



# UTAH

## Modernizing TANF for American Families



### SYSTEMS TO **FAMILY STABILITY** NATIONAL POLICY ACADEMY

#### Supportive Technical Assistance and Coaching Through the Policy Academy Model

Utah credits the technical assistance offered through the Policy Academy with keeping the team “on track and focused,” said Dorothy Hall, Program Manager, Utah Family Employment Program. Hall added that the Academy’s structure, plans, and tools “helped us identify what we needed to do, and what milestones we needed to hit.” It also enabled the team to arrange a visit from Climb Wyoming, an established career training and placement program for low-income, single mothers. “Having Climb come down was really helpful,” said Karla Aguirre, Director of Program, Policy and Training for the Department of Workforce Services, Workforce Development Division. “Their technical assistance was really beneficial in getting our third Next Generation Kids cohort designed and ready to launch. Climb has been offering cohorts for single moms for a long time. Learning how they organize and plan their days and how they facilitate mental health interventions and involve clinical staff was extremely helpful.” Hall also highlighted the technical assistance Utah received to develop instructional videos on executive functioning skills (e.g., time management, task initiation) to “help develop relationships between clinical and non-clinical staff and highlight resources available to TANF participants.” Offering these trainings on demand via video will enable the team to extend its training academy’s reach without committing additional staff time and resources.

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 2012, the Utah state legislature unanimously passed the Intergenerational Poverty Mitigation Act to “help individuals and families in the state to break the cycle of poverty.” The Act mandated that the Department of Workforce Services (DWS) collect data on and produce annual reports about adults and children at high risk of or experiencing intergenerational poverty. It also created the interagency Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission, chaired by Jon Pierpont, Director of DWS. The commission was tasked with developing a plan to limit the occurrence and duration of intergenerational poverty.

Director Pierpont charged his agency’s leaders with developing a DWS strategy to support the state’s goal. “As we talked about how to meet the objective of reducing intergenerational poverty, the light bulb went off that we needed to look at how we were working with TANF participants,” recalls Dorothy Hall, who manages the policy and program side of Utah’s TANF program, the Family Employment Program (FEP). Spurred by this realization, Hall and her colleagues began developing an initiative to shift FEP’s emphasis from compliance to outcomes and prioritize building relationships with families through family-focused case management. They tested their approach with the 2014 launch of Next Generation Kids (NGK), an intergenerational pilot that DWS has since expanded to two additional cohorts. “Motivational interviewing<sup>1</sup> was a key component of NGK that enabled us to develop a more intensive, relationship-based case management model. As motivational interviewing and family-focused case management became successful, it made sense to transfer them to our broader FEP program,” said Hall.



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Utah’s goal of scaling motivational interviewing and family-focused case management statewide aligned with and was supported by the Policy Academy’s focuses on whole family approaches and improved case management systems. Utah’s Policy Academy team knew that the key was to provide staff with the training they needed to build relationships with TANF participants and let the participant guide decisions about the programming they pursue. The team developed a conceptual structure for delivering staff training, the FEP Refocus Academy. “It was about teaching skills, not teaching

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<sup>1</sup>Motivational 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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staff to implement a program,” said Hall. To distinguish it from traditional “one and done” trainings, the FEP Refocus Academy was designed to offer an in-depth, ongoing learning pathway.

The FEP Refocus Academy was a key piece of FEP’s broader Refocus Initiative, which aimed to realize FEP’s philosophical shift to family-focused models, systems, and policies. These were developed by seven FEP Refocus work groups coordinated by Hall under the direction of Karla Aguirre, Director of Program, Policy and Training for the DWS Workforce Development Division (WDD). The work groups automated routine tasks, freeing staff to devote more time to building relationships with families; reconfigured FEP’s online assessment tool to guide staff in focusing on the family; simplified written materials to reduce confusion and improve TANF participant experiences; and developed a curriculum, supporting materials, and training evaluation plan for the FEP Refocus Academy.

The FEP Refocus Academy kicked off in February 2016 and delivered six courses on motivational interviewing and case management at nine locations over the course of 10 months. A total of 245 staff received training. The team made a point of engaging FEP supervisors in the FEP Refocus Academy and securing their buy-in, consequently raising the Academy’s profile among direct service staff. Supervisors participated in supplemental trainings on staff coaching that equipped them to support staff in cultivating and applying their new skills in their home offices. The trainings have been well-received, said Aguirre. “We are moving the needle.”

The FEP Refocus Academy’s overwhelming popularity has presented some challenges for DWS, which has been inundated with internal and external training requests. The FEP Refocus Academy was intended to train only FEP staff in 2016, but by spring, staff from other DWS programs as well as other DWS divisions (such as Housing and Community Development and the Office of Child Care) were clamoring to participate. Ultimately, the team decided to alter its plan and offer trainings to all DWS WDD operational staff ahead of schedule. FEP’s trauma awareness training, also designed for internal use, is currently being offered to all DWS staff. Fifty-six training sessions were provided in cities throughout the state and across Utah’s 31 employment centers. The scale of the training has been “very intense” for FEP, said Aguirre. Staff members, especially Hall, have been stretched by the demands of organizing and providing technical assistance for the trainings. Despite that, Aguirre and Hall are restarting the Academy in 2017 with a course on executive functioning, the cognitive processes underlying time management, multi-tasking, and other functions, which can be impaired by adverse traumatic experiences.

Just months after the FEP Refocus Academy’s first year concluded, Hall was already seeing a change in how FEP staff were working with TANF participants, creating family goal plans, and documenting family progress. “Seeing staff recognize the importance of building relationships is encouraging,” said Hall. “Our charge was reducing intergenerational poverty in Utah, and that was the catalyst for changing the way we work with people. If staff continue to build those relationships, then positive outcomes will occur.”



### Highlights from Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy Sites

When asked about a bright spot in Utah’s Academy experience, Dorothy Hall, Program Manager, Utah Family Employment Program (FEP), described the changes she is witnessing in the local FEP offices. “The true change is in how our staff work with TANF participants,” she said. “To me, that is the real work. They’re excited and you can feel the excitement. Staff come out of a training, walk up to me, and say: ‘This is the greatest thing ever.’ Cultural change is very difficult to achieve, and we are seeing that. Staff feel better about the work they do. You cannot always measure that.”