



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



**Welcome to the
Office of Family Assistance (OFA)
Regions VI and VII
TANF Data Reporting and Analysis Series
Webinar #3: Using Research to Inform Practice**

Thursday, September 12, 2013

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Using Research to Inform Practice: ACF's Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC)

September 12, 2013

OFA Regions VI and VIII TANF Webinar Series: TANF Data Reporting and Analysis, Webinar # 3

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Context and Motivation

- **Since welfare reform there has been a significant decline in 3 areas related to welfare research:**
 - 1. State and local welfare and family self-sufficiency research capacity**
 - 2. State-generated research and state-specific program evaluation**
 - 3. Academic interest in TANF program operations including the use of administrative and program evaluation data**

- **Simultaneously, there have been a number of advances in welfare research including:**
 - **Acceptance and adoption of RCT's as the “gold standard” for answering causal questions**
 - **Advances in alternative methodologies examining causal relations**
 - **Increases in data and computing power which make it easier and faster to conduct research**
 - **Improvements in the academic training of new graduates entering the field**

The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC) – The Response

- A unified, multi-component approach
 - No one entity or funding mechanism could meet all research and program needs and address all issues
 - Diversity is a strength
 - Based on a network theory of implementation and change
 - FSSRC > sum of the parts
- Consortium – “An association of two or more individuals or entities with the objective of participating in a common activity or pooling their resources for achieving a common goal.”
- Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC) Components
 - Advancing Welfare & Family Self-Sufficiency Research Project (a.k.a. Project AWESOME)
 - Family Self-Sufficiency & Stability Research Scholars Network (Scholars Network)
 - Data Center for Family Self-Sufficiency

Project AWESOME

- **OPRE contract with Mathematica Policy Research**
 - **Key Personnel: Michelle Derr, Alicia Meckstroth, Matt Stagner**

- **Primary Activities**
 - **Document the state of the field**
 - Development of a strategic plan for the FSSRC
 - **Maintain engaged communication with key constituencies**
 - **Be “on call” to respond rapidly to emerging policy and research needs**
 - **Produce and disseminate products that enhance the knowledge base in family self-sufficiency research**
 - **Support collaboration and coordination of activities of the Consortium including related cooperative agreements and research contracts**

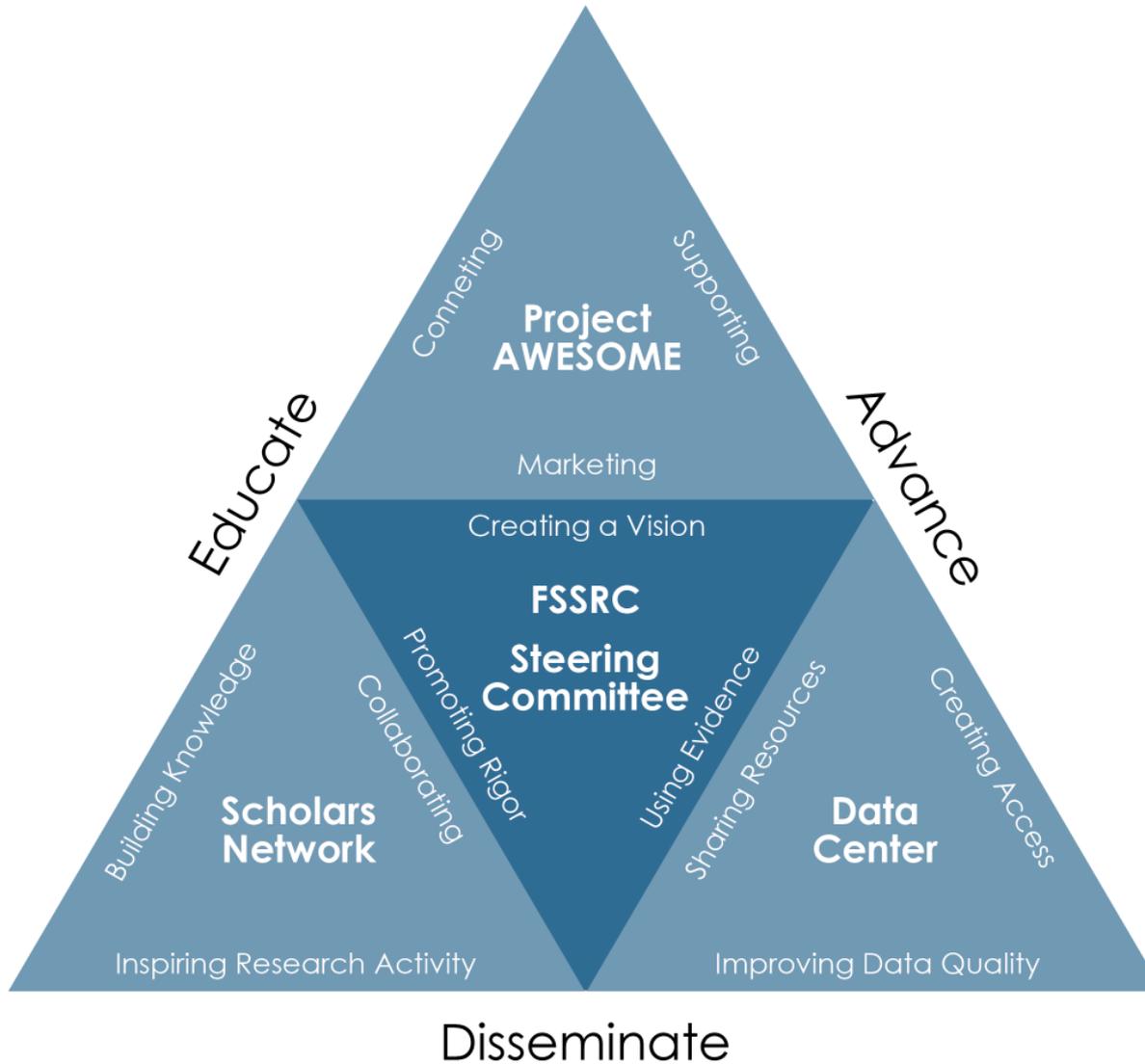
Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center

- **Cooperative agreement to develop, implement and support ongoing operations of a Data Center related to Family Self-Sufficiency programs and research.**
- **The Center will serve as a hub to support the development of state and institutional capacity for data collection, linkage, and, where necessary, data storage.**
- **Possible Center activities include:**
 - **Conducting a national assessment of state and needs of the field**
 - **Negotiating, supporting and maintaining ongoing access agreements for administrative and program evaluation data**
 - **Facilitating expedited data access and streamlined processes for accessing data**
 - **Engaging in activities to support secondary analysis of data**
 - **Conducting supporting activities**
 - **Working with State and local human services to improve data quality**

Family Self-Sufficiency Research Scholars Network

- 7 grants to Principal Investigators to join a network of scholars
- The Scholars Network will be a collaborative enterprise of scholars who undertake research in family self-sufficiency and stability that is both scientifically rigorous and highly relevant to family self-sufficiency programs and research.
- Cooperative agreements with scholars to :
 - Work independently and collectively to undertake a systematic, multi-disciplinary examination of the current gaps in family self-sufficiency and stability policies, programs and existing research focusing on two areas:
 - Research on the institutional state of the field of State and local human service agencies, CBOs and systems of support for children and families,
 - Contributions of stability and instability within and across various domains and disciplines.
 - Execute research and program evaluation activities in collaboration with human services agencies and CBOs
 - Participate in a multi-disciplinary learning community by collaborating with other members of the Network , Data Center and affiliated scholars

Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC)



Collectively, what will the Consortium do?

- **Maintain, elevate and promote an emphasis on rigor**
 - For example, through Project AWESOME the Consortium will support the activities of the NAWRS Research Academy
- **Supplement state and local research capacity**
- **Stimulate academic interest**
 - Develop a multi-disciplinary conceptual framework
 - Focus on unanswered, but emerging interests
 - Exploit variation across states and localities as an opportunity for research, rather than a constraint
- **Facilitate research partnerships**
- **Provide an institutional mechanism to be nimble and respond rapidly when policy and research issues arise, such as natural experiments**

Timeline

- Consortium is in its formative stages
- Project AWESOME began October 2012
- Scholars Network and Data Center grants will be awarded by Summer 2013
- FSSRC Steering Committee will begin planning October 2013
- Ongoing – Engage stakeholders and seek out opportunities for program and research collaborations
 - We want you to be engaged with us!

Why engage? A local agency perspective...

The Goal: Improved policies and programs through evidence-based decision-making at state and local social service agencies.

→ Increasingly important in current fiscal environment.

- 1. Internal research and evaluation capacity can enhance agency operations with critical and timely insights into policies, programs, and procedures.**
- 2. Fully developing and leveraging high-quality research capacity requires agency commitment, internal resources, and external supports.**
- 3. The Research Consortium can play a valuable role in making this happen!**

1. In-House Research Can Improve Operations

Advantages of internal research capacity include:

- **Easy access to administrative data and to staff and clients (for interviews, surveys, focus groups)—without lengthy agreement and approval processes.**
- **Familiarity with agency programs and with the structure, contents, and “quirks” of agency administrative data.**
- **Ability to be responsive to administrators’ timelines and inform program reporting and operations in real time.**

1. Improve Operations (cont.)

Internal research staff are thus uniquely positioned to:

- Evaluate a wide range of agency actions, from small program and procedural “tweaks” to complex new interventions and pilots.
 - Conduct detailed and timely process evaluations to complement and explain impact findings and support improvements in implementation.
 - Inform the development of new policy proposals and pilot programs through research and analysis re: client experiences, perspectives, and outcomes.
- *Cost-effective way to develop the evidence base agencies need to maximize their impact.*

1. Improve Operations (cont.)

Examples from NYC Human Resources Administration:

- **Random assignment evaluation of an alternative process for establishing child support orders for children on cash assistance.**
- **Quasi-experimental evaluation (propensity score matching) of public- vs. private-sector subsidized jobs programs for cash assistance clients.**
- **Client surveys, client-staff observations, and administrative data analysis to inform transition toward a self-directed service model in SNAP.**
- **Focus groups with clients to understand program outcomes and enhance communications efforts.**

2. Developing and Leveraging Research Capacity

Key conditions include:

- **Buy-in from agency leadership.**
- **Trained research and evaluation staff.**
- **Culture of collaboration between administrators and researchers able to override time constraints, differences in training and perspectives, and competing priorities.**
- **Access to technical assistance and “lessons learned” regarding research methods, strategies, and techniques that can be applied at the agency level.**

Also very helpful: High quality administrative data and archiving!

3. The Research Consortium Can Help

The FSSRC offers an array of mechanisms to:

- **Communicate the value of in-house research and evaluation capacity to agency leaders and administrators.**
- **Provide technical assistance and other resources and supports for rigorous research.**
- **Facilitate information-sharing among state and local agency researchers about research methods and findings.**

→ E.g., Through support of the NAWRS Research Academy...

NAWRS Research Academy

- Focused on enhancing agency capacity to use rigorous research methods—including random assignment—to improve and document program effectiveness.
- Connects federal, state, and local researchers and administrators together with other research and evaluation experts.
- Activities include panels, workshops, and plenary speakers at the annual NAWRS conference, as well as webinars and other virtual events throughout the year.
- A Google Group serves as a forum for discussion and information-sharing—encourage your staff to join!
→ Go to <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/nawrs-research-academy/join> or email me at dinank@hra.nyc.gov.

For More Information

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Thank You!

- Thank you for joining today's Webinar on the Using Research to Inform Practice!
- Please take the time to fill out the **Webinar evaluation** that will pop-up on your screen as the Webinar concludes.



Thank You!

- Please join us for more events in the OFA Regions VI and VIII TANF Data Webinar Series. Information on upcoming events will be available soon!