



Promising Pathways Initiative

OVERVIEW

Background

Across Federal, State, and Tribal programs there is an increased need to support increased transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in programs. The desire for enhanced performance and accountability has solidified the preference to use practices for which effective evidence is available. While there is widening recognition on how evidence-informed practice helps increase the efficient use of resources, serious challenges remain to integrating this approach into the TANF field. In addition to the lack of a common definition of “evidence-informed” and “evidence-based” in the TANF world, a majority of program outcomes are measured anecdotally and additional efforts are required to develop consistent documentation and data collection strategies across programs.



Why is the Promising Pathways Initiative Important?

There is limited information about the type of evidence available at the TANF program level that establishes how the multitude of TANF programs define practice and assure fidelity of implementation. Without this information, determining what constitutes a “best” or a “promising” practice for TANF programs is problematic. Traditional research methods like quasi experimental designs and experimental methodologies that are the foundation of determining evidence based practice are challenging to carry out in the dynamic context of TANF programming. Understanding what type of information is needed to establish an evidence pathway leading to identification of evidence based practice within TANF programming is needed. The Promising Pathways Initiative seeks to address this knowledge need through an evidence informed practice approach. This approach is illustrated by the attached **framework: Promising Pathways Initiative: Developing the Capacity for Evidence Informed Practice.**

The Promising Pathways Initiative is grounded in the research on evidence based practices and utilizes the same lexicon as the research field, yet is cutting edge in exploring the appropriate technical assistance interventions required to move a program or practice along a continuum of evidence that moves the TANF field forward. This initiative will support the selected sites by building capacity of the sites to identify practice and program components; develop and document evidence; and articulate the resulting “story” about the effectiveness of the program or practice. Through this Initiative, OFA will develop the capacity for promising TANF programs to collect non-experimental evidence to demonstrate fidelity of implementation that is “evidence informed,”¹, and is critical to launching these promising programs along a pathway to potentially become an evidence based practice.

¹ The operational definition of evidence informed practice for this Initiative is a promising program that defines its practices and examines (through data collection, analysis, and documentation) the fidelity of implementation of its practice with respect to its definition. It is acknowledged that this definition of evidence informed practice differs from other existing descriptions that depict programs that are replicating in whole or in part an existing practice. Both the nature of the types of TANF programs being implemented and the context in which they operate necessitate that a more appropriate standard is developed.



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How will the Promising Pathways sites benefit?

Ten existing TANF programs were selected by OFA to participate as learning laboratories for developing the capacity for becoming an evidence informed practice. An initial environmental assessment was conducted to identify existing TANF programs/practices for possible inclusion in this effort. Criteria used for inclusion was primarily focused on the program being cited as “promising” by an external source, or one that has undergone an external evaluation. This initial scan was then refined based on geographic diversity, program/practice diversity, and reflective of regional review. One site was identified in each of the 10 ACF regions for inclusion in the Initiative. Sites are supported through intensive technical assistance to develop and use the evidence base generated from collecting data on their practice. Mapping, collecting, analyzing, and reporting (sharing results) are key functions of an *Interactive Assessment Process loop* (illustrated in the framework) that are intended to lead to evidence informed practice. During their participation in the Initiative, Promising Pathway programs have access to the following types of customized and individualized technical assistance:

- Ongoing individualized, and embedded technical support to develop a program-specific pathway to evidence informed practice;
- Technical assistance around defining and documenting practice; determining program fidelity; and examining program effectiveness;
- Dedicated site coaches;
- Development of a customized Individualized Technical Assistance Plan (ITAP);
- On-site and virtual training and technical assistance from trainers and consultants; and
- Participation in a Capstone Program Innovation Institute.

How will this Initiative move the TANF field forward?

OFA is implementing the **Promising Pathways Initiative** to work with 10 TANF programs/sites around the country that have been designated as innovative or promising and high performing. The Initiative is supporting programs working in a variety of areas, including: subsidized employment and transitional jobs; work supports (e.g. transportation); job training and placement; case management; Tribal self-sufficiency; and education and career pathways. The technical assistance provided through this Initiative focuses on developing and measuring effective solutions that foster healthy families and strong communities. By documenting evidence-informed innovation at the local level, and sharing these outcomes and strategies across the TANF field, OFA plans to use these practices to build a foundation for documenting practice and moving the field forward. The Promising Pathways Initiative will help advance innovative program planning for low-income populations and support the documentation and distribution of evidence-based results within TANF. The Initiative is supporting all selected Promising Pathways sites with:

- Ongoing individualized and customized technical assistance and resources to increase the capacity to document and analyze outcomes;
- Support and guidance in sharing evidence-based outcomes across the TANF field; and
- The opportunity to work in partnership with peer organizations in strengthening performance measurement and data collection.