



ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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North Carolina Work First LASER TLC Site Journey

The Office of Family Assistance initiative, “Leveraging America’s Social and Economic Resilience TANF Learning Community” (LASER TLC), joins 10 TANF Programs across the country to address the challenges of human service delivery following the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaboration focused on improving responsive services for TANF families.

Goals & Objectives

The North Carolina Work First policy team sought to modernize its TANF program. Through the TLC, its work focused on two goals:

- **Develop and implement an online application for TANF benefits.** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, families seeking TANF services visited a county office to apply. During the pandemic, the Work First program introduced telephonic applications so families could apply without an in-person visit. The team developed an online application for TANF benefits (known as ePASS) to further expand access because 43.5 percent of North Carolina residents live in rural areas.¹
- **Explore ways to serve the whole family.** North Carolina’s TANF caseload has declined over the last 15 years. Eighty-two percent of its caseload is child-only cases.² The Work First team wanted to deepen its understanding of multigenerational (2gen) approaches to service delivery in TANF. The goal was to better support the whole family—not just those participating in work activities.

Change Strategies

To achieve these changes, the Work First team:

- **Built relationships with key partners:** The team invited a technical expert from the state systems team and county directors to brainstorm and share ideas. The goal was to better understand systems capabilities and limitations. The team discussed the counties’ views on the proposed change and options for building buy-in.
- **Conducted process mapping to understand the client experience:** The team mapped an application process from start to finish. This helped to identify pain points and improvement areas.
- **Explored 2gen:** The team talked with experts and explored research literature. It also connected with other states and counties about their experience moving to a 2gen service model.

¹ North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management (2020).

² Office of Family Assistance TANF Caseload Data (2022).

North Carolina’s Journey

North Carolina’s TANF Program, called Work First, is a state-supervised, county-administered program. The state has 100 counties of varying size and socioeconomic status. It includes both urban and rural communities.



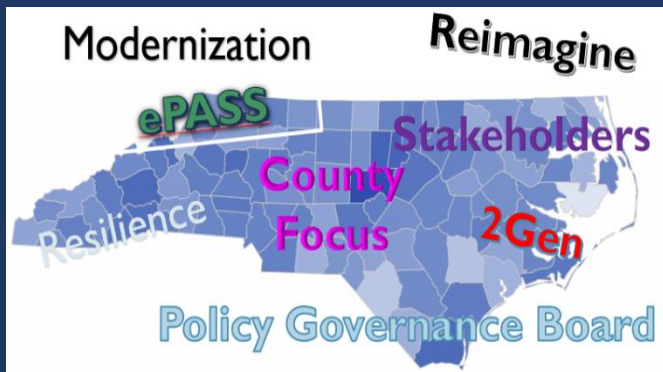
Challenges & Supports

Challenges:

- Several key leadership transitions slowed progress.
- Systems limitations prevented pilot testing of ePASS with counties before rollout.
- County-level variation in program structure, staffing, and needs complicated ePASS implementation planning.

Supports:

- Including both technical systems staff and county Division of Social Services Directors in change planning provided timely insights that shaped the work.
- Other state-run programs, including Medicaid and SNAP, already use ePASS.



Lessons Learned from Our Journey

- Change is best achieved when the team includes diverse views and expertise.
- To sustain change and help leaders delegate, all team members must understand the motivation and vision for the change.
- Sharing knowledge and access to resources related to the change effort ensures progress does not slow or stop if a team member leaves the organization or is unavailable.

Journey Insights

The NC journey with LASER TLC included opportunities to ask ourselves, “How can we do this differently?” We kept the customer and stakeholders at the heart of every decision and produced a quality product for the citizens of NC. We are eager to see the increased opportunities the citizens of NC have while utilizing a more modern point of entry.

What’s Next ...

- Refine Work First ePASS to increase application quality.
- Continue to explore 2gen approaches.
- Encourage innovation at the county level.
- Continue to collaborate and communicate with counties and key partners.
- Explore other ways to modernize TANF. Examples include trauma-informed service delivery, coaching, and increased supportive services.



— Leveraging —
America’s Social &
Economic Resilience

Focus on Results

The Work First policy team sought to:

- Provide applicants with an accessible and easy online application that could be completed without staff assistance.
- Decrease the number of TANF Work First applications completed in-person.
- Increase application quality and accuracy.
- Create a better-informed county leadership, front line supervisors, and workers about 2gen approaches to serving families.

ePASS: Successes So Far

- Work First ePASS went live on December 19, 2022. In the first two full months, Work First applications increased sharply. The program received 6,546 applications in January and 4,530 in February. This compares to a monthly average of 1,210 between January and November 2022.
- About 75 percent of the applications in January and February 2023 were completed through ePASS.
- However, this did not translate to a large increase in caseload. This is likely due to a high number of ineligible applications.
- In March, the team added clearer guidance about the eligibility requirements for Work First in ePASS.

2gen: Successes So Far

The Work First policy team invited Marjorie Simms, Managing Director of Ascend at the Aspen Institute, to present on 2gen at an annual conference of county Social Services directors and leaders. Attendees asked questions and engaged with their peers about 2gen work statewide.

