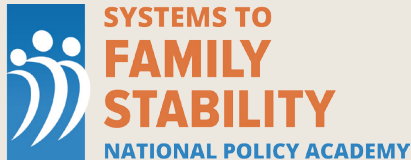


# WEST VIRGINIA

## Modernizing TANF for American Families



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

For the West Virginia team, the Policy Academy provided a space to clearly articulate West Virginia WORKS' vision and start down a path toward improving family well-being, stabilization, and employment outcomes through participant-driven, whole-family case management. The team attributes the creation and implementation of the West Virginia Bridge model to its participation in the Policy Academy, where members were introduced to various case management models that aligned with their vision. Leveraging the consultation provided by coaches and learning from other states on a similar journey, West Virginia took meaningful steps toward organizational and programmatic change, including the development of benchmarks to measure the effectiveness of its Bridge in improving participant outcomes. "We would not be where we are today without the Policy Academy and our coaches' support," said Michael DeMary, Family Assistance Region Program Manager for the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR).



*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, leadership from West Virginia WORKS (the state's TANF program) attended OFA's TANF Directors East Coast Meeting: "Building Linkages Within and Across States to Achieve Family Independence." The meeting focused on emerging research and best practices to improve participant outcomes by reducing potential employment barriers and working in partnership with participants to develop pathways toward sustainable livable-wage jobs. This served as the impetus for leadership to assess their practices and take bold steps to transform the state's TANF program.

At the time, the state's service delivery model centered on "workers interacting with participants to place them in Federal allowable work activities" to meet the Federal work participation rate, explained Michael DeMary, Family Assistance Regional Program Manager for the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. However, the state realized that mere placement in an employment activity was neither a guarantor nor a predictor of long-term positive employment outcomes. To refocus West Virginia's current case management approach to better address employment barriers early, while also developing a consistent experience for participants across 54 county programs, West Virginia created a statewide WV WORKS Council comprised of 25 members at various levels within state and local TANF departments.

### *The Council took an incremental approach to its case management transformation.*

First, the Council developed and implemented a standardized TANF orientation for potential participants. It encouraged counties to use their initial participant assessment as an ongoing tool to gauge participant needs and progress. Recognizing that workers needed training and support to transform their case management approach, they offered "Re-focus of Case Management" training to each region in the fall of 2014. The training was designed to shift workers' mindsets from previous compliance-driven models to a family-centered, employment-focused model by offering training focused on the value of addressing family circumstances, developing partnerships with community resources, and enhancing job retention efforts.

West Virginia then applied to the Policy Academy for specialized technical assistance to develop its next phase of implementation. The state's Policy Academy implementation team focused on defining clear steps the state and counties could take to continue to shift their case management approach. Through research of West Virginia TANF participant data, the Policy Academy team knew of the most common challenges their TANF participants faced: reliable transportation, affordable child care, and adequate health care. To the team, the data showed how inextricably linked a participant's success was to his or her family members and their needs, and as a result, shifted their focus from individual barrier reduction to whole-family case management approaches.

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The team was intrigued by Economic Mobility Pathways' (EMPath)<sup>1</sup> Bridge to Self-Sufficiency,<sup>®</sup> which uses the visual symbolism of a bridge to outline a clear path of how families can move from current life circumstances to future economic security. The Bridge illustrates these paths through various pillars, such as family stability, well-being, education and training, financial management, and employment and career management. West Virginia embarked upon an early effort to adapt EMPath's Bridge to meet the state's specific needs.

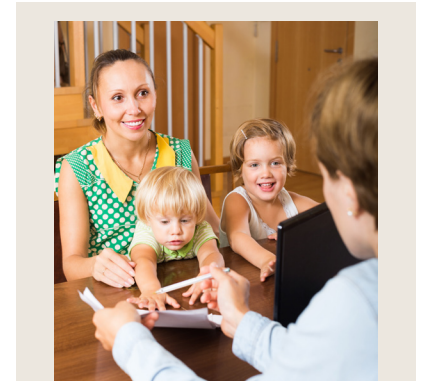
The Bridge "provides workers a framework for how to help participants improve their life by assessing the whole family's needs," said DeMary, and does so with flexibility and the understanding that a participant's circumstances may and likely will change. With strong emphases on family stabilization, job readiness, job retention, and connection to community resources, the team saw the West Virginia Bridge model as an essential first step in shifting the state's case management approach and used it to both gain support and clearly articulate the state's theory of change.

Beginning in December 2015, the Policy Academy team began disseminating its Bridge to county leadership and frontline staff at regional meetings. Several county offices shared concerns that they may lack the community resources to respond to participants' employment barriers. Some were not comfortable fully adopting the new approach without a better sense of their available resources. In response, the Policy Academy team worked with each county to map community resources, resulting in comprehensive county-specific support resource guides.

Ongoing conversations with the counties about the Bridge also revealed that customer engagement strategies had to change to realize the state's goals. Staff members were accustomed to using approaches that were concrete, sometimes prescriptive, and even punitive. Counties had a strong interest and need to enhance workers' knowledge and skills. The state saw coaching and motivational interviewing as a key to helping counties transform case management and become participant and family-centered. The Bridge also created a framework to articulate the supports workers can provide participants to help encourage program compliance and minimize sanctions.

The team began coaching and motivational interviewing training for county workers in December 2016 to build staff capacity and improve participant engagement. Feedback for the training was positive, with staff noting it increased awareness about potential employment barriers and offered specific strategies for engaging participants as partners.

West Virginia is currently working to maintain momentum for its Bridge and shift TANF office cultures. This includes assessing existing data collection systems, exploring how to measure program benchmarks and participant outcomes relative to whole-family approaches, and seeking to further refine participant assessment tools. Overall, counties are optimistic and energized about participant engagement. "We now ask, have we done everything we can to support this participant's success?" said DeMary.



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

When asked about a bright spot in his Academy experience, Michael DeMary, Family Assistance Region Program Manager for the West Virginia DHHR shared, "We are proud of our Bridge model and what we've accomplished with it thus far." Prior to the Academy, West Virginia did not have a clear plan for how to achieve its vision of shifting to a new case management approach for its TANF program. The West Virginia Bridge model became the vehicle for moving away from primarily focusing on employment activities to participant-driven outcomes and a whole-family approach. Not only was West Virginia able to define its plan through the Bridge, but its implementation has led to increased collaboration with counties, including the delivery of training and provision of resources to enhance workers' capacity to sustain the new case management approach.

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