

OWRA

Online Work Readiness Assessment

New Web-based Suite of Resources Enables Case Workers to Serve Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Participants



What is OWRA?



The Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) is a Web-based suite of resources, tools, assessments, and guidelines that will help State, County, and Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agency staff engage participants in work-focused activities that lead to long-term self-sufficiency. Provided through the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA), this free online resource helps TANF professionals make informed decisions about a participant's readiness for work, identifying barriers to employment, as well as selecting and implementing education, training, and core and non-core work activities. The OWRA tool levels the playing field as it provides case managers with the tools, methodology, and process to ask the assessment questions, integrate new participants into the TANF program, and strengthen service delivery linkages with other agencies. OWRA can help meet TANF requirements by generating plans that include appropriate core and non-core activities mandated by the legislation.

OWRA is organized into four related Modules that allow TANF case managers to identify TANF participants' barriers to work, determine participants' work skills and work readiness, link

participants to pertinent development and work activities, and track and monitor participant activities.

The Intake Module is a customizable TANF intake form that captures fundamental information for case decision-making and family independence. Data are collected on demographics, employment, and education.

The Assessment Module uses the information collected in the *Intake Module* to develop a comprehensive assessment of each TANF participant's strengths and barriers. The *Assessment Module* assesses TANF participants' strengths and barriers in education, work experience history, work skills and interests, substance abuse, mental health, and barriers to employment such as learning disabilities, domestic violence, housing, transportation, and child care. The summary assessment also includes recommended actions that will allow case managers to plan immediate barrier-reduction strategies, as well as to initiate short-term employment and career-building activities.

The Self-Sufficiency Plan (SSP) and Work Readiness (WR) Modules may help State, local, and Tribal agencies to better assess TANF participants' work readiness and suitability of their employment placement by consolidating information from the *Intake* and *Assessment Modules* to create a dynamic report that can be continually updated as the participant progresses on the path toward work readiness. The *Self-Sufficiency Plan and Work Readiness Modules* will create a personalized self-sufficiency plan that will serve as a guide for determining the TANF participant's readiness for work and will aid the case manager in making appropriate recommendations for training, employment, and education. Additionally, these Modules will assist TANF case managers and participants with a career planning tool that links an individual's unique interests and abilities with workforce and labor market needs.

The Reporting Module will focus on monitoring and tracking data on TANF participants' engagement in activities that have been previously identified in the *Intake, Assessment, and Self-Sufficiency Plan Modules*. This Module will feature a "dashboard"

that will assist in data tracking, enabling TANF agency leadership to monitor performance and revise activities in real time.

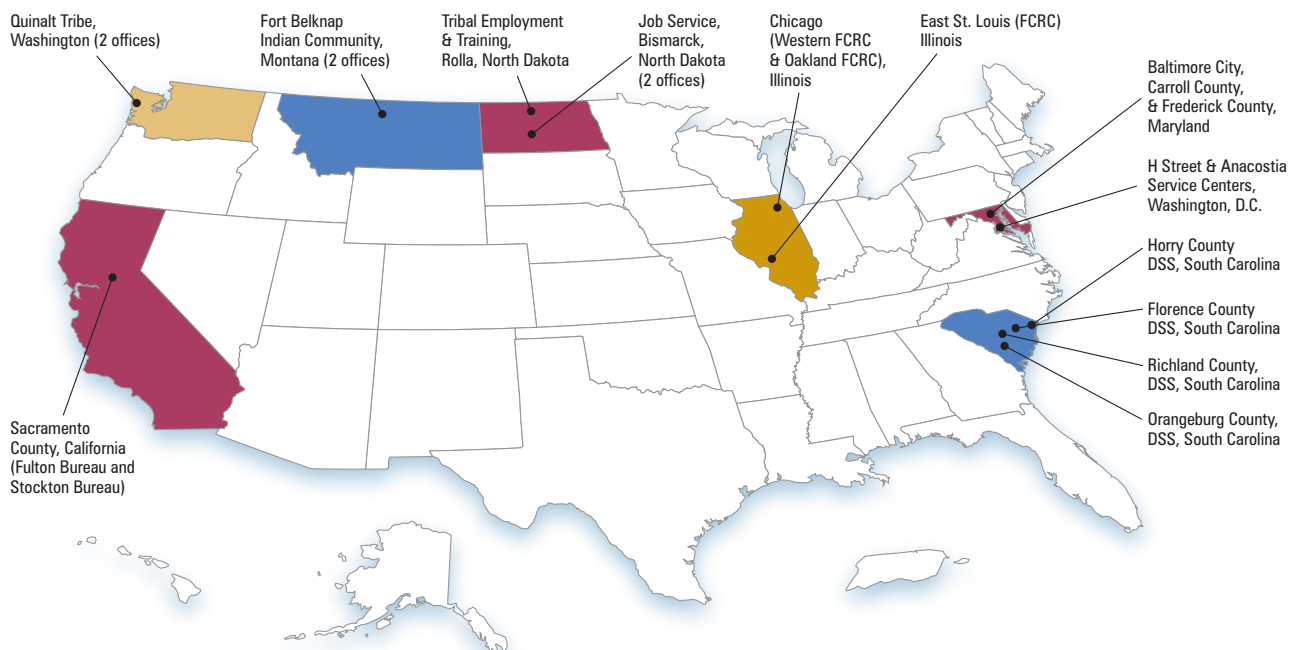
OWRA has been field tested from three pilots. The initial pilot version of the Online Work Readiness Assessment tool was piloted by ACF in 2006-2007 with Maryland Family Investment Administration (FIA) within the Department of Human Resources (DHR). From January to July 2009, OFA worked with five States and the Quinault Indian Nation Tribe on an intensive pilot to gather feedback, recommendations, and lessons learned on the OWRA *Intake and Assessment Modules* in streamlining case management activities and modernizing assessments for TANF participants. Building off the knowledge learned and recommendations provided from the 2009 pilots, the *Intake and Assessment Modules* were modified and prepared for a National Rollout. From June to September 2010, OFA piloted the entire OWRA tool with the revised *Intake and Assessment Modules*, and the newly developed *Self-Sufficiency Plan and Work Readiness Modules*, the *Reporting Module*, and Work Readiness Resource in 12 localities across three States, the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council, and the District of Columbia. The purpose of the pilot phase was to test the extent to which the new components—the *Self-Sufficiency Plan and Work Readiness Modules*, the *Reporting Module*, and Work Readiness Resource—meet the needs of States, Territories, and Tribes who use OWRA, identify necessary enhancements, make continuous revisions to the backend architecture of the tool in order to strengthen the tool, and make modifications to the entire tool.

Through the 2009 and 2010 pilot process, OFA piloted OWRA in 21 localities across 5 States, 2 Tribes, and D.C., and 1,159 individuals were assessed.

From the pilots, the following were the key lessons learned:

- **Standardized** the level of comprehensive assessments, which is critical when population served is multiple-barriered and transient;
- **Increased accountability** for case managers on the level and comprehensiveness of assessments done on TANF participants;
- **Promoted consistency** across case managers in terms of diagnosing untreated barriers among TANF population;
- **Created a roadmap** for providing detailed information to guide employment planning for TANF participants;
- **Assisted and enabled case managers** to think more holistically about participants' desires, objectives, strengths, and barriers;
- Pilot sites reported an **increase in individuals** identified with mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence barriers; and
- **Generated increased engagement** from TANF participants with more open dialogue and conversation between participant and case manager.

Online Work Readiness Assessment—2009 and 2010 Pilot Sites



How does OWRA work?



The Intake and Assessment Modules involve an interview and assessment process that allows TANF professionals to:

- Identify employment-related strengths, interests, and challenges;
- Develop barrier reduction strategies, activities, and support (substance abuse, child care, housing, etc.);
- Identify work engagement activities (job search and readiness, community service, work experience); and
- Ensure equitable service delivery across the program.



During an interview with a TANF participant, the case manager records the participant's responses to demographic, employment, and education questions directly into the OWRA tool. Based on the

participant's responses, OWRA produces a comprehensive assessment of the individual's educational strengths and barriers, work history, work skills and interests, housing, transportation, child care, and, when applicable, substance abuse, mental health, learning disabilities, and domestic violence information.

Once all the data is entered, the case manager receives the following electronically:

- A printed report of the participant's responses to the OWRA assessment; and
- A summary assessment document that includes tailored recommendations.

Both the print report and summary assessment can be saved electronically on a secure file server or printed out and kept as part of the TANF participant's case files.

The Self-Sufficiency Plan and Work Readiness Modules

take the initial assessment to the next step, creating a self-sufficiency plan and providing TANF participants with a career planning tool that will link an individual's unique interests and abilities with workforce and labor market needs. These Modules assist case managers, and program administrators conduct summary and trend analyses of the



demographic, barriers, employment history, and skills assessments of the TANF population. As an open source tool, OWRA is customizable to specific State, Tribal, or County

requirements. During the 2009 and 2010 pilots, the application's assessment questions and reports were extensively vetted. However, they can both be customized via changes to the code and database. Instructions for making these changes are provided on the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Web site at (<http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/tanftc>). By using OWRA, case managers will have a better insight into the work and career interests, as well as the training and support service needs, of TANF participants.

The Reporting Module is intended for leadership at your local agency or at the County, District, Tribal, or State level. The Reporting Module is a tool that summarizes demographics, barriers, skills assessments, and other data as previously identified and collected in the *Intake, Assessment, and Work Readiness Modules*. There are six standard reports and each of the reports provides a taxonomy of top-level barriers and subcategories.

As information is continually added and updated, the *Reporting Module* allows case managers and especially managers at the Center, County, District, and State level to understand the characteristics and demographics of their case load/TANF population on various aggregate levels and to inform strategies used at the case management, supervisory, and administrative levels to design and customize programs to meet the TANF participants' needs.

The *Reporting Module* includes a Dashboard that provides OWRA users with an at-a-glance view of their Center/County/District/State's health and client-level information with graphs and charts. Every time the source data is updated, the dashboard is also updated. Users can also run reports that provide a breakdown of factors within a caseload, such as Demographics; Educational Attainment; Employment History and Career Preferences; and Barriers around Transportation, Housing, Legal issues; Child Care, Domestic Violence & Well-Being; and Health.

What makes OWRA different?



The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance has funded the implementation of the OWRA tool. OWRA has a rich history of field testing and has been piloted in diverse locations, including large cities, rural areas, and Tribal communities. The initial pilot version of the Online Work Readiness Assessment tool was piloted by ACF in 2006-2007 with Maryland Family Investment Administration (FIA) within the Department of Human Resources (DHR). Through the 2009 and 2010 pilot process, OFA piloted OWRA in 21 localities across 5 States, 2 Tribes, and D.C., and 1,159 individuals were assessed.

The purpose of the pilot phase was to gather feedback, recommendations, and lessons learned on the OWRA Intake and Assessment Modules, the Self-Sufficiency Plan and Work Readiness Modules, and the Reporting Module, in streamlining case management activities and modernizing assessments for TANF participants. One of the key lessons learned from the pilots

were that the OWRA tool's comprehensive assessment, referral and reporting features helped case managers to create individualized barrier reduction and work readiness plans for participants. Additionally, it promoted consistency across case managers in terms of diagnosing untreated barriers among TANF participants.



The service delivery mechanisms promoted through the OWRA tool also allowed more time for coordinating services and meeting participant needs, while addressing gaps in program services. Overall, the tool provided a user-friendly roadmap providing detailed information to guide employment planning for participants.

Leadership from pilot sites reported that the OWRA tool assisted case managers to think more holistically about participants' desires, objectives, and strengths and barriers; helped identify "risk" characteristics resulting in a higher number of referrals for mental health and domestic violence; encouraged dialogue with the participant which ensured participant engagement; and generated more buy-in to recommendations among participants.





1. Who can access the OWRA tool?

Provided by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the OWRA application source code and instructions for deployment are available at no cost to all interested parties.

2. What are the technical requirements of using OWRA?

The application uses the following technologies:

- Built in Java
- Runs on any standard compliant Java application server (e.g., Tomcat, GlassFish, Weblogic, and Websphere): pilots used Sun GlassFish Enterprise Server v2.1.1
- Relational database (e.g., MySQL, Oracle, MS SQL Server): pilots used MySQL
- Application is built on a standard 3-tier architecture (Web, application, and database) for scalability and security, and uses a Model-View-Controller framework
- Browser's pop-up blocker should be disabled; certain views open in new windows
- Javascript is used extensively in the application
- Adobe PDF
- Internet Explorer 7.0

For additional technical instructions and guidelines, please visit <http://stage.peerta.acf.hhs.gov/tanf/index.cfm>.

3. How long does it take to administer the OWRA tool?

On average, administering the OWRA tool takes 45 minutes. However, the time taken to administer the tool is also dictated by the specific needs of a participant, and as such may take more or less time.

4. What is the difference between the printed questionnaire and summary assessment?

The questionnaire, also called the assessment, is generated at the end of Modules 1 and 2. It summarizes the participant's strengths and barriers. In addition, the worksheet also generates recommended action steps for the case manager to review with the participant.

The summary assessment or the assessment worksheet is the OWRA end product meant to serve as the initial outline for a participant's self-sufficiency plan.

5. What were some of the results of the OWRA pilot?

After two six-week piloting phases and 1,159 assessments, OWRA users across a diverse range of locations, such as large urban cities with significant case loads, like Chicago, Illinois, and Baltimore, Maryland, rural locations like Florence, South Carolina, and Frederick, Maryland, Tribes such as the Quinault Indian Nation in Washington and Fort Belknap in Montana commented that OWRA assisted TANF programs specifically, and potentially other social service programs, in the gathering of client information. Pilot sites saw a rise in the number of referrals to work supports and services, and helped case managers to direct participants to more appropriate job retention services. OWRA improved the standardization of assessments, which is critical when a population is transient or dislocated, and provided consistency across case managers in terms of diagnosing untreated barriers among clients. Generally, the sites indicated that the OWRA tool was geared for service coordination and was a valuable resource for understanding gaps and demands in services. OWRA also allowed case managers to engage their participants better.

The State, County, and Tribal leadership perceived OWRA as a tool for ensuring accountability among case managers towards their participants, which improved the quality of service delivery. Policy-makers from the pilot sites used OWRA to determine where additional resources are needed along the client service continuum.

6. I do not work for a TANF program, but work with a lot of the same individuals. What can OWRA do for my clients at my nonprofit, workforce office, or educational institution?

OWRA generally can be used by any program that serves low-income populations and/or individuals with multiple barriers to employment. Although OWRA was developed by OFA for TANF programs, the tool can be used by nonprofits, workforce agencies, job developers, social service case managers, education workers, and others interested in learning more about their clients with regard to their employability. OWRA provides an outline of strengths for and barriers to work, and provides recommendations that can be used for child care purposes, transportation case management, substance abuse case management, and job placement, to name a few. The tool also provides specific recommendations that are specifically tailored to the needs of your customer and provides some informational markers on topics that may be of interest to you regardless of your work institution.

7. What technical support/technical assistance is available for users of OWRA?

OFA does not currently offer in-person training for OWRA users. Users who decide to use the tool are permitted to access the online training for the OWRA tool. Users may also receive or download a user's guide and supporting documents when they choose to use OWRA. In addition, we have also made available on the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Web site an Online Learning Community that can help you and your staff explore and learn more about using OWRA. Limited virtual Technical Assistance is also available through the Helpdesk at 1-866-989-6972.

8. Do I have to complete every question and every section of OWRA?

It is highly recommended that you administer OWRA in its entirety. However, it is important to note that users do not have to administer OWRA in the way that it is laid out; rather users have the option to pick and choose those sections that are more

important to their programmatic needs. Users DO NOT have to complete every question in every section.

9. What about two-parent households in my TANF caseload? Does OWRA work to improve service to them?

The OWRA tool assists users working with both single-parent and two-parent households. The tool assesses the work-readiness of all individuals who take the assessment. Two-parent households can complete two assessments and use the resulting recommendations to develop individual self-sufficiency plans, thereby increasing their employability prospects. OWRA also assists in comprehensive case management, which is aimed at improving the employability of both parents so that they are able to contribute to the financial well-being of the household. The OWRA assessment adds to the self-sufficiency plan and helps in the development of programs, i.e., job skills training and job search.

10. How will OWRA help recently unemployed or long-term job seekers?

OWRA enables case managers to determine strengths and barriers to employment and makes targeted recommendations for all managers based on specific needs. OWRA can, for example, enable job seekers to demonstrate to prospective employers their identified skills, highlighted knowledge, and outlined strengths. Entry-level workers and those returning to the workforce benefit from OWRA as a first step on a successful career path. OWRA helps individuals better understand the skills they need to acquire to strengthen their marketability and employability and actively pursue advancement in the workplace.

11. What happens if I identify barriers to employment while working with my client?

OWRA provides you a comprehensive assessment of each of your clients, and once completed, you will have a better understanding of change to the specific services that the client will need to move forward. If you identify barriers, OWRA can provide a preliminary referral for your client and has the functionality to link your client to specific support services within the community.

12. My State currently has an assessment that we enter into a database. Can I import previously collected data into OWRA?

Once fully deployed, States, Tribes, and Counties can integrate OWRA with existing systems by creating Web services for the OWRA application to access. The OWRA application includes an option to “pull” demographic information from an existing system to avoid duplicative data entry by case managers and provide data consistency. Currently, you can manually enter the data if necessary or desired.

13. Does each of my clients receive a unique identifier? How is it determined?

Yes, each participant is issued a unique identifier that you and your office decide on. Some offices use the case file number, while others use the client’s Social Security number. You may check with your supervisor or division manager to learn how each customer will be identified in OWRA.

14. Is the OWRA system compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)?

Many of the elements of HIPAA relate to the use and dissemination of health information regarding individuals. The information technology provider is responsible for ensuring the secure collection, transmission, and storage of information entered into the system. Procedures for use of this information outside of the OWRA system remain with the human services agencies, including taking steps to protect participant privacy. The OWRA system itself is used as a tool to collect, store, manipulate, and report on this information only to users with authorized user accounts. All decisions regarding who receives an account, how the information is entered, how the information is disseminated, and what happens to the information once it is retrieved (printed or saved to another medium) is at the purview of the relevant human services agency. Information entered into OWRA or retrieved from OWRA shall be treated with the same standards for privacy protection as any other medium, including hand-written or typed information.

OWRA does not transmit or disseminate information to third parties. Information is protected between the user’s Web browser, on the OWRA servers, and back to the user’s Web browser using the aforementioned procedures.

15. How is the information collected by State, County, and local Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agency staff protected from unauthorized access?

Each OWRA user/agency staff will be required to login to OWRA with a user ID and password, which provides access only to information entered by that user. Administrator accounts, which provide access to interview information across case managers, should be provided only to staff members that are authorized to review this type of data. However, procedures to screen users, including administrators, and protect against unauthorized use or distribution of information, outside the system, must be defined and implemented by individual agencies.

How can interested States, Tribes, or Counties get OWRA?



The OWRA application is available to interested organizations to host and use (within their own network) at no cost, provided as a courtesy of the Office of Family Assistance. To download the OWRA tool, interested TANF administrators may go to the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Web site (<http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/tanftc>) and review the "Download OWRA" section. The necessary application files are provided here, as well as documentation to assist States, Tribes, and Counties with deployment and necessary customization.

In addition, the OWRA Online Learning Community (OLC), found in the "OWRA Resources" section of this site, provides users with an opportunity to experience firsthand how the tool looks and operates. The OWRA OLC offers both an OWRA demonstration link and virtual training on the tool. The demonstration section leads users through a presentation explaining the background, development stages, and snapshots of the OWRA tool. The virtual training component provides a step-by-step training on how to utilize the Modules, including the option to create your own case file to conduct a mock interview using the tool. The benefit of this OWRA Learning Community is that users can access it at their own pace and when most convenient.

The OWRA Resources section of the Web page also contains user guides for all Modules, as well as technical assistance and training materials, information, and links to Web sites that may assist TANF and information technology stakeholders. Please email the TANF TechConnections Team with any questions regarding the OWRA OLC at TANF_TechConnections@icfi.com.

Contact Us



Thank you for your interest in the OWRA tool. The Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance applauds your efforts in supporting TANF families on a path towards self-sufficiency. The OWRA tool may be invaluable in providing you with an efficient method of meeting TANF participants' needs in your States, Tribes, Territories, and local communities. If you have any questions regarding the installation, use, and maintenance of the OWRA tool, please contact the TANF TechConnections Team at TANF_TechConnections@icfi.com.

For inquiries into upcoming technical assistance events, available training resources, and questions on how OWRA can provide your State, Tribe, or County with a powerful self-sufficiency tool, please contact:

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TANF TechConnections is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance under contract HHSP233201000644G to ICF International.