
A Study of TANF Work Participation and Engagement

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MATHEMATICA
Policy Research

Study Context

- ❧ **Increasing federal interest in TANF recipients with zero hours in work participation activities**
- ❧ **Limited documentation on how the recession affected the services and resources available to engage TANF recipients**
- ❧ **State and local TANF agencies are interested in effective strategies for increasing engagement and employment outcomes**

Study Description

Research questions:

- **What circumstances explain client participation—or nonparticipation—in work activities?**
- **What strategies have states and localities implemented to increase participation in federally defined and other work or work-related activities?**

Data collection

- **Site visits to 11 communities in 8 states**
 - Sonoma County, CA; Hartford and Norwich, CT; Pinellas County, FL; Burlington, IA; Hennepin and Stearns counties, MN; New York City, NY; Dallas, TX; Wasatch Front North and South Regions, UT
- **Telephone interviews with 30 state TANF administrators**
- **Document review (e.g., policy manuals, management reports, organizational materials, etc.)**

Presentation Overview

- ❧ **Changing TANF Program Environment**
- ❧ **Policies and Programs that Influence the TANF Caseload**
- ❧ **Services and Supports to Encourage Engagement**
- ❧ **Engagement in Federally Defined Work Activities – Reasons for Counting and Not Counting**
- ❧ **Strategies for Increasing Engagement and Program Outcomes**

Changing TANF Program Environment

TANF programs facing:

- Reduced budgets resulting in fewer staff and limited supports for recipients
- Increased caseloads/workloads
- Narrowed service options

 More part-time employment now than in the past

 Some states revisiting TANF program design

Policies and Programs that Influence the TANF Caseload Composition

- ❧ **Policies influence who comes on, stays on, and is removed from the TANF caseload**
- ❧ **TANF caseload composition may influence service delivery needs necessary for engagement**
 - More work-ready can immediately focus on employment
 - Hard-to-employ may require more intensive service approach
- ❧ **States with a lower effective work participation rate have greater flexibility with program design**

Policies and Programs (cont.)

Circumstances of those on the TANF caseload

- **Families with documented barriers**
 - Broadly defined exemptions keep them on the TANF caseload
 - Use of solely state-funded programs removes them
- **Nonparticipants/Those who are difficult to engage**
 - Gradual full-family and partial sanctions keep them on the caseload
 - Upfront work requirements and immediate full-family sanctions remove them
- **Working or work-ready clients**
 - High earned income disregard and worker supplement programs keep them on the caseload
 - Lump sum payments and temporary support programs remove work-ready from the caseload

Services and Supports to Encourage Engagement

Upfront work activities designed to immediately engage clients in work activities

- Orientation sessions
- Assessment and employment planning
- Upfront job search

Activities focus primarily on job search, unsubsidized employment, and basic education

- One site, NYC, relies heavily on work experience
- Other sites sometimes use community service, work experience, subsidized employment
- Four study states encourage and support education and training

Services and Supports (cont.)

- **Specialized programs for those with documented physical and/or mental health conditions**
 - NYC—WeCARE
 - Utah—Licensed Clinical Therapists
 - Iowa—Home visiting program
- **Resources available to address personal and work-related needs**
 - **Primarily transportation and child care supports offered**
 - In some states budget cuts have reduced the availability and/or the accessibility of these services
 - **Clients mostly linked to resources in the community**
 - **Two study states provide up to \$1,000 in flexible funding for work supports (IA, UT)**

Engagement in Federally Defined Work Activities

- ❧ **Reports on Engagement (RoE) used to closely examine participation in federally defined work activities**
- ❧ **Study site visits used to better understand engagement**
- ❧ **Clients who are meeting work requirements**
 - Typically engaged in unsubsidized employment, job search, and/or education and training
 - Attempt to quickly engage them in work activities
 - Mandatory timelines for staff to complete service delivery processes (such as processing applications, linking clients to activities)

Engagement (cont.)

Clients with zero participation hours

- **Reasons include: disregarded from participation, state and temporary exemptions, in sanction process, first month on TANF, administrative delays, failure to engage**
- **Contributing factors**
 - Broadly defined exemptions with no program requirement
 - Delays with accessing child care and/or transportation
 - Waiting for activities to begin
 - Inability to quickly detect and address nonparticipation
 - Unresponsive sanctioning policy and/or process

Engagement (cont.)

Engaged, but not counting

- **Reasons: non-countable activities, hours that do not meet verification standards, hours beyond the statutory time limit on participation, unreported countable hours**
- **Contributing factors**
 - Part-time work with varying schedules and fluctuating hours
 - Policies that allow for extended participation in job search and education
 - Limited service options and personal/work supports
 - Problems with reporting and verifying work participation

Strategies for Increasing Engagement and Program Outcomes

- ❧ **Clear expectations for clients, staff, and providers**
- ❧ **Training on managing caseloads, reporting/verifying hours**
- ❧ **Meaningful work activities that motivate and support clients**
- ❧ **Management reports that raise awareness of client/caseload status**
 - Caseload activity reports and formal case reviews
 - Developing performance management reports

Strategies (cont.)

- ❧ **Quickly enforcing consequences for nonparticipation**
- ❧ **Improvements in data quality**
- ❧ **Formal initiatives for improving business processes**
 - **Utah's Theory of Constraints/Throughput Operational Strategy**
- ❧ **Use of performance-based contracts**
- ❧ **Federally funded employment initiatives (such as ARRA subsidized employment)**

For More Information

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