A Study of TANF Work Participation and Engagement

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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
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.
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
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)
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
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)
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