

Using Employment Services Practice Models to Transform a System

The Office of Family Assistance's (OFA) Policy Academy for Innovative Employment Strategies (PAIES) was an intensive technical assistance (TA) initiative in 2019-2020 for six programs across four jurisdictions interested in improving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) practice. During the initiative, participating teams received dedicated coaches, strategic planning, access to expert consultants, and tailored written resources. Additionally, they participated in several convenings, peer exchanges, and virtual trainings.



Background

The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) serves one in nine Massachusetts residents through a variety of state and federal human service programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), and Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children.

DTA staff provide eligibility and engagement services supported by 22 local offices. TAFDC staff include employment specialists (called Full Engagement Workers) who provide office-wide support for employment-related activities, self-sufficiency specialists who carry reduced caseloads of young parents, and generalized staff who determine eligibility and provide case management services. The urgency associated with determining program eligibility made it difficult for generalized staff to meaningfully support or explore career options with participants.

With historically low unemployment rates for many years, DTA began to explore new strategies to help participants transition successfully to economic stability. Before joining PAIES, DTA embraced a coaching approach based on EMPATH's Mobility Mentoring® model,¹ which DTA called the Employment Service Practice Model. Massachusetts piloted this model with TAFDC staff in four local DTA offices—where each office was empowered to individualize and develop tailored coaching strategies. Each also used and adapted EMPATH's Bridge to Self-Sufficiency®, a visual tool to help participants identify their unique paths forward.² Simultaneously, DTA employment specialists and self-sufficiency staff participated in EMPATH workshops on their Mobility Mentoring model to support the incorporation of brain science and goal-focused principles into all aspects of DTA's work.

PAIES Objectives

Initial feedback from pilot staff and participants on the Employment Service Practice Model was very positive and prompted numerous changes to better support and scale it across DTA. During PAIES, DTA aimed to (1) streamline program rules and requirements for working families while removing administrative burdens when possible for staff, (2) better incentivize and support employment-related activities into career pathways, and (3) ease the "cliff effect" as participants worked toward economic mobility.

PAIES Challenges, Adaptations, and Accomplishments

To meet its PAIES objectives, DTA:

- **Increased professional development opportunities for staff.** DTA developed trainings and materials for staff to facilitate conversations on the causes of poverty³ and strategies for disrupting generational poverty. Training was phased in slowly to integrate feedback from participants and strengthen connections to DTA work.

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- **Increased emphasis on multi-generational approaches.** In summer 2019, DTA re-procured its \$8 million Competitive Integrated Employment Services program. Selected vendors were required to expand their focus on two-generation approaches, offer employment supports to non-custodial parents, and target services to meet individualized participant skills, needs, and goals.⁴
- **Updated state policies.** Some DTA policies created unintended barriers to participant employment. Policies were changed to provide access to free childcare for relative caregivers, remove the first vehicle from the state's asset test to acknowledge the importance transportation plays in economic mobility, eliminate a benefit increase for those who claim an exemption from the work program, and end the practice of a benefit payment reduction for those experiencing homelessness.
- **Explored opportunities for realignment of job functions.** DTA wanted to create more time for generalized workers to engage with participants in an individualized, goal-centered way by identifying tasks that could be realigned or streamlined. For example, they began to expand participant self-service options for applications, recertifications, and some case management tasks. DTA has also begun exploring shifts in their staffing structure where some staff focus more on eligibility-related tasks, while others provide intensive coaching.

To ensure alignment across DTA's PAIES and related priorities, they created a logic model that tracked and showed the interconnectedness of their multiple workforce initiatives. To help staff maintain momentum, DTA also prioritized communication to ensure all staff understood the "why" of proposed changes, how the changes would benefit participants and their families, and how program metrics translated into participant outcomes.

Next Steps

PAIES provided DTA with a structure to reflect on its successes and creatively consider what "could be" in the future. Sustaining momentum and addressing change fatigue will be key to ensuring continued success. Before taking on additional changes, DTA will focus on ensuring new innovations are understood, supported, and implemented. As evidenced through PAIES, DTA's transformational culture change embraces creativity, accountability, and passion by celebrating participant successes, strengthening staff capacities, and fostering productive relationships.



Moving Forward During COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, DTA was forced to pivot many service delivery processes quickly to meet the needs of Massachusetts residents. Between January 2020 to May 2020, DTA's caseload increased 17% across all programs, with an 11% increase in the TAFDC program.

To be responsive, DTA tapped into many of the innovative ideas and strategies developed during PAIES—such as moving their economic assistance application online and strategizing reforms of its work program sanction policy and participation tracking. As DTA's workforce transitioned to fully remote operations, they have engaged families differently through virtual coaching strategies and capitalizing on available supports.

¹ EMPATH (2016), Mobility Mentoring®, <https://www.empathways.org/approach/mobility-mentoring>. Mobility Mentoring includes four elements: (1) the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency®, a visual tool to help participants identify their unique path forward; (2) coaching to help participants internalize their aspirations for economic mobility; (3) goal setting using a SMART format (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound), which provides manageable action steps; and (4) recognition of participants' achievements.

² EMPATH (n.d.), Bridge to Self-Sufficiency®, <https://www.empathways.org/approach/bridge-to-self-sufficiency>

³ Training on disrupting poverty was based on materials and learnings from Dr. Donna Beegle, President of Communication Across Barriers. <https://www.combarriers.com/>.

⁴ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (May 2019), Employment services program report, https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/05/24/fy19_dta_esp_report.pdf.