Pandemic-Era Innovations for the Future of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs

How Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs transformed traditional practice to meet new challenges, and where TANF programs can go from here

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the way TANF programs operate in unprecedented ways. This brief has two purposes:

1. To capture some of the adaptations and innovations that programs designed to meet the rapidly evolving circumstances of the pandemic, and
2. To highlight promising practices and pose design questions for programs to explore, refine, and possibly test as next steps.

Throughout the pandemic, Mathematica collected data from TANF programs to understand the challenges they faced, the innovations they developed, and the promising strategies that were emerging. We drew on two primary sources for these data. First, we documented the experiences and topics described during virtual learning community groups with state and local TANF program leaders and staff, held between May and September 2020. Second, we conducted 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 Box 1). Mathematica collected this information and developed this brief under Project SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research Knowledge), funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The perfect storm: A catalyst for change

The public health restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted TANF and workforce agencies to significantly change their service delivery models. State or local guidelines largely

Box 1. Where our data come from

Mathematica fielded seven surveys to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs with which we were engaged in technical assistance, those who were part of an existing learning community, and individuals who had signed up for a distribution list related to support during the pandemic. We collected 965 responses across all seven surveys, including responses from 18 states. Respondents were generally managers, supervisors, or direct service staff in TANF programs. About 63 percent of all responses (n = 612) were from staff located throughout California[1] and 10 percent (n = 92) were from staff located throughout Colorado. This heavy clustering within two states owes to two factors: (1) Mathematica's available distribution list for the survey included more than 600 contacts within California, far exceeding any other states, and (2) personnel at the state level in Colorado disseminated the survey to county personnel on several occasions. Mathematica wishes to thank the American Public Human Services Association for their help disseminating the surveys.

restricted or suspended in-person services, many eligibility and case management personnel were reassigned from TANF programming to staff the surge in unemployment insurance claims, and many TANF agency personnel had to re-balance their work and caregiving responsibilities due to widespread disruptions in school and child care and to family illnesses. Few programs had contingency plans in place for these kinds of immediate changes. Moreover, the pandemic disrupted or prematurely ended work experience sites, internships, and community service placements, causing many TANF work activities to halt. Given the sharp rise in unemployment during the early months of the pandemic, program participants faced significant challenges in looking for and finding work (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021). As this public health crisis continues to evolve, TANF programs face a choice about how or whether to sustain the innovations of this period.

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.

1. Streamlining the TANF program experience with technology

Programs found creative ways to streamline participants' experiences by using technology, such as:

Providing coaching, case management, and employment or training services through online platforms for the first time or in expanded ways. This included videoconferencing software, text messaging, and instant messaging through social media to communicate with participants. For example, programs granted Microsoft Teams or Zoom[2] licenses to case managers so that they could schedule and conduct their interactions with participants through the platform; before the pandemic, few case managers had access to scheduling and conducting participant meetings in a videoconferencing platform.

Offering group activities, such as orientations and workshops, virtually (see Box 2). For example, several programs converted hours-long, in-person orientations into short, recorded videos posted to YouTube or Vimeo for participants to watch on their own. They did this by (1) identifying the top few takeaways for participants to know; (2) significantly streamlining the content and making it more visually engaging with graphics and limited text; and (3) self-recording videos using Microsoft PowerPoint.[3]

Box 2. Going virtual: Program activities "in the cloud"

In a survey of 123 TANF program administrators and staff, we found:

- 89 percent of respondents said their agencies offered program orientation virtually
- 73 percent of respondents said their agencies conducted initial program assessments virtually
- 84 percent of respondents said their agencies delivered ongoing case management virtually
- 77 percent of respondents said their agencies delivered job-search and job-readiness support virtually
- 60 percent of respondents said their agencies offered adult basic education virtually
- 71 percent of respondents said their agencies offered postsecondary education virtually

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Recording personalized short videos using a desktop webcam (along with a web-based software such as Loom) and sending them to participants via text message. This strategy allowed case managers to check in with participants in a more engaging way (relative to email or text message) and for the participant to view the video on their mobile device at a convenient time.

Launching a virtual support group that program participants designed and led for their peers, in response to the reported high levels of social isolation and lack of engagement during the pandemic. In one county, the group met once per week via videoconference in the evenings

and featured topics meant to encourage positive social connection among youth and young adults in their personal and career aspirations. Case managers provided technical support (for example, setting up the videoconferencing platform) and joined each gathering to support the participants as needed.

Using existing resources freely available online to support education and training activities. Programs reported that they began directing participants to websites such as Cell-Ed, Coursera, and GCFLearnFree.org for on-demand virtual education in a variety of fields. Before the pandemic, some programs reportedly viewed these educational websites as resources to use occasionally, but during the pandemic, programs reported that they increasingly viewed them as a primary way to support participants' education.

Converting key documentation steps that previously required in-person interactions and hard-copy materials into completely virtual processes. Many programs began accepting and using e-signatures on a variety of official forms, and allowed participants to submit documents electronically rather than coming to an office or mailing them in. DocuSign was a popular tool for this purpose. Participants were able to take pictures and submit documents, fill out applications, and complete e-signatures with their smartphones. These innovations streamlined services for staff and participants.

What's next? Design considerations for TANF programs

Increased use and adoption of technology by TANF programs introduced a profound degree of flexibility. This presents a key design question for programs moving forward:

How might more flexible opportunities for participant engagement through technology be sustained in TANF programming?

Consider what action your organization might take to advance any of the innovations described above:

- *Learn* more about how case managers, program participants, or community partners currently experience key aspects of your programming (such as orientation, assessment, regular check-ins) and whether the use of technology could help to streamline or improve their experiences.
- *Innovate* by tailoring one or more of the strategies described above to your program's unique needs; take time to briefly document what people should do and how you will equip them to succeed.
- *Improve* on these strategies by designing a road test to pilot the new approach and gather data on users' experiences with these new technologies to refine them before using them more broadly.

2. Bridging the digital divide

Some programs focused on addressing access challenges among participants by providing technology devices and supports to increase connectivity during the pandemic. The gap in digital access for participants and staff came to the fore during the pandemic and proved to be a prominent challenge to delivering virtual services in an equitable way (Box 3). TANF programs focused on strengthening digital access and fluency with a range of technologies, software, and digital platforms for staff and participants to enable new ways of working together and accomplishing tasks in a virtual environment.

Box 3. From the field: Technology challenges during the pandemic

In a survey of 127 TANF program administrators and staff, we found:

- 28 percent of respondents said most participants have access to a broadband Internet connection
- 30 percent of respondents said participants struggle with the high cost of technology
- 16 percent of respondents said most participants have access to a computer
- 83 percent of respondents said participants' access to technology is a problem
- 52 percent of respondents said technology issues sometimes cause a problem for staff working remotely

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Providing computers or Internet access to participants, recognizing that participants had limited access to technology as a result of closures of public libraries and computer labs at TANF offices (see Box 4). Several programs provided Wi-Fi hotspot devices to participants and worked with community leaders to quickly set up Wi-Fi zones in neighborhoods or public locations that lacked access. Some programs used agency funds to purchase laptops or tablets for participants. One program sent a bus equipped as a Wi-Fi hotspot into the community so residents could connect to the Internet. In general, programs did not report an influx of additional funds to support these efforts, suggesting that existing incentive or supportive services funds could be reprioritized.

Box 4. From the field: Bridging the tech gap

In a survey of 127 TANF program administrators and staff, we found:

- 31 percent of respondents said their agencies offered computers or laptops directly to participants during the pandemic
- 22 percent of respondents said their agencies purchased new technology equipment to benefit participants
- 15 percent of respondents said their agencies provided paid Internet or Wi-Fi hotspots directly to participants during the pandemic
- 33 percent of respondents said their agencies offered trainings or technical assistance to participants on how to access and effectively use technology

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Increasing use of phone and social media communication channels. Seventy-three percent of survey respondents indicated that most participants have access to a smartphone. In response, staff reported increased use of text messaging and instant messaging (through social media) to check in with participants. Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp were popular tools for this purpose, and were particularly well received among youth and young adult participants. Some programs reported increased frequency in their connections with participants during the pandemic, relative to their pre-pandemic experiences, using these modes of communication.

What's next? Design considerations for TANF programs

As programs consider hybrid service models that mix in-person and virtual service offerings, the importance of digital access and fluency across a range of technologies will only continue to grow. This presents two key design questions for programs moving forward:

How might TANF programs intentionally incorporate strategies that enhance participants' access to and ability to use technology, both for engaging in TANF services and the broader workforce? Secondly, how might opportunities for communication between program staff and participants become more flexible through more frequent, virtual touch points?

Consider what action your organization might take to advance any of the innovations described above:

- *Learn* more specifics about the digital divide and technology disparities program participants may be experiencing in your community by conducting listening sessions, surveys, or asking about this issue when case managers and participants meet.
- *Innovate* by identifying ways to repurpose existing program funds (for example, incentive or supportive services dollars) and resources (for example, job search lab laptops or tablets) to directly increase participants' access to technology.
- *Improve* on these innovations by testing whether increased access to high-quality technology or internet leads to any changes in engagement and participation in program activities.

3. Reframing participant engagement and accountability: From "all or nothing" to "start with something"

Programs devised new ways to engage participants, reframe messaging, and promote accountability (even as they relaxed program participation requirements). Some TANF programs took

advantage of increased flexibility in federal and state requirements to engage participants more responsively and focus on their short-term needs and goals.

Experimenting with different messaging to participants about program expectations and engagement, which was enabled by increased flexibility in TANF work participation requirements from the federal government (HHS 2020) and most state governments (Shantz et al. 2020). Before the pandemic, program staff reported that their messaging to participants emphasized the required number of hours participants would need to complete and that a failure to complete the required number of hours would result in a conciliation or sanction initiation process for noncompliance. During the pandemic, many program staff reported that their agencies refocused messaging on participants' own short-term goals and taking action on something of importance to participants.

Continuing to track and require countable hours for participants, but revising the approaches to reengagement and conciliation (see Box 5). For example, some programs reported that outreach to participants for noncompliance focused on making sure participants were safe and offering support services. One program allowed participants to resolve a sanction of benefits by watching a reengagement video online and lifted the sanction same day.

Reevaluating the types of activities participants could engage in to fulfill participation requirements. One program redefined a community service activity to include supporting distance or remote learning for multiple students in their neighborhood. Another program offered paid internships to participants to build and install protective shields at county offices. Some programs that typically emphasized work participation instead encouraged participants to engage in mental health counseling and domestic violence services.

Box 5. From the field: Engagement in work-related activities during a pandemic

In a survey of 98 TANF program administrators and staff, we found:

- 76 percent of respondents said their program was granting "good cause" exemptions for work participation requirements
- 2 percent of respondents indicated their program was enforcing TANF work participation requirements as they did before the pandemic
- 22 percent of respondents indicated they were actively engaging participants in work activities, but with flexibility in the types of activities and number of required hours
- 23 percent of respondents indicated they had sanctioned at least one participant since the onset of the pandemic for nonparticipation

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Where do we go from here? Design considerations for TANF programs

As programs gradually reinforce participation requirements, there might be lessons from the pandemic for how best to engage participants in program activities and services.

How might alternative framing and engagement strategies discovered during the pandemic provide a more empathetic, positive approach to helping participants meet TANF program requirements?

Consider what action your organization might take to advance any of the innovations described above:

- *Learn* more about how program participants respond to different types of messaging and framing by conducting a workshop to review language and ways in which expectations are communicated.
- *Innovate* by co-designing revised, human-centered messaging and communication materials with input directly from case managers and program participants.
- *Improve* on your messaging about accountability and expectations by testing different strategies to see whether there are changes in participants' engagement and participation in program activities.

Ready to Learn, Innovate, and Improve?

This brief is an invitation to those of you on the frontlines of TANF programming to consider how these innovations catalyzed by the pandemic can be brought into the future to achieve better outcomes. We invite you to learn, innovate, and improve using one or more of the design considerations in this brief.

Endnotes

[1] For context, California served 1,106,964 recipients per month, on average, during calendar year 2020 (including recipients served through separate state program/maintenance of effort funds), which is about 40 percent of the national TANF caseload for the same period (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020).

[2] Note: Mention of specific platforms or products here and throughout this brief does not imply endorsement on the part of Mathematica or OPRE.

[3] For a brief instructional video on how to do this, see: https://vimeo.com/413925913.

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