Economic Resilience TANF Learning Community (LASER TLC)

**Post-Pandemic  
Modernization: How  
Four TANF Programs  
Took Strides to Make  
Their Systems More  
Accessible and  
Responsive to  
Communities**



— Leveraging —  
*America's Social &  
Economic Resilience*

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# Post-Pandemic Modernization: How Four TANF Programs Took Strides to Make Their Systems More Accessible and Responsive to Communities

## Introduction

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program plays a key role in the United States' web of social safety net programs. Created by legislation in 1996, there have been few updates to the policies and regulations governing the program.

TANF now supports more than 1.7 million Americans each year on average.<sup>1</sup> The federal government delegates the authority to design and implement TANF programs to states and federally recognized tribes. They often further delegate responsibility to counties and localities. This results in wide variation in TANF programming.<sup>2</sup> The benefit is that states and localities can design their TANF programs to best meet the needs of their communities and economies.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2023 forced TANF programs to rethink service delivery. Seemingly overnight, programs were forced to find new ways to implement policies and innovate through the use of technology.<sup>3,4</sup> In response, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) launched the Leveraging America's Social and Economic Resilience (LASER) TANF Learning Community (TLC).

LASER TLC builds on the immediate adaptations to the pandemic. It helps programs design and implement sustainable strategies for the post-pandemic world. Four of the ten program teams, highlighted here, focused their efforts on modernization projects. These ranged in scope from redesigning an application to ushering through major legislative and policy changes.

## LASER TLC Sites

The 10 TANF program sites took advantage of the Learning Community to address human service delivery issues and challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. All 10 TANF programs formed teams. Each received training and coaching designed to produce improved and more responsive services:

- \* Anne Arundel County, Maryland
- \* Larimer County, Colorado
- \* Kentucky
- \* North Carolina
- \* North Dakota
- \* Pennsylvania
- \* Washington
- \* Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy's Reservation
- \* Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- \* Yurok Tribe



<sup>1</sup> Based on Fiscal Year 2022 caseload data reported by the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, available at [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/fy2022\\_tanf\\_caseload.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/fy2022_tanf_caseload.pdf) (accessed May 23, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Hahn, Heather, David Kassabian, Lina Breslav, and Yvette Lamb (2015). A Descriptive Study of County- versus State-Administered Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs. OPRE Report # 2015-42, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>3</sup> Shantz, Katie, Linda Giannarelli, Ilham Dehry, Sarah Knowles, and Sarah Minton (2022). State TANF Policies During the COVID-19 Pandemic. OPRE Report # 2021-233, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>4</sup> McCay, Jonathan and Ellen Bart (2021). Pandemic-Era Innovations for the Future of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs. OPRE Report # 2021-188, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The four highlighted TANF program teams are: the Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians Tribal TANF program; the North Carolina Work First Program; the Kentucky Works Program; and the North Dakota TANF Program. This brief highlights the small and large ways of approaching TANF modernization. It offers insight into what can be achieved through small, intentional steps guided by a bold vision for innovation.

## Modernization: Small Steps, Big Changes

Modernizing a program may seem complex, difficult, and resource intensive. It certainly can be. Yet, the four of the LASER TLC teams highlighted below show that modernization can come in a variety of forms. In fact, *modernization is a series of incremental and intentional changes guided by a broad and bold vision.*

Consider how each of these program teams advanced their vision, ranging from small steps to big changes.

### First impressions matter: Reimagining the intake application for Scotts Valley Tribal TANF

The Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians is a federally recognized, landless Tribe. Its nearly 300 enrolled members are located in north-central California. The Tribe operates a TANF program that serves its members, members of the Big Valley Band of Pomo Indians, and other Tribes living in urban Contra Costa County, California.



The Tribe worked with their LASER TLC coaching team to identify and prioritize ideas to strengthen its program. After a few months, the Scotts Valley Tribal TANF (SVTT) team coalesced around a vision to be:

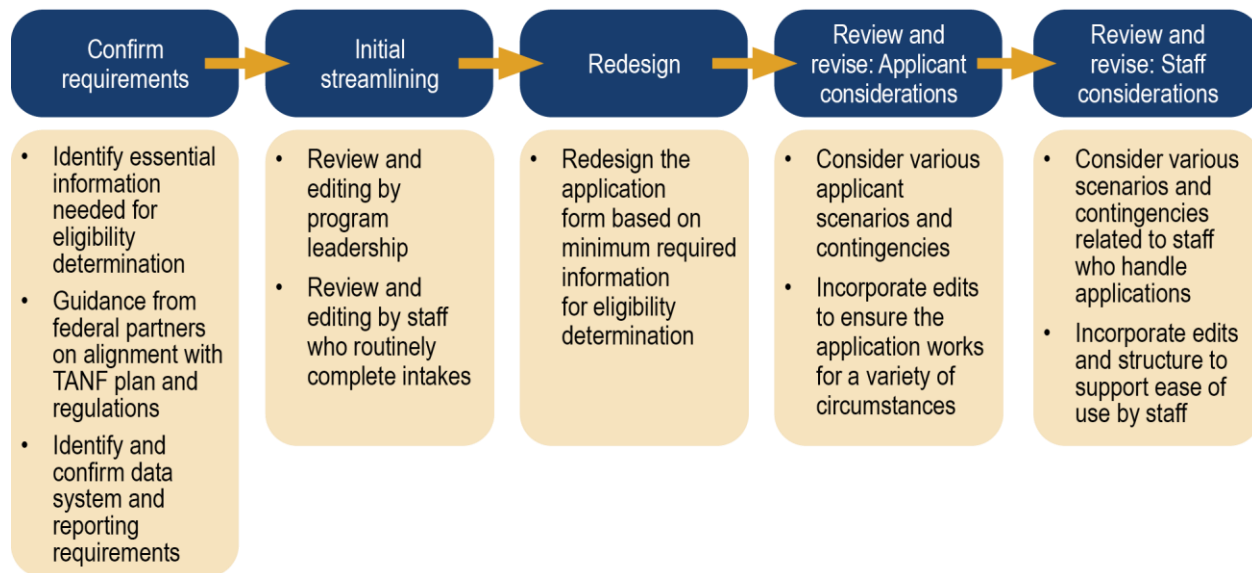
*a premier Tribal TANF program that cares and provides timely support to families; invites families in and provides a stress-free experience; and empowers families and staff alike to grow and thrive.*

Guided by this vision, the SVTT team started with a redesign of its intake application, which is the first experience families have with the program.

Since its inception, SVTT used the same intake application form. The dense, 14-page document was difficult for applicants to complete and burdensome for staff to use. It required extensive detail and information which, upon careful review, was largely unnecessary for determining an applicant's eligibility. For SVTT, the first step toward modernization was redesigning this application, centered on the experiences of families and frontline staff.

In partnership with its LASER TLC Coaching team, the SVTT team reviewed, redesigned, and revised the application (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Application Redesign Process**



The redesign process was an iterative one. It was supported by biweekly working meetings over the course of several months. Making progress on this initiative outside of these dedicated sessions was challenging, given limited staff resources and high demand for leaders’ attention. Convening every other week proved key to moving the redesign forward. These meetings also fostered collaboration between the SVTT and LASER TLC coaching team.

As of May 2023, the redesigned application is four pages long (as opposed to fourteen). New design choices make it less burdensome and stressful for applicants and staff. These include:

- ✓ Converting most open-response questions to checkboxes for ease and consistency.
- ✓ Eliminating all fields not needed to determine program eligibility. (This information can be collected later, during case management.)
- ✓ Producing an e-fillable and printable version that can be filled out by clients and brought to an intake appointment.
- ✓ Creating staff-facing components that streamline the process of documenting and verifying household income and resources.
- ✓ Pairing the application with a Motivational Interviewing-based approach for conducting intake interviews. This fosters a friendlier, warmer first impression of the program.

Figure 2 shows the difference in design of the former and new application forms.

## Figure 2. Application Design Changes

Income			
Does anyone, including children, get or expect to get income from any source listed below?			
Check "YES" or "NO" for each item	YES	NO	Check "YES" or "NO" for each item
1. Wages, salary, tips, overtime for work, or other program			16. VA Education related income
2. Other training allowance			
3. Educational grants, loans and other scholarships			
4. CarWORTH/cash aid from another state			
5. Refugee Assistance (RCA)			
6. Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI)			
7. GAGR (General Assistance/Relief)			
8. Worker's Compensation			
9. Child/Spouse Support			
10. Strike benefits			
11. Loans, Gifts, Contributions			
12. Legal or insurance settlements/court action proceeds			
13. Sale of Notes, Contracts, Trusts, Stocks, Investment Items			
14. Military Allowance or Pension			
15. Foster Care Benefits			
SVTT Application			

Resources			
Does anyone own or is anyone buying real estate, such as land and/or buildings anywhere, including outside the U.S. <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO			
If "YES", complete below: include land and/or buildings in which the title is shared			
Type: <input type="checkbox"/> Land <input type="checkbox"/> Condo <input type="checkbox"/> Apartment <input type="checkbox"/> House	How do you use the property? <input type="checkbox"/> Live in it <input type="checkbox"/> Rental Property	Owner(s) #	Who rents the room or house? # If YES, how much? \$
Address or Location			
Does anyone, including children, have any of the following personal or business-related resources? Include all resources owned, used, controlled, shared or held jointly with any persons. The SVTT Program will determine whether or not these resources count.			
Check "YES" or "NO" for each item	YES	NO	Check "YES" or "NO" for each item
1. Cash (on hand or otherwise)			10. Trust funds (beneficiary or not applicable)
2. Un-cashed checks (on hand or otherwise)			11. Notes, Mortgages, Deeds of Trust, Contracts of sale, etc.
3. Savings accounts—children's and adult's			12. IRA or ROTH plans, etc.
4. Checking accounts—children's and adult's			13. Retirement funds which are available if you stop work (such as PERA, etc.)
5. Credit Union accounts			14. Employee Deferred Compensation
6. Stocks, Bonds, Certificates of Deposit, Money Market accounts, etc.			15. Life Insurance or Annuity
7. Oil, Mining or Mineral Rights			16. Life Estate Interest in any property
8. Burial Trusts or Contracts, Insurance, Organized Funded Funds or Pans			17. Long-term Care Insurance
9. Income Tax Refund			18. EBT cash balance from a previous month.
If "YES", complete below:			
Resource	Business Related <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	Owner	Account or Policy #
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		Name of Bank
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		Current Value
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		
#	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO		
Does anyone get or expect to get money from any of the above resources, such as Interest, Dividends, etc.? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO			
If "YES", complete below:			
Name	Source of Dividends/Interest	Amount	How Often
			Business Related <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
			<input type="checkbox"/> No
			<input type="checkbox"/> No
SVTT Application			

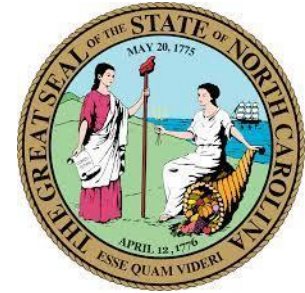
  

Part 4a: Household income and resources	
<p>In order to determine your eligibility for the Tribal TANF program, we need to know what sources of income you have and what resources you own. This helps us accurately calculate your cash assistance benefit. Please check the box next to any sources of income or resources that apply to you or someone in your household. If you have a question or are unsure, make a note and discuss it with a Scotts Valley Tribal TANF Program staff person at your intake interview. Please note that documentation will be needed to verify all incomes sources and resources.</p>	
Income	Resources
<input type="checkbox"/> Earned income (wages) from any employment <input type="checkbox"/> Any income from the Social Security Administration (SSA) including disability payments <input type="checkbox"/> Any income from Veterans Affairs (VA) including disability payments <input type="checkbox"/> Revenue sharing, Per Capita payments, or any other payments made by or on behalf of a Tribe or based on Tribal enrollment <input type="checkbox"/> Gifts received from any source <input type="checkbox"/> Rent from property <input type="checkbox"/> Rental from property <input type="checkbox"/> Educational grant, loan, or scholarship <input type="checkbox"/> Refugee Assistance <input type="checkbox"/> CarWORTH/Volunteer-to-Work cash assistance from another state, county, or tribe <input type="checkbox"/> Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) <input type="checkbox"/> Annuity or dividend payments (including from mineral/oil/mining rights) <input type="checkbox"/> Legal or insurance settlement <input type="checkbox"/> Pension or other retirement payments <input type="checkbox"/> Worker's compensation <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployment insurance <input type="checkbox"/> Child support <input type="checkbox"/> Foster care benefits <input type="checkbox"/> Winnings from gambling, lottery, bingo, or prizes <input type="checkbox"/> I have \$0 income <input type="checkbox"/> Other source(s) of income – please list below:	<input type="checkbox"/> Real estate (including land) of any kind <input type="checkbox"/> Cash on hand (including any uncashed checks) <input type="checkbox"/> Bank accounts of any kind (checking, savings, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Stocks, bonds, certificates of deposit, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> College savings accounts (e.g., 529 plan, Education Savings Account, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Retirement accounts (e.g., 401k, IRAs, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Cash apps (e.g., ApplePay, Venmo, PayPal, Zelle, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Prepaid cards (e.g., Green Dot, Chime, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Crypto currency (e.g., Bitcoin, DogeCoin, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Fundraising accounts (e.g., GoFundMe, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Development Account (IDA) <input type="checkbox"/> Cafeteria (125B) accounts (e.g., Health Savings Accounts, Flexible Spending Accounts, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Trust fund <input type="checkbox"/> Life insurance or annuity <input type="checkbox"/> Vehicles <input type="checkbox"/> Any personal property of value of \$500 or more (list below under "Other") <input type="checkbox"/> I have \$0 resources <input type="checkbox"/> Other resource(s) – please list below:
<p>For any of the income sources or resources you checked above, is there <b>more than one source</b> for your household (for example, wages from two jobs or two cash apps)? If yes, please note below:</p>	
<p>Please bring your most recent documentation (within 30 days) for each source of income and resource you checked above.</p>	
<p>During your intake interview with Scotts Valley Tribal TANF program staff, we will review this list with you and gather additional details. Having your documentation on-hand will help us avoid delays in processing your application.</p>	

The SVTT team had staff pilot the redesigned application as part of a training in June 2023. The SVTT staff team completed the application themselves to experience it as an applicant would and reported positive feedback about the new design. Because of the streamlined nature of the form, staff acknowledged that more effort will be required on their part, using motivational interviewing techniques, to understand clients' circumstances and needs. Challenging existing assumptions is key when modernizing and reevaluating processes that may no longer be helpful. It was also important for the SVTT team to keep staff health and wellbeing in mind by focusing on changes that could make the process easier and more efficient.

## Increasing accessibility: Creating an online application for North Carolina Work First

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique challenge for Work First, the North Carolina TANF program: when local service offices closed, there was no way for residents to apply. Work First was the only public benefits program that did not have an online application option. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) had to work quickly to allow and then conduct eligibility interviews by phone so that applications could be processed. This challenge sparked an impetus for change through the LASER TLC.



The NCDHHS team launched an effort to bring the Work First application online using the ePASS system, which was already being used by North Carolina's Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and energy assistance programs. This would modernize Work First and align it with the state's other public benefits programs.

First, the NCDHHS systems and technology teams worked to better understand the ePASS system's capabilities and limitations. Then they began building the online Work First application. NCDHHS also invited early input from federal partners to ensure compliance with reporting requirements.

Because North Carolina's TANF program is administered by counties, seeking input on the proposed change from county social service directors was especially important. The NCDHHS team created a standing Governance Board (comprised of county directors) to provide routine input and advice on proposed policy changes.

In partnership with its LASER TLC coaching team, systems and technology team, and several county directors, the agency developed a journey map of the proposed ePASS application experience. The map conveyed the journey, from start to finish, of families applying for benefits and the staff assisting them (see Figure 3). This process helped the team identify potential pain points and prioritize areas requiring further clarification and planning.

**Figure 3. Journey Map Sample**



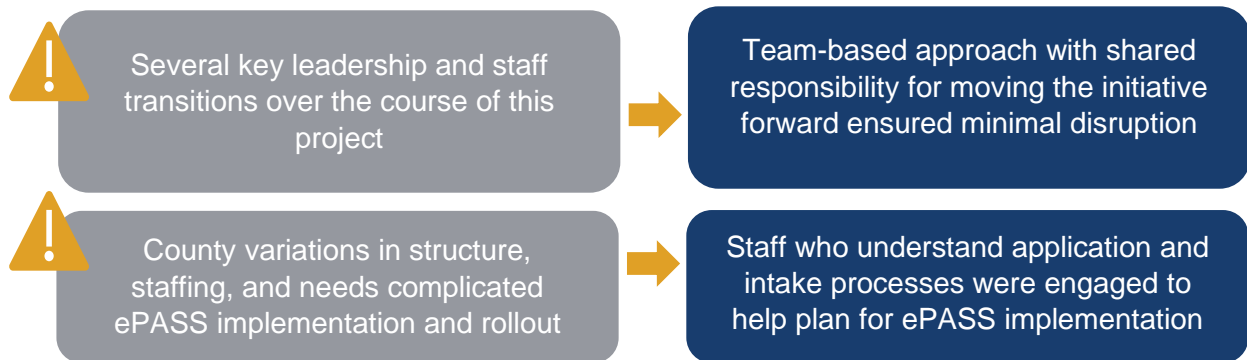
The ePASS application for Work First was designed with the following goals:

- ✓ Reduce the need for staff to assist clients with completing applications. This frees up staff time for more meaningful and important customer service interactions.
- ✓ Increase accessibility to the Work First program by no longer requiring clients to apply in-person.
- ✓ Increase the accuracy and completeness of applications. ePASS automatically verifies entries and performs error-free calculations.

After a little more than a year of work, the Work First ePASS application went live in December 2022. Unfortunately, ePASS did not have the capability to make the Work First application available only in select counties or instances for pilot testing. Instead, the NCDHHS team conducted internal testing prior to launch.

Within the first month of launch, Work First received more than quadruple the number of applications it had received in the same month one year prior. About 75 percent of those were completed through ePASS. However, the team found that many of those applications were ineligible for assistance. This led NCDHHS to provide clearer guidance in the ePASS system about Work First eligibility requirements.

This modernization project, like most, involved its fair share of challenges, which the team overcame:





## Strengthening engagement: Rolling out an Integrated Case Management model in Kentucky

The Kentucky Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) launched several modernization projects to advance its vision of breaking the cycle of poverty. One key project was an Integrated Case Management (ICM) model.



The ICM begins its case management interactions with participant-led goal setting. This is followed by a plan to achieve those goals, created collaboratively by the participant, case manager, and service contractor. As one Kentucky Works Program (KWP) administrator described it, this was to “get back to the basics of case management” by focusing on meaningful engagement with families, connecting families with local resources to meet their needs, and building families’ independence one goal at a time.

The DCBS recognized that case management is a nonlinear process. It requires frequent adaptations to meet evolving family needs. The DCBS team approached this modernization project with the following philosophy:

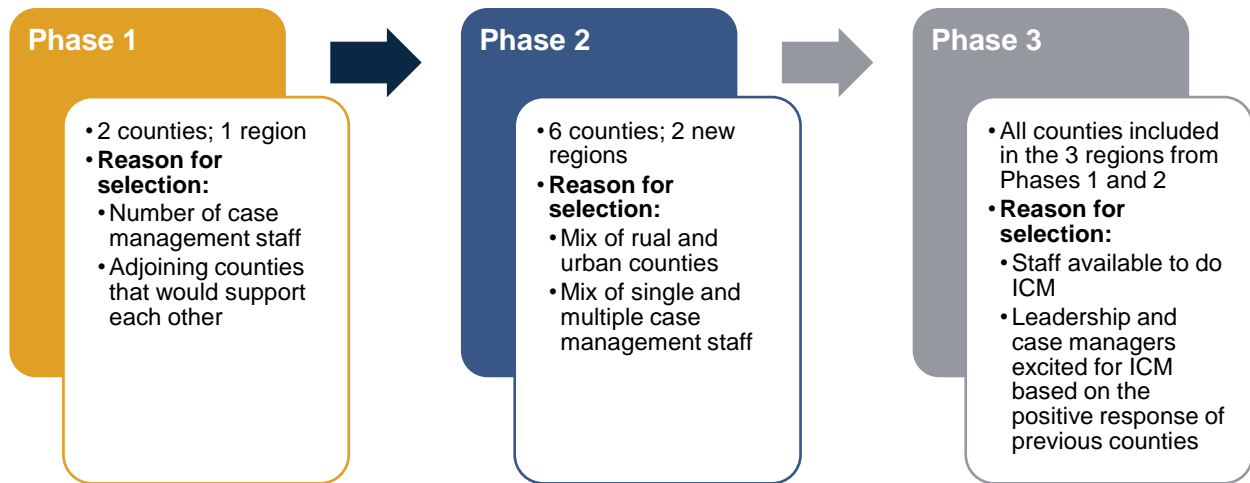
*openness and willingness to reevaluate long-established steps in the process—to question, revise, and even eliminate case management steps in order to better serve families.*

DCBS used the LASER TLC and worked with the LASER TLC coaching team to conduct an incremental approach, piloting ICM over three phases. New counties were added only after obtaining feedback and implementing suggested changes. Pilot partners were selected based on which would most help DCBS improve ICM before full implementation across Kentucky (see Figure 4).

The collaboration between DCBS and its pilot partners was key to Kentucky’s success. During each phase, they held biweekly meetings, obtained detailed case logs, and facilitated open feedback loops. DCBS learned what worked and what didn’t. This allowed issues to be identified and addressed quickly.

This close working relationship strengthened local buy-in by demonstrating DCBS’s commitment to listen and respond to local feedback.

**Figure 4. Kentucky DCBS Pilot Phases**



The ICM model involved several components, including:

- ✓ **Local, dedicated case management.** Case managers work with a specific caseload rather than fielding phone calls for all services on a rotating, first-available basis. This allows case managers to develop relationships with participants and gives participants a known point of contact.
- ✓ **New staff training.** Case managers received training in the context and causes of poverty and human-centered, empathetic approaches to family engagement. They also learned how to coach participants through setting and planning their own goals.
- ✓ **Participant-led processes.** Participants begin setting goals in their very first appointment. Case managers then engage them in backward planning. This process breaks their goals down into small, manageable steps. Case managers then identify specific resources to support each step in the plan.

Each of these changes required close collaboration with partner counties to learn more about implementation. It allowed DCBS to refine the ICM approach before rolling it out across the commonwealth.

Through the pilots, DCBS discovered how to staff call center and in-person services to address participants' immediate needs while allowing case managers to focus on ongoing needs. DCBS also learned that when case managers have more time to review caseloads, address challenges, and conduct outreach and follow-up with their clients, they are more satisfied with their work.

## Shifting policy and practice: Bringing North Dakota TANF into the 21st century

Since 2021, the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services (NDDHHS) has worked on a large-scale initiative to modernize its TANF program. This effort has included several legislative changes, a redesigned eligibility staffing model, and a new framework for case management and workforce services. It builds on a comprehensive effort undertaken in 2021 called *Strategic Doing* which involved statewide data collection from families and staff to learn about areas for TANF improvement.



This environmental scan was guided by a framing question:

***Imagine if North Dakota led the nation in providing TANF services. What would that look like? How would that be different from our approach today?***

Two key insights gained through the scan were : (1) eight out of 10 TANF recipients are children and (2) 67 percent of recipients identify as Native American.



Through the LASER TLC, NDDHHS sought to create a strategy to address findings from the scan and advance its vision for modernization through policy and practice changes.

The agency began efforts to build support for and move forward a legislative agenda that would:

- ✓ Increase the program's standard of need and maximize the use of supportive service dollars.
- ✓ Redesign monthly reporting requirements for participants and staff to reduce administrative burdens.
- ✓ Remove the Pay After Performance (PAP) policy which delayed initial benefits to families.

At the same time, NDDHHS recognized the need to adapt program practices to the planned shifts in policy.

To this end, the North Dakota team and its LASER TLC coaching team engaged a variety of North Dakota partners serving TANF families. In summer 2022, they began brainstorming together to decide how to respond to the framing question above. These virtual sessions generated consensus on how to strengthen focus on participants' goals, shift the focus away from compliance toward meaningful outcomes, and be more responsive to families' needs.



In October 2022, NDDHHS convened its community partners in-person for an innovation workshop, building on these priorities. This led to the identification of six essential elements to define North Dakota’s modernized TANF program:

- ✓ Create a meaningful experience for families.
- ✓ Build responsive and supportive relationships with families.
- ✓ Provide a stress-free and simple experience for families.
- ✓ Build core capabilities of individuals.
- ✓ Connect individuals to employment and training opportunities.
- ✓ Deliver a robust suite of benefits and services.

Since then, the NDDHHS team has worked to define and refine these elements, explore how the agency and its partners can accomplish them, and examine research and practices from other states.

North Dakota’s modernization initiative is complex and will take years to fully realize. Yet, the team has realized considerable success even within one year. The legislature has approved key bills and community partners have demonstrated strong buy-in and commitment.

The team’s collaborative approach and an emphasis on early, consistent communication has played a big part in its early success.

## Promoting TANF Program Modernization

TANF modernization consists of evolving TANF programs to better advance families’ economic mobility by addressing their individual strengths, goals, and needs. It can often feel like a considerable effort. Sometimes, modernization goals seem out of reach in the face of pressure to meet federal or state requirements, the need to coordinate multiple entities with different motivations and incentives, and the challenges of practical and cultural changes to the way TANF practitioners work.

Each of the modernization efforts described above is distinct, ranging from changing one form (in the case of Scotts Valley) to overhauling statewide policies and practices (in the case of North Dakota). Yet, common threads are clear. **Collaboration** is the cornerstone—engaging key partners in the process of identifying, creating, and trying out change.

The experiences of the TANF programs profiled in this brief show that TANF modernization is not only desirable—it is possible. Modernization is within reach of any TANF program. It can be achieved by being willing to set a bold vision, create a targeted action plan, intentionally collaborate with a broad set of partners, and stay flexible and nimble as circumstances change.

As illustrated in this brief, TANF staff and administrators seeking to modernize their programs can consider the following strategies.

**Cast a vision for modernization.** Successful change efforts start with a compelling, shared



vision. Program directors who seek to modernize their TANF programs can work with their teams and partners to develop and communicate a vision for their effort. This vision should define the change they hope to make and explain why that change is important for the families and communities they serve. A strong vision is the north star that guides the team's actions, motivates partnerships, and helps the team gauge success.

**Translate your vision into a targeted action plan, focusing on small changes**



**first.** As the experiences of programs profiled in this brief show, TANF modernization doesn't need to entail a complete program redesign. Often, large shifts start with small, targeted steps. TANF leaders who are interested in modernization will benefit from breaking down their vision into concrete, manageable steps and developing an action plan that is feasible for all partners.

**Collaborate with a broad set of partners to make progress.** TANF programs



operate in an ecosystem of interconnected government and community entities. Often, partnership across programs is essential to create and sustain service improvements. TANF modernization efforts are strengthened by intentional, consistent collaboration with other programs and entities, grounded in a shared vision for serving and supporting families. During the LASER TLC, program teams partnered closely with coaches who facilitated the dynamic change process. You can learn more about this and other collaboration instrumental in the LASER TLC at <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/lasertlc>.

**Be willing to pivot and adjust plans as circumstances evolve.** Technical,



operational, or staffing challenges—not to mention shifts in policy or practice—are common. When faced with changing circumstances, TANF leaders and their teams benefit from taking a step back and recalibrating their approach. Maintaining a strong focus on the core vision while being flexible and adaptable about strategies and tactics helps TANF modernization efforts succeed.

