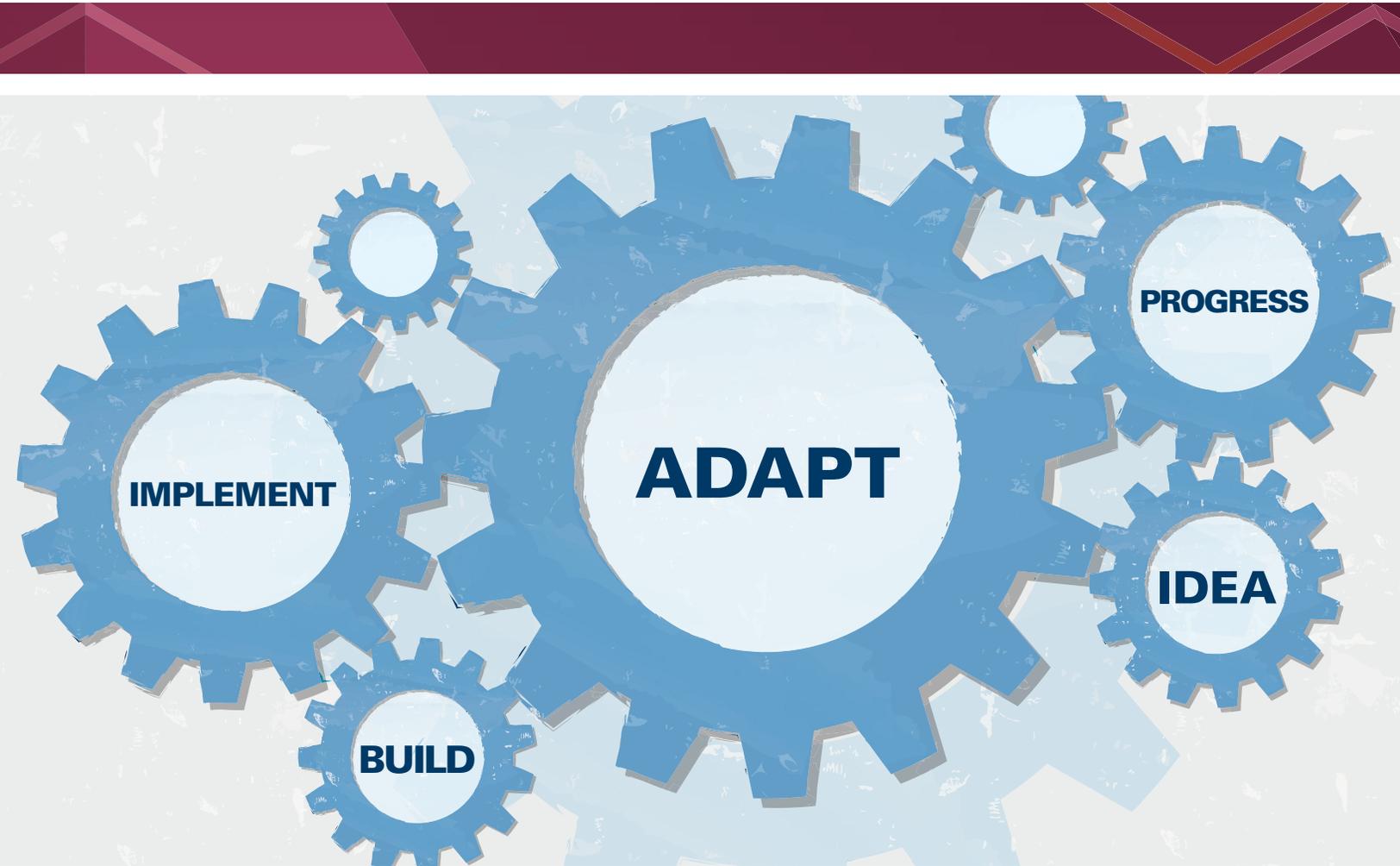




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Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

Maryland Department of Human Resources 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 Maryland Department of Human Resources' (MD DHR) experiences in customizing OWRA to enhance the state's TANF assessment processes and improve outcomes for clients. Following the passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) in 1996, the state began looking at local assessment processes and in 2006, in partnership with OFA, developed a computer-based assessment prototype that became the basis for OWRA. Maryland was later a pilot site for OFA through multiple iterations of OWRA and fully adopted the tool in 2013. This profile discusses how MD DHR customized OWRA, shares staff feedback on the tool, as well as lessons learned through its use.

Background

Shortly following PRWORA's passage, Maryland began to assess how it could enhance its client assessment processes to more comprehensively address TANF client barriers.

In 1997, the state's TANF program partnered with the University of Maryland, School of Social Work's Family Welfare Research and Training Group (FWG) to study how local Maryland TANF offices were assessing client needs and participant outcomes. Their research, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, found that the state needed a more consistent and standardized assessment process to accurately identify client barriers to work. Up until that point, counties used a variety of more informal approaches to assess clients. Following this research, in 2006, OFA, in partnership with Maryland, developed a computer-based, comprehensive TANF client assessment prototype, which later became the basis for the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) tool.

To continue its efforts towards a formalized, statewide assessment approach, Maryland played a key role in OFA's OWRA pilot tests between 2008 and 2010 – piloting the tool in Frederick and Carroll Counties, as well as Baltimore City. The tool was later rolled out county by county beginning in 2013, on an optional basis. This phased approach helped the state resolve any unanticipated performance issues on a small scale before it was made available across the state. Although not mandatory, most Maryland counties ultimately adopted OWRA, including some of the state's largest jurisdictions, such as Montgomery County, Prince George's County, and Baltimore City.

Quick Facts on Maryland's TANF Program

Service area: Statewide program

Total population: 5,938,737

Total number of clients served annually: 49,739

Service focus areas: TANF

Common client barriers: child care, transportation, and mental health

Year adopted OWRA: 2013



How OWRA Was Adapted

When deciding how to adapt OWRA, MD DHR leadership recognized that they needed to fit the tool into the state's existing TANF computer systems, called WORKS (Work Opportunities Record Keeping System) and CARES (Clients' Automated Resource and Eligibility System).

Maryland's TANF program uses WORKS to coordinate public assistance programs statewide, allowing staff to track client participation in work programs and report work participation rates. It interfaces in real time with CARES, a program that helps process benefits by tracking client demographic information and data about clients' financial eligibility for benefits. MD DHR added OWRA to the WORKS main menu page so staff could open both programs from a single system, giving them easy access to the tool through a process they already used to track TANF clients. It also created an automatic interface between OWRA and CARES, which pre-populates basic client contact and demographic information into OWRA before a case manager begins an assessment. This coordination between multiple business systems helps staff streamline and reduce administrative work associated with using the tool.

MD DHR also adapted OWRA's user role features. An important security aspect of the tool is that it has various user role functions, allowing users access to different levels of information in the Reporting Module depending on their role in the organization. OWRA offers multiple account levels, including state, district, and county level; quality assurance access; and supervisor and case manager levels. MD DHR pared back and organized their OWRA accounts into three primary user categories: quality assurance, supervisor, and case manager. Using the Reporting Module, Maryland's quality assurance users can view aggregated assessment data at the state level. Supervisors can view the state's reports as well as edit state reports. Case managers can create and edit reports in their district (county) office but only have access to cases at the district level. This district office component is one of the key adaptations Maryland made to OWRA's user roles because it allows case managers to quickly locate information they need by limiting search results to their district. To enable this feature, MD DHR gave each case an identification number correlating to its district.

Maryland made additional changes to OWRA's Reporting Module, which was running slowly on district computers equipped with Internet Explorer 8 instead of the most current software. To cope, MD DHR created a reporting feature in WORKS that takes the same data from OWRA but processes it more quickly. Because WORKS also generates a set of reports, integrating OWRA's Reporting Module into WORKS reduced duplication. MD DHR also added more export options to the Reporting Module, which usually only generates PDF reports. Maryland changed this so that when leadership access OWRA data in WORKS they can choose to convert it to a PDF file, Comma Separated Values (CSV) file, or Excel spreadsheet—offering more flexibility for using and analyzing data.

MD DHR also made other changes to OWRA to further improve efficiencies. The state added filters to track assessments, by adding a date range field as well as a completion status field to OWRA's search functions. Adding these feature saved time for case managers in conducting assessments by eliminating the need to search through the entire pool of assessments.



How OWRA Fits Into the Business Process

In Maryland, when a client applies for TANF, they must go through an eligibility intake process with a MD DHR staff person. Once MD DHR determines eligibility, the client will return to the TANF office to complete the OWRA assessment with a MD DHR case manager.

At the beginning of the assessment, the case manager will first search the CARES database for the client using his or her CARES customer ID or Social Security number. If the client is in the system, the OWRA Intake Module will pre-populate with the client's demographic data, and if not, the case manager will enter a new case into CARES. MD DHR expects case managers to complete the assessment with the client in one sitting and take about 40 minutes to walk through each of its modules. During the Assessment Module, the case manager will work with the client to identify his or her strengths and barriers to employment. After the case manager and client have completed that module, the

case manager transfers the OWRA assessment results into the WORKS system. WORKS, in turn, will help the case manager make relevant referrals to community providers on the client's behalf.

"All OWRA user categories have access to barrier reports... We do this because the more information case managers have, the better job they can do in managing their caseload."

-Faith Freeman, Program Manager,
Bureau of Workforce Development, MD DHR

Outcomes

Since implementing OWRA, counties using the tool report that they are better able to identify, assess, and respond to the barriers clients face to work participation.

Montgomery County, for instance, uses OWRA only for specific 'hard to serve' subsections of their TANF population, including clients with disabilities and those with criminal records. The county has found that the tool allows case managers to better serve these populations because it helps them identify critical barriers to work. Due to some of Montgomery County's successes with the OWRA, county leaders are considering expanding its use to the Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWDs) population.

Maryland's implementation of OWRA has not been without challenges, though, the most significant of which has been ensuring case managers complete assessments. Fully completing assessments helps states using OWRA more accurately assess their data and the tool's effectiveness. For Maryland, this may require additional training for case managers using the tool, assuring they click the 'finish' button after an assessment, since the system does not automatically assume completion, as well as discussing how to handle skipped sections or questions that may deem an assessment incomplete.

Lessons Learned

An important lesson in Maryland's implementation of OWRA relates to getting 'buy-in' from frontline case managers on the tool's value in improving their work with clients.

OWRA is a more thorough tool than many case managers were accustomed to, and some expressed concern about spending 40 minutes on an assessment. To address this, MD DHR worked to reshape perceptions around the level of detail needed to accurately evaluate strengths and barriers and conduct a complete assessment of a TANF client. MD DHR also ensured that the tool was accessible and user-friendly, creating an interface with existing data systems that case managers use regularly. That interface cut down assessment time by pre-populating as much information as possible before the case manager began an assessment. Training was also offered to help shift the department's case management culture towards more thorough client engagement practices.

Another key takeaway from MD DHR's OWRA implementation was the importance of making the tool easily accessible to different levels of staff, based on their specific needs. For example, adding dates as a search function within the tool made it easier for leadership to find individual assessments, while adding district level identifiers let case managers only search from their county's pool of assessments and quickly find the ones on which they were working.

While it has been difficult to identify funds to make OWRA-related technology updates, MD DHR has made needed changes within the system to address slow processing times at county offices that still use Internet Explorer 8. Maryland has kept an eye on the future, however, and is considering what it would need to do to save previously entered OWRA data if and when local computer systems are upgraded.

Conclusion

Maryland staff value the comprehensive nature of OWRA's questions, how the assessment builds to more sensitive topics, and how it has helped identify client barriers and strengths.

Although the state has struggled with incomplete assessments, staff believe the tool comprehensively captures client strengths and barriers and has vastly improved their referrals system. The state continues to reach out to local offices and staff to promote OWRA's use and show its potential for helping them better serve TANF clients, while also increasing work participation rates.



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