Anne Arundel County OWRA Case Study
July 22, 2019

Introduction

In the last decade, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs have undertaken 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 to develop and deliver an online assessment tool to better address these issues and help TANF and human service providers assess the strengths, barriers, and work readiness of low-income clients.

> **The Benefits of OWRA**
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> - Serves as a specialized, comprehensive online resource.
> - Promotes better understanding of client needs.
> - Streamlines intake process.
> - 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.

As a go-to resource that supports clients as they move toward sustainable 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 1,200 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 assessing the strengths, barriers, and work-readiness of clients and offering a plan for work support activities. OWRA delivers this approach utilizing five modules, shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: OWRA Modules

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 Module	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 the Work Readiness Resource Module is available to help caseworkers and participants explore resume writing, soft skill development, interests, abilities, and labor market information.
Labor Market Information (LMI) Module	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 time period regarding 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.

This case study shares the experiences of the Department of Social Services (DSS) of Anne Arundel County, Maryland in their use of OWRA, to improve the outcomes of their TANF participants (the TANF program in Maryland is referred to as Temporary Cash Assistance or TCA). Maryland has been involved with OWRA since it was a pilot site in 2009. For this case study, representatives from the county recount the most useful parts of the tool in working with their participants towards self-sufficiency as well as potential places of improvement. They also detail the data systems in place in Maryland as well as the partnerships already established with two research institutions, the University of Maryland School of Social Work and the University of Baltimore Jacob Francis Institute, to explore avenues the state could take to determine the impact of OWRA.

Background of OWRA

In the summer of 2009, ICF partnered with Maryland and nine other states to pilot OWRA. The Maryland pilot sites for OWRA were Baltimore City, Carroll County, and Frederick County[1]. Since 2009, the use of OWRA has expanded in Maryland to include Anne Arundel County.

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[1] https://familywelfare.umaryland.edu/assessmentreports.htm

Anne Arundel's Use of OWRA

Anne Arundel County uses OWRA to conduct a comprehensive assessment through their local vendor Jobs Work Arundel[2] (JWA) and their Department of Social Services. JWA partners with the Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services to move TCA participants on a path of self-sufficiency through barrier removal, up-to-date skills and certifications, training, skills development, and work experience placement that leads to employment.[3] JWA also uses a modified version of OWRA to assess Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) clients.[4] Additionally, OWRA is used to assist the Department of Social Services with determining whether to grant or deny a 60-month time limit hardship exemption. The OWRA assessment helps the case managers identify the participant's barriers, which then can be addressed with the proper resources to help the participants become self-sufficient. Staff reported approximately 137 participants assessed with OWRA from TCA and SNAP programs from January – May 2019. Our data confirms that 81 of those participants were assessed from the SNAP E&T program. Six to ten caseworkers use OWRA on a weekly basis.

Exploring OWRA Outcomes

In May 2019, OFA and ICF conducted a site visit with Anne Arundel County in order to: (1) understand the benefits that OWRA has provided to clients, caseworkers, and leadership based on staff reports; (2) measure effectiveness of OWRA by obtaining data on client outcomes; and (3) discuss how OWRA can be improved, particularly around career pathway plans. The following report details staff responses.

Anne Arundel County values OWRA as a tool that helps improve the outcomes of their participants. Leadership and case workers note the importance of OWRA in helping identify barriers to employment and assisting case workers on empowering their participants to work towards a career pathway. Exhibit 2 highlights the strengths of OWRA from the case workers' and leaderships' perspectives.

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[2] More information about JWA: Jobs Work Arundel (JWA) – provides specialized workforce development services for families receiving TANF benefits. JWA enrolls TANF participants and delivers Career Corner, a three-week job readiness workshop. Upon completion of Career Corner, TANF participants then move into the Placement Phase where they are engaged in employment with jobs developed by JWA staff or into Work Experience Internships and/or training and education activities. Services provided are based on an individualized assessment and Employability Development Plan for each participant. JWA is operated by the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation so all TANF participants have simultaneous access to appropriate WIA services. (Peer TA, 2000)

[3] http://www.aawdc.org/programs/jobswork-arundel

[4] In 2017, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) awarded the Maryland Department of Human Services (MD DHS) a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Process and Technology Improvement Grant (PTIG). Through that grant, MD DHS contracted with ICF and GeoSolutions to develop and pilot online systems designed to help SNAP customers and their case managers address customer employment-related needs. ICF integrated its proprietary workforce readiness assessment, Work Quotient (wQ) and designed it to be used specifically with MD DHS's SNAP program. wQ is a comprehensive, data-driven system that assesses an individual's employment readiness and provides resources to encourage development of a career pathway aligned with one's interests, strengths, and needs.

Exhibit 2: Strengths of OWRA

How effective do you feel OWRA is in helping you address your participants' needs?

Category	Case Worker	Leadership
Work Readiness	Somewhat Effective	Effective
Obtaining Employment	Somewhat Effective	Effective
Developing a Career Pathway	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective
Child Care	Effective	Very Effective
Criminal Backgrounds	Effective	Extremely Effective
Health Issues	Effective	Very Effective
Housing Instability	Effective	Very Effective
Limited Education and/or Training	Effective	Somewhat Effective
Transportation Instability	Effective	Very Effective

Case workers in Anne Arundel County note that OWRA is very effective in addressing participant needs relating to career pathways. Through the LMI Module, OWRA helps caseworkers identify potential occupations and career pathways for their participants to pursue. The LMI Module produces reports showing occupations and labor market trends and projections for the occupations that offer the greatest potential for the participant based on past work history, interests, skills, abilities, and barriers. Caseworkers believe that OWRA is somewhat effective in helping address participant needs relating to work readiness and obtaining employment. Although OWRA helps identify certain barriers for the participant, the caseworker must provide the appropriate referrals and the participant must be motivated to pursue opportunities.

Caseworkers comment that a positive outcome of using OWRA is an increased self-awareness for the participant. Participants not only have a better understanding of the obstacles the programs aims to help them overcome, but their potential for leading a self-sufficient life.

Possible Improvements to OWRA

Staff provided suggestions for system wide improvements to increase efficiency, streamline modules, and expand career pathways. Although Anne Arundel County considers OWRA to be a valuable tool that helps improve the outcomes of their participants, caseworkers and other staff feel that assessments take a little longer than the ideal amount of time. Currently staff estimate that a full assessment in OWRA averages forty minutes. To reduce the length of time it takes to assess participants with OWRA, Anne Arundel County caseworkers suggest reducing the number of criminal background and substance abuse questions so that participants must

answer only five questions. Additionally, caseworkers suggest that the number of questions on employment history be reduced and simplified to not require that all entries be completed, such as the timeframe that participants worked at each job and the names of supervisors, since many participants struggle to provide this information. Caseworkers also recommended expanding the number of questions on mental health to include questions on: (1) the length of time the participant has been struggling with mental health issues; and (2) whether they are seeking or would like counseling. Finally, caseworkers suggested that the labor market information report categorize occupations into high-demand industries in the region, such as healthcare, information technology, transportation, construction, and hospitality (also known as HITCH industries in Anne Arundel County).

Staff also provided suggestions for OWRA customization specifically for Anne Arundel County to improve the tool. The Department of Social Services uses OWRA to determine whether to grant or deny a 60-month time limit hardship exemption for TCA participants. Participants who receive an OWRA assessment have already gone through the initial intake process which screens for childcare barriers. According to caseworkers, this makes the childcare component of OWRA redundant to their initial intake process for TCA participants. Even so, leadership spoke about the ability of this section of OWRA to guide conversation and help the caseworker identify which participants have children with special needs.

Lessons Learned

Caseworkers noted that participant disclosure of information is often an issue, which can affect employment and other outcomes. Disclosure of information is critical to successfully addressing employment barriers. Some caseworkers struggle with disclosure of information of participants when talking about sensitive topics. Caseworkers at JWA work in cubicles with curtains separating the walkway from the pseudo-private meeting space. Establishing a more private setting could increase the likeliness of disclosure from participants. Another detail that impacts participant disclosure is caseworker gender. Some female participants may only be comfortable sharing sensitive information with other female case workers. Potentially matching participants with a caseworker that they feel most comfortable with when using OWRA may improve the likeliness of disclosure from participants.

Caseworkers comment that participants often do not disclose information about criminal backgrounds during the OWRA interview. There have been times where JWA sends participants to an employer only to find out after that the employer does not hire applicants with a criminal background. OWRA provides an opportunity for disclosure of criminal backgrounds, knowing this information will more effectively help caseworkers connect participants to appropriate employment.

Measuring Success: Data Collection and Evaluation Capacity

Measuring outcomes, particularly around employment, is critical to assessing the success of workforce development efforts. It allows programs to understand if services have the intended impact. If a program is not meeting outcome goals, agencies can make improvements. Performance outcomes data may also provide meaningful information for future grant applications, which often require evidence of success. The state of Maryland has set up internal data systems and has collaborated with research institutions including the University of Maryland School of Social Work and the University of Baltimore Jacob Francis Institute to support the collection and analysis of program outcomes.

Internal Data Systems

The state of Maryland maintains demographic and program participation data in the Client Automatized Resources and Eligibility System (CARES). CARES houses case level and individual program participation information for TANF and SNAP.[5] Maryland maintains employment and earnings data in the Maryland Automated Benefits System (MABS). Employment and earnings data are sourced from state Unemployment Insurance (UI) records, reported quarterly in an aggregate form.

Partnerships with Research Institutions

DSS has partnerships with the University of Maryland School of Social Work and the University of Baltimore Jacob Francis Institute (JFI).

The University of Maryland School of Social Work analyzes trends of TCA participants, the reports of which are stored at https://familywelfare.umaryland.edu/ and are publicly available. While the publications report state-wide trends, they often break down information by county level. This allows the public to see aggregated demographic data of Anne Arundel County TCA participants as well as general trends of case closures and employment data.

JFI partners with the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS) to provide data analysis, and other services. JFI submits quarterly reports to DHS detailing performance measures of TCA. JFI also conducts analyses of high growth industries in Maryland, illustrating employment opportunities for TCA participants. JFI is also analyzing the interaction among SNAP, Unemployment Insurance Benefits, and TCA, and evaluating the outcomes of selected TCA-funded substance abuse treatment.[6]

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[5] https://familywelfare.umaryland.edu/assessmentreports.htm

[6] http://www.jacob-france-institute.org/research/state-projects/

TANF/Workforce Innovation and Opportuity Act (WIOA) Alignment

Maryland developed a combined state plan that aligns its workforce and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs (one of only 26 states and 2 territories). Maryland's TANF/WIOA alignment team utilized technical assistance provided by ICF through OFA's *Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy*[7] in the spring of 2015 to develop clear strategic goals and potential measurable benchmarks to define the state workforce system's success.[8] Maryland's benchmarks for success are intended to allow stakeholders to look at outcomes important to the state's system, beyond federally mandated WIOA and Work Participation Rate measures, and other outcomes not typically captured through workforce systems but that are indicative of financial stability and systems change.[9] The overall vision behind Maryland's benchmarks for success is to "increase the earning capacity of Marylanders by maximizing access to employment, skills and credentialing, life management skills, and supportive services."[10]

Maryland's benchmarks for success include the following five goals for achieving that vision:[11]

- Increase earning capacity of Maryland's workforce system participants by maximizing access to **employment;**

- Increase earning capacity of Maryland's workforce system participants by maximizing access to and use of **skills and credentialing;**

- Increase earning capacity of Maryland's workforce system participants by maximizing access to and use of **life management skills;**

- Increase earning capacity of Maryland's workforce system participants by **eliminating barriers to employment; and**

- Strengthen and enhance the **effectiveness and efficiency** of Maryland's workforce system.

The use of OWRA is critical to the last two goals, eliminating barriers to employment and strengthening and enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of Maryland's workforce system. Maryland notes the importance of OWRA in identifying and eliminating barriers to employment and the state's benchmark for its goal to strengthen and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of its workforce system is to "use a common comprehensive employment readiness assessment accessible to all across the workforce development system".

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[7] https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/uploaded_files/SFS-NPASiteProfile_Maryland-508.pdf

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid

Expanding Data Collection

As described above, Anne Arundel County maintains data primarily on the required performance measures and Maryland has created a framework for measuring the success of its workforce system focused on increasing earning capacity of its participants. Success can be further measured by

> "It is supposed to be people before performance. How do we collect that data – the soft data? I am satisfied – what makes you satisfied?" – Venus Williams, Resource Division Manager/Contract Manager, Anne Arundel Department of Social Services

collecting data on other employment related outcomes and how OWRA contributes to those outcomes. Anne Arundel County may explore collecting more detailed employment data and other outcomes data through a participant survey. Short-term outcomes data could focus on: (1) improvement in basic skills; (2) improvement in work readiness skills; (3) reduction in barriers to employment; (4) education/credential attainment; and (5) employment. Long-term outcomes data could focus on: (1) employment retention; (2) career pathways development; (3) increasing wages; and (4) economic self-sufficiency. Surveys could also capture details of the participants' feelings of satisfaction with employment. They could also highlight more subjective factors such as job satisfaction, perceived job security, and perceived opportunities for advancement. Leadership at DSS explained that qualitative data around these topics exist in the case notes, but they are not reflected in the quantitative data. Leadership at DSS were enthusiastic about gaining an understanding on these subject factors.

As Anne Arundel County continues to use OWRA with TCA and SNAP participants, they may choose to customize the tool to more specifically meet the county's needs. With their strong existing partnerships at the University of Maryland School of Social Work and the University of Baltimore Jacob Francis Institute, they may also choose to expand their data collection to further their understanding of participant outcomes.