Human Services Practice Brief

Brittany English, Scott Baumgartner, and Annalisa Mastri

Foundations for Innovation: How Three Human Services Programs Laid the Groundwork for Sustainable Change

Human services programs must develop the ability to innovate, adjust, and improve to serve children and families in an environment that has become more complex and challenging. A decade into the economic recovery from the Great Recession, and with record low unemployment rates, individuals remaining on public benefits require new solutions to meet their service needs. Over the years, programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) have tried many different strategies to improve clients' economic security, but for many people, these strategies have not made much of a difference.[1] Human services programs are taking a hard look at their programs and facing a common reason for failure to help these families thrive: the inability to adapt to change.

Getting started

In this brief, we share three foundations for innovation for these programs. Each began by asking a fundamental question: *How does each part of our program environment contribute to improving outcomes for families?*

Years of routine program administration have created a culture often challenged to change and focused on compliance.[2] Innovators layered changes onto existing processes or failed to get full support for their vision—and that just further reinforced existing cultures. Fundamental shifts are needed to ensure that innovation takes root and flourishes. Investments in reducing complexity and bureaucracy, building skills of supervisors and staff, and putting humans back at the center of human service delivery can help programs meet the needs of families facing challenges like low educational attainment, unemployment, criminal records, mental and physical health issues, and children with special needs.[3]

Over several projects, we worked with three employment programs funded by TANF that are pursuing innovations in customer service. They are creating a culture of learning to lay the groundwork for change in their service environment. In all three cases, their efforts have led them to pursue novel approaches, improve efficiency, and reduce staff stress and turnover while more fully supporting clients at each step along their path. Although the examples are specific to TANF programs, the lessons may apply to human services programs more broadly.

To begin, staff acknowledged that elements of their program—like requiring employed customers to pick up a transportation pass during normal business hours—might make sense in theory, but in practice created hurdles. Processes developed over time might be redundant or, worse, work at cross-purposes. Taking a step back to look at how the program environment affected clients, staff, and organizational culture helped programs identify areas of concern and set the stage for change. Through our work with

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TANF programs, we have identified three foundations on which programs can changes processes and strengthen personnel capacity to improve client experiences and to enhance program environments:

- **Reduce** the complexity of processes clients must navigate
- **Simplify** the paperwork and processes and paperwork staff must use
- **Promote** a culture focused on meeting clients' needs

Foundation #1: Reduce the complexity of processes clients must navigate

Cognitive load—the amount of information that someone can keep in the front of their mind at one time—is a real issue for families enrolled in human services programs. The structure and complexity of tasks they must navigate are mentally taxing, and the benefits may be unclear, leading them to stop participating in helpful and needed services—even if there are penalties, such as a reduction in benefit amounts, associated with doing so.[4] Suggestions to reduce complexity for clients include:

Streamline paperwork. In many programs the volume of paperwork has grown, along with time and costs associated with completing it.[5] One program required clients to complete 80 pages of forms and write their name and contact information over a dozen times. How did things get to this state? As requirements changed and new ideas about how to serve people emerged, forms were added, but few were removed. Many were outdated, no longer required, or irrelevant for services provided. Reducing complexity for clients will also reduce complexity for staff. Trimming down client paperwork means less data for staff to enter, file, and maintain, freeing time to provide more value-added services.[6] In response, the program conducted a comprehensive review, combined or eliminated nearly three-quarters of the forms, and instituted a calendar for monitoring and updating client-facing paperwork.

Provide seamless customer service. Case managers need to be able to fully support their clients to address their individual needs. One program developed a process that was efficient in terms of internal operations but made it difficult for clients to know what services they could receive, when they could receive them, and from whom. Here's how it worked:

1. One case manager handled the initial intake paperwork.
2. Various workshop facilitators interacted with the client to help achieve job readiness.
3. A different case manager worked with the client until he or she was job ready.
4. The client met with up to five different job developers, who all maintained separate job leads, to identify employment opportunities.
5. Another staff member worked with the client to verify initial employment.
6. Yet another followed up to verify ongoing employment.

During the three to four weeks a typical client engaged in the program before finding a job, he or she might interact with more than a dozen staff. Opportunities to build relationships and coordinate services were few. Most handoffs were impersonal—clients were given a referral and told to make an appointment. The program is now focusing on warm handoffs and designating one person as the primary contact to coordinate the team.

Improve communication about next steps. Communication is crucial for helping clients navigate a program—especially one with work requirements—and receive the support they need to move forward on their path. Yet in two programs we worked with, clients were largely on their own. The initial information session did not even reveal why the clients were told to report to employment services, let alone what services they would spend the rest of their day or week participating in. In one program, clients were expected to spend up to 20 hours per week in workshops, but never were they given guidance on which workshops might address their needs or teach them needed skills. The program has since revamped its information session to provide an overview of the program services and provided training to staff on how to develop service pathways for clients—including what workshops might be useful to them.

Reduce waiting times. Many clients find long waits in the employment office frustrating. One program required them to bring their timesheets in every Friday. Case managers were supposed to do a quick check to verify completeness and provide bus passes on the spot. But clients were seen on a first-come, first-served basis, and some needed discussions with their case managers. This created wait times for others that could be hours long. To add to their frustration, clients didn't get any other services while they waited and couldn't leave and come back. Now, clients can submit timesheets on multiple days of the week. This is more accommodating of clients' work schedules, and wait times are shorter because clients aren't all trying to submit their timesheets in a small window of time.

To reduce the complexity of processes clients must navigate…

- **Streamline paperwork:** assess the paperwork clients must complete, remove unnecessary items, and make necessary forms more client-friendly
- **Provide seamless customer service:** create opportunities for staff to develop relationships with clients
- **Improve communication about next steps:** ensure that clients know what their responsibilities are
- **Reduce waiting times:** respect clients' time and avoid frustration

Foundation #2: Simplify the paperwork and processes staff must use

Complex paperwork and processes contribute to a culture focused on compliance with rules.[7] Staff may feel that they are losing sight of the families they are trying to help. Staff in all three programs reported feeling stressed and overwhelmed by their clerical duties. They also said that performing these functions left less time to provide value-added services, like offering targeted referrals and building clients' skills. And staff who think clerical tasks are getting in the way of helping clients can become dissatisfied or leave. Suggestions to simplify paperwork and processes for staff include:

Limit impromptu interactions. Case managers in all three programs met with walk-ins, which can disrupt scheduled meetings. Asking case managers to jump from one thinking task to another is inefficient and decreases the quality of their work.[8] These unplanned interactions also tend to be unproductive for the client, because the case manager has other duties to attend to. Sensitive discussions may be interrupted by someone who just needs to drop off a form or get a signature. Programs have explored training administrative staff to handle drop-in requests and setting aside times for walk-ins and for case managers to handle paperwork.

Take a hard look at clerical tasks. For a variety of reasons, case managers need to document client interactions and completion of required activities. They also need to have enough time to work directly with clients. In two programs, some staff spent nearly as much time writing case notes as they did meeting with clients. In one instance, they spent up to four hours a week in mandatory staff meetings to hear announcements that could be handled by email. In another program, data quality staff spent the bulk of their time manually compiling client reports for case managers who did not use them. These programs developed guidance and boilerplate text for case managers to adapt for their case notes; reduced reliance on meetings for conveying announcements; and discontinued producing unused reports.

Give staff the tools and training they need to do their jobs efficiently and consistently. Putting innovation at the heart of service delivery may require greater investments in staff who, in two programs, felt unsupported and got little formal training. In lieu of formal training, new staff were instructed to shadow others with more seniority and take notes. Staff in one program took turns leading orientation sessions for new clients, but lacked a curriculum and scrambled to develop their own materials. This led to huge inconsistencies in the material covered. Staff are now writing standard operating procedures, standardizing curricula, and providing training and ongoing support to staff.

Convey consistent expectations for common client-staff interactions. All three programs noted inconsistent and ambiguous expectations about steps case managers needed to follow, which led to wide variations in the time spent on common activities, such as attending meetings, fielding walk-ins, and completing case notes. In one program, the length of one-on-one client orientation sessions varied from 45 minutes to 2 hours because of unclear direction on topics to cover. To counter this, the program developed guidance on average meeting length and topics to be discussed, while allowing the case managers to adapt as client situations warranted.

To simplify the paperwork and processes staff must use…

- **Streamline paperwork:** assess the paperwork clients must complete, remove unnecessary items, and make necessary forms more client-friendly
- **Limit impromptu interactions:** keep to a schedule that avoids unplanned and unproductive walk-in meetings that disrupt the work day
- **Take a hard look at clerical tasks:** make sure that paperwork requirements don't crowd out the time case managers have to spend with their clients
- **Give staff the tools and training they need to do their jobs efficiently and consistently:** invest in guidance and ongoing support
- **Convey consistent expectations for common client-staff interactions:** ensure staff-client interactions are productive, efficient, and meaningful

Foundation # 3: Promote a culture focused on meeting clients' needs

Good customer service ensures that clients get connected with what they want and need. Yet all human services programs have performance requirements, including penalties for noncompliance, and must follow rules and regulations that influence organizational culture and service delivery. For example, TANF programs must meet the federal work participation rate (WPR) performance metric. Other programs must submit drug test results, or pay stubs to verify employment. In these highly regulated environments, focusing on compliance with rules and regulations can—if staff and administrators are not vigilant—overshadow connecting clients with needed services.[9] Suggestions to promote a culture focused on meeting clients' needs include:

Shift focus to the client experience. Individuals and families who come to human services programs just need help. They need to be connected to services in a manner that is streamlined, effective, and tailored to their needs. In all three programs, a "culture of compliance" prevailed—staff spent more than half their time checking adherence to rules, performing clerical functions to document compliance, and sending reminders to noncompliant clients. This led to a one-size-fits-all approach, with few opportunities to customize the experience and motivate any particular client. Taking a step back and viewing their services through the eyes of their clients was eye-opening for programs. One revised its initial orientation to get rid of irrelevant content and focus on services and clients' needs, developed tracks for different types of clients, and created a service delivery model emphasizing meeting goals clients set for themselves.

Adopt a holistic set of performance benchmarks reflecting a range of client outcomes. If participation in work activities is the only metric for evaluating success, programs tend to focus narrowly on clients who are not in compliance. Those who are showing up for meetings, attending activities, and submitting timely documentation may be overlooked. To combat this, programs are developing a more holistic set of performance measures, including client progress toward goals, educational attainment, measures of family stabilization, and rates at which clients return to the program within a defined period.

Engage with the state and county Departments of Human Services (DHS) to set realistic expectations. Federal TANF policy gives states a lot of discretion in how they operate programs.[10] Yet in two programs, states were holding the county-run programs responsible for WPRs well in excess of federal requirements. For example, the target WPR for one program operator was 70 percent, when the actual statewide target was nearer 15 percent. Two programs have begun working with the state and county DHS around more realistic expectations around WPR, which can in turn reduce staff stress and help shift away from a culture of compliance.

Recognize that change fatigue is real. Repeated, failed attempts at organizational change can lead to low morale and resistance to further change if staff do not feel supported.[11] Staff in all three programs were in a constant state of change, being asked to incorporate new policies, processes, and duties in quick succession, often with little or no training or follow-up. The time needed to understand and comply with these changes created new demands on staff and further limited their ability to focus on clients. To combat this, programs are giving staff a sense of the end goals and concrete milestones to achieve them.

To promote a culture focused on meeting clients' needs...

- **Shift focus to the client experience:** Avoid a "culture of compliance"
- **Adopt a holistic set of performance benchmarks reflecting a range of client outcomes:** Participation in work activities is one of many metrics that can show how clients are making progress towards their goals
- **Engage with the state and county Departments of Human Services to set realistic expectations:** Set benchmarks that are meaningful and achievable
- **Recognize that change fatigue is real:** Practice open communication with staff to avoid low morale and resistance that can result from shifting expectations

Next steps

Innovation is more than redesign or overhaul of a program's structure; it is an ongoing and continuous process that requires buy in and motivation from staff. It involves encouraging a problem-solving mindset and empowering employees to use new tools and experiment with new approaches to achieve greater impact. Programs are working toward success by taking a hard look at their environment; getting rid of old, inefficient, and unnecessary processes; supporting staff to adopt and adapt; and orienting the culture toward new approaches going forward. By assessing where they are and where they want to be in the future, they can create more client-centered services and deliver them in ways that speak more directly to clients' needs, while increasing staff satisfaction that they are making a difference.

Project IMPROVE is an innovative technical assistance project supported by the Office of Family Assistance. Under this project, Mathematica uses the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2) framework in partnership with state and local TANF programs to design and test innovative employment-focused practices.

For more information about Project IMPROVE contact Michelle Derr at mderr@mathematica-mpr.com.

Endnotes

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