



Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

**New Hampshire Department of Health and
Human Services' Employment Program 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.

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 the [New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Service's Employment Program \(NHEP\)](#) in customizing OWRA for the state's TANF program. Prior to implementing OWRA, the state used a combination of computer-based and paper-based data collection methods, which proved laborious for staff. This profile details the ways in which New Hampshire used OWRA to streamline these processes and save time for case management staff and clients by developing a client-administered version of the tool. It includes information about how New Hampshire uses OWRA to regularly collect data and assess program effectiveness to offer a multi-faceted service delivery approach that promotes long-term job placement and improved client outcomes. This profile also includes staff and client feedback on their experiences with OWRA, as well as staff lessons learned.

Background

Following the passage of the federal Deficit Reduction Act in 2005, many states, including New Hampshire, had to reassess their TANF programs and implement reforms that focus more keenly on work participation rates and countable core work activities.

As part of New Hampshire's reform efforts, state leadership adopted a philosophy called "Precision Case Management," which helped the state articulate the key outcomes they hoped to achieve through the TANF program.

Through this approach, the state sought to:

- Help families out of poverty through parental employment.
- Aid parents in leaving TANF with employment and career plans.
- Ensure clients leave TANF with budget management and barrier coping skills.
- Ensure clients use the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other resources to maintain independence.
- Help disabled clients move from TANF to Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled (APTD) and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- Ensure TANF clients welcome their independence, rather than fear it.



Quick Facts on New Hampshire's Employment Program (NHEP)

Service area: Statewide Program

Total population: 1.327 million

Total number of clients served annually: 6,567

Service focus areas: TANF

Client to case manager ratio: 1:50

Common client barriers: transportation, health issues, and childcare

Year adopted OWRA: 2014

To accomplish these objectives, NHEP leadership recognized the need to regularly collect data and assess program effectiveness. They also sought to establish a service delivery approach that was a multi-faceted process that promoted effective job placement and long-term self-sufficiency. A key tool in that process was New Hampshire's New HEIGHTS (New Hampshire Empowering Individuals to Get Help Transitioning to Self-Sufficiency) System, a computer program that automated benefit issuance, client scheduling, reporting, and drove eligibility flows for 32 New Hampshire assistance programs. However, through this system, most information collected about individual TANF client cases continued to be recorded on paper and either scanned or manually entered into New HEIGHTS—a labor intensive process.

New HEIGHTS, while labor intensive, was an improvement over previous data collection and reporting capabilities and the state reaped positive results, with TANF families remaining on assistance for an average of 18 months, with 59 percent leaving the system and not returning. New Hampshire became a leader in caseload management in the Northeastern states.

However, the combination electronic and paper-based approach still proved laborious for staff. Because the system did not generate reports automatically, management had to manually pull data on TANF offices, vendors, and case managers. New Hampshire leadership therefore began exploring additional ways to improve the agency's processes, and, in 2012, requested a site visit and information about OWRA. The visit further spurred their thinking and they began to re-evaluate intake processes and assess how they could customize OWRA to improve their practice, streamline services, and reduce staff burden.



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How OWRA Was Adapted

In reviewing how to adapt OWRA, New Hampshire leadership was particularly interested in streamlining their current processes to free time for Employment Counselor Specialist staff to focus on case management. Prior to OWRA, NHEP's case management process was lengthy, consisting of the six-step process outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: NHEP Business Process Prior to OWRA Implementation



To improve this process for staff and clients, New Hampshire decided to modify OWRA so it could be self—rather than staff—administered. New Hampshire's version of OWRA, the Work Readiness Assessment Tool (WRAT), is designed to be a client, self-administered tool that can be completed anywhere and at the client's convenience rather than during a pre-scheduled appointment in a TANF office. Figure 2 shows the new business process after implement WRAT.

To make this change in functionality, New Hampshire moved OWRA questions from the tool itself into Survey Monkey—a web-based, self-administered survey tool. In doing this, New Hampshire also changed OWRA's Reporting functions, as well as its SPP Module. In the original OWRA, the Reporting aggregates data at an organizational, county, and state level to provide TANF staff with demographic information about their clients. In addition, in the original OWRA, the SSP is generated for each client based on their questionnaire responses, pulling on their strengths and barriers to create an individualized plan. To maintain these features, while still supporting a client-administered tool, New Hampshire created a scoring rubric and database that aggregates data from WRAT, and includes a printout of WRAT client responses to inform case management plans developed collaboratively between clients and Employment Counselor Specialists. New Hampshire also modified and changed some questions in the tool to better address

Figure 2: Current NHEP Business Process



specific barriers their TANF participants faced. For example, many case workers found that their clients were not able to participate in employment training programs because of debt-related issues. To help address this through WRAT, the state added questions about financial management and debt, and bolstered questions about work readiness to make employment the primary focus of the tool, rather than OWRA's original focus on career exploration (see sidebar).

How WRAT Fits into the Business Process

New Hampshire slowly phased WRAT into NHEP offices across the state. WRAT was first implemented in several counties in the summer of 2014. Then, over the course of six months, additional counties began using WRAT until the tool was operational statewide in early 2015. The phasing in of WRAT allowed the state to continue to adopt and customize the tool as it was being deployed. This gradual, stepped approach also allowed the state to collect feedback from early implementers and make modifications to improve the new process before it was taken to scale.

Today, within two weeks of a client's eligibility determination, he or she is assigned an Employment Counselor Specialist and is required to complete WRAT. With an internet connection, the client can take the assessment at his or her personal computer, at the library, or at a contracted work site. WRAT cannot be taken on a mobile device and with the Survey Monkey platform, the client cannot edit or change his or her results and must complete the survey in one sitting (or re-do the entire assessment). On average, WRAT takes about 20 to 30 minutes to complete. As of July 2015 only about three percent of clients have had to re-take the assessment, either because of an error in the original assessment or because the individual left the program and returned at a later time.

Assessing Financial Literacy and Management through WRAT: Select Questions

- What is your total student loan debt amount?
- Are you currently in default or forbearance?
- Is the student debt for a federal or private loan?
- Do you have credit card debt?
- What is your total credit card debt amount?
- Are you behind in your credit card payments?
- Do you have car loan debt?
- Are you behind in your car loan payments?
- Do you owe back rent?
- What is your total back rent amount?
- Do you owe back mortgage?
- What is your total back mortgage amount?
- Do you have outstanding fine and/or legal fee debt?

When a WRAT is completed, results are sent to a central state location, where they are scored against a specially designed rubric that weighs answers given on topics such as mental health, substance use, and child care, to determine if an individual has a barrier in that area. Depending on the score, the case either goes back to the Employment Counselor Specialist or is referred to a special state office unit with staff trained in the client's identified challenge area. Common challenges referred to special office assistance include mental health problems, substance abuse issues, and domestic violence. Staff from these units will further screen and seek treatment referrals, where appropriate. When ready, the case is returned to the Employment Counselor Specialist for employment assistance.

Outcomes

As of July 2015, 700 WRAT self-assessments have been completed across the state. Since the implementation of WRAT, NHEP has realized systemic, staff, and client benefits.

While there was some initial concern that the self-administration approach may result in incomplete assessments or untruthful responses, the opposite has occurred. Anecdotally, NHEP staff report that allowing clients to complete assessments in a comfortable and private space of their choosing has led to honest and real progress in identifying barriers.

At an organizational level, with WRAT, NHEP can more accurately identify participant barriers, allowing the agency to better direct resources towards alleviating them. The agency has identified and used more community providers that address the barriers most common among their TANF clients.

At a staff and client level, the specificity of the questions in WRAT give NHEP staff a keener understanding of client issues beyond a generalized problem area. Where before they may have only known that a client has a transportation barrier, with WRAT they will know the specifics of the challenge, whether the client is not near public transportation, cannot afford a car, does not have a driver's license, or money for gas. Because WRAT also identifies client strengths, staff can acknowledge and support those accomplishments, but also direct their time and resources to supports that address each client's individual needs.

Lessons Learned

NHEP leadership and staff have had a positive experience testing and adapting the OWRA tool.

While WRAT was first rolled out in the summer of 2014, full adoption took place six months later. Even after initial release, the team was modifying the tool through client and case manager feedback. Through this process, New Hampshire has learned:

- The critical importance of including staff at all levels in testing and changing the tool to maximize its adoption and effectiveness.

- The need to take an iterative approach to implementation that allows ample time for review, testing, and customization.
- The importance of allowing ongoing review and modifications to the tool as staff or client needs change.

Conclusion

While its technical platform is very different than OWRA's, underlying the development and execution of WRAT were the same interests in streamlining assessments and better identifying and addressing client barriers. NHEP has been pleased with WRAT'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.



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