

Peer TA: Director's Den

April 2014: Re-engaging Disconnected Mothers in the Workforce through Innovative TANF Programming



The Director's Den is a special section of the Peer TA website that was created to facilitate communication between the Director of the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and TANF program stakeholders. Periodically, the OFA Director will provide timely insights and useful information. This article seeks to address current issues related to the program, poverty, and American families. I welcome (and encourage) your feedback and communication through peerta@icfi.com.

Hello and welcome back to the Director's Den. This past month, some of my staff attended a planning session for the upcoming [White House Summit on Working Families](#). Jointly hosted by the Center for American Progress, the Department of Labor and the White House Council on Women and Girls, the event will bring together a large group of stakeholders in June 2014 to discuss the issues facing our country's working families and strategies to ensure that all members of our society have equal access to quality jobs and wages. One of the priorities of the Summit, and the Administration as a whole, is to help women reach their full economic potential. I wanted to take some time in today's Den to highlight why this is important, and to discuss how our Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is contributing to this effort.

Even before the most recent economic recession, employment outcomes among low-income mothers had been [declining](#) over time. Despite the proportion of mothers who entered the workforce after the passage of welfare reform, a significant percentage remained in [poverty](#) and their earnings and labor force participation

rates have decreased since 2000. Today, new employment sectors are emerging that provide potential career pathways for low-income single mothers. However, despite such opportunities, a growing group of single mothers has become [disconnected](#) from work and public assistance. These mothers are defined as those who are not in school, have annual earnings of less than \$2000, annual welfare receipt of less than \$1000 and annual Supplemental Security Income (SSI) receipt of less than \$1000. They also often face multiple barriers to [employment](#). OFA, among other stakeholders, believes that it is essential to support these mothers and parents holistically, in order to ensure both their well-being and that of their [children](#).

Established in 1996, the TANF program has provided opportunities to many low-income mothers. States have used federal and state funds on everything from wage supplements to barrier reduction to education and job training. TANF provides the resources for low-income mothers who are seeking economic independence to learn new skills and engage in targeted training. Moreover, for the one in five [disconnected](#) mothers, TANF programs can serve as a key to entering growing employment or occupational sectors, while aiding mothers in securing jobs that will lead to family-sustaining wages and benefits. For example, during the Great Recession and shortly thereafter, prioritized TANF funds – designated under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) and known as the TANF Emergency Contingency Fund – provided significant job opportunities.

Under ARRA, thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia utilized dedicated TANF emergency funding to employ more than [260,000](#) low-income individuals. [TANF programs](#) had a tremendous impact on the employment outcomes of long-term unemployed individuals in such industries as healthcare, the service industry, manufacturing and business administration. Individuals were placed in potentially [high-growth](#) and sustainable private sector jobs. Post-ARRA, TANF [continues to provide opportunities](#) to recipients by allowing states to use federal funds to directly subsidize employment opportunities and build [stronger employment foundations](#) leading to potential long-term independence.

As the disengagement among low-income mothers has increased, various employment sectors have begun to hold tremendous promise for many to achieve economic independence. Increased opportunities created in the [healthcare sector](#) by the retiring of the Baby Boomers, for instance, have created potential career pathways for [TANF recipients](#) and other low-income mothers.

Following this trend, OFA is among the leading federal agencies implementing innovative healthcare workforce activities for low-skilled, low-income and disengaged Americans in response to the passage of the [Affordable Care Act \(ACA\)](#). Authorized by the ACA, our [Health Profession Opportunity Grants \(HPOG\)](#) program provides education and training to TANF recipients and other low-income individuals for occupations in the health care field that pay well and are expected to either experience labor shortages or otherwise be in high demand. Across all HPOG sites more than 28,000 individuals have been served as of April, 2014. The majority of participants are women (89 percent) and have one or more children (65 percent). One grantee, the Workforce Development Council (WDC) of Seattle-King County in Washington State has been a leader in serving TANF recipients and other low-income individuals. Approximately 40 percent of their participants reported receiving TANF cash assistance when they enrolled. WDC supports participants through individual training accounts to use at local training providers and through purchasing classes specifically designed for HPOG participants at local community colleges. Designated Navigators (case managers) assist HPOG participants in identifying and enrolling in appropriate training programs and provide assistance with support services, job search, and employment retention by helping participants navigate the education, workforce and social service systems. Navigators leverage support services from TANF and other programs to the greatest extent possible to preserve resources and avoid adding another case manager for individuals who are, in many cases, already working with multiple case managers. WDC also documents and addresses needs that may be unique to successful participation in healthcare training, such as requirements for immunizations, physicals, health insurance, and criminal background checks.

I look forward to engaging with you in a productive dialogue about opportunities to increase employment, education and training to mothers and custodial parents who are served by the TANF program. TANF provides tremendous flexibility to improve the employment outcomes of disconnected mothers in the workforce. Much work remains, however, to ensure that these women have access to and can benefit from the services that TANF programs can provide to help them and their families attain higher levels of economic and personal well-being. OFA looks forward to hearing from TANF stakeholders from across the country. We hope that you'll take a moment to write me a question or comment and as permissible we'll respond as soon as possible.