

RAMSEY COUNTY

Modernizing TANF for American Families



Supportive Technical Assistance and Coaching Through the Policy Academy Model

When asked about the technical assistance offered through the Policy Academy, Kate Probert Fagundes, Public Assistance Division Manager of Employment Services, said, “Our coach and OFA delivered expertise and ensured we got access to the right people.” She also appreciated her coach’s provision of concrete examples. “She didn’t just say, ‘here’s the paper—read it.’ She said, ‘here’s the paper, here are the five key things that you should focus on, here’s an example of someone doing it well,’” said Fagundes. “The site exchanges were also helpful—borrowing and stealing ideas is good,” she said, adding, “it’s good to process these topics across the states and not just internally.”



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 2014, the Employment Services division of the Ramsey County Workforce Solutions program initiated a “systems sea change” and began to fundamentally shift the way it worked with TANF participants. A key element of this transformation was a new, family-centered approach—the Life-Long Learning Initiative (LLI). LLI is grounded in a philosophy of self-determination and the belief that TANF participants can develop new skills to support their economic self-sufficiency.

Among the tools LLI uses are *My Bridge of Strength*, Ramsey County’s customized strength assessment tool, and a participant-driven goal plan template to guide TANF participants in setting and achieving self-sufficiency goals. New TANF participants complete the assessment and use the results to develop goal plans that both drive and track their progress. Case managers support participants through motivational interviewing (MI),¹ coaching, and executive skills (for example, time management, multi-tasking, and task initiation) development.

The Policy Academy’s focus on case management and coaching aligned with these core LLI components and provided fertile ground for the continued development and refinement of the LLI approach. The Academy also offered Ramsey County the opportunity to apply LLI principles to its work in other Academy target areas: TANF–workforce alignment and two-generation approaches. As the Policy Academy got underway, Ramsey County began honing an existing program, a TANF–workforce integration pilot called “Pipeline to Prosperity.” “Our goal was to determine a natural point of integration so that families could benefit from both TANF and workforce services,” said Kate Probert Fagundes, Public Assistance Division Manager of Employment Services.

Fagundes explained that the Ramsey County Policy Academy Team bolstered Pipeline to Prosperity with LLI principles, incorporating “My Bridge of Strength and goals to help families build plans that fully leverage these integrated services.” She emphasized the importance of “applying both TANF and workforce dollars and offsetting costs” to launch the pilot, and highlighted the benefits of the strong structural and operational links between TANF and workforce development in Ramsey County. Employment Services is positioned in a standalone department with the Workforce Investment Board (WIB), and WIB members “view TANF as a program they are responsible for, and embrace TANF participants as potential employees.” Fagundes is a member of the WIB, which further strengthens the ties between TANF and the workforce program. Launched with a cohort of 20 participants in 2015, Pipeline to Prosperity expanded to serve 150 individuals in early 2017.

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¹Motivational interviewing is a counseling approach based on five general principles: 1) expressing empathy, 2) developing discrepancy, 3) avoiding argumentation, 4) rolling with resistance, 5) supporting self-sufficiency. (“Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change Health Behaviors – Tips Sheets,” October 2015, OFA PeerTA, <http://health.mo.gov/living/healthcondiseases/chronic/wisewoman/pdf/MIToolkit.pdf>).

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As it applied LLI principles to TANF-workforce integration, the Ramsey County Policy Academy team also began to explore ways it could bolster two-generation services. “We really looked hard at how we could also use LLI to improve services and outcomes for the whole family unit,” said Fagundes. “Our initial priorities were: 1) in areas where we were directly serving youth to determine how to track their outcomes; and 2) in areas where we were directly serving parents, providing services in a way that had a positive impact on children’s lives and outcomes.”

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As it worked to extend the LLI approach to two-generation services, the Ramsey County Policy Academy team was challenged by its structural isolation from Ramsey County’s Department of Health and Human Services. Its primary alignment with the WIB facilitated TANF-workforce integration but left Employment Services without formal ties to Ramsey County’s child care, child protection, and other human services divisions. This made it more difficult to coordinate social services for TANF participants across service settings. Employment Services addressed this challenge by inviting many colleagues from the local Department of Health and Human Services into the Ramsey County Policy Academy team, which fostered stronger service linkages. These collaborative efforts are ongoing, and connections are being forged with corrections, financial assistance, child care, and child protection.

As it extended LLI principles to new service areas, Ramsey County continued to refine and enhance the LLI approach. Staff with expertise in executive functioning began incorporating intensive executive skills development into LLI for small cohorts of TANF participants. “We are teaching people to develop and use a skill that they might not be good at—addressing that specific issue with them to facilitate long-term stability,” said Fagundes. This enhancement deepened the application of LLI’s principles of executive skills development and life-long learning.

Ramsey County is currently expanding intensive executive skills development with a differential intervention pilot. Through the pilot, TANF participants will be assigned to one of three distinct interventions based on the results of an initial participant assessment. The interventions, ranging from most to least intensive, are: 1) an evidence-based Individual Placement Support model for families in which parents and/or children have mental health issues; 2) LLI with intensive executive skills training for participants who cannot otherwise secure/retain employment and achieve self-sufficiency; and 3) standard job readiness support (job leads and professional clothing) for participants who are prepared to enter the workforce.

Moving forward, Ramsey County plans to scale its differential intervention and its other Policy Academy pilots across the TANF system. “We’ve been piloting these human-centered, individualized approaches with the goal of bringing them into the system through a 2018 request for proposal (RFP) process,” said Fagundes. She added, “The Policy Academy got us closer and closer to writing the RFP, which we began in the spring of 2017.” With the release of the RFP, Ramsey County will engage contractors to scale its Policy Academy work, and the “systems sea change” initiated in 2014 will ripple farther across Ramsey County.



Highlights from Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy Sites

A bright spot in the Policy Academy for Ramsey County was the successful expansion of its Pipeline to Prosperity pilot. “With our coach’s support, we were able to figure out how to support that initiative and grow it. We started with 20 families and went to 150. We have two local 2-year colleges involved, and our 4-year university, Metropolitan State University, is now joining in,” said Kate Probert Fagundes, Public Assistance Division Manager of Employment Services. “We’re looking for space on campus, because delivering services at colleges automatically exposes our customers to that environment,” she said. This co-location is mutually beneficial, as it can attract “enrolled college students who can benefit from our program as well.”