OWRA Lessons Learned Peer Exchange with District of Columbia, Arkansas, and New Hampshire

September 2018

Setting the Stage

The Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Income Maintenance Bureau of Employment Programs contacted the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) Technical Assistance (TA) Team, to learn how other states had utilized OWRA. The OWRA TA Team convened three virtual site exchange discussions to support this technical assistance request with the:

- New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Economic and Housing Stability, Bureau of Employment Supports;

- District of Columbia Department of Human Services (DC DHS); and

- Arkansas Department of Workforce Services, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

The goal of the peer-to-peer exchanges was to have each OWRA site share: (1) why they selected OWRA as their initial client assessment; (2) what the targeted issues are being addressed with the adoption of OWRA; (3) how they rolled out OWRA; and (4) how OWRA implementation has impacted each site. As a result of the site exchanges, the members of the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services Office of Income Maintenance presented their findings to the Department's leadership. The Department has approved that the division will establish a four-county pilot beginning in January 2019.

> The OWRA TA Team would like to thank the following for participating in the site exchange.
> **Arkansas**
> Nagaraj Bettadapura
> Phil Harris
> **DC**
> Brian Campbell
> **New Hampshire**
> Kimberly Geraci
> Laurie Krause

Issue

The Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Income Maintenance Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP) held a series of focus groups in 2018 around the effectiveness of the current Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) model. Feedback from the focus groups indicated the current assessment method was lacking, which made it

difficult for TANF programs to accurately identify a client's barriers to self-sufficiency. Because the current assessment asks only seven questions to determine eligibility, it fails to uncover all potential barriers to work. BEP explored various assessments, and asked each of the peer exchange sites several questions, including:

1) Why did you adopt OWRA?
2) What issues were you trying to address with OWRA adoption?
3) How was OWRA rolled out?
4) How was OWRA aligned with existing state systems?
5) What has been the impact of using OWRA?

District of Columbia

In 2012, DC DHS decided to redesign its services for families who are receiving or are eligible for TANF, and families experiencing housing instability. As part of that redesign, the agency identified service integration and case coordination as two major strategies at the core of the new model. In addition, DC DHS wanted to move away from its "one-size-fits-all" approach and develop more customizable barrier removal options for TANF participants. OWRA (with modifications made by DC DHS) achieved both of those goals by rewording the OWRA questionnaire with the same questions used in other DC agency assessments. In addition, DC DHS revamped the OWRA reporting features to categorize clients based on their strengths and barriers to work. DC DHS administrator Brian Campbell underscored the importance of DC DHS's TANF redesign by explaining, "the fact that we have a robust assessment tool that allows us to make intelligent referrals based upon barriers, that has fundamentally changed how we do business. It drives our business process. It drives how we make referrals. It really is a hub for us."

In 2011, DC DHS piloted a redesigned TANF program, using the publicly available OWRA tool. The program resulted in tremendous increases in employment services participation. Before DC DHS moved to full rollout and training of its 70 TANF case managers, DC DHS made three significant customizations of the OWRA tool.

The first customization was interfacing OWRA with the DC DHS TANF eligibility system, reducing entry duplication. This made TANF participation identification possible across two systems.

The second – and most extensive – customization was to align the OWRA's 12-tab questionnaire with assessment questions used by other DC agencies including the DC Department of Mental Health and the Child and Family Services Agency. Aligning OWRA's assessment questions with those used by DC agencies meant if a barrier was identified by DC

DHS, the client did not have to be reassessed by the other agency. This increased partnerships across agencies for the District and reduced client frustration.

A third customization that DC DHS undertook was revamping the Reporting Module in OWRA to better meet their needs. DC DHS determined that generally, clients that come into the TANF program fit in one of four service quadrants:

1) Job Placement – Clients placed in this category have reasonable levels of job skills and work experience with limited barriers to work. These clients receive job placement services to help connect quickly to employment.
2) Work Readiness – The participant has a proven track record but will need support in resume writing or other skills to be placed in a job. These are considered short-term supports.
3) Barrier Mediation – The client has a significant barrier that needs to be addressed prior to being job or work ready.
4) Supplemental Security Income (SSI) – The client has been determined to be exempt from work participation requirements due to a disability or severe barrier. They will be placed in the component of the DC's TANF program known as "Power", and will receive help applying for federal disability benefits from SSI program. These clients will not be subject to TANF time limits.

DC DHS developed an algorithm based on the participant's responses to the OWRA questionnaire, which placed individuals into one of four predetermined quadrants. While simultaneously redesigning their assessment system, DC DHS restructured their vendor referral network to be aligned with these new quadrants. As a result, DC DHS administration has a reporting dashboard that shows how many participants are in each of the four quadrants. Having this sophisticated reporting structure provides DC DHS with the ability to identify services for their clients as well as training needs for their case managers. It has led to conversations on why some case managers make recommendations that others do not, and has led to greater efficiencies in the department.

The main lesson learned, identified by DC DHS, is that intelligent and well-informed referrals are critical to the success of TANF clients. The TANF Comprehensive Assessment (TCA) has provided case managers with an assessment system that can effectively identify individual barriers and strengths.

> "…If you are going to do an intelligent referral to different services suppliers based upon need, it is going to start and stop with the quality and ability of your assessment and the assessment's ability to make intelligent referrals. If you cannot get that right, then the whole thing fails." - Brian Campbell, DC DHS Administrator

While an effective assessment helps, DC DHS feels that aligning their vendor network to the needs of their clients was invaluable. Under DC's prior TANF system, employment services were provided primarily by a set of vendors offering the same set of job readiness services. Under the reform TANF program, providers only accept clients through referral from DHS based on TCA. Vendors are to develop an Individual Responsibility Plan for each client. Payment for vendors is based primarily on achievement of specified goals, such as meeting work participation requirements, completing education and training, and job placement and retention. Tying payments to achievement of specified education and employment outcomes is intended to ensure that TANF employment funds are directed to providers offering the best services.

Arkansas

In 2015, Arkansas was looking to revamp their TANF program to align their assessment and case management systems. The state explored various assessments but decided to utilize OWRA because of the ability to align the tool with their case management system. Arkansas reviewed the publicly available OWRA tool and linked the assessment with employment projections information. The results of the assessment were then exported into the case management system. (Both elements are in the current version of OWRA.) Since Arkansas TANF system was being remodeled, it was easy to align OWRA with the case management system, which allowed for ease of use.

Arkansas rolled out to the entire state at one time. The state worked with an initial vendor to link Labor Management Information with OWRA, as well as align to the Case Management System. Since the initial design, staff have provided ongoing operations and maintenance of the tool. One lesson learned is the state did not take the time to train workers in motivational interviewing. As such, the state feels it missed an opportunity to get the most out of the tool.

Arkansas workers noted the questions help capture the full picture of a client's circumstances. It provides guidance to help the client and worker, in partnership, determine next steps. The tool has aided clients, by shedding light onto how negative behavior patterns may prevent them from achieving their goals. Supplementing this, the strengths component of the tool has helped remind clients of the positive aspects of their life despite, their current circumstances and the existing resources available to them.

Arkansas clients are often unaware of the various job readiness services and other resources available outside of cash assistance. They are typically surprised and appreciative of the different vendors that can support them on achieving their goals. Overall, OWRA has helped them uncover issues and barriers they were unaware of before.

Prior to OWRA, New Hampshire had a TANF program called New HEIGHTS. Although the program had successful outcomes, it was labor intensive. The combination of electronic and paper-based approaches 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. As a result, New Hampshire leadership began exploring additional ways to improve the agency's process. The state's leadership wanted to adopt OWRA to streamline their current process; this would free time for Employment Counselor Specialist staff to focus on case management. To do this, New Hampshire modified OWRA so it could be self-administered, rather than by staff. 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.

In order 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 module functions, as well as its Career Pathway Plan module. In the original OWRA, the Reporting module aggregates data at an organizational, county, and state level to provide TANF staff with demographic information about their clients. In addition, a Career Pathway Plan is generated for each client based on their questionnaire responses, which pulls on their strengths and barriers to create an individualized plan. New Hampshire created a scoring rubric and database that aggregates data from WRAT in order to maintain these features, while still supporting a client-administered tool. It also includes a printout of WRAT client responses, to inform case management plans developed collaboratively between clients and Employment Counselor Specialists.

Since the implementation of WRAT, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (NHDHHS) 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, NHDHHS 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. Beforehand, they may have

only known that a client has a transportation barrier, with WRAT, they can now know the specifics of the challenge. For instance, this may include 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 additionally acknowledge and support those accomplishments. Thus, WRAT allows for praise of strengths while also enabling case workers to direct their time and resources to supports that address each client's individual needs.

When a WRAT is completed, results are sent to a central state location. Results 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 Councilor 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 Councilor Specialist for employment assistance.

Next Steps

Resulting from the peer exchanges, the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Income Maintenance Bureau of Employment Programs presented the findings to agency leadership. The leadership wants to pilot OWRA in early 2019 in four counties to measure the tool's use and effectiveness. The team is using the lessons learned from these three OWRA sites they heard from during this technical assistance exchange to determine how to roll out, train, and use the OWRA tool to improve its services for those wanting to become self-sufficient.