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## Employment Coaching: What Do Participants Say?

### Introduction

Employment coaching involves a trained staff person or coach working collaboratively with a participant to set personalized goals, as well as supporting, motivating, and providing feedback to participants as they pursue goals. Coaches aim to help participants use and strengthen the self-regulation skills—sometimes referred to as soft skills or executive functioning skills—that are needed to get, keep, and advance in a job (Cavadel et al. 2017).

To explore the potential of employment coaching for individuals with low incomes to help them get and retain jobs, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is sponsoring the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Related Populations (Box 1). The evaluation assesses the implementation of four coaching interventions and their impacts on study participants' self-regulation, employment, earnings, self-sufficiency, and other measures of well-being.

As part of the evaluation, we talked with participants to get a more complete picture of the interventions than we could get through speaking with program leaders and coaches alone. Listening to participants enabled us to better understand how they viewed the coaching, what they liked and did not like, and whether they thought it was effective. These conversations were held through in-person, in-depth interviews with 44 participants enrolled in the study who received coaching services from the studied interventions.



*An employment coaching session takes place at a LIFT office.  
(Photo: Rich Clement, Mathematica)*

### Box 1. About the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Related Populations

The evaluation uses an experimental research design to assess the effectiveness of coaching interventions in improving participants' self-regulation, employment, earnings, self-sufficiency, and other measures of well-being. The evaluation involved random assignment of program applicants to either a program group, who were offered coaching, or a control group, who were not offered coaching. Data collected for the impact study include the following:

- A baseline survey conducted at study enrollment of all 4,272 study participants
- Two follow-up surveys of all study participants conducted at about 9–12 and 21 months after study enrollment
- Records of coaching and other services for program group study participants in all interventions and control group participants in Jefferson County, Colorado
- Administrative data on quarterly earnings and TANF receipt for all study participants

The evaluation also includes an implementation study. Data for the implementation study include observations of coaching sessions (both in-person observations by the study team and coaching sessions video-recorded by program staff); interviews with coaches, other program staff and leaders, and participants enrolled in the program group; review of program documents; and data collected while providing technical assistance to the sites.

For additional information about the evaluation and snapshots of each program, visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/evaluation-employment-coaching-tanf-and-related-populations-2016-2021>, or [email](#) us to receive regular updates on the project.

## Box 2. Four coaching interventions in the evaluation

- **Family Development and Self-Sufficiency program (FaDSS)** in Iowa. Under contract to the state, 17 local human services agencies use grants from the Iowa Department of Human Rights to provide TANF participants with coaching during home visits. Seven of those 17 agencies are participating in the evaluation. Coaches conduct assessments of participants' family functioning, domestic violence, and child development, and use a goal-setting form with participants. They also address families' challenges to employment and job retention. FaDSS coaches are not trained to assess or consider self-regulation skills. However, through coaching, the coaches help participants practice and strengthen their self-regulation skills. Participants are expected to meet with their coach twice per month in the first three months and then monthly.
- **Goal4 It!™** in Jefferson County, Colorado. Goal4 It! is an employment coaching intervention designed by Mathematica and partners that is being piloted in a TANF program as an alternative to more traditional case management. Coaches follow a structured goal-setting process with participants that involves several forms for setting goals and identifying challenges to reaching them. Coaches are trained on self-regulation skills, but they do not discuss them with participants explicitly. Participants are expected to meet with their coach monthly.
- **LIFT** in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. LIFT is a nonprofit organization that provides career and financial coaching to parents and caregivers of young children. LIFT also operates in Washington, D.C., but that location is not participating in the evaluation. LIFT coaches are trained on self-regulation skills, but they do not discuss them with participants explicitly. They use an assessment tool and a goal-setting form with participants during the coaching process. Participants are expected to meet with their coach twice in the first month and then monthly. LIFT provides financial incentives to encourage participation in coaching sessions and address participants' financial needs. Participants receive \$150 every three months if they attend at least two sessions during that quarter. Total payments cannot exceed \$1,000.
- **MyGoals for Employment Success** in Baltimore and **MyGoals for Employment Success** in Houston. MyGoals is a coaching demonstration project designed by MDRC and partners that provides employment coaching and financial incentives to unemployed adults receiving housing assistance. It is operated by the Housing Authority of Baltimore City and the Houston Housing Authority, respectively. MyGoals coaches are trained to assess participant's self-regulation skills using a questionnaire, and they discuss these skills with participants explicitly. They also use several tools with participants during the coaching process, including goal-setting forms. Participants are expected to meet with their coach monthly. MyGoals provides three types of incentive payments: (1) a payment after completing program intake, (2) a payment each month a participant attends a coaching session, and (3) payments for obtaining and retaining employment. Participants can earn a maximum of \$5,000.

This brief summarizes what we learned from the interviewed participants. Overall, participants reported developing strong relationships with their coaches as they worked toward achieving their goals. Participants thought coaching was helpful and valued the social support and the connection to resources they received. For improvements to the interventions, participants suggested offering additional resources and more concrete employment supports.

Because the sample of interviewees is small, our findings might not represent the experience of all participants served by the interventions participating in the Evaluation of Employment Coaching. Instead, the findings provide a more detailed description of a select group of participants' experiences with coaching, based on their own stories and accounts of their time in the interventions.

## In-depth interview methods

In spring 2019, we spoke with 44 program group study participants who received coaching. These participants were from all four interventions in six locations. (See Appendix A for the number of interviews completed by intervention and location.) All interviewed participants consented to being interviewed and having the discussion recorded. Interviews were held one-on-one, in-person, and lasted up to two hours. The interviews were conversational, guided by a protocol of open-ended questions and probes. This allowed interviewers to develop rapport with the participants, to help participants feel more comfortable sharing their perceptions and experiences. The participants were given \$50 as a token of appreciation. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. They were held in a community location instead of in the programs' offices to ensure participants felt they could speak candidly about their experiences. Locations included libraries, mental health centers, Head Start centers, and community colleges.

## Interview participant characteristics

To ensure that the participants interviewed had some recent experience with coaching, we only interviewed study participants who had received at least two coaching sessions and were randomly assigned between two and 12 months prior to the interviews. Instead of asking the programs to select or recruit participants, we reached out to all study participants who met these criteria using information we collected during the study and invited them to participate. We conducted interviews with the first participants who accepted the invite. We aimed to interview at least 8 participants from each intervention and succeeded in interviewing between 6 and 20 participants from each intervention.

The participants we interviewed were mostly mothers, an average age of 36, and people of color (67 percent were non-Hispanic Black, and 10 percent were Hispanic). Most participants were unemployed (81 percent) and had at least a high school diploma (84 percent) at the time they enrolled in the study. Goal4 It! and FaDSS participants were all TANF recipients. Appendix B shows that the interviewed participants' characteristics are similar to those of the full program group, except that the interviewed participants were less likely to be Hispanic and were more likely to have finished high school or have earned a GED.

## Key findings

Below we describe the key findings from the interviews. The findings highlight:

- the participants' relationships with their coaches and their reasons for joining the interventions;
- the types of goals they set, the challenges they faced to reaching them, and their sources of motivation;
- how participants were held accountable and the progress they made to reaching their goals; and
- the participants' opinions about the interventions and suggested improvements.

### Most participants reported highly valued, strong positive relationships with their coaches.

Participants most often characterized their coaches as being pleasant and friendly, compassionate, positive, understanding, helpful, and good listeners. A participant from Goal4 It! shared:

*“It was a big moment because I had to tell her about my background, that I’m going through mental health [challenges], that my son was going through some things because he’s special needs. And she was just very understanding, and that right there, it made our relationship work the whole time.”*

Box 3 explains how one participant describes her relationship with her coach.

Among the participants interviewed, at least one person in every intervention—and everyone in FaDSS—referred to their relationship with their coach as a friendship. Several participants across interventions said their coach was their only source of support or only friend. One FaDSS participant shared, “I text her like she’s my friend. I don’t have nobody else here but [her].”

Several participants in MyGoals Houston and FaDSS compared their coach to a family member—a mother, aunt, or big sister. “So, you know she’s like a big sister to me,” a MyGoals Houston participant explained. “It’s like she filled that void that I’ve been missing ‘cause I don’t have nobody to talk to really.”

Participants often said their coach knew the participant on a personal level and that they had a good understanding of each other. A MyGoals Baltimore participant explained:

*“We used to talk all the time. It was a connection between us all because my birthday was the same day as her mother’s and her mother had passed away... We had this connection.”*

### Box 3. A coach and participant built a bond over time

When Heather [not her real name] first met with her MyGoals coach, she was apprehensive. “You have to like really tell somebody, a stranger, your business,” she explained. But Heather’s coach made her feel really comfortable—comfortable enough to share her dreams for her future. It helped that her coach seemed comfortable with herself. Heather felt like her coach had her best interests in mind and genuinely wanted to help her.

Heather and her coach met monthly to review her goals and her progress. During these meetings, her coach would ask her how she was doing on the goals she had set—“Hey. Did you meet that deadline? Did you accomplish what you set out for? How is it going?” Heather shared that over the year she had been working with her coach, the two had built a bond. Heather appreciated that her coach understood her wants and needs. She described the characteristics of a good coach as someone who listens, understands, is prepared, and takes good notes.

Source: MyGoals Baltimore participant interview

Similarly, a LIFT participant said:

*“I believe that our relationship is fine. I say that we both have a perfectly fine understanding and great communication. I believe she’s a wonderful person and, you know, I really like and enjoy working with her.”*

Participants in FaDSS often said their coach would do anything for them. One FaDSS participant shared what she had learned from her coach:

*“That she’s always there to help and that there is always resources for everything that you need to do, you just got to look or ask for them, and that there are people that care and it’s not just through a business standpoint. There’s people that put their whole heart and soul into their job... there’s people that will be willing to drop everything that they’re doing if you need a hand or an ear or a shoulder. Like it’s just really nice.”*

Participants discussed the social support their coaches provided as a benefit they received from the interventions. Participants shared that they received advice and guidance, encouragement, and emotional support from their coaches and valued having someone to talk to. “I’ve always felt taken care of by her. So, it really feels good,” said a Goal4 It! participant.

One FaDSS participant shared:

*“She’s just like a friend... I know she’s not going to go and tell the whole town what’s going on with me, and I can trust her, and trust is a big thing, you know. You got to have somebody to open up to or, you know, we can’t just bear all that weight yourself sometimes. It can get overwhelming being a single mom with two kids.”*

A MyGoals Baltimore participant said:

*“What gives me hope? It’s just when I do talk to [my coach], and we communicate, I learn something from her, you know what I’m saying? Because you’re never too old.... Some of the things that we’d be talking about and she talks to me about... I’m like, ‘Oh, I never thought about it like that,’ because like I said, usually I don’t have many people I talk to, you know what I’m saying... I’m able to talk to her and be free. She enlightens me to things in a different way.”*

Although most participants described having positive relationships with their coaches, it was not universal. Some of the interviewed participants in Goal4 It! described their relationships in less positive ways, and some other participants described negative experiences. Two Goal4 It! participants described having good relationships with their coaches at first, but that the relationship worsened after the participants opened

up about their lives or after a disagreement. One Goal4 It! participant reported that her coach was just an acquaintance; another said she had no relationship at all with her coach. One MyGoals Houston participant described the relationship with her coach as “just a professional one.”

A few participants in Goal4 It! suggested that it would have been helpful if their coaches were more attuned to their personal situations and more understanding of each person’s unique circumstances. One of these participants shared how she would improve the intervention:

*“Maybe just make sure that they have caseworkers that are willing to understand and know each person’s situation, not just assume it’s all the same type of person that’s in the same situation, because everybody’s so different.”*

The relationships in Goal4 It! might not have been as strong because the coaching occurs within the compliance context of a TANF program. In TANF programs, participants face work participation and other program requirements; if these requirements go unmet, it can result in penalties. Coaches must hold participants accountable to these requirements, which could potentially cause challenges for the relationship. TANF applicants who consented to be in the study and were randomly assigned to receive Goal4 It! had to participate in Goal4 It! coaching to continue to receive TANF.

**Participants’ reasons for joining the coaching interventions included getting a better job, seeking financial education, and wanting social support.**

Some participants shared that they joined the interventions to get help finding a stable or better job. One MyGoals Houston participant said she joined the program to:

*“Get somewhere in life. Help finding a job, because...that’s what she told me the program do, so. You get the job, and not just any job. Like even though I’m taking this five-hour job... she’s still trying to help me find a job of my dreams, a job I want, and then you know, helping me plan my life. Like basically coaching me on what I need to do.”*

Others reported joining to get help with going back to school or increasing their skills. Several participants stated they joined the coaching programs because they were seeking financial education and resources. Other participants joined to get personal support and resources for their families (resources offered by the interventions include in-kind items, like furniture, and referrals to services, like mental health counseling).

Explained one participant about why she joined FaDSS:

*“It sounded interesting to me, and I wanted to know more because I’ve done therapy a few times and [this] felt like it would be more like a personal counselor who would help. Like ‘You need help with finding this, this, and this, I can help you with that, I’ll give you resources, but then I’m also here to be your friend and to listen and not to judge you.’”*

### **While working with their coaches, interview participants most commonly set goals directly related to employment.**

Interview participants across the interventions most commonly reported setting employment goals, followed by education, financial, and health goals. Some talked about getting a dream job; others talked about getting a job that would make ends meet. Coaches also reported that employment goals were the most common type of goal set by participants, except in LIFT, where financial goals were reported to be most prevalent. This might be because LIFT explicitly focuses on participants setting financial goals.

Interestingly, many participants across all the interventions had a goal of starting a business. At least one participant from each intervention mentioned this as a goal. Participants mentioned wanting to be their own boss. Business ideas included providing transportation, selling T-shirts, owning a hair salon, providing cleaning services, and running a day care.

Common education goals included obtaining a General Education Development certificate or a nursing degree. Commonly set financial goals included saving money or fixing credit. Common health goals included improving overall health and losing weight.

### **In reaching their goals, participants faced challenges related to caring for their families, their health, and transportation. Coaches were able to help participants mitigate these challenges in some cases.**

Taking care of children and, in some cases, other family members was the most commonly discussed challenge among interview participants, particularly in Goal4 It! and FaDSS. Participants shared that lacking adequate child care or wanting to look after their children themselves interfered with getting a job or improving their education. Several participants reported challenges as single mothers, and some desired flexibility in their work schedules so they could care for their children themselves. Some participants also described having responsibilities caring for parents, siblings, and grandparents, including providing financial and emotional support that added to the demands placed on them. “I’m not always consistent because... I have three kids, I’m a single mom. Yeah. That’s why all of my goals are not where they should be,” shared a MyGoals Baltimore participant.

Six participants shared that their coaches were able to help them obtain child care. However, one participant said her coach never helped her with her child care needs, despite her requests. She shared:

*“They said that they were going to get me back on [child care benefits] for my daughter after school, and it never happened. I kept asking [my coach] about it, and she said that the lady that runs that program had passed away or something and they had a replacement that was having all kinds of problems.... It was definitely something I was interested in, and I was asking at every appointment, but it just never happened.”*

Another participant shared that she struggled to get adequate child care for her autistic child, despite her coach’s help, because of a lack of specialized child care resources in her area.

Health was also a challenge discussed by 23 of the 44 participants. Participants shared facing physical health challenges, such as vision impairment, brain injury, heart attack, and narcolepsy, as well as mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety. Several participants also reported facing co-occurring physical health challenges.

One LIFT participant described her challenges with depression and how coaching helped address the inertia resulting from depression:

*“[LIFT] helps...give me resources for mental health—so they help me, you know, to reach my goal...and like, you know, you’re down, you’re depressed, sometimes it stops you from doing what you need to do.”*

Six participants shared that they received mental health resources from the coaching interventions, including referrals to mental health counseling and yoga classes for stress relief. Two Goal4 It! participants also reported receiving support with their health challenges from their coach, such as help applying for disability benefits, referrals to nutrition classes, referrals to other program staff who help people with health challenges find employment, and information about their health condition.

Transportation was also a common challenge that interview participants faced (see Box 4 for an example). It was especially common among FaDSS participants, who are more likely to live in rural areas. Several participants shared that they did not own a car or their car needed repair. Others mentioned that they rely on public transportation, but that it is expensive or involves a long commute to available jobs.

#### Box 4. One participant's coaching experience

Kendra [not her real name] had just moved to Iowa from Chicago with her two children when she joined the FaDSS program. Without a reliable car, she was having a difficult time pursuing her goals of obtaining her General Education Development certificate and getting a job. There is no public transportation available in Kendra's area. She also faced a serious medical condition that required her to have surgery and attend physical therapy, which also limited her available time to go back to school.

Kendra explained that her coach helped her reach her goals by checking in on her progress and pushing her to continue to pursue them. Her coach also taught her about chunking up and prioritizing tasks in order to complete them. "Basically, I think I learned from her, I'll say like [how to] complete tasks," she explained. "Like don't try to do too many things at one time. Complete one thing before you hop into another one.... It's basically like don't try to do too much that you can't handle.... Because I'll be doing all types of stuff. Fifty million things at one time, and I'll never complete anything." Kendra's coach provided her with resources, such as beds for her children and referrals to schools. Her coach also followed up with her TANF case manager who was helping secure support for paying for Kendra's car repairs, to check on the status of her request. Kendra said that she enjoyed working with her coach, saying "she acts like a regular friend." She also valued all the support her coach provided her. She shared, "I'm going to tell her tomorrow, like, 'You know I really appreciate you.'"

Source: FaDSS participant interview

One Goal4 It! participant shared her challenges with losing her license:

*"But, I think, mostly I'm just trying to get back to my driving, and that gets in the way a little bit, because I don't drive, and I've had some issues with driving here in Colorado, some tickets and—stuff like that. That's mostly what stands in my way."*

Almost all Goal4 It! interview participants (eight of nine) shared that they received transportation benefits in the form of gas money or bus passes from the program, and two MyGoals participants reported receiving money to help with their transportation costs. The Goal4 It!, MyGoals Houston, and FaDSS programs each had one participant report receiving referrals to

organizations that could help pay for car repairs; one FaDSS participant also reported receiving listings of cars for sale from her coach.

#### Participants' motivation to pursue their goals was often their children. Some also found the goal setting process motivational.

Almost half of all interview participants said their children were a primary motivation for pursuing their goals. As a MyGoals Houston participant stated, "my future for my kids, first and foremost, just to know that they'll be okay. If my future's better, their futures are better. That's it."

Other reported motivations included a desire to improve their lives and wanting to make family members proud. Several Goal4 It! participants found the act of setting goals in itself motivating. One participant shared the following when thinking about what motivates her:

*"Honestly, setting goals...like, you really underestimate the power of writing things down for yourself and, like, just having a structure. Like, the structure of that was really, really encouraging. I was like, oh, I grasp this."*

#### Participants who received financial incentives described them as helpful but had mixed opinions about whether they motivated behavior.

LIFT and MyGoals (in both Baltimore and Houston) offered financial incentives to encourage engagement with the program; MyGoals also offered an incentive to encourage employment. Participants saw these incentives as a benefit of the programs. Several participants who received incentives from these coaching interventions shared in the interviews that they liked receiving the incentives. Some participants appreciated that the additional financial support helped cover the cost of some of their basic needs, like paying for groceries and gas, and hence reduced their stress.

*"I think it's very important cuz you'd be at the end of the month, you're not gonna have enough, you know what I mean? Cuz once you pay all the bills ... that's it."*

– A MyGoals Baltimore participant

The extent to which participants thought the incentives changed their behavior is less clear. Some participants said that the incentives did motivate them to participate in the program, while others thought they were not the primary motivator. Some participants described that they valued the connections to resources, the knowledge and skills, and the social support they received from the interventions more than the financial incentives.

*“I think [they] definitely [are motivating]. I think it’s \$35 a month they give for participating in it, other incentives if you have a job and stuff like that, and I think that that’s definitely motivating for a lot of people because sometimes at \$35, or I think it’s \$120 or \$140 a day if you’re employed, that can really make a difference for a lot of people.”*

– A MyGoals Baltimore participant

*“They were saying that to help you toward your savings goal we’ll give you the \$150. I think it is a good incentive, but there are other benefits too of being in the program.”*

– A LIFT participant

Participants also varied on their opinion on whether a larger incentive would have made a difference. Some participants thought the program offered a large incentive while others pointed out that the incentive was small relative to their bills and with the expected earnings from getting a job.

*“It’s not enough to pay a bill, so the money was definitely not something that keeps me motivated to come.”*

– A MyGoals Baltimore participant

*“I’m not really worried about that incentive, because at the end of the day, it’s just help. I’ll [still] need a job.”*

– A MyGoals Houston participant

### **Coaches helped participants stay accountable to their goals mainly by checking in on their progress and reminding them of their agreed-upon action steps.**

An important element of coaching is holding participants accountable to their goals. This mostly involves the coach asking in a session about steps the participant has taken toward goals that they set in prior meetings. Participants discussed in interviews that these checks on their progress were motivating. Some participants noted that just knowing that they were going to have to meet with their coach and discuss what they had accomplished helped motivate them to accomplish their tasks before the next meeting. A few participants explained they did not want to let their coach down or would feel guilty if they had not accomplished what they set out to do by their next meeting.

*“Checking on me and stuff... means a lot. Because that gives you the incentive to move on and really get it done.”*

– A MyGoals Baltimore participant

*“Every time she comes, [she asks] ‘How’s school going? Did you call [the school]?’... I know for a fact tomorrow she’s going to talk about school. That’s the first thing she says. ‘Well, how’s school going?’”* – A FaDSS participant

*“Because I know that I wanna get this done, I guess, when I know I’m gonna see her again, I wanna have this done, so, I guess it’s just the point of knowing that... okay, I gotta make sure it’s done because I know she’s gonna ask me about it.”*

– A MyGoals Houston participant

Participants talked about how the checks on progress were conducted in a supportive way. Three MyGoals Baltimore participants and one LIFT participant said there were no penalties if they did not make progress toward their goals, and that they appreciated not being pressured or feeling like they would be removed from their program if they did not accomplish their goals.

*“It’s not like we are going to strong-arm you or something. Hey... you didn’t do this, so now you have a sanction where you are going to be sanctioned from the program or something. They don’t make you feel like that. That’s what I like about the program.”* – A MyGoals Baltimore participant

In contrast, participants in Goal4 It!—a TANF program—talked about sanctioning and loss of benefits if they didn’t meet their goals. When asked if there would be consequences if she did not achieve her goal, a Goal4 It! participant shared,

*“I think there could be, but it would depend on the effort you are putting in and how realistic the goal was. If you go in and say to your case manager, well, I just didn’t feel like working on this this month, there probably would be consequences. I do feel like it’s a program where you’re gonna have a lot easier time if you’re putting into it what you should be. I think not only is that typical of a lot of things in life, I feel like that’s how it should be.”*

While most coaches focused on accountability only during the coaching sessions, we also heard about examples of coaches texting or calling participants between sessions to help keep them on track. Participants described appreciating these in-between session contacts as a reminder of their commitments and as a touch point if they needed support from their coach. One LIFT participant noted that at her request, her coach texted her when she received her paycheck to remind her about her savings goal.

*“I feel like the texting is good because... even though I make checklists and stuff, I don’t always get through them. And sometimes I forget, so it’s like [the coaches] hold you accountable. They hold you accountable as much as you want to be held accountable because I feel like she wouldn’t have texted me if I didn’t ask her. I asked if she could text me because I know myself that when I get paid, I’m not thinking about oh, go open a savings account. I’m thinking about all the stuff that I want to buy.”*

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### **Most participants had made some progress toward reaching their goals at the time of their interview.**

Thirty-nine of the 44 interview participants shared that they had achieved at least one accomplishment through the intervention at the time of their interview. The most common types of accomplishments were related to removing employment challenges, achieving financial goals, and improving their health. Employment-related goals included obtaining a drivers' license; securing child care; obtaining training or education credentials; and finding a job. Financial accomplishments included opening a savings account and saving a set amount of money. Health accomplishments included feeling depressed less frequently and quitting smoking. Three participants also improved their housing situation, such as by moving to a better neighborhood or out of a home that had air quality issues.

A Goal4 It! participant shared what accomplishment she was most proud of. She said, "Getting my license back...because it's what got me this job.... It just makes me a better employable candidate." A FaDSS participant said she was proud of earning a credential while in the intervention. "My CNA. Because I really did not think I was gonna go get it. I really did not think that I was gonna pass my test or anything like that. All I have is state exams.... I passed all my test with As."

Those participants who indicated they had not accomplished any specific goals yet either shared that they faced specific challenges to doing so or felt they had not yet had enough time to accomplish a goal. These participants had been receiving coaching for between two and six months. Some participants said they could not meet their goals because they had unresolved child care needs or a health condition. Some participants felt the program had not provided them the resources they needed, like connections to available jobs. A MyGoals Houston participant felt she was just beginning her path toward obtaining her goals. "I mean, we are getting started. We are just getting warm. So I'm expecting a lot more.... We have a lot to do. A lot to get done, and I wouldn't say that it's by any means finished after these few months."

### **Some participants spoke positively of the tools used to help set goals; a few did not find them helpful.**

Of the participants who discussed the tools used to support goal setting, four Goal4 It! participants and two MyGoals Houston participants said they found the tools helpful. Some participants reported that they found the tools helpful to inform their discussions with their coaches and help determine what goals they would work on. Others shared that the tools

helped them become more focused and organized and helped them remember their action steps. One MyGoals Houston participant said she found the questionnaire that asked about her self-regulation skills informative.

*"It helped me to figure out more of my personality because we took the little test, the personality or traits, or skills test. Or not a test but like questionnaire of what we are good at and what we feel like we would be good at, and it helped me to see what jobs I would be better suited for."*

One Goal4 It! participant liked the goal setting tool and used it regularly.

*"The paperwork [my coach] gave me, I still have them and I still try to use that design to get things accomplished. So I like that aspect of it.... I think it's very beneficial for people who, especially like me, who don't know the basics of setting up structure in their life."*

Two participants said they did not like the tools or did not find them useful. A Goal4 It! participant described the tools as being repetitive. A FaDSS participant did not find using the FaDSS goal-setting form helpful. "I just usually throw it in my laundry basket, because I pretty much know what my goals are, so I don't really need a piece of paper to tell me."

### **Overall, participants thought the coaching interventions were helpful.**

Thirty-eight of the 44 participants shared that the coaching interventions were useful to them. Participants described the coaching interventions as helping them reach their goals by motivating them, holding them accountable, and keeping them on track. Several participants described the coaching interventions as able to help them improve their lives and motivate them to get more out of life.

One Goal4 It! participant shared, "Yeah. I was kind of, I think, in awe of it.... Who knew a trip to Human Services could be so great?" Another Goal4 It! participant said, "I think people should know that it's not just something you have to do. It's something that really puts your life in perspective and helps you."

A FaDSS participant described the intervention as follows:

*"[The program is] more than happy to help make your life a little easier, or if you're uncomfortable in a way of something, they're there to strengthen that comfortability and to help you progress in your life. That's what they're there for, so don't be afraid.... And if FaDSS is there to help, I would do it every time.... I would not change this for the world."*



Similarly, a LIFT participant said:

*“It’s a great program. They try their best to help you, help you to be a better parent to your child, help you reach goals, to make life better for you and your child.”*

A MyGoals Houston participant shared:

*“It’s helpful. MyGoals has helped me, put me in a place to motivate me to go back to school. My coach motivates me.... It’s very motivating. Pushy, you have a pushy coach that gets on you about the things that you need to do, and for me that’s a good thing because I am a single parent...with nobody, no family, and that’s kind of like support. Something that I haven’t had in a long time. So, I think it’s a good thing.”*

Yet not all participants thought the coaching was helpful or as helpful as they wanted it to be. In Goal4 It!, some participants felt they did not receive much help beyond the financial assistance they received from TANF. These participants were some of the same participants who described having strained relationships with their coaches.

*“I haven’t really noticed anything that Goal4 It! has helped me with. Everything that I am accomplishing right now is based from me. Not even from [my coach] or anything. It’s what I’m doing for myself.”* – A Goal4 It! participant

A few MyGoals participants thought the program needed more employment supports to help participants obtain jobs. “It’s not what you think it is. I mean, do you want to just sit there and talk to someone for an hour. Okay? If you’re looking for a job, you better off doing it on your own,” a MyGoals Houston participant stated.

### **Participants shared that they received resources and built skills while participating in the interventions.**

Interview participants across the interventions reported receiving resources (both in-kind items and referrals to services) from the interventions. This was especially true in Goal4 It! and MyGoals Houston. Goal4 It! participants mentioned receiving transportation support, housing resources, job search resources, child care, and work clothes. MyGoals Houston participants mentioned receiving job postings and other job search resources, information about education and training programs, résumé help, and work clothing.

A LIFT participant described how her coach helps her with resources she needs:

*“She gave me resources, like, she’ll look up resources.... I was qualified for the services for [mental health] counseling, but now I’m not because I got cut from my medical, so now I’m filing an appeal for that, so she’s trying to see, like, how did my appeal go with that and stuff like that.... So now I’m trying to look for free counseling.”*

Some participants also shared they gained skills through the interventions. MyGoals Houston, MyGoals Baltimore, and FaDSS participants commonly shared that they gained self-regulation skills, including patience, time management, organizational skills, anger management, goal-setting skills, and self-care techniques. This is interesting because while MyGoals coaches explicitly talk with participants about self-regulation skills, FaDSS coaches do not. MyGoals Baltimore and MyGoals Houston participants also shared gaining other skills such as résumé-writing skills.

A MyGoals Houston participant shared how her coach has influenced her behavior:

*“I definitely told her that I get a little anxious, I get a little snappy, so she’s helping me with little techniques you know, before you get too upset just breathe and, you know, if you feel like you’re in a situation and you just can’t handle it, it’s okay to get up and walk off. You don’t have to address every single thing. If you’re uncomfortable, it’s okay to speak about it, don’t ever be in a situation that’s going to make you uncomfortable, so as far as my attitude is concerned and dealing with situations, I definitely say that she’s helped me with that because I be on edge.”*

A MyGoals Baltimore participant said the following about what she learned in the program:

*“I just learned better how to budget my money, eating habits, speaking better. There’s other things too now that—like speaking better, talking better, you know I’m saying? Being more confident in myself and more assertive.... Just go for it, you know I’m saying? Just keep going forward. No matter what, you keep going forward. Knowing that [my coach] was always available.”*

**To improve the coaching interventions, participants mainly suggested providing additional resources and employment supports.**

Across the interventions, several participants suggested that the coaching should be augmented with additional resources. These resources included assistance for families with their basic needs, additional child care resources, and credit repair resources.

These participants appreciated the resources that were available, but they felt more were needed. A LIFT participant explained:

*“You know, maybe...they should be able to come out with maybe even more resources but, you know, at the moment, like I said, they’re perfectly fine the way they are but...maybe find more resources for people with low income or families like that.”*

In the MyGoals interventions, many participants shared that they would have liked more employment support. One Goal4 It! participant also desired more help with employment.

The examples they provided included job leads, job search resources, and more skills training. One MyGoals Houston participant shared:

*“The advice is good, the guidance is good, but I was hoping for a little bit more of a help in getting the job or maybe they have like a connection to get to a job or stuff like that.... Like, I guess, I would say getting you in touch with the job or sending you to a place that is hiring or they’re like guaranteed—not guaranteed. I know they can’t guarantee cuz you have to do an interview on your own but—I guess, putting us more in the way of the opportunities instead of just, ‘Okay, apply here.’ And see if they call you and stuff like that.”*

## Summary of lessons for programs and policymakers

Interviews with these program participants suggest several lessons and potential implications for coaching interventions and programs wanting to implement coaching.

**Strong coach–participant relationships are important to participants.** In general, interview participants valued the relationships they formed with their coaches and the social support they received as a result. When participants felt like they had strained relationships with their coaches, they also felt like they received less benefit from the intervention overall.

Programs interested in operating coaching interventions might want to consider training staff (or hiring staff with the ability) to quickly build rapport with participants. It is also important for staff to have empathy and be supportive.

**Participants appreciate connections to resources, but some desire more support.** Participants also valued the resources they received through the interventions that helped them overcome their challenges and move closer to reaching their goals. For intervention improvements, several participants suggested that having more resources for participants would have been helpful, and some desired more concrete employment supports, like job placements and employer connections. These employment supports would be in addition to the supports already provided by the interventions, such as résumé help, job postings, access to an employment resource room, and tailored labor market information.

Coaching interventions could consider what resources the population they serve might need and consider ways of connecting participants with those resources. Building partnerships with other providers, including employment service providers and employers, might be useful strategies.

**Combining strong coaching with enhanced employment resources could improve interventions.** One MyGoals participant suggested combining these two key characteristics into one intervention, incorporating strong coaching and robust employment services. The participant described how she would create a new intervention based on her experience in the coaching intervention and another employment program:

*“So, I would [take from] MyGoals the coaching part and the guidance part. And from [the other program], I will take the career readiness to show you how to ground yourself, how to be professional and, you know...what to do at an interview, how to build a résumé, is what I will take [from that program], and clash these two together and boom, you have a powerful program.”*— A MyGoals Baltimore participant

Overall, interview participants agreed that the coaching interventions were helpful to them in achieving their goals and improving their lives. Participants highly valued the social support, guidance, and resources they received. Offering additional resources to support families in meeting their basic needs and obtaining employment could further enhance coaching interventions.

## Reference

Cavadel, E., J. Kauff, M.A. Anderson, S. McConnell, and M. Derr. *Self-Regulation and Goal Attainment: A New Perspective for Employment Programs.* OPRE Report #2017-12. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017.

## Appendix A: Number of participant interviews by intervention and location

Intervention	Location	Number of interviews
FaDSS	Cedar Rapids, Iowa	6
LIFT <sup>a</sup>	Chicago, Illinois	4
	New York City, New York	5
Goal4 It!	Jefferson County, Colorado	9
MyGoals	Baltimore, Maryland	9
	Houston, Texas	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>44</b>

<sup>a</sup> We did not interview participants in LIFT Los Angeles because of the large Spanish-speaking population and our lack of capacity to conduct the interviews in Spanish.

## Appendix B: Characteristics of interview sample and full program sample at study enrollment

The sample of program group participants we interviewed has similar characteristics to those of the full program group sample. Most participants in both groups were female, about 35 years old, and unemployed at the time they enrolled in the study. However, the interview participants were less likely to be Hispanic than the full program group and were more likely to have finished high school or have earned a GED. See table below.

Baseline characteristic	In-depth interview sample	Full program group sample
Average age (in years)	36	34
Female (%)	88.6	91.2
Race and ethnicity (%)		
Hispanic	9.5	24.2
Black, non-Hispanic	66.7	55.8
White, non-Hispanic	21.4	18.3
Other	2.4	1.7
Did not complete high school or GED (%)	15.9	26.6
Unemployed at study enrollment (%)	81.4	82.6
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>2,140</b>

Source: Baseline survey. MyGoals participant data on gender and race come from Public Housing Authority data collected at the last recertification for housing benefits before enrolling in the study.

Note: Missing data rates range between 2 percent and 5 percent.

GED = General Education Development certificate.

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