

# OWRA: Case Studies Report

Overview of Eight Sites  
September 2016

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## Introduction

This summary report provides an overview of case studies conducted by ICF in 2015-2016 of eight sites implementing the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) tool. The case studies reveal common findings among sites indicating strengthened client-centered case management and more efficient business processes.

### Historical Context

Since the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA) has invested in numerous interventions designed to support welfare reform and improve outcomes for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In the last decade, TANF programs have redesigned their programs to increase their focus on effective case management, comprehensive assessments, relevant front-end services, and meaningful employment outcomes.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they have explored and developed new and better methods for moving 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 challenges.

### Prior to OWRA

Many human services agencies used either paper-based assessment tools or a combination of paper- and computer-based assessment tools and had inefficient processes for adequately capturing client data and referring them to appropriate activities and resources. Cognizant of the need in the field for a standardized comprehensive assessment tool for enhancing the quality of case management and identifying work readiness of low-income clients, OFA contracted with ICF in 2007 to develop and deliver an online strengths-based assessment tool. The purpose of OWRA is to assess client strengths, barriers, interests, and skills in order to successfully connect them to jobs that are long-term, earn livable wages, include job progression, and match the skills, interests, and needs of the client. After the completion of a variety of questions critical to determining work readiness, OWRA generates a Self-Sufficiency Plan that summarizes strengths and barriers, while also making recommendations on work activities and additional supports.



TANF Clients Served

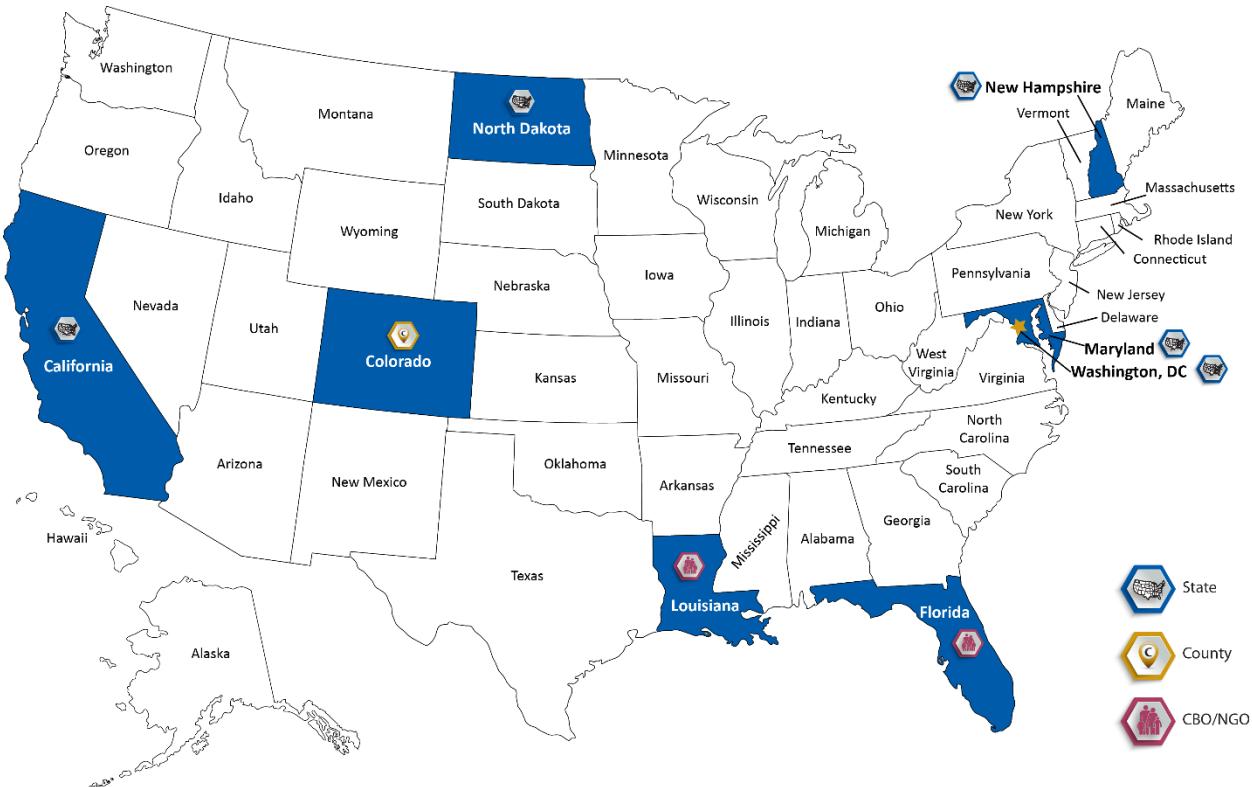
California	535,217
Faith in Fathers	548
Fresh Ministries	188
Jefferson County, Colorado	1,800
Maryland	49,739
New Hampshire	6,567
North Dakota	1,192
Washington, D.C.	15,710

### Background of Case Studies

Since its first iteration in 2011, the OWRA tool has evolved to incorporate stakeholder feedback, enhance the case management experience, and improve overall efficiency. ICF staff developed case studies of eight sites who adapted and implemented OWRA for use with their clients. The eight sites were California Department of Social Services; Fresh Ministries in Jacksonville, Florida; Jefferson County, Colorado Department of Human Services; Maryland Department of Human Resources; New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services; North Dakota Department of Human Services; Supportive Integrated Services, Inc. Faith in Fathers Program in Shreveport, Louisiana; and Washington DC Department of Human Services.

<sup>1</sup> Hoffman, L. (2007, June 13). *State Strategies for Improving the Employment Outcomes of TANF and Low-Income Families* (Issue brief). Retrieved September 29, 2016, from <https://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/0706IMPROVINGTANF.PDF>

**Figure 1: OWRA Case Study Sites**



These case studies are based on administrative data, documentation review, and interviews with site leadership, staff, and clients to highlight the site's assessment process prior to OWRA, adaptations to OWRA for their target population, integration of OWRA into existing business processes, outcomes, and lessons learned. The sites shared common goals for change, including administering a standardized assessment tool, enhancing case management services, strengthening data collection, streamlining business processes, and improving client outcomes. Additionally, most sites did not have a system in place to accurately identify, coordinate, and track the vendors, programs, and additional resources in which clients were referred.

As a result of OFA's leadership and ICF execution of the OWRA vision, the tool has been adopted by over 1,000 state and local programs, including TANF, workforce, Healthy Marriage, and Responsible Fatherhood programs. To read the individual site case studies and learn more about OWRA, visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/owra>.

## Overview of Key Findings

***OWRA is a key tool in the wider, national movement towards coordinated, strengths-based, and family-focused TANF case management.*** OWRA has demonstrated its ability to be an innovative tool in the broad national movement to improve client outcomes through coordinated, strengths-based, client-centered comprehensive case management. Case studies reveal the OWRA tool provides a platform in which workers can build rapport with clients, assess critical components of work readiness, and support client success through individualized case planning. Workers and clients appreciate the questions within OWRA that help identify a path in which clients can address their barriers, pursue their interests, and attain self-sufficiency.

*In an environment of “needing to do more with less”, the use of OWRA led to increased efficiencies across a wide range of program areas.* Most sites experience limited resources and increasing caseload, the use of OWRA led to improved efficiencies across a wide range of program areas. Through the use of the online tool, programs were able to minimize duplication of effort, simplify the customer experience, deliver real-time data-sharing, and connect clients to relevant resources.

*Programs predominantly used a phased approach in rolling out OWRA within their county or state.*

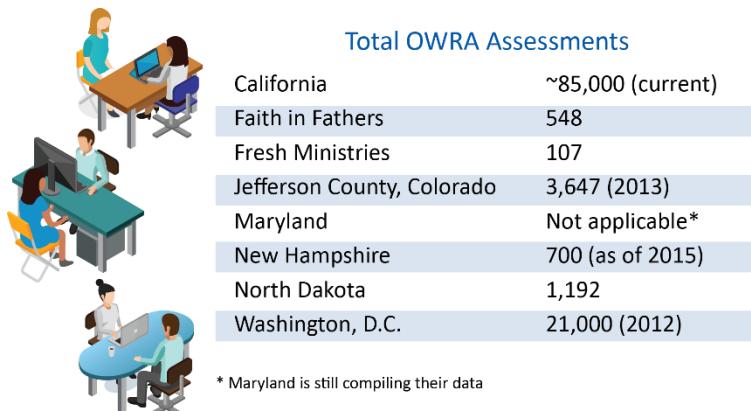
Case studies show that most of the sites chose to pilot OWRA in order to gauge additional needs, allowing them to identify ways to customize the tool with questions specific to target populations, provide relevant staff training, and improve business processes to reflect use of the tool.

*Programs capitalized on OWRA’s customization ability in order to make the tool more effective and responsive to local needs and populations.* OWRA’s innovative technology allows it to be customized to meet the unique needs of sites and the clients they serve.

## Client-Centered Assessment

At its core, TANF is a program focused on helping families connect to work and become self-sufficient. Over the last 15 years, the program struggled to reach those in need with an effective set of benefits that address both cash assistance, as well as, training and employment opportunities intended to lift families out of poverty. Nationwide, TANF benefits alone do not meet 50% of the federal poverty level and in 16 of those states, not even 20% of poverty. Further, the purchasing power of TANF has eroded with benefits worth 20% less than in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Also complicating TANF’s effectiveness is the fact that, while the program includes accountability measures for participation in work activities (namely the work participation requirement), TANF programs are not accountable for employment outcomes. As a result of the TANF work participation rate becoming the principle performance measure, many states implemented TANF programs focused on achieving higher work rates, at times to the detriment of vulnerable families trying to find and maintain stable employment. Programs focused on the goal of work rate success were more inclined to direct an individual towards any accessible job rather than a career pathway aligned to someone’s’ interests and skills.

Recognizing the shortcomings of this “one size fits all” job training and placement model, in the last few years, a number of states underwent fundamental systemic changes geared towards identifying and meeting the goals and needs of TANF participants – what some call a strengths-based or client-centered approach. States like Oregon<sup>3</sup>, Washington<sup>4</sup>, and Washington D.C.<sup>5</sup> also initiated “TANF redesign” efforts, near complete overhauls of



<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/chart-book-tanf-at-20>

<sup>3</sup> [https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/uploaded\\_files/2014%20Region%20X%20Oregon%20Site%20Visit%20Report.pdf](https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/uploaded_files/2014%20Region%20X%20Oregon%20Site%20Visit%20Report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/state-tanf-redesign-human-services-modernization-efforts>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

their program in an attempt to better connect families to work to mitigate their need for assistance. Programs that embrace these changes typically focus on increasing access and simplifying policies, making procedures more client-friendly, enhancing service coordination, reducing paperwork, and seeking to increase outreach to potentially eligible individuals. Comprehensive participant work strengths and barriers assessment is another key element to client-centered case management. The more time spent upfront with a participant, determining their career interests, identifying strengths and skills related to their work history, mapping out customized referrals to mitigate work barriers, and creating a career pathway, the more invested the individual is more likely to be which leads to a greater likelihood of following through with their self-sufficiency plan.<sup>6</sup> OWRA, as attested to in the eight case studies, plays a significant role in state efforts to include in-depth, strengths-based assessment as part of their client-centered case management approach.

***OWRA helps programs identify client barriers and strengths while also keeping individuals engaged and motivated during the case management lifecycle.*** One of the most common barriers programs encountered pre-OWRA implementation was the struggle to adequately identify client strengths and barriers. For many of these programs, this knowledge gap became especially problematic when it came time to create referrals – case workers were uncertain where to send individuals for services as they did not have a clear picture of their caseloads' needs, skills, and career interests. Following the implementation of OWRA in the eight sites, the programs unanimously reported that the comprehensive assessment led to a dramatically improved understanding of clients' actual skills, education levels, interests, barriers, and other factors affecting work readiness. In the words of a Faith in Fathers case manager, "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". In addition to filling a knowledge gap around client strengths, barriers, and interests, a number of programs also used OWRA to help case managers access labor market information and match participants' skills and backgrounds with employment opportunities. OWRA also provided tangible benefits to programs trying to improve their upfront participant engagement and motivation.

#### **Identifying Staff Training Needs**

Faith in Fathers found OWRA's ability to comprehensively identify and summarize client barriers helped prioritize staff training needs. By reviewing OWRA caseload data, leadership used trends in participant needs to determine topic-specific trainings that would strengthen staff skills and knowledge.

Using OWRA's customized, client-specific referral and support recommendations, programs reported an increased likelihood that their clients will feel motivated to stay engaged in activities laid out in their self-sufficiency plan. Aligning work supports to participants' background and interests led to improvements in client participation for both employment and work-related activities. Programs reported engagement and retention success for both participants with moderate work barrier levels as well as individuals considered "hard-to-serve". The timing of when to introduce OWRA to the participant was also a factor in engagement success. Fresh Ministries found that using the tool very early in the intake process increased client buy-in and relationships with staff and helped improve retention rates. A

handful of states expressed some concern over case workers submitting incomplete assessments but, as a whole, believed that the tool comprehensively captured client strengths and barriers in a way vastly superior to their previous process.

<sup>6</sup> Bloom, D., Loprest, P. J., & Zedlewski, S. R. (2011, August). *TANF Recipients with Barriers to Employment* (Issue brief No. 1). Retrieved September 29, 2016, from <http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/TANF%20Recipients%20with%20Barriers%20to%20Employment.pdf>

**Programs view OWRA as a tool for helping build trust between case workers and clients.** Engagement and motivational building success are closely linked to the level of trust that exists between case worker and participant. It stands to reason that an atmosphere of trust and respect is conducive to participant growth or positive behavioral change. As reported in the case studies, OWRA offers case workers a user-friendly, strengths-based appraisal tool that facilitates co-planning/decision making (participant and case worker). Staff from New Hampshire, in describing trust-building and OWRA, stated that the tool is a way to help TANF participants “welcome their independence rather than fear it”. As reported in the case studies, one of the keys to the trust-building is creating a comfortable environment for the appraisal. To accomplish this, programs implemented strategies such as letting clients know in advance the length of time needed for an OWRA appraisal, offering supportive services like childcare, and letting individuals know in advance of their right to not reply to a certain question. Programs also emphasized the importance of significant training on OWRA prior to working with participants to ensure that case workers used the tool “fluently” facilitating a more natural conversation during the appraisal.

#### Understanding Clients Served

The South Dakota Department of Human Services discovered, as a result of OWRA data collection, they were serving a large portion of clients who experienced mental health challenges. This improved their triage of clients and referral process.

A handful of programs reported using motivational interviewing (MI) in conjunction with the OWRA appraisal. Programs have found client-worker interactions have significantly improved as a result of using non-judgmental open-ended questions that seek to understand the client’s circumstances combined with insightful observations expressed by the worker. Furthermore, the use of MI has fostered a more collaborative client-worker relationship, facilitated client self-exploration regarding needs, interests, and goals, as well as increased client commitment to follow-through with agreed next steps. When combined with OWRA’s robust questions that facilitate a comprehensive assessment, sites found the overall assessment experience was greatly improved and appreciated the flexibility offered in the OWRA tool to quickly navigate between relevant topics and build context by using OWRA’s notes.

## Program Efficiency

Due to the combination of increased caseloads and reduced resources in the past several years, TANF programs have undertaken redesign efforts to streamline and increase the efficiency of their business processes while also implementing a holistic case management approach. Programs have addressed this in a variety of ways that have included adopting innovative technology, revamping the intake process, providing staff training on extensive case management, and forging creative collaborations with partners.

Prior to OWRA, sites expressed common concerns related to their business processes, particularly the lack of a standardized assessment tool that accurately identified strengths, barriers, interests, and resources. Case studies indicate that before adopting OWRA, the eight sites used either paper-based assessment tools or a combination of paper- and computer-based assessment tools. The prevailing challenges related to these assessment tools were that they were time-consuming and administered inconsistently among staff. It was not uncommon for case managers within the same site to use a variety of assessment tools depending on the client and record different types of information making quality data collection, analysis, and reporting extremely difficult. Furthermore, with the variety of information gathered combined with an inability to access real-time client data, the client experience would vary depending on the worker and would typically include the client having to re-tell their story to each worker.

***OWRA has demonstrated itself as a tool that can drastically improve program efficiency at all levels within the organization.*** At the programmatic level, comprehensive assessments, like OWRA, promote consistent service delivery, align existing assessment tools, and set clearer performance guidance for workers. The robust data collection and reporting features of OWRA, allow programs to assess the overall program, including potential gaps in service delivery, trends among clients served, staff training topics, and additional resources needed. Especially for programs who serve a high percentage of clients with multiple and/or severe barriers, the OWRA tool provides a platform by which case managers can more effectively triage clients and engage them in appropriate activities, including relevant high-quality supportive services. Additionally, OWRA's versioning capabilities allows case managers to update client information rather than completing a new assessment each time the worker meets with the client. Case workers also discovered entering as much demographic data about the client in advance helps expedite the assessment process and leaves more time for other potentially lengthier discussions with the client. This overall improved service delivery model reduces client frustration and caseload churn while strengthening the worker-client relationship.

***OWRA's innovative customization features further enhance program efficiency by improving coordination and collaboration with key partners.*** Integrating OWRA into existing databases reduced worker data entry into multiple data systems and created more of a one-stop-shop for capturing client data. This in turn increased collaboration between internal and external stakeholders making it much easier to collect, maintain, share, and report client information. The ability to imbed specific information about available resources into OWRA also made it possible to more effectively coordinate a continuum of care for clients and strengthen the referral process. Increased program efficiency has greatly improved the performance of workers and the quality of services for clients.

## Phased Roll-out

Most programs chose a phased approach when rolling out OWRA, bringing a small group of stakeholders together to test the reliability, user-friendliness, and overall experience of both the worker and client in using the tool. Through the pilot process, sites were able to hone in on site-specific lessons learned, determine staff training needs, allow partners and vendors to interact with the tool, and adapt the tool to better serve their target population. The pilot of the tool also allowed sites to determine how the use of OWRA fit into their current business processes and identify ways in which they could modify their business processes to more efficiently serve clients using OWRA. Overall, those who conducted a pilot appreciated the information gained and used it as a launching point for bringing OWRA to scale.

Sites used similar methods for piloting OWRA, which generally entailed selecting a few workers or counties to first implement the tool on a small scale. Workers and clients were given the opportunity to provide feedback about their experience with the tool, which was considered during the customization phase of rollout. Once the tool was adapted to best meet worker and client needs, training was developed and the tool was implemented on a larger scale. A few sites use continuous quality improvement strategies to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the tool.

***Staff training is a critical component of successfully rolling out OWRA.*** Sites need to identify training needs and provide initial and ongoing training on interviewing techniques and case management that emphasize the value of comprehensive assessments. Sites who participated in the case studies conducted in-person training to learn how to use the OWRA tool. In addition, sites provided training for staff on topics related to comprehensive

### Tips on Staff Training

- Allow workers practice time and flexibility to individualize their approach
- Provide ongoing training in motivational interviewing, case management, etc.
- Ensure supervisory staff are trained in how to use and interpret reporting features

case management, interviewing techniques, client engagement, and Motivational Interviewing (MI). Some sites elected to have additional support for staff that included shadowing a colleague, access to a Help Desk, and a resource library. One site shared how OWRA is a great training tool for new case managers in that it guides them through completing a comprehensive assessment.

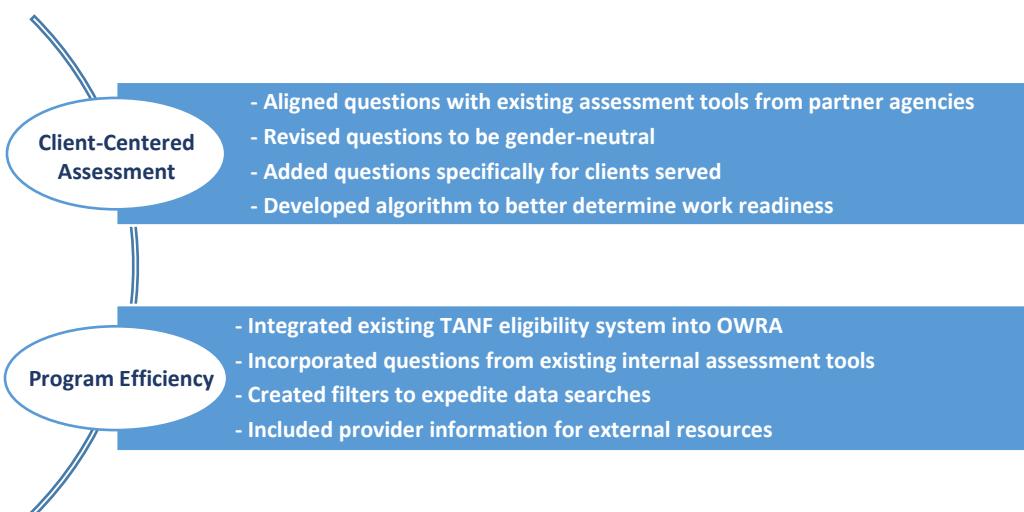
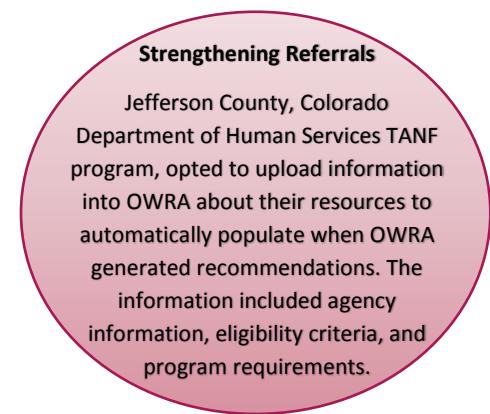
## Customizations

*The opportunity to add, revise, or eliminate OWRA assessment questions allows sites to align their existing assessment tool questions, draw out relevant information from their target populations, and strengthen the worker-client relationship.* Sites minimized duplication of data entry and reduced client frustration by reviewing their existing assessment tools, internally and from partners, to align OWRA's questions. This ensured workers and clients did not need to cover the same type of question multiple times. Another enhancement to OWRA under the guidance of OFA included the transformation of previously female-centric questions for child support and domestic violence into gender-neutral questions in order to be relevant for male clients.

*Programs that integrated their existing data systems with OWRA experienced a reduction of duplicative data entry, easier transition for the workers, and streamlined business processes.*

Those sites that were able to completely eliminate, reduce number of data systems, or merge existing data systems with OWRA found it reduced time spent by case managers entering, searching, and retrieving client information. To further enhance program efficiency, a few sites expedited data searches by creating filters pertaining to assessment date, completion status, and age.

Due to ongoing enhancements and refinements to OWRA, its relevance has extended beyond the original TANF program to include additional stakeholders in the fields of Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood, and Health Professions Opportunity Grant (HPOG). Case studies demonstrate the customizations made by sites strengthened client-centered assessments and case management process, and enhanced program efficiency.



## Conclusion

Sites have made great strides in improving their business processes, organizational culture, and staff capacity to integrate OWRA into every aspect of how they serve clients. OWRA has expanded the ability of sites to meet the needs of 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 service delivery. Additionally, the use of OWRA has led to more informed, relevant, meaningful individualized plans and referrals based on client's actual circumstances. The availability of real-time data in OWRA has enabled decision-makers to focus program resources on common barriers faced by their clients and invest wisely in services to address trends within their client population.

Overall, OWRA has successfully demonstrated itself as an innovative, standardized, comprehensive assessment tool that improves program efficiency, streamlines business processes, strengthens case management, and promotes family self-sufficiency through attachment to relevant resources and employment opportunities.

### Lessons Learned

- Align and merge existing assessments, internally and of partner agencies, to reduce duplication and client frustration
- Involve staff at all levels in testing and customization to maximize tool effectiveness and buy-in
- Allow ample time for initial and ongoing customization to reflect changes in staff or client needs
- Provide staff training and practice time to integrate into existing case management and improve worker performance
- Complete all required components of tool accurately to ensure ample data for assessing site data and tool effectiveness

### *Recommendations for the Field*

The lessons learned outlined in the eight case studies primarily center around bringing OWRA to scale within a site, from initial adoption of the tool all the way through formal implementation of OWRA by the entire site. The following are recommendations shared in the case studies on ways to support future sites in rolling out OWRA:

- Recommend sites to conduct business process mapping and strategic planning to determine ideal ways to integrate OWRA into existing business processes and culture
- Provide ongoing webinars or regional workshops for OWRA users to refresh their knowledge and skills on topics such as interviewing techniques, case management, MI, OWRA reporting features, etc.