TANF PILOT EVALUATION

September 2026
OPRE Report 2026-041

Learning from the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 TANF Pilots

Designing studies of outcomes-based performance measurement in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs

Congress created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant in 1996 with four purposes, which include helping families end reliance on government benefits by promoting job preparation and work.[1] The Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 (FRA) authorized the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to select up to five states to pilot a new way to measure TANF program performance. Under the pilots, states will negotiate TANF performance benchmarks for work and family outcomes instead of the standard TANF performance measure known as the Work Participation Rate or WPR (Exhibit 1). The pilots mark a significant shift for the TANF program, with potential implications for future TANF policy and practice.

To make the most of the opportunity that the FRA TANF pilots represent, it is important that policymakers, practitioners, and other related parties understand how states implement their pilots, the successes and challenges they experience in doing so, and how these changes relate to improving families' economic self-sufficiency. With these goals in mind, HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which administers the TANF program through the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), is conducting the TANF Pilot Evaluation. The evaluation includes implementation and outcome studies that will collect in-depth data from key groups to understand states' goals for the pilots, what they implement and how their pilots unfold, and how participants' outcomes

Exhibit 1. A new way to measure performance in TANF: Moving from process measures to outcome measures

Since the creation of TANF, the federal government has held states accountable to the Work Participation Rate (WPR). The WPR is a process-based measure that measures the proportion of all work-eligible TANF participants who are engaged in work and work-related activities. The TANF legislation adjusts WPR benchmarks for each state through credits for spending state money on TANF participants and reducing the state's overall caseload size. In Fiscal Year 2024, 39 states had a WPR benchmark of zero.

States participating in the FRA TANF pilots are accountable for new performance measures related to work and family outcomes, instead of the WPR. Four measures are required for all pilot states and are listed below.

1. **Employment rate,** measured two quarters after exiting TANF
2. **Median earnings,** measured two quarters after exiting TANF
3. **Median earnings,** measured four quarters after exiting TANF
4. **Earnings above Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) income eligibility,** measured four quarters after exiting TANF

In addition to the four measures above, each state will propose using two short-term progress indicators tied to the activities it is conducting in its pilot to assess whether it is on track to meet its performance measures.

Source: Falk and Landers 2026, Office of Family Assistance 2026.

[1] The four statutory purposes of TANF are to: (1) provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of families on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

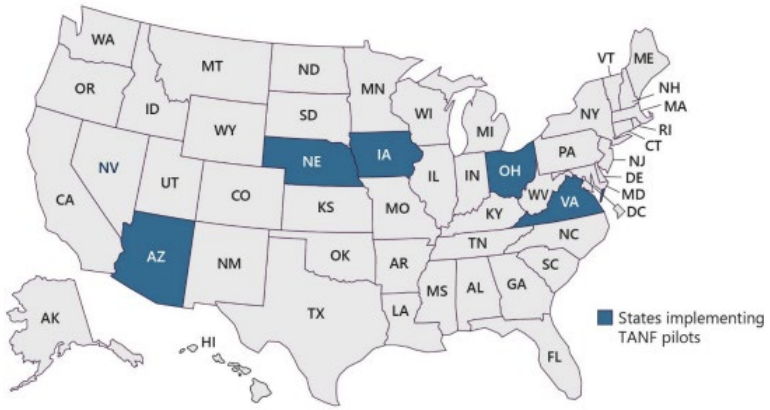
adjacent possible
Mathematica Progress Together
APHSA American Public Human Services Association

change after pilot implementation. The purpose of this brief is to give an overview of the design of the TANF Pilot Evaluation and the research questions it will address.

States implementing TANF Pilots

ACF selected five states—Arizona, Iowa, Nebraska, Ohio, and Virginia—to conduct pilots over six years (Exhibit 2). The first year, starting in October 2025, is a planning year for the pilot states to develop services aligned with their new performance measures and negotiate benchmarks with ACF. Over the next five years—October 2026 through September 2031—they will implement their pilots and refine services based on their performance against the benchmarks.

Exhibit 2. States implementing TANF Pilots



The pilot states have flexibility to develop program rules and provide services designed to lead to family self-sufficiency while addressing the needs of the populations they serve and the specific circumstances in their states. States' pre-pilot implementation of TANF differs considerably (Exhibit 3). The differences across states will help the field learn how the pilots operate in different contexts.

Exhibit 3. Characteristics of TANF programs in Pilot states as of February 2026

	Arizona	Iowa	Nebraska	Ohio	Virginia
Administration	State administered	State administered	State administered	County administered	County administered
Employment and training service providers	One contracted service provider	Local workforce agencies	One contracted service provider	County workforce agencies	Local Departments of Social Services
Average monthly number of one- and two-parent families[a]	597	1,236	733[b]	5,690	6,108[b]
Maximum monthly benefit for a family of three	$347	$426	$552	$623	$587
Time limits[c]	12 months	60 months	60 months	36 months	60 months[d]
Effective WPR in 2025	0	0	0	0	0

Sources: Site visits conducted by the TANF Pilot Evaluation in January-February 2026; OFA Fiscal Year 2025 TANF caseload data, available at https://acf.gov/ofa/data/tanf-caseload-data-2025.

[a] TANF legislation prescribes different work participation rules for different family types, based on the number of parents present in the home. Children can receive TANF even if their parents do not, and they are not subject to work participation rules. Those "child-only" cases are not included in the table.

[b] Nebraska and Virginia reported serving no two-parent families to OFA in Fiscal Year 2025. Two-parent families in these states are served through separate state-funded programs.

[c] TANF legislation institutes a 60-month lifetime limit on TANF participation, though states can institute stricter guidelines.

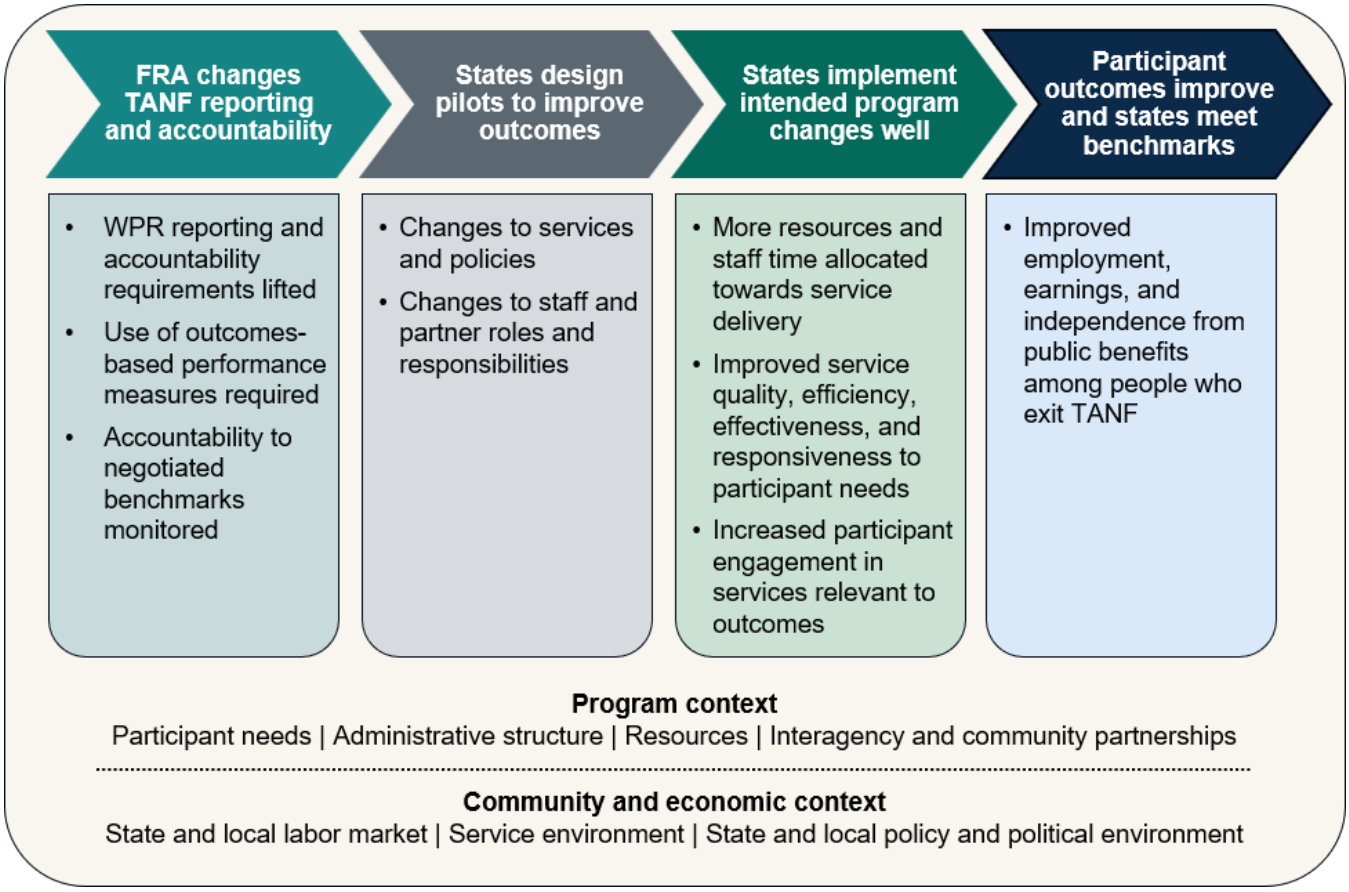
[d] In Virginia, participants can receive TANF for no more than 24 consecutive months.

A key difference among pilot states is in how states' TANF programs are administered, which has implications for TANF program variation within and across states. Two states (Ohio and Virginia) are state supervised and county-administered systems. In these systems, states set policies, such as eligibility requirements and benefit levels, but counties have some discretion or flexibility in the local TANF program design. For example, in county-administered states, county-level employees deliver TANF services, counties contribute funding for TANF, and county officials have more input into local TANF budgets and policies (Hahn et al. 2015). As a result, participants' experiences with TANF in state-supervised, county-administered states can differ across the state, depending on the county where they receive services. Three states (Arizona, Iowa, and Nebraska) operate state-administered TANF programs, which means that the state agency establishes more consistent TANF policies across the state and plays more of a role in local-level implementation of TANF, such as by directly employing local TANF workers, contracting with service providers, and shouldering most, if not all, TANF costs (Hahn et al. 2015). All states, whether state- or county-administered, differ in how much autonomy counties have and the roles of states (Hahn et al. 2015).

TANF Pilot theory of change and evaluation research questions

The TANF Pilot Evaluation design is informed by a theory of change that summarizes the relationship between the pilot and its intended effects (Exhibit 4). The first column in the theory of change identifies the changes provided by the FRA and the flexibility given to states. The second column describes what states include in their pilot designs. The third column hypothesizes program changes that could result from implementing the pilots. The fourth includes the participant outcomes that the evaluation is examining.

Exhibit 4. Theory of Change: How the FRA TANF Pilots may lead to improved program and participant outcomes



In sum, the theory of change shows how the additional flexibility granted by the move to outcomes-based performance measures could affect program and participant outcomes. Key mechanisms include:

- Staff time and program resources move away from compliance work (such as verifying participation in work activities to meet the WPR) and toward service delivery and engagement with participants.
- The services that programs offer change from ones intended to fulfill the WPR, like participation in required types and amounts of work activities, to ones with evidence of improving participant outcomes related to the new performance measures.
- To meet outcome-based performance measures (as opposed to process-focused performance measures) states may undertake improvements in service quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and/or added responsiveness to participant needs. ACF is providing pilot states with technical assistance to make these types of improvements.

The TANF Pilot Evaluation has six research questions that align with the theory of change. Together, they cover the design and implementation of states' pilots, program and participant outcomes, and overall lessons learned.

Research Question 1: How did states design their pilots? This question covers states' goals for their pilots, the selection of additional performance measures and benchmarks, and design choices for the pilots, such as changes they made to services, process, and policy to achieve intended outcomes.

Research Question 2: How did states implement their pilots? This question explores how states' pilot designs worked in practice, what helped or hindered implementation, and how TANF leaders, staff, and participants experienced the pilots. It also covers states' implementation context and the sustainability of the pilots.

Research Question 3: What were TANF programs' outcomes during the pilot period? This question explores the extent to which the allocation of resources and staff time changed, and whether there were changes in participant engagement in services. It also explores staff and participant perceptions of services and contextual factors that may have influenced changes in program outcomes.

Research Question 4: What were TANF participants' outcomes during the pilot period? This question looks at whether states met benchmarks related to their performance measures. It specifically examines participant outcomes related to employment, earnings, and dependence on government benefits overall and for specific subgroups of participants. Subgroups of interest may include participants who received different amounts of services, participants in rural areas, and participants with younger children.

Research Question 5: How did the shift to outcomes-based performance measures relate to participant outcomes? This question looks at differences in short- and long-term outcomes overall and for specific subgroups, and explores contextual factors that may have affected the relationship between the pilot and changes in participants' outcomes.

Research Question 6: What were the lessons learned from the pilots? This question identifies overall lessons learned about the shift to outcomes-based performance measurement for state and federal staff and recommendations for TANF policy and practice moving forward.

The evaluation includes an implementation study (covering research questions 1, 2, and 3) and an outcomes study (covering research questions 4 and 5). Research question 6 will synthesize findings from both studies. Exhibit 5 shows the research questions and the data sources that the evaluation team will

use to address them through the implementation and outcomes studies. The designs of these studies are described in the sections below.

Exhibit 5. TANF Pilot Evaluation research questions and data sources

Data Sources and Activities	RQ1 Pilot design	RQ2 Pilot implementation	RQ3 Program outcomes	RQ4 Participant outcomes	RQ5 Relationship of participant outcomes to performance measures	RQ6 Lessons learned
Interviews with TANF program and partner leaders and staff	✓	✓	✓			✓
Interviews with TANF participants		✓	✓			
TANF leadership and staff surveys		✓	✓			
TANF staff time-use survey			✓			
Costs and resources workbook		✓	✓			
State administrative data on TANF participants			✓	✓	✓	
National Directory of New Hires data				✓	✓	
TANF participant surveys			✓	✓	✓	
Federal staff interviews	✓					✓

Implementation study design

The implementation study is designed to give a detailed account of how states design and implement their pilots, the factors that affect implementation, and how implementation changes over time. The implementation study will highlight promising strategies that contributed to changes in outcomes among TANF participants. It will also offer detailed lessons learned at the federal, state, and local levels that may guide future decision-making in the TANF program.

The implementation study is drawing on multiple data sources. The study team is planning to collect data throughout the study period so that it can describe implementation over time and how the states' pilots evolve from the beginning of the pilot period to the end (Exhibit 6). These activities include:

- **Interviews with TANF program and partner leaders and staff.** The study team will conduct site visits each year to every pilot state (including up to five counties or local areas) to hear from TANF and key partner leaders and staff to build a comprehensive understanding of states' context, pilot operations, and factors that affect the implementation of the pilots (such as staffing, leadership, and data use). Annual site visits will allow the study team to follow up about what they heard on prior visits and paint a nuanced picture of pilot implementation and changes over time. The study team will also conduct virtual interviews with up to 10 local TANF leaders to examine how the pilots are implemented in local areas that are not part of the site visits. These interviews will help the study team understand county- and local-level variations in how the pilots are implemented.

- **Interviews and surveys with TANF participants.** The study will gather information directly from TANF participants in two ways. In the first and fourth years of the pilot, the study team will conduct in-depth interviews with TANF participants to learn about their backgrounds and experiences in the pilots. A participant survey (described in the outcomes study section below) will also ask participants exiting TANF about their experiences with TANF, interactions with staff, and employment outlook.
- **TANF leadership and staff surveys.** The study team will survey all employment services leadership and staff from TANF offices and partners once as they begin to launch their pilots in Year 1 and once at the end of Year 4 of the pilot. These surveys will cover their professional role and experience, TANF program implementation, and experiences with TANF service delivery and performance management. The surveys will gather a broader perspective on pilot implementation than the site visits. Administering the surveys near the start and the end of the pilot period will allow the study team to compare the two time points.
- **TANF staff time-use survey.** Twice a year, starting at the end of the planning year and ending in Year 4, the study team will survey a sample of frontline staff and partners about their workload and how they spend their time. The survey will help the study team understand the extent to which the amount of time that staff spend on administrative work or direct service delivery changes during the pilot.
- **Costs and resources workbook.** The costs and resources workbook will capture information on costs associated with pilot start-up and resources allocated to program management, service delivery, and performance measurement. It will help the study team assess how the pilots influence the allocation of resources during the pilot period. States will share information to complete the workbook at three points during the pilot: during the planning year, at the end of Year 2, and at the end of Year 4.
- **State administrative data on TANF participants.** The study team will receive individual and aggregate state administrative data on TANF participants throughout the study period. For the implementation study, TANF administrative data will be used to understand participants' background characteristics and service receipt patterns and the overall composition of the TANF caseload.
- **Federal staff interviews.** To inform lessons learned, the study team will interview federal staff to learn about their experiences with the selection of performance measures, negotiating and monitoring benchmarks, and providing technical assistance. The study team plans to do four rounds of interviews: during planning and start-up, early implementation, late implementation, and the end of the pilot.

The study team will analyze data across all these sources to identify findings and lessons that help TANF practitioners, policymakers, and other related parties understand the implementation of the pilots. Analysis will be ongoing to inform future data collection, analysis, and technical assistance to the pilot states. For example, analysis of early site visits will inform the topics covered in later site visits. Ongoing analysis will also enable sharing lessons throughout the pilot period to help pilot states make data-informed decisions about their TANF programs and continuously improve. The TANF Pilot Evaluation implementation study includes early and final implementation reports.

Exhibit 6. Implementation study data collection timeline

	October 2025 – September 2026 Pilot planning year	October 2026 – September 2027 Pilot year 1	October 2027 – September 2028 Pilot year 2	October 2028 – September 2029 Pilot year 3	October 2029 – September 2030 Pilot year 4	October 2030 – September 2031 Pilot year 5
Interviews with TANF program and partner leaders and staff	●	● ●	● ●	● ●	● ●	●
Interviews with TANF participants		●			●	
TANF leadership and staff surveys	●				●	
TANF staff time-use survey	●	● ●	● ●	● ●	● ●	
Costs and resources workbook	●		●		●	
State administrative data on TANF participants	*Collected continuously throughout study*					
Federal staff interviews	●	●			●	●

Outcomes study design

The outcomes study is documenting whether the shift to outcomes-based performance measurement relates to key outcomes for TANF participants including employment, earnings, dependence on government benefits, family stability, and self-sufficiency. To address the research questions, the outcomes study plans to analyze data on three groups of TANF participants (Exhibit 7): (1) those exiting TANF before the start of the pilots, when the WPR was in place (the year before the planning year); (2) those exiting TANF during the early stages of the pilots (Years 1 and 2 of the pilots); and (3) those exiting in later stages of the pilots (Years 3 and 4 of the pilots). Comparing the three groups allows for examination of how outcomes changed after the pilot went into effect and assessment of whether the maturity of pilot implementation within a state influences participant outcomes.

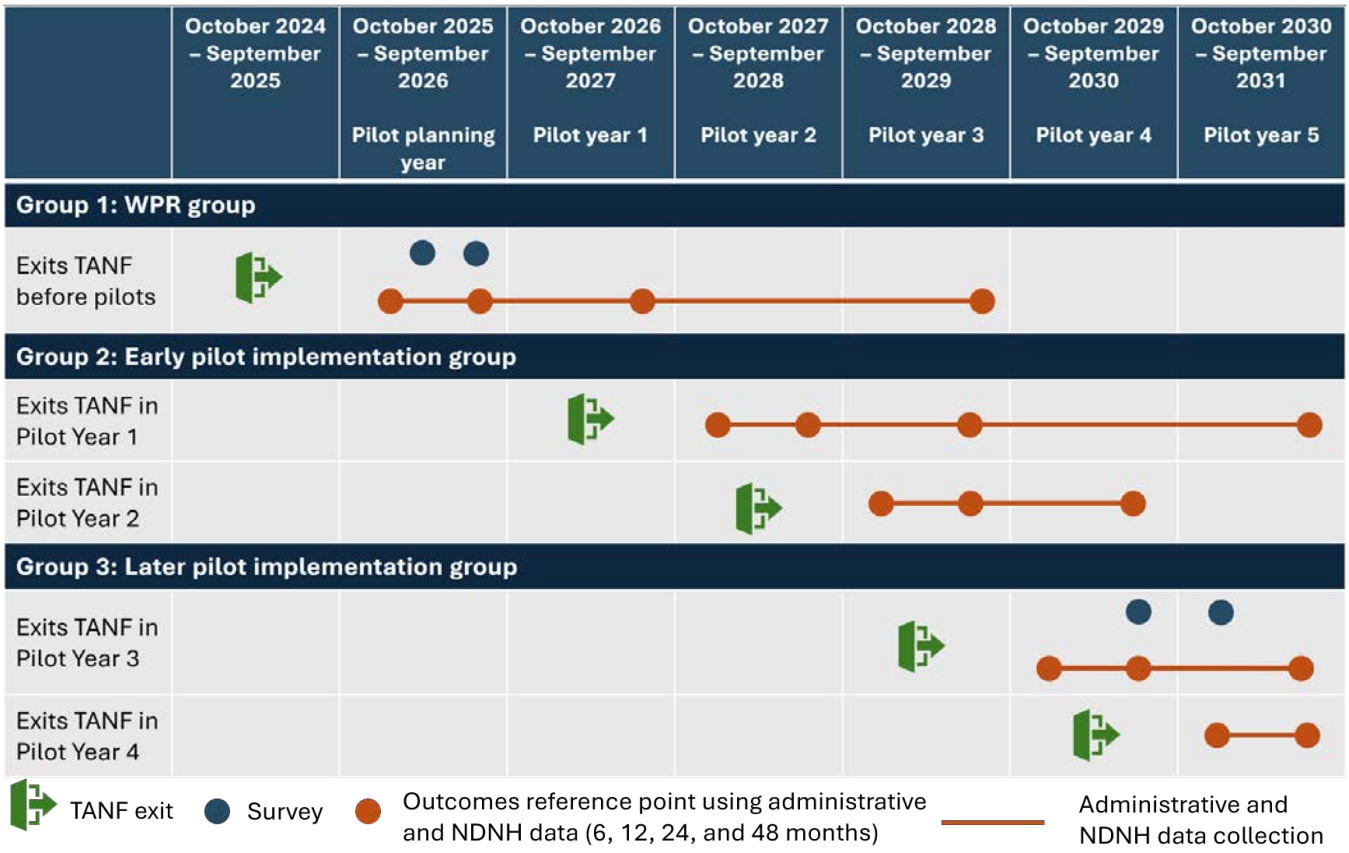
The outcomes study will rely on three types of data sources, collected throughout the study for each group:

- **National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) data.** The NDNH is a federal database of information collected from state Unemployment Insurance agencies about individuals' employment and wages. It is the source for the four mandatory performance measures and is the primary data source for the outcomes study as it enables analysis of participants' employment, earnings, and independence from federal food benefits.
- **State administrative data on TANF participants.** In addition to the TANF administrative data described in the implementation study section of this brief, the outcomes study plans to examine data that states already submit to ACF about the work outcomes of people exiting TANF through the form ACF-199.[2]
- **Survey of TANF exiters.** The study team will invite TANF exiters to complete a survey to provide more nuanced information about their outcomes and supplement data available in administrative sources.

[2] More information about ACF-199 and other TANF reporting forms is located at: https://acf.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/reporting-instructions

For example, the survey asks about exiters' job satisfaction and wages earned through gig and independent contracting work, which is not included in the NDNH data.

Exhibit 7. Outcomes study data collection and analysis timeline



NDNH and state administrative data will be available for all three groups of TANF participants. The study team plans to examine these data throughout the study period and assess outcomes at 6 and 12 months for all groups. The study team will also assess outcomes at 24 and 48 months after TANF exit for some TANF participants.

Unlike the administrative data sources, the survey will only be administered to some participants who exited TANF before the pilots and some who will exit in Pilot Year 3. The study team will first invite TANF exiters to complete a form, collecting contact information and information about their experiences in the TANF program. The study team will then contact those participants to complete the survey about 12 months after they exit TANF to learn more about their outcomes.

The outcomes study analysis compares outcomes for participants served before the pilots, under the WPR, to those served after pilot implementation, under outcomes-based performance management. The analysis will control for key variables that could influence outcomes, such as local unemployment rate, county poverty rates, county population size, and individual participant characteristics such as education level. A key limitation of this approach, referred to as a quasi-experimental cohort comparison design, is that it cannot account for unobserved factors that could affect outcomes. This limits the study's ability to attribute changes in outcomes to the pilots, rather than other changes occurring at the same time. In addition to the cohort comparison analysis, the study will compare outcomes for participants served early in the pilots (Group 2) to those served later (Group 3) and analyze descriptive statistics to report outcomes

under the pilots. The study will also examine outcomes for key subgroups, such as participants who received different amounts or types of services, participants in rural areas, and participants with younger children. The TANF Pilot Evaluation outcomes study includes interim and final outcomes reports.

Study timeline and next steps

TANF pilot states have a planning year between October 2025 and September 2026 to prepare to launch their pilots in October 2026. The pilots run through September 2031. As of publication, the TANF Pilot Evaluation team is conducting data collection to learn about how states are designing their pilots and working with sites to explore state-specific study design considerations, such as the availability of state administrative data. The study team anticipates publishing initial study findings in 2027, with an interim implementation report that describes the pilot states' planning year and first year of pilot implementation, and will publish implementation and outcome findings throughout the duration of the pilots.

About the TANF Pilot Evaluation

To maximize the lessons learned from the FRA TANF pilots, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is overseeing Project SUPPORTT (Supporting Pilot Program Outcomes, Research, and Technical Assistance in TANF). The goal of Project SUPPORTT is to design and conduct implementation and outcome studies of the pilots and provide research, evaluation, and data-related technical assistance to pilot states. ACF has contracted with Mathematica, The Adjacent Possible, and the American Public Human Services Association to conduct this work. In implementing the pilots, states will also receive support from the TANF Outcomes Technical Assistance and Logistics (TOTAL) project funded by the Office of Family Assistance and led by MEF Associates.

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This product was finalized and published after March 2026, reflecting ACF's updated approach in which some research portfolios were realigned to be embedded in the ACF offices that manage the programs. Consistent with this approach, this product was reviewed and approved by leadership of the ACF Office of Family Assistance.

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