Research BRIEF
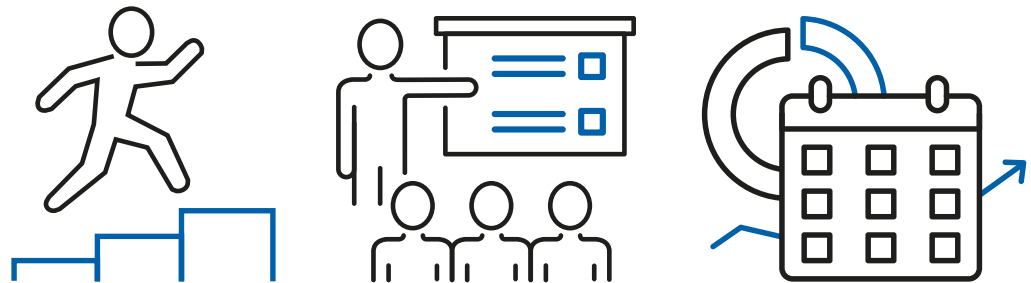
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Improving Employment Outcomes: Using Innovative Goal-Oriented Strategies in TANF Programs

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs aim to help participants find jobs and achieve economic independence. New evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and other behavioral sciences suggests that TANF programs may be able to improve these outcomes by applying the science of self-regulation.

Self-regulation refers to a foundational set of skills and personality traits that enable people to control their thoughts, emotions, and behavior (Table 1).[1,2,3] It's what helps all of us set goals, make plans, solve problems, reason, organize, prioritize, initiate tasks, manage time, and persist in and monitor our actions. Research suggests that interventions that focus on self-regulation to help people reach their goals may also improve their prospects in employment and other areas of life, such as parenting, interpersonal relationships, and general well-being.

This brief was developed as part of the Goal-Oriented Adult Learning in Self-Sufficiency (GOALS) project, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families. It describes the efforts of four TANF programs to implement three new interventions that are informed by evidence on self-regulation and designed to help participants reach their personal and job-related goals. The Mathematica team worked with the programs as they deployed their interventions using a framework called Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²), which involves iteratively refining and testing implementation approaches.[1]

Table 1: Examples of self-regulation skills		
Skill category	**Skill**	**Definition**
Personality factors	Motivation	The to drive to pursue, persevere, and accomplish tasks
	Grit	The perseverance and passion that help people persist in striving toward long-term goals despite challenges
	Self-efficacy	The belief we have in our ability to perform at a high level
Emotional skills	Emotion understanding	The ability to recognize and understand emotions in ourselves and others
	Emotion regulation	The ability to alter the intensity of an emotion being experienced and the behaviors that go along with that
Cognitive skills	Executive function	The abilities to stop automatic or inadvisable actions in favor of more appropriate behaviors, remember critical information while conducting complex tasks or activities, and hold multiple ideas at a time and switch between them as necessary
	Selective function	The ability to attend to one particular aspect of a task in the face of other thoughts, information, and actions
	Metacognition	The ability to reflect on and evaluate how we think, which is sometimes referred to as 'thinking about thinking'

Source: Cavadel, E., Kauff, J., Anderson, M.A, McConnell, S., and Derr, M. "Self-Regulation and Goal Attainment: A New Perspective for Employment Programs." Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017.

THE INTERVENTIONS

The three interventions that we studied in the GOALS project are designed to help TANF participants gain economic independence by setting and pursuing goals (Box 1 provides brief descriptions of the programs implementing the interventions). One intervention—Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan (WOOP)—is *evidence based*, meaning that it has rigorous evidence of effectiveness in various contexts. The other two—My Journey to Success and Goal4 It!™—are *evidence informed*, meaning that the science on self-regulation and goal achievement drove the development of the interventions, but the interventions have not been rigorously evaluated. All three interventions were adapted to and integrated into TANF programs. When designing and implementing the intervention, each TANF program considered the federal and state regulatory conditions and their local resources.

Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan

WOOP is a strategy for helping people fulfill their wishes and change their habits. Research has shown WOOP to be effective in a variety of domains.[4] For example, it has improved healthy eating, level of physical activity, and self-care for diabetes patients.[5,6] WOOP has also enhanced academic outcomes such as exam preparation, attendance, and course grades.[7] And, it has been effective in improving interpersonal

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Box 1. The TANF programs in the GOALS project

Mathematica engaged four TANF programs seeking to implement new interventions—specifically, interventions that draw from the literature on self-regulation and are designed to help participants reach their goals. Although these TANF programs vary in several ways—including the types and number of organizations involved with service delivery, number of participants served, urbanicity, and geographic location—they all have a desire to innovate and to improve participant outcomes.

Larimer County Workforce Center in Fort Collins, Colorado—WOOP and My Journey to Success
Under contract with the Larimer County Department of Human Services, the workforce center provides employment and supportive services to roughly 1,500 families annually through its TANF program. Between 2012 and 2015, the center's point-in-time TANF caseload grew from 414 to 593, while annual funding for TANF was cut from $3.1 to $1.7 million. In 2016, the workforce center introduced My Journey to Success and WOOP in an effort to serve customers more efficiently and effectively.

Jewish Employment and Vocational Services (JEVS) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—WOOP
JEVS was established in 1941 with a mission to "enhance the employability, independence, and quality of life of individuals through a broad range of programs." The program serves over 35,000 people a year through 20 programs in inner-city Philadelphia, including employment programs serving almost 5,000 TANF recipients. In 2016, JEVS began using WOOP with a small segment of this population.

Oregon Department of Human Services' Self-Sufficiency Program in Linn County, Oregon—WOOP
Oregon's Department of Human Services runs two self-sufficiency offices in Lebanon and Albany, which are both rural areas in Linn County, Oregon. Each office offers TANF; child care assistance; services related to domestic violence, refugees, and employment; and benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The challenges of serving a rural population spurred interest in innovative ways to help TANF participants, and both the Lebanon and Albany offices began using WOOP in response.

Project 500 (P500) in San Francisco, California—Goal4 It!™
P500 is a two-generational program that seeks to lift San Francisco's most at-risk families out of poverty. It is led by the San Francisco Human Services Agency, in collaboration with the Department of Public Health, Office of Child Support Services, and Office of Early Care and Education. P500 began in 2016 to serve at least 500 families who are eligible for CalWORKS (California's TANF program) and the Nurse-Family Partnership, an evidence-based parenting support and home-visiting model for first-time mothers and their babies. As part of a multipronged strategy, P500 staff began using Goal4 It!™ to help participants set and pursue goals.

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relations, such as by increasing tolerance toward members of disadvantaged groups and encouraging fairer behavior in bargaining games.[8]

Developed by Gabriele Oettingen, a professor at New York University, WOOP draws on more than 20 years of research and combines two scientific principles—mental contrasting and implementation intentions. Mental contrasting is a process in which people consider all the reasons why their current situation does not match their desired future and why they have not yet achieved their wish (that is, the obstacles preventing them from making a change). Considering these obstacles allows people to think about the steps necessary to achieve their wish, which encourages goal-directed behaviors. An implementation intention is an if/then statement that links an obstacle that a person may encounter while pursuing a wish and the planned response to that obstacle— for instance, "if X occurs, then I will do Y."[9] Because an implementation intention prescribes when, where, and how to take action to achieve a change, it's more effective than a regular intention, which only specifies an intended outcome or behavior without a plan in place to achieve that intention.[10]

WOOP incorporates these principles into a four-step process:

1. **Identify one key wish** that is challenging but can be fulfilled within a fairly short period (for instance, a day, a week, or a month).

2. **Imagine the best outcome** that would result if that wish were fulfilled and how that would feel.

3. **Search deeply within oneself** to identify the main inner obstacle (for instance, an emotion, irrational belief, or bad habit) preventing the fulfillment of the wish.

4. **Identify one action or thought** to overcome the obstacle and articulate the plan in the following form: If (obstacle), then I will (action or thought).

People can use WOOP in a variety of ways. For example, they can listen to a three- to six-minute video or audio recording that walks them through the steps in the WOOP process (see www.woopmylifetoolbox.org). Or, they can use a worksheet to guide them through the process. People trained to use WOOP for themselves can verbally lead people through WOOP one on one or in a group. Dr. Oettingen trained staff in the TANF programs participating in the GOALS project on the WOOP process, and the staff practiced administering WOOP with peers and family members before using it with program participants.

My Journey to Success

My Journey to Success is a web-based, interactive system designed to save time that TANF participants and staff would otherwise spend talking through routine processes and instead use it to have in-depth, meaningful conversations about participants' goals. Participants enter information about their goals and program activities into the system, and they interact with staff through file sharing and messaging. Frontline staff can track participants' entries in real time and respond to and send messages. Participants can access My Journey to Success and all of its functions from a computer or smartphone.

My Journey to Success has two main features. First, it systematizes the steps to achieving common participant goals (such as securing housing or arranging child care). It allows users to follow a guided, self-paced process for completing steps toward their goals in an online environment. Participants can choose from among several "pathways," or topic areas such as housing or child care, which correspond to their goals (see Figure 1). Within each pathway, coaches work with participants to decide on appropriate "action steps"—pre-established tasks—to take to meet their goals, such as filling out a housing application or searching for child care providers. My Journey to Success guides participants through the necessary tasks of each step by providing resources and information on screen, often prompting the participant to watch a video, type a response, or complete a short quiz (see Figure 2).

The second main feature of My Journey to Success allows participants to electronically record and submit their hours of TANF work participation. Participants can submit this information without having to appear at a TANF office in person, saving them time, hassle, and money. Staff can review, modify, and approve the submitted reports online. Previously, staff had to enter participation data from a paper form into an electronic system, and the data entry and review process typically took more than half of a case manager's time. My Journey to Success eliminated the data entry step and enabled staff to complete other tasks related to documenting work participation hours within minutes. With the time they save, staff and participants can focus on goal setting and pursuit.

Figure 1.
My Journey to Success goal pathways (screen shot)

Photo courtesy of Larimer County Economic and Workforce Development Department and TuaPath, LLC

Figure 2.
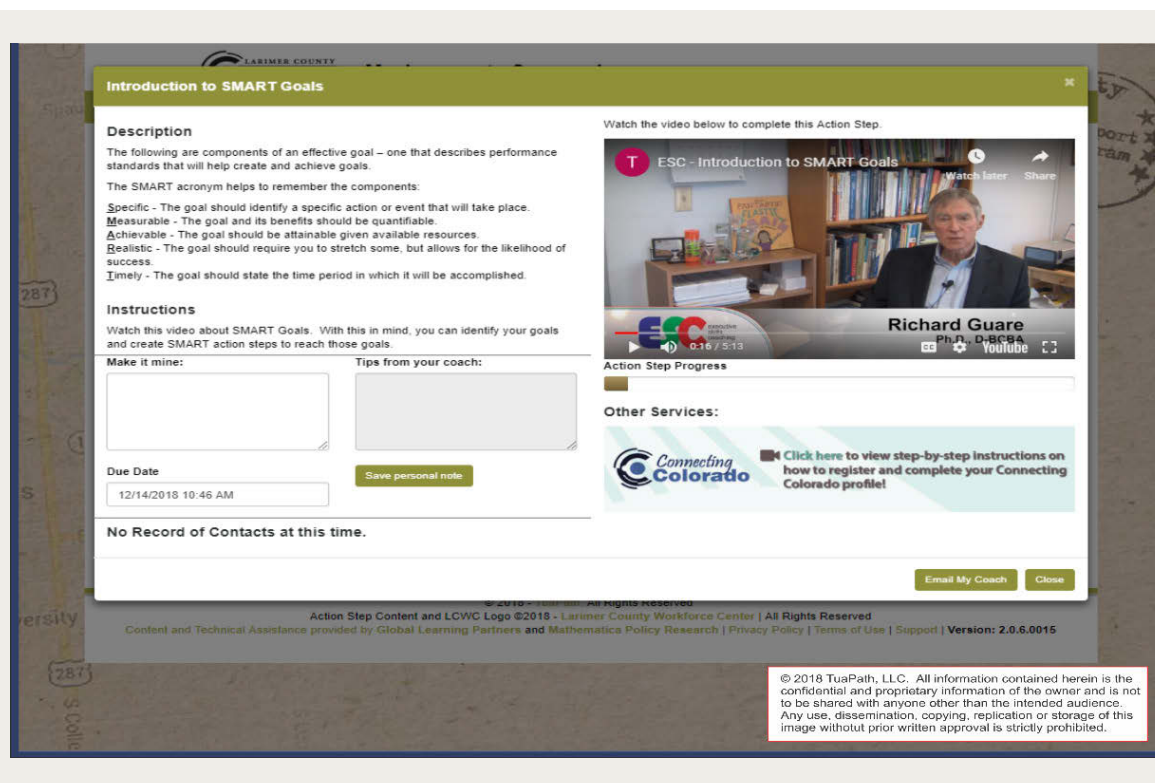## My Journey to Success illustrative action step (screen shot)

Photo courtesy of Larimer County Economic and Workforce Development Department and TuaPath, LLC

Goal4 It!™

Goal4 It!™ is a behavioral science-informed process for helping people work toward their goals.[11] This simple, habit-forming, replicable process enables participants to set meaningful goals, break goals down into manageable steps, develop specific plans to achieve them, and regularly review their progress. Its design drew on work from scientific experts, researchers, and practitioners. Goal4 It!™ helps participants practice and build core skills, find ways to eliminate stressors that may interfere with goal achievement, and have meaningful discussions with staff.

The model involves four interdependent phases—each with specific activities and tools—that participants work through with the help of a coach. Each phase builds upon the prior phase, but a person may need to return to a previous phase as his or her circumstances change (for example, the GoalReview process may highlight a need to return to the GoalPlan phase).

1. In the **GoalLearn** phase, coaches help participants assess their strengths and challenges and identify personally meaningful goals. To do this, coaches must develop relationships with participants so that they can engage in deep conversation and ongoing reflection. This involves considering and learning from successes and failures to identify—and eventually make progress toward—realistic goals. In this phase, participants and coaches use the "Stepping Stones to Success," form which

helps them gauge the level of stress participants are having in different areas of life. They also use a technique called "goal storming" to brainstorm potential goals, steps to achieve them, and resources needed for success.

2. The **GoalPlan** phase involves (1) zeroing in on a meaningful goal; (2) breaking the goal into manageable and achievable steps; (3) naming obstacles to goal achievement and corresponding solutions, a process that research shows can increase the likelihood of success by two to three times;[12] and (4) formalizing a concrete, specific plan to achieve the goal. Participants and coaches use several tools in this phase. For example, the "My Goal Plan" tool guides participants through the process of setting, planning for, and reflecting upon one goal. The "My Pathway" tool helps participants break down a complex goal into smaller goals and identify steps to reach those goals. And the "Potholes and Detours" tool helps participants identify and address personal and family challenges that interfere with goal achievement.

3. During the **GoalDo** phase, participants take action to achieve their goals. The direct-service staff may help prepare or support participants during this stage, but participants ultimately take action on their own. Coaches can offer anticipated incentives (such as a gift card or baby supplies that participants earn upon completing agreed-upon actions) or unanticipated rewards (prizes given in recognition of effort or accomplishment) to encourage progress toward a goal.

4. In the **GoalReview** phase, coaches provide ongoing support to participants as they progress toward their goals. This phase involves frequent and regular Review, Assess, Plan (RAP) sessions, which are focused conversations between the coach and participant to review the participant's recent efforts and progress, to reassess the reasonableness of the goal and any obstacles to reaching it, and to revise the plan or identify additional support. Participants and coaches also use the Stepping Stones to Success tool to monitor progress.

Each part of the process requires foundational self-regulation skills and, when executed routinely, creates an opportunity to practice and improve behaviors that make it possible to achieve goals. For instance, participants have a chance to exercise reasoning and reflection in the GoalLearn phase, planning and prioritization in the GoalPlan phase, task initiation and persistence in GoalDo, and flexibility in GoalReview. The model is also designed to improve the quality and consistency of services provided across direct-service staff.

USING LI² TO "ROAD TEST" INTERVENTIONS

Mathematica created Learn, Innovate, Improve—or LI²—in partnership with the federal Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and the Harvard Center on the Developing Child. The LI² framework consists of a series of replicable, evidence-informed activities designed to improve the quality of new interventions. The activities are conducted by practitioners (for example program administrators, supervisors, and direct-service staff) in collaboration with researchers. In this way, LI² brings social science theory, research evidence, and practice wisdom together, with the goal of creating innovations that are practical, effective, scalable, and sustainable. The LI² process has three phases (Figure 3):

Figure 3.
The Learn, Innovate, Improve process

Source: Derr, M., Person, A., and McCay, J. "Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives."
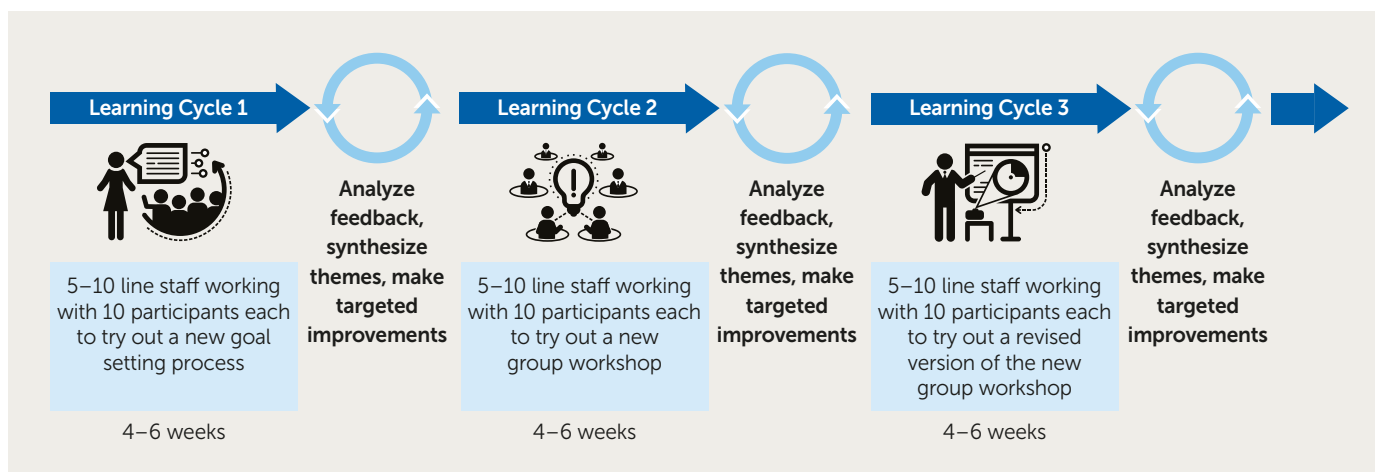Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2017.

1. **Learn:** This first phase helps practitioners clarify their reasons for seeking change and the problems they wish to solve.

2. **Innovate:** The objective of the second phase is to identify and prioritize potential solutions to the problems defined in the Learn phase.

3. **Improve:** In the third phase, participants try out the program changes in contained practice settings, collect data on the process and results, and make adjustments before scaling up the changes.

A road test, conducted as part of the Improve phase, is an iterative prototyping and learning process in which the L1² team deploys carefully selected new strategies in contained practice settings. Typically, a few staff and clients use the new strategies over a short period of time (about four to six weeks) and then provide formative feedback. Afterwards, the team analyzes the data and feedback to develop concrete recommendations for refining the strategy. Road tests typically include two or more of these rounds of feedback, known as learning cycles.

The road tests offer a chance to try new strategies in real-world service-delivery settings while limiting the consequences if the strategies do not work as planned. The short time frame of a road test makes rapid adaptation and refinement possible when new strategies fail to produce the desired effect. Figure 4 shows the general road test process with several learning cycles, each of which focuses on refining a certain strategy within a larger program-improvement effort. In some cases, several learning cycles may be used to refine a single strategy.

Figure 4.
An example of the road test process

Source: Derr, M., Person, A., and McCay, J. "Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives."
Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2017.

Mathematica conducted road tests with the four TANF programs participating in the GOALS project. The goal was to improve the quality of the interventions and their implementation, with an eye toward preparing them for possible evaluation. We tailored the road test to the learning objectives of each program.

San Francisco's P500 began using Goal4 It!™ during a four-week learning cycle in which staff used the intervention with 10 families each. Feedback from the program indicated that some of the staff were more actively using Goal4 It!™ with families than others. As a result, during the second learning cycle we instructed all staff to use Goal4 It!™ with all of their clients over two weeks. During this "boot camp" approach, we collected daily feedback from the supervisor who held a 30-minute all staff meeting each morning and collected daily feedback from staff about their interactions with clients directly through online surveys.

Despite variation in how programs used WOOP, they each conducted two learning cycles, spending four weeks on the first cycle and seven weeks on the second. Staff took part in telephone interviews and weekly online surveys about their experiences implementing the intervention. For the Larimer County Workforce Center we completed three learning cycles of My Journey to Success of four to six weeks each. We analyzed data entered into the virtual platform, feedback from staff and clients collected through hard copy questionnaires, and observational data from staff meetings with clients.

FINDINGS FROM THE ROAD TESTS

Each TANF program had to make changes to its service-delivery approach and staff practices in order to implement its new goal-oriented interventions. The programs' experiences offer several overarching lessons for the field on how to adapt, implement, and scale up these types of interventions. Box 2 provides information on how the programs are using the interventions, given the lessons from the road tests.

Science-informed, goal-oriented strategies can require time and effort to integrate into the service environment. Each of these interventions require a more customized approach to service delivery as they focus on individualized goal pursuit. Shifting from an approach that focuses on compliance with work requirements, which tends to be standard practice, to an approach that focuses on helping clients set and pursue individual goals requires staff to change their mindsets and behaviors, which takes time. For example, staff weren't comfortable using WOOP with clients until they had spent time practicing it on themselves or with friends or family. In the case of Goal4 It!™, feedback from P500 staff suggested that the more time staff spent using the tools with participants, the more they understood them and the more constructive their feedback became. These findings mean that staff need time and support to become comfortable with interventions that are philosophically different from a program's legislatively mandated focus on compliance with rules.

A shift from a compliance-oriented approach to a goal-oriented one also requires changes to other program services and messages. Before shifting approaches, it would behoove programs to examine their existing practices, identify any misalignments

Box 2. How the TANF programs have incorporated lessons from the road tests

Larimer County Workforce Center in Fort Collins, Colorado—WOOP and My Journey to Success
The road tests revealed that practicing WOOP on themselves and with family members or friends is important for increasing staff's understanding of the intervention and their confidence using it. In response, the team has dedicated an hour of its two-hour biweekly staff meetings to peer practice of WOOP. The objectives are to increase staffs' comfort with WOOP, their use of WOOP personally and with others, and their WOOP facilitation skills. Through multiple road tests, the workforce center has found that WOOP tends to work best for its clients who feel "stuck." The road test for My Journey to Success suggested a need for more content development in the system. In response, the workforce center added new pathways and action steps. The center has also started systematically gathering and using data from the system on client activities and progress.

Jewish Employment and Vocational Services (JEVS) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—WOOP
The road tests suggested that adding WOOP to existing activities improved the quality of the interactions by uncovering some of the obstacles to goal progress. They concluded that orientation sessions, job-search workshops, and regular meetings between staff and participants are good opportunities to incorporate WOOP. Initially, staff used WOOP during any interactions they deemed appropriate with clients exempt from the TANF work requirements. As a result of the road test, JEVS has begun embedding WOOP into the twice monthly required home visits with these clients. JEVS plans to launch group WOOP sessions to reinforce and build on clients' experiences with WOOP during the home visits. In response to findings on the value of practicing WOOP, the team holds monthly WOOP support meetings for all staff. JEVS also recently embedded training on WOOP into the team's onboarding procedures for new frontline staff.

Oregon Department of Human Services' Self-Sufficiency Program in Linn County, Oregon—WOOP
A key finding from the road tests was that one-on-one WOOP sessions tend to work most successfully when conducted in a calm, quiet, private space without the potential for interruptions. The Linn County Self-Sufficiency Program discontinued its systematic use of WOOP in 2018, in part because staff found that the cubicle environment in the office was unconducive for the types of conversations that resulted from WOOP and they were unable to use other spaces (such as meeting rooms) for WOOP. Numerous staffing changes, including the promotion of the TANF director to a regional position, also made it difficult to use WOOP consistently, since the director had been the primary champion of WOOP.

Project 500 (P500) in San Francisco, California—Goal4 It!™
Project 500 was one of the first sites in the country to implement Goal4 It!™. The road test there helped to refine the overall practice model and to define a new "boot camp" approach to conducting road tests that has been successfully replicated in other sites. While Project 500 continues to use Goal4 It!™, they primarily use it to assist clients with long-term planning rather than short-term goals. Several of the Goal4 It!™ tools have been embedded into the program's database which helps to track when staff use them with clients. The P500 supervisor noted that the Goal4 It!™ tools have been helpful in bringing a level of fidelity to the goal-pursuit process that staff use with clients.

with the proposed intervention, and redesign such practices (to the extent possible) to ensure that strategies and messages in the same program do not undermine one another. For example, after adopting My Journey to Success, the workforce center found several instances in which existing paper forms or other data systems were incompatible with the online platform.

Strong "champions" at all levels of the organization can be critical to the success of goal-oriented strategies. The importance of internal "champions" of the new approaches became apparent during the road tests. In one of the programs implementing WOOP, the program manager spearheading the implementation unexpectedly went on leave during the road test. While the manager was gone, enthusiasm for the intervention waned, and its use temporarily lapsed. In addition, during some learning cycles, a few direct-service staff or program managers noticeably bought into the intervention. Other staff who felt less comfortable or had trouble adopting the new practices commonly reported consulting their colleagues for advice and support. These champions helped promote the adoption of WOOP in LCWC and JEVS, in particular. Given the required shift in mindset to use an intervention like WOOP, staff who promoted the technique and coached their peers through the process played a key role in implementation.

The purpose of and rationale behind the goal-oriented tools and processes should be made clear for staff. For example, Goal4 It!™ incorporates a specific four-step process for goal achievement that must be followed closely, based on scientific principles about goal pursuit. But the road tests revealed that staff may not have fully understood the reasons behind such specific processes and did not see the important differences between the new and old practices. A sharp focus on the evidence driving the intervention during initial trainings and early implementation helped staff to more easily understand the rationale behind the new strategies—and the importance of sticking closely to the new process.

More specific and tailored guidance is needed on how to use goal-oriented interventions with participants who are in crisis. In all three goal-oriented interventions, staff reported not using the new approach with participants in crisis (for example, people who faced eviction, had a child removed from the home, or had a serious medical condition), reasoning that their circumstances required a different approach. However, all goal-oriented interventions that were road tested can be adapted to serve participants in these situations. For instance, staff can help participants tailor their goals to address and avert future crises, or they can use the goal process to identify and plan small steps to take in a current crisis, with an eye toward promoting empowerment and progress. Additional training, guidance, and practical illustrations on how to use the interventions with participants in different situations can teach staff how to tailor and adapt these interventions to help those in crisis.

Using a systematic, analytic process like a road test can pay off by helping programs uncover "sticking points" in implementation, reinforce desired behaviors among staff, and foster staff buy-in. All programs used findings from the road test to refine

the implementation of their interventions. By highlighting the important drivers of implementation success, road tests can provide meaningful help to a program focused on resolving the specific obstacles to sustaining a new goal-oriented intervention. Providing constructive feedback to staff during the road test promotes a deeper level of staff engagement with the interventions, facilitates staff buy-in to the new approach, and reinforces necessary behavior changes. However, obtaining regular input *from staff* (and participants) can be challenging. It's incumbent on program leaders to actively encourage the delivery of consistent, detailed feedback so that both staff and participants can engage more in these processes

CONCLUSIONS

The interventions we studied in TANF programs through the GOALS project have the potential to improve employment outcomes for families living in conditions of poverty; they are well-grounded in the science of self-regulation and are designed to help participants reach their personal and job-related goals. However, to implement these interventions well requires intentionality and precision with respect to integrating them into existing program services. Without careful attention to the integration of these interventions, the benefits and potential impacts of these interventions may not be fully realized. Programs may use analytic techniques like the road test process to iteratively refine and scale up promising interventions and help ready their programs for rigorous evaluation to determine effectiveness.

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