

Providing Unpaid Work Experience Opportunities for TANF Recipients: Examples from Erie County, New York; Montana; and Hamilton County, Ohio

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ABSTRACT

This practice brief profiles three work experience programs that engage nearly all work-ready TANF recipients in unpaid work activities, either alone or in conjunction with education and training. Unpaid work experience is designed to mirror regular employment in the paid labor market. TANF recipients are assigned to entry-level jobs at government offices, nonprofit agencies, educational institutions, or for-profit businesses, creating an immediate attachment to the labor market. Rather than earning an hourly wage, recipients receive their TANF grant and food stamp benefits in exchange for the hours they work. In addition to helping recipients meet their TANF work requirement, these programs are designed to help recipients gain job skills and become acclimated to a regular work schedule. Erie County, New York, contracts with neighborhood organizations to provide work experience opportunities near the places where recipients live. Montana uses work experience placements as training sites to build recipients' job skills. In Hamilton County, Ohio, a consortium of agencies administers and provides work experience to TANF recipients.

INTRODUCTION

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) established federally mandated work participation requirements for states and penalties for failing to meet them, giving states incentives to help TANF recipients find paid employment or participate in unpaid work or work-related activities as quickly as possible. While some policymakers had anticipated that states would create large unpaid programs for work experience or community service to meet these requirements, only a few states did so. Now that states are required to meet effectively higher work participation rates, there

ABOUT THIS PROJECT AND BRIEF

This practice brief is one of a series describing state and local *Strategies for Increasing TANF Work Participation Rates*. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) resulted in significant increases in the effective work participation rates that states must achieve. The series of briefs is designed to assist state and local officials in thinking about strategies that might aid them in meeting federal work participation requirements in their TANF programs.

The briefs in this series draw on information gathered from case studies of nine programs and describe approaches adopted by selected states and/or local offices that might be of interest to other program administrators. None of these programs has been rigorously evaluated, so their effectiveness is unknown. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services does not specifically endorse any of the approaches described in this series. All briefs in the series can be accessed at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/TANFWPR>.

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may be more interest in creating work experience programs to help TANF recipients who have not been successful at finding unsubsidized paid employment.

Work experience is one of nine core activities in which TANF recipients can participate to meet the first 20 hours of their weekly work requirement. Work experience programs are intended to provide TANF recipients with work opportunities that will help them to develop skills, knowledge, and work behaviors that will increase their employability. In lieu of an hourly wage, work experience participants continue to receive their TANF and food stamp benefits while participating in the program. They can work for a government, nonprofit, or for-profit employer.

As a protection to recipients, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) may apply to welfare recipients participating in work experience activities, depending on the nature of the work experience assignment. If so, welfare agencies are required to calculate the maximum number of hours allowed by taking the total value of the family's combined TANF and food stamp benefits and dividing it by the federal or state minimum wage (whichever is greater). Recipients in work experience programs who work the maximum number of hours per week allowed under the FLSA, even if the total number of hours worked is less than the number required to meet the 20-hour core requirement for the overall rate, may be counted as meeting their core work hours requirement as long as the state has a simplified food stamp program in place.¹ If the number of hours allowed under FLSA is greater than 20, recipients can participate in non-core activities for any hours over 20. Non-core activities can include, for example, job skills training directly related to employment or education directly related to employment (for recipients who have not completed high school or a GED).

ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK (Buffalo)

Buffalo, the largest city in Erie County, New York, is one of the poorest cities in the United States. Neighborhoods where TANF recipients are concentrated often are plagued with high crime, drug use, and a limited availability of good jobs. In response to the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA), TANF admin-

ERIE COUNTY, NY

Key Program Features

- Work placements located in neighborhoods where recipients live
- Specialized placements for those with high service needs
- Paid work site supervision with low staff-to-participant ratio
- Up-front screening to refer only work-ready TANF recipients
- Job development staff to aid with transition to unsubsidized, competitive employment
- Subsidized work placements
- Incentives for contracted service providers to identify and report nonparticipation quickly

Noteworthy Achievements

- Over two years, the county experienced a 15 percentage point increase in the work participation rate, which program administrators primarily attribute to changes in the work experience program.
- Of those participating in the PIVOT program, which places work experience clients in subsidized jobs, 85 percent transition into permanent jobs.
- 60 to 90 percent of the TANF recipients assigned to contracted service providers meet federal work participation requirements.

istrators at the Erie County Department of Social Services (DSS) examined the structure of their TANF employment program in the context of the local economy. They concluded that an expanded and redesigned work experience program would provide TANF recipients with the best possible chance of meeting their work requirements while also providing them with an opportunity to build their work skills. They restructured their existing work experience program with several goals in mind: (1) increasing participation in federally countable work activities by making work sites more accessible to recipients, (2) regenerating local communities by expanding services available at local community centers, and (3) encouraging families to become involved with and invest in their communities.

Contracted service providers, located in neighborhoods where TANF recipients live, provide work experience opportunities and administer Erie Coun-

ty's program. The work experience program targets work-ready TANF recipients, assigning each one almost immediately after they qualify for TANF to a work experience placement in his or her neighborhood for up to 35 hours per week. The contracted service providers hire work site supervisors to work exclusively with TANF recipients. The county encourages, but does not require, contractors to provide recipients with opportunities on-site to combine 20 hours per week of work experience with 10 to 15 hours of education or vocational training to meet their work requirement.

Key Program Features

Early Assessment and Triage. Erie County relies on an up-front assessment and triage process to identify applicants who are ready for work experience. Shortly after the initial intake appointment, TANF applicants complete a series of standard screenings and assessments administered by an employment counselor (case manager) to identify potential drug or alcohol addictions and determine the applicants' level of employability. Based on the findings, applicants are then assigned to one of the following four service units: (1) transition to work (employability) unit—for those who are work-ready, (2) substance abuse unit—for those actively participating in day or residential substance abuse treatment, (3) medical unit—for those with a documented physical and/or mental health condition, and (4) SSI unit—for those who appear to meet the SSI/SSDI eligibility criteria. Most applicants are initially referred to the employability unit, but they may be referred to the other units at any time if a drug or alcohol condition or disability is identified. Of those referred to the employability unit, there is an initial upfront three week applicant job search component. Of those that are not placed in employment during this three week period, nearly all are assigned to work experience or a combination of work experience and education or training.

Neighborhood Placements. Work experience placements are provided by contracted nonprofit agencies, known as neighborhood hub sites, in neighborhoods where large numbers of TANF recipients live. The four neighborhood hub sites are community centers or large nonprofit organizations that provide a variety of social services to neighborhood residents. Each of these centers and organizations has been operating

A CLOSER LOOK AT A NEIGHBORHOOD HUB SITE: THE BELLE CENTER

The Belle Center, a neighborhood hub site serving recipients in the west side of Erie County, offers social service programs for TANF recipients and other low-income families.

History. Erected in the 1960s, the center stands in memory of Father Vincent Belle, a local priest who was murdered while ministering to the sick in the neighborhood.

Scope of Services. The Belle Center has an operating budget of \$1.2 million per year. The Center provides social services, work experience opportunities, vocational training, academic enrichment, mentoring, child care, and recreational activities for families in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood Demographics. In this disadvantaged community, about half of the residents' incomes fall below the federal poverty level and 70 percent of the children are raised by a single parent.

Services Available to TANF Recipients. TANF recipients assigned to the Belle Center for work experience may enroll in several educational programs offered at the hub site such as GED, ESL, and computer training courses. Recipients between ages 17 and 24 also may be eligible for the Buffalo LeaderShape AmeriCorps program, where they earn a stipend and money for college in exchange for their labor. (The TANF agency has provided funding to augment some of the educational programs, but is not the primary funder of any of the services other than work experience.)

Children and Youth Services. Children from TANF families may access services such as leadership development, conflict resolution, academic supports and tutoring, mentoring, and summer academic and vocational programs. The center also offers an on-site preschool program.

Facilities. The recently renovated Belle Center houses a computer lab, classrooms, basketball courts, an indoor swimming pool, and a teen center.

within its respective community for many years. However, they only recently began working as contracted service providers to offer employment services to TANF recipients.

The county implemented a neighborhood work experience model with several benefits in mind. First, it reduces recipients' need for transportation; recipients typically live no more than a walk or short bus ride away from the hub site where they perform their work. Second, recipients may access the wrap-around services available within the hub site, such as child care, preschool, after-school and mentoring programs, and mental health counseling. These services are funded by a variety of sources (including government contracts, federal grants, and private donations) and are available to all neighborhood residents, including TANF recipients. This also allows recipients to combine work experience with vocational or education programs, such as GED and ESL, offered on-site. Third, according to staff, the use of neighborhood hub sites increases TANF recipients' investment in and connectivity with the community. Developing strong social networks expands the availability of emotional and physical supports that, according to staff, often are lacking for TANF recipients.

Through a contractual arrangement with the Erie County DSS, the nonprofit agencies operating the neighborhood hub sites hire work experience supervisors whose full-time job is to teach TANF recipients job skills and healthy workplace habits. In selecting hub sites, DSS chose agencies where recipients and their families could access a range of supports during their work experience placement. More recently, the county has helped local hub sites develop vocational training programs and classes where recipients can earn their high school diploma or GED.

The neighborhood hub sites can decide how to structure their work experience positions, although their decisions must be approved by the county. An agency may assign TANF recipients to work on temporary projects where their tasks are based on the agency's immediate needs. For example, one agency gave several TANF work experience recipients the task of building new coat racks for the in-house child care center. Other work experience jobs may include jani-

torial, clerical, or groundskeeping positions. Agencies also may organize a group of participants to complete a project in the community. Such project assignments may last a few days or a few months.

Nearly all TANF recipients are assigned to a work experience position on-site at the neighborhood hub site, although some hub sites will arrange placements with other organizations in the community for TANF recipients who are ready to transition into competitive employment. In these latter cases, the agency operating the neighborhood hub site is responsible for arranging and monitoring the work experience placement. The hub sites rely on their strong connections within the community to create positions outside of the hub site.

Paid Supervision. Since many TANF recipients have little or no work experience, they often need individualized help to learn basic work habits and strengthen their job skills. They also may need help in managing personal and family challenges. Work site supervisors, who are paid employees of the hub sites, work exclusively with TANF recipients assigned to participate in work experience, giving recipients a foundation for effectively functioning in a competitive work environment. Assigned to work with 15 to 35 TANF recipients each, the supervisors work alongside recipients daily, and therefore are able to directly observe recipients' behaviors and help them develop healthy work habits. For example, they might teach recipients appropriate actions to take when their child is sick and the recipient does not have backup child care (such as calling a supervisor or finding a coworker with whom to trade shifts). They also may brainstorm with a recipient to resolve an interpersonal conflict at the workplace or may provide suggestions for improving a recipient's appearance at work. Work site supervisors also build recipients' job skills for such tasks as using a computer program, operating a complicated telephone system, or using cleaning equipment to maintain a building. When personal or family challenges interfere with a recipient's attendance or ability to perform a job, the supervisor contacts the TANF case manager or a county-designated work site liaison who then helps the recipient resolve the challenges so that he or she can once again focus on participation and employment goals.

Specialty Placements. Although TANF case managers usually assign recipients to a work experience provider in their own neighborhood, recipients with substantial service needs may be referred to a specialized provider, such as one with experience serving people with disabilities. For example, recipients assigned to the substance abuse unit who complete their initial treatment are then referred to a local mental health provider that offers them a work experience placement and access to follow-up treatment. Those who require more structure and support at their work placement typically are referred to Goodwill Industries, whose staff has skills and experience to tailor work placement activities to meet such needs.

Placements in Government Agencies. In addition to the hub sites, Erie County also offers work experience placements in government offices, county parks, and at the Buffalo Zoo to TANF and Safety Net recipients. The Safety Net program is a statewide program that provides cash assistance to singles, childless couples, and families with children who have reached the end of their 60-month TANF time limit. In general, government work experience placements are targeted primarily to Safety Net recipients rather than TANF recipients. Still, a TANF recipient may be referred to a government placement when it is more convenient for them than a neighborhood provider or while they are waiting for a work experience placement in their neighborhood.

Individualized Job Development and Placement. To aid in the transition to work, Erie County DSS has six job developers on staff who work closely with recipients in work experience placements to place them in competitive jobs in the community. Once a recipient consistently shows up on time and is performing well, the TANF case manager and/or work site supervisor will notify the job developer supervisor, who will in turn assign a job developer to the recipient. The job developer works individually with each recipient to identify opportunities for competitive employment. Recipients continue in their work experience placement while working with the job developer. To avoid disrupting the recipient's work day, job developers meet with them at their work experience site. Job developers talk with the recipient about their job skills and work interests so they can identify current job openings for which they might apply. The job development unit maintains a database

of more than 600 employers with whom they have relationships and listings of current job openings. In those cases in which the job developer has an existing relationship with the employer, he or she may contact the employer directly to talk about the recipient's strengths. Job developers also help recipients prepare for job interviews by role-playing with them and talking with them about how to make a good impression (for example, about the importance of showing up on time, physical appearance and dress, and appropriate conversation).

Subsidized Work Placements. To create more permanent job opportunities for TANF recipients, Erie County DSS created the PIVOT (Placing Individuals in Vital Opportunity Training) Program. In this program, recipients are hired by a private-sector employer under an agreement that the county will pay the recipient's wages for six months in exchange for training the recipient, provided the employer commits to hiring the recipient permanently afterward. PIVOT, which targets those ready for competitive employment, is offered as an incentive to TANF recipients who show up consistently and perform well at their work experience placement. Employers conduct a formal hiring process, including job interviews, with a pool of 10 to 15 TANF recipients whom county job developers have identified as being appropriate for the positions. Recipients are selected to be part of the interview pool based on how well their skills match the job requirements as well as their level of interest in the position. Employers have leeway in structuring the screening and interview process. Some interview a select group while others may interview all those referred to them by DSS. Employers use PIVOT as a way to screen and train potential entry-level workers. For Erie County DSS, PIVOT is a way to engage employers who are willing to hire TANF recipients. For TANF recipients, it creates opportunities to successfully transition into competitive, unsubsidized employment. At any given time, approximately 400 TANF recipients are working in PIVOT jobs, most of whom (approximately 85 percent) transition into a permanent job with their PIVOT employer.

Performance-Based Contracts Based on Participation. To encourage accountability in achieving TANF outcomes, Erie County uses performance-based contracts through which the hub sites are paid the full

amount of their contract if they maintain a 75 percent quarterly work participation rate. Their payment amount is reduced by 15 percent for achieving a 65 percent work participation rate, by 25 percent for a 55 percent rate, and by 50 percent for a 45 percent rate or below. Providers may refer nonparticipants back to DSS after five days of inactivity and after a warning letter has been sent to the recipient. Those referred back to DSS are removed from the contractor's work participation rate calculation, allowing providers to earn the full payment. This provision allows DSS to quickly identify and reengage nonparticipants.

Service Delivery and Administrative Approach

Enrollment. Within a week of submitting their TANF applications, eligible recipients are screened and assigned to one of the four aforementioned service units. Work-ready TANF applicants referred to the employability unit complete a three-week "job club" to prepare for and find a job. During the job club period, applicants attend a weekly job search workshop and are required to submit at least four job applications each week as a condition of TANF eligibility. Once their TANF application is approved, those who do not find competitive employment during the applicant job search are assigned to a neighborhood hub site or county placement for a work experience assignment. Together, the case manager and recipient decide which hub site best matches the recipient's work interests and service needs. DSS employment counselors (case managers) are expected to assign recipients to work experience placements within a month of their initial application.

Before referring a recipient to a hub site, the DSS employment counselor develops an employment plan for the recipient that defines the total number of hours he or she must participate in work activities and how many of those hours must consist of work experience. Where possible, the county encourages providers to engage recipients in 20 hours per week of work experience and to fill the remaining hours with educational activities (mostly working toward their high school diploma or GED) or vocational training. Once recipients are assigned to a neighborhood hub site they are immediately placed in a work experience position.

Administrative Structure. Erie County DSS handles all eligibility, case management, and job placement services for TANF recipients. DSS contracts directly with providers of specialty placements, such as Goodwill Industries. DSS also contracts with a large provider, United Way of Erie County, to serve as the fiscal agent and provide administrative oversight for the work experience program, including procuring the subcontracts for the four agencies operating the neighborhood hub sites. DSS and United Way select the hub sites. This arrangement is used for a couple of reasons.

First, using United Way as the fiscal agent allows DSS to provide a broader range of work experience opportunities than the county could provide. County layoffs of building maintenance staff several years ago heightened labor unions' concern that unpaid work experience would be used to replace paid county jobs. As a result, the unions have limited the work that TANF recipients can do for county agencies. For example, they cannot operate any machinery more complicated than a vacuum since performing these tasks could displace existing county workers. In addition, county work site supervisors cannot teach recipients job skills that would result in the displacement of any existing county employee. Since United Way and its subcontractors do not operate under the requirements of the county labor union, they have greater autonomy and flexibility in building recipients' job skills.

Second, United Way is able to streamline the hiring process for work site supervisors and to purchase needed equipment, such as lawn mowers and computers, more quickly than the county could.

Staffing. County supervisors, case managers, job developers, and work site supervisors at the contracted service providers work collaboratively in an attempt to deliver seamless work experience services. To foster communication, county staff are encouraged to meet with recipients and work experience supervisors at the work sites. In practice, county supervisors visit the hub sites at least monthly to talk with worksite supervisors and recipients who are assigned to work experience placements. The visits may be more frequent if the site or program participants need more support. Staff members each have a

distinct role to play in the county's work experience program.

- **Employment counselors** (case managers) who provide basic case management work directly with TANF recipients. They monitor their participation in work experience and address personal or family challenges that interfere with their participation or progress. Each counselor manages roughly 200 TANF and Safety Net cases, limiting the amount of one-on-one work they can do. They primarily communicate with the work site supervisor about the participant's participation, ongoing service needs, and readiness for and progress toward obtaining a permanent job.
- **Work site supervisors** hired by the neighborhood hub site agencies assign job tasks and oversee their completion. Working directly with a small number of work experience recipients, these supervisors play an active role in socializing recipients to a work environment. In addition, they monitor and track recipients' participation in work activities and seek to reengage them if they fail to show up.
- **DSS work site supervisors** (two employees) monitor the hub sites' work site supervisors to ensure that recipients receive adequate supervision and are performing well at their work sites. Visiting the providers regularly, they address difficulties with service delivery such as monitoring and tracking recipients' participation and keeping the recipients engaged in program activities. They also may make suggestions for improving the overall quality of the work experience program. In some cases, they may help resolve a problem with a program participant, but this is not the primary focus of their work.
- **DSS work site liaisons** (two employees) act as a bridge between the employment counselors and the agencies' work site supervisors in reporting who is completing their required work experience hours and who is not. Liaisons relay notices of nonparticipation from the hub site agency to the recipient's employment counselor.
- **DSS job developers** (six employees) work individually with recipients at their job sites or in the

DSS office to help them find and make the transition to competitive, unsubsidized employment. Having worked closely with the recipient, work site supervisors at the hub sites also may recommend to the job developer alternative jobs in which the recipient may excel. DSS job developers also facilitate placements for the PIVOT program.

Program Results

Achieving a high work participation rate is a challenge for Erie County and for New York State as a whole, based partly on state policies. For example, recipients with documented physical and/or mental health disabilities or drug or alcohol addictions are exempt from participating in program activities in New York State, but they remain in the denominator for purposes of the federal work participation rate calculation. Also, New York State has a "partial" family sanction policy in place, whereby only the noncompliant adult is removed from TANF and the other members of the assistance unit continue to receive a pro-rata portion of benefits. This means that cases in which adults are not meeting their work participation requirement remain in the denominator of the work participation calculation while the adult is in sanction status. In spite of these challenges, as of March 2008, Erie County had achieved a work participation rate of 42.4 percent. According to county TANF administrators, expanding their existing use of work experience helped them achieve more than a 15 percentage point gain in about two years. Contracted service providers played an instrumental role in contributing to meeting the state's participation rate requirement; providers reported participation rates between 60 and 90 percent for those recipients assigned to them. At any given time, about half of the total TANF work-mandatory caseload is assigned to participate in work experience.

MONTANA

For more than a decade, Montana's Office of Public Assistance (OPA) has relied on work experience as an activity for teaching TANF recipients job skills and basic work habits. Across the state, OPA hires contractors to provide all case management and employment and training services, including work

experience for TANF recipients. Unlike the other programs highlighted in this brief, which are unique to the counties where they operate, Montana’s program is standardized statewide. In addition, Montana targets the entire work-mandatory TANF caseload, including those who are hard to employ. As a result, the state offers a range of work placements at both government and nonprofit agencies. Recipients assigned to work experience are required to participate for 33 hours per week, and in order to encourage their progress toward work, recipients can spend no more than three months at any given work site. Staff believe that building in a transition point prevents the recipient from treating the placement as a permanent job and creates a natural point at which a recipient might move to competitive employment.

TANF administrators and contracted service providers in Montana face two unique challenges in providing work experience. First, Montana covers a large area. Geographically, Montana is the fourth largest state in the continental United States, yet it ranks near the bottom (44th) in total population, with just under 1 million residents. Thus, providers must find work experience opportunities and monitor the work sites in many rural areas. Providing work experience opportunities in rural areas is time consuming and, in some cases, it is challenging to find employers who are willing to provide work placements. Second, Montana is home to a large Native American population, many members of which live on reservations where unemployment rates are as high as 50 percent. Across the state there are seven designated Native American reservations, each home to between 3,000 and 26,000 residents. TANF recipients participating in tribal TANF programs on reservations with unemployment rates of 50 percent or more are exempt from TANF time limits, but not from work requirements. Thus, work experience provides one of the few options recipients in the tribal programs have for meeting their work participation requirement.

As noted previously, Montana operates a statewide work experience program. For purposes of describing the program, we use information on the program’s operation in Lewis and Clark County (Helena).

MONTANA

Key Program Features

- Tiered work placements in the community based on recipients’ employability
- Employability assessments to assign level of work placement
- Structured training plans to define work site activities
- Weekly performance appraisals and time-limited placements to encourage progress
- Case managers who work frequently and intensively with a limited number of recipients (15 to 25 recipients each)
- Work experience coordinator who serves as a liaison between recipients and employers
- Skills training for recipients in their work placement

Noteworthy Achievements

- The program achieved a 45 percent state work participation rate by engaging roughly half of the TANF work-mandatory caseload in work experience.
- Statewide, nearly half of the non-tribal caseload is engaged in work experience.
- One local work experience site has permanently hired 98 TANF recipients.

Key Program Features

Structured Training Plans. Montana uses work experience placements as training sites to build the job skills of TANF recipients, particularly those with limited skills and experience. Individualized training plans—negotiated between the recipient, the work experience coordinator, and the employer providing the placement—establish expectations about the training and capacity-building activities that the employer will offer the recipient in exchange for labor. The training plan also provides recipients with the opportunity to set attainable employment goals. A recipient’s TANF case manager has primary responsibility for developing the plan and can decide whether or not to hold a joint meeting with the em-

MONTANA'S TRAINING PLANS

A training plan is a formal agreement between the recipient, the contracted service provider, and the employer describing the skills and experience the recipients will obtain from their work activities. Examples of activities included in training plans are described below.

Stock Clerk, Good Samaritan Thrift Store (Level One Site)

The recipient will learn—

- organizational skills by sorting clothing and other donated merchandise.
- customer service skills by helping shoppers locate merchandise.
- freight handling skills by loading and unloading trucks on the docking bay.
- merchandising skills by stocking and displaying products to attract customers.

Data Entry Clerk, Department of Revenue, (Level Two Site)

The recipient will learn—

- data entry skills by entering tax forms into a computer system.
- data processing skills by coding and verifying alphabetic or numeric data.
- operation of a 10-key data entry machine.

ployer and the recipient in developing the plan. It is not uncommon for the initial communication with the employer to be handled over the phone. Training plans are reviewed at least monthly so that all those involved (the case manager, employer and recipient) stay focused on what they set out to achieve through the placement. Employers who use these placements as a way to screen entry-level workers reportedly see individualized training plans as an opportunity to invest in the skill development of potential employees.

The creation of structured training plans also holds work site supervisors accountable for engaging

recipients in meaningful activities. Unlike in Erie County, where work site supervisors are paid to supervise TANF recipients, in Montana each employer designates a permanent employee to supervise the TANF recipient assigned to a work experience placement. As such, the majority of their time is dedicated to supervising permanent employees rather than the TANF recipient completing a work experience assignment. Given all the demands and responsibilities placed on supervisors, the training plans increase the likelihood that the work-related needs of TANF recipients will be addressed. In their monitoring role, TANF case managers are responsible for ensuring that each TANF recipient receives adequate supervision and that the training plan is being implemented.

Tiered Work Placements. To accommodate the varying skills, abilities, and circumstances of TANF recipients, Montana has created two levels of work placements. Recipients are assigned to either a level one or a level two work placement based on their job readiness. At any point in time, roughly two-thirds of the work-mandatory TANF recipients are assigned to level one work placements while the remaining third are assigned to level two work placements. Recipients may move up to level two as their job readiness improves. Work placements for both levels are in government organizations and nonprofit agencies.

Recipients with low cognitive functioning, personal or family challenges, criminal histories, or limited or no work history are assigned to level one placements. Examples of level one placements include assignments to the Good Samaritan Thrift Store, the offices of the City of East Helena, and Head Start programs. Recipients in these placements may perform janitorial tasks, sort clothing, serve in clerical positions, or handle customer service responsibilities. Agencies that offer these placements typically are experienced in assigning recipients to tasks and environments that match their abilities. While the actual tasks performed in level one and level two sites are sometimes similar, such as clerical or receptionist positions, the level of support provided to address behavior or attendance issues is greater at level one sites.

Recipients with some job skills and work experience who are relatively work-ready are assigned to level two sites. For example, at the Governor's Office,

TANF recipients may be assigned to constituent services, where they perform clerical tasks, process mail, and respond to information requests sent to the office. TANF recipients assigned to work experience at the state Department of Transportation fill mail-room and clerical positions. OPA staff believe that working alongside permanent employees gives TANF recipients exposure to and confidence in transitioning to competitive employment.

Employability Assessment. Decisions about a recipient's work assignment are based on a comprehensive employability assessment and observations of the recipient's behaviors and attitudes during a two-week job search period. As part of the initial TANF orientation, a TANF case manager meets individually with each new recipient to gather information about her or his work history, educational attainment, barriers to employment (for example, physical or mental health conditions, criminal histories, children's behavioral issues), and work-related service needs (for example, transportation and child care). In addition to the standard assessment, case managers also administer specialized screenings to detect domestic abuse and to assess learning abilities and needs. This information is combined with observations of the recipient's attendance, punctuality, interpersonal skills, and physical appearance during the two week up-front job search period to determine whether the recipient requires a level one or level two work experience placement.

Weekly Performance Appraisals. Work site supervisors actively monitor and report recipients' participation and performance to the case manager. As part of the weekly timesheet review, the work site supervisor reviews and approves the recipient's reported hours and completes a short performance appraisal summarizing the recipient's work week. The appraisal uses a series of four-point scales to determine if the recipient's performance or behaviors meet agency standards for (1) appropriate appearance, (2) dependability, (3) punctuality, (4) productivity, and (5) being a team player. Work site supervisors also are asked to indicate whether they would like to talk with a work experience coordinator regarding the participant's progress or any problems the recipient may be having at the work site. The recipient and TANF case manager meet weekly to review the performance appraisal. This creates an opportunity to discuss any

additional training or supports the recipient might require to improve performance.

Time-Limited Work Placements. Recipients may spend up to three months at any given site. Sometimes exceptions to the three-month limit are made when the employer is willing to hire the recipient in the near future. The end of a given work placement is a natural transition point for entering competitive, unsubsidized employment. For those who need additional time and experience to prepare for regular employment, or where jobs may not be readily available, changing work placements allows the opportunity for the recipient to learn from different employers and experience different work sites.

Intensive Personal and Work Supports. In Lewis and Clark County, four primary supports are available to help recipients succeed at their work placement. First, TANF case managers, who carry caseloads of 15 to 25 recipients each, meet with their recipients at least weekly to monitor their participation and progress. Small caseloads allow for intensive involvement to resolve personal and family issues (for example, substance abuse, domestic abuse, housing instability, or mental health) and to teach basic soft skills (for example, communication, problem-solving, or personal hygiene) during in-person meetings. Second, a work experience coordinator, who is an experienced TANF case manager, acts as a liaison between employers and recipients to resolve work site issues. When recipients have difficulty with a work placement, the coordinator can identify needed resources or reassign them to a different site. Coordinators also serve as the primary contact for the employer for issues related to attendance, timeliness, or attitudes that create conflict at the work site. Third, work site supervisors at the employer provide daily guidance and support to recipients while they are working. Wherever possible, these supervisors integrate recipients into the daily operations by inviting them to meetings, trainings, and social events. Finally, the TANF agency provides recipients with work supports such as transportation, child care, and workplace clothing.

Supports for Work Site Supervisors. In Lewis and Clark County, the work experience coordinator actively cultivates relationships with employers in the community. The coordinator receives feedback from

work site supervisors about recipients' performance and any issues that might arise at the work place. The coordinator may organize case conferences to discuss problems, authorize additional training, or develop a plan for reengaging a recipient who is not actively participating. The coordinator visits the work site supervisors at least monthly at their agency. Recipients are required to sign a release of information form before they start their work assignment, allowing employers and coordinators to talk candidly about recipients' progress and employability.

Job Readiness Activities and Skills Training. Program administrators have learned that when all recipients are targeted for work experience, some preparation is necessary prior to placing recipients at a work site. Prior to passage of the DRA, contracted service providers in Montana engaged recipients in structured work preparation activities and skills training (for example, computer training) for up to three months. While program administrators recognized the benefits of this work preparation period, they substantially reduced the time recipients spend in these preparatory activities in order to increase their chances of meeting the TANF work participation rates. Recipients are now assigned to a work experience site shortly after they are determined to be eligible for TANF, and job readiness activities and skills training are provided as needed after recipients are assigned to their work experience placement. TANF administrators, contracted service providers, and employers all feel that the pre-DRA approach worked better. In their view, it helped to prepare recipients for their work experience placement both by providing explicit instruction on the soft skills and some of the hard skills needed to succeed on the job. It also provided recipients with an opportunity to get into the habit of participating in a structured program activity.

Service Delivery and Administrative Approach

Enrollment. In Montana, the goal is for a TANF recipient assigned to work experience to begin his or her work experience placement within a month after the TANF case is opened. After recipients complete their initial TANF application, they complete the employability assessment. Work-mandatory TANF recipients continue with a two-week program of job search and job readiness. Those who are unsuccessful

in finding a job during that period are immediately referred to a work experience coordinator, who matches them to a work experience placement based on their level of employability and work interests. To make a good match, the work experience coordinator reviews the recipient's initial assessment and their documented performance during the two-week job search period. To alleviate recipients' fears about working, the TANF case manager meets them at their work experience site on the first day. Because Montana has been operating a work experience program for many years, it has a large pool of employers to draw upon and is almost always able to find a work experience site that is consistent with a recipient's interests and abilities.

Beginning with enrollment, recipients are encouraged by their case managers to look for competitive employment while they are participating in work experience. They may give them job leads, role-play a job interview, or help the participant identify work-related strengths. In addition, recipients may use the local One-Stop Career Center, a full-service job search resource operated by the state's Department of Labor, or in-house job-search resources offered by the contracted service provider. As standard practice, providers try to recruit work-experience sites where the employers are willing to hire TANF recipients who perform well. One employer in Lewis and Clark County has hired about 100 TANF recipients who completed their work experience at the agency.

Administrative Structure. In Montana, OPA contracts with 14 local providers across the state that offer a full range of case management and employment and training services for TANF recipients. Each provider is required to create a work experience program within the communities each is contracted to serve. In Lewis and Clark County, the Career Training Institute (CTI) began serving TANF recipients in 1998, offering a full range of job search and training resources. OPA handles all initial and ongoing eligibility.

Staffing. While CTI has primary responsibility for operating the work experience program for TANF recipients, CTI staff also work in partnership with employers. Their respective roles are as follows.

- **CTI case managers** actively assess and address recipients' personal service needs as they relate to their ability to get and keep a job. When recipients stop participating, they immediately try to re-engage them.
- **CTI work experience coordinators** act as liaisons between and a support to recipients and work site supervisors. The coordinator, who is responsible for developing job placements, actively cultivates relationships with employers in the community.
- **Work site supervisors**, who are employees at each work site, mentor TANF recipients daily at the site. They also notify CTI staff when a recipient does not show up for work or when there are other problems related to recipients' performance at the job site. Work site supervisors often serve as job references when recipients assigned to them apply for competitive employment. Work site supervisors do not receive any financial reimbursement from the contractor or from the TANF agency.

Program Results

In partnership with contracted service providers, Montana's OPA uses work experience as the primary service strategy for helping TANF recipients move from welfare to work. Across the state, each month roughly half of the work-mandatory non-tribal TANF recipients participate in work experience, generally in government and nonprofit agencies. (The participation rate among tribal TANF participants is substantially lower.) Relying primarily on work experience, in 2007 Montana achieved a work participation rate of 45 percent. With an 18 percent caseload reduction credit for 2007, the state expects to exceed its effective all-families federal work participation rate requirement. The state also has been successful with job placement, earning a TANF High Performance Bonus for six consecutive years during the time that bonuses were awarded.²

HAMILTON COUNTY, OHIO (Cincinnati)

With the implementation of PRWORA, Ohio Jobs and Family Services (JFS), the state TANF agency, developed the policies and basic framework for operating work experience programs in the state. The guidelines define the number of hours recipients must

participate and provide information on how to calculate hours under FLSA. They also provide information on how sanctions and other TANF policies should be applied. Since Ohio's TANF program is county-administered, each county has built its own administrative infrastructure and service delivery system for operating work experience programs based on the resources available and service needs of its TANF recipients. When new requirements under the DRA went into effect, Ohio's counties were well positioned to place recipients in work experience because they had an infrastructure for placements already established.

In Hamilton County, TANF administrators rely on work experience as a primary work activity for their roughly 2,800 work-mandatory TANF recipients. Individual and group work experience placements in government and nonprofit agencies are scattered throughout the county. Recipients work up to 30 hours per week for no longer than six months at any one site, unless the work experience position will lead to a permanent paid position, in which case its duration may be extended.

Hamilton County has a well-established lump-sum payment diversion program, which provides support to about 1,000 work-ready TANF applicants per year, alleviating the need for them to receive TANF cash assistance. According to county TANF administrators, giving work-ready applicants lump-sum diversion payments instead of TANF has resulted in a greater percentage of hard-to-employ TANF recipients on the caseload, as compared to other counties. (All counties in Ohio operate lump-sum payment diversion programs, but Hamilton County has been especially successful at creating a large and well utilized program.)

Key Program Features

Individualized Work Placements. Hamilton County offers a range of work placements to which recipients are matched based on their job skills, work interests, and service needs. Work experience sites in Hamilton County provide entry-level positions in areas such as janitorial, clerical, and food services. Employers that provide work experience placements include government organizations, nonprofit agencies, and educational institutions. Based on an initial assessment,

HAMILTON COUNTY, OH

Key Program Features

- Individualized community placements
- Educational institutions that offer work experience placements to those enrolled in secondary or higher education
- Work experience administered by a collaborative of agencies, each providing specialized services
- Vocational assessments used to match recipients to appropriate work placements
- Work sites that offer skills training and work supports

Noteworthy Achievements

- Hamilton County maintains a 35 percent work participation rate, among the highest in the state.
- Of those assigned to work experience, roughly 47 percent met the hours required to count in the numerator of the work participation rate calculation.

recipients and vocational assessors consider work experience sites that would be a good match, taking into account each recipient's needs and interests.

Typical tasks performed by participants include processing mail, filing documents, answering the telephone, landscaping, and cleaning office buildings.

County adult education providers and local community colleges have been strong partners in providing work experience sites. Hamilton County JFS works closely with local educational institutions to offer work experience to TANF recipients enrolled in a secondary or higher education program. Often, TANF recipients' work experience placements, such as student lab assistant or academic tutor, are structured to enhance their educational activities. Program administrators believe that the combination of school and work experience will increase recipients' chances of obtaining a well-paying job.

Preparatory Group Work Placements. Hamilton County JFS offers temporary work experience group

placements for recipients who need extra support and for those waiting for a work assignment. Such recipients are assigned to a group placement in the mailroom at JFS, where they create address labels, sort mail, and compile application packets, among other tasks. County TANF administrators indicated that this site offers recipients flexibility and a high level of support that they might not find in a community placement. In addition, recipients may review the in-house job board to identify job opportunities available in-house and elsewhere. At the time of the site visit, 15 TANF recipients were assigned to the JFS mailroom, with each recipient assigned to a morning or afternoon shift. In the past, as many as 33 TANF recipients have been assigned to JFS at one time.

Use of Vocational Assessments to Match TANF Recipients With an Appropriate Placement.

Believing that finding a good match between the recipient and the employer is important to success, Hamilton County JFS relies on skilled staff to assess recipients and determine appropriate work placements. Recipients assigned to work experience are referred to a vocational assessor, who uses a questionnaire developed by the agency to gather information about the recipient's past work history, educational attainment, work interests and goals, and any personal and family challenges that might interfere with work. In making a match, staff primarily consider recipients' abilities, experiences, and work interests. They also consider where recipients live and their participation in previous work assignments. Based on this information, they develop a vocational assessment plan, which includes a work experience placement. Together, the vocational assessor and the recipient identify an employer from a list of existing work experience placements or may contact a new employer who would be a good fit for the recipient to seek a placement with.

Collaboration and Co-location. Hamilton County JFS provides work experience using a "one-stop shopping" service approach, known as the Community Link Collaborative, in which staff from different agencies are co-located, providing targeted functions based on their area of expertise.³ For example, a local substance abuse and mental health treatment provider hires licensed clinicians to conduct in-depth assessments of those suspected of having a substance abuse or a mental health condition to determine who is appropriate for work experience. Agencies with expe-

rience serving individuals with disabilities conduct the vocational assessments to assign recipients to an appropriate work experience placement. Local employment and training service providers hire staff who manage work site coordination. This consists primarily of monitoring recipients' participation and progress. Co-location allows staff members to effectively coordinate services and share information about the resources available within their respective agencies.

Personal and Work Supports. To prepare recipients for competitive, unsubsidized employment, Hamilton County JFS and work experience sites offer a variety of personal and work supports. First, as needed, service coordinators (case managers) are available to help recipients address their personal and family challenges, such as physical or mental health conditions or housing needs. They may refer recipients to services available from agencies in the community to address these challenges. Second, many of the work sites offer job skills training and other work supports. For example, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) offers a preschool program for the children of TANF recipients who are earning their high school diploma or GED and are completing their work experience assignment. CPS also offers TANF recipients a life skills workshop to build their problem-solving and communication skills as well as their self-esteem. Finally, JFS provides basic work supports such as child care, transportation, and work clothing for those enrolled in work experience.

Service Delivery and Administrative Approach

Enrollment. Before TANF recipients are referred to a work experience slot, they complete the series of screenings and assessments previously mentioned to determine their job readiness and to identify any personal or family issues that need to be resolved before they can begin their work placement. Recipients with mental health conditions or learning disabilities may be referred to a screener, a licensed counselor, or a social worker employed by a local mental health agency involved with the work experience program for an in-depth psychosocial assessment and, when appropriate, a service referral. Recipients who need additional services before beginning a placement are assigned to a service coordinator, who helps them obtain services to address conditions that interfere

with work. Those who are work-ready complete a four-week job search. If they have not obtained employment after this four-week period, they are assigned to a vocational assessor who further assesses them and matches them to an employer to begin work experience activities. Ideally, recipients are assigned to a work experience placement immediately after they complete their four-week job search requirement. Delays may occur if the recipient is difficult to place because she/he has a criminal record or needs to arrange for child care.

Administrative Structure. Since the implementation of PRWORA, Hamilton County JFS has handled TANF eligibility responsibilities in-house and contracted out all case management and employment and training responsibilities to providers in the community. JFS case managers handle initial and ongoing TANF eligibility. Contracted staff provide information regularly to JFS staff on program participation, and JFS implements any actions that affect eligibility, such as the imposition of sanctions. Contracted staff have full responsibility for developing and implementing employment plans for the recipients referred to them.

JFS contracts directly with Talbert House, a large nonprofit community-based agency, which in turn subcontracts with seven different community agencies that collectively make up the Community Link Collaborative. In addition to Talbert House, partners in the collaborative include three community-based organizations, one of which targets individuals with disabilities; a faith-based employment service provider; and two specialized treatment providers (for mental health and drug and alcohol abuse). Staff from each of these agencies are co-located in a large facility where TANF recipients are served.

In the past, Hamilton County JFS also contracted with local providers to offer work experience placements. This approach received mixed reviews. On the one hand, this arrangement reportedly improved the availability of work experience placements and the quality of the work site supervision provided to TANF recipients. On the other hand, even though JFS was paying for the slots, many were going unused. JFS did not renew the provider contracts because the agency thought its TANF funds were not

being well spent. Now, when employers provide work slots they are not compensated financially.

Staffing. Community Link comprises roughly 80 staff from the agencies in the collaborative. Talbert House contributes the largest number of staff, nearly half of those assigned to Community Link. The two specialized treatment providers offer the fewest staff, six in all. Community Link staff positions directly involved with the work experience program are described in greater detail below.

- **Greeters** are the initial point of contact for recipients referred to Community Link. They are responsible for making an initial determination about who is appropriate for work experience. They base their decisions on an initial assessment completed shortly after recipients apply for TANF.
- **Vocational assessors** conduct comprehensive vocational assessments of all recipients referred to work experience and, based on the results, match recipients to work experience placements. These positions are provided by two agencies—a local mental health provider and an agency experienced at serving individuals with disabilities.
- **Work experience coordinators**, who represent staff from more than half of the agencies in the collaborative, monitor recipients' participation in work experience and their progress toward competitive employment. While they are required to meet with recipients monthly at their work sites, caseloads of around 200 recipients per worker make this challenging. In some cases, recipients are not seen as often as required.
- **A work site developer**, a position created recently, recruits employers to offer work experience sites. She maintains a list of about 100 employers and also will develop additional sites at the request of the vocational assessor and/or recipient. For example, if a recipient has a particular career interest or would like to work at an employer near where she lives, the work site developer would find a new site if an appropriate one does not already exist.

- **Screeners**, many of whom are licensed clinical therapists, are available to assess the recipients and provide treatment recommendations for those who may reveal disabilities, such as mental health, substance abuse, or learning disabilities. Signs of these conditions may surface as the recipients engage in work experience programs and are subjected to the pressure of working.
- **Service coordinators** provide assistance to help address personal and family challenges. After any personal or family challenges are resolved, the recipient is referred back to a work experience coordinator who is responsible for monitoring the case.

Program Results

In November 2007, relying substantially on work experience, Hamilton County achieved a 47.8 percent work participation rate. While the county's rate has fluctuated somewhat since then, dropping to as low as 33 percent due to policy changes, Hamilton County was and remains one of the highest performing counties in the state. At any point in time, about a third of the work-mandatory caseload is assigned to work experience, and about 47 percent of those in work experience complete the hours required to meet the work participation requirement. The decline in the county's work participation rate has been attributed to new definitions of countable work activities, particularly changes in the length of time recipients may participate in job readiness activities, and to the lack of restrictions on the length of time a recipient may be exempt from work activities while looking for child care. County TANF administrators are hoping to reverse the recent decline in their work participation rate by focusing on engagement and limiting the child care exemption to three weeks.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the DRA, few states used work experience as a primary activity for engaging TANF recipients in countable work activities. However, it is possible that more states will look to work experience programs as a strategy for meeting the more stringent DRA requirements. In keeping with the work-first philosophy, work experience offers TANF recipients a rapid attachment to the labor force that they might not have

otherwise been able to achieve. The experiences of these programs suggest that program administrators considering implementation of a work experience program may need to be prepared to address the following challenges: (1) finding the right balance between providing sufficient up-front preparation to increase participants' chances of success and quickly moving recipients into a countable work activity; (2) encouraging steady participation; (3) developing work placements that meet the diverse needs and interests of clients; (4) providing support to help participants find competitive employment; and (5) addressing the concerns of local labor unions when needed.

REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is interested in knowing whether readers of this brief found it useful and how it has informed their work and interests in this topic. You are invited to send comments on how you found out about the brief and whether it contributed to considerations concerning policy implementation. Please email your comments to pic@hhs.gov and include the title of the brief in the subject line of your email.

NOTES

¹In an effort to streamline program administration, PRWORA provided the states with the option of operating a Simplified Food Stamp Program (SFSP) for households whose members are receiving TANF assistance. The simplified program was designed to create conformity between TANF and the Food Stamp Program by merging the programs' rules into a single set of requirements for individuals receiving both types of assistance. PRWORA also allows the states to implement a limited, or "mini," simplified program in which the food stamp work requirement is replaced by TANF's work requirement. A SFSP or mini-SFSP must be in place for states to use the combined value of food stamps and TANF benefits to determine the number of hours a recipient can be required to work in an unpaid work experience or community work experience placement.

²High Performance Bonus awards were made in Fiscal Years 1999 through 2004 to reward states for achieving high performance in meeting the purposes and goals of the TANF program. Absolute and improved performance on work measures (job entry, job retention and earnings gains) were rewarded for all six years.

³Talbert House administers Community Link. Other agencies involved with the collaborative include Easter Seals Work Resource Center, Recovery Link, Jewish Vocational Services, Crossroads Center, Greater Cincinnati Behavioral Health Services, and the Alcoholism Council.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

The Deficit Reduction Act (Title VII, Subtitle A)

[frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname='09congress_bills&docid=f:s1932enr.txt.pdf](http://www.webgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname='09congress_bills&docid=f:s1932enr.txt.pdf)

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Martinson, Karin, and Pamela A. Holcomb. "Innovative Employment Approaches and Programs for Low-Income Families." Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, February 2007.

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Derr, Michelle K. "Providing Specialized Personal and Work Support." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., February 2008.

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http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare_employ/identify_promise_prac/reports/creating_tanf_vocational/creating_tanf_vocational.pdf

Using TANF Sanctions to Increase Work Participation Rates

Kauff, Jacqueline, Michelle K. Derr, LaDonna Pavetti, and Emily Sama Martin. "Using Work-Oriented Sanctions to Increase TANF Program Participation." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., September 2007.

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare_employ/sanction_pol/reports/sanction_pol/sanction_pol.pdf

Universal Engagement and Working With the Hard-to-Employ

Kauff, Jacqueline, Michelle K. Derr, and LaDonna Pavetti. "A Study of Work Participation and Full Engagement Strategies." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., September 2004.

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/full-engagement04>

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