Pennsylvania
LASER TLC Site Journey

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

Goals & Objectives

In 2020, the Pennsylvania (PA) Department of Human Services' (DHS) launched a broad effort to redesign its employment and training (E&T) programming in a human-centered way. Leaders from the PA DHS Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP) participated in the LASER TLC. The goal was to redesign the bureau's evaluation framework, shifting away from a compliance-driven approach toward an outcome-driven approach.

BEP sought to identify and track participant outcomes that matter for economic stability and long-term success. The bureau wanted to make better use of the data it collects to inform decisions about program, service, and process improvements. They also sought to foster a dynamic of shared learning, transparency, and ongoing improvement between BEP and its partners.

Change Strategies

During the LASER TLC process, one of BEP's most significant 'wins' was generating buy-in among all BEP staff to enact shifts in the data they track and how they use it. The team focused on upskilling staff skillsets and changing mindsets and behaviors. They also wanted to improve system-level supports.

Support staff skillsets, mindsets, and behaviors:
- Provide data literacy training and upskilling for staff who need it.
- Include staff in the selection of new outcome measures. This builds buy-in and supports development of a useful data dashboard.
- Provide human-centered design training for staff.
- Create a clear timeline for integrating changes to staff responsibilities.

Organization and system-level supports.
- Create a data dashboard to share metrics and participant outcomes.
- Implement updated messaging and processes with contracted provider partners focused on outcomes and ongoing learning rather than compliance.

Pennsylvania's Journey

As Pennsylvania's lead TANF agency, DHS provides E&T programming for more than 5,000 individuals annually. This is done through contracted provider partners across the commonwealth.

In July 2020, DHS launched a redesign of its largest program, the Employment, Advancement, and Retention Network (EARN). This effort shifted programming away from rapid employment, or a "work-first" model, toward a human-centered design that addresses clients' and their families' needs and goals holistically to support financial independence.

Challenges & Supports

Challenges:
- Some staff lack confidence in interpreting and using data.
- Change fatigue.
- Changing administration, which could introduce new priorities.
- Limited agility and ability to change "old" habits and ways of doing things.
- Embedding changes into existing timelines and processes.

Supports:
- Flexibility to shift priority from creating the new evaluation framework (data dashboard) to building up staff capacity first.
- Staff commitment to helping families.
- Diversity and knowledge.
- Relationships with providers and partners to collect input on the new framework and dashboard.
- Existing data collection and analysis infrastructure.

Lessons Learned from Our Journey

- BEP was already collecting a lot of the metrics needed to shift from a compliance-focused system to one that emphasizes participant outcomes. It was just a matter of learning how to interpret these metrics and have conversations about the context behind the data.
- Change—especially cultural or mindset change—is hard and can be slow, but it is essential work. There were many times where it felt like the project was taking one step forward and three steps back. This helps to keep the goal up front so that you can stay the course regardless of the detours that may arise.
- Most staff are doing the best they can with what they currently have. Leading with humility is important for fostering an environment where people can speak their true opinion without fear of repercussion.
- Trust provider partners and their shared commitment to serving families, and don't be afraid of the criticism or feedback they may offer. Prioritize building trust.

Journey Insights from Our Team

"These lessons learned may feel obvious, but they made all the difference as we worked toward a culture shift within the department to prioritize human-centered design."

"I think we feel more patient to some extent. In the past, everything we've done around here has been very reactive. It's very different when you start being proactive. We've moved things faster, but it feels we have the time and patience to do what's right, and that feels different."

"This [work] has always been about delivering better outcomes in our system. A lot of policy had changed to make that possible… [but] we were in a deficit to be able to tell a story about changes we'd made. [This project addressed] the pieces [we needed] to implement changes we were hoping to implement, and we hope we can see measurable, demonstrable change."

Focus on Results

Changes within BEP

- Staff are excited to shift from a 'program monitoring' mindset to a 'program advising' mindset in their relationships with contracted provider partners. This includes changes in the monitoring visit protocol that reframe interactions between providers and BEP monitoring staff. This shifts from "checking boxes" to engaging in conversation to improve program data together.

Changes with provider partners

- Conversations with provider partners are now guided by an updated data dashboard.
- Updated the language in provider statements of work to emphasize participant outcome metrics over compliance metrics.

What's Next …

- Continuing feedback cycles as part of program advising visits with provider partners.
- Utilizing and refining a data dashboard to help staff and providers discuss participant outcomes and drive outcome improvements.
- Updating provider contracts to embed participant outcome metrics.

LASER TLC
TANF Learning Community

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America's Social &
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