

## Promoting Strong Families through TANF

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program plays a key role in promoting strength and stability for families experiencing poverty. By helping families to meet their basic needs, obtain employment, and nurture healthy family relationships, TANF programs can foster long-term family wellbeing and economic independence. States have significant flexibility to use TANF funds to address unique family needs and accomplish any of the four purposes of TANF, including:

1. Assisting families so children can be cared for in their own homes or the homes of relatives;
2. Reducing the dependency of parents in need by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
3. Preventing pregnancies among unmarried persons; and
4. Encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.<sup>i</sup>

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer-Based Training and Technical Assistance (PeerTA) contract, this is one part of a series of briefs that highlight innovative and strategic ways that states are leveraging TANF funds to strengthen families and communities by building capacity for self-sufficiency and economic independence. Other parts of this brief include spotlights on kinship navigator programs, child protective services prevention, stress management supports for mothers, and connections between TANF & WIC. For additional information on the TANF program and its legislative framework, please refer to the Office of Family Assistance's TANF Laws and Regulations page.

## Healthy Relationship Initiatives

One of the statutory purposes of TANF is to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.” Research demonstrates the importance of two-parent families as they are associated with positive outcomes for children and parents. Research suggests that two-parent families may be more financially stable and experience less stress than their counterparts (Acs and Nelson, 2004 and Brown, 2010).<sup>ii,iii</sup> Furthermore, the children in these households may have more positive physical and mental health outcomes.<sup>iv</sup>



**How is a healthy marriage defined?** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services posits: “There are at least two characteristics that all healthy marriages have in common. First, they are mutually enriching, and second, both spouses have a deep respect for each other... [A healthy marriage] is a mutually satisfying relationship that is beneficial to the husband, wife and children (if present) ... It is a relationship that is committed to ongoing growth, the use of effective communication skills and the use of successful conflict management skills.”<sup>v</sup>

The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) funds 30 organizations through the Family, Relationship, and Marriage Education Works (FRAMEWorks) grants.<sup>vi</sup> These grants aim to help strengthen families and help individuals improve their relationship skills, economic stability and mobility. Activities and services provided through these grants integrate skills-based healthy marriage education with services to address relationship skills and job and career advancement opportunities.

## Spotlights on Healthy Relationship Initiatives

**West Virginia's Healthy Relationships Initiatives.**<sup>vii</sup> West Virginia's Healthy Relationships Initiative promotes healthy, violence-free relationships through educational workshops focused on marriage and relationship skills, parenting education, and financial literacy. The initiative aims to: (1) Improve marriage and relationship education skills, (2) Provide job and career advancement services to promote economic stability, and (3) Teach age-appropriate relationship and financial skills to youth to foster healthy relationships and economic self-sufficiency.

Activities under healthy relationship initiatives focus on topics such as:

- relationship skills,
- pre-marital education,
- divorce reduction,
- marriage mentoring,
- conflict resolution, and
- financial management.

Additionally, West Virginia's Fatherhood Program addresses the unique needs of fathers by providing education and support to strengthen marriage and relationship skills.

**North Carolina's Healthy Marriages Initiatives.**<sup>viii</sup> North Carolina's initiative equips individuals with the skills and education needed to form and sustain healthy marriages. Offered through local community-based family resource centers, this voluntary program provides comprehensive family support services to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Participants receive education on key relationship skills such as communication, emotion management, and conflict resolution, through both group and individual marriage and relationship education sessions.

**Florida's Healthy Relationship Initiatives.**<sup>ix</sup> Florida's HEART (Hear, Empathize, Assess, Respect, Talk) Initiative promotes awareness of healthy relationships among teens. A collaboration between the Florida Department of Children and Families and the Florida Department of Education, this initiative focuses on early intervention and the prevention of unhealthy relationships and teen dating violence. It provides teenagers, schools, and communities with resources to help students develop essential relationship skills.

Florida also has an initiative that supports fathers in maintaining active, positive roles in their children's lives. It offers educational workshops, mentorship opportunities, and one-on-one support on co-parenting collaboration and strengthening mother-father relationships. The initiative also includes a statewide awareness campaign on responsible fatherhood and provides resources to help fathers stay engaged in their children's lives.

**Utah's Healthy Marriage Initiatives.**<sup>x</sup> Guided by the Utah Marriage Commission, Utah's initiatives provide educational resources and services to support healthy relationships and strong, stable marriages. Many resources, including podcasts, webinars, and blogs, are available digitally. For nearly 25 years, Utah has offered relationship education and marriage-strengthening programs, leveraging TANF funds since 2004. These efforts are now embedded in state statute, reinforcing Utah's long-term commitment to family well-being.



Utah Senator Mike Lee posits Utah's rank as the state with the highest social capital may be attributable to its public policy efforts to promote healthy, stable marriages.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Office of Family Assistance. (2024). *About TANF*. <https://acf.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/about>

<sup>ii</sup> Acs, G., & Nelson, S. (2004). What Do "I Do"s Do?: Potential Benefits of Marriage for Cohabiting Couples with Children. Urban Institute, Assessing the New Federalism.

<sup>iii</sup> Brown, S. L. (2010). Marriage and child well-being: Research and policy perspectives. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(5), 1059-1077.

<sup>iv</sup> Lut, I., Woodman, J., Armitage, A., Ingram, E., Harron, K., & Hardelid, P. (2021). Health outcomes, healthcare use and development in children born into or growing up in single-parent households: a systematic review study protocol. *BMJ open*, 11(2), e043361.

<sup>v</sup> Knox, V. W., & Fein, D. (2008). Designing a marriage education demonstration and evaluation for low-income married couples. MDRC.

<sup>vi</sup> Office of Family Assistance. (2020). FY 2020 Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees. <https://acf.gov/ofa/grant-funding/fy-2020-healthy-marriage-and-responsible-fatherhood-grantees>

<sup>vii</sup> West Virginia's TANF Virginia. (2023). *FY 2024 State Plan* is available here: *for TANF*. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bfa/policyplans/Documents/FY%202024%20TANF%20State%20Plan%20-%20Public%20Comment.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> North Carolina. (2022). *North Carolina's TANF State Plan* is available here: *state plan*. <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/2022-2025-tanf-state-plan-final/open>

<sup>ix</sup> Florida's Florida Department of Children and Families. (2023). *TANF State Plan* is available here: *state plan renewal*. <https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2024-01/Florida%20TANF%20State%20Plan%202023-2026.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> More information about Utah's Utah Marriage Commission is available here: (n.d.) *Utah marriage commission history and current responsibilities*. [https://extension.usu.edu/strongermarriage/umc\\_history#:~:text=Although%20the%20UMC%27s%20core%20services,affiliate%20agreements%20and%20other%20collaborations](https://extension.usu.edu/strongermarriage/umc_history#:~:text=Although%20the%20UMC%27s%20core%20services,affiliate%20agreements%20and%20other%20collaborations)

**PeerTA.** Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), PeerTA provides individual and group technical assistance and other supports to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) implement best practices and ensure compliance with TANF statutory purposes. PeerTA is led by MEF Associates and The Adjacent Possible.