TANF Technical Assistance Virtual Meetings:
Navigating New Pathways Towards Building Thriving Communities

TIP SHEET

In February and March of 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA), held a series of three virtual meetings with state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and stakeholders. The series, Navigating New Pathways towards Building Thriving Communities, invited state TANF administrators and other staff to participate in cohorts by ACF Region (Regions I-IV, V-VIII, and IX-X). Each session focused on a specific topic related to supporting families through COVID-19 and beyond, and each took place three times (once for each regional cohort).

Drawing on expertise from both within and outside the TANF field, the *Adapting Client-Centered Approaches to a Virtual Environment* sessions explored themes related to programmatic changes that—necessitated by COVID-19—have great potential to improve client outcomes through and beyond the COVID-19 recovery. This tip sheet provides a synthesis of key takeaways from the meetings. It is intended for TANF program directors, supervisors, managers, and case workers.

Adapting Client-Centered Approaches to a Virtual Environment

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many TANF programs rapidly adapted their program delivery to ensure the continuity of supportive client services. These changes have touched on a broad range of topics, including creating a safe environment for coaching customers, new technical systems and platforms, addressing broadband access, and engaging in trauma-informed practices.

To provide effective human services case management in a virtual setting, TANF stakeholders must focus across people, policy, systems, and technology. Session presenters encouraged participants to take a holistic view of policies and programs, seek opportunities to innovate, and establish and bolster partnerships.

By choosing to focus on the specific needs of the customer with flexible, trauma-informed, accessible, and trust-enhancing services, caseworkers and supervisors can tap into innovations demanded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building participant-focused case management in a virtual setting requires a shift in fundamental assumptions about how, why, and under what circumstances we conduct human services interactions and the roles we play within these interactions.

For additional background on building trauma-informed TANF organizations, see the OFA Peer TA Toolkit: Building a Trauma-Informed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program and the Interrupting the Impact of Traumatic Stress Tip Sheet.

A Note on Virtual Case Management & the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Drawing lessons learned from the COVID-19 response does not diminish the significance of the pandemic.
- Identifying elements of virtual case management necessitated by the pandemic that promote long-term customer outcomes honors the opportunity in the crisis.
- While this tip sheet is organized for different audiences, remember that staff filling these professional roles also have personal experiences with COVID-19 that should be honored in developing solutions.

Tips for promoting positive human services interactions in a virtual setting include:

For Individual Workers	• Create a virtual experience based on needs that feel safe and private for both you and your customers. For meetings, try to offer flexible scheduling to accommodate work-life balance issues. • Recognize that virtual services are different than in-person and allow time to adapt. • Be aware of your tone while communicating in a virtual setting when the benefits of meeting in-person (e.g., body language) are absent. • Do not be afraid to admit you need something different or new. Communicate openly, and if possible, be inclusive of stakeholders at every level in these discussions. • Build a lexicon of phrases that support success in virtual human services delivery; imagine various scenarios that might occur and be prepared with responses that advance customer outcomes while maintaining a safe, judgment-free environment. • Be willing to say you are new at this model of work; being honest about your lived experience—within the bounds of caseworker/customer propriety—builds trust.
For Supervisors	• Adopt a coaching model in supervising staff so that they might serve as effective coaches for their customers. • Recognize the COVID-19, broadband access, and technological literacy challenges experienced by your staff, even as they work to help others with the same challenges. • Clearly communicate flexible, adaptive policies that respect the lived experience of staff; model flexibility. • Like customers, staff are experiencing increased stressors such as technology issues, family dynamics, and lack of privacy; check in with your staff to see how they are doing, what their schedules are, and what support can be provided. • Identify and document what works, what continues to be a challenge, and how you can grow from COVID-19's impacts to the next generation of social and human services. Conduct reoccurring meetings with necessary stakeholders to continually address evolving short-term and long-term challenges.
For Leaders	• Create space to learn and share staff innovations in delivering virtual services. • Provide appropriate training and development opportunities for your staff. Support and empower them to carry out new models or changes to technology and processes. Actively seek to identify, understand, and remediate broadband/technology access and digital skill inequities. • Foster an environment of active listening, trauma-informed practice and language, and flexibility as staff navigate new ways of supporting customers and staff. • Learn and advocate for policy and practice improvements that support staff innovations and flexibility. • Identify or revisit partners that are adapting to solve the same challenges and find ways to work together (e.g., broadband service providers, technology companies, or other agencies or programs that serve similar customers).

To learn more about these tips, programs, or the *Adapting Client-Centered Approaches to a Virtual Environment* events, a full meeting summary report is available on the OFA Peer TA website at: https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/adapting-client-centered-approaches-virtual-environment-virtual-meetings-february-and-march.