



## **Pre and Post employment Support for TANF Participants**

**Title of Event:** *Overcoming Barriers to Employment*

**Date(s):** November 17 - 18, 1998

**Location:** Administration for Socioeconomic Development, Department of the Family, Santurce, Puerto Rico

### **I. Summary**

The ACF Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network coordinated this workshop on behalf of the ACF Region II office, the Administration for Socioeconomic Development, Department of the Family, Santurce, Puerto Rico, and the Department of Human Services of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The purpose of this two day technical assistance event was to present promising strategies and lessons learned from other states and local agencies regarding pre and post employment support for TANF participants, and to identify possible areas where they could be applied within Puerto Rico's system. Workshop participants received information from and engaged in discussions with representatives from state and local agencies in Maryland and Wisconsin on various topics related to overcoming barriers to employment. Topics included changing the focus from income maintenance to employment, strategies for welfare diversion, and different approaches to Work First. This summary highlights the main points from the workshop discussion in reference to these areas.

### **II. Participants**

Seventy-one participants attended the workshop from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and three were from the U.S. Virgin Islands. Workshop participants from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Administration for Socioeconomic Development included Dr. Mario Acevedo, Administrator; Ms. Marta Ortiz, Authorized Representative for the TANF Program; and Mr. Roberto Serrano Selva, Delegated Agencies Coordinator. Central Level staff were also in attendance as well as Service Directors, Local Supervisors, Social and Family Assistance Technicians, and delegated agency representatives from the Administration's ten regions. The three representatives from the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Human Services were Ms. Ermin S. Boschulte, Administrator, Financial Programs Division; Ms. Lorayne A. Hassell-Webb, Placement System Specialist; and Mr. Lennox C. Zamore, Director, JOBS Program. Ms. Petra

Arroyo, Children and Families Specialist, Administration for Children and Families, U.S.  
Department of Health and Human Services, represented ACF Region II.

## **I. Session Summary**

### *Day One*

The first day of the workshop was initiated with opening remarks by Dr. Acevedo. Dr. Acevedo discussed the changing focus of TANF and the responsibility the agency and its staff have to get TANF participants adjusted to the change. He emphasized that the approach to welfare and family support that he would like to see the agency take be consistent with helping people “earn their living so they can take back their lives.” Dr. Acevedo noted that 27,000 people were placed in jobs within the last year and that Puerto Rico closed the fiscal year with a 42% participation rate, as opposed to the 30% that is required by the Federal government. He discussed the impact of the recent hurricane on the Commonwealth’s resources, both financial and human, stating that they still had much work to do to get things back to normal for those hardest hit. Dr. Acevedo also discussed the new information handbook the agency has developed to provide basic information on TANF services available and how to access them, and he noted that a TANF state plan and guidelines will be implemented in January 1999. He closed his remarks by stating that the vision for Puerto Rico is to “awaken hopefulness of a future with a better quality of life for the citizens.”

The first presentation was a review of the findings and overview of state challenges resulting from the ACF Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network assessment conducted earlier in the year. Ms. Aracelis Holguin-Pena from Caliber Associates provided an overview of the issues and concerns of other states in regard to TANF implementation. Included in her presentation was also a discussion of national trends regarding need for supportive services such as transportation, post employment services, and child care.

The next presentation was that of Ms. Vesta Kimble, Deputy Director of the Anne Arundel County, Maryland Department of Social Services. She discussed the challenges of changing the culture of welfare at the local level and how Anne Arundel County was able to make those changes through the creation of a Jobs Center. The Center provides on-site, free of charge, job finding, job acquiring, and job maintenance support services including job listing, resume development, interviewing skills, clothing and child care subsidies. A major impetus of the center is that every person who walks through the door seeking support must first be interviewed by a child support worker in order to 1) identify child support needs, 2) establish paternity, and 3) discuss “good cause” reasons for not filing for child support. Therefore, if child support is an option, establishment of an order of support or enforcement of a current order is enacted. Participants are then interviewed by a job counselor to determine the need for support services (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse), participate in employment assessments, receive needed subsidies for child care and transportation, and get appropriate referrals to occupational and job training support services. The participant will then visit with a caseworker to discuss financial needs. Ms. Kimble stated that only 5% of the people who come to the Center end up with cash assistance payments. Many are placed in jobs soon enough to avoid the need for cash assistance, and may receive Medicaid and Food Stamp support in the interim. Ms. Kimble

also discussed the use of welfare avoidance grants where those in need are provided with a cash grant to support specific needs (e.g., clothing, transportation, rent payments) as they seek employment. As a result of its work at the Jobs Center, the County has been able to:

- Quadruple the number of job placements
- Increase the average rate of placements
- Decrease the cash assistance caseload, and
- Reduce recidivism (a return to cash assistance within 6 months) to 7%

Specific strategies which contributed to the success of the Jobs Center include:

- Career planning and a parent's assessment tool to help under-employed parents
- Transportation subsidies--as a benefit, not a supportive service
- Employment update (monthly reporting) to keep up with participant's wage changes and job starts/losses
- Training for staff, particularly in EITC (earned income tax credit) from the IRS, alcohol and other drugs, domestic violence, and anger management.

The next presenter was Ms. Tina Koehn, Administrator for Wisconsin Works (W-2), United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS), which provides TANF support to migrant and seasonal farm workers. Wisconsin has combined welfare reform with workforce development strategies aimed at changing the focus of welfare. The emphasis is on transitioning people from subsidy dependence to financial independence. The W-2 philosophy specifies that 1) for those who can work, only work should pay, 2) the assumption is that everybody is able to work within their ability, 3) policies must strengthen the responsibility of both parents to care for their children, and 4) there will be no entitlement. Major policy changes under the W-2 system include:

- A 60-month time limit, with a 24-month component
- A family size cap, with no additional cash benefits for exceeding the limit
- A Work First emphasis as opposed to providing an entitlement
- Required participation from both custodial and non-custodial parents
- Minor parents no longer eligible.

W-2 employment programs seek to move participants up a self-sufficiency ladder with opportunities made available through unsubsidized employment, trial jobs, and community service jobs. Participants who transition from TANF to work receive a slightly higher cash benefit for participation in community service jobs. From there they move to trial jobs, which are subsidized, to full-unsubsidized employment. During the transition period, participants also receive support services such as child care, transportation, and job access loans to be used for specific needs such as clothing, education and training, and job search, and parenting workshops.

Ms. Koehn concluded her presentation by discussing the importance of clearly communicating the Work First message. W-2 accomplishes this by training all staff on

how to deliver the Work First message, diversion of applicants from cash benefits when all they need is to have support for work related costs, and immediately engaging participants in the process of seeking employment.

A panel discussion on “Changing the Focus” included Vesta Kimble and Tina Koehn as well as Wilma Fonseca, Contracting Manager for UMOS, and Mark Millspaugh, Program Analyst, Family Investment Administration, Maryland’s Department of Human Resources. The panel was moderated by Mr. Roberto Serrano Selva, Puerto Rico’s Delegated Agencies Coordinator, who asked a number of specific questions of the panelists. Below is a recap of the questions and a summary of the responses.

**Question: How would you describe the TANF populations in your areas?**

Majority of population is economically disadvantaged and face health and drug abuse issues. Many of them are in transition within the TANF program and are adjusting to having to work for a cash benefit. Many need to develop basic life supporting skills ( e.g., time management, financial management, etc.).

**Question: What are you doing with participants who are not yet job ready?**

There are several safety nets provided to assess and enhance job acquisition skills. Participants are required to attend job application and resume development classes, as well as basic reading and writing improvement classes. In addition, both general and customized job training may be provided by employers. In general, efforts are made to work with employers to promote job placement, and to work with participants to motivate them to get and retain employment.

**Question: What are the primary obstacles that stand in the way of finding meaningful employment?**

1. Time restrictions and policies on training and eligibility. There is too much to do in a short period of time. There is a need for more time flexibility that is not tied to Block Grant dollars.
2. Child care availability and affordability. Parents need to have access to providers who they feel will provide a safe and sound environment.
3. Transportation--getting people to where the jobs are.
4. Limited number of good jobs.

**Question: For the above obstacles, what efforts have worked to address them?**

Training obstacles resulted in the inability to get people to the level that employers wanted them (e.g., with a high school diploma). The solution was to look for job training programs that required a lower skill level, so participants could work their way up to a

specific level as they earned a living. This often required customizing training to what specific employers were looking for in the entry-level job market.

The lack of jobs can be addressed by placing participants in quality community service jobs when paying jobs are not available.

In addressing barriers and obstacles to employment it is essential that agencies 1) take risks with strategies and approaches, 2) be innovative, 3) seek out partners and 4) use flexibility in the interpretation of the TANF laws to meet specific needs.

**Question: How do you change the mentality of those who do not want to work?**

1. Cutting off the grant when they do not participate and reinstating it when they do. Some states reduce the grant, which is not always effective, because people simply get adjusted to living off of less money.
2. Use of a “strike” policy where participants who get 3 strikes for habitual non-participation are banned from ever returning to the program.
3. Need to explore the reasons behind the lack of motivation (e.g., substance abuse or domestic violence).
4. Motivation is supported through dignified and respectful customer service. The focus is not to judge but to look at the total person and their situation.

**Question: How do you maintain staff morale?**

Recognize the power that staff have and give them front line decision making responsibility. Staff need to know what the outcomes need to be and given the opportunity to work in a results-oriented atmosphere. Staff must be given a role in decisions. For example, it is essential to involve caseworkers in shaping policies and procedures.

The final presentation of the day was given by Vesta Kimble and Mark Millspaugh, who discussed Maryland’s strategy for welfare diversion. Mr. Millspaugh began by describing Maryland’s Family Investment Program, which seeks to move families off of assistance as quickly as possible. A new initiative within the program, *From the Ground Up*, was developed to provide a system of support for participants. It will bring together staff within local departments from TANF, housing, education, and social services to one location. The goal is to work in partnership to move participants as quickly as possible to self sufficiency, thus reducing caseloads. This will allow the state to be able to reinvest caseload savings back into the program.

Ms. Kimble discussed how Anne Arundel County uses HELP (Help Eliminate Lifetime Poverty) grants to support participants' financial needs without having to initiate a TANF cash benefit. The grants do not count toward the 60-month lifetime limit, and participants cannot receive both the HELP grant and TANF. Grant monies can be used for car payments, rent or mortgage payments, or utility bills. Participants must establish proof of need and meet specific criteria, including:

- Compliance with work requirements
- Cooperation with child support
- Use of grant to solve an immediate cash crisis that will not likely occur again the next month
- Ability to meet ongoing expenses after grant monies have been used, and
- Use of other services to reduce the family's ongoing budget (e.g., child care and transportation assistance).

Ms. Kimble also discussed the county's efforts to provide those who need it with a way to purchase a used automobile through the "Wheels to Work" program. Through this program, non-profit organizations accept donated vehicles, repair them, and make them available at little or no cost to those who needed.

### *Day Two*

The second day of the workshop began with a presentation on Work First efforts in Maryland and Wisconsin. Tina Koehn and Wilma Fonseca began by discussing the approach taken by United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS) in implementing Work First. UMOS takes a customer service focus with an emphasis on taking care of the participant's immediate needs and providing appropriate information as to how the process works, and how to successfully engage in employment support services. The focus of the program is aimed at establishing job readiness and providing sufficient teaching and coaching to participants as they seek, acquire, and strive to retain employment. The UMOS approach involves comprehensive case management, support services, community based services, and an emphasis on job retention and sustained employment. UMOS utilizes community strengths and educates its staff on accessing external resources. The program engages in local collaborative planning which responds to a Wisconsin mandate to eliminate duplication, maximize resources, utilize a customer-focused one stop approach, and promote coordination among agencies and local programs. They engage local collaborative planning teams for the purpose of establishing a job seeker's partnership and an employer's partnership within local municipalities. The job seeker's partnership provides a one-stop location for job search support including education and training and access to potential employers. The employer's partnership provides a single point of entry approach to job skill development, economic development, and workforce planning support, as well as access to potential workers.

Mark Millspaugh responded to the presentation on UMOS by discussing similar and different approaches Maryland has taken in its Work First efforts. The overall philosophy of Maryland's Work First model is that the best way to succeed in the labor market is to join it. Therefore, the impetus is directed towards gaining employment for participants, so that they have the opportunity to learn good work habits on the job and not in a classroom. Employment is expected; the first activity required of participants is an up front job search. In addition, participants receive no TANF cash assistance for the first 14 days after they submit the application while they search for a job. Within Maryland's

Work First model, the agency will attempt to place those who cannot find employment through mechanisms such as on-the-job training and community service. Participants are motivated for work through the encouragement and support of staff and the use of full family sanctions for those who fail to participate. Sanctions are lifted after participants begin to comply with work requirements. Transitional assistance is offered to families who have been sanctioned through a third party, e.g., a local community agency, who will assist the participant in meeting the requirements for having the sanctions lifted. Similar to Wisconsin, Maryland seeks to establish partnerships with employers and community organizations in order to create a more receptive job market. The state makes the effort to have reliable data on local employment markets, as well as data on jobs available to specific participants (based on skill, education and experience levels), and to engage in large-scale marketing campaigns for employers.

The afternoon of the second day was devoted to large and small group discussions of the lessons learned from Maryland and Wisconsin. The Puerto Rico regional groups and the group from the Virgin Islands engaged in an action planning exercise to identify how they could apply the approaches and strategies presented. The following is a summary of the ideas that emerged from the planning activity.

**Suggested strategies:**

- Maximize external resources by forming partnerships and collaborations with local community programs, employers, and other social services agencies within the Commonwealth.
- Increase staff development efforts by providing training and education to staff across social services, and other related disciplines, regarding the changing focus and culture of welfare and how to assist people in transitioning from welfare to work.
- Establish a comprehensive plan for organizing all the regions towards a Work First approach, including acquiring technical assistance from others who have been successful to help Puerto Rico develop its own model.
- Encourage and support more communication between the Department and the Delegated Agencies regarding the process that takes place with the participant in order to support effective referrals and use of services. In addition, institute regular meetings of Department and agency staff to strengthen communication, facilitate brainstorming and problem solving, provide opportunities to learn from each other regarding best or promising practices, implement a team work approach, and foster consistency within the program. It was also suggested that staff from Delegated Agencies be placed in local offices to assist in motivating participants toward employment.
- Expand social services and job search support efforts, including job counseling and vocational training. Increase employer outreach efforts through job fairs, distribution of informational brochures, and working collaboratively with the Chamber of Commerce and the business councils.



- Enhance public awareness of the change in focus from welfare to work by initiating a public information campaign designed to increase understanding of the general public and potential employers.
- Work to change the mentality of participants by creating a Work First culture within the agencies and the Department as a whole. Need a firmer approach with participants, but one that avoids sanctions and focuses on providing incentives for acquiring and maintaining employment, e.g., continuation of housing assistance after employment.
- Provide Delegated Agencies with the funding and flexibility to provide critical supportive services to enhance the job search process, e.g., cash grants for clothing, transportation, and required licenses for certain jobs.

#### **IV. Evaluation Feedback**

At the conclusion of the workshop each participant was asked to complete a technical assistance evaluation form. Participant feedback, both written and verbal, indicated that the workshop was extremely well received. Participants felt the information provided by the speakers and the outcomes from their small group interactions were very beneficial. Following are a sample of the comments participants provided through written feedback:

1. Describe any immediate benefits to you or your agency as a result of the TA provided.
  - Reorientation of our staff toward culture change and a Work First focus
  - Provided us with some knowledge about various ways to begin the difficult task of overcoming barriers to employment with the hard to serve population
  - Assisted us in Work First plan/model formation, collaboration, and innovation
  - Taught us that we can change the focus of interest of the clients
  - Gave me a positive attitude towards what our clients can accomplish
  - Ideas to implement our Work First focus
  - If we believe in what we are doing, we can meet our goals.

2. Describe any longer term benefits of the TA.

Planning for on-site TA on a smaller scale to assist in Work First transitional planning  
 In the long term, this experience will help us in the implementation of strategies, ideas, and plans

Overcoming most of our actual barriers.

3. Identify what was most useful about the TA.
  - Motivation and creative ideas
  - Implementation of the different strategies used in other States that we can use in our efforts to move TANF clients to employment, through the Work First model

- Began the process of paradigm shifting
- The help and assistance they (presenters) gave to the participants
- We can learn about the things that other States have accomplished and what we can do
- Work First, culture change, and welfare diversion information
- The way the speakers presented their ideas in a simple and believable way.

4. How could the TA have better met your needs?

- Perhaps a visit to Anne Arundel County, Maryland to see how the program works
- A TA to focus on the needs of the Virgin Islands only. I'd like to invite you to train the Jobs staff on Work First
- Have total workshop in Spanish.

5. Final comments:

- It would be great to meet again in a year to present our findings and achievements
- Next workshop should bring in states that have a large Hispanic population
- Need to do a needs assessment or study in Puerto Rico to determine client's needs before implementing the program
- The exchange of ideas and experiences has been very useful for all of us in the social field in trying to achieve our goals in TANF and Welfare to Work.
- I hope we can change how our clients see themselves. As Mark (Millsbaugh) said, "Every person is capable of making something better of their lives."
- When is the next event?!