



## Morongo Tribal TANF Program (MTTP) 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 Morongo Tribal TANF Program (MTTP) delivers Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and limited emergency assistance to eligible Native American families with one or more children. The Morongo Band of Mission Indians administers this California-based program. The intent of the MTTP is to promote career development and education to enable participants to become self-sufficient. The MTTP provides prevention and family formation services to youth and adults, incorporating life skills and cultural activities designed to promote healthy families.

MTTP began in Riverside, California in 2005 and was expanded into San Bernardino County in 2014. Tribal elders recognized a growing need to provide services across the community and broadened the programs reach to serve all families with a tribal heritage, not those only from the Morongo Tribe.

### COVID-19 Response

The COVID 19 pandemic elicited a disaster response from many support programs across the country. MTTP relied on its emergency assistance process, which was designed to help families impacted by natural disasters such as fire or flood or during any other declaration of state or national emergency. Many tribal communities have been fully displaced in Northern California due to severe fire damage, causing most Tribal TANF programs and State TANF programs in California to consider emergency and natural disaster response services as part of their preparedness measures.

The application is inclusive of all natural disasters, which allowed it to apply to MTTP's COVID-19 response. To assist more families during the pandemic, the limited emergency assistance application was revised to be shorter and more concise. Eligibility requirements were also loosened to support additional families due to the severe impacts of COVID-19.

Like many TANF programs, MTTP's COVID-19 response included considerations for the delivery of remote services. As a continued part of this effort, MTTP is working to update its website. The update will include the ability for participants to submit forms and applications online.

### Program Successes

Thanks to its previous disaster preparation and lessons learned from other tribes, MTTP was able to react quickly to utilize the resources they had already set aside. MTTP's Executive Director noted that one key factor for the success of

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their COVID-19 response was their strong coalition with other tribes. MTTP was able to conduct timely outreach to Indian health clinics, schools, and human services organizations due to these strong relationships. They were also successful in leveraging their connections with non-profit agencies. This collaboration across services and tribes enabled eligible families to be aware of the transitional and emergency services available to them.

While MTTP did not have many participants lose employment because of the pandemic, many suffered reduced wages. This increased the shift towards transitional services. MTTP's program focused on re-skilling their participants to be ready for the digital environment and shifting their programming to provide more work supports to people with basic needs.

Throughout the height of their pandemic response, MTTP continued to offer non-emergency services as needed. These included cash assistance, support services (e.g., childcare, transportation, employment, education), and prevention and family formation services. The shift to remote services alleviated the burden for participants to come in-person for services, making some services easier to access without the added challenges of transportation and childcare.

### Program Challenges

The initial shift to primarily digital communication was difficult to MTTP staff and participants. The program had to find new ways to reach their participants, including email marketing and phone and text communication.

MTTP's strong prevention, tutoring, and family formation programs struggled to translate to the virtual environment. Having never provided these programs online, MTTP staff had to reimagine programs and focus on engaging participants and providing a sense of community in the online format. Additionally, MTTP had to assist participants in the learning curve experienced by moving into a virtual format.

### MTTP's Recommendations

MTTP's primary recommendation for other TANF programs is to be flexible. Programs should assess the needs of the service area and customize where possible. This means providing culturally appropriate services, referrals to appropriate community resources, and being creative in keeping participants engaged. Programs should collaborate with community partners, non-profit organizations, and local tribes to share resources, best practices, successes, and pitfalls. For tribal organizations, this includes continuing to focus on meeting the needs of the reservation, tribes in the service area, and the community.



### COLLABORATING FOR SUCCESS:

The Morongo Tribe was successful in their COVID-19 response thanks to their quick collaboration with community partners and their strong coalition with other tribes which allowed them to get information to families. This collaboration was possible due to established relationships from years prior. Because of limitations with TANF, it can be difficult to reach people that are eligible. Having relationships with other tribes, CBOs, and county organizations helped to spread word that MTTP was able to provide COVID-related emergency services.

*The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) thanks Katy Ciotti, Executive Director of the Morongo Tribal TANF Program, for providing information for this program summary.*