



Supporting Career Growth through Family-Centered Coaching and Goal Setting

The Office of Family Assistance's (OFA) Policy Academy for Innovative Employment Strategies (PAIES) was an intensive technical assistance (TA) initiative in 2019-2020 for six programs across four jurisdictions interested in improving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) practice. During the initiative, participating teams received dedicated coaches, strategic planning, access to expert consultants, and tailored written resources. Additionally, they participated in several convenings, peer exchanges, and virtual trainings.



Background

In 2017, the District of Columbia Department of Human Services (DHS) embraced a two-generation vision for its TANF program. This vision recognized a household's TANF cash income as a protective factor for children at risk of intergenerational poverty. It also acknowledged that supporting parents to pursue education and employment activities was essential. These activities would set families on paths to increased economic security, rather than simply meeting administrative requirements. To realize its vision, DHS provided access to comprehensive supportive services while drawing from customers' own motivations, skills, and interests for future careers.

Prior to adopting a two-generation framework, in July 2016, DHS piloted a coaching case management strategy called Targeted Mobility Coaching (TMC), which was based on concepts from EMPATH's Bridge to Self-Sufficiency®.¹ TMC empowered TANF customers by building skills and behaviors they could use to achieve their personal or family goals. The approach was family-centered, with customers identifying their needs and developing plans with support from coaches.

PAIES Objectives

When applying to participate in PAIES, the District aimed to expand its coaching approach to help all TANF customers identify career ladders that would increase their families' economic security. DHS leadership knew from the outset that coaching would be needed to support customers as they progressed through the rungs of the career ladder, helping them problem-solve, plan, and prepare for employment success. This would require a culture shift within DHS, and skills building for DHS and TANF Employment and Education Program (TEP) contracted case managers to move from compliance monitoring to mentoring and motivating. "The plan for PAIES was to shift case management interactions from transactional to transformative. We didn't want case managers to prescribe goals, we wanted them to come from customers. Case managers could then help customers devise their own solutions to the challenges they faced," said DaiJuan Wade-Jones, the DHS Supervisor for Special Projects, Operations and Training who led the PAIES project in the District.

PAIES Challenges, Adaptations, and Accomplishments

As part of their PAIES approach, DHS engaged The Lab@DC, a team within the Mayor's Office of the City Administrator that tests how District policies can be improved, to review outcomes from the TMC pilot and examine its scalability. The

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In traditional case management, it's "just timesheets, [they] don't ask you anything." By contrast, with a coaching approach, "they know you, and you know them...A coach is someone who cares about your well-being. [My coach] is always asking about my home life."

—DC TANF customer, quoted in *The Lab@DC's review of TMC*

Lab@DC recommended changes to the TMC training and delivery to make it more consistent and impactful. One recommendation was to reconfigure the TMC program manual as a desk reference for daily use by coaches, with embedded lesson plans, worksheets, and checklists for customer meetings.

These tools would prompt coaches to employ coaching techniques.

Another recommendation was to streamline data collection systems to allow coaches to focus on customers, not reporting. To boost the coach-customer relationship, The Lab@DC recommended DHS apply a user-centered design² lens to all customer processes and keep coach-customer pairings consistent to allow for relationship-building.

Also as a part of PAIES, DHS began building a career pathway tool that coaches could use with TANF customers to explore career options specifically among the District's high-growth industry areas.³ DHS designed the online tool to depict the education, skills, and work experience required to obtain entry-level, mid-management, and executive positions within the high-growth industries, along with considerations for how work in these occupations fit with raising a family (for example, odd hours or inconsistent schedules). Coaches would guide customers through the tool as they asked customers to reflect on their work interests and strengths.

To ensure the career pathway tool would be effective, DHS conducted focus groups with DHS staff, TEP provider staff, education partners, and TANF customers. Gathering customer feedback throughout the initiative helped frame how coaching and career pathway could align. Focus group members conveyed that immediate needs such as stable housing and childcare often prevented TANF customers from focusing on their career goals. Based on this information, DHS incorporated into the tool more information about how to access supportive services. DHS also learned that the term "career exploration" — the key activity that the career ladder tool was supposed to enable — was not a familiar phrase to DHS or TEP provider staff, nor to TANF



Moving Forward During COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, the District's challenge to bridge the "digital divide" (making sure all households have equitable online access for learning, working, and connecting with government services) was illuminated. During the summer of 2020, DHS focused on helping TANF customers contact case managers and complete paperwork regardless of their internet capabilities. DHS distributed equipment to staff and added research questions for the pilot specifically about how the pandemic impacts coaching delivery. It also explored how to continue virtual coaching when both the case manager and customer are home and may be juggling multiple priorities during their interactions.

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customers. However, TANF customers in the focus groups did associate a “career” with the ability to plan for their family and success. Knowing this, DHS adopted simpler language in the tool that resonated with customers. Finally, DHS and TEP provider staff shared their belief that career planning could be enhanced through career interest assessments that identify customers’ transferrable skills. These assessments would provide a foundation for career coaching and career goal setting.



As DHS explored how to scale coaching in the context of career exploration, it became apparent that some aspects of the TMC model needed to be refined. Based on what it learned from staff, providers, and customers during PAIES, DHS prepared to launch a pilot of a new Enhanced Coaching model. DHS would first train in-house coaches on the model and later roll out training for TEP provider staff.

The new model would emphasize training for supervisors on coaching techniques, so they could provide better support to frontline staff. “We realized that having supervisors trained as coaches was an integral part of the coaching model,” shared Wade-Jones. It would also include a new set of tools for coaches to use with customers, to provide more consistency in the coaching experience. Training on the Enhanced Coaching model would reinforce the coaching concept of discovery, which is the process of helping an individual determine their own goals and ambitions. The training would also reinforce how to guide an individual to set their own short-term action items in pursuit of a longer-term life goal.

Next Steps

Going forward, DHS plans to integrate the career pathway tool into future coaching training and case management systems. DHS will also continue to build out the career pathway tool. A top priority will be to identify employers and local job training providers for each of the District’s high-growth industries. DHS will also continue to integrate coaching across every customer touch point, using two-generation principles to guide case management, program integration, and services to customers and families.

¹ EMPATH. (n.d.) Bridge to Self Sufficiency®. <https://www.empathways.org/approach/bridge-to-self-sufficiency>

² See “User-Centered Design Basics” (n.d.). Retrieved on June 22, 2020 from <https://www.usability.gov/what-and-why/user-centered-design.html>

³ The six high-growth industries identified by the District of Columbia Workforce Investment Council at the start of PAIES were Business Administration and IT, Healthcare, Construction, Hospitality, Security and Law, and Infrastructure.