

TANF Rural Communities Initiative

OVERVIEW

Background



The face of poverty in America is often perceived to exist in a predominantly urban setting. However, since the late 1950s¹ families in rural environments have continually experienced higher poverty rates than their counterparts in America's cities. Fourteen percent of individuals within the *national* Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseload live in non-metro communities. However, rural states experience a very different reality – with as many as three-quarters of their TANF caseload living outside urban areas.² TANF participants, in these areas, face severe challenges – such as less

favorable employment opportunities, lower-paying jobs, health care, food security, transportation, and child care – to becoming self-sufficient. Rural TANF agencies at the State, Tribal, and local levels also need support and technical assistance in meeting the high work participation requirements under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. Given the continued scale of poverty and limited job opportunities in rural areas, it is important for State and local TANF agencies to continue supporting programs that reduce barriers to employment and strengthen delivery of social services to low-income families.

Overview of Initiative

The Rural Communities Initiative is providing to States, Tribes, and local TANF agencies in 16 rural sites the opportunity to share information and promising practices on critical rural issues and barriers to employment such as transportation, education, job skills, economic development, case management, assessments, and child care. The Initiative is delivering a variety of technical assistance to the 16 **rural TANF sites**. These organizations are being supported with the following types of technical assistance:



- A 2 ½ day Rural Communities Academy held in September 2008;
- On site expert consultation;
- Site visits and exchanges;
- Individualized technical assistance plan with follow up support;
- A 1 ½ day Rural Leadership Forum held in September 2009;
- Webinars and teleconferences; and
- Online and hard copy resources that detail promising rural TANF program strategies and techniques.

Additional targeted training and technical assistance will be provided to the 16 selected rural TANF sites throughout the project timeline, including peer-to-peer learning opportunities around critical rural TANF issues identified by participating sites. Additionally, a Rural Specialists panel consisting of key policy, research, and practitioners in rural TANF and poverty issues is guiding guidance and expertise throughout the development and implementation of this Initiative.

Rural Communities Academy

This 2 ½ day Academy brought together 4-5 representatives from each of the rural sites selected for technical assistance, selected representatives from the promising practice sites, and state and Federal TANF program representatives for a facilitated information gathering and action planning event. Workshops and plenary sessions with members of the Rural Specialists panel and other content specialists and practitioners provided all stakeholders the opportunity to gather information and resources on meeting the challenges of moving rural TANF participants into higher levels of self-sufficiency. Specifically, the 16 rural TANF sites worked with Rural Specialist Panel members, representatives of promising practices in rural areas from across the United States, and other facilitators to create individualized technical assistance (TA) plans as a roadmap for their implementation of new ideas and strategies informed by their Academy experience.

¹ Rural Sociological Society. (2006). *The Challenges of Rural Poverty*. RSS Issue Brief – Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century, Number 2, January 2006. <http://www.ruralsociology.org/briefs/brief2.pdf>

² Government Accountability Office. (2004). *Welfare Reform – Rural TANF Programs have Developed Many Strategies to Address Rural Challenges*. United States Government Accountability Office. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04921.pdf>

Rural Leadership Forum

The Rural Communities Leadership Forum will serve as the capstone event of the Initiative. Representatives of the 16 rural TANF sites will come together to share lessons learned; explore leadership and sustainability plans; and discuss successes garnered and challenges encountered from the implementation of the Rural TANF sites' TA plans, and explore leadership and action plans.



On-going Technical Assistance

Webinars

Periodic topic-specific Webinars are provided to the participating 16 rural TANF sites. These Webinars allow the 16 rural TANF sites to virtually attend a presentation/workshop where presenters explore relevant topics in-depth, share information, and allow for dialogue amongst presenters and rural sites. Topics covered to date include rural transportation, economic development, civic engagement, accessing technology, wage subsidies, and distance learning.

Conference Calls

A series of conference calls are led by content specialists, practitioners, and ICF staff moderators on content areas or topics identified by the 16 rural TANF sites. Each conference call also includes an interactive question and answer session.



Site Visits

The 16 sites have the option to participate in facilitated site visits where rural specialists, Federal/contractor staff, and promising programs provide on-site consultation. Site exchanges serve as intensive training opportunities for the 16 rural TANF sites to replicate aspects of innovative programming being implemented at promising practice sites.

Roundtables

Rural Communities Initiative Roundtables allow rural TANF sites to meet with experts and peers in a smaller setting to discuss a specific topic in-depth. Issue-specific roundtables to date have focused on rural transportation, economic development, and intensive case management.

Additional Technical Assistance

The 16 rural TANF sites have access to additional resources, including a Rural Communities Initiative listserv, a Rural Communities Initiative Web page on the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network Web site which sends out periodic updates and resources; environmental scans and resource lists, tailored to meet the needs and requests of the rural TANF site(s); and site visits and peer-to-peer exchanges around issues specifically affecting the sites involved.

Outcomes of Initiative

The 16 selected Rural TANF sites will be provided with:

- Individualized technical assistance plans and resources to aid them in increasing their work participation rates;
- Support and guidance in creating and designing programs that reduce barriers to employment and strengthen delivery of social services to low-income families in rural areas;
- The opportunity to develop solutions and an action plan to better address the needs of TANF families living in rural settings through peer-to-peer dialogue and a collaborative learning environment;
- Ongoing technical assistance such as site visits, site exchanges, Webinars, and teleconferences, to promote facilitating collaboration and exchange of ideas; and
- Web page on Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network that provides resources, summaries of technical assistance events, and links to additional Web based materials for improving services to TANF participants in rural areas.

