



From Compliance to Employment Opportunity

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

"We knew we needed to change," shared Maria Wortman-Meshberger, Employment and Support Services Chief in the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Welfare and Support Services (DWSS). Large scale systems change is not often the battle cry for state government officials, but in 2018, Nevada DWSS faced significant financial penalties for failing to meet the minimum work participation rate for its TANF program over several years. The program had long focused on compliance with disappointing results. "We asked ourselves—what is the true goal of the TANF program? What should the program be giving people?" said Wortman-Meshberger. Failing work participation rates and mounting financial penalties made a clear and compelling imperative for change.

PAIES Objectives

DWSS joined OFA's PAIES as it began to develop its change agenda. Its primary goal was to transition New Employees of Nevada (NEON) (Nevada's TANF program) from a transactional cash assistance program to a transformational employment opportunity program for TANF participants and employers. DWSS wanted to reconnect with "the core purpose of helping TANF participants find sustainable employment opportunities through education, training, and career pathways to high demand careers, and message that intent to everyone, including staff and participants," noted Wortman-Meshberger.

DWSS's PAIES implementation team planned to engage staff from every level of the program—frontline, supervisors, managers, and administrators—to support three objectives:

- **Identify existing strengths:** Identify and assess promising practices across the NEON program already helping families transition to employment successfully.
- **Adopt what works:** Incorporate research-based practices that use coaching techniques, improve participant executive skills, and implement innovative employer engagement practices to close the opportunity gap.
- **Engage staff in the systems change agenda:** Ensure management buy-in but also widen the circle of influence for staff to create and drive the change process.

PAIES Challenges, Adaptations, and Accomplishments

The PAIES implementation team realized their change agenda required clear shifts in some elements of DWSS organizational culture. DWSS created a workforce development unit to build partnerships with education and training providers to ensure NEON participants are ready and able to compete for in-demand jobs. The unit's primary goal is to build direct relationships between the TANF program and

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local employers and educational institutions so that NEON participants not only have work credentials, but the industry knowledge and foundational skills valued by employers. These relationships will help reframe community and business perceptions about NEON participants as untapped resources—ready to contribute to business success.

During PAIES, DWSS also sought to shift how it engaged and included staff in system changes and redesign efforts. To jump start this shift, the PAIES implementation team hosted a series of virtual and in-person “listening and leading” sessions with case management, supervisory, and management staff across the state. These sessions offered staff a chance to discuss program challenges in the context of creating solutions while allowing NEON staff from all levels to be active contributors to the overall program redesign.

During sessions, staff worked together to identify a set of shared values and practice principles that matched DWSS's overall PAIES goals and promoted values like empowered caring, adaptability, teamwork, and motivational coaching approaches. Traditionally, this level of strategic planning had been the exclusive realm of administrative leaders and managers. With staff working alongside leadership, DWSS began to establish crucial anchors for a more engaged and positive workplace culture. Staff also brainstormed innovative prototypes to improve program performance. Teams explored revising intake forms to shorten wait times, adopting more customer-centered processes to reflect participant choices, and offering learning activities while individuals awaited approval to receive cash assistance benefits. Conversations from the listening and leading sessions sparked a level of enthusiasm and ownership of the change process that has assisted DWSS improvement efforts. They also validated the strategic direction and preliminary action steps planned by DWSS, as they were welcomed by staff and in some cases enacted very quickly.

Next Steps

DWSS has begun business process re-engineering (BPR), and many lessons learned during PAIES have been incorporated into the effort. During BPR, NEON staff offered valuable feedback to ensure the best processes were designed for both staff and participants. The BPR effort is an important bridge beyond PAIES to sustain many key ideas generated during the NEON listening and leading sessions. As a result of its BPR initiative and innovative ideas from NEON staff, DWSS will revise and align its process manuals, client engagement forms, and training protocols based on its new employment opportunity philosophy and practice principles.



Moving Forward During COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, DWSS was given five days to transition 75% of its workforce to remote work. The division was able to leverage several existing resources to facilitate the transition. The DWSS system applications allowed seamless continuation of application processing and virtual case management. Employees were also already using an interactive case management application for participants. DWSS distributed computer equipment for staff that did not have home computers and ensured drop boxes were at all DWSS offices to allow for collection of new applications and necessary paperwork from participants. In partnership with local grocery stores throughout the state, hard copy assistance applications were made available to individuals. DWSS also found ways to ensure staff commitments were seen and appreciated. The deputy administrator sent daily and weekly email updates of program status and agency and staff achievements.