Serving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Recipients in a Post-Recession Environment

By Elizabeth Brown and Michelle K. Derr

BACKGROUND

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies are operating in a challenging post-recession environment, with growing program demands and shrinking state and local budgets. The recession of 2007–2009, one of the worst in recent history, and a slowly recovering economy has placed added strain on TANF and other public assistance programs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Before December 2007, the unemployment rate hovered around 5.0 percent for about 30 months. By October 2009, the rate had peaked at 10.0 percent, the second-highest unemployment rate within the last 60 years.[1] The number of job openings since the recession gradually increased between July 2009 and October 2011, from 2.1 to 3.0 million per month, still less than the 4.8 million job openings just before the recession (March 2007). In addition, the recession had far-reaching effects on state and local governments. Forty-three states experienced budget shortfalls from 2009 to 2012, with more than $500 billion in cumulative gaps during this time (Gordon 2012). Furthermore, the policy and procedural changes required under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA)[2] had a dramatic effect on state and local TANF programs. Yet the ways in which states are operating during this post-recession period has not been well-documented. This brief, supported by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), describes the changing demands on state TANF programs and how states have responded. It also describes opportunities for growth and improvement that TANF programs might consider. The findings are based on a study that included telephone interviews with TANF administrators in 30 states and an analysis of existing data.

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Changing Demands on State TANF Programs

Through interviews with state program administrators, we identified three primary areas in which TANF programs have changed since the beginning of the economic downturn in 2008. Although some of these changes began before the recession, the effects of the downturn may have accelerated or intensified the effects. Changes include a decrease in federal funding to support TANF programs, an increase in the demand for public assistance programs, and the high unemployment rate with fewer full-time jobs.

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1. Decrease in Funding to Support TANF Programs

TANF is primarily supported with federal funding through the TANF block grant. As reported through the interviews with state TANF administrators and existing analysis, the declining value as well as the reallocation of TANF block grant funds has left TANF programs with limited funds to provide services. In addition, many states benefited from the supplemental grants that were not renewed in 2011. Program administrators in at least 18 of the 30 study states talked about the challenges of losing these funds. Finally, state budget cuts have had reverberating effects on TANF programs.

▶ Declining Value and Reallocation of TANF Block Grant Funds

The Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) brought about significant changes in the way assistance programs were funded by moving from an allocation based on the number of eligible recipients to a block grant funding structure. The TANF block grant gave states greater flexibility in how they structured and implemented public welfare programs. They could invest in services as long as those services met one of the four broadly defined purposes of TANF.[3]

Initially, states benefitted financially from the block grant funding structure because the amount was based on state spending at a time when caseloads were high. However, two factors caused resources to become scarcer over time. First, when states experienced TANF funding levels that exceeded direct needs in sustaining the TANF program itself, state legislatures reallocated substantial portions of TANF funds to pay for services such as child welfare, emergency assistance, and youth services, among others (Derr et al. 2009; Schott et al. 2012). But during the economic downturn when TANF caseloads rose and increased resources were needed, many state TANF agencies were unable or did not attempt to reclaim the transferred funds to support TANF cash assistance and employment services (Schott and Pavetti 2011). Second, the overall value of the block grant has not been increased or adjusted for inflation in nearly 20 years—since PRWORA was implemented. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) recently estimated that the total value of the block grant decreased by 30.1 percent in that time (CRS 2013).

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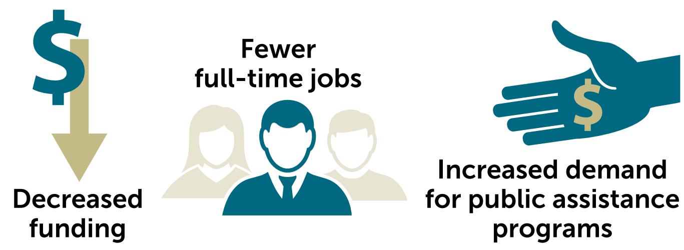
During the telephone interviews, TANF administrators talked about the eroding value of the block grant. Although they discussed this situation mostly anecdotally, the existing evidence about the value of the block grant confirms that TANF faces fiscal challenges. Though they did not directly discuss the use of TANF funds for purposes other than TANF cash payments and employment services, this occurred in all of the study states, according to additional TANF financial data collected in 2011 in accordance with the Claims Resolution Act of 2010. Child welfare payments and services, domestic violence, and emergency assistance were the categories with the largest percentages of "Other" spending across the states.

Changes in TANF programs since 2008



▶ Discontinuation of Federal Supplemental Grants

Beginning in 1996, 17 states received federal supplemental grants annually to augment their TANF block grant. These funds were provided to states that had relatively low welfare benefits in comparison to other states in 1994—which was the base year for the block grant calculation—or that had high population growth at the outset of the block grant funding (Pavetti et al. 2011). The goal was to reduce the disparity between poorer and wealthier states under the block grant allocation. States given supplemental grants received TANF block grant amounts per poor child that amounted to less than half of those provided to other states. On average, the supplemental grants accounted for nearly 10 percent of each of the recipient state's annual federal TANF allocation. These funds expired in July 2011. During the interviews, the state TANF administrators in Utah and Alabama talked about the challenges of losing the supplemental grants. Eight other states in the study also lost this funding.

▶ State and Local Budget Cuts

Government programs across the board suffered adverse effects of budget constraints and reduced tax revenue. As a result, budget cuts in social service programs were common. Of the 30 states studied, 25 experienced TANF program budget cuts from the state level, though they still continued to meet their maintenance-of-effort (MOE) requirement to draw down their federal TANF block grant.[4] TANF budget reductions varied across states from less than 1 percent in Colorado to 50 percent in Illinois. Five states—Florida, Nebraska, New York, Texas, and Wisconsin—did not experience any budget cuts on the state level during the economic downturn. However, New York noted that the state was unable to fund as many discretionary programs as it had in the past, and some of these programs had supported employment activities for TANF clients. The financial situation caused the state to make difficult decisions on which programs to support, which in turn could affect the services available to TANF clients.

2. Increase in the Demand for Public Assistance Programs

From the start of the economic downturn to 2012, public assistance caseloads increased, placing greater demands on the eligibility and case management resources within human service agencies. Although TANF caseloads modestly increased in many states during the economic downturn and subsequent slow recovery, all states contended with large increases in other assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid. From FY 2007 to FY 2012, SNAP participation increased by 89.4 percent, compared to a 7 percent increase in TANF. As Figure 1 shows, SNAP caseloads increased significantly in every state in response to the economic downturn, which had produced high, sustained unemployment. Of the 30 states studied, Nevada had the largest increase in its SNAP caseload at 196.6 percent. The state also had one of the highest increases of unemployed workers during this period.

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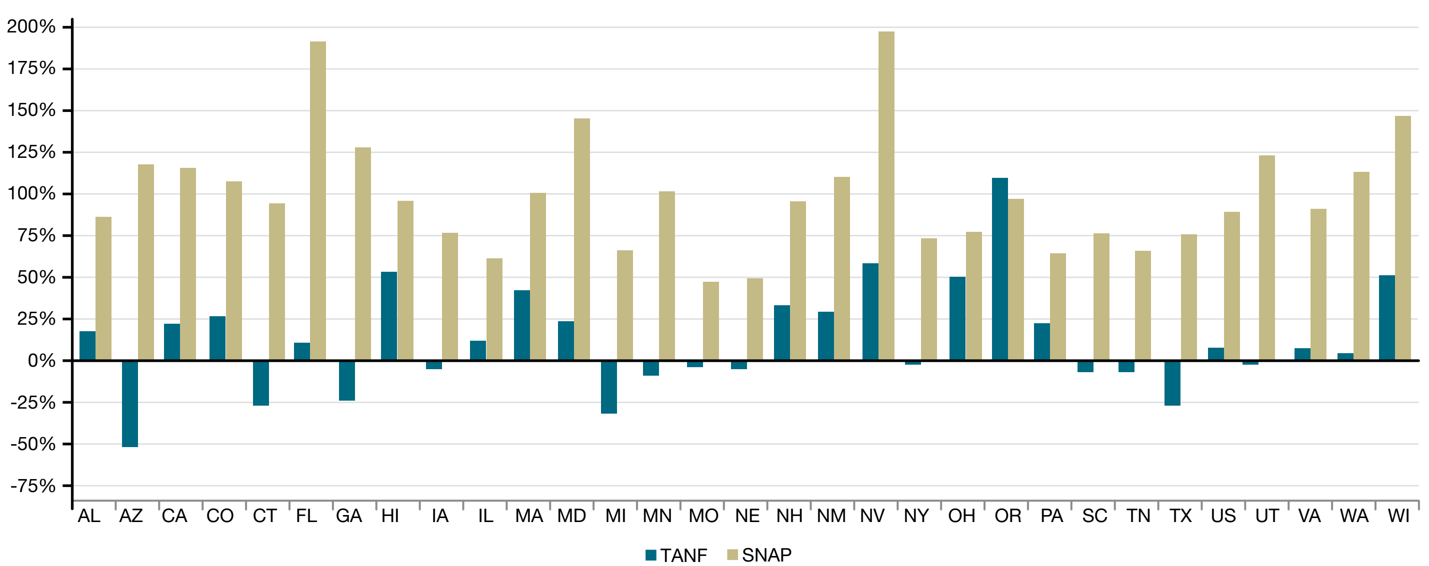
Many state agencies that administer TANF are also responsible for a range of assistance programs for low-income families. In some states, eligibility workers carry caseloads that include a mix of assistance programs—TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and child care, among others. During the economic downturn, these workers had increasingly larger caseloads (particularly driven by the significant increases in SNAP and Medicaid), and they had to comply with federal requirements for timeliness for determining initial and ongoing eligibility in multiple programs. For example, the TANF program administrator in New Hampshire said that eligibility workers are generalists and determine eligibility for TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, child care assistance, Aid to the Needy Blind, Old Age Assistance, and Refugee Cash Assistance. Between 2007 and 2012, New Hampshire reduced the number of eligibility workers while at the same time the TANF and SNAP caseloads increased by 32.8 percent and 95.3 percent, respectively.

Among the 30 study states, about half (17 states) experienced increased TANF caseloads from FY 2007 to FY 2012, ranging from a high of 109.2 percent in Oregon to a low of 3.5 percent in Washington State. In states that experienced declines, TANF caseload decreases ranged from 1.7 percent in New York to 51.9 percent in Arizona. Some of these states introduced solely state-funded programs, which would have removed clients from the caseload data. However, the average increases that were seen were higher than the average decreases—31.8 percent compared to -16.2 percent, respectively.

3. High Unemployment, Fewer Full-Time Jobs

Twenty-five of the 30 administrators interviewed reported that TANF clients faced an increasingly competitive labor market. With high unemployment rates (Table 1) and a large pool of available workers, employers were able to be more selective

Figure 1. Percent Change in TANF and SNAP Average Monthly Cases for Fiscal Years 2007–2012



Source: TANF data are from ACF in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. SNAP data are from the Food and Nutrition Service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
Note: Fiscal year data are used to compare across programs. TANF is measured in families and includes separate state programs. SNAP is measured in households.

with their potential employees. Although not confirmed by employment data, at least 16 state administrators reported that employers with entry-level positions—those traditionally sought by TANF clients—were requiring more experience from workers than prior to the recession. For example, employment service providers in New York City stated that retailers were requiring two years of experience for entry-level sales clerks. Administrators in other states remarked that employers were asking more frequently for certifications or requiring increased levels of education.

At least 28 state administrators noted a general lack of jobs, with fewer job placements for TANF clients as a result. In Washington State, TANF exits due to employment were monitored throughout the economic recession. As the unemployment rate rose, the number of exits due to employment decreased. From 2007 to 2012, state administrators estimated that the percentage of TANF clients who exited the program due to employment decreased from about 55 percent to 41 percent.

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More competitive labor markets have reportedly increased the length of time it takes TANF clients to find employment. At least 15 state administrators reported that TANF clients were spending more time in job search activities. For example, in Connecticut, employment services staff said that it took several weeks to several months longer than in the past for TANF clients to find employment. The state eliminated its subsidized employment program due to budget constraints and limited other available activities. As a result, clients had few activity options tto meet their required participation hours. Most clients continued to participate in job search activities beyond the statutory limit in which job search activities could count toward the state work participation rate.

Of the 30 states studied, 17 reported that TANF clients were increasingly working in part-time rather than full-time positions. Administrators stated that, in general, employers were not hiring for full-time positions. During the economic downturn and subsequent recovery, many TANF clients were working one or multiple part-time jobs. Depending on the state and its earned income disregard, some part-time workers were still eligible for TANF. Those in part-time work were required to combine work hours with other work activities to meet the federal work requirements. State administrators remarked that varying work schedules typically associated with part-time jobs made it difficult to supplement work with other activities, particularly if the client had reached his or her limit on countable job search hours.

Table 1. Unemployment Rates for 30 Study States

States	January 2007	January 2010	January 2013
United States	**4.6**	**9.8**	**7.9**
Alabama	3.3	10.3	6.9
Arizona	4.2	10.3	8.0
California	4.8	12.3	9.8
Colorado	4.1	8.9	7.3
Connecticut	4.4	9.1	8.1
Florida	3.3	11.3	7.8
Georgia	4.5	10.4	8.7
Hawaii	2.2	6.9	5.2
Illinois	4.6	11.2	9.0
Iowa	3.4	6.1	5.0
Maryland	3.8	7.7	6.7
Massachusetts	5.3	8.8	6.7
Michigan	6.9	13.7	8.9
Minnesota	4.4	7.8	5.6
Missouri	4.6	9.7	6.5
Nebraska	3.0	5.0	3.8
Nevada	4.5	14.6	9.7
New Hampshire	3.7	6.7	5.8
New Mexico	3.8	8.1	6.6
New York	4.3	8.9	8.4
Ohio	5.3	10.6	7.0
Oregon	5.2	11.0	8.4
Pennsylvania	4.7	8.8	8.2
South Carolina	6.4	11.7	8.7
Tennessee	4.8	10.4	7.7
Texas	4.5	8.2	6.3
Utah	2.6	8.0	5.4
Virginia	2.8	7.2	5.6
Washington	5.1	10.0	7.5
Wisconsin	4.9	9.2	7.0

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Responses from State Governments and TANF Agencies

State governments and local TANF agencies have taken steps to address the current trends of funding pressures, as reported by interview respondents. First, states and localities made explicit attempts to reduce program costs. They made changes that reduced the number of administrators and staff, reduced the total amount of the TANF cash grant to families, and decreased the amount and types of work and personal supports available to address barriers to employment. Second, state legislators and program administrators made policy and eligibility changes to limit the number of people who can apply and qualify for a cash assistance grant. Third, program administrators made modifications to their contracts with employment service providers. In many cases, program administrators reduced the total dollar amount of the contract, but increased or held steady the number of clients to be served. Finally, they assessed and, in some cases, redesigned employment services and reprioritized performance outcomes from a focus on participation to a focus on employment.

1. Explicit Efforts to Reduce Program Costs

Due to funding pressures of the economic recession and subsequent slow recovery, states employed specific strategies to adjust to the new program environment, such as reducing staffing, adjusting TANF cash grants, and reducing available work and personal supports.

▶ Reductions in Administrative and Program Staffing

States sought cost savings through reducing administrative and program costs. Twenty-six of the 30 states studied experienced staff reductions in the TANF program since 2008. Implementing layoffs, furloughs, and early retirement packages, and not filling vacancies, were some of the ways that states reduced the number of administrators and frontline staff. Twenty-five administrators were not filling vacancies for a period of time during the economic downturn (Table 2). Eleven reported furloughing staff, with some furloughs lasting several years—even into 2013. Twelve were required to lay off staff to meet budget constraints. In addition to these strategies, some states offered buyouts and early retirement for workers. In Connecticut, for example, state employees were offered the option of early retirement—which, combined with a hiring freeze, reduced the staff in one Department of Social Services office from 37 eligibility workers to 7 eligibility workers.

The extent and impact of staff reductions varied considerably across and within the study states. Several states lost staff at the agency level, including administrators and frontline workers. For example, New Hampshire had a 50 percent reduction in its statewide eligibility staff, while Colorado lost only one full-time position at the state level. Staff reductions extended to county and contractor staff at the local level. Oregon experienced a 75 percent statewide reduction in full-time contracted staff. Many states shifted responsibilities, changed processes, and required staff to carry higher workloads to continue to meet program demands. Staff reductions increased workloads for existing workers, and by encouraging retirements, some states lost important institutional knowledge held by long-term program administrators or experienced service staff. Four states—Florida, Nebraska, Tennessee, and Texas—did not experience any reduction in staff through furloughs, layoffs, or leaving vacancies unfilled.

Table 2. Strategies to Reduce Staff During Economic Downturn in 30 Study States

States	Furloughs	Not Filling Vacancies	Layoffs
Alabama		■	
Arizona	■	■	■
California	■	■	
Colorado		■	
Connecticut	■	■	
Florida			
Georgia	■	■	■
Hawaii	■	■	■
Illinois	■	■	■
Iowa		■	■
Maryland	■	■	
Massachusetts		■	■
Michigan		■	
Minnesota		■	■
Missouri		■	■
Nebraska			
Nevada		■	■
New Hampshire		■	■
New Mexico		■	
New York	■	■	
Ohio		■	■
Oregon		■	
Pennsylvania		■	■
South Carolina	■	■	
Tennessee			
Texas			
Utah		■	
Virginia		■	
Washington	■	■	
Wisconsin	■		

Source: Interviews conducted with TANF administrators in 30 states as part of the Work Participation study.

As the economy has improved, states have lifted hiring freezes and started to increase staffing levels. For example, New Mexico implemented a hiring freeze during the economic downturn and adopted a business model to increase the efficiency in eligibility determination. In the past year, the state lifted the hiring freeze and has begun refilling some of the positions that were lost due to attrition. Even with new hiring, states reported that they were not at pre-recession levels and had adapted to operating with fewer staff and increased workloads.

Reduction in the Amount of the Cash Grant

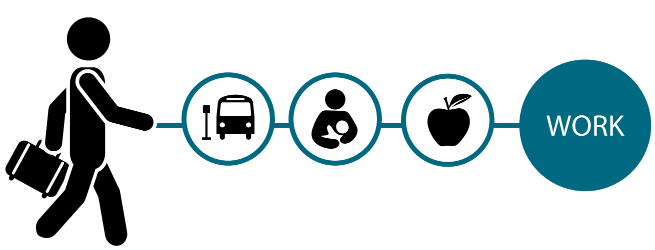
Under resource constraints, states reduced the availability and types of services offered to TANF clients. Administrators in five states—California, New Mexico, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin—reported having to reduce their monthly cash assistance benefits. Washington State reduced its grant amount by 15 percent in 2011 and introduced a maximum grant limit the same year. Similarly, New Mexico cut its grant amount by 15 percent, while South Carolina reduced its grant by 20 percent (from about $250 to $200 for a family of three).

Decreased Availability of Work and Personal Supports

States decreased the availability and types of personal and work supports for TANF clients. The majority of reductions occurred in child care, transportation, and services that help remove barriers to employment. Seventeen of the 30 state administrators interviewed reported decreases to support services. In Michigan, legislators reduced funds for transportation, clothing assistance, and other support programs, such as energy assistance. In Georgia, the state eliminated funds for support services within the TANF program. They now rely entirely on community organizations—which also experienced budget cuts and service reductions—to provide supports to TANF clients. Across the states, cuts to child care programs caused delays in accessing services and placing TANF clients in work activities.

Many states reduced or eliminated programs and services specifically targeted to the hard-to-employ. For example, due to budget cuts, New Hampshire eliminated a jobs program that served persons with disabilities. An Alabama program designed to help hard-to-serve clients was short staffed and unable to provide as much personal attention as these clients needed.

States reduced or eliminated personal and work supports for TANF recipients



2. Limits on TANF Caseload Growth

At least 11 states responded to increased caseloads with explicit legislative and administrative initiatives designed to contain caseload growth. For example, Washington State redefined the hardship exemption criteria for those reaching the end of their federal time limits so that fewer families qualified, aligned with federal work requirements by eliminating previously state-only allowable activities, and imposed a strict sanction policy with a lifetime sanction after three repeat terminations. Other states have implemented upfront program requirements, which can reduce the number of new cases, and streamlined their sanctioning processes to more quickly remove nonparticipants.

Respondents noted that contracting changes increased the workloads for existing staff, decreased resources for clients, and made it difficult to provide quality services to TANF clients.

3. Modified Contracts with Local Employment Service Providers

At least 20 states reduced the total value of contracts with service providers or required them to serve more participants, or both. Seventeen of the 30 state administrators reported reductions in funds for contracted service providers. Hennepin County in Minnesota reduced contracts with employment service providers by 23.5 percent in a single year, FY 2013. Contractors responded by cutting service options for TANF clients (such as workshops), reducing staff, and spending less per participant. In South Carolina, state and local social service workers were required to conduct job readiness classes because of contract reductions with providers. In Massachusetts, funding for employment services for TANF clients was reduced from $38 million in 2009 to $7 million in 2013. Connecticut had fewer funds for TANF service options and narrowed the focus of available activities to job search, GED courses, and unsubsidized employment. Across the states, respondents noted that contracting changes increased the workloads for existing staff, decreased resources for clients, and made it difficult to provide quality services to TANF clients.

4. Rethinking TANF Practices and Performance Measures

Working with fewer resources, states made efforts to improve efficiency and program performance. For example, one state was planning to use data to raise awareness of program progress and overall performance. Another state was in the process of implementing an extensive assessment of all TANF applicants and ongoing cases to improve the quality of individualized case management. The District of Columbia recently overhauled its TANF program—including adding a process for triaging clients and placing them in service tracks that reflect their job skills, abilities, and service needs—with the goal of improving participation and employment outcomes through more targeted services. Through the use of technology, Utah increased the efficiency of determining initial and ongoing eligibility by using a web-based portal where clients can record case changes and report their participation hours. Utah also shifted performance outcomes such as job placement and wages to focus more on employment, rather than on participation.

Opportunities for Program Improvement

TANF agencies are working in a changing and uncertain environment with considerable challenges. But overcoming these challenges could create opportunities for innovation and organizational change. We found opportunities for growth in five areas:

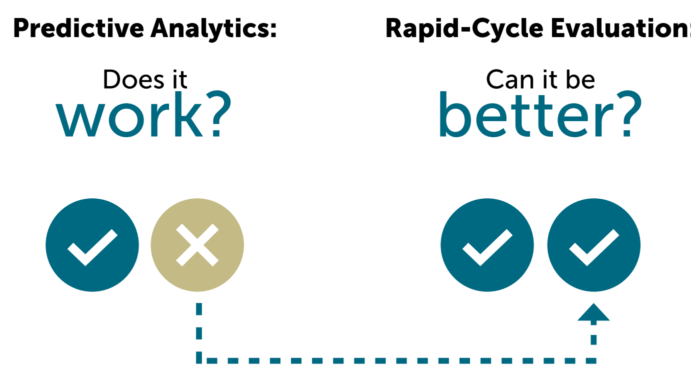
1. **Redefining the vision and mission of the state or local TANF program.** In response to changing resources and needs, select states are redesigning their TANF programs. The motivation to revisit their program may encourage innovation and growth.

2. **Making cost-neutral policy and program changes.** States are running their TANF programs in an environment with scarce and declining resources. Recommendations for low-burden policy and program changes may therefore offer the most promise. For example, states and localities might explore ways to improve a job search workshop by incorporating a structured curriculum that includes goal-directed behaviors to improve employability and parenting outcomes. Other changes may include improving an assessment process or the methods for implementing a sanction policy. Still another option is to explore partnerships with workforce development providers or community-based organizations where TANF clients may be referred for employment services and supports.

3. **Increasing program engagement.** Despite scarce resources, states and localities have continued to explore ways to improve the efficiency and appeal of program services to engage TANF clients in work or work-related activities. Findings from two ACF-funded studies showed noteworthy practices for increasing engagement such as structured job search workshops, participation incentives for TANF recipients, personal and work supports, and performance-based contracts for providers (Derr and Brown 2014; Pavetti et al. 2008). In addition, customization of services based on clients' interests and abilities might also increase program engagement.

4. **Improving business processes.** Improving the efficiency of business processes could help agencies engage TANF recipients more quickly and consistently or could free up funds, which could then be re-invested in other TANF services.

5. **Using data to increase program awareness and performance.** As mentioned, many states and localities are rethinking their TANF practices and redefining their performance measures. Improvements might include enhancing data quality, refining program indicators, or using targeted reports on performance management to raise awareness about program outcomes. An emerging area that may be beneficial is the use of data analytics and rapid-cycle evaluations, which are low-burden ways to test program or policy changes. These strategies typically produce results quickly and can determine whether the services provided are effective.



ENDNOTES

[1] The unemployment rate peaked at 10.8 percent during the September 1982 through June 1983 economic recession.

[2] For TANF agencies, the DRA brought about significant changes that increased the effective work participation rate (WPR) for states. Although the types of activities remained the same, changes in the federal definitions of activities, the methods used by states to report and verify participation, the people counted in the WPR calculation, and the recalibration of the caseload reduction credit increased the pressure on states to engage TANF clients in federally defined work activities.

[3] The four purposes of TANF are (1) to provide assistance to needy families; (2) to end dependence of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) to prevent and reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and (4) to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

[4] To meet their MOE requirement, states must spend 80 percent (or 75 percent, if they meet certain performance outcomes) of the total amount spent on welfare and welfare-related programs in 1994.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

The findings summarized in this brief were gathered as part of the Work Participation study, conducted by Mathematica and its partners, the Urban Institute and Winstead Consulting, on behalf of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). For this study, we conducted telephone interviews with TANF program administrators in 30 states (in 2012) and in-depth site visits to 8 of those states. Topics covered during the telephone interviews included (1) the TANF program environment, (2) policy and procedural changes to increase the work participation rate (WPR), (3) work participation and engagement, and (4) the calculation and reporting of the WPR and other outcome measures.

Prepared for:
Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Project Officer: Girley Wright

Prepared by:
Mathematica Policy Research
1100 1st Street, N.E. Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20002-4221
Project Director: Michelle Derr
Principal Investigator: Gretchen Kirby

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For more information on this brief, contact Michelle K. Derr at mderr@mathematica-mpr.com.