Designing Participant-Centered Programs

Participant Reflections on What Works Well in Social Services Programs

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Introduction

The State Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Case Studies project highlights innovative approaches various programs take to support the employment of people and families with low incomes, including people who receive TANF. Over four months, from December 2019 to March 2020, the study team visited nine programs across the country to learn about these programs and how they approach their work to fulfill their missions. As part of the visits to eight programs, the study team conducted in-depth interviews with two to five participants per program.[1] Some participants were enrolled in their program at the time of the interview, and others were former program participants who were reflecting on their time in the program. These interviews offered a different view into program services from that of program staff, highlighting the perspectives and experiences of those engaging with services firsthand.

This brief describes the perspectives of people participating in these programs. It highlights what the interviewed participants most appreciated about these programs and how the services supported their goals. These programs, all seeking to alleviate barriers people with low incomes face when finding and obtaining work, used an array of approaches and service delivery models. Box 1 offers a summary of each program, including their focus populations and specific services, along with links to their detailed case studies.

About this brief

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) funded Mathematica and its subcontractor, MEF Associates, to execute the State Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Case Studies project from September 2018 to September 2021. The project team identified nine innovative programs through a scan of the field and engagement with stakeholders; visited the programs to interview program staff and participants, conducted structured case reviews, and observed program activities; and wrote nine descriptive case studies. OPRE and OFA are in the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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[1] The research team's visit to New York City occurred remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic and did not include interviews with people participating in the program.

Despite the various modes of service delivery and particular offerings of each of these programs, three broader themes emerged that resonated across programs. These participant perspectives provide insight for people designing policies and programs. Based on these perspectives, practitioners and policymakers might consider incorporating the following elements to design more participant-centered programs:

1. **Enable supportive and collaborative interactions between staff and participants.** Participants described feelings of care and mutual respect during their interactions with program staff. These feelings helped create a sense of stability, as participants said they knew they had people on their team to help ensure they succeeded.

2. **Provide comprehensive wraparound supports and opportunities to develop life skills.** Participants identified two benefits of wraparound supports. First, supports such as child care or transportation assistance alleviated some of the logistical barriers to participation. Second, participants discussed how skill-based opportunities like workshops and classes created time and space for them to think about and care for their emotional well-being, particularly as related to parenting.

3. **Encourage peer connections among participants.** Participants noted the pool of knowledge and resources that came from a broader sense of community with their peers in the programs. Participants could help connect one another to resources, and interviewees noted the unique support that comes with navigating similar life experiences as their peers.

Sample and methodology

This brief presents findings from our analysis of 21 in-depth interviews with participants from eight programs profiled for the State TANF Case Studies project. Though all the programs serve people with low incomes, programs also served specific populations: four programs served people receiving or eligible for public benefits like TANF; two programs served families experiencing housing instability; and two specifically served mothers.

Program staff selected participants for interviews. Research team staff encouraged sites to identify participants whose experiences were typical of the program, as opposed to those who excelled or struggled most. In addition, program staff were present in interviews at two sites.

The small number of participants interviewed and our deference to staff in selecting participants means the sample is not representative of the broader swath of program participants. The sample likely includes people more predisposed to speak positively about the programs and more likely to have positive outcomes during the program. Even with these limitations, common themes emerged from these interviews that resonated across programs. Further, the frequency of these themes despite differences in program models and service delivery underscores the value of considering these perspectives in program design and implementation. Each theme explored in this brief emerged in interviews with participants from at least four different programs.

Given our concern for participant confidentiality, we do not identify which programs participants engaged with. Instead, we contextualize findings and direct quotes by describing other features of the programs. For example, we might say, "A participant at a program that provided housing services."

Box 1. Overview of programs included in this analysis

Community Action Organization (CAO) of Scioto County, Ohio. CAO is a community hub of services focused on supporting people with low incomes, including by offering employment and workforce development for adults and youth. The Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program provides eligible youth ages 14 to 24 with work experience and support services. In addition, CAO has a behavioral health unit staffed with family navigators and counselors who provide counseling and supportive services to youth and adults.

Community Caring Collective (CCC). The CCC is the backbone organization of a network of about 45 organizations serving people with low incomes in Washington County, Maine, in service areas such as education and job training, health and mental health, early childhood education and care, legal assistance, and basic needs. In addition to connecting and supporting partner organizations, the CCC designs, launches, and supports incubated programs to address emerging community needs. Participants interviewed shared their perspectives on one incubated program, Family Futures Downeast (FFD), rather than the CCC as a whole. FFD is a two-generation program managed by a collaborative group of community partners that provides coaching, education, and workforce services to cohorts of adults with low incomes as well as early childhood education to their children.

Climb Wyoming (Climb). Climb is a nonprofit organization that provides career training and placement for single mothers who are eligible for TANF across six sites in Wyoming. Cohorts of up to 12 participants engage in six to eight weeks of job training followed by job matching, and then six to eight weeks of subsidized job placement. Participants receive mental health services, support services, and life skills education throughout the program.

Kentucky's Targeted Assessment Program (TAP). Across 35 Kentucky counties, TAP provides comprehensive assessment and intensive case management services to parents who are involved in the state's TANF or child welfare systems. The program helps participants overcome barriers to self-sufficiency, which can include mental health issues, substance use disorders, intimate partner violence, or a learning disability or deficit. TAP specialists provide intensive case management to participants to prepare them for treatment, refer them to community-based services and treatment programs, and facilitate their follow-through with referrals and services.

New Moms. New Moms is a nonprofit organization serving pregnant and parenting young women and their children in Chicago, Illinois. Participants in New Moms' 16-week job training program, delivered in cohorts, develop work-readiness skills, practice job search skills, and receive hands-on employment experience through New Moms' social enterprise candle company, Bright Endeavors. In addition, New Moms operates a transitional and permanent supportive housing program, a family support and parenting education program, and provides wraparound support services on-site for program participants and their children.

Ohana Nui—Family Assessment Centers (FACs). The Hawaiian phrase for "extended family," `Ohana Nui is a service delivery framework used across the Hawai`i Department of Human Services that focuses on supporting multigenerational families. One of the first initiatives under this framework was to develop the FACs, which provide emergency shelter and on-site services for families with children experiencing homelessness in Honolulu City and County. FACs bring wraparound services on-site and staff help participants apply for benefits and medical coverage and engage in a job and housing search with the aim of moving into permanent housing in 90 days.

Rhode Island Works (RIW). RIW is the state's redesigned TANF program that aims to first identify participants' barriers to employment, then address those barriers before directing participants to look for jobs. The state works with four vendors who provide case management to participants. Case managers work with participants to identify their barriers to employment, such as mental health, substance use, housing, transportation, and child care needs, and provide referrals and resources to help overcome them. After addressing their barriers, participants can move into other program components, such as vocational training and work readiness, to prepare for employment.

Solutions for Change (Solutions). Solutions is a nonprofit organization in Northern San Diego County, California, that provides transitional and permanent housing, work-readiness training, and wraparound support services for parents experiencing homelessness, the majority of whom have substance use disorders. Cohorts of participants engage in a three-phase, 1,000-day program consisting of progressively independent housing; intensive case management; unpaid work experience; classes about life skills, parenting, and employment readiness; on-site mental health services; and recovery support services for people with substance use disorders.

Our interview protocols for the in-depth interviews covered topics such as participant background and personal history, past and present employment experiences, program experiences, linkages and use of wraparound services, financial stability and support, and perception and assessment of the program. The research team conducted interviews, which typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, between December 2019 to March 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The team then recorded and transcribed the interviews. We conducted the interviews to learn more about the programs for the case studies. However, throughout the interview process and during field work, we learned information that would likely be of interest to people designing and implementing social programs providing employment support. As such, we revisited the interview transcripts and notes to create this brief.

As authors of the brief, we reviewed and manually coded the transcripts. We took an inductive approach to coding, meaning we reviewed the transcripts to see what themes emerged and developed a codebook based on those themes. We also conducted an interrater reliability check to ensure all coders were uniformly interpreting and applying the codes.[2]

The research team did not collect detailed demographic information about the participants interviewed. Anecdotally, all but two of them had children younger than 18. Most were women, as many programs served families and parents, and all described some degree of material hardship. They often described experiences with recent job loss, housing instability, difficulty paying bills, or use of safety net services such as TANF and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Many of the participants interviewed described experiences with substance use disorders, though most of these people indicated they were in recovery at the time of the interview. In the sites with a more explicit focus on housing, the participants were either presently living in housing through the program shelters or had been when they began the program. In one site, all the interviewees had active child welfare cases.

The remainder of this brief presents considerations for program practitioners and policymakers, followed by the themes and specific experiences participants shared in their in-depth interviews.

Enable supportive and collaborative relationships between staff and participants to support participant engagement

When asked to reflect on the programs and what stood out to them, participants most commonly responded about their relationships with program staff, including case managers, counselors, and receptionists. Participants from all eight programs spoke about staff in superlatives and noted how support from staff helped them stay engaged with their programs. Many participants described how these relationships and staff commitment to their success created feelings of stability during otherwise turbulent or unsteady times in their lives. Participants felt respected and valued. They often noted their feelings of partnership with staff, and mentioned that staff's expressed commitment to their progress helped them succeed in the programs.

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[2] Two of the three authors conducted interviews as part of a broader research team. Our analysis is primarily based on review of interview notes and transcripts. We intend to share these participants' perspectives and stories with the utmost respect. We recognize the responsibility we have as researchers to share participants' stories in a way that reflects them and their experiences.

Supportive relationships with staff fostered feelings of respect and safety

Participants from five programs cited the presence and dedication of staff as the most helpful part of their programs. Beyond supporting their employment or training goals, participants reported feeling seen, cared for, valued, and respected by staff. One participant at a program that emphasized connecting participants to other local community organizations described how staff tried to get to know her as a person instead of just seeing her as a client going through the program. She felt that staff cared about her. Another participant at a program seeking to connect participants to social services said the staff continually made the effort to lift her spirits and make her feel welcome.

> *"I was sad that I had to be [at the program]. I was sad that I lost my job, and I kind of just didn't want to be here. But every day, they would say, 'Good morning,' and say my name every day. All the staff knew my name."*

For a few participants, these relationships and interactions with program staff were a shift from interactions they had had with staff in other social services programs; namely, participants said they did not feel like these program staff looked down on them as staff in other programs had. One participant said her experience with the staff in this program was unlike her previous experiences at other programs.

> *"The two caseworkers that I've had…didn't make me feel so like a scum…. You know what I mean? Sometimes when you go into places like that you just feel like [scum], but they didn't make me feel that way."*

A participant at a program primarily serving people with substance use disorders said he was surprised by how accepting the program staff were of him and his experiences. He said that instead of trying to expose his flaws and point to those as weaknesses, the program staff just made him feel like he was a good person.

This warm and welcoming approach by staff created a sense of safety for the people they served. Because they felt accepted and not judged, participants indicated they were more willing to engage with the program. One participant said this approach by staff laid the groundwork for how to engage successfully with the program.

> *"It was a very nonjudgmental environment. They just made it clear that if something's going on, you had to communicate about it."*

Collaborative relationships with staff helped participants feel like their success was a team effort with multiple people helping them achieve their goals

The feelings of safety and nonjudgment with staff helped participants feel like they had partners invested in their success and that they were not navigating these programs on their own. In addition, instead of being told what to do as a directive, participants from five programs described a collaborative approach to their engagement with programs. Staff asked participants what they could do to help them accomplish their tasks and goals. A participant in a job training and placement program noted the encouragement she felt from this team-based approach to achieving goals.

> *"You weren't alone. You're fighting for your future, but you have a whole bunch of people behind you pushing you forward."*

Some participants mentioned how attuned program staff were to their individual circumstances. They said staff took time to understand what they as individuals wanted and needed, and then worked toward those participant-identified goals. A participant at a program providing case management services to parents said her case manager made sure she was available to help her and made the effort to fully understand her needs.

> *"She actually listens to me and asks me what I want, what I need help with. And she tries to help me."*

Beyond participants feeling like staff were their partners in the program, participants from a couple programs that provide case management and connect them to other community services said they felt like program staff went above and beyond their duties to help them. Even if this level of support and engagement was expected of staff, the attention to detail and ongoing support bolstered participants' belief that the staff genuinely cared about them and were invested in their success. One participant said she felt her case manager would do whatever she asked or needed her to do.

> *"Literally if you want them to hold your hand, they'll hold your hand."*

Participants mentioned that program staff would accompany them to appointments, call external agencies on their behalf, or walk them through a job application. One participant in a program focused on job placement said the case managers listened to her preferences about where she wanted to work; she felt like she had a say in her decisions about the future.

This team effort served as an accountability mechanism, and participants noted feeling more compelled to continue engaging with program services

These relationships with staff cultivated an atmosphere that more broadly supported participant engagement and provided an additional reason for participants to engage. When participants felt secure and cared for in these relationships, they said they were more purposeful about coming to appointments and engaging with program services because they knew someone else was invested in their success. Participants from half the programs specifically mentioned feeling this sense of accountability to program staff. One participant in a program that offered case management said it was "refreshing" to have someone expecting them to show up.

> *"It's helped my work ethic … just knowing that someone is depending on me to be here."*

A participant in a program providing housing and case management services said she liked sharing the good news of her progress with program staff.

> *"I look forward to [case managers'] check-ins, to say hi to them, to say, 'I did this today.' I love reporting to them the good stuff."*

Provide wraparound supports to make it easier for participants to focus on employment and training services and support participants' emotional well-being

Participants reflected on the complexity of their lives and the challenges they face in balancing competing obligations, making ends meet, and sustaining their participation in employment and training

programming. For example, participants mentioned balancing work and child care, dealing with personal traumas, navigating homelessness, working through substance use challenges, and other factors that affected their capacity to search for and maintain employment.

Alongside the employment-focused elements, most programs connected participants to wraparound supports that addressed their needs. In addition to connecting participants to services assisting with housing, transportation, and child care, some programs also offered life-skills resources like parenting classes and workshops on financial planning. These wraparound supports empowered participants to address their wider array of life responsibilities so they could have the time and space to engage more fully in their employment and training activities. Participants also noted how these wraparound supports helped create a sense of autonomy and self-direction, which helped build their sense of self-worth and investment in themselves.

Material supports alleviate challenges related to ongoing program engagement and employment

Participants from five programs noted that wraparound supports helped them progress toward financial stability. Such supports alleviated the financial burdens associated with transportation and other costs of participating in these programs. A participant from a program that provides bus passes while participants are engaged in the program said that not having to pay for transit enabled her to save her earnings from her job, moving her closer to financial stability.

> "It [is] money that we can have in our savings because we don't have to pay for [transportation] until we get our own job."

A participant at a program connecting families with low incomes to partner organizations expressed relief that the program could help her find child care while she attended classes.

> "A chance for me to have child care and go to school—that was a big help for me."

Participants tended to emphasize the benefits of these material supports in programs with housing services. Participants who enter these programs are experiencing homelessness. A participant at one of these programs said the housing component significantly helped her stabilize financially, and it meant she was not consumed with housing costs. She felt this helped her focus on other parts of her life.

> "I have enough to make ends meet, just by living [here in the program]. But if I was in the real world, no, not yet."

Participants also mentioned the thoughtfulness and care that went into these wraparound supports. One participant who was homeless immediately before entering the program said the program provided her with everything she needed in her unit.

> "Before I moved in, I asked them, 'Do I need to buy cleaning things?' They said, 'You don't need to buy anything. You have everything.' They made sure everything is taken care of."

Having program staff manage or assist with these supportive services enabled participants to focus on the benefits of gaining those resources instead of sorting through logistics to acquire them. Such support from staff helped reduce participants' cognitive load and mental burden, which enabled participants to engage more fully in the programs.

"I've got so many supports, from the family support, the housing, and this job program. It's a motivation."

Certain wraparound supports helped participants foster a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, especially as related to parenting

Participants across six programs noted specific supports like workshops and classes that not only helped them develop useful skills and tools but also helped support their emotional well-being. Such supports included access to individual and group counseling, classes on budgeting and financial skills, and conflict resolution workshops. Multiple participants indicated that engaging in these supports was one of the first times they had the time and space to think about themselves and their personal needs. Participants across programs tied their involvement in these services to their identity as a parent, such as one participant from a program providing housing and wraparound services.

"I've finally learned through recovery that if I don't take care of me, then I can't take care of [my kids]."

Multiple participants echoed this sentiment, that the opportunity to take time to care for themselves has positive effects that benefit their children as well. A participant from another housing program reflected on lessons she learned about emotional intelligence from parenting classes.

"We were basically being educated on how to permanently change our lives. We're not just handed an apartment in here. We were taught how to … take care and change and transform…. It's a process, and it doesn't happen overnight, but we're given a foundation on how to live better and transform ourselves by getting educated … [and] being better parents."

Facilitate relationships among peers to create sources of connection, informal networks and support, and shared progress

Participants mentioned the feelings of community and connection with other people who were engaging in the programs. Peers in the program could share information and resources and helped participants feel accountable to the group. These peer relationships also served as emotional supports, and the shared experiences among peers helped create a community and helped participants develop friendships, all of which contributed to a sense of belonging and stability. These findings were particularly salient among participants in the three programs with a cohort model in which participants progress through the program together.

Program peers shared information, resources, and experiences, creating a pool of knowledge that benefitted everyone

People participating in the programs, particularly those in programs with a cohort model, could compile and share useful resources and knowledge. Participants from five programs noted the benefits of having peers with a wealth of information and the opportunity to learn from others. A participant who was part of one of these cohort models described learning about resources from peers.

> *"Here, I have a whole building full of other women who have all these other resources that I might not know about…. You have all these awesome people that are brainstorming ideas or giving you advice or reassuring you, and that was definitely helpful."*

For one participant in a program with the cohort model, hearing about the similarities in his peers' lives during meetings or workshops helped him recognize and better understand the impact of his actions on his family.

> *"I got to see where they're coming from. I got to hear their story … I [was] like, 'Oh, that's how my wife felt. Oh, that's what I was doing, and I didn't know.'"*

The shared experiences helped foster emotional support and encouragement among program peers, creating a broader sense of community and sharing in progress toward goals

In addition to the benefits of the material supports and learning from one another, participants from half the programs noted the emotional benefits of engaging with peers in these programs. Participants felt supported and less alone knowing that others were going through similar experiences, both in dealing with their past and in navigating their programs. A participant from a program that is part of a network of resources said the universality of some of their challenges brought them closer, creating a sense of belonging and care among their peers.

> *"You all kind of go through your own things. It was so weird because, at least with our cohort, we kind of were going through the same stuff. If one of us was going through it, then we all went through it."*

Participants also described the friendships they built in the program, and how these relationships helped them progress toward their goals. A participant from a program with required workshops and classes said seeing her experiences reflected in others participating in the program was one of the most helpful parts about the workshops.

> *"It was pretty cool getting to see other moms who are definitely in the same position as I am just trying to get ahead for their kid. I made some friendships."*

In developing these friendships and connections with peers, participants also motivated each other to achieve their goals. One participant from a cohort-based program mentioned the feelings of shared success among her peers, noting how everyone could share in the common goal. By supporting her peers, she internalized that support for herself.

> *"It's not going to feel like a success unless everybody's crossing this finish line together. It was a very team-oriented thing…. Just by speaking encouragement into the other moms, you were kind of speaking encouragement into yourself as well."*

The same participant noted that hearing from program alumni was helpful, too, as it built on this shared experience and enabled participants to see someone with a similar experience succeed.

> *"Having the graduates come in and hearing what they went through and where they're at now, it's nice to see. When they were in our spots, they were having the same doubts, frustrations, and issues that we were having, but look at where they're at now."*

Conclusion

Overall, participants described an array of program features they appreciated and they felt contributed to the effectiveness of the employment goals of the programs. Relationships with staff that felt authentic, mutually respectful, and supportive helped participants feel like they had an advocate who shared in their commitment to success. Tangible supports, such as child care, housing, and transportation, enabled participants to fully participate in their programs because their basic needs were met. These supports helped create time and space for participants to explore emotional and personal goals that contributed to an overall sense of well-being. Peer relationships with others in their programs helped participants access an informal network of knowledge and resources and provided emotional supports and encouragement through a shared sense of community. Practitioners and policymakers can consider incorporating these participant perspectives and reflections to design participant-centered programs, which can help support participant engagement and success.

Participants had largely positive and enthusiastic reflections on these programs and their experiences with them. Those selected to be interviewed by programs might have been less likely than the typical participant to offer critical assessments of the programs. Although some participants did mention specific areas for improvement, those discussions fall outside the focus of this brief, which highlights the elements of programs participants felt helped them succeed.