

COLORADO

Modernizing TANF for American Families



Supportive Technical Assistance and Coaching Through the Policy Academy Model

For the Colorado team, the technical assistance offered through the Policy Academy “gave us a framework to achieve great outcomes for families and meet our Federal work participation rate requirements,” said Katie Griego, Director of the Employment and Benefits Division, Colorado Department of Human Services. The ability to connect with other states doing similar work through peer-to-peer facilitation helped Colorado build from others’ innovative ideas and lessons learned. Griego also shared that “learning more about implementation science was key in helping us recognize the importance of structuring conversations” and allowed Colorado to “move forward in a way that is more task-based.” Team members shared that the expert consultation provided by their Academy coaches kept them energized and focused on working together to reach their goals.



The Office of Family Assistance’s (OFA) Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy (Policy Academy) was an 18-month intensive technical assistance (TA) initiative in 2015–2016 for seven states and one county interested in modernizing and improving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) practice. During the initiative, sites received dedicated coaches, onsite strategic planning, access to expert consultants, and tailored written resources. Additionally, they participated in several in-person convenings, peer exchanges, and virtual training.

In early 2015, the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) was assessing ways to improve long-term employment outcomes for its TANF program participants by reducing employment barriers and streamlining services. Each of Colorado’s 64 counties operated differently in how they provided case management supports, but most primarily focused on placing TANF participants in allowable work activities to meet the Federal work participation rate (WPR). Cognizant that a participant’s attachment to an allowable work activity did not consequentially lead to sustainable employment, CDHS began to review its policies, practices, and systems to identify ways counties could engage participants differently to increase their job readiness and long-term job prospects. Katie Griego, CDHS Director of the Employment and Benefits Division, shared that to accomplish this transformation, they needed “a specific plan of how programs and workers could give TANF participants the individualized tools they needed to be successful.”

The Policy Academy afforded the state an opportunity to reflect on its burgeoning vision and create a framework within which to implement it. Working within a county-administered, state-supervised jurisdiction, the state team sought to create a structure in which its 64 county human services departments could provide consistent high-quality family-centered programming, but also do so with some flexibility to be innovative and address the unique needs of its participants.

The state began to plan for a shift in its TANF service delivery model—to move away from a compliance-centered approach to an employment-focused one that was participant-centered and supported the whole family unit. However, as planning got underway, Colorado learned that it had not met the Federal WPR requirement. During the Policy Academy planning process, Griego said, “We had to consider if we could continue pursuing innovative changes to service delivery while also complying with Federal requirements.” The team used this opportunity to make sure any programmatic changes addressed potential barriers to employment but also connected TANF participants to federally defined allowable work activities in a way that would meaningfully place them on an employment path.

➤ **The state created a sub-group within its larger Policy Academy team, named the “64 Strong Implementation Team,” to focus on fully engaging counties and establishing a common set of shared values and goals.**

Candace Cadena, the state’s Data and Evaluation Analyst, was designated as the state co-chair of the 64 Strong Implementation Team, a responsibility she shared with co-chair Shelley Grattan of Mesa County. During regular convenings, the co-chairs have helped drive the team toward concrete action steps aimed at enhancing service delivery to minimize TANF participants’ potential challenges to employment and to promote positive long-term outcomes. The 64 Strong Implementation Team has also relied on implementation science training and technical assistance from the Policy Academy to help frame Colorado’s work as team members moved from exploring their vision to designing their approach. The implementation team concept gave Colorado a “formalized infrastructure to develop the capacity and resources needed to address our Policy Academy vision and the tasks we were trying to achieve,” said Cadena.

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In designing an employment-focused, federally compliant model, the team initially developed a bridge model that allowed for both innovation and standardization across counties based on the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency® developed by Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath).¹ For the team, the Bridge was a visual representation of how they could engage and serve TANF participants through a combination of comprehensive case management, employment services, and post-TANF transitional assistance with the goal of improving economic security. Colorado's version of the Bridge emphasized program design and management, family-centered services, coaching and case management, employment services and supports, and transitional TANF supports.

Once a draft model was devised, the team shared it through its monthly TANF county administrators meeting, as well as other lines of communication with state and county staff. Administrators raised concerns, however, that Colorado's Bridge was too linear and focused on compliance rather than the participant or each county's specific needs or strengths. Though most counties remained supportive of the Bridge's stated goals to increase long-term employment outcomes by providing consistent, individualized, participant-centered services, the metaphorical Bridge did not gain traction.

Revising the draft Bridge with the state's larger stakeholder group was an important turning point in how the implementation team would realize its case management transformation goals. While the Bridge offered a helpful visual to showcase the state's theory of change, the counties wanted and needed something specific, malleable, and actionable. At a summer 2016 in-person Academy planning session, the team transformed the underlying principles and themes of the Bridge into an adaptive Playbook with concrete action steps.

The 64 Strong Implementation Team is encouraged by how the Playbook (to be completed in the fall of 2017) will give counties the tools they need to create high-quality, family-centered services that encompass effective case management, employment services, and supports. The Playbook is designed to meet each county where it is along an implementation continuum, whether it is in an early stage or full implementation. The Playbook consists of implementation areas similar to those in the initial Bridge model; for each area, there are strategies and measurements that counties can use to gauge "success" to ensure they are working toward shared statewide goals. Strategies include an array of practices that counties can implement to address timely processing of benefits, accurate data entry, and ongoing comprehensive assessments. The Playbook "also focuses on employment in ways we have not in the past," said Griego, providing recommendations for how counties can leverage "local workforce centers and labor market information to connect individuals to the right training, skills, and education to become marketable."

Colorado is also developing a companion communication plan to the Playbook with targeted messaging to key audiences and stakeholders. The team believes that the care taken in building the team and listening to the concerns and interests of their larger stakeholder audience has been critical. The experience of developing the Bridge and Playbook has offered a new framework within which Colorado state and county TANF leadership can collaborate. It has created an improved and consistent method for regular communication, and importantly has helped the state and counties identify a set of shared goals and objectives that will guide them down a path toward enhanced family-centered programming.



Highlights from Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy Sites

When asked about a bright spot in its Academy experience, Colorado shared how important it was to bring together counties to identify a shared vision and commitment to change through the 64 Strong Implementation Team. As Katie Griego, Director of the Employment and Benefits Division, Colorado Department of Human Services, stated, "In a state-supervised, county-administered structure, Colorado has a great opportunity to collaborate with counties and explore solutions that address very diverse needs." Not only was the Colorado team able to agree on its vision, but they were able to define state and county roles in how to progress towards it. Since many of Colorado's strategies suggest changes in local policies and practices, in a state-supervised environment "it would have been easier for the state to dictate, but that was the wrong way to go," added Data and Evaluation Analyst Candace Cadena. "We needed buy-in and active participation from the counties early on." The intentional structure the team has created for these conversations "will have a lasting impact for our state," Griego explained, "by providing support to counties as they implement strategies to move toward consistent, high-quality programming."

¹Economic Mobility Pathways. Bridge to Self-Sufficiency.® (n.d). Retrieved February 6, 2017, from <https://www.empathways.org/our-work/our-approach/bridge-to-self-sufficiency>.