



Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) *TANF Disaster Response Highlights*

HIGHLIGHT STATEMENT: TANF Disaster Response Highlights provide a broad overview on how state and tribal TANF programs responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many programs' responses were informed from lessons they learned in responding to prior disasters. The information within these highlights has been shared to assist with the development of adaptable approaches and proactive disaster responses. Such preparations help ensure the uninterrupted continuation of services to the populations supported by TANF programs during crises like health pandemics and natural disasters.



Program Overview

Colorado's Department of Human Services (CDHS) supervises the Colorado Works program which provides Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The program is administered locally through each of the state's 64 counties with support from CDHS on program design. Through Colorado Works' comprehensive approach to supportive services for the entire family, TANF participants receive a customized blend of benefits, both for child-only and work-eligible families. Colorado's multigenerational approach responds to the full spectrum of economic mobility challenges facing the families they support. Supports are structured based on the knowledge that participants applying for TANF assistance are likely experiencing a variety of socioeconomic challenges in their lives, which affect the entire family.

COVID-19 Response

Colorado has a long history of dealing with disasters. This includes floods that occur each year as the snow melts throughout the state, summer fires, and tornados. Tornados also plague a portion of the state. This substantive disaster experience meant that Colorado was well prepared to employ programs like Disaster Assistance¹ and Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits (NRSTs) to their TANF families. This additional support was offered through the state's Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security Act (CARES) funding and Pandemic Emergency Assistance Funds (PEAF).

When a disaster strikes, the main priority for CDHS is to identify and respond to the individual needs of each family. In previous disasters, this has included short-term food or housing assistance. However, previous disasters did not affect employment in as serious or as widescale a way as the pandemic has. In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been especially important to find solutions that are best suited to individual family needs. This includes considering a family's health and well-being when searching for employment.

To deliver maximum responsiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic, many TANF programs utilized the [Good Cause Exemption](#). This enabled programs, like Colorado Works, to ensure no TANF participants experienced an interruption in benefits for failure to comply with the work requirement due to their inability to work during the pandemic.

CDHS response also focused on the needs of their staff. They worked diligently to provide equipment that would maintain client confidentiality in the remote environment and spearheaded initiatives to maintain staff morale.

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Program Successes

By and large, Colorado's most notable program success came with their focus on maximizing the use of available technologies. This focus on technology included the use of an online application, and the virtual delivery of many services such as employment readiness and GED prep courses. Colorado successfully launched a mobile application which allowed participants to also submit documents via their cell phones. CDHS supported the uptake of this app by marketing it on social media and informing participants about it during virtual appointments. Counties changed policies to allow for the acceptance of participants' verbal agreement, in lieu of signatures on paperwork. This adjustment allowed TANF participants to continue receiving their benefits without the added burden of coming to an office in person during the pandemic.

Collaboration with workforce development centers allowed CDHS to continue this shift in programming and referrals, which they were able to do online and over the phone. These changes, while challenging at first, proved to be successful for Colorado Works participants, and showed CDHS that they could provide meaningful supportive services using an entirely virtual approach.

Program Challenges

The biggest challenge CDHS faced was ensuring equitable access to the new technologies they were rolling out. Some counties were required to procure and distribute mobile computers, which was a time-consuming and resource-intensive undertaking.

Program staff struggled to deal with the increased stress of supporting their participants while they were also experiencing the pandemic. Staff struggled to balance responsibilities as full-time professionals with large caseloads of individuals experiencing crises, with added familial responsibilities such as childcare and homeschooling. In response, CDHS encouraged counties to implement flexible work-from-home policies for staff and, when possible, to allow staff to choose a work schedule that accommodated their non-work responsibilities. This required providing workers with empathy and grace while everyone adjusted to the "new normal."

Next Steps

Increased accessibility and usage of online platforms for Colorado's TANF recipients was one positive to come out of the pandemic. Since first implementation, participants' use of technology-based solutions, including the online and mobile platforms, has increased dramatically. Colorado



LAUNCHING MOBILE APPS:

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CDHS utilized a mobile application which allowed participants to submit documents via their cell phones. This alleviated the burden of in-person paperwork submissions. CDHS supported the uptake of this app by marketing it on social media and informing participants about it during virtual appointments.

Works (CDHS) plans to maintain the use of online platforms, supportive services, and partner referrals moving forward. CDHS is exploring options on continuing other COVID-19 policies, such as being able to formally record client verbal agreements for paperwork moving forward.

The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) thanks Crickett Phelps, the Benefits and Services Section Manager at Colorado Department of Human Services, for the information provided for this program summary.

¹"Disaster Assistance is for Denver residents with children in the home who are denied or will likely be denied for public assistance programs but still meet broad-based TANF eligibility criteria and present a real need for services directly relating to the COVID-19 pandemic." Denver Human Services TANF Disaster Assistance Frequently Asked Questions (<https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/denver-human-services/documents/emergency-disaster-assistance-faqs.pdf>)