

Career Pathways

Employment Strategies Used in TANF's 30-year History

Career pathways approaches connect participants to a sequence of education, training, credentials, supportive services, and employment opportunities that can lead to progressively better jobs and higher earnings. In Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), they represent an evolution beyond rapid job placement ('work first') and stand-alone work activities, emphasizing the skills, education, and job growth opportunities that support long-term economic independence.

WHY TANF TRIED THIS

- TANF programs increasingly recognized that rapid job placement does not always lead to stable work or higher earnings,¹ and sought approaches that help participants build skills and advance beyond an initial job.
- Employers need workers with skills matched to available jobs. Career pathways bring TANF, workforce, education, and employer partners together to prepare participants for occupations with advancement potential.

HOW IT WORKS



ASSESS

Understand participants' goals, skills, experience, and support needs.



MAP

Plan a sequence of education, training, credentials, and employment steps.



SUPPORT

Foster progress through coaching and wraparound services.



ADVANCE

To the extent possible while still engaged in TANF, support participants to advance into better jobs and secure additional credentials.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Career pathways approaches can help TANF and other low-income participants build skills and credentials, and some programs also improve employment and earnings. These approaches typically combine training with supportive services and strong connections to employers.²



Can Improve Key Outcomes

Career pathways approaches can improve earnings, employment, and education outcomes, but results vary across programs.²



Holistic Approaches Make a Difference

Promising programs tend to combine training with other supports.²



Reductions in Benefit Receipt Tend to Be Small

Career pathways approaches produced small average reductions in public benefit receipt, although results varied across programs.²

To learn more about what works to help job seekers with low incomes find and keep employment, see the Administration for Children & Families' Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse: <https://pathwaystowork.acf.gov/>.



EXAMPLES IN ACTION



Health Profession Opportunity Grants

- Provided grants to organizations in multiple states to support TANF participants and other adults with low incomes with education, occupational training, supportive services, and employment assistance for in-demand health care careers.³



Pascua Yaqui Tribe

- Developed a career pathways model that coordinates Tribal TANF, workforce, education, and employer partners to help participants move through education and training into jobs offering opportunities for advancement.⁴

MOVING FORWARD

- **Career pathways approaches can lead to meaningful outcomes for TANF participants.** The strongest approaches combine demand-driven training with coaching, supportive services, and close employer partnerships.
- **Moving forward,** TANF programs can build clearer pathways from assessment to training, credentials, employment, and advancement, while providing ongoing coaching and supports at each step.

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Sources

- ¹ Hamilton, Gayle. Improving employment and earnings for TANF recipients. Urban Institute, 2012. [Link](#)
- ² Welch, Erin, Jillian Stein, Jeffery Jen, and Stephen Nuñez (2024). Evidence Snapshot: Career Pathways, OPRE Report #2024 -148, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [Link](#)
- ³ For more information, see <https://acf.gov/archive/opre/project/health-profession-opportunity-grants-hpog-research-and-evaluation-portfolio>.
- ⁴ For more information, see <https://cteconsortium.org/>.

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<https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/>