



Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

FreshMinistries, Jacksonville, Florida Profile

Fall 2015

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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 case study shares the experiences of [FreshMinistries](#), an interfaith community-based organization located in Jacksonville, Florida, and how they deployed and customized OWRA to improve client outcomes. Beginning in early 2015, FreshMinistries started using OWRA for their U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Face-Forward grant, which provides employment, credentialing, and training opportunities for court-involved youth. FreshMinistries uses OWRA to assist case managers in building stronger relationships with clients, identifying barriers, and generating plans that outline essential referral services for clients, such as mentoring, work readiness supports, continuing education and job placement. This profile shares information about how FreshMinistries uses OWRA to improve client outcomes. It also includes staff and client feedback on their experiences with OWRA, as well as staff lessons learned.

Background

For the past 25 years, FreshMinistries has offered education and employment services to high-risk and justice-involved youth in Northeast Florida.

Fresh Path draws on FreshMinistries' existing education-employment model to help Jacksonville area youth: (1) overcome work-related barriers to employment; (2) enhance employability; (3) progress towards promising career pathways; and (4) encourage personal development. The program has two distinct tracks, targeted to specific age groups: **Fresh Path for Youth** (ages 14-17) and **Fresh Path for Young Adults** (ages 18-24). Services are delivered to both age groups across five distinct phases (see Table 1).

In the fall of 2014, after they were awarded the DOL grant, FreshMinistries leadership decided to use and adopt OWRA for the organization's new Fresh Path program to better assess new client needs (Phase 1), build program capacity, and develop individualized career pathway plans using OWRA's SPP feature (Phase 2).

Quick Facts on FreshMinistries' Fresh Path Project

Service area: Jacksonville, FL

Total population: 823,652

Total number of clients served annually: 188

Service focus areas: court-involved youth

Client to case manager ratio: 1:28

Common client barriers: legal barriers, education, mental health, transportation

Year adopted OWRA: 2015

Table 1: Phases of FreshMinistries' Fresh Path Program

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
Youth referral or recruitment, intake, and assessment process (within first 30 days of enrollment)	Case managers and youth develop an Individual Career Pathways Plan (within 30 days of enrollment)	Intensive case management, expungement, and diversion services begin for all enrolled youth	Fresh Path for Youth Educational interventions; Summer employment; Mentoring; Service learning Fresh Path for Young Adults Educational interventions; Occupational training; Workforce activities; Mentoring; Service learning; Job placement	Follow-up services: Intensive case management; Re-employment services; Support services (during the final nine months)

How OWRA Was Adapted

FreshMinistries began using OWRA in early 2015 and did so without making any customizations to it. However, after using OWRA for six months, FreshMinistries' leadership decided to make modest tweaks to the tool to meet some distinct needs of their young clients.

Specifically, all Fresh Path clients, as a prerequisite to their enrollment in the program, have had some juvenile justice system involvement and likely have already received supportive services through that system. To better address this, beginning in the fall of 2015, FreshMinistries is adding new questions to the tool to determine:

- At time of enrollment, whether the client was confined or within three months of release/probation.
- If the client was or is a foster youth.
- What supportive services the client is currently receiving (mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, other).
- At the time of arrest, whether the client:
 - Was high school student.
 - Had dropped out of school.
 - Was a high school graduate/GED recipient.

In addition, FreshMinistries will be adding new filter criteria to OWRA's Reporting Module. With the original version of OWRA, this module formats aggregated information over a specified time frame about client population demographics, employment and education histories, barriers, and career preferences. It provides comparisons between client population needs, enabling the user to make data-based decisions about referral strategies, services, and partners. FreshMinistries wanted to continue using this functionality, but also wanted to add additional features to the module to help it separate data along its youth and young adult pathways. This would not only allow the program to identify differences between service needs and clients based on their age, but also help with their outcome reporting requirements to DOL.



How OWRA Fits in with the Business Process

Young people enter the Fresh Path program through recruitment and referrals from several FreshMinistries partner organizations, including: the State Attorney Office's Juvenile Diversion Programs, the State's Department of Juvenile Justice, more than 50 community partner organizations, as well as a local high school that refers youth who would otherwise be expelled.

When Fresh Path first began, the official enrollment point in the program was right after potential participants attended the program's orientation, but before they were assessed using OWRA. At the time, orientation was the only gauge of client readiness to participate in the program.

Staff immediately noticed that they were losing more clients than anticipated shortly after enrollment, and they posited that a possible lack of buy-in and engagement early in the process was leading young people to drop out. Seeing OWRA as not only a data collection and synthesis tool, but an opportunity to begin to build staff-client relationships early, the program incorporated OWRA into their enrollment process to help increase new client engagement and retention.

Today, when young people enter the program, they participate in an orientation session to introduce them to Fresh Path requirements. Before orientation concludes, each client is scheduled for an individual meeting where OWRA is administered. Case managers complete OWRA with the new client, taking approximately 45 minutes to one hour to do so. Once the assessment is completed, the young person is officially enrolled in the program.

After formal enrollment, case managers begin to work with clients to address barriers identified during OWRA's administration, and discuss the client's OWRA-generated career pathway plan. Participants may receive a range of services following this meeting, including: mentoring up to three times a week, work readiness supports, and monthly continuing education classes (such as legal supports, financial literacy, and drug and alcohol education). Older participants, ages 16-19, also receive employment placement supports for full-time employment in the summer and part-time work during the school year.

Outcomes

Since August 2015, FreshMinistries has administered OWRA with 107 clients.

FreshMinistries staff report the tool has helped them more quickly and easily identify key barriers facing the young people with whom they work. Staff have also used it to build realistic plans for each client and focus resources and energies on shared challenges, such as education and financial literacy, which have been identified as barriers for many program participants.

FreshMinistries has also been pleased with using OWRA as part of their enrollment process, rather than beginning assessments afterwards. They have found that it has helped build early staff-client relationships and has resulted in a decrease in early drop-outs.

Lessons Learned

FreshMinistries' lessons learned from adapting and implementing OWRA span several aspects of the program, including data collection and analysis, federal reporting, client service delivery and engagement.

Through this process, they have learned:

- **The importance of taking time to understand the tool and then adapting it to address specific issues affecting a program's client-base.** For FreshMinistries, this meant adding questions that help unearth the extent of the young person's prior involvement in the juvenile justice or child welfare system and the support services he or she received during that time.
- **That they can adapt the tool to meet their reporting and data collection needs.** FreshMinistries found the Reporting Module's data aggregation and analysis functionalities very useful, but wanted to take them a step further to help differentiate services by each target population's need and to help with federal reporting requirements.
- **That they can use OWRA, not just as a tool to assess client needs, but also as one to engage clients early.** FreshMinistries found that early use of the tool increased client buy-in and relationships with staff, helping to improve program retention rates.

Conclusion

The training and use of OWRA has been a universally positive experience for FreshMinistries.

The program is using it to better identify barriers for Fresh Path clients, and it has helped them streamline their federal reporting requirements by automatically aggregating client data. "OWRA has lived up to all expectations and then some," said the Fresh Path Youth Program Coordinator, Michelle Harcourt.





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