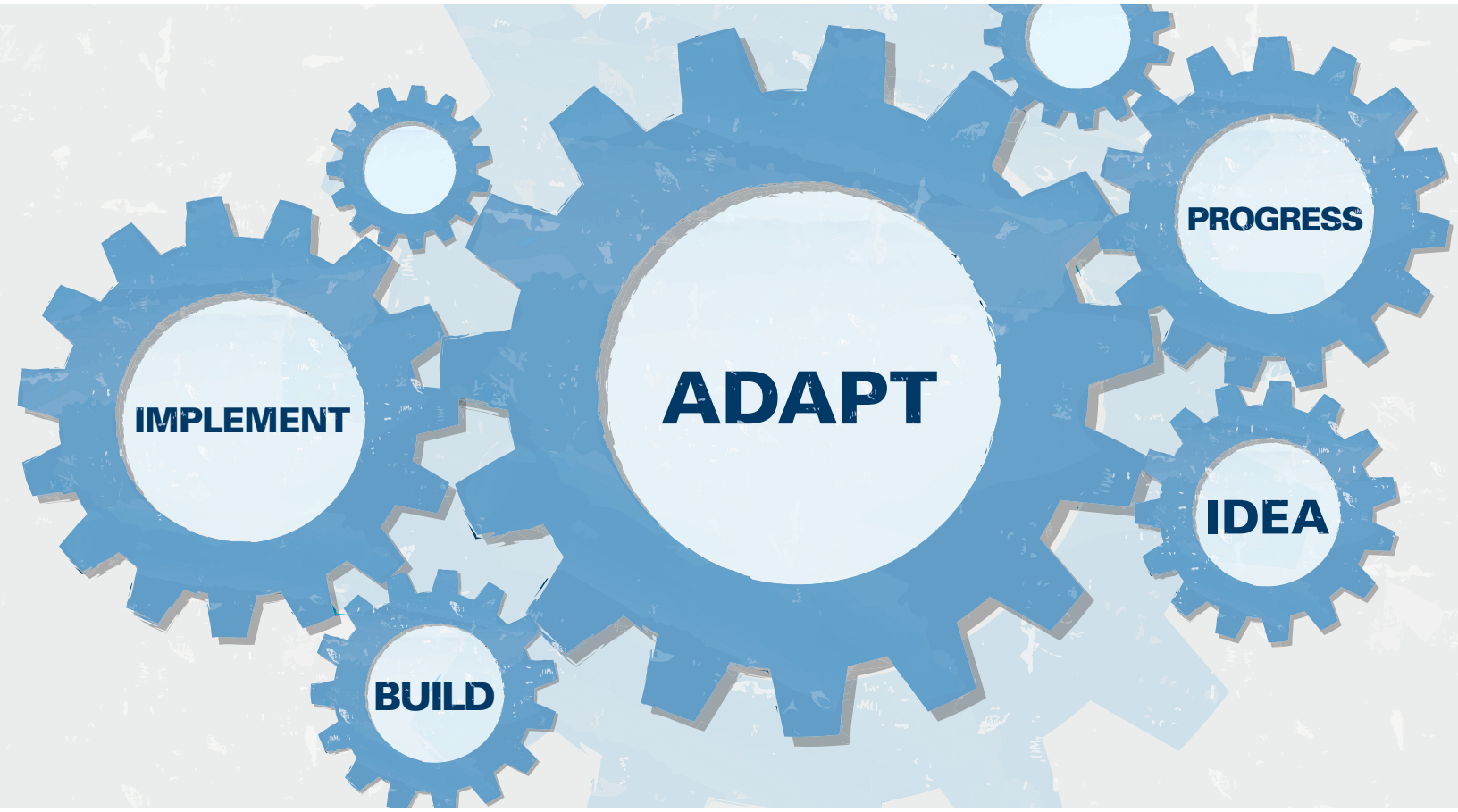
ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

OWRA
Online Work Readiness Assessment



Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

Colorado Department of Human Services, Jefferson County Profile

Fall 2015

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Introduction

In the last decade Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs have begun to undertake redesign efforts that increase their focus on front-end services and assessments. They have begun, in light of changing caseloads and labor force demands, to explore and develop new and better methods for moving all work eligible individuals into more stable career pathways. Programs are working to better identify unobserved barriers to employment, use modern technologies, and implement multi-faceted approaches to address increasingly complex client challenges.

In 2007 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA) contracted with ICF International to conceive and deliver an online strengths assessment tool to better address these issues and help TANF and human service providers assess the strengths and work readiness of low-income clients.

As a go-to resource that supports clients as they move toward real self-sufficiency, the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) is a specialized, web-based suite of tools and assessments that help human service agency staff make important decisions about client readiness to secure employment and meet work participation targets. Today, a range of TANF, workforce, and Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs are using OWRA. To date, over 1,000 state and local programs have downloaded OWRA and adopted or adapted the tool to meet their organization's assessment needs.

The Benefits of OWRA

- A specialized, comprehensive, online resource.
- Promotes better understanding of client needs.
- Streamlines intake processes.
- Moves participants into work activities faster and with better results.
- Helps program administrators make better and more effective resource decisions.
- Provides applicable recommendations based on data collected and customized to the organization.

OWRA's web-based platform offers an innovative approach to creating a plan for clients that summarizes their strengths and barriers, and makes recommendations on placement into work activities and work supports. It offers social service agency caseworkers and staff services for clients through five modules. OWRA's modules include:

Intake Module	Data is collected on client demographics, employment and educational background, household composition, and finances.
Assessment Module	Organizes the information collected in the Intake Module and develops a comprehensive "snapshot" of barriers and strengths to work. This module serves as the foundation for the resulting SSP.
Self-Sufficiency Plan (SSP) and Work Readiness Resource	The SSP highlights client strengths, suggests recommendations for reducing client barriers, and allows for customized referrals and recommendations to address barriers and develop a career pathway. In addition, a portal of Work Readiness Resources is available to help caseworkers and participants explore resume writing, soft skill development, interests, abilities, and labor market information.
Employment Projections	Provides participants with state and local labor market information for occupations in line with their educational backgrounds, interests, and skills.
Reporting Module	Streamlines business processes by providing aggregated information over a specified period of time about client population demographics, employment and education history, barriers, and career preferences. Enables organizations to make data-based decisions about referral strategies, services, partners, and programs based on client needs.

For more information on OWRA, visit: https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/owra/.

This profile shares the experiences of Jefferson County, Colorado Department of Human Services' TANF program, Colorado Works, in customizing OWRA to improve client outcomes. Prior to implementing OWRA, Jefferson County staff used a paper-based assessment that provided limited insight into client strengths and barriers. Today, the county uses OWRA to ensure consistency across assessment processes, improve client experience, and better understand employment barriers to make coordinated referrals. This profile shares information about the county's focus on integrating OWRA with Motivational Interviewing techniques to ensure that client interactions are personal and draw out important information that could impact workforce success. This profile also includes staff and client feedback on their experiences with OWRA, as well as staff lessons learned.

Background

Prior to implementing OWRA, Jefferson County had been using a paper-based assessment tool that "was not capturing the information we needed to develop appropriate work plans with our customers," shared Tara Noble, a Colorado Works Supervisor. The tool was administered inconsistently, particularly with respect to how much information was captured during the assessment on their paper-based forms.

Jefferson County wanted to move away from this approach and adopt OWRA to:

- Increase consistency in the information their staff gathered.
- Use a tool specifically designed for TANF customers, which would help ensure information collected could be used in the development of an employment plan.
- Streamline the assessment process and increase efficiencies by having information stored in a database rather than a case file.

Quick Facts on Jefferson County Colorado Works Program

Service area: Jefferson County

Total population: 558,503

Total number of clients served annually: 1,800 families

Service focus areas: TANF

Client to case manager ratio: 1:50

Common client barriers: domestic violence, mental health, medical disability, housing, lack of childcare, lack of GED/high school diploma

Year adopted OWRA: 2013

How OWRA Was Adapted

Jefferson County began using OWRA as a pilot with several caseworkers in 2011 and 2012. Despite the success of the tool, both case workers and administrators were resistant to move fully from a paper-based assessment to an electronic one. Therefore, from December 2012 – March 2013, county leadership explored other assessment options. In March 2013, however, the county decided to move forward with OWRA, and it became mandatory for all Colorado Works clients starting July 1, 2013.

Jefferson County was pleased with the tool and only made one customization, to the SSP, which staff generate after the questionnaire is completed. The SSP aggregates the strengths and barriers identified by the tool and provides recommendations for the client to mitigate those barriers. Jefferson County customized the SSP by adding site-specific information to the recommendations that automatically generate. For example, if the SSP identifies a mental health barrier for an individual, the recommendation it provides is customized to include the names of specific service providers in the county, their specialties, locations, and information needed to make a referral.

Jefferson County was very interested in ensuring the tool aligned with their Motivational Interviewing (MI) approach. This interest was one that led to some of the county's initial resistance in moving away from their paper-based system. To allay those concerns, the county's in-house MI expert reviewed the tool and developed an MI "desk guide" to assist staff in introducing the tool to clients, making assessment interactions personal, and identifying which sections were mandatory and in which sections staff only needed to answer one or two questions, and more fully use the notes fields to build context. The MI expert was pleased with the way the tool was structured, and the way that instructions were scattered throughout to promote staff /client relationships.

Jefferson County also provided MI training to their staff administering OWRA (called coordinators) around how to use it, depending on their interviewing style. The training provided tips on using the tool, whether the coordinator preferred a more linear, question by question approach, or if he or she preferred a more conversational method to elicit client information.

In the fall of 2015, the state began the process of making OWRA available to every county. Counties will not be required to use OWRA but, if they adopt it, it will be accessible for use with any Colorado Works client.

Motivational Interviewing (MI)

According to Miller and Ronick (2013).

"**Motivational interviewing** is a collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change."

Key Points:

- The overall style of MI is one of guiding.
- MI is done "for" and "with" a person.
- MI is not a way of tricking people into changing; it is a way of activating their own motivation and resources for change.

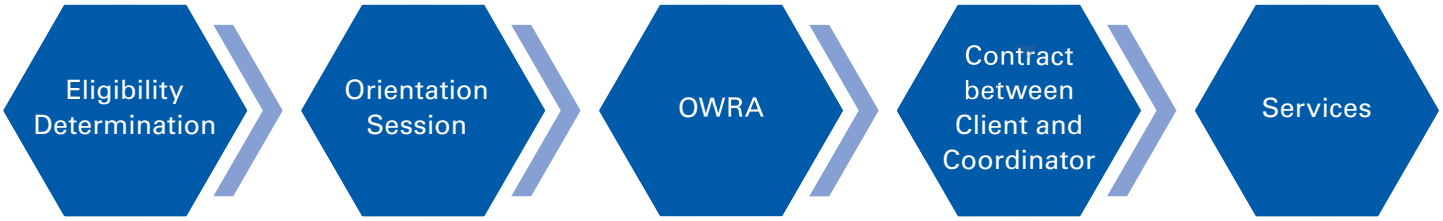
How OWRA Fits Into the Business Process

Individuals interested in receiving TANF first meet with a county Colorado Works eligibility worker who determines whether he or she is eligible to receive TANF (see Figure 1 below).

If the client meets Colorado Works criteria, he or she is scheduled to attend a case management team orientation, where the individual will receive an overview of Colorado Works and the program requirements. The client is then assigned a coordinator (case manager), who will meet with the new client one-on-one.

At that first one-on-one meeting, the coordinator administers the OWRA assessment, which usually takes 1.5 to two hours, including the creation of the SSP. The coordinator will then enter the SSP information into a state-wide database, from which a contract is created and presented for the client's and coordinator's signatures.

Figure 1: Jefferson County's OWRA Business Process Flow



Outcomes

Jefferson County is very pleased with the consistency OWRA has brought to its Colorado Works assessment process and believes that the detailed questionnaire has led to better client strength and barrier identification. Coordinators know more about their clients, leading to better plans for them. Coordinators are also very pleased with OWRA as a repository for case information for past and existing clients, allowing for a smoother process for re-opening cases if a client returns to the program.

As of July 2013, 3,647 OWRA assessments have been administered by Jefferson County. While the county continues to use the first iteration of OWRA, they expect to use a newer version of OWRA as it is rolled out to the entire state. They look forward to the new version—seeing it as more user friendly, and including better prompts to transition into sensitive topics.

To help with the statewide move to OWRA, Jefferson County has provided training and materials at statewide county administrator meetings so that other counties understand what OWRA is and how to use it. Jefferson County also delivered a webinar for neighboring counties on OWRA that discussed the functionality of the tool and demonstrated mock interviews to illustrate how coordinators with different personality types could use it. In addition, several counties—including Denver—have visited Jefferson County to see OWRA in action, and learn about the county's implementation process.

Lessons Learned

Jefferson County credits much of their successful implementation of OWRA to allowing time for their coordinators to familiarize themselves and work within the tool in the six months leading up to full county implementation.

This practice time, which allowed them to become familiar with the navigation and the questions before it was mandatory, was crucial to success. This allowed coordinators to determine how to best fit OWRA into their interview styles and give them a degree of comfort with the tool before using it to assess clients.

While the implementation of OWRA has been a success, Jefferson County staff have focused almost exclusively on using the Assessment and SPP Modules of the tool, and have not used its other capabilities, such as the Reporting Module. Jefferson County staff are interested in exploring OWRA's Reporting functionality for expanded use in the future.

Conclusion

Despite skepticism in moving from a paper-based to an electronic assessment tool, Jefferson County is very pleased with how OWRA is working for Colorado Works participants.

They made a significant effort to fit OWRA into their current business processes, including their existing Motivational Interviewing approaches. Allowing staff the time they needed to become comfortable with the format of the tool before using it with clients proved critical in easing the transition and ensuring assessment interviews were fully focused on the clients' needs rather than the new technology.

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