



## OFA State and Tribal Technical Assistance and Resources *Reentry and TANF: Supporting Mothers on Their Path to Independence* Webinar Audience Q&A Follow-Up

Over the last quarter of a century, the United States has seen a [700% increase in the number of women](#) who are confined in local, state, and federal correctional facilities; this is [twice the growth for men over the same time period](#). Of these women, research shows that over half of women in prisons and 80 percent of women in jails are mothers. Most of these women are the [primary caretakers of their children](#). Those reentering their community after being incarcerated must overcome unique and difficult barriers to ensure their well-being and reduce their chances of recidivism. In addition, a mother's ability to regain custody of their children may rely on their ability to address any mental or physical health conditions, find stable housing, have food security, secure employment, and establish child-care. Access to public assistance supports like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can be a gateway to meet the parole and child welfare requirements to reunite a mother and child, and to secure a life of self-sufficiency.

On July 14, 2021, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) hosted a webinar titled *Reentry and TANF: Supporting Mothers on Their Path to Independence* to discuss TANF's role in providing social supports to reentering mothers and their children. The webinar featured presentations by:

- Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director, National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, Rutgers University, Camden New Jersey
- Jennifer Robinson, Deputy Commissioner, Temporary Assistance, Onondaga County (New York), Department of Social Services-Economic Security
- Monika Madaras, Assistant Administrator, Reach Up (TANF) Economic Services Division, Vermont Department for Children and Families
- Heather Newcomb, Women's Program Manager, Vermont Works for Women

Speakers explored the current state of the incarceration of women and mothers and its effects on child welfare, as well as how state and local TANF programs have supported mothers and their children as they reenter into their communities. Following the moderated panel discussion, presenters engaged in a Q&A session with the audience. This document provides the answers to the submitted questions that were not answered live.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS<sup>1</sup>

**Question:** In Kentucky, we have a volunteer requirement for re-entering citizens. Does Vermont have a similar requirement, and how does that affect how the TANF program serves these individuals?

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<sup>1</sup> Some questions and responses have been edited for brevity and clarity.



**Ms. Madaras:** In Vermont, a volunteer requirement set by the Department of Corrections would also count toward an individual's TANF work requirement. The rule provided below explains this in more detail:

*Community service is a core activity. Community service programs are structured activities monitored by the case manager or other entity. Hours a participant spends in community service provide a benefit to the community or member of the community. The placements may be located at public or nonprofit sites with local supervision on a daily basis. Hours a participant engages in any type of organized community service placement, including those organized and required by the corrections department or diversion program, are community service programs within this activity. Participants in this work activity are not employees of the placement site or of the state of Vermont. Placement in this activity will provide participants with the opportunity to maintain their employment skills as well as to demonstrate their employment potential when they have been unable to obtain subsidized or unsubsidized work. The placement may also provide training and experience designed to enhance the participant's skills. Placement in community service programs arranged by the department must be conducted in accordance with a contract between the department and the placement that specifies provisions such as length of placement, development of job skills, and release time for job search.*

**Question:** Is the Safety Net Assistance (SNA) program similar to the General Assistance Program that most states have?

**Ms. Robinson:** I do not believe so. Most other states do not grant financial assistance to single, childless individuals.

**Question:** How long can a client be enrolled in the Onondaga County (New York) Safety Net program?

**Ms. Robinson:** One can be on cash safety net for 24 months. After that has expired, they will get switched to "non-cash" safety net, which means the total amount of their monthly benefit is sent directly to their landlord and utility company. If there is anything leftover, that will go to the recipient as direct cash. Please note the average safety net monthly benefit amount is \$380 so there is usually nothing left after rent and utilities are paid.

**Question:** As a reentry service provider with great appreciation for all these factors you highlighted regarding treatment, support, and person-centered care for returning mothers, I am hoping for more information about how TANF programs can partner with community reentry programs to help mothers succeed. Specifically, I am hoping to know more about what my organization, as a nonprofit, can/should do or how we can better engage TANF. Do you have any recommendations?

**Ms. Newcomb:** Typically, I take the "lead" in reaching out to TANF service providers after discussing this with clients and getting their permission. I share a list of the services we provide, and inquire about collaborating to not duplicate services. I often recommend holding team meetings with all providers, and most TANF providers are open to this format. It is also beneficial for the client since they are not attempting to juggle meetings with multiple providers when they can meet with everyone at once. If an independent meeting is needed with the client to complete tasks, then I will schedule that before/after the team meeting to simplify the client's schedule.



**Ms. Robinson:** We try to conduct as much outreach with the community as possible, so our partners are educated on what TANF can or cannot provide. Having open lines of communication is very helpful; community partners should have a couple of direct contacts at the local Department of Social Services and vice versa.

**Ms. Madaras:** One recommendation I could share is contacting your state's TANF Director and starting the discussion of what is already being done for TANF participants/mothers who are reentering. It would also allow you to learn more about how TANF is administered in your state as some states have a lot more flexibility in their rules than others. Then, if you are able to survey TANF participant about their legal system involvement, you might find a lot of participants who could be interviewed about their experience and suggestions. In Vermont, we feel strongly about getting the participant's input and feedback on changes and participants seem to enjoy "having a say" in the program changes.

**Question:** Is there any research that shows the correlation between allowing children to visit their incarcerated parents and recidivism?

**Ms. Adalist-Estrin:** The most comprehensive work to date on parent/child prison visiting is *Parent-Child Visiting Practices in Prisons and Jails*, by Lindsey Cramer, Margaret Goff, Bryce Peterson and Heather Sandstrom, April 13, 2017, available [here](#). The following excerpt briefly address the impact of child visits on parent's recidivism:<sup>2</sup>

*Parent-child visits can also have differential effects on parents. Experts noted that opportunities for parents to see their children while incarcerated can support parental attachment and promote a continued bond after release. They also explained that visits can motivate parents to comply with facility rules, leading to fewer disciplinary reports, and participate in correctional programming. Extant research shows that parents who receive more visits from their children have lower rates of recidivism after release (Cochran 2012, 2013; Duwe and Clark 2013; Hairston 1991; Pierce 2015; Poehlmann Tynan 2015). Cochran (2013) examined the visiting patterns of over 2,000 people convicted of felonies serving at least 12 months in Florida state prisons between November 2000 and April 2002. He identified four patterns of visiting that had disparate effects on recidivism: (1) no visits (the person did not receive any visits while incarcerated), (2) near-entry visiting (visits were most frequent when someone was first incarcerated then tapered off), (3) near-release visiting (visits increased in the months before release), and (4) sustained visiting (visits occurred regularly throughout incarceration). Though most incarcerated people received no visits at all, people who received sustained visits were least likely to recidivate. Given the promising correlations between regular parent-child visits and reduced institutional misconduct and recidivism, visits could be an important motivator for improving parent outcomes during and after incarceration.*

*Conversely, experts indicated that some parents do not welcome visits and view them as potentially harmful to their relationship with their children. Parents may not want their children to see them in a*

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<sup>2</sup> This excerpt, beginning on page 8, draws on three key reports: (1) Cochran, Joshua C. 2012. "The Ties that Bind or the Ties that Break: Examining the Relationship between Visitation and Prisoner Misconduct." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 40: 433-40.; (2) ——. 2013. "Breaches in the Wall: Imprisonment, Social Support, and Recidivism." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 51 (2): 1-30; and (3) Duwe, Grant, and Valerie Clark. 2013. "Blessed Be the Tie that Binds: The Effects of Prison Visitation on Recidivism." *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 24 (3): 271-96.



*correctional setting and might prefer to avoid in-person visits or to sever communication with their children entirely while incarcerated. Visits may cause them to feel shame for being incarcerated, and they may also have concerns about exposing their children to the stressful prison environment and the trauma of repeated separation. Programs can address these concerns by incorporating parent-child visits into a comprehensive family strengthening program, discussed in more detail below, that instructs parents, their children, and primary caregivers on the importance of visits and offers a therapeutic visiting environment for contact visits. In sum, previous research and our interviews with experts suggest that parent-child visiting is neither innately harmful nor therapeutic. A confluence of family dynamics and systematic issues determines whether visits mitigate or exacerbate the separation and trauma a child experiences when their parent is incarcerated.*

Other research puts more emphasis on younger children and their incarcerated parents.<sup>3,4,5</sup> These studies suggest that while visits can strengthen the attachment between parent and child, the logistics of care (who does the child live with and how stable is the relationship between the caregiver and the incarcerated parent), the visiting environment (including who brings the child) and circumstances surrounding the release (housing, employment, etc.) will likely influence recidivism more significantly than the fact that there was visiting between parent and child.

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<sup>3</sup> Poehlmann, Julie. 2005. "Representation of Attachment Relationships in Children of Incarcerated Mothers." *Child Development* 76 (3): 679–96. [focuses on maternal incarceration]

<sup>4</sup> Poehlmann, Julie, Danielle Dallaire, Ann Booker Loper, and Leslie Shear. 2010. "Children's Contact with Their Incarcerated Parents: Research Findings and Recommendations." *American Psychologist* 65 (6): 575–98.

<sup>5</sup> Poehlmann-Tynan, Julie. 2015. "Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents." *Focus* 32 (2): 13–17.