



ADMINISTRATION FOR  
**CHILDREN & FAMILIES**  
Office of Family Assistance

# *Staff Strategies To Improve TANF Employment*

**KANSAS: CAREER NAVIGATORS AND RETENTION  
SPECIALISTS IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS**

Employment retention for participants in the Successful Families Program (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF) program is improving with a change in strategy at the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF). Adjustments to staffing models have resulted in an increased focus on specialized career development services, meaningful connections to employers and employment opportunities, and innovative post-employment services to support retention.



# **TANF** *Works!*

Integrating Innovative Employment & Economic  
Stability Strategies into TANF Programs

EMERGING PRACTICE SERIES | 2018 - 03

## THE TANF CHALLENGE:

### *What Issues Do TANF Programs Face?*

DCF understands that its TANF staff want to help participants find sustainable employment. However, a number of challenges complicate the process, including:

**Pressure of the Immediate:** Some people engage with TANF because they need to quickly acquire a job to support their families. Often times, they face additional life challenges that require immediate attention. The system creates additional pressures with the immediate tasks involved in determining eligibility for services. Prior to the change in organizational structure, Kansas caseworkers had their time allocated equally between program eligibility and job attainment. Yet eligibility tasks continually took priority, leaving little or no time for staff to provide employment services.

**Short Window of Time for Employment Assistance:** With Kansas TANF cash assistance capped at 24 months,

participants must move quickly towards employment. Some participants, including people from other states, enter TANF with very brief time remaining when they can receive benefits. Others need time for employment preparation (such as high school equivalency or English as a Second Language classes) before they can engage with potential employers. The challenge of time limits places pressure on both the case managers and participants to start working on employment goals and to stay focused.

**The Cliff Effect:**<sup>1</sup> TANF participants transitioning to employment, with enough wages, can experience a gap in resources. This happens when their new employment earnings cause them to exceed the income eligibility threshold for supports, such as child care subsidies or Medicaid benefits, while their new earnings are not enough to purchase replacement services. Without support networks and resources during this critical time of change and transition, many participants get frustrated and discouraged, either leaving their jobs or taking actions that sabotage an employment opportunity. Even when securing higher wages, low-income individuals may not feel prepared for the abrupt changes and often need education or coaching to navigate the transition well.



## THE INNOVATIVE SOLUTION:

### *What Solution is Proposed to Address These Challenges?*

Kansas reduced its time limit on TANF cash assistance to 36 months in 2015 and 24 months in 2016. At the same time, the state has been aggressive about its commitment to helping its TANF participants find and sustain employment. Aligning these two realities, DCF knew that if it wanted to improve employment outcomes for its TANF participants within the time available, the agency would need to provide additional supports.

In 2014, the agency leadership team began its plans to implement transitional supportive services and post-employment individualized mentoring. The concept was initially conceived as

a volunteer mentoring program that would add a personal touch to agency-provided case management services and a source of support and connection to someone in the local community. Over time, DCF realized that, to achieve its goals, the continuity of professional staff was necessary. The agency also determined that embedding these responsibilities into the work duties of its staff would create a culture shift that would prioritize sustained employment. As a result, plans shifted to a restructuring process, which resulted in shifting eligibility responsibilities away from case managers while also adapting the case manager role into two new, separate responsibilities.

## These new roles, Career Navigator and Transitional Retention Specialist, have the employment goals of TANF participants as their mission.

Career Navigators (CN) provide in-depth guidance to participants who are seeking work, helping them to prepare for and obtain employment. Transition Retention Specialists (TRS) provide supportive services once TANF participants are employed, addressing barriers that may arise and providing coaching to increase employment retention, leading to self-sufficiency. In some counties, a different person fills each of these jobs and, in other counties, one person divides time between the two roles.

### ALIGNING INNOVATION WITH RESEARCH:

#### *What Is Known That Provides Confidence This Idea Can Work/Will Matter?*

Studies have identified promising practices for helping participants stay employed and increase their earnings during this period. One significant study that directly addressed the issue of employment retention for low-income individuals was the MDRC-led [Employment Retention and Advancement \(ERA\) evaluation](#). The study identified several promising practices used in 12 programs (three of the 12 produced consistent increases in individuals' employment retention and advancement), including:<sup>2</sup>



**Specialized Job Coaching:** Case managers maintained frequent communication for the first 6-12 months after placement to ease the transition into work and to provide encouragement, especially at potential "tipping points."



**Earning Supplements:** Some ERA programs offered wage supplements, such as a Texas program that offered \$200/month if the participants maintained full-time employment for 12 months (the Kansas program does not offer wage supplements, but offers incentives to maintain contact with the TRS who can assist with barriers encountered). The study showed that some financial supplement coupled with job coaching did improve job stability.



**Focus on Long-term Employment:** One ERA program in Chicago encouraged participants to focus on careers rather than a job, activities that could contribute to long-term employment goals, and advocating for wage increases.

Although some programs focus on either pre-employment services (e.g., job search assistance, training, education) or post-employment services (e.g., retention, work supports, incentives), many programs offer a combination of pre- and post-employment support services and individualized case management to address retention and advancement.<sup>3</sup> The Kansas DCF offers this combination of services; what is new about their approach is that case managers specialize in each role to provide more intensive services at each stage of the participants' career path. These specialized case managers act as a type of scaffolding<sup>4</sup> by helping TANF participants identify barriers during their employment and providing additional support as they navigate the move from cash assistance to self-sufficiency.

### PROGRAM MODEL:

#### *What Is Being Done?*

Agency leadership has established an Employment Services unit. DCF Career Navigators and Transitional Retention Specialists are at the center of a state effort to shift staff labor resources towards supporting the employment goals of TANF participants. Intensive case management that leads to employment and focuses on job retention for employed clients is organized around individualized work plans. Staff assist in planning, coordinating, developing, and maintaining employment opportunities using a network of relationships with employers, community agencies, state and local programs, and resources.

TANF participants now receive significant support from agency staff in meeting their employment and career goals:

- Individualized career guidance, job preparation, and training based on eligibility, assessments, and labor market demands;
- Employment supports such as childcare assistance, job on-boarding expenses (tools, etc.), transportation assistance, and help with other barriers as needed, such as addiction counseling;
- Training and apprenticeship opportunities to develop skills and social capital;
- Employer relationships maintained to help participants with finding job opportunities and managing work relationships post-hire; and
- Continued support after employment, such as coaching, resource referrals, problem-solving support, and ongoing guidance.



## CAREER NAVIGATORS

Following eligibility determination, the CN guides TANF participants along a sustainable career pathway, working intensively with individuals to prepare for employment. They engage participants in developing individualized plans that identify their skills and interests and the steps they need to take to realize their employment goals. High school equivalency (GED) preparation, job skills training, interpersonal skills coaching, and resume development are some of the tactics used by the CN before participant job search activities begin. Staff maintain relationships with employers to help identify potential job opportunities and career options, utilizing a network of community providers to assist participants in addressing their barriers to employment. Individualized plans and the navigators' networks combine to create unique solutions for each TANF participant.

## TRANSITIONAL RETENTION SPECIALISTS

DCF knew that shifting case managers from eligibility to career navigation was a bold step, but an additional and important innovation was the creation of the TRS. Assisting TANF participants in meeting their employment goals is a big step forward, but the employment unit found that, too often, individuals ran into barriers that interrupted their employment success. The TRS role was created to provide staff attention and support towards

sustained employment and to help facilitate the transition to self-sufficiency. Once a TANF participant is employed, the TRS takes over the coaching/case management relationship from the CN, maintaining monthly contact through phone and/or face-to-face meetings. To encourage continued engagement with the TRS, a \$25-\$50 participant incentive is offered for in-person meetings. This helps motivate participants to stay in touch with DCF during a 12-month transitional period (with an optional additional 12 months), accessing benefits when needed. In addition to ongoing encouragement, education, and coaching, TANF transitional support services may include financial support such as transportation assistance, car repairs, gas money, job-related clothing or tool purchases, and assistance with rent or insurance payments.

## CASELOAD SIZE

Caseload sizes for DCF staff vary depending on a number of factors, including the scope of the person's responsibilities and the geographic area covered. For example, a CN who travels to outlying counties may have a caseload of around 40. If staff members divide time 50/50 between the CN and the TRS role, then they may have larger caseloads of 60-65 as some of their participants will be employed and require less frequent and/or mainly phone contact. Accountability is maintained by the TRS, who tracks participants for the 12-month post-employment period, providing monthly snapshots of progress.



## RESULTS:

### *What Has Been Learned/Achieved?*

DCF has an employment retention goal that states 40 percent of TANF participants that obtain jobs will stay employed for more than 90 days. Following the addition of the CN and TRS roles, the agency tracked employment retention data for a year and found that 87 percent of participants that obtained jobs were still employed. Twenty-two percent of this group left TANF or found a better job with higher pay or promotions, but were still employed. Based on discussions with participants and staff, the agency attributes this high level of retention to the intentional strategies that the CN and TRS use in working with participants. Anecdotally, navigators report fewer participants cycling back onto TANF caseloads and fewer individuals reaching the 24-month time limit on benefits, though the agency has not collected that data.

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Before, the focus was on getting participants off cash assistance. Now, it's much more about earning enough to sustain them. I don't see as many 'repeat customers,' and if I do have one, I don't have them as a participant for very long.

- **GERALDINE (GERRY)**  
Career Navigator/Transitional Retention Specialist

Another internal evaluation of the Kansas employment retention strategy found that, during the second year of employment, the rate of TANF participants sustaining their jobs improved by 10 percent between 2014 and 2017.

One of the best benchmarks that a program idea is working well is the degree to which participants value what is offered. Former TANF participants see the benefits of having a transitional support system, as evidenced by 95 percent of them accessing these post-employment support services.

These program outcomes suggest that ongoing career navigation and transitional supports provide a mechanism for TANF participants to overcome employment barriers, not only to achieve their career goals, but also to do the even harder work of staying on the path to self-sufficiency.

### *Summary of Lessons*

- 1 Restructuring staff roles has created valuable time to provide the critical individualized, ongoing coaching that can result in strong relationships and successful employment outcomes.
- 2 Establishing staff as a transitional support resource can help participants address the cliff effect, finding new support services to fill in gaps left by a loss or reduction of benefits.
- 3 Providing consistent staff relationships, plus support services and resources, can lead to an increase in employment retention rates and fewer individuals returning to TANF.

## A FIELD VIEW OF THE EMERGING PRACTICE:

Voices from the TANF Agency

### Ensure a Solid Handoff from Active TANF Status to Transitional Services



Kansas TANF participants receive letters and calls over several weeks before and after they come off cash assistance, letting them know about the transitional services. However, the most effective transition is for the CN to personally introduce or direct participants to the TRS.

“The transitional process really relies on the Career Navigators. We've learned that, when a participant is close to coming off of cash assistance, the navigator needs to plant the seed that there are transitional services available. I like to sit in with the Career Navigator at that appointment to introduce myself.

- TAYLOR  
Career Navigator/Transitional Retention Specialist

### Establish Boundaries

Close relationships with participants make a CN or TRS more effective, but that level of engagement can also become time-consuming and emotionally taxing. Staff must be clear about expectations and accessibility from the start, setting appropriate boundaries with participants and themselves.

“I tell all my staff, it's important to maintain boundaries. Don't give out your personal cell number; make sure you have a balance.

- CHICKA RICHARD  
Employment Services Program Administrator - Wichita Region

## Build Relationships to Ease the Transition



When TANF participants know their TRS and feel comfortable communicating their needs, they are more likely to receive the right supports at the right time. It works best for the TRS to meet with newly transitioning participants for the first time in person, even in rural areas, as this helps to establish the relationship.

“It's important to emphasize the relationship that they get to continue for the additional 12 months, along with the support services. It's not just, 'Here's some money we can help you out with,' but 'You're still supported. We understand that this is a difficult transition, and you're still going to have somebody there to help you out.'

- JULIE  
Transitional Retention Specialist

### Empower Staff to Be Creative in Helping Participants Achieve Employment Goals



The Kansas system has increasingly focused on long-term self-sufficiency. Many complex barriers can prevent a participant from gaining and retaining employment, with not all of them directly related to the workplace. It's the job of both the CN and the TRS to know their participants well so they can help them to address issues before they prevent job attainment or cause job loss.

“They tell us to think outside the box. I have a participant who is covered in tattoos. So finding employment for her was extremely difficult, but I told her about cosmetic makeup that could cover her tattoos.

- TAYLOR  
Career Navigator/Transitional Retention Specialist



## Demonstrate a Non-Judgmental Attitude



Some participants may feel embarrassed about their situation or may have had negative experiences with a human services agency. In order to gain the necessary trust, Career Navigators and Transitional Retention Specialists treat participants with dignity from the start.

“ People have been told they won't amount to anything, that they are not smart enough or whatever. Staff treat them with dignity and instill in them the belief that they can do it and that we (CNs and TRSs) will be right there with them to reach their goal.

- **ANDY WEST**  
Employment Services Program Administrator - West Region

## Ask for Staff Ideas and Input



The skills and insights of front-line workers in Kansas were key to creating a system that could serve participants effectively without gaps in service. Career Navigators and Transitional Retention Specialists were able to suggest supports and strategies during the planning stage that made the biggest difference for their participants.

“ When the switch to transitional services was enacted, we started doing a lot more trainings. We got to develop new strategies. Our opinions mattered. The extra training and support all added up to make this program very successful.

- **GERALDINE (GERRY)**  
Career Navigator/Transitional Retention Specialist

## TANF SUCCESS IN ACTION:

### *Danny's Story*



Danny was dealing with a two-headed monster when he applied for TANF in 2015. His life had become unrecognizable, with foreclosure of his family's suburban house and his usual upbeat personality shattered. A two-year-old foot injury had led to prescribed opioid painkillers, leaving him with an addiction that drained the family's finances and lying listless on the couch. Danny lost a job he had held for 14 years when the printing company that employed him found itself foundering, resulting in bounced paychecks and reduced hours. Addiction and depression immobilized him.

In addition, he was afraid to look for new work. He had anxiety about how people would perceive the record of his teenage incarceration in the 80s. "I've never been somebody who didn't want to work. It was just a scary thought to have to go apply somewhere [with a criminal record]," he says. "It really was the biggest hurdle for me. And then, of course, when you get into the position where you lose your house and everything, you don't even know what to pick up first."

After they lost everything, Danny's wife, Lisa, wanted him to apply for public assistance, but he was too proud. He finally got the courage to walk into the TANF office, but with little expectation that they could really help him. He dreaded having to explain his record to anyone, and initially left that information off his TANF application. When his new Career Navigator, Christina, found out about his history and confronted him matter-of-factly about the felony, he laid everything out on the table: his incarceration, his depression, his opioid addiction, his hopelessness.

With support from Christina, his wife, and his four teenage children, Danny managed to get clean. Christina helped him develop a career plan, which resulted in his enrollment in a truck driving school at the local community college. He went through the training and got the tools needed, including his commercial driver's license. He started working on his resume and interview skills with Christina, particularly on how to answer those questions about his past. "When we practiced for the interview, Danny was stuck on that one issue because it was just so scary to him," Christina says. "But we needed to work on other questions, too. Eventually, I remember seeing the realization in his face, 'Oh, yeah! I have all of these other skills.'"

Danny got an interview and was hired by a family-owned trucking company that he admired. Highly motivated to succeed and to please both his wife and his TANF CN, in his first year of employment, Danny was awarded Driver of the Month, a huge boost to his self-confidence and motivation. He takes great pride in driving long-haul routes in his Peterbilt truck, as he and Lisa travel the country together.

Danny continues to feel close to Christina and stays in touch. The affection between the two is real and is born from working as a team to help him achieve and sustain his career goals. Even now, with Danny on the road again and thriving in his job and life, Christina is only a phone call away.

“ I don't think we could've done it without [my Career Navigator]. I hate to say it, but I'd probably still be doing the same thing I was before I applied: nothing.

## TANF SUCCESS IN ACTION: *Taneke's Story*



Because Gerry is also trained as a TRS, she was able to maintain contact with Taneke once her cash assistance stopped, providing the supports necessary for her to successfully retain her job, including help with gas money and other car expenses. TANF also helped pay for the bright-pink scrubs she proudly sports at work.

***“You don't have to stay in a bad situation. You can move on and that's what I did.”***

Thanks to the support she found at DCF, Taneke has gone from looking away to looking the future straight in the eye with confidence.

Career Navigator Geraldine “Gerry” remembers meeting Taneke. She remembers all too vividly that the newly single mother had such low self-esteem that she wouldn't look people in the eye.

But that didn't keep her from having dreams. Taneke had always wanted to be a nurse, but she had grown up as one of five children of a single mom and had never considered such a thing possible: “I just didn't have anyone to direct me the right way. I spent 10 years of my life working at McDonald's,” she says.

Taneke married young but, after 17 years of marriage, her husband left her and their son. She felt completely lost. She and her 11-year-old were sleeping on friends' couches when she decided to take control of her life by applying for TANF cash assistance and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). That's when she met Gerry, her DCF Career Navigator.

Gerry immediately helped Taneke set goals for herself, such as getting her own apartment and a working car, and, addressing what was foremost in Taneke's mind, she helped her lay out a path to becoming a nurse. Taneke received supports through the TANF program to help her reach her goals, including applying for and receiving financial aid to attend nursing school, and moving into subsidized housing. Taneke also was connected with resources for utility deposits, car repairs, and even reduced-cost, high-speed internet. “Gerry helped me stay focused and arranged financial help,” says Taneke. “That was a big burden off me.” Gerry also provided encouragement and support, helping Taneke break out of the mindset that she wasn't capable of doing more.

Going back to school wasn't easy because she deals with ADHD. “Everyone that knows me knows I can't stay focused,” she says. “But circumstances can force you to change, and I had to get myself together.” With supports from the TANF program and her school, she made the honor roll for the first time in her life and passed the nursing board exam. That gave Taneke the confidence to get her first job as a licensed practical nurse (LPN). She was ecstatic when she was employed by an assisted living facility, at \$21/hour. She finally had security for herself and her son.

“Once I got my job, TANF [cash assistance] stopped, food stamps stopped, which is what I wanted, because it's telling me that I don't need it anymore,” says Taneke, whose personality is now bright and vivacious. She works three days a week and takes classes the rest of the time, doing prerequisites toward her Bachelor of Science in the nursing program and to become a registered nurse.

## TANF SUCCESS IN ACTION:

### Falon's Story



Falon has seen good times and bad. This mother of five knows how to take advantage of a good opportunity to better herself. Running on sometimes just an hour or two of sleep a night, she is using the Transitional Retention Services from the DCF TANF program to retain a well-paying job and go to school while she takes care of her children.

When Falon's husband got arrested and the family lost his income, she found herself at her wit's end. She was unable to hold a job that would pay the bills while still allowing her to care for her kids, ranging from 4-year-old twins to a 17-year-old. Her extended family had moved away, so, in desperation, she called 2-1-1. They directed her to DCF to seek cash assistance.

Falon had been a certified nursing assistant (CNA) in another state but her license had lapsed. Her DCF Career Navigator helped her enroll in classes at the local technical college, where she completed courses and passed the CNA exam. "It is a life changer," Falon says of the individualized help she received. "I wish more people had the courage to ask for help that could change their life."

Armed with the certification, she got a job that covers her bills and works with her kids' schedule. It isn't easy. She works the graveyard shift at a long-term care facility in order to be with her children before school and at bedtime. But she also no longer receives cash assistance and loves her job, where, in her second month of employment, she received the "Employee of the Month" award. All of this seemed to be the right steps toward her long-term goal of becoming an LPN.

As luck would have it, life challenges continued even though she had a job. Within the first six months of working, her washing machine broke and she needed help with gas money to drive back and forth to her job. Again, she turned to her TRS, who arranged for resources to help cover the cost of washing clothes at a laundromat and gas to get to work. Falon learned she also qualified for assistance in

pursuing her certified medication aide license, which will increase her income. These supports have made it possible for her to keep her job, but also to chart a path to a more prosperous future.

“ It's devastating [to discover that a newly-prized paycheck doesn't cover many unexpected expenses]. A lot of people quit at that point. They give up. The transitional help gives you the option, gives you the help so you don't quit.

Falon says this transitional support has been crucial. "Without this program," she says, "I would be lost. Just trying to do things on your own without family support is difficult. Once I was able to get the help that I needed, I felt accomplished, like nothing could hold me back." And apparently nothing has.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Circles USA. Retrieved from <https://www.circlesusa.org/cliff-effect/>
- <sup>2</sup> Rolston, H., Maniha, J. K., and Campbell, N. (2002). "Job Retention and Advancement in Welfare Reform." Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute. Policy Brief No. 18; Hamilton, G., and Scrivener, S. (2012). *Increasing Employment Stability and Earnings for Low-Wage Workers: Lessons from the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Project*. OPRE Report 2012-19, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>3</sup> Holzer, H. J., and Martinson, K. (2006). "Can we improve job retention and advancement among low-income working parents?" *Focus* 24(2).
- <sup>4</sup> Ruiz De Luzuriaga, N. (2015). *Coaching for Economic Mobility*. Boston: Crittenton Women's Union [EMPath].

# Contact & Partner Principals

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Submitted to Damon L. Waters, Contract Officer Representative, OFA

# Further Resources

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORT

- [Minimizing the Cliff Effect](#) (OFA PeerTA)
- [The Cliff Effect: New Approaches to Overcoming Self-Sufficiency Barriers](#) (Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation/Design Impact/CityLink)
- [Using Brain Science to Design New Pathways Out of Poverty](#) (EMPath)

## OTHER PROGRAMS OF INTEREST

- [Work Advancement & Support Center \(WASC\) Demonstration](#) (MDRC)
- [The Family Self-Sufficiency \(FSS\) Evaluation](#) (MDRC)
- [Evaluation of Compass Family Self-Sufficiency \(FSS\) Programs](#) (Abt Associates)

## FURTHER RESEARCH

- [Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review](#) (Mathematica)
- [Providing Earnings Supplements to Encourage and Sustain Employment](#) (MDRC)
- [Promoting Employment Stability and Advancement Among Low-Income Adults](#) (MDRC)
- [Employment Strategies Evidence Review](#) (Administration for Children & Families)
- [What Strategies Work for the Hard-to-Employ?](#) (ACF/Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2009)

## TANF EMERGING PRACTICE SERIES

The Emerging Practice Series highlights strategies being deployed by TANF Agencies and their partners to address the needs of TANF participants seeking to gain and sustain meaningful employment. These ideas are often in the innovation stage, yet show promise for consideration by other TANF programs based on implementation success and evidence from related research. This innovation by TANF Agencies is critical to an on-going learning agenda and to the ultimate development of Promising Practices, which are ultimately documented through a more rigorous process.

Each publication is structured with a similar format:

- **The TANF Challenge:** What Issue(s) Do TANF Programs Face?
- **The Innovative Idea:** What Solution Is Proposed to Address These Challenges?
- **Align Innovation with Research:** What Is Known That Provides Confidence This Idea Can Work/Will Matter?
- **Program Model:** What Is Being Done?
- **Results:** What Has Been Learned/Achieved?
- **A Field View of the Emerging Practice:** Perspectives from the TANF Agency
- **TANF Success in Action:** TANF Participants' Perspectives