

# Overcoming Barriers to TANF Participation Learning Collaborative: Synthesis of Activities and Findings

Office of Family Assistance

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# Motivation

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- / Many families may face multiple barriers accessing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and miss out on needed financial and other supports.
- / The historical focus on the work participation rate (WPR) has led to program design choices that may hinder participation.
- / TANF provisions in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 (FRA) underscore the importance of connecting TANF participants with services that lead to positive employment and education outcomes.



# Vision

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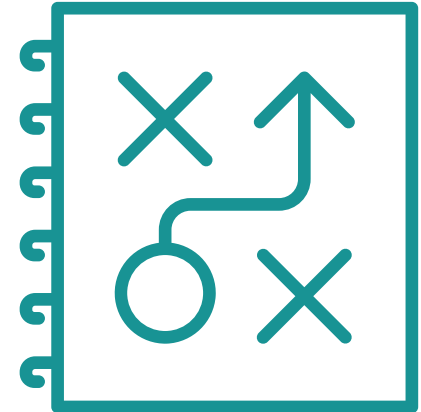
/ Help TANF programs begin to take steps to address a priority barrier to participation in their programs.



# Strategies

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- / Increase understanding of key barriers to TANF program participation and their likely causes.
- / Increase understanding of the degree of control programs have to address key barriers to TANF program participation.
- / Increase awareness of strategies that may help address key barriers and thus improve TANF program participation.



# Collaborators

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- / Of the 13 states that joined the Collaborative, an average of 12 participants attended each session.
- / Participants were TANF program administrators with expertise supporting policy, eligibility, and operations.
- / The states represented both state- and county-administered TANF programs.

## Regions I-III

- / New Hampshire
- / New York\*
- / New Jersey\*
- / Virgin Islands
- / Pennsylvania

## Regions IV-VI

- / Florida
- / Georgia
- / Kansas
- / Mississippi
- / Minnesota\*
- / New Mexico

## Regions VII-X

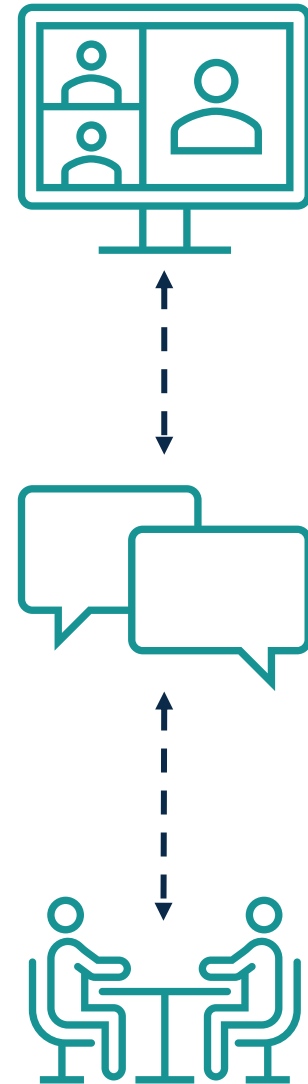
- / Hawaii
- / Wyoming

\* Denotes county-administered TANF programs

# Structure

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- / Participating sites met monthly for six months (March-August 2024).
- / Virtual meetings lasted 60-90 minutes.
- / Sessions featured content presentations, full group and breakout group discussions, peer sharing, and brainstorming using human-centered design activities.



# Topics Covered

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- / Barriers to TANF participation at the system-, administrative-, and individual-levels.
- / The potential impact of various barriers on families and programs.
- / Identifying which barriers program leaders may or may not have control over.
- / Identifying priority barriers to address and planning for change.



# **Session 1: Identifying Barriers to TANF Participation**



# Barriers & Burdens

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/ Learning Collaborative participants shared their perceived barriers most salient to TANF participation for their programs:

- Restrictive state policy, including benefit amounts and onerous work activity verification.
- Staffing challenges, like training and retention.
- Clunky, outdated, and slow-to-change systems.
- Scarcity of employment and training resources.
- Lack of transportation, housing, and childcare supports and resources.
- Mental health, substance use, or other medical issues.
- TANF participant attitudes towards work.

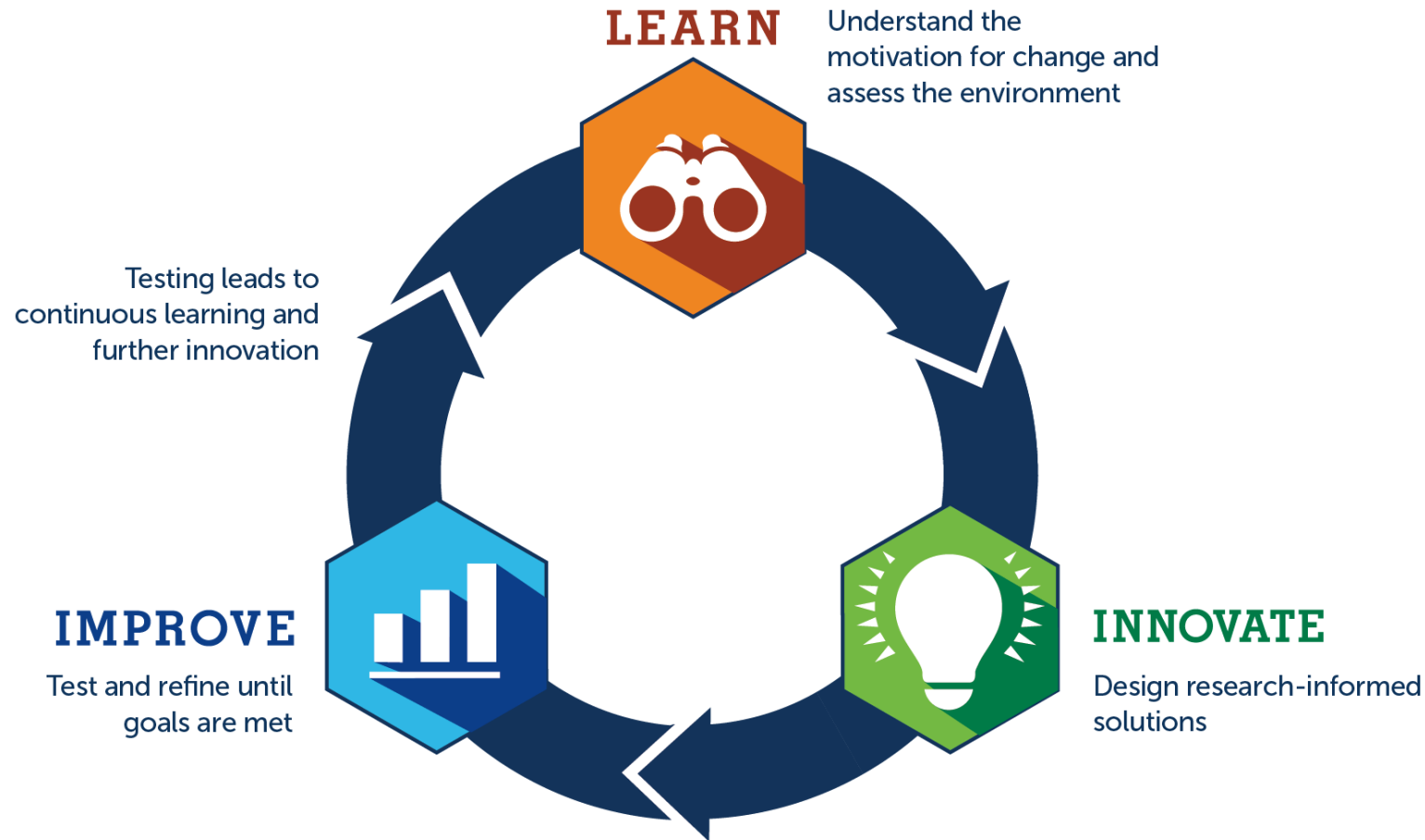
”  
Transportation is a big challenge in this primarily rural state with no metros and few buses.

“

Benefit amount & benefit cliff—  
are the benefits even worth it?

# Session 2: Introducing A Change Framework

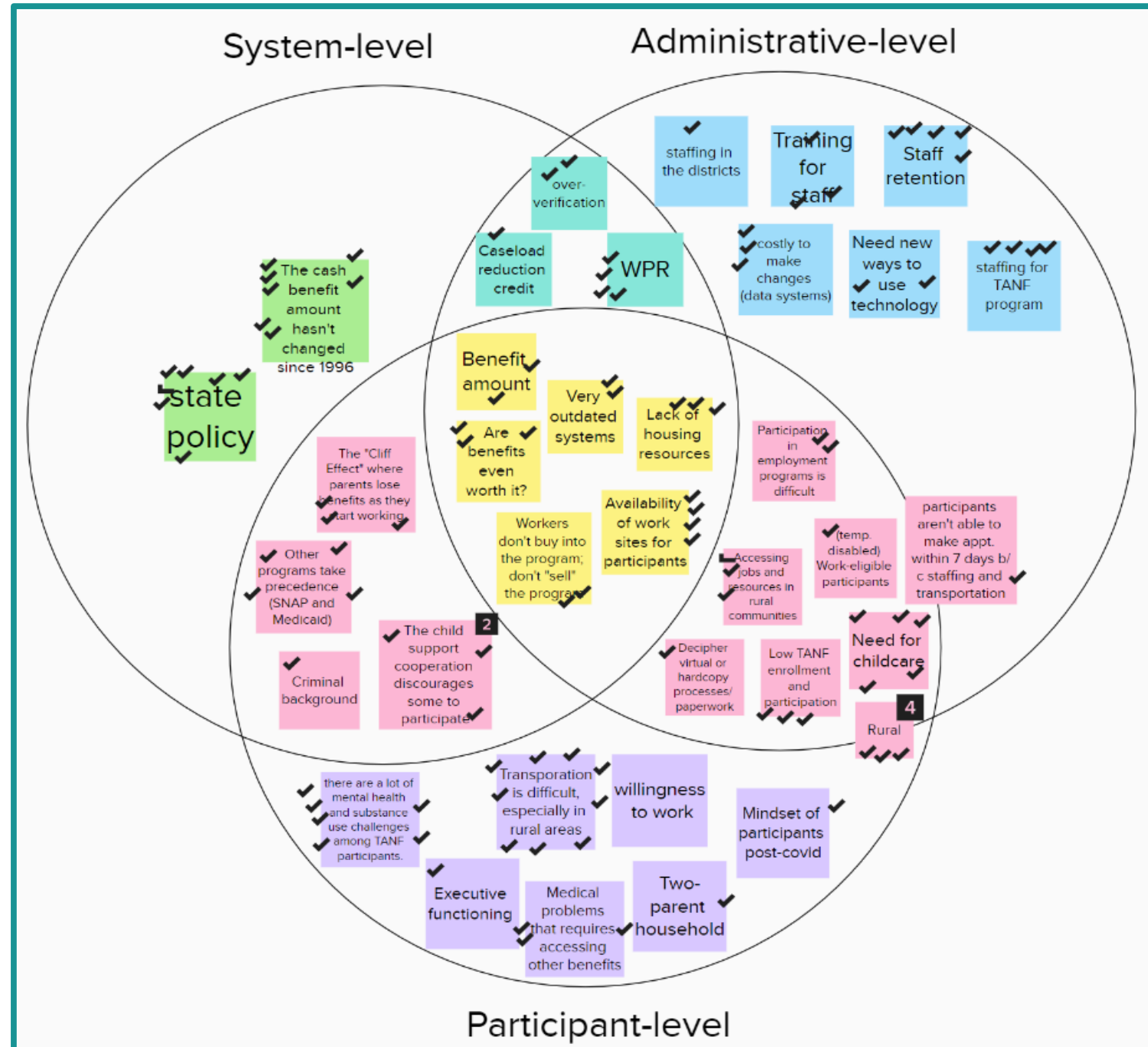
# Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI<sup>2</sup>)



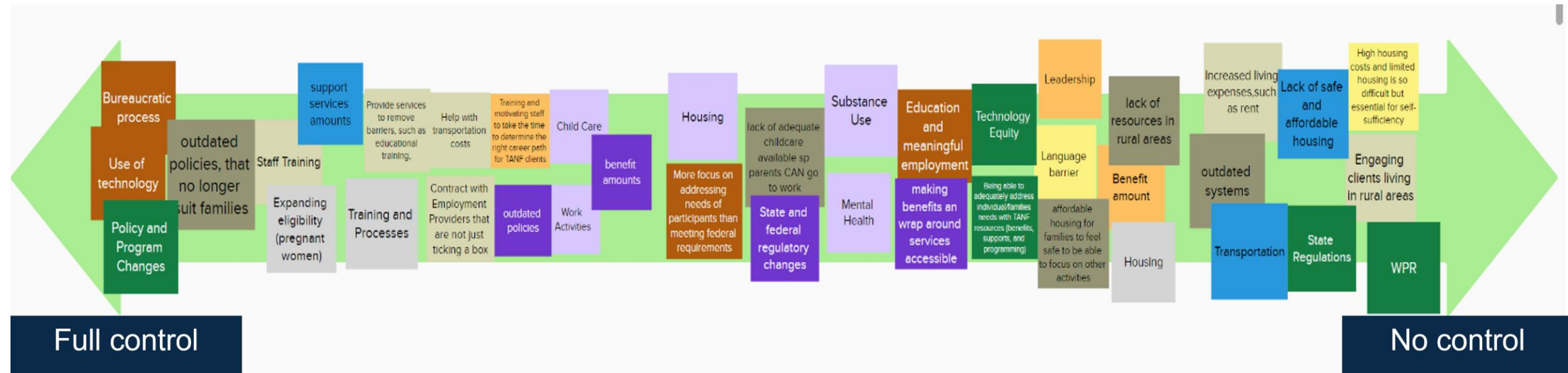
/ A framework and process for evidence driven change

# Zooming Out

- / Barriers identified in Session 1 were grouped into categories to facilitate a “zoomed out” perspective.
- / Participants placed a checkmark on a barrier if they felt it was relevant to their program.
- / States shared similar pain points in what they perceived as barriers to TANF participation with some variation for rural communities.



# Locus of Control



- / Participants often named barriers like housing and challenges serving rural areas as outside of their control.
- / The barriers that states feel they have more control over varied widely but often had to do with updating written policies and procedures and training their staff.

# **Session 3: System-level Barriers to TANF Participation**

# Centering the Family



Dr. LaDonna Pavetti, Senior Fellow at MEF Associates, shared examples, strategies, and insights from the field of leveraging TANF flexibilities to address **system-level barriers** to participation. She shared:

- Some states worry a lot about compliance and WPR, but there are a few examples of states that have been able to leverage their flexibilities to design programs to suit their **unique contexts**.
- Changes in service delivery are about coaching and putting families at the center.
- Families that come to TANF experience crises that are not easy to solve, but supportive services make lives easier and could make participating in TANF programs more accessible.

## Resources

- [Work Verification Plan Guide \(texas.gov\)](https://www.texas.gov)
- [Unlocking-Job-Progressions-Full-Report.pdf \(markle.org\)](https://www.markle.org)
- [Career MAP | dhs \(dc.gov\)](https://www.dhs.gov)

# **Session 4: Administrative-level Barriers to TANF Participation**



# “Stigma and the Social Safety Net”

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To help address barriers to TANF participation at the **administrative-level**, Dr. Jessica Lasky-Fink, Research Director at The People Lab, discussed how the delivery of social safety net programs can perpetuate stigma for recipients of public assistance.

- Jessica highlighted the effects of “welfare stigma” and its three dimensions: societal, internalized, and anticipated stigma.
- The concept of “welfare stigma” is highly racialized and gendered, and includes stereotypes about laziness, ambition, and moral inferiority.
- Such stereotypes correlate with beliefs about the causes of poverty and norms of “deservingness.”



# Changing the mindset

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States engaged in small group discussions to reflect on how written communications sent to TANF participants could be a barrier, and reflected on what they could change to reduce any stigma associated with participation in their TANF programs. Some reflections include:

“The way that you market or sell anything is based on language. Participants should feel as though TANF programming truly wants to help participants succeed. Language that is too formal or stringent might make some programs seem unappealing to participants.”

“You really have to think about changing the mindsets of the workers, too. Any communications that are sent out need to be reviewed to determine if the information is related to the client.”

“This work starts with every county office worker treating everyone the way they want to be treated. Workers can give participants all of the information that they need and make sure they comprehend it because so many times that’s a barrier because a lot of times participants don’t understand what notices mean.”

# **Session 5: Individual-level Barriers to TANF Participation**

# Amplifying family voice to address individual-level barriers

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Page Humphrey, Program Manager at Iowa Health and Human Services, presented Iowa's ongoing efforts to increase family engagement and voice through the Family Development & Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS) Program. She focused on how self-directed, evidence-informed processes build capabilities and improve the economic mobility of FaDSS families.

FaDSS staff routinely ask families for their feedback, promote family choice through their processes, and use a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach that activates motivation and a commitment to change and supports self-regulation.

FaDSS' recent improvement efforts include:

- Revised core components and vision statement.
- Designing a leadership framework and practice.
- Using coaching to strengthen staff skills and support continuous growth and learning.
- Using coaching strategies with families to improve economic mobility and well-being.
- Redesigned the process for continuous improvement.
- Transformed program culture.



# Opportunities for improvement

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States envisioned the kind of experience they would like TANF families to have in their programs. Some insights include:

- / States want participants to experience TANF programs that are accessible, empower families, and address unique family circumstances.
- / Common participant-level barriers include transportation, access to childcare, and access to health care services.
- / States feel that many of their opportunities to reduce participant-level barriers are contingent on systems- and administrative-level changes, such as changes in policy, program culture, and budgets, and improvements in staff training.

## Resources

- Family Voice Compass: [A Resource to Build a Family Voice Council](#)
- Using Family Input to Improve TANF and Child Support Programs: [A Video Series](#)
- OPRE brief: [Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field](#)
- OPRE toolkit: [Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs: Resources for Program Staff, Leaders and Families](#)
- PeerTA Podcast: [Incorporating Lived Experiences into Decision Making](#)

# **Session 6: Roadmap to Addressing Barriers to Participation**

# Planning for what's next

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- / Learning Collaborative participants identified a priority barrier to TANF participation for their program to address.
- / They brainstormed change strategies, their desired outcome(s), help and hinder factors, and concrete next steps to help them take action!

## **Priority barriers:**

- Punitive messaging about the program
- Confusing employment services
- Outdated policies that no longer serve families
- Program participants' language barriers
- Payment limit for employment-related support services
- Transportation challenges, especially for program participants in rural areas



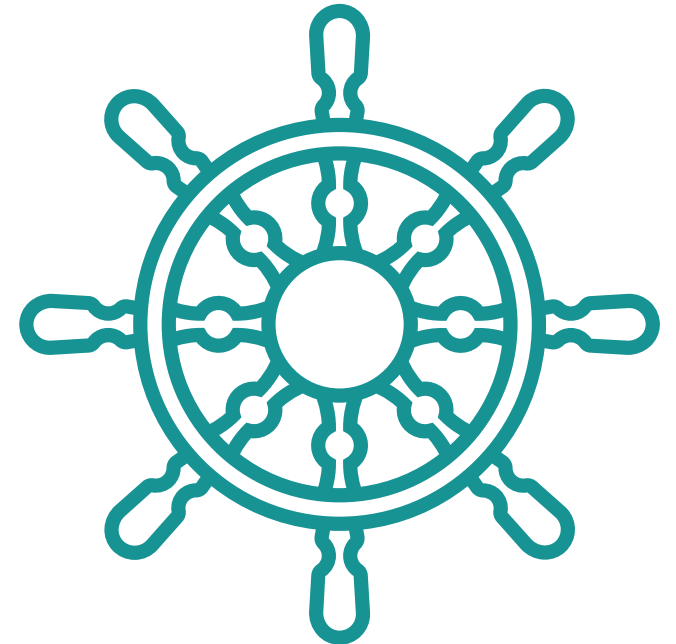
# **What We Learned from States**



# High expectations, little control

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- / Many states expressed tension in both meeting program requirements and serving families how they would prefer.
- / They recognized that their programs are oriented toward meeting WPR.
- / States also expressed that the most challenging barriers to participation outside of their control include:
  - Availability of work for participants.
  - Mental and substance abuse needs.
  - Lack of reliable transportation, especially in rural areas.
  - Hiring and retaining staff.



# Compassion and self-sufficiency

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- / Learning Collaborative participants are deeply aware of the individual-level barriers TANF families experience and demonstrated empathy.
- / Participants recognized how TANF policy and programs' approach to services may further stigmatize receiving TANF benefits and discourage TANF participation.
- / Participants were committed to supporting TANF families in achieving self-sufficiency.



# States were interested in:

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- / Hearing from and engaging even more with their peers about how they address specific barriers to participation.
- / In-depth, ongoing opportunities to plan and strategize collaboratively with peers to address barriers.



# For more information

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- / This Learning Collaborative was part of OFA's STAR TTA contract, managed by BLH, Mathematica, and The Adjacent Possible.
- / For more information, contact [Steve McLaine](#) and [Damon Waters](#).

