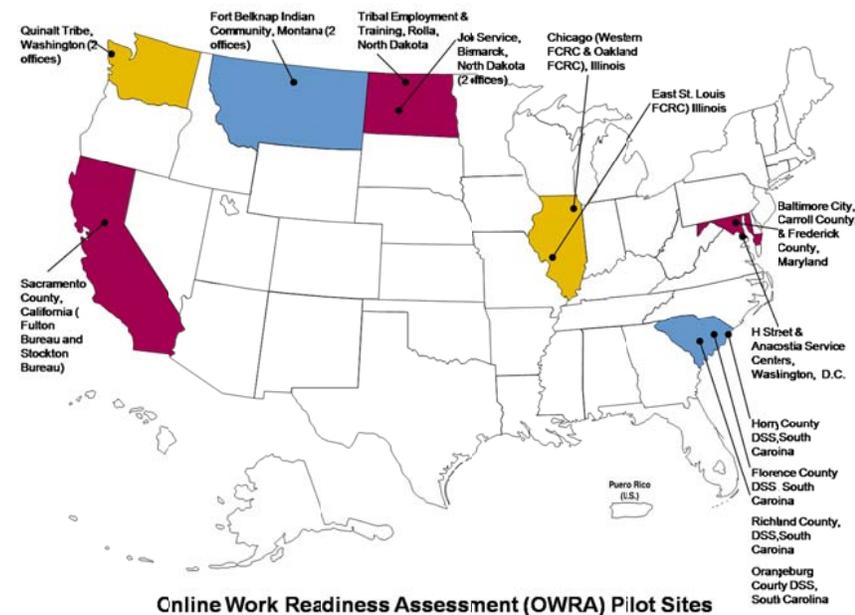


Overview

The focus of TANF programs has shifted away from merely processing cash assistance payments to helping clients find and maintain employment.¹ State, Tribal, and county Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and social service providers are increasingly challenged with meeting the work readiness needs of TANF participants and low-income workers with multiple barriers to employment.² Recent research suggests that States continue to seek more innovative and creative strategies to proactively adapt the services available to low-income workers due to the changing economy and economic structure.³ As social services programs are charged with improving the work readiness and employment of low-income and working individuals with limited resources, the use of integrated, automated, and virtual client services and tools have become an integral component of a holistic case management approach. Although OWRA has been designed to serve TANF participants primarily, the need to employ a standardized approach to service provision across a myriad of human services practices areas is in line with public agencies' move toward interoperability of systems and procedures. OWRA can be applied to the human services continuum in order to establish common data collection, utilization, and reporting practices, as well as to standardize service provision within and across human services practice areas.

What is the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) Tool?

In response to the needs of the field, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and



Families Office of Family Assistance (OFA) developed the specialized and comprehensive **Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA)** Web-based tool to screen and assess participants and refer them to support services or employment options based on their work readiness. OWRA has a rich history of field testing and validation from three pilots. Through the 2009 and 2010 pilot process, OFA piloted OWRA in 21 localities across five States, two Tribes, and Washington D.C. In total, 1,159 individuals were assessed. From the pilots, the following key lessons learned highlighted the impact of OWRA in the field:

¹ Cyphers, Gary (2001). *Client Assessment and the Next Step in Welfare Reform*. Policy and Practice. Available at: <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-85005877/client-assessment-and-next.html>

² Danzinger, Sandra and Kristin Seefeldt (2002). *Barriers to Employment and the "Hard to Serve": Implications for services, sanctions, and time limits*. Gerald R. Ford School, University of Michigan.

³ See Pindus et al. (1995); French (2006); Martinson et al. (2010); Goldberger (2005); Duke (2007)

- **Standardized** the level of comprehensive assessments which is critical when the population served is transient and has multiple-barriers;
- **Increased accountability** for caseworkers in completing high-quality, comprehensive assessments of TANF participants;
- **Promoted consistency** across caseworkers in diagnosing untreated barriers among the TANF population;
- **Created an effective roadmap** for providing detailed information to guide employment planning for TANF participants;
- **Assisted and enabled caseworkers** to think more holistically about participants' desires, objective, strengths, and barriers;
- **Improved identification** of mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence barriers;
- **Generated increased engagement** from TANF participants by promoting more open dialogue and conversation; and
- **Improved job placement matching** using comprehensive assessment.

OWRA Implementation 2011

Building off the lessons learned from the 2009 and 2010 pilots, OFA intends to fully implement OWRA across two sites in 2011. The focus of the implementation is to increase client assessment, work readiness activities, and systematically improve assessment-based economic self-sufficiency planning along a client service continuum. During the six month implementation phase, OFA will provide structural supports that initiate and institutionalize the OWRA tool by providing technical support, onsite training, virtual Helpdesk service, regular check-ins, and individual site coaches. In addition, OFA will map out business processes and integrate OWRA into legacy systems, develop a customized OWRA tool, and work with sites to realign staff activities to meet the needs and requirements associated with the new system and approach.

Implementation sites will partner with OFA to adapt and customize OWRA to fit their dynamic work readiness activities. Sites will be responsible for assisting in strategic planning for the implementation, providing overall site coordination, deploying OWRA during the pilot months, and providing daily oversight on the use of OWRA. Additionally, sites will provide periodic consultation to OFA on implementation management, challenges faced and strategies used to overcome them, coordination of site activities and work flow, and other relevant issues pertaining to the full implementation of the OWRA tool at the local level.

Sites will utilize the OWRA tool for up to six months and will assist OFA as "leading sites" to highlight the importance of client assessment, comprehensive case management, client service tracking, job preparation/work readiness, and employer engagement. Furthermore, the sites will inform OFA and the field on lessons learned from integration and implementation of OWRA. In addition to ongoing technical assistance, OFA will capture lessons learned and other critical information pertaining to full-scale implementation from users through informal interviews, conference calls, and electronic mail. Additionally, OFA will host focus groups with users to measure the efficacy of the OWRA tool to: (1) improve overall staff activities, (2) increase case management efficiency and effectiveness, (3) improve comprehensive client assessment-based case management and service delivery, (4) enhance accuracy and relevance of client information and client referrals, and (5) increase client work readiness and economic self-sufficiency outcomes. Information gathered will enhance the ability of OFA to fully implement the OWRA tool on a national scale and help refine and enhance self sufficiency plan development.

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