



## Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) 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

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) houses the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program which provides temporary assistance to pregnant women and birthing people and needy families with one or more dependent children. Due to a history of natural disasters across the state, Illinois has a Crisis Assistance Program<sup>1</sup> as a part of their TANF services. The Crisis Assistance Program responds to a variety of situations such as tornadoes and flooding, due to the state's diverse geography and climate.

### COVID-19 Response

During times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, IDHS partners with other organizations such as the Red Cross to meet peoples' immediate needs and sign them up for longer-term assistance services such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Beginning March 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 public health emergency, IDHS made provisions to policy to assist customers and the local offices. Like many states, all local offices were closed, and communication between staff and participants transitioned to over the phone, email, and online.

IDHS relaxed some policies while maintaining compliance with federal regulations. Face-to-face requirements for interviews were waived for more remote options, verbal attestation was accepted for signatures on applications, responsibility and service plans were temporarily suspended for newly approved TANF cases, and customers required to participate in work and training were given good cause exemptions when appropriate.

### Program Successes

IDHS was successful in striking the balance between the technology-driven landscape of the pandemic and the needs of their individual program participants. One factor in this was the in-person triage of issues that allowed staff to determine if a client could be assisted remotely, over the phone.

Illinois received approval to submit forms on behalf of customers without access to digital tools and adapted their technology to be able to record verbal confirmations and attestations from participants over the phone. IDHS is continuing to explore ways to leverage low-technology options to improve service delivery such as automated text message reminders.

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# Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)

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Through a state-funded COVID-19 response initiative, IDHS was able to provide TANF participants with a one-time cash stipend to assist with the purchase of technology.

IDHS reflected that collaboration with agile partners was key to service provision for a variety of participants. Partners who already offered wraparound services and delivered them in diverse ways were best suited to adapt to the changing needs resulting from the pandemic. Partner organizations that had knowledge of other related social services, such as workforce agencies, have provided additional support through their integrated perspective.

### Program Challenges

The shift to more remote service delivery was also challenging for IDHS staff. Because this was the first time they had worked remotely, the Department did not have take-home devices readily available for all staff. This caused some staff to experience connectivity problems, especially for those who were using personal devices. However, the Department was able to purchase laptops for staff to mitigate this issue for those working from home.

### Next Steps

During a crisis, it is particularly important that TANF participants can continue to receive uninterrupted supports. While IDHS succeeded in this regard for many participants during their response to COVID-19, the state continues to be forward-thinking by identifying areas for continuous improvement. Moving forward, IDHS would like to focus more on expanding their usage of technologies and developing and implementing innovative strategies to engage participants. This would include expanding virtual training programs for participants.

IDHS is also taking access into consideration and is looking for ways to increase digital equity and access to case managers and services. The Department currently works with community colleges to expand digital access to low-income students who may otherwise be inhibited from receiving services. In the future, IDHS would like to continue to expand these types of partnerships, through initiatives like a laptop loaner program for all TANF participants.

IDHS is exploring the option of expanding the ways in which participants can access services by expanding communication to include text messages, which will remind participants of upcoming appointments and paperwork that needs to be submitted. This will be an opt-in service for participants that IDHS indicates would be a win-win for both participants and staff.



**TEXT REMINDERS:** IDHS is currently working to implement text message reminders for TANF recipients. These automated reminder texts would remind participants about appointments and administrative deadlines helping to mitigate any interruptions in service delivery.

*The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) thanks Terri Vaniter, Senior Public Service Administrator, Dan Lyonsmith, Associate Director of Workforce Development, and Kathy Segobiano, Senior Public Service Administrator, all of whom are from the Illinois Department of Human Services and provided the information for this program summary.*

<sup>1</sup> Illinois Department of Human Services website, [IDHS: WAG 06-03-01: Crisis Assistance \(TANF\) \(state.il.us\)](#)