



Regions IX and X Virtual Tribal TANF Technical Assistance Meeting: Building Capacity to Support Families in a New Reality



On December 8-10, 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA), held the Building Capacity to Support Families in a New Reality virtual meeting. The meeting brought together representatives from Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Native Employment Works (NEW) programs in ACF Regions IX and X. Meeting topics focused on how Tribal TANF and NEW programs can best adapt and pivot to meet the needs of families and individuals whose challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This tip sheet provides a synthesis of key takeaways from the meeting. It is intended for Tribal human services providers, including TANF and NEW program directors, supervisors, managers, and case workers, who support needy Native individuals and their families daily and respond to the unique challenges faced by Native American Communities.

TIP SHEET

Tip 1: Increase Accessibility in the Time of Social Distancing

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally impacted the ways in which staff can engage with customers. Programs have been forced to adapt and find creative ways to engage customers for intake, compliance, and ongoing case management. Underlying all these approaches is a desire to increase the ways in which customers can access TANF and NEW supports and benefits.

Streamline customer experience by simplifying processes, reducing touch points, and merging paperwork. Many grantees have updated policies and procedures with a focus on streamlining processes and removing outdated, duplicative, and cumbersome steps for clients and staff alike. There are a variety of ways that TANF and NEW programs can achieve this. Programs could consider accepting documentation in different formats, such as by allowing clients to sign and submit documents from their phones, verbally over the phone, or physically into a socially distanced drop box. Merging eligibility paperwork can also reduce client burden. Additionally, programs could simplify internal processes by assigning specific roles to staff members, such as having one staff member conduct all intakes—one to process paperwork, one to track all service requests, and another to track referrals.

While programs have seen a decrease in caseloads as the pandemic continues and other emergency resources are available, caseloads may increase again once protections and other pandemic assistance funds end. Programs may find themselves needing to process a large volume of paperwork quickly. Streamlining procedures will help programs expedite coverage for families while reducing administrative burden.



Consider multiple ways for customers to receive services. For example, which processes do not require personal contact to be performed and approved? If customers do not have access to reliable internet, consider whether they can receive information by phone. If this is inaccessible, consider dropping off informational paper packets to customers' homes or providing via outdoor tables that allow for social distancing and privacy. Be sure to inform customers of the various ways they can reach the TANF or NEW program.

Provide education and training courses in a variety of formats. Programs have expanded education and training offerings, using Zoom, YouTube, Facebook, and FaceTime, or by offering them in audio format. Some have worked closely with partners to assess needs and develop strategies to increase online training services. Some even mail paper curriculum packets to customers. One program published trainings on YouTube and then linked them to its Facebook page, since many customers stayed in touch with the program via Facebook (via cellphone or computer). Consider the major ways customers engage with your program and provide resources through these easy-to-reach channels.

When planning to re-enter the office, SPIPA redesigned their office intake area by first setting up an isolated side door that only clients used. They stocked offices with sneeze guards, Lysol wipes, masks, gloves, and zero contact thermometers, and set up socially distanced tables outside for clients to fill out intake paperwork.

- DeAnn Harris, South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency

Think creatively about providing employment services and opportunities in a socially distanced manner. Some programs have established virtual or drive-through job fairs, allowing customers to engage with employers, exchange their resumes, and learn about new opportunities. They also build in time for one-on-one exchanges between customers and employers, just as they would during traditional face-to-face job fairs.

Tip 2: Strengthen Your Cybersecurity Practices

Establishing internet security procedures is critical, as cyber-attacks have increased widely due to the transition to work-from-home practices. Programs must be aware of potential data breaches that can compromise confidential information shared between customers and caseworkers.

Sixty-five percent of security breaches occur internally, and some tribes have been specifically targeted by cyber-security attacks. It is important to train staff to identify the kinds of links they should not be clicking.

- Amber Young, California Tribal TANF Partnership



Remember that emails are often a gateway to security breaches.

Encrypting emails is one strategy to increase information security for your office.

Establish virtual private networks (VPNs) for staff who work from home.

VPNs provide an extra layer of internet security by disguising staff's personal identities while they use the internet. Using a VPN will encrypt your staff member's



internet connections, protecting them from unauthorized use while also hiding IP addresses. This allows for secure web use and protects against being tracked by outside parties.

Encourage your staff to use secure digital file storage programs. Common examples of secure digital file services that can be used collaboratively across staff include Dropbox, Microsoft OneDrive, and Google Drive.

Tip 3: Address Mental Health with Customers and Staff

Stress, fear, anxiety, anger, grief, loss, and hopelessness are common mental health concerns which have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. TANF and NEW programs should take steps to build resilience at the individual, team, and organizational levels, since staff's mental health needs are critical to address so they can continue to provide necessary supportive services to customers who depend on them. Additionally, customers served by these programs are grappling with exacerbated pressures and uncertainties as well as responsibilities to juggle brought on by the pandemic. Establishing regular mental health check-ins for both customers and staff is key to ensuring they have the resilience and support needed.

Tips for supporting customers:

- 1. Take care of your own mental health before working with others.** Staff need to practice self-care for themselves before they can appropriately care for their customers.
- 2. Know when to refer out.** In most cases, TANF and NEW staff are not licensed mental health professionals. For this reason, staff should be able to identify when customers need to be referred to more intensive mental health services.
- 3. Provide mental health assessments during intake.** For instance, Soboba Tribal TANF provides all customers with a mental health counseling assessment when they first meet with a caseworker, allowing them to be referred to onsite mental health specialists if needed. Counseling services count towards participation for customers' work plans to remove barriers that will lead to successful employment.
- 4. Check in regularly with your customers.** Use a variety of methods including phone calls, home visits, social media messages, and text messages to maintain regular contact. Acknowledge and validate how customers are feeling during difficult times.

Tips for supporting staff:

- 1. Encourage wellness activities while on the job,** including team walks outside, weekly staff check-in calls, daily meditation or breathing exercises, regular movement, and setting healthy work-life boundaries. Leaders can provide supports by sending out weekly coping tips and self-care reminders, and by establishing regular listening sessions with staff.
- 2. Encourage staff to establish healthy habits while not at work.** This includes eating well, exercising regularly, engaging in mindfulness training, taking vacations, meditating, and connecting with religious/spiritual beliefs.



3. **Provide supports to staff.** This could include sending out weekly coping tips and self-care reminders or establishing regular listening sessions with staff. It is important to remain open to staff feelings, emotions, and feedback.
4. **Identify symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (STS).** Symptoms of STS can occur within individuals but also within teams and organizations. Potential symptoms of STS include:¹
 - In **individuals**: anxiety, fear and worry, isolation, sadness, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, illness flares, trouble focusing or intrusive thoughts, and relational conflicts.
 - In **teams**: increased worker absenteeism and subsequent increased pressure on other team members, increased work conflicts as short tempers flare, withdrawal from colleagues, avoidance of stressful or traumatic tasks, stress, negativity and fear among colleagues, inability to hear or respond to supervision or support, and low morale.
 - In **organizations**: constant changes in work relationships, diminished inter-team relationships, breaking workplace rules as a result of apathy, lack of vision for the future and flexibility, decreased work output, negative attitude toward clients, decreased progress toward outcome indicators, increased turnover, increased costs to the agency, increased mental health and other costs to clients, lack of respect for deadlines, negativity toward management, reluctance to change, and the belief that improvement is not possible.

Tip 4: Expand and Strengthen Diverse Partnerships

Collaborating with partners can allow your program to provide more critical resources, training, and employment opportunities. It can also sometimes create blended funding opportunities, which can be important when maintaining and expanding programs to match customer needs. Programs can leverage partners to provide laptops and phones to customers and their children to fill technology gaps. Many programs have also engaged with current and new partners to expand employment and work-based learning opportunities.

Set clear expectations with potential partners and be flexible to meet employers' needs, such as by designating a central contact person or modifying placements and reimbursement processes as needed.

- Katy Ciotti, The Morongo Band of Mission Indians

Consider partnering with workforce development boards that already engage employers to create new job opportunities needed in local areas.

Engage with community colleges and tribal colleges. Due to the pandemic, many colleges are pivoting to provide increased virtual classes and to expand the times at which classes are held to accommodate a variety of schedules. This presents an opportunity to re-engage with local colleges; especially consider those who provide work-based learning programs, including apprenticeships. These opportunities provide valuable on-the-job training to customers, provide them with a livable wage, and connect them to local employers and unions.

¹ This list of symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress was created by Dr. Barbara Pierce.



Reach out to the Indian and Native American Employment Rights Program (INAERP) that can help connect Tribal members with local employment opportunities. There are hiring preferences for tribal members living on or located nearby recognized tribal lands. INAERP works with any company that does business with the federal government and is knowledgeable about a wide variety of employers throughout the United States. INAERP can provide TANF and NEW programs with a list of local employers that may already have tribal hiring preferences in place and can connect tribal members to available positions.

Consider working with a federal program to increase availability and affordability of broadband. There are several federal programs that provide these services, including the [Federal E-Rate program](#), the [Universal Service Fund](#), and the [2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority](#) (though this last program has since ended).

Tip 5: Take Advantage of the Opportunity to Rethink Services

While the difficulties caused by the pandemic, particularly for Native American populations, are not to be minimized, the pandemic has also created opportunities for programs to rethink aspects of employment, education and training, and social service provision.

Build new policies, classes, and services for customers and staff. The pandemic has raised awareness about the importance of mental health checks for customers and staff alike. Consider whether it is possible to build mental health screenings into customer intakes going forward, or whether your weekly Zoom calls with staff have helped them vocalize when they need help. Think about opportunities for your customers to learn how to use digital platforms to communicate, or whether there are opportunities for customers to gain skills in computer maintenance, IT, or cybersecurity.

Evaluate changes that could become the “new normal.” If your office has expanded the ways by which you accept customer documents, for example, evaluate whether this has assisted customers in submitting their paperwork on time. The same goes for moving in-person training classes to YouTube or Facebook. Have digital offerings eliminated some barriers to participation, such as transportation? Think about whether customers’ ease of use has increased. Actions that were initially established as temporary may be beneficial to those you serve in the long-term.

Consider how workers can be re-engaged for different job openings. While hospitality jobs have been reduced, the need for delivery drivers has increased. Additionally, many places now need workers to take temperature checks or fulfill other health and safety roles. These types of roles may be available to TANF and NEW customers without extensive further training.

Ensure quality is kept and consistency is maintained. When COVID began, everyone was in crisis mode, and made quick changes to adapt to the rapidly updating conditions. That was fine in the interim but ensure that any issues do not become permanent within your programming.

- Drew Hanson, Salish Kootenai College



Pay attention to flexible and varied opportunities to receive education, training, and instruction. Worldwide, employers have had to adapt to employees working remote full-time while balancing the demands of home life. This has contributed to an increased awareness that work, training, and education schedules need to be flexible to attract diverse candidate pools. Previously, customers who may have been excluded from certain classes due to scheduling, transportation, or childcare barriers may now have better access to resources in a variety of formats and/or times. Pay special attention to opportunities for asynchronous learning, which allows customers to receive content when it best suits their schedules, rather than being forced to attend during a specific time.

Look beyond your area. The increased emphasis of digitalization and remote instruction, training, and work opportunities means that individuals are not as bound to their geographical area. A speaker from Salish Kootenai College explained that the switch to remote learning resulted in the highest student enrollment in years during the pandemic. Consider remote learning, career upskilling, and training programs that may be available to customers remotely.

To learn more about these tips, programs, or the *Building Capacity to Support Families in a New Reality* virtual meeting, a full meeting summary report is available on the OFA Peer TA website at:
<https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/2020-ofa-regions-ix-and-x-virtual-tribal-tanf-technical-assistance-meeting>.

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