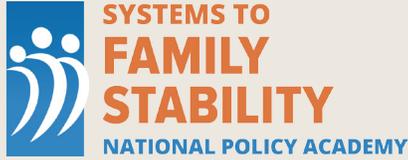




CONNECTICUT

Modernizing TANF for American Families



Supportive Technical Assistance and Coaching Through the Policy Academy Model

For the Connecticut team, the technical assistance offered through the Policy Academy “helped us think big and refine our goals,” said Peter Palermino, Connecticut’s TANF Administrator. The exposure to national consultants and experts on two-generation evaluation and approaches, he said, kept the team motivated and abreast of the latest thinking and work. “We know we are not working in isolation,” said Palermino, “that this is part of a larger national conversation and efforts and it has helped my team stay engaged and challenged by the work ahead.” The team has also seen great value in the Academy’s support to foster connections with other Academy teams. “We’ve learned about other states’ approaches,” shared Palermino, “to see what they have done—or not—and why.”



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, on-site strategic planning, and access to expert consultants and tailored written resources. Additionally, they participated in several in-person convenings, peer exchanges, and virtual training.

In 2015, Connecticut became one of just a handful of states to pass legislation that supported coordinated service improvements for low-income children, their parents, and families by embedding two-generation policies across human service domains. Supporting the creation of six two-generation pilots across the state, the legislation also called for the design of a long-term state plan to adopt two-generation models with the support of TANF funds.

▶▶ *Peter Palermino, Connecticut’s TANF Administrator, saw the law’s passage as an opportunity.*

Nominating his state to participate in the Policy Academy, Peter Palermino, Connecticut’s TANF Administrator, would leverage the recently passed state law and the Academy’s technical assistance supports to shed light on the importance of including non-custodial parents (NCPs)—particularly fathers—in the two-generation policy and practice movement. “We have had a robust fatherhood initiative in Connecticut for years,” said Palermino, “but we have not connected that program to TANF...or to the two-generation conversation.” He continued, “Many of the issues that NCPs face are no different than those of the custodial parents with which we work...they share a child, have limited skills, and as a family unit (even if not living together) are not economically stable to support their family.” Anthony Judkins, the state’s Fatherhood Initiative Program Manager, agreed. “NCPs are an important contributor to families that we simply have not accessed,” Judkins said. “We wanted this project to engage them and not just as a pocketbook.”

The Connecticut team’s Policy Academy goal, said Diana DiTunno, Consultant and Project Manager, Connecticut Department of Social Services in partnership with the UCONN School of Social Work, was to “transcend the household walls...to encourage co-parenting and raise families out of poverty by using a two-generation approach to support NCPs and their children, together” in partnership with the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Connecticut created a large implementation team to achieve this goal—including representatives from each branch of government, colleagues from early childhood education and TANF, child support enforcement (judicial and executive branches), the legislature’s Commission on Children, and the United Way.

It was with this large and diverse team, said Palermino, that Connecticut achieved “an early and symbolic win.” Through education and advocacy, the team worked with the legislature to expand the two-generation law’s definition of household so that NCPs could receive pilot supports. “Without serving a client, we were able to include NCPs in the conversation,” said Palermino, opening the door for them to receive two-generation services and encouraging the legislative pilots to connect with their local fatherhood programs.”

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Palermino and his team then began to plan for their own NCP-focused two-generation pilot with New Opportunities, Inc., a community action agency in Waterbury, Connecticut, as a key partner. With a fatherhood program and early childhood arm in place and strong child support and TANF staff at DSS field offices nearby, the team surmised that a New Opportunities-led pilot would be able to leverage existing resources and mirror the state’s supportive implementation team at the local level.

At a kickoff meeting with Waterbury partners, which included members from the local executive, legislative, and judicial branches—colleagues from the courts, early education, child support, and TANF—state and local implementation teams began to create a pilot action plan. Their first steps were to refine the pilot’s target population of NCPs and their children, ages five and under, through an analysis of Waterbury’s fatherhood program data, and then to develop their internal and external referral pathways. The team identified funds through the Social Services Block Grant to support the effort and, in follow-on planning sessions, began to develop a statement of work that articulated benchmarks for program messaging, recruitment, and service delivery. Unique to the pilot, the team also agreed on the importance of hiring a clinical coordinator or navigator who would offer case management services to pilot families and would have a background in mediation and working with custodial *and* non-custodial parents.

To inform the pilot program design and outcome measures, the Connecticut team also sought support from the Policy Academy and from other local programs. Through the Academy, the team connected with Dr. Christopher King from the Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas at Austin in developing its evaluation plan and identifying specific outcome measures, especially those relating to child well-being that would complement adult measures the TANF system was more accustomed to tracking. The team has also connected with local Waterbury philanthropy to coordinate efforts and pool resources.

The team has faced challenges along the way, including managing its large implementation team and ensuring each member can add value to the effort. “We have known what we wanted to do,” said Judkins, but the composition of Connecticut’s team changed and it has taken time and effort from their core team members to get all the right people at the table, at all the right times. “This also does not happen overnight,” said Palermino. “It takes time to get contracts in place...but also to carefully consider how to best reach and engage a constituency group that has historically been left out of the conversation and that often faces many barriers.” “The team has made course corrections along the way,” added Palermino, “to ensure there is a strong educational component to this work—so staff across all implementation team organizations understand the risks, opportunities, and needs of our target population.” The state team also anticipates helping New Opportunities look across its different funding streams to track outcomes for the pilot that may span different aspects of their program. “The evaluation technical assistance support through the Academy will help inform that effort,” Palermino said.

Connecticut expects to launch the NCP two-generation pilot in the fall of 2017 with 20 families. “We hope that it will showcase how to truly include NCPs in two-generation service provision...that it will become the standard and not something special,” said Judkins. DiTunno agreed, “We hope this effort will change the language we use and the services we design when implementing programs for families...no matter where each family member resides.”



Highlights from Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy Sites

When asked about a bright spot in their Academy experience, Connecticut team members noted the increase in collaboration and conversation within the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS). As impressive as their large state and local, executive, legislative, and judicial branch teams are, it is the increased engagement within their own office of which core team members, TANF Administrator Peter Palermino, Fatherhood Initiative Program Manager Anthony Judkins, and Project Manager Diana DiTunno, are most proud. “We are talking across divisions and programs about what we are going to do and how we are going to execute this pilot and better include non-custodial parents (NCPs) in programs,” said Judkins. “We knew what many of our external partners were working on, but we didn’t know what our internal partners were up to,” he added. DSS colleagues who administer the Social Services Block Grant and Community Services Block Grant have become critical players in Connecticut’s two-generation pilot, said Palermino, allowing Connecticut to make NCPs a part of the conversation across other programs as well. “We all report to different people within DSS, but this effort is offering an example of leadership that brings together program managers and directors to streamline and serve overlapping clients.”