



## Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

**California Department of Social Services 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:

<b>Intake Module</b>	Data is collected on client demographics, employment and educational background, household composition, and finances.
<b>Assessment Module</b>	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.
<b>Self-Sufficiency Plan (SSP) and Work Readiness Resource</b>	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.
<b>Employment Projections</b>	Provides participants with state and local labor market information for occupations in line with their educational backgrounds, interests, and skills.
<b>Reporting Module</b>	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 [California Department of Social Services](#) (CDSS) in customizing OWRA as a statewide appraisal tool for the [California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids](#) (CalWORKs) Welfare to Work System. It details the ways CDSS used OWRA to implement a standardized assessment process across the state. It provides background on the legislation that mandated the standardized tool, the process for adapting and customizing OWRA for California, and the training and support mechanisms needed to roll the tool out across all 58 counties. This profile also includes staff and client feedback on their experiences with OWRA and staff lessons learned.

## Background

California has a state-supervised, county-administered TANF program called CalWORKs, which is overseen by CDSS. Historically, counties have had discretion to use their own appraisal tools at intake and before or after Welfare to Work (WTW) orientation sessions. Counties could also set their own standards to assess and develop participant work plans. In 2013, California passed legislation requiring a standardized assessment tool across the state to ensure every CalWORKs participant received the same level of assessment – documenting their strengths and barriers to employment before being placed in WTW activities.

That law, [Assembly Bill 74](#) (AB 74), required mandatory standardized upfront appraisals of individuals entering the WTW system with the goal of improving outcomes for participants and increasing participation in work and educational activities. It mandated that CDSS collect information on: (1) employment history, skills, and interests; (2) educational history and learning disabilities; (3) housing status and stability; (4) language barriers; (5) physical and behavioral health, including mental health and substance use; (6) child health and well-being; (7) criminal history; (8) domestic violence; (9) need for supportive services; and (10) any other information that may affect an individual's participation in work activities. The appraisal had to include information about each individual's strengths and barriers to work and results in individual WTW plans. The bill also required staff to be trained on the administration of the tool, including training on rapport building and interview techniques.

After the bill passed, CDSS had to design and implement a new tool and business process that addressed these requirements. As a state-supervised, county-administered TANF program, the appraisal tool needed to be flexible enough to accommodate differences in county services and referrals while still maintaining certain legislatively mandated standards across the state. Counties needed to have a strong

voice in the development process and play a role in shaping how the appraisal tool was integrated into current systems.

### Quick Facts on the CalWORKs Program

**Service area:** Statewide Program, County Administered

**Total population:** 38.8 Million

**Total number of clients served annually:** 535,217 ([average annual caseload](#))

**Service focus areas:** TANF

**Common client barriers:** alcohol and substance use, education and learning needs, emotional and mental health, transportation and child care

**Year adopted OWRA:** 2014

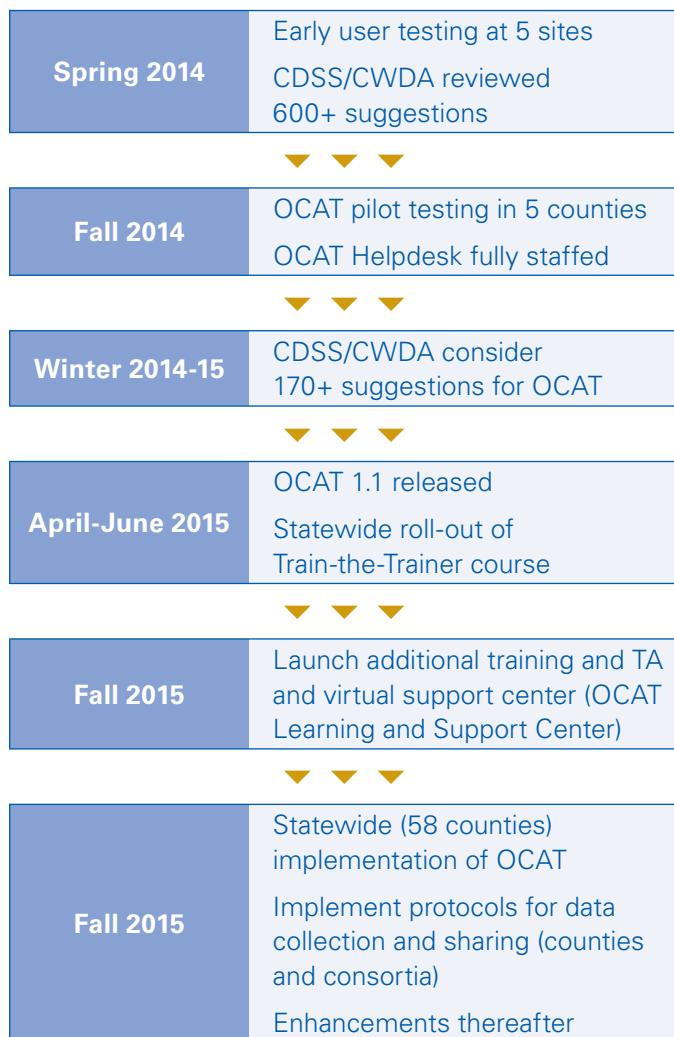
# How OWRA Was Adapted

Prior to implementing OWRA, CDSS was familiar with the tool because Sacramento County had previously participated in an OFA-sponsored OWRA pilot test in 2009. Following the pilot experience, CDSS remained intrigued by the tool and invited OWRA representatives to present it at a CalWORKs Academy meeting. Shortly thereafter, CDSS requested a demonstration of OWRA to CDSS and other California stakeholders and decided to invest in its customization as the basis for the state's new standardized appraisal tool. CDSS started the customization process in February 2014 to turn OWRA into the Online CalWORKs Appraisal Tool (OCAT).

CDSS used a phased approach to convert OWRA to OCAT, which included early use and feedback on OWRA, in-depth requirements discussions with CDSS and other stakeholders, including the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) of California, several rounds of feedback from state and county users, a pilot test in five counties, and a structured decision-making process for incorporating user recommendations (see Figure 1). To support the statewide roll-out, CDSS used a train-the-trainer model to bolster training at the county level and a Helpdesk to support users.

The first step in the phased approach was to convene several counties in early user testing of the original OWRA tool and solicit county input to provide information about customization needs. This first round of user testing resulted in over 600 suggestions from stakeholders on how to customize OWRA for California. To consider every request CDSS established a Change Control Board (CCB) to review and make determinations on all customization recommendations.

**Figure 1: Phased Approach to OCAT Development and Roll Out**



In the fall of 2014, five counties pilot tested what would become OCAT. The pilot sites and a number of other stakeholders submitted over 170 changes and customization requests to the CCB. Following the pilot and CCB decisions, CDSS developed OCAT 1.1 (see adjacent box for differences between OWRA and OCAT).

In the spring of 2015, CDSS conducted 14 train-the-trainer sessions, in which county trainers attended in-depth two-day trainings to hone their training techniques to teach case managers to effectively use OCAT and motivational interviewing in appraisals.

Over 300 trainers participated in cluster trainings covering all 58 counties. As part of the trainings comprehensive toolkits were developed, including training agendas, pre-training webinars, exercises, a User Guide, and support materials. After the completion of the train-the-trainer sessions, county trainers trained the county case managers and OCAT users during the summer and fall of 2015.

### OCAT: OWRA Customized for California

- Added California phrasing.
- Revamped employment section.
- Added human trafficking section.
- Expanded learning needs section.
- Added reports by household composition.
- Revamped Self-Sufficiency Plan to become Appraisal Summary and Recommendations (ASR).
  - Removed work activities/hours.
  - Added tables for client strengths; barriers; WTW exemption, Exceptions and Program Waivers; Family Stabilization Evaluation; evaluation recommendations based on work, education, and/or barrier removal.



# How OWRA Fits Into the Business Process

AB 74 and the implementation of OCAT changed the CalWORKs business process. Before AB 74, individuals entering the program went through WTW orientation and a brief appraisal consisting of an examination of employment history and job skills and were sent directly to job search and job club activities. Only if clients exhibited significant barriers or after they failed to achieve full employment were they referred for a full barrier assessment and the development of a WTW plan. Prior to AB 74, approximately 50 percent of participants were sent back to receive further assessment or barrier removal services.

AB 74 altered the business process (see Figure 2), creating a thorough upfront appraisal that allowed individuals to bypass employment and job search activities if the appraisal determined they needed additional barrier removal services. The goals of the new processes were to improve outcomes in work and education activities, maximizing a client's time with the flexible WTW 24-month time clock, which does not start until an individual enters those activities. It included an assessment of strengths as well as screenings for exemptions, family stabilization needs, and potential barriers to employment that impair an individual's ability to work.

**Figure 2: How OCAT fits into the CalWORKs Business Process**



## Impressions of OCAT

Post-pilot focus groups with several case managers (CMs) and clients found:

- Clients felt that the comprehensive nature of the appraisal process promoted better understanding of client issues and challenges and established a rapport between the client and CM.
- Clients appreciated the detail and customization in the goal identification and work plan.
- CMs and clients suggested shortening the length and time involved during appraisal and integration of demographic collection with other California systems.
- CMs requested additional training especially in the areas of motivational interviewing and addressing sensitive subjects.

# Outcomes

As of October 1, 2015 all 58 counties in California use OCAT. California is in the early stages of implementation and participant employment or participation outcomes are not yet available.

However, CDSS is monitoring process outcomes throughout the implementation period. As of September 25, 2015 California counties had generated over **9,000 completed interviews with clients** resulting in client-specific comprehensive Appraisal Summary and Recommendations (ASRs), which are similar to the OWRA Self-Sufficiency Plan (SSP).

# Lessons Learned

During the pilot testing of OCAT, counties identified lessons learned and best practices in administering OCAT, including:

- **Create a comfortable environment.** The appraisal process can be lengthy, which may be demanding for both the case manager and the client (62 percent of county users reported that the appraisal took 1.5 hours or longer to complete). Pilot counties recommended filling in a client's demographic information prior to the appraisal appointment, taking breaks when needed, and providing water or other refreshments during the appraisal interview. A long-term goal of OCAT is to integrate it with other California data systems so information such as client demographics could be automatically populated.
- **Help arrange childcare.** The presence of children during the interview was distracting for the parent and an OCAT case manager. Pilot testers suggested: (1) preparing the client for the length of the interview; (2) warning parents that the length of the interview may frustrate child(ren); and (3) requesting that the parent make childcare arrangements prior to the interview. Through an All County Letter from April 2015, CDSS provided guidance to counties that childcare and transportation support should be available for clients to attend appraisal appointments.

# Conclusion

California is in the midst of implementing the OWRA-based OCAT statewide. Success in California has been fostered by a legislative requirement for standardizing the TANF client appraisal process throughout the state and requiring case managers who administer the standardized appraisal be trained in rapport building and interviewing techniques.

These requirements paved the way for implementing a customized version of OWRA and provided a supportive framework for conducting training and capacity-building activities for county trainers and administrators. Interviewees indicate that the thoughtful feedback processes arranged by CDSS, and the early use of OWRA and pilot testing for the customized version of OWRA, resulted in a final version of OCAT that reflects

the specific needs and desires of case managers and clients in California. In addition, interviewees stated that case managers are learning more about their clients and are better able to provide the supportive service referrals that will help clients as they participate in WTW activities, such as training and/or employment.



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