



# Identifying and Combating Bias in TANF-Funded Employment Services

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## Overview and Introduction

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is one of many public programs that offer employment services to job seekers with limited incomes. The federal government provides a block grant to states, territories, and tribes to administer the program within a broad federal framework. TANF provides cash assistance and other services to participants who meet state-defined eligibility requirements. However, to receive ongoing cash assistance and services, most participants are subject to work requirements. Some services that TANF participants might access include education and training, job development,<sup>1</sup> connection to work-based learning,<sup>2</sup> and individualized assistance in searching for and applying for jobs. Significant variation occurs in how states use the funds from the TANF block grant in providing services, benefits, and activities.

This brief focuses on the employment services that state TANF programs often provide to participants, which can include job search assistance, career-building activities, skills training, and one-on-one case management. More specifically, this brief describes how both individual and structural biases can influence the employment services provided by TANF programs and the interactions between employment services staff and participants.

### Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, established in 1996 with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), aims to help families with low incomes increase financial stability and economic mobility by providing cash assistance and other services. Overseen by the Office of Family Assistance in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, TANF is implemented locally by states, tribes, and territories that design and operate TANF cash assistance programs in addition to other services, including employment and training programs.

Instead of improving equitable and stable employment outcomes for job seekers, employment services driven by biased approaches might exacerbate and reinforce existing disparities within the labor market. The brief also provides concrete strategies that individual staff members providing employment services can adopt when working with participants as well as strategies that TANF program leaders can consider implementing to combat biases at an organizational level.

## Key Messages and Tips for Employment Services Staff and TANF Program Leadership

TANF program staff and leadership seeking to support long-term economic stability of TANF participants receiving employment services may consider trying to

- 1 Acknowledge their own individual implicit biases;
- 2 Recognize how these biases can adversely impact their interactions with participants and the advice they give;
- 3 Understand how larger labor market forces, such as occupational segregation, might introduce biases when providing employment services; and
- 4 Tailor employment services to each participant's unique circumstances and skills and adopt a strengths-based approach.

## How Biases Can Show Up in Employment Services

The skills and biases individual staff bring to their work with TANF participants can have implications for participants' long-term labor market trajectories. Though research is mixed, evidence exists that employment services provided by TANF programs can increase earnings as well as short-term employment. They have also been shown to increase engagement in and completion of education and training programs.<sup>3</sup>

In certain situations, employment services staff can support and influence participants' decision-making about their career trajectories. The emphasis that these staff place on different options, such as education and training versus near-term employment or the industry sector of focus, can figure prominently in the path job seekers take. Overemphasizing rapid reemployment over skill acquisition and credentialing can potentially reduce opportunities for long-term income gains. Conversely, directing participants to education and training programs with high costs or misaligned with individuals' skills and interests can cost individuals valuable time in the labor market with no long-term payoff. Additionally, broader systemic factors, such as occupational segregation and structural inequality in the labor market, can shape how employment staff interact with TANF participants.

**Occupational segregation occurs when certain groups of people based on gender, race, legal status, and ethnicity are overrepresented in specific sectors of the labor market.** It is prevalent in the U.S. labor market<sup>4</sup>. Black and Latino workers are disproportionately represented in "lower-skilled" occupations such as sales, service, and production and underrepresented in "higher-skilled" occupations such as management and professional related industries.<sup>5</sup>

### Usage of term "employment services"

This brief uses the term "employment services" to include the range of employment-related interactions between TANF program staff and participants. These interactions could include a case manager working with a participant to identify employment-related goals and plans to achieve them; a job developer working with a participant to refine their resume and apply for jobs; or an employment coach helping a participant tap into their motivation to set meaningful personal goals and plans to achieve them. We use this term to include the range of services to which programs often refer by other terms, such as "case management" and "employment coaching." We acknowledge that the substantial literature describes in more detail the variation in these approaches.

Women are highly concentrated in domestic and care occupations, such as home health aides, personal care aides, and childcare workers.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, prevailing stereotypes based on race, gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics can often create occupational segregation that constrain workers' occupational choices. For example, women have historically been stereotyped as "caring" and "domestic," leading many to believe that they are more likely to succeed in teaching, nursing, or caregiving roles, instead of in leadership and management.<sup>7</sup>

Occupational segregation within the labor market is a key source of inequitable employment outcomes. The average household income of families of color is around half of that of White families.<sup>8</sup> The types of occupations largely held by men and women of color are more likely to be unstable and low paying and are more likely to offer few opportunities for growth or upward socioeconomic mobility.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, societal biases can often create and perpetuate income inequality through devaluation of work. Society ascribes value to the work performed by certain groups, such as women, to be of lesser value, and because of this gender bias, the segregation or high proportion of female workers in a given occupation decreases the pay leading to work devaluation.<sup>10</sup>

**Inequities in the broader labor market systems can often undermine and introduce bias into employment services interactions.** Employment staff might be unknowingly swayed by the information of broader labor market trends instead of focusing on the interests and strengths of the individual job seeker. All employment staff hold implicit biases that sometimes stem from societal stereotypes and biases and can be heavily influenced by their understanding of the labor market. They might inadvertently steer their participants toward certain career or educational pathways stereotypically associated with the job seeker's background and identity, which contributes to occupational segregation.<sup>11</sup> This guidance can have detrimental impacts on their participants' employment outcomes because they might end up in unstable and low-paying occupations.

**Individual biases of employment staff can affect their interactions with participants when developing plans and working toward long-term economic stability.** Everyone holds biases, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs.<sup>12</sup> As the human brain processes vast amounts of information, biases naturally arise, leading people to make illogical decisions or take actions influenced by their personal attributes, such as values, memory, and socialization.<sup>13</sup> These biases can lead to discriminatory thoughts or behaviors because people might hold preconceived notions about others that might be untrue. Whether implicit or explicit,<sup>14</sup> the assumptions employment staff make about the individuals they are serving can have substantial implications.

Instead of focusing on the unique skills, experiences, and interests of a given participant, employment staff might be driven by their biases related to participants' gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, or other personal characteristics. This misplaced focus can result in employment services misaligned with the participant's specific needs and instead can reinforce existing, broader inequalities in the labor market, including potentially directing participants to lower-wage jobs or education and training programs misaligned with participants' interests.<sup>15</sup> Below we describe a range of individual biases that can potentially affect employment services interactions.

### Implicit versus Explicit Bias

**Implicit biases** are attitudes, stereotypes, or beliefs that affect our behavior, actions, and understanding in an unconscious manner. People might be completely unaware about their implicit biases.

**Explicit biases** are attitudes, stereotypes, or beliefs that people might hold about a person or group on a conscious level.

**Cultural biases occur when someone attributes an individual’s traits and behaviors to a larger group of people.** These biases reflect prevailing stereotypes about certain groups of people depending on their racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. Research suggests that people might develop these implicit biases and act on them unintentionally.<sup>16</sup> Studies show how the perceptions of people in mentoring or teaching positions can impact student outcomes. For example, one study found that larger racial disparities occurred in test scores and suspensions in counties with stronger implicit and explicit pro-White/anti-Black bias among teachers.<sup>17</sup> The biases held by those in mentoring and teaching positions can have a direct impact on the outcomes of their students or participants. In an employment services setting, the decisions or suggestions made by employment staff might be informed by stereotypes they hold about the participant, such as certain groups of people being deemed more or less “suitable” for certain occupations or educational opportunities. Such stereotyping can lead to worse employment outcomes for certain groups of people, especially if those groups are stereotyped to hold specific jobs typically considered to be low wage, low skilled, and unstable.

**Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to seek information that supports or confirms someone’s existing beliefs.** Consequently, people are likely to disregard information that might challenge their beliefs, preventing them from taking stock of all the information at their disposal, which can skew decision-making.<sup>18</sup> If an employment staff member holds certain views about the participants with whom they are working, they might seek only information that reinforces what they believe about the participant, even if information that runs counter to their beliefs is presented. For example, when employment staff work with women, who society often typifies as domestic, they might be primed to ask women about skills that speak to their caregiving abilities; thus, employment staff can inadvertently suggest teaching or caregiving occupations to women because of their preconceived notions.<sup>19</sup>

**Attribution bias is the tendency to explain a person’s behavior by referring to their character rather than situational or environmental factors.** People tend to overestimate the weight of someone’s personality traits or their perceived character and instead underestimate the influence of the larger circumstances that can impact their behavior.<sup>20</sup> Employment staff working with job seekers might attribute certain actions or behaviors to the job seekers’ personalities, which might be informed by cultural biases, as well, instead of by other situational elements, such as challenges job seekers might be facing in their personal lives or structural barriers impacting their ability to find long-term and stable employment.

**Finally, egocentric bias occurs when people rely too heavily on their own point of view.** Accordingly, the egocentric bias causes people to either underestimate how different other people’s viewpoint is from their own or to ignore other people’s viewpoint entirely.<sup>21</sup> Instead of developing a participant-centric focus when working with participants, employment staff might place too much emphasis on what they personally believe is best for their participants rather than considering the participants’ interests and perspectives.

**TANF organizational policies and procedures have direct implications for how employment staff approach service delivery.** The TANF statute holds states accountable for engaging a proportion of their TANF cash assistance recipients in federally defined work activities. State can use a range of strategies to meet this work participation rate, or WPR.<sup>22</sup> States expect employment services staff to ensure TANF cash assistance recipients are engaged in enough hours in countable activities to meet work participation requirements. Given the limits TANF rules place on education and vocational training, this emphasis creates a “work-first” environment that prioritizes employment in any job over seeking a higher-quality job that aligns with the participant’s skills and career goals or investment in extensive education and training that might lead to longer-term economic mobility.

**The legislation trickles down into the way states and counties operate their employment services programs.** For example, employment service providers are often incentivized to reach specific WPR or unsubsidized employment goals. These performance metrics influence the behavior of both staff employed by TANF programs and the organizations and agencies with which TANF programs often contract to provide employment services. These intermediaries funded to provide TANF services are often compensated based on performance goals. Performance goals prioritizing near-term employment as opposed to longer-term earnings and employment outcomes might increase the likelihood that employment staff direct participants to lower-wage, unstable, entry-level jobs.<sup>23</sup> TANF policies related to education and training can also reinforce existing inequities in the labor market. The statute's limit on counting long-term postsecondary education to meet the WPR might discourage employment staff from promoting education and training programs aligned with participants' skills, interests, and career goals.

## Strategies to Combat Bias in Employment Services

Knowing how to identify, combat, and address biases that might inform employment services interactions is vitally important to supporting positive and equitable employment outcomes for participants. Although larger systemic factors might be out of the scope for individual TANF programs to directly address, TANF programs can adopt strategies at a programmatic level as well as strategies that employment staff can employ when working with participants to improve their employment outcomes in an equitable way. Below are examples of such strategies that individual employment staff and program leaders can adopt during their interactions with participants.

### Strategies for Individual Employment Staff

#### Identify and acknowledge implicit biases.

Identifying implicit biases is the first step in being aware of how they might impact interactions with other people and unlearning them. Implicit association tests can be a helpful starting point; these tests can measure a variety of unconscious preferences and biases, including gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, or other characteristics.<sup>24</sup> Some other ways staff can identify their implicit biases include exposing themselves to diverse perspectives and reflecting on how they view those perspectives. Leaving their comfort zone and learning more about the experiences of other people can help highlight beliefs or thoughts about certain groups of people they might have been unaware they held.<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging where one's biases fall will allow employment staff to begin interrogating and reflecting on how their biases have impacted their interactions with job seekers.

How are my suggestions and advice to participants informed by my preconceived biases?

How am I unintentionally allowing certain stereotypes about the participant's background affect my interactions with them?



Am I prepared to provide accommodations to participants with disabilities?

How am I prioritizing participants' goals and interests?

How am I helping participants achieve long-term employment and economic mobility?

### **Use a strengths-based approach and understand resources around accommodations and language accessibility.**

Rather than focusing on individuals' weaknesses or deficits, employment staff can help participants understand their strengths and develop employment plans that draw on these strengths. This approach means giving participants opportunities to share their short- and long-term goals and working collaboratively with them to identify career pathways that match their interests and skills. Staff might also work with participants who have disabilities—visible or invisible—or whose native language is not English. Staff might consider identifying a wide variety of workplace supports, including equipment, flexible schedules, or transportation assistance when helping participants with disabilities identify and choose occupations and might avoid assuming what activities or jobs participants are able or unable to do. Employment staff can also prepare resources for those who have difficulty communicating in English, such as providing translations or working with translators. Staff might also consider suggesting that participants enroll in English language courses or participate in training programs that will provide exposure to both the work and the language.

**Prioritize long-term economic mobility and growth.** When employment staff espouse a work-first approach and encourage their clients to find employment quickly, participants might end up in low-paying and unstable jobs that have few opportunities for growth. Without economic stability, many of these participants will eventually cycle back onto cash assistance. Staff can encourage participants to pursue opportunities in jobs that can provide long-term economic stability and growth. They can also help set participants on an education or training path to promising occupations.



**Consider the unique circumstances of each participant.** Clients have varying schedules, availabilities, and responsibilities, which can influence what sorts of jobs or education and training opportunities will be practical for them to pursue. For example, although some TANF participants might be able to pursue a job with a 9-to-5 workday, that same job might be infeasible for someone who has two young children and few childcare options. Staff should consider these circumstances when presenting those opportunities.

How can I prevent myself from assigning stereotypical meanings to participants' behavior?

How am I tailoring my advice to each individual participant's specific circumstances?

## Strategies for TANF Program Leadership

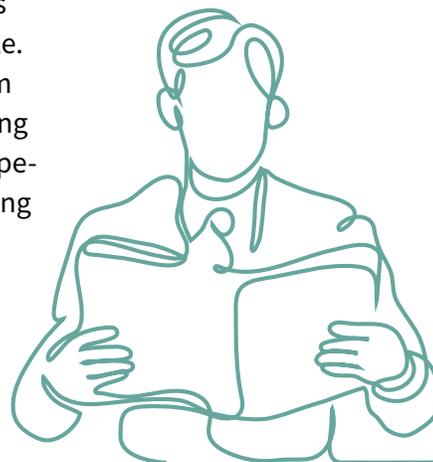
Below are strategies TANF programs or leadership can take to ensure all employment staff have the tools to identify and combat biases that might arise during their interactions with TANF participants.

**Conduct bias trainings.** Program leadership could provide bias trainings for their staff to help them identify any potential unconscious biases they might hold and equip them with strategies to counteract their biases. The training could also incorporate identifying and countering biases reflected in the labor market. Programs can aim to train new staff when they are onboarded and provide regular refresher trainings to remind staff of the importance to continuously be aware of biases overall and to prevent these biases from impacting their interactions with participants.

**Use data.** Using data can help programs and staff look at access to and take-up of different employment services and, if possible, assess how their employment services are affecting participants' employment outcomes along racial, ethnic, or gender lines. TANF programs and employment staff can use performance data or track their clients' outcomes and identify gaps or disparities among different groups of people. Knowing where these gaps are can help inform the suggestions employment staff make moving forward (e.g., a TANF program notices that a specific group of people is participating in a training program at much lower rates than everyone else). Administrators and leadership can also evaluate how the metrics they are using to gauge their programs' success incentivize certain behaviors or employment activities.

How do the ways our program measures success affect our interactions with participants?

Am I using data to make sure that participants have a wide range of job and training opportunities available?

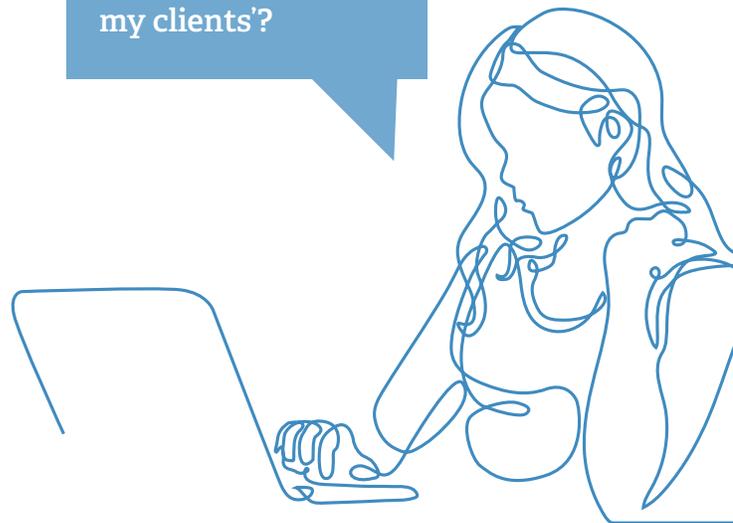


**Use valid assessments.** If TANF agencies are using assessments to support employment services, they should ensure that these are applicable to diverse populations and that they avoid reinforcing existing biases in the labor market. Flawed assessments can lead to biased determinations of a population and inaccurate results, especially if the assessment is unvalidated and untested on multiple demographics. To determine whether an assessment is valid, a program leader can investigate the extent of the research conducted to validate the tool, verify whether there were pilot tests on the tool, confirm who they administered the assessment to, and ensure the analysis results conclude validated measures. Alternatively, programs can choose to forego assessment tools and instead implement evidence-based coaching interventions, such as motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioral coaching, to support connecting participants to employment services.<sup>26</sup>

Employment services are often an integral part of the services TANF programs provide to participants. As participants work with employment staff to strive for long-term economic stability, their interactions might often be influenced by individual and systemic factors, which can detrimentally impact their employment outcomes. These factors include implicit individual biases that employment staff might have as well as larger systemic issues informed by TANF organizational policies and labor market trends. Recognizing how these factors can negatively impact employment services interactions and knowing where these individual biases lie are important steps in working toward producing more equitable employment outcomes for TANF participants that offer long-term and stable economic growth.

Are our assessments uplifting individuals' strengths, aptitudes, interests, and ambitions?

Was the assessment tested on similar demographics and characteristics as my clients'?



## The Promising Occupations Project

This brief is part of the Promising Occupations Achievable through Education or Training for Low-Income Families project funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families. This project aims to create a TANF practitioner-friendly, interactive website that allows users to identify promising occupations attainable through short-term education or training and are projected to grow with family-sustaining wages. For more information about the Promising Occupations project, please visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/promising-occupations-achievable-through-education-or-training-low-income-families>

## Endnotes

- 1 Program staff work with participants in finding and creating employment opportunities.
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