



Telling the OWRA Story: Adaptation Highlights from the Field

North Dakota Department of Human 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:

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 [North Dakota Department of Human Services](#) (NDDHS) in customizing OWRA for the state's TANF program. Prior to implementing OWRA, different North Dakota counties used different assessment tools and case management strategies. This profile details the ways in which North Dakota used OWRA to develop a uniform case management process across the state. It includes information about how North Dakota integrated OWRA into existing technologies and business processes, as well as discusses how OWRA enhanced the state's case management approach. This profile also includes staff and client feedback on their experiences with OWRA, challenges the state has faced, and lessons learned.

Background

North Dakota's TANF program is state-supervised, county-administered. Beginning in 2012, the state began contracting out its post-eligibility determination and case management services across all 53 counties. The state started to use three different contractors across the counties; one works with 46 counties and the other two works with the remaining seven.

Each of the contractors used different assessment and barrier reduction procedures, which resulted in inconsistencies across the state in how case management services were delivered. To remedy this, NDDHS began to explore standardized assessment options, including OWRA. NDDHS was familiar with OWRA because it had previously participated in an OFA-sponsored pilot test of the tool in 2010. Given their previous knowledge of the tool, NDDHS decided to adopt OWRA to meet their desire for a uniform assessment tool.

Quick Facts on North Dakota's TANF Program

Service area: Statewide program

Total population: 739,482

Total number of clients served annually: 1,192

Service focus areas: TANF

Client to case manager ratio: 39:1
(average among the 3 contractors)

Common client barriers: legal issues, transportation, mental health concerns, housing, and child care

Year adopted OWRA: 2013



How OWRA Was Adapted

NDHDS implemented OWRA in a phased approach, first pilot-testing it in Bismarck and several other counties from July 2013 to early fall 2013. From the start of the pilot, North Dakota's intention was to use OWRA across the state to ensure consistency across contractors. The phased approach allowed NDHDS to begin use of OWRA on a smaller scale and increase buy-in before the statewide rollout.

Following the pilot, the state launched OWRA across all 53 counties without making any changes to the tool. For the first three months of statewide implementation, case managers in each county (known as employment counselors), administered OWRA with new clients, as well as with individuals already on the TANF caseload to ensure that all TANF clients could benefit from OWRA's coordinated assessment approach and strength and barrier identification processes. Today, employment counselors assess all new TANF clients using OWRA after an eligibility determination is made by the state's employment contractors.

Although OWRA is administered statewide, the state does not currently use all of its features, focusing largely on the Intake and Assessment modules. The state is not currently using the tool's Self-Sufficiency Plan (SSP) and Reporting features. Employment counselors transcribe responses from the SSP into a summary report that is used to develop a separate employment plan.

How OWRA Fits Into the Business Process

In implementing OWRA across the state, one of the most significant challenges NDHDS faced was integrating the tool with existing processes and technologies. Prior to the OWRA rollout, the state's largest contractor, which services 46 counties, already had a database in place that included an employment plan, similar to OWRA's SSP.

To use some of the existing technology without duplicating efforts, the state allowed the contractor to continue using its employment plan, but the state redesigned it to complement OWRA assessment questions. As a result, the NDHDS employment plan is organized by the same employment barriers that are identified through the OWRA assessment – making the integration of OWRA with current business processes a more seamless process. Upon deploying OWRA, NDHDS technical staff also integrated OWRA with existing technology. NDHDS hosts the OWRA system directly within their pre-existing database, so employment counselors can access the tool in a familiar environment while accessing other programs concurrently.

North Dakota did experience issues however, with server compatibility and the recommended platform to be used for OWRA. Because NDHDS used a different server than is recommended for OWRA, the OWRA Help Desk worked with the state to provide files compatible to their server.

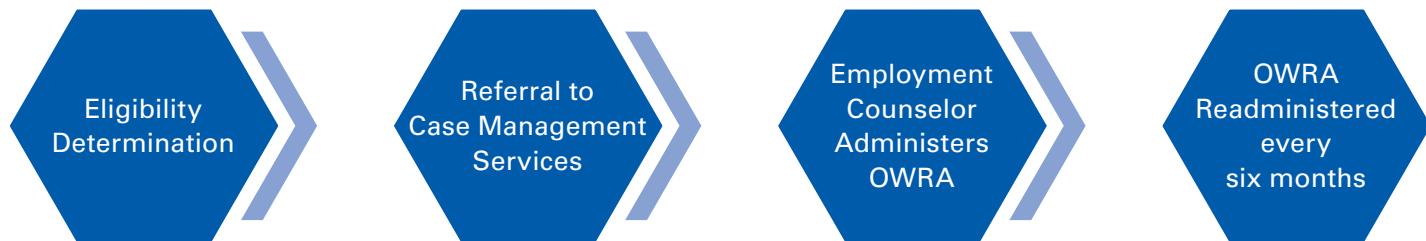
While the state experienced some technical difficulties in their initial deployment of OWRA, today, the tool is fully integrated within North Dakota's business process (see Figure 1 on next page). When a potential client applies for TANF, he or she first meets with a county eligibility worker who determines eligibility, in part, through the provision of an extensive questionnaire. Once eligibility is verified, the client is referred to

one of the state's employment contractors for case management services, where he or she is assigned an employment counselor.

Employment counselors will immediately schedule their first meeting with their new client, at which OWRA is administered. Typically this first meeting occurs in person, within two to seven days of the employment counselor being assigned. In addition to using OWRA at an initial assessment, employment

counselors also re-administer the tool every six months to address clients' changing needs or circumstances. Since NDDHS reports that OWRA takes up to two hours to administer per assessment, this process is time-consuming. Employment counselors do not use OWRA's "versioning" feature, which would allow users to create a new version of a case and update the specific assessment areas that have changed since the previous assessment.

Figure 1: NDDHS Client Flow



Outcomes

As of August 2015, OWRA has been administered to approximately 1,192 clients across North Dakota.

While the state is not currently using OWRA's Reporting module, which allows users to aggregate and track barrier identification and population demographics, NDDHS has shared anecdotal evidence of improvement. For example, both employment counselors and state staff see OWRA as a good learning tool, particularly for staff new to case management, as it guides the counselor through the process of completing a comprehensive assessment.



Lessons Learned

Having administered OWRA statewide and across several contractors, NDDHS found it helpful to incorporate the tool into existing technological platforms and contractor employment plans so as not to have to fully revamp their previous system. They also noted the importance of ensuring that the assessment experience is client-friendly, with administration times that are not too lengthy, while still gathering needed information.

NDDHS staff recognize that while they have had challenges with OWRA, including technological issues and concerns about the time required to administer and re-administer the assessment, there are several components of OWRA that are not currently being used, which could improve the OWRA experience for clients and staff. These include:

- Adopting the “versioning” feature, which would allow users to create a new version of a case and change only the areas that are new. This would eliminate the need for a new assessment every six months; and allow employment counselors to only update the tool with new information.
- Training on motivational interviewing techniques, as well as efficient ways to navigate in the tool, to assist staff in building client relationships and cutting down the time it takes to complete an assessment.

- Using OWRA’s Reporting module, which would provide local and state-level leadership with aggregated information about client population demographics, employment and education history, barriers, and career preferences, enabling NDDHS to make data-based decisions about referral strategies, services, partners, and programs.
- Integrating NDDHS’s current employment plan with the OWRA SSP. Incorporating the existing process into OWRA’s SSP would increase efficiencies as plans would automatically generate from assessments, rather than staff having to manually transcribing responses in summary reports and employment plans.

Combining the state’s initial eligibility questionnaire with OWRA may be another way to increase efficiencies. The state may consider how these two processes overlap, where they are different, and how OWRA could be customized to include new questions to streamline the intake process.

Conclusion

While North Dakota is using OWRA to effectively identify and assess strengths and barriers, there are ways that the process could be made more efficient for state staff, employment counselors, and clients. Supportive training on interviewing techniques, adding reporting and versioning features will only enhance both the client and staff members’ experiences.





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