



North Dakota 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 as they worked to address the challenges of human service delivery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and focused on improved and responsive services to their TANF families.

Goals & Objectives

In 2022-2023, the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) worked to modernize its TANF program. Before engagement in the LASER TLC, DHHS conducted an environmental scan using client focus groups, a client experience survey, and a staff experience survey. It also examined best practices from other states. These efforts identified several opportunities to strengthen the program. The team established three goals moving forward:

1. Address findings from the environmental scan, including changes to state policies and practices.
2. Build and strengthen relationships with state and federal partners, community-based agencies, and tribal governments.
3. Develop and support systems that are more responsive to the needs of clients.

Change Strategies

To achieve these goals, the DHHS team used the results of the environmental scan to prioritize improvement strategies, including: (1) increase the Standard of Need and TANF benefit payment, (2) remove the state’s “Pay After Performance” (PAP) model, and (3) realign TANF monthly reporting requirements.

In summer 2022, the state hosted a series of “virtual design” workshops with service providers and community partners. The workshops identified changes that can improve client experiences and better serve families. They also identified less burdensome accountability methods that complied with federal and state regulations. Three key themes emerged:

1. Focusing efforts on participants’ goals and progress.
2. Orienting services around families’ most important needs.
3. Centering staff-client interactions on coaching, rather than compliance and documentation.

North Dakota’s Journey

The North Dakota TANF caseload has steadily declined since the Great Recession (2008-09). As of 2021, it serves an average of 850 households statewide.¹ Of those served, 67% identify as Native American and 8 out of 10 are children.² North Dakota’s seeks to modernize its TANF program to meet the needs of families today.

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Journey’s Challenges & Supports

Challenges:

- Prioritizing the key findings from the environmental scan.
- Using a human-centered model to promote accountability while remaining compliant with federal and state regulations.

Supports:

- Service providers and community partners support the modernization initiative.
- The legislature approved key policy changes to modernize benefits, streamline processes, and better meet families’ needs.
- Agency leadership continues to support comprehensive and complex changes to the TANF program.

¹ ND DHHS Environmental Scan, 2021.

² ND DHHS SFY Data, 2020. Administration for Children and Families Data, Nov. 1, 2021.



Lessons Learned from Our Journey

- Proactive, clear, and consistent communication is key. Different teams have different roles and responsibilities. So DHHS learned the importance of tailoring messages to each group.
- Partnership and buy-in is critical to the team's success. DHHS now prioritizes staff, client, and partner voices in its modernization efforts.
- "Families thriving" now serves as the guiding vision for TANF work. The team continually refers to the new "Essential Elements" (*right*) as guideposts for building a new and better program for all families in North Dakota.
- It is important for staff to spend time reflecting on their "why": why they do this work and what motivates them. This has been a source of inspiration and motivation for moving the modernization initiative forward.

What's Next ...

- Establish practices and services that reflect the "Essential Elements."
- Implement legislative and policy changes that support the modernization initiative.
- Work with service providers and community partners to improve the delivery of services and the overall client experience.
- Build partnerships with tribal governments and communities to strengthen services for Native and Indigenous families.



Leveraging
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Essential Elements

In October 2022, DHHS held another workshop with community partners. Teams used human-centered design activities like journey mapping to visualize the client experience. This helped create a new vision for the North Dakota TANF program centered on "families thriving." The process also identified six "essential elements" to define the program moving forward:

Creating a meaningful experience for families

Redefining the customer-staff relationship

Providing a simplified, stress-free customer experience

Delivering a robust package of benefits to families

Building core capabilities of families

Strengthening education and training services

Focus on Results

Successes:

- ✓ Increase in the Standard of Need and TANF benefit amount.
- ✓ Removal of the PAP policy that created obstacles to accessing benefits.
- ✓ Streamlining of the TANF Monthly Reporting process.
- ✓ Consensus on a new set of "essential elements" to ground the TANF program moving forward.

Anticipated Outcomes:

- Stronger client engagement in the TANF program.
- Greater outreach to North Dakota families who are experiencing poverty or economic crisis.
- Increased economic stabilization of families served through TANF.

