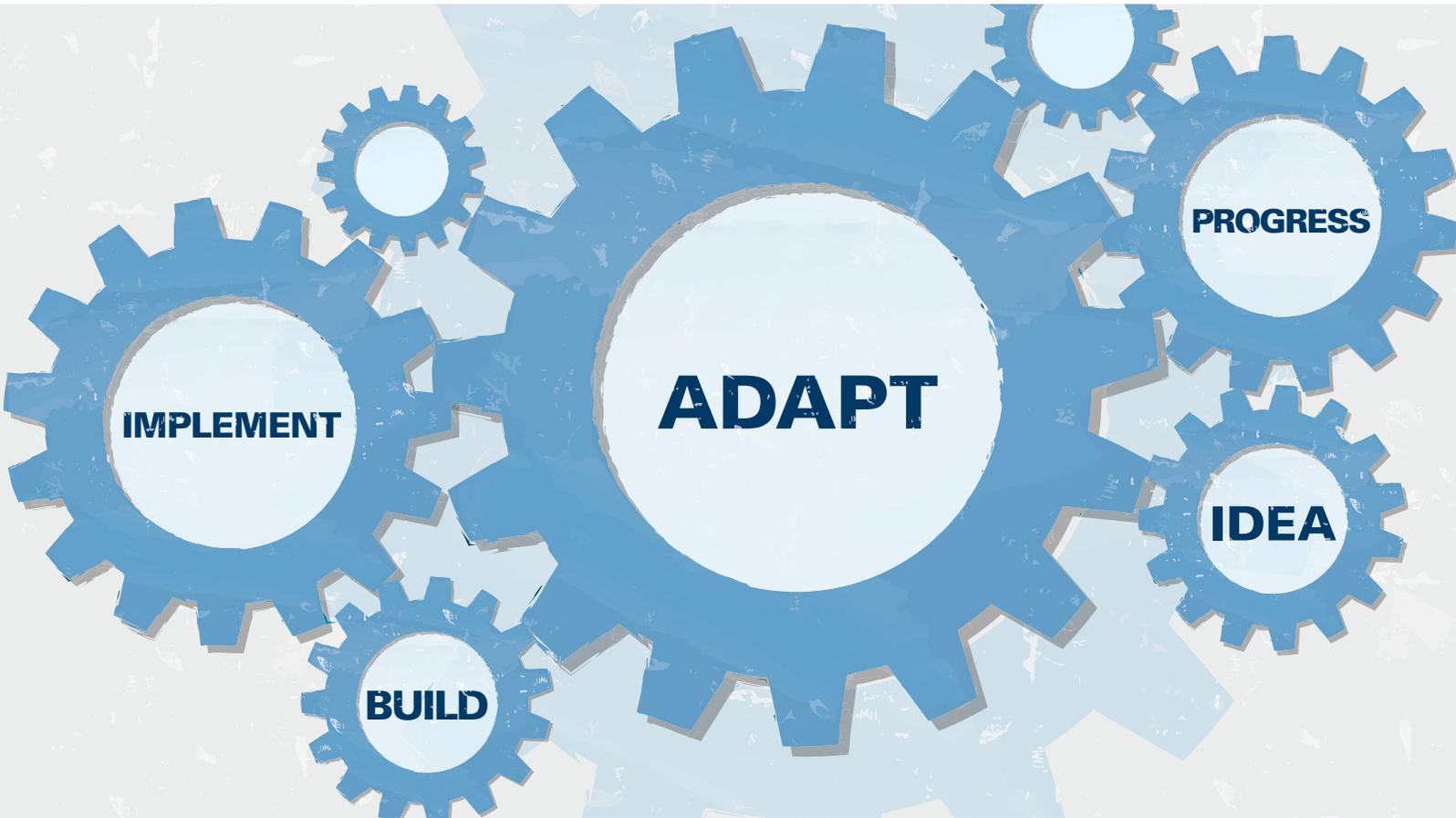




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Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

**Supportive Integrated Services, Inc.
Shreveport, Louisiana Profile**

Fall 2015

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Our thanks to Tammy Plater, Faith in Fathers Program Director, who shared information on Supportive Integrated Services Inc.'s (SIS) OWRA implementation process and experiences using the tool. Information for this profile was also gathered from a short video filmed for the Office of Family Assistance in 2014, [Pathways to Self-Sufficiency – Spotlight on Faith in Fathers Program](#), and a presentation by Sharron Jarmon, Faith in Fathers Facilitator ([The Online Work Readiness Assessment \(OWRA\): Successful Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantee Experiences](#), Office of Family Assistance HMRG Grantees Annual Meeting, June 26, 2013).

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 Supportive Integrated Services, Inc. (SIS) in implementing the OWRA tool for their Faith in Fathers responsible fatherhood program. The profile outlines how SIS used a customized version of OWRA to work with fathers in the economically distressed area of Caddo Parish, Louisiana. It describes how SIS used OWRA to screen fathers for employment barriers at intake so that case managers could provide immediate supportive services referrals and identify employment opportunities through the use of OWRA's individualized Self-Sufficiency Plan and Employment Projections capabilities. This profile also includes staff and client feedback on their experiences with OWRA and staff lessons learned.

Background

SIS is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization that has been providing services for low-income residents in northern Louisiana since 2005. Several local women who had been running a for-profit agency founded the organization with the initial goal of providing substance abuse and mental health counseling services for the Caddo Parish community, which includes the City of Shreveport, the fourth most populous municipality in Louisiana.

In recent years, SIS has expanded its programs and services to include *Reaching for the Stars*, a mentoring project for children of incarcerated parents and Faith in Fathers, a responsible fatherhood program supported by an OFA Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood grant from October 2011 through September 2015.

Besides helping fathers improve their employment and economic situations, the Faith in Fathers program focuses on enhancing parenting and relationship skills so that fathers can be more involved with their children and better partners to the mothers of their children. The program also seeks to reduce the risk of domestic violence and provides legal assistance on issues of child custody, navigating family court proceedings, and understanding visitation rights.



Quick Facts on Faith in Fathers Program

Service area: Northern Louisiana

Total population: 254,969

Total number of clients served annually: 548

Service focus areas: Caddo Parrish, LA, (Shreveport area)

Common client barriers: education, legal

Year adopted OWRA: 2013

How OWRA Was Adapted

Prior to adopting OWRA, SIS relied on pen and paper assessments that did not readily identify client needs or provide the type of management and data-based decision-making the OWRA tool enables.

SIS served as an OWRA pilot site in 2013 to help OFA explore how a customized version of the tool could be applied to a responsible fatherhood program. During this piloting process, OFA worked with SIS to test a gender-neutral version of the original OWRA tool that emphasizes economic self-sufficiency, with additional questions relating to child support, parenting, and relationships. SIS received technical assistance and staff training on using OWRA and motivational interviewing case management strategies. Following the pilot period, SIS decided to continue to use the tool in their work with fathers from October 2013 through September 2015.

SIS' customized version of OWRA included the following adaptations designed to make it more applicable for work with fathers:

- Added gender-neutral questions, such as questions about paying child support in addition to those about receiving it.
- Added a focus on healthy relationships and fathers, such as specific questions about the status of their relationship and interest in receiving relationship information and support.
- Added questions about participants' marital status to ensure that all relevant household information was captured and to help adhere to OFA grant reporting requirements.
- Added questions about multi-partner relationships, parent involvement, and custody.
- Placed more emphasis on employment and work readiness.
- Included questions on financial stability that can help identify areas of information need, such as budget management and banking.
- Integrated the OWRA Employment Projections module, which extracts information from the assessment related to the client's education, job history, career interests, and any legal barriers, and compares this data with employment projections in the Caddo Parish region to align client interests and needs with available jobs in the community.



"The OWRA tool helps you get to know your client better. It really gets to the root of what's going on in their life and it helps you understand how you could better help them."

– Briona Hamilton, Case Manager

How OWRA Fits in with the Business Process

When fathers enroll in the SIS Faith in Fathers program they are scheduled for a 30-45 minute OWRA intake assessment conducted by a program facilitator.

During the assessment, the tool assesses strengths, identifies any employment barriers, and provides Employment Projections for relevant occupations based on a client's interest, experience, education, and criminal background. Fathers are assigned a case manager who uses the information to provide a realistic view of career choices and job availability based on local workforce needs. Case managers then work with fathers to create individual Self-Sufficiency Plans (SSPs) that include specific goals to help track progress and make adjustments as necessary.

As part of the SSP, the case manager and client agree upon needed training, education, and supportive services and the case manager makes relevant referrals to community-based and partner agencies. SIS prints out the relevant OWRA assessment questions and answers to send with each referral—giving partner providers more background on individuals referred.

Outcomes

The Faith in Fathers program has used OWRA to assess needs and develop SSPs for 548 fathers. Most participants are low-income with employment barriers such as criminal backgrounds, limited job skills, and low educational levels.

OWRA has improved the program's ability to identify and address individual barriers to employment. It has also improved program outcomes by helping case managers access labor market information and match participants' skills and backgrounds with employment opportunities.

Providing participants with this information and the steps required to obtain available jobs has helped develop SSPs with realistic goals.

Case managers report that the way OWRA's questions are constructed helps them dig deeper with clients and identify barriers that clients may not otherwise have mentioned. Case managers also like that they can navigate through sections of OWRA that are most relevant for their specific clients. For instance, a case manager can hone in on sections that may be most applicable to fathers, such as those relating to multi-partner relationships, current child support orders, or any outstanding child support arrearages (debt).



"The questions helped me find out where I was, and what could be done to try and help me. It made me think... I had to go through the process to find out exactly where I needed to be."

– Faith in Fathers Participant

Lessons Learned

SIS' experience showed that OWRA can be used in fatherhood programs, but it is important that staff receive training on technical aspects of the tool, such as how to complete the assessment interview and use the SSP.

Because clients may not report all barriers, it is particularly important that staff who conduct OWRA assessments receive training in motivational interviewing techniques to ensure that participants are comfortable in revealing sensitive information and that all relevant details are included for career planning purposes. When SIS began using OWRA, each assessment interview took an hour or longer, but as staff became more proficient with the tool they were able to complete most interviews in 30-45 minutes.

Through implementation, SIS also learned that supervisory staff need training on how to use the Reporting Module and interpret aggregate data. By identifying common participant barriers and comparing staff use of the information, SIS supervisors were able to improve the level of services provided. For example, if reports show that many clients are dealing with mental health issues, then staff may need additional training on how to interview these clients and supervisors can ensure that relevant service referral networks are developed.

Conclusion

OWRA has expanded the ability of SIS to meet the needs of its clients by better identifying and addressing client barriers, matching client abilities and strengths to existing job opportunities, and providing detailed reports to help management monitor and adjust the provision of program services.

"OWRA gives [our] case managers' better insight into what services our clients may need."

– Tammy Plater, Faith in Fathers Program Director



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OWRA
Online Work Readiness Assessment