Supporting Mental Wellness for Program Staff and Participants: Strategies for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Leaders

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Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other human services programs faced unprecedented challenges managing the COVID-19 global pandemic. They were tasked with serving America's most vulnerable families as they navigated difficult economic circumstances and public health risks. Across the United States, researchers documented high rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress as a result of the pandemic, particularly during the early months (Aknin et al. in press; Jewell et al. 2020). One panel survey completed in June 2020 found that 40 percent of adults were struggling with mental health or substance use (Czeisler et al. 2020).

The pandemic took its toll on state and local TANF program staff, in addition to families. Staff were managing the complex needs of families with low incomes, while adapting to their own circumstances as they shifted from providing services in person to serving people remotely. They were juggling work and family responsibilities and managing the stress and anxiety of an uncertain future. Racial violence and unrest compounded the challenges of managing COVID-19. Many staff of color experienced an intensified layer of stress and fear. They were showing signs of stress, including lack of focus, fatigue, agitation, and a sense of hopelessness (see Box 1). In response to these crises, TANF leaders adapted in new and innovative ways to support staff and families.

In this brief, we capture how TANF programs adapted to promote staff and participant wellness

and the innovative adaptations that leaders might consider adopting or sustaining moving forward. Although TANF programs implemented many of these adaptations in response to the pandemic, the lessons and practices may be valuable strategies to address persistent stress and trauma and improve staff and participant well-being beyond the end of the public health emergency. The benefits of adopting strategies that promote wellness among staff and participants include improved staff morale, reduction in staff turnover, and higher quality interactions between program leaders and staff and program staff and participants (McGarrigle and Walsh 2011).

Box 1. Survey on TANF program staff general well-being

In a sample of 128 TANF staff within six states (California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Vermont):

- 62 percent said they felt confident in their ability to handle personal problems
- 43 percent said they felt things were going their way
- 47 percent said they sometimes felt they were unable to control the important things in life. Another 24 percent said they felt that way very or fairly often
- 23 percent said they felt like they could not overcome difficulties very or fairly often
- Their top concerns were: safety of family and friends (62 percent), managing work and family life (53 percent), and effectively serving customers remotely (36 percent) ◄

As of February 2021

Strategies that reduce stress and promote wellness for TANF program staff and participants

Throughout the pandemic, we collected data from TANF program leaders and staff to understand the challenges they faced delivering services during the pandemic, the innovations they developed to promote wellness, and the promising strategies that emerged and could be sustained. We collected data from leaders and staff through three channels: web-based surveys, informal virtual community group conversations, and feedback during individualized evaluation support (see Box 2). Mathematica and The Adjacent Possible completed this work as part of the Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research and Knowledge (SPARK) project on behalf of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

Below, we profile changes made in response to the pandemic and provide guidance on how TANF programs can implement, adapt, and test these changes in their own settings.

Create flexibility

The uncertainty of the pandemic made it difficult for many to effectively plan. In response, TANF program leaders gave staff flexibility to respond to work and personal needs. They offered **flexible working hours**, including evenings and weekends, which allowed staff to balance competing priorities, such as caregiving.

This flexibility extended to participants as well. TANF programs provided participants **flexible meeting hours**, the **ability to schedule their own appointments**, and a **choice in the modes of contact** (for example, phone, text, or video call). This flexibility extended to sanction policies and procedures for participants who were in sanction status prior to the pandemic. Recognizing the material hardship created by the pandemic, programs **made it easier for participants to cure their sanction**. According to staff, conversations about revised sanction cures gave them an opportunity to reengage participants.

Extending this flexibility into the future could yield benefits for staff (for example, by reducing the amount of paperwork required to cure the sanction) and could help participants advance their careers and fully engage in program activities.

Box 2. Where our data come from

- Seven **web-based surveys** with TANF program leaders and staff between January and March 2021, addressing topics such as office safety and reopening, use of technology, staff and participant well-being, and performance and accountability, among others (Office of Management and Budget control #0970-0531. See [videos presenting](#) survey findings).

- Experiences and topics discussed during **virtual community groups** with state and local TANF program leaders and staff representing six states—California, Colorado, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Vermont. This included roughly 100 group discussions held between May and September 2020.

- Stories and experiences shared during video calls with TANF leaders, staff, and participants representing about a dozen programs for which we provided **individualized evaluation support** as part of the SPARK project during the pandemic. ◢

Provide a safe working environment

The threat of contracting COVID-19 was a significant source of stress for many staff and participants, particularly those with medical conditions or those with family members who were at higher risk of developing serious symptoms of COVID-19. TANF leaders took precautions to reduce the risk and fears of contracting COVID-19. For example, they (1) reconfigured offices to enable appropriate social distancing between desks, (2) required masks on-site, and (3) installed plastic shields around workstations. A few programs experimented with opening resource rooms for limited hours for a small number of participants. Participants were required to socially distance to use the computers, and the programs allotted time for cleaning the room in between scheduled sessions. Programs also issued guidance to staff about how to manage interactions with participants who were frustrated about their benefits or unwilling to follow COVID-19 precautions.

While in a post-pandemic environment many of these precautions may be unnecessary, continuing and expanding some of these practices for improving physical and emotional safety, such as trainings on managing interactions with frustrated participants, could pay off. In addition, COVID-19 heightened the awareness among program leaders and staff about the importance of psychological safety in the workplace. Research has found that psychological safety, or the ability to voice concerns without punitive consequences, can promote high quality decision making, healthy group dynamics and interpersonal relationships, and more effective implementation of the program (Edmundson 2018). Leaders might expand practices to promote psychological safety in the workplace in the future.

Institute regular check-ins

Throughout the pandemic, TANF program leaders frequently checked in with their staff, and staff did the same with participants. For example, leaders and staff reported that some programs routinely asked about stress and well-being at the beginning of interactions—whether it be at a staff meeting, a supervision meeting, or a meeting with a program participant. The goal of these impromptu check-ins was to provide emotional support and, if needed, referrals to mental health or supportive service providers. One manager implemented a regular wellness questionnaire with staff to gauge their stress levels and support them with any areas that needed to be addressed. Staff used frequent check-ins with participants as a way to cultivate the relationship without the pressure of meeting the federal work requirements.

Establishing agency norms and practices to support staff is a proactive approach to managing stress. For example, dedicating time for formal supervision can create consistency and a safe space for staff to develop professionally and manage their stress with support from leaders (see Box 3). Through a structured supervision practice, leaders and staff can engage in meaningful conversation that promotes the professional growth and development

of direct service staff and helps troubleshoot challenges before they arise. In addition, supervisors can model the behaviors they want to cultivate in staff, which, in turn, can benefit the relationship between staff and participants. Program leaders can also consider putting procedures in place for how to connect staff and participants who disclose they are experiencing mental or emotional distress with appropriate, accessible resources.

Box 3. Michigan Works Great Lakes Bay: Structured supervision practice

During the pandemic, Michigan Works Great Lakes Bay, a site participating in Project SPARK and Project Improving Program Outcomes via Evidence-Based Technical Assistance (IMPROVE), training and technical assistance projects funded by ACF, instituted a regular supervision practice with a structured goal setting component. Each supervisor developed a plan for their practice that included their goals, when and how often they would meet with each member of their team, potential roadblocks to meeting consistently, and solutions to address them. Findings from a pilot test carried out by the SPARK project revealed that it was an adjustment for supervisors initially, but that both supervisors and staff valued the consistency and frequency of the supervision time. As one staff member shared, "I left feeling empowered. We're all learning together." A supervisor shared, "In meetings before, it was about putting out the current fire. Now we are getting to know and trust one another. ◢

Prioritize self-care

Managing and carrying out human services work, which is often crisis-oriented in nature, particularly during a pandemic, can create stress that may permeate the agency and burn out leaders and direct service staff (Kahn 2005). One of the primary lessons of the pandemic is the importance and benefits of self-care. Examples of activities that TANF leaders used to promote self-care during the pandemic included allowing flexible work hours and encouraging staff to avoid working extra hours, set clear boundaries, and take time off to recharge. Carving out space

and time at work or home to practice mindfulness was another self-care strategy some leaders encouraged staff to use (see Box 4).

Box 4. Mindfulness in TANF programs

At the start of the pandemic, Mathematica launched "An EPiC (Equip and Practice in Community) Response to COVID-19 and Beyond," under Projects IMPROVE and SPARK to support TANF programs. Part of that effort involved developing a series of 20-minute videos featuring stress and wellness topics hosted by a mindfulness teacher and licensed clinical social worker. Between April 27, 2020 and January 26, 2022, there were 850 views of the stress and wellness videos. Programs can consider using these videos to support wellness. ◢

In addition, select programs prioritized self-care as regular component of staff development and supervision. Evidence suggests that people who practice self-care are not only better equipped to deal with the stress at work, but also can model for others the importance of maintaining healthy workplace behaviors (Butler et al. 2019). To create a culture of self-care, TANF agency leaders have taken steps such as managing staff workloads, encouraging staff to use vacation and sick leave, and designating space within the office for staff to recharge. Leaders have also included self-care and staff wellness as a job competency (Derr et al. 2018), a strategy used by some TANF agencies prior to the pandemic that has been recently adopted more widely by other TANF agencies. Doing so may help normalize the practice of self-care and serve as a reminder during regular supervision and annual performance reviews that the agency supports staff wellness. To promote participant wellness, leaders have continued practices in place prior to the pandemic such as improving access to mental health resources, incorporating wellness strategies into workshops and other activities, and allowing wellness activities to count toward program requirements (Derr et al. 2001).

Cultivate connection and community

The pandemic taught TANF program leaders the benefits of investing in social connections and support for staff. Before the pandemic, social connection and support typically happened informally within the office. Working remotely forced agencies to designate time to foster these connections. Some supervisors **focused staff meetings on building connections among staff** and supported staff by **using interactive tools** like live polling to encourage virtual engagement. Supervisors also reported sending staff daily jokes or funny videos and hosting informal, virtual, social activities with their teams to help improve staff morale and connection.

To help combat social isolation, program leaders and direct service staff strove to **actively engage community partners** with whom they worked to talk about pressing issues such as how they have adapted to the pandemic. They also worked with community partners to create opportunities for staff and participants, particularly for those experiencing social isolation, to build connections with others in their communities. For example, one program encouraged staff to engage in community forums organized by a partner agency on topics such as connecting with customers virtually and encouraged both staff and participants to engage in community forums on managing stress. In another program, staff and youth participants joined socially distant outdoor activities for youth organized by a partner organization. Continuing these practices may have limited costs to the agency and can build staff and participant social connection and increase comradery (Fargion et al. 2020).

Talk honestly about diversity, equity, and inclusion

COVID-19 and the concurrent racial violence and social unrest forced people to slow down and reflect. Many TANF programs began formal and informal conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the

workplace. In some programs, leaders of color and White allies joined to, among other efforts, hold webinars to **discuss strategies to advance leaders of color** and schedule regular team meetings to **discuss microaggressions in the workplace**. One state hired a Diversity and Equity Manager who is tasked with **fostering open and honest dialogue about the oppression people of color have experienced** as staff and participants within TANF and workforce programs. In some programs, conversations among leaders and staff have extended **to reexamine the ways programs provide services, with attention toward economic and racial disparities and efforts to advance DEI practices** to promote economic justice for families of color who live in poverty. TANF leaders might consider institutionalizing some of these DEI practices such as creating an internal position dedicated to DEI, holding regular conversations about DEI, and making changes to agency policies and procedures with an eye toward equity and inclusion.

Next steps

Although the pandemic has created significant disruptions in TANF programs and people's lives more broadly, the lessons programs learned can be carried forward to support improvements in staff and participant well-being in the future. Prioritizing addressing stress and wellness in TANF programs can have a lasting impact on program leaders, staff, and families. Future evaluations and evidence-building work might explore areas such as supervision and staff support; mindfulness practices with staff; and efforts to cultivate connection and community among staff and participants.

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