



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance

Applying Trauma-Informed Practices for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Eligibility Workers

Tip Sheet

Trauma-informed practices are those that realize the impact of trauma, recognize its signs and symptoms, respond by integrating this knowledge into policies and practices, and seek ways to resist re-traumatization.¹ Implementing trauma-informed practices helps ensure your engagements with TANF customers are safe and effective. It also helps you build a positive relationship and trust and empowers customers in their own journeys to achieve financial stability.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration notes that there are six guiding principles of trauma-informed practice:

- **Safety:** Customers feel physically and psychologically safe in each interaction.
- **Trustworthiness and transparency:** Engagement and decisions are conducted with transparency to build and maintain trust.
- **Peer support:** Programs support mutual self-help between customers to promote recovery and healing.
- **Collaboration and mutuality:** Staff seek to level power differences with customers to meaningfully share decision-making.
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** Customers' individual strengths and experiences are built upon.
- **Cultural, historical, and gender issues:** Staff are aware of cultural, historical, and gender issues and actively work to reaffirm diverse identities through their interactions with customers.

As an eligibility worker, your job roles may include:

- Being the first point of contact with a TANF applicant.
- Reviewing an applicant's TANF application.
- Collecting the applicant's financial information and other information relating to their job history and household composition.
- Engaging with the applicant to verify application information.
- Making an eligibility determination and notifying the applicant of the results within a prescribed period.

Use the tips below as you engage with TANF customers. **Keep in mind that these tips are not about what you do, but how you do it—** they focus on engagement approaches that foster collaboration, promote shared respect, and offer support.

“Keep in mind that these tips are not about what you do, but how you do it.”

Trauma-Informed Practice Tips

Show sensitivity when collecting private and confidential information

You may be the first staff person an applicant engages in the TANF program. This first impression is critical in setting a tone that is collaborative and supportive. Yet, in this early engagement, you must collect highly confidential information about an individual's finances and financial history. Be sensitive to how this may impact the way a TANF applicant feels during this early encounter. To adopt a trauma-informed process, consider:

- Taking a few moments to begin building a positive relationship. This may be as simple as offering the applicant water if you are meeting in-person or asking them about how they are that day. Acts of kindness can help ease some of the vulnerability one may feel with requesting cash assistance.
- Sharing your sincere desire to help the applicant improve their circumstances while striving to be respectful. Politely let them know what services might be available to help them achieve this.
- Acknowledging the sensitivity of the information you are collecting. State why you need it to help the applicant receive assistance.
- Clearly stating how you will use the information, how you will keep it private, who else may have access to it, and why.
- Collecting the information in a private space (whether you are in-person or virtual) where others may not hear your conversation or be able to see sensitive financial forms or statements.

Be transparent about the process and responsibilities

Completing a TANF application and submitting all the required financial information can be daunting. Forms may be long and use legal jargon or other terms that are hard to follow. Some applicants may struggle to complete forms or submit required documents due to confusion about what is needed and by when. Be aware of how engaging in this process may cause stress or feel disempowering. To adopt a trauma-informed process, consider:

- Using short and concise language noting what your role and responsibilities are in gathering information to make an eligibility determination. Reminding customers of your limitations can help set realistic expectations.
- Being upfront about how long the eligibility determination process takes, including how long it may take for the applicant to gather needed documentation and respond to other requests for information.
- Repeating what the applicant's responsibilities are throughout the eligibility determination process with specific and concise information about timeframes and expectations.

- Explaining the purpose(s) of various aspects of the TANF application process and, if possible, helping to complete pieces that are not clear.
- Giving space for the applicant to ask questions at each interaction. Consider pausing after explaining something with multiple steps and asking the applicant if they have any questions throughout the encounter.
- Exploring ways to streamline and simplify the process to save staff and applicant time. For example, creating a short video explaining the process and what is required or creating a simple checklist for applicants can help them understand what documents are needed or eliminate steps that are not required.

Be future-oriented and strengths-based

Your role is important and focused on determining whether the applicant meets financial criteria to receive cash assistance. As such, you must be compliance-focused regarding these requirements. Using a trauma-informed approach can help you achieve this goal. Building a positive relationship and trust between the applicant and your program will make the process smoother for everyone. Consider using engagement techniques that help the applicant understand the benefits of participating in the TANF program, that staff want to help them succeed, and how it may help them and their family. To adopt a trauma-informed process, consider:

- Sharing the benefits of the program and its role in helping families find financial stability.
- Communicating with sincerity a hope that the individual and their family can receive the supports they need to improve their circumstances.
- Using language that focuses on strengths (and not just compliance, barriers, needs, or deficits). For example, avoid phrases like "I'm sorry for...", "victim of...", "suffering with..." Instead opt for phrases like "thank you for sharing," "I hear you," "survivor," and "living with."

Ensure a warm hand-off

If, after the eligibility determination, a different staff person is assigned to support the customer, consider making a warm hand-off. Introduce the customer to the new staff person by email, text, phone, virtual meeting, or even in-person. Doing so can help build a positive relationship as well as the customer's sense of safety and belief that you (and the program) are there to support them.

Managing a Difficult Exchange

Applying for TANF can be a difficult process for any individual and their family. As an eligibility worker, you may have encounters with applicants that may get heated or be difficult. Below are some tips about how to be trauma-informed in these circumstances:

| When someone... | Consider... |
|--|---|
| <i>Begins to raise their voice</i> | Aggressive behavior may have been an effective way for the individual to protect themselves from current or past adverse experiences. Additionally, when people are engaged in a situation in which they feel powerless, they may be triggered by past traumatic experiences. This can activate the “fight or flight” response, where they feel the need to “fight” (or become loud or aggressive) as a method of coping. But your emotional safety and wellbeing must also be prioritized. The individual’s capacity to regulate behaviors may be overwhelmed, so offer them a break to allow their nervous system to calm down. The break can give them a moment to gain control. You may say something like, “we have been discussing some difficult topics. Let’s take a short break before we continue.” You can also tell them that you need a break to decrease the power imbalance by taking some responsibility for the situation. This can help the individual feel more secure with you. |
| <i>Won’t engage or answer questions</i> | Some of the questions you are asking may touch on sensitive information that can elicit feelings of shame, self-criticism, and embarrassment. When people feel judged or “less than,” it is human nature to shut down or not respond. Answering sensitive questions, such as those about one’s financial stability or personal history, requires a baseline level of trust and security with you. If the individual won’t engage or answer your questions, you may say something like, “I want to acknowledge that some of these questions are sensitive and personal. I need to ask them to help you continue to receive your TANF benefits.” Consider pausing and asking if they have questions. Seek to address any of their concerns before moving forward. By providing choice, you help create a more inclusive exchange. |
| <i>Shares information where the sequence of events is hard to follow</i> | If someone is asked to recount a stressful, adverse, or traumatic event, this too may elicit a trauma response. Enduring traumatic experiences can lead to an increase in stress hormones that can shut down parts of the brain responsible for memory and organization of thoughts, which can make it difficult to recall or share a chronology of those events. In this instance, use active listening techniques and let the individual talk without questioning discrepancies and do not place them under pressure to piece together fragmented memories. |
| <i>Shows nonverbal signs of distress</i> | Tapping feet, biting nails, shutting down, clenching one’s teeth, and generally fidgeting can all be signs of distress. If someone is being asked multiple questions that may remind them of past trauma, they may experience an anxiety response. In this instance, consider offering a glass of water (if you are in-person), offering a break in the meeting, slowing your own breathing which the individual may follow, or non-judgmentally pointing out the body language you are seeing and how you are interpreting it. You may say something like, “I see you tapping your feet and I know this can be a hard conversation. Would you like to take a quick break, or do you have any questions for me before we continue?” By verbalizing what you are seeing and using a tone that conveys compassion, you can show concern about the individual’s health and safety. |

This tip sheet was made possible through support from Prime Contract No. HHSP2332015000961, Task Order No. 75P00120F37005 through funds from the State and Tribal Technical Assistance & Resources (STAR) for TA contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and presented to James Butler, Federal Contracting Officer’s Representative.

Special acknowledgement to the State and Tribal TANF staff and former customers who helped inform this tip sheet, as well as Dr. Suzan Song and Melissa Bocash, Program Administrator, Reach Up (TANF), Vermont Agency for Human Services. Thank you to BLH Technologies, Inc. staff who edited and designed this tip sheet and ICF staff who wrote it. To read other parts of this series, check out:

[Brief #1: Laying the Foundation: Trauma-Informed Practices in TANF Programs.](#) This brief is for TANF leadership and administrators to support programs in designing and implementing trauma-informed practices.

[Brief #2 Applying Trauma-Informed Practices in Case Management and Supervision.](#) This brief is for TANF case managers and supervisors to design and implement trauma-informed practices when working with customers.

Suggested citation: Kendall, Jessica R. & Ramirez, Emily (2022). “Applying Trauma-Informed Practices for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Eligibility Workers.” Washington, DC: Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

References

¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014. https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf