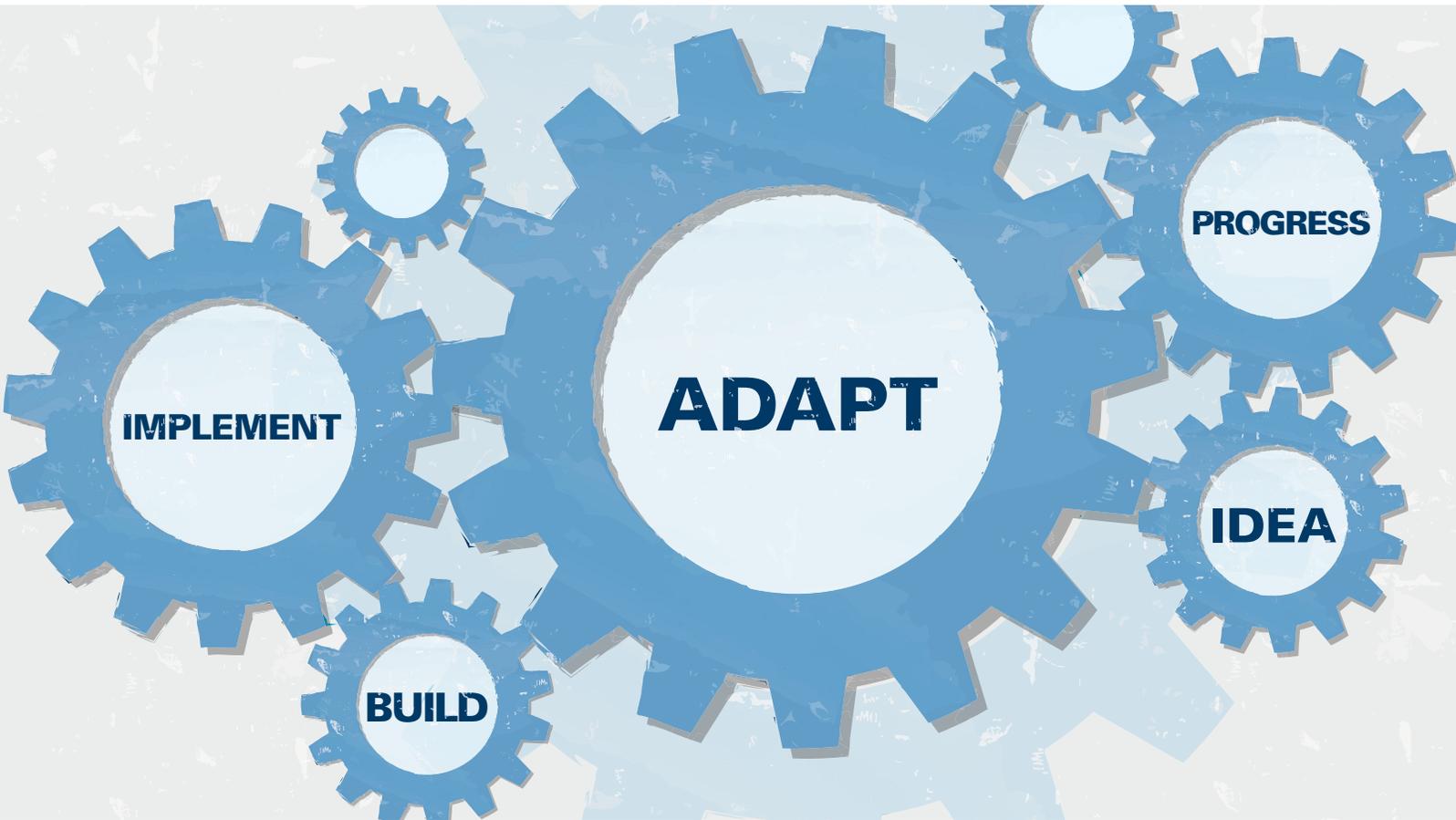




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Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

**District of Columbia
Department of Human Services Profile**

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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.

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.

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.

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

This profile shares the experiences of the [District of Columbia Department of Human Services' \(DC DHS\) TANF program](#), in customizing OWRA to improve client outcomes. Today, the District uses OWRA to ensure consistencies across the assessment process, better understand client needs, align TANF assessments with sister agencies, and coordinate vendor resources. This profile also shares how the District customized OWRA's Reporting Module dashboard to determine long-term client needs, as well as shares staff feedback on their experiences and lessons learned.

Background

The District of Columbia struggled after the 1996 passage of welfare reform to adequately address the myriad of client barriers TANF recipients faced within the federal law's new 60-month lifetime limit. In 2003, the Urban Institute published a [study](#) that confirmed these struggles, finding that 90 percent of DC TANF recipients faced at least one significant challenge (such as low work experience, having less than a high school degree, mental health problems, or being chemically dependent) to becoming self-sufficient and 75 percent faced more than one. In response and despite the federally legislated time limits, DC continued to serve many TANF clients beyond the 60-month time frame.

Still with a significant percentage of TANF clients still continuing to receive assistance beyond the 60-month time frame, the DC Council, in 2010, passed a law that included steeper benefit sanctions for families not fully compliant with assigned work activities. The new law spurred DC DHS to concentrate efforts on TANF reform that would better address barriers and reduce the number of families receiving assistance after 60 months. A key principle underlying this reform effort became the concept of "universal engagement," which assumes that every TANF client is able to participate – and should be expected to participate – in activities that help prepare them for employment. It recognizes that clients have varied strengths and needs and that TANF agency expectations must be tailored to those needs.

DC DHS participated in an OFA-sponsored pilot test of the OWRA tool in 2008. With knowledge and experience with the tool and driven by the principles outlined above, in 2011, DC DHS began to pilot a redesigned TANF program that included OWRA. A key component to this effort was to use OWRA to better identify which clients were ready for work, and which needed additional supports or referrals to address barriers before becoming job ready.

In 2012, DC DHS began a full redesign of its services for families who receive or are eligible for TANF and families experiencing housing instability. Two major strategies at the core of the approach included integrating services and coordinating cases across human service agencies. DC DHS also began to implement OWRA across the District and moved away from its "[one-size-fits-all](#)" approach--developing more customizable barrier removal options for TANF clients.

Quick Facts on The District of Columbia's TANF Program

Service area: Districtwide Program

Total population: 658,893

Total number of clients served annually: 15,710

Service focus areas: TANF

Client to case manager ratio:

Common client barriers: housing instability, chronic unemployment, underemployment, new highly educated demographic seeking services post lay-off

Year adopted OWRA: 2012

"Although our original decisions were intended as a humane way to protect children and families, the unintended consequence was that many families remained on TANF for many years... The cash benefit has always been just enough money to keep people alive, but not enough to support or encourage families to succeed."

– David Berns, Former Director, DC DHS, from Government of the District of Columbia, Department of Human Services. (2013). [Urgency and Hope for TANF Recipients](#).

How OWRA Was Adapted

Before DC DHS adopted OWRA they used multiple paper assessments with TANF clients. However, using a paper-based approach led to inconsistencies both in assessments and in referrals to specialized services.

After DC DHS began to pilot OWRA in 2011 they realized that they wanted to make several customizations to the tool before all case managers (70 in total) were trained on it and started using it. First, to reduce entry duplication and save time for both case managers and clients, DC integrated their TANF eligibility system with OWRA. By doing so, intake data would automatically populate in OWRA's Intake Module and would not need to be reentered.

Second, DC DHS customized OWRA's Assessment Module by changing several questions to align with the assessment tools partner agencies, such as the DC Department of Mental Health and the Child and Family Services Agency, use. In doing so, when or if a client was referred to that sister agency, the individual would not have to sit for another assessment if those questions were already posed and answered through OWRA. This customization enhanced partnerships across agencies and reduced client frustration. For example, because DC DHS and the DC Housing Authority often have overlapping clients, DC DHS chose to enhance OWRA's housing stability questions to match those asked during Housing Authority intake (see text box to the right).

Lastly, DC DHS re-worked OWRA's Reporting Module to help better determine whether clients were ready for job placement, needed short-term pre-placement supports, or longer term barrier remediation. To do so, they developed an algorithm based on client responses to OWRA questions that would help them determine where a client was along the pathway to being job ready in one of four quadrants (see table on next page).



Assessing Housing Stability through DC OWRA – Select Questions:

1. Where did you stay last night? Where were you staying prior to the place you stayed at last night?
2. How long have you stayed in the place you stayed last night?
3. Is this housing subsidized?
4. Are you able to stay in this housing for more than 90 days?
5. If you paid the rent or utilities you owe or contributed to rent or utilities, would you be able to stay in your current housing?
6. Is there other safe housing where you and your family can stay when you need to leave?
7. Do you need assistance finding some place to stay?
8. Do you need assistance to be able to stay in your current housing?
9. What type of assistance do you need?
10. Right now, are you receiving help related to your housing needs from any other agency?

DC DHS Reporting Module

Quadrant 1: Job Placement

Clients placed in this category have reasonable levels of job skills and work experience with limited barriers to work. These clients will receive job placement services to help connect quickly to employment.

Quadrant 2: Work Readiness

Clients in this quadrant have a proven track record but will need supports in resume writing or other skills to be placed in a job. These are considered short-term supports.

Quadrant 3: Barrier Mediation

Clients in this third category have a significant barrier that needs to be addressed prior to being job or work ready.

Quadrant 4: Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Clients are determined to be exempt from work participation requirements due to a disability or severe barrier. These clients will be placed in the component of the DC's TANF program known as "Power" and will receive help in applying for federal disability benefits from the SSI program. These clients will not be subject to TANF time limits.



Simultaneous to the Reporting Module enhancement, DC DHS restructured their vendor referral network to align with each of the above categories. As a result, DC DHS customized the OWRA reporting dashboard that shows how many clients are in each quadrant and which offices and case managers' are referring individuals to those categories. Adding this sophisticated reporting structure allows DC DHS to identify services for their clients as well as training needs for their case managers. It has also led to conversations on why some case managers make recommendations that others do not, as well as improved efficiencies across the agency.

To align with these categories and the outcomes the District sought to achieve through each, DC DHS also reworked its vendor payment approach. It created a performance-based contracting method that was based on the achievement of specified goals, such as meeting work participation requirements, completing education and training, and job placement and retention. Tying payments to achievement of specified education and employment outcomes would help ensure TANF employment funds were directed to providers offering the best services.

How OWRA Fits into the Current Business Process

Prior to OWRA, DC TANF clients participated in a limited orientation and assessment and most clients were directed to short-term job search and job readiness services (such as resume assistance), regardless of their skills, work experience, or barriers to employment. Contracted employment vendors offered these services, but most offered the same menu of supports. DC's paper based assessment system also led to inconsistencies in referrals and the level of detail in assessment forms.

Today, DC DHS assures consistency by having all case managers across the District assess clients with OWRA. This process includes both Intake and Assessment and serves as the client's entry point into the TANF program. Following the assessment, clients attend a comprehensive orientation session to help them understand program rules and regulations, their rights and responsibilities, as well as options for education, training, and supportive services. Using OWRA's SSP feature, case workers and clients work together to develop an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP), which outlines what the client is expected to do to make progress toward employment. Using universal engagement principles, clients play an active role in both developing as well as updating their IRPs.

DC DHS then track individual outcomes in the agency's web-based case management system, Customer Assessment, Tracking and Case History (CATCH).

CATCH captures and audits TANF client participation in work preparation, search, and placement activities. OWRA assessments are uploaded into CATCH when the case management process begins. DC DHS has also integrated its data management software, Tableau, with OWRA and CATCH, so staff can now view and analyze outcomes in a dashboard format.

After IRP development and depending on each client's needs, the case manager may assign the client to a different agency partner to be the lead service provider and to develop a more detailed client plan. If the client's main barrier is mental health issues, for example, the Department of Mental Health (DMH) could be designated as a family's primary TANF provider. DC DHS and DMH would then collaborate to provide comprehensive case management services to the client and his/her family.

Outcomes

DC DHS is committed to using OWRA for all of its clients. In the first year of implementation alone, DC DHS used OWRA to conduct intake assessments for almost all TANF clients in DC, with over 21,000 assessments conducted by 70 case managers.

DC DHS reports that as a result of OWRA's implementation they have been able to make more intelligent referrals based on clients' actual skills, education levels, interests, barriers and other factors that affect their work readiness. That process, in turn, has helped decrease the likelihood that clients

will be placed in activities that are not suited to their background or interests and improve client participation in employment and work-related activities. In addition, DC DHS's improved IRP and targeted referral approach has helped clients work collaboratively with their case managers toward increased self-sufficiency.

Lessons Learned

Through the use of OWRA, DC DHS staff learned that intelligent and well-informed referrals are critical to the success of TANF clients, to identify their needs, interests, and barriers.

DC DHS also found that aligning its vendor system with its four primary population categories is key to using OWRA's data to better inform client services and referrals. Finally, DC benefited from first piloting OWRA before bringing it to scale. Through the piloting process they were able to identify how OWRA's questions could be aligned with partner human service organizations to not only improve efficiencies within DC DHS but across other agencies serving the same clients.

Conclusion

DC DHS has been pleased with OWRA's implementation thus far as both an improved method to collect client data and an enhanced vehicle through which to comprehensively understand client needs and strengths.

DC DHS feels strongly that the use of OWRA has led to more intelligent and informed referrals, ultimately leading to more positive outcomes for DC's TANF population. DC DHS has instituted a very comprehensive process for working with TANF families to provide them with targeted services that increase their likelihood of employability and family-sustaining employment. Although OWRA's customization was costly, DC was able to create a comprehensive process that increases client chances for achieving family-sustaining employability. As Brian Campbell, DC DHS' Administrator stated, "...it does exactly what we want it to do."



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OWRA
Online Work Readiness Assessment