



# Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program Improvement Stakeholder Engagement Practice Brief

## Leveraging America’s Social and Economic Resilience TANF Learning Community (LASER TLC)

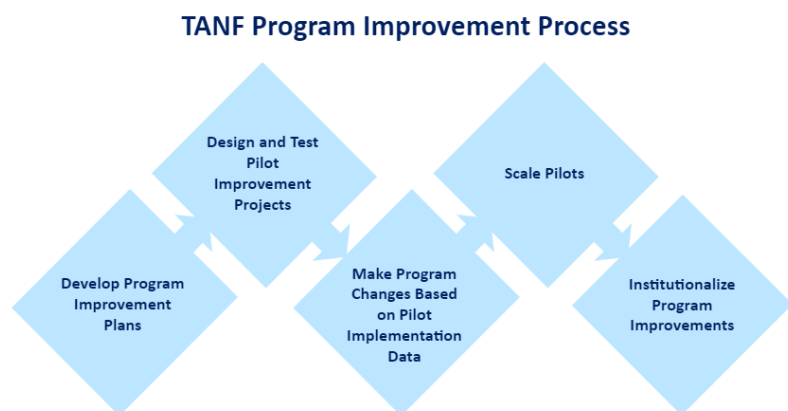
### Background & Context:

The TANF Program Stakeholder Engagement Practice Brief, part of a suite of Leveraging America’s Social and Economic Resilience TANF Learning Community (LASER TLC) products , addresses the critical topic of stakeholder engagement. This practice brief presents the *Effective Stakeholder Engagement Framework*. The experiences of the 10 TANF programs that participated in the Office of Family Assistance (OFA)’s first LASER TLC from July 2021 to December 2022 also informs this framework. This brief provides TANF program staff with evidence-informed strategies for effectively engaging external and internal stakeholders to strengthen and advance program improvement initiatives.

### TANF Program Improvement Initiatives:

TANF programs regularly engage in program improvement efforts focused on changing policies, organizational structures, operational procedures, and case practices to a) improve program performance; b) strengthen service delivery; and c) achieve better outcomes for families and children receiving TANF program benefits.

Regardless of the specific purposes driving the improvement process, the actions employed to implement desired changes, or the scope and intensity of the improvement effort, the fundamental interrelationship between TANF program improvement initiatives and TANF stakeholder engagement requires explicit attention.



## The TANF Program Improvement and Stakeholder Engagement Nexus:



Successful TANF Program Improvement Initiatives largely depend on effective engagement with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. **Internal stakeholders** are the individuals or groups who work directly with or are part of the state, county, or tribal agency administering the TANF program, such as state, county, and tribal TANF program leadership and staff, broader human services leadership, and families receiving TANF benefits.

**External stakeholders** are individuals, groups, or organizations working outside of government or in other governmental agencies that actively contribute to program operations, play a supportive role in TANF program implementation, or hold perspectives on TANF program operations and performance. Examples include workforce agencies, service providers, advocacy groups, and community members.

The BLH Team (BLH Technologies, Inc./Mathematica, Inc.) used a process of “**stakeholder mapping**”<sup>1</sup> with the LASER TLC sites to help them identify and prioritize stakeholders. Through this process, the sites identified internal and external stakeholders who have a vested interest or personal stake in their program improvement efforts. Stakeholders are mapped by their “influence”—defined by each stakeholder’s ability to persuade or affect action planning and relative power on program improvement implementation.

Secondly, the stakeholders are mapped according to how they would be “impacted” by the implementation of the change agenda. Impact is defined as the effects of the program improvement on the stakeholder or the relative consequences of the change for them. Those stakeholders with high influence or high impact need to be actively engaged throughout program improvement process.

## The Effective Stakeholder Engagement Framework (ESEF):

The **Effective Stakeholder Engagement Framework (ESEF)** encourages TANF programs to transition from identifying “who” internal and external priority stakeholders are and “why” they are a priority to examining approaches and methods on “how to” engage them. This framework is based upon extensive literature on stakeholder engagement.<sup>2</sup> The following four components incorporate the core tenets of the ESEF. In practice, the four ESEF components function in a

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Stakeholder Mapping Process developed by Strategy Management Consulting. See [SMESstrategy.net](http://SMESstrategy.net) for more information.

<sup>2</sup> Based on stakeholder engagement literature: Rabinowitz, P. (2021); Khodyakov, D., Bromley, E., Evans Kay, S. and Sieck, K. (2018); Betley, E., Sigouin, A., Sterling, E., Felicity, A., Gazit, N., and Luz Porzecanski, A. (2018); Koppich, E. J. (2010). Deloitte (2014).

cyclical and iterative manner. Activities associated with each component feed into and impact other components.

1. **Effective Relationships** – Relationships are critical to successful change efforts. TANF Programs need to **build and sustain positive and effective interpersonal and intergroup interactions** within and across priority internal and external stakeholders. Effective relationships between TANF programs and priority stakeholders in support of program improvement requires proper and regular attention to make sure both parties are operating in honest, authentic, trusting, and healthy ways to enhance and advance engagement and change making and using “relationship centric” strategies.

Additionally, TANF programs should focus on building and sustaining “trusting relationships.” Key practices include being sensitive to each other’s priorities; supporting co-learning and co-design strategies; and explicitly addressing power differentials.

2. **Effective Communications** – Clarity of the problem being addressed and the goals and objectives of the change agenda are central to moving it forward. TANF Programs should consider the **effective exchange of information to and from** priority internal and external stakeholders. Effective communications between TANF programs and priority stakeholders demands honest and transparent exchanges conducted in civil and courteous ways to facilitate shared understanding across diverse perspectives to strengthen and deepen engagement and change. Fundamental action drivers for effective communications include agreement on preferred communications methods and channels; encouraging appropriate and timely responses; and maintaining dialogue that bolsters effective teamwork.
3. **Effective Consultation** – In working with stakeholders, TANF Programs should engage in **effective discussion of ideas and advice**. Effective consultation between TANF programs and priority stakeholders encompasses putting forward ideas, offering advice, raising concerns, and providing counsel to enhance and advance program improvement. This consultation is grounded in displays of respect and appreciation for constructive inquiry to support collective action. There are four distinct types of questioning<sup>3</sup> to consider:
  - a. **Straightforward Questioning**: straightforward questions to promote open and free inquiry about the ideas, advice, and suggestions introduced and considered.
  - b. **Diagnostic Questioning**: questions to explore each other’s thought process and share ideas about potential reactions and consequences to the advice.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Schein, E. (1999).

- c. **Challenge-Oriented Questioning:** questions to respectfully share thoughts and ideas when there are concerns about ideas or advice or their potential consequences.
- d. **Action-Oriented Questioning:** action-oriented questions to consider and assess present and future activities resulting from implementing the ideas or advice.

Effective consultation necessitates meaningful and substantive bi-directional questioning where the TANF program and the stakeholder operate as colleagues and partners. At the heart of consultation is working together and achieving shared objectives. Essential for success is establishing clarity about the expectations for consultation; providing constructive feedback on all contributions and discussions; identifying opportunities for collaboration and coordination between and among the stakeholders; and implementing an agreed upon process for reconciling differing perspectives.

- 4. **Effective Decision Making** – Finally, TANF Programs need to consider **effective inclusive and participatory procedures for reaching decisions** with priority internal and external stakeholders. This is based upon verifiable commitment to inclusion and active participation affirming responsibility and accountability. Effective decision-making among TANF programs and stakeholders for purposes of engagement and program improvement compels the introduction of diverse, equity-based, and inclusive procedures comprised of applicable ground rules, broad acceptance of decision-related responsibilities, and consensus-building methods to produce genuine engagement and real change.<sup>4</sup>

To conduct effective decision-making, agreement on decision-making ground rules, specifically who will be involved in the final decision, is critical. It is important to streamline decision-making procedures; and implement a process for consensus building and working through decisions where differences of opinion remain. Once decisions are made, associated responsibilities and accountability for decision-making must be transparent. Customer voice should be prioritized in decision-making. TANF programs and stakeholders could consider applying the widely accepted and used Responsible/Accountable/Consulted/Informed (RACI) approach to shape their decision-making processes and procedures.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from McDowell, T. and Mallon, D. (2020).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.whatissixsigma.net/raci-matrix/>; <https://www.cio.com/article/287088/project-management-how-to-design-a-successful-raci-project-plan.html>.

## Conclusion

This TANF Program Improvement Stakeholder Engagement Practice Brief provides research and practice informed guidance to TANF programs and priority internal and external stakeholders engaged in TANF Program Improvement Initiatives. The brief explains the critical interrelationship between TANF programs and the engagement of stakeholders in relation to tangible program improvement accomplishments.

The practice brief also clarifies the significance of the concepts of “influence” and “impact” related to the vested interests of TANF programs and priority stakeholders for TANF program improvement. The brief presents the research- and practice-based Effective Stakeholder Engagement Framework (ESEF) and discusses the major components of the framework: (1) Effective Relationships; (2) Effective Communications; (3) Effective Consultation; and (4) Effective Decision-Making. The brief specifies guiding principles and action drivers for each component of the ESEF.

The TANF Program Improvement Stakeholder Engagement Practice Brief provides the context and background for several other tools provided to the LASER TLC sites (such as the Stakeholder Engagement presentation and the Influence/Impact Matrix). It offers a blueprint for TANF programs, and their priority internal and external stakeholders committed to making the attitudinal, behavioral, managerial, and operational changes that will upgrade program performance, strengthen service delivery, and achieve better outcomes for TANF program families.

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