



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance

POLICY ACADEMY FOR
**INNOVATIVE
EMPLOYMENT
STRATEGIES**

Building Systems Change Through Staff Engagement



**Lessons Learned from the
Policy Academy for Innovative
Employment Strategies**

Building Systems Change Through Staff Engagement

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Introduction

Engaging staff in systemic change helps leaders benefit from their team's individual and collective expertise. Recognizing expertise at all levels empowers staff to identify, evaluate, and implement strategic solutions. This strategy helps organizations beyond the immediate resolution of a challenge; it creates a culture that empowers employees, nurtures innovation, and promotes nimble responses to emerging issues.¹

Innovative solutions in human services are often borne from effective staff engagement at all levels.^{2,3} When human services organizations make large-scale changes, existing staff can offer expert knowledge. Staff can address known challenges and uncover new ones not yet visible to leadership. Managing and supporting staff to navigate changing roles and contribute to solution development is the core of building systems change.⁴



Policy Academy for Innovative Employment Strategies

The Policy Academy for Innovative Employment Strategies (PAIES) was an intensive technical assistance experience. Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the Academy helped participating sites improve coaching and career pathways approaches (see Appendix A for more information).

This brief informs TANF leadership about strategies to effectively engage staff to inform systems change. It shares key takeaways from the PAIES experience of the Division of Welfare and Supportive Services (DWSS), Nevada's TANF agency. A companion PAIES brief that highlights coaching case management strategies can be found <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/ofa-paies-brief-series-tanf-coaching-scale>.

Background

Two intersecting trends impacted Nevada's PAIES participation and achievement of objectives: challenges in meeting mandated Work Participation Rates (WPR) and a larger context of human services modernization. Noting these trends, Nevada started "NEON" (New Employees of Nevada) to connect low-income Nevadans with high-demand, high-growth industries. At the TANF level, led by DWSS, these efforts included employment and training offerings. DWSS aimed to build a robust employment base for its NEON (TANF) participants. This effort reflected a programmatic shift away from a compliance oriented TANF cash assistance program and advanced a vision for TANF as an employment opportunity program.

¹ Cattermole, G., Johnson, J. and Roberts, K. (2013). "Employee engagement welcomes the dawn of an empowerment culture," *Strategic HR Review*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 250-254. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-04-2013-0039>

² Galbraith, M. (2020). Don't just tell employees organizational changes are coming — Explain why. Retrieved 9 June 2020, from <https://hbr.org/2018/10/dont-just-tell-employees-organizational-changes-are-coming-explain-why>

³ Georgiades S. (2015). Employee engagement and organizational change. In: *Employee Engagement in Media Management*. Media Business and Innovation. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16217-1_2

⁴ Parent, J.D., and Lovelace, K.J. (2018). "Employee engagement, positive organizational culture and individual adaptability," *On the Horizon*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 206-214. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-01-2018-0003>

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DWSS' specific PAIES objective was to **reduce poverty through innovative career pathways**. DWSS adopted programmatic innovations while building an engaged project team of key stakeholders (see Figure 1).

Committed to learning from staff experiences at all levels, DWSS invested in "strategic listening and leading" sessions. Leadership actively sought staff views on how best to serve low-income Nevadans.

Strategically named to invite participation, the session promoted a "give and take conversation." Discussion included core NEON purposes, the role of frontline workers and supervisors, training needs for NEON staff, and partnership strategies. It also featured a global focus on the best way to deliver the NEON program as an effective employment opportunity program for Nevadans.

Findings and Recommendations

DWSS' experience in systems change began with the challenging task of reviewing current operations and identifying areas for improvement. Doing this paved the way to work with staff to craft a vision for the new NEON. When asked about how to translate their experience into staff engagement strategies for other programs, DWSS' PAIES team reflected on various themes.

Emphasize a holistic view of business processes

DWSS did not meet the mandated WPR even when work participation was its intended goal. Leadership and staff considered whether and how their practices supported their goals.

"Everything we do, including Personal Responsibility Plans, pre-eligibility screenings, and employment retention efforts, need to be aligned with our core purpose."

—Maria Wortman-Meshberger,
Employment and Support
Services Chief, DWSS

Framing TANF as an employment program with the primary goal of putting Nevadans to work in meaningful employment drove the conversation when DWSS began its next steps. DWSS began business process reengineering (BPR) and incorporated its employment program vision into organizational changes. Throughout the BPR process, staff engagement determined how NEON needed modification. "Thoughtfulness and a desire to sustain past PAIES" drove DWSS' approach, shared Maria Wortman-Meshberger, Employment and Support Services Chief. Engaging staff informed a holistic view and revealed areas less visible to leadership.

Communicate clearly and tailor messages to audiences

Engaging stakeholders across levels is critical. But DWSS also stressed tailoring messaging to ensure clarity. Notably, message tailoring was not about covering up details, but it highlighted elements of the overall message most resonant to a specific audience. For example, when issuing a policy memorandum, DWSS might include the language "based on

your feedback" to show responsiveness to staff input. DWSS highlighted the value of inclusive language in staff communications and keeping a focus on outcomes. This helped team members maintain a long-range view when interim outcomes fell short of targets. DWSS also stressed two-way communication. This created a culture where staff could share critical information.

Figure 1: Innovative career pathways for NEON using an integrated team approach



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Maintain mission focus

DWSS' messaging about interim outcomes focused on what really mattered. DWSS' mission was to connect low-income Nevadans to its best employment opportunities. When challenges or other objectives presented potential distractions, DWSS maintained its focus on outcomes.

DWSS also acknowledged that equipping all caseworkers with the same tools and philosophies (for example, coaching; see companion brief at <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/ofa-paies-brief-series-tanf-coaching-scale>) would provide consistent statewide services to NEON participants.

Empowering and engaging staff were embedded in all initiatives, and desired outcomes could not be realized unless staff engagement was practiced at all levels of the organization. This included how staff were trained, how they understood their role(s), and how they related to program work. It also covered staff contributions to policy and program discussions. DWSS leadership started hearing the new messaging at the staff level in design sessions. This demonstrated that systems change had become entrenched in NEON.

Establish meaningful outcomes and orient programs to meet them

Maintaining focus on core purposes drives behaviors. But teams also need to measure their success. Ongoing monitoring through a Core Team, post-implementation reviews, and a regular review of feedback provided insights into how changes were handled. DWSS noted fidelity to the model was vital so what worked could be measured. Flexibility to change policy, if things were not working, was also key.

Data proved a valuable tool when engaging upper management. It helped tie intended or proposed changes to evidence trends and show impact. DWSS cited the value of program-generated data to monitor change and drive messaging to stakeholders. Sustaining change was challenging, but staff spirits were buoyed when progress was made; data were critical to understanding, describing, and sharing success.

Conclusion

Lessons learned from DWSS offer insights into how TANF and human services agencies might deploy staff expertise to inform effective systems change. DWSS' experience highlights the value of genuine engagement. Seeking meaningful input and honoring it through consideration, application, and communication promotes progress.

By engaging staff in the development of its reimagined process, DWSS created a culture of innovation that welcomed staff input over time. This formed a self-sustaining dynamic that led to continuous quality improvement.



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Appendix A Overview of the Policy Academy for Innovative Employment Strategies

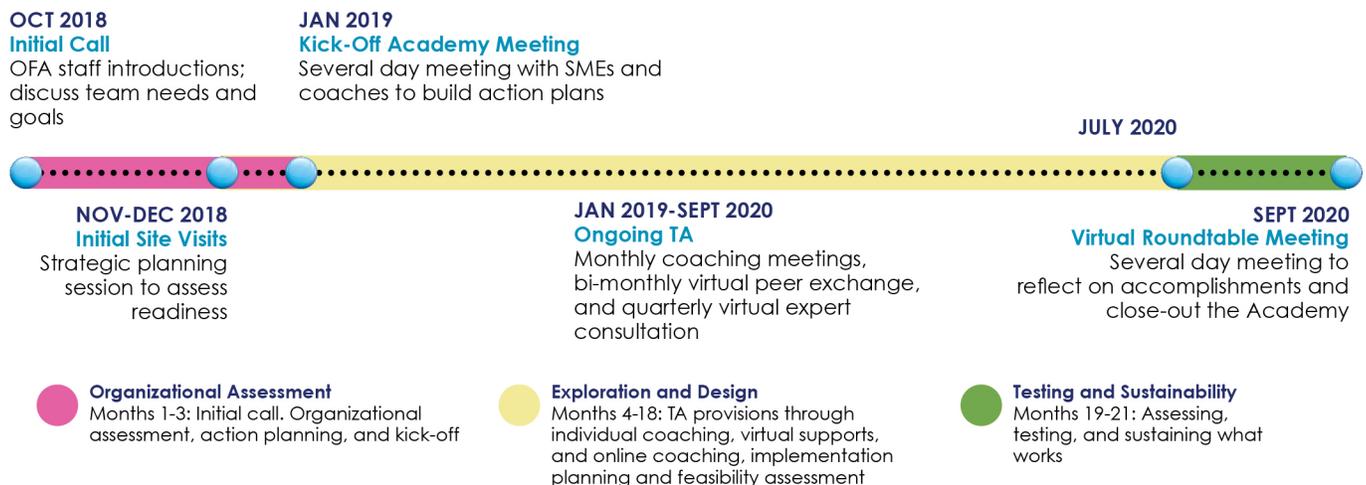
The 2019-2020 Policy Academy for Innovative Employment Strategies (PAIES) helped TANF programs develop, plan, and initially test comprehensive, innovative approaches to increase employment outcomes for TANF participants.

PAIES supported states and localities in transitioning from traditional case management to coaching models. It also helped enhance and improve career pathway approaches.

Participating programs explored, planned, and developed detailed implementation strategies focused on lasting systems change. Guided by an understanding of programs' organizational strengths and needs, technical assistance coaches helped programs assess their readiness. The coaches also assisted participating programs in developing action and implementation plans and building capacity and infrastructure to meet their Academy goals. PAIES included three technical assistance (TA) phases aimed at supporting programs: Organizational Assessment, Exploration & Design, and Testing & Sustainability (see Figure 2).

- **A team-based approach:** Participating programs created "implementation teams" that include committed, relevant stakeholders and community partners. These supporters built and enhanced organizational relationships during the Academy to institute change.
- **Dedicated coaches:** Participating programs have dedicated TA coaching teams who worked with them throughout the Academy to facilitate readiness assessments, develop strategic action plans, track progress, and coordinate in-person and virtual TA activities.
- **Support from experts:** National, state, and local experts and thought leaders acted as faculty at Academy meetings. They were available quarterly for targeted support and guidance to participating programs.
- **Targeted TA:** Participating programs received customized, ongoing support from TA coaches to address program priorities and effect systems change. Support included site visits, in-person Academy meetings, virtual technical assistance, product development, and peer team exchanges.

Figure 2: PAIES Timeline





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