



TANF & Child Welfare Partnering for Prevention: IOWA'S SITE JOURNEY

The Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance convened the Families Are Stronger Together Learning Community (FAST-LC) in partnership with the Children's Bureau to support eight States and two Tribes in forming partnerships between Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare programs focused on preventing families' involvement in the child welfare system. The FAST-LC took place between September 2023 and September 2024.

Motivation for Change

After a restructuring in 2023 to align human services and public health into a new unified Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the agency had a unique opportunity to find innovative ways of holistically serving families. Through the FAST-LC, Iowa HHS sought to:

1. Assess and analyze the existing service landscape for families.
2. Define and identify specific opportunities for cross-program collaboration within existing work processes.
3. Develop a plan for future work oriented toward preventing families' involvement with the child welfare system.

Partnership Innovations

Iowa HHS formed a workgroup composed of individuals in various divisions, including TANF and child welfare. The workgroup gathered regularly with the goals of aligning the mission, coordinating current initiatives, identifying overlapping efforts, and seeking new opportunities for collaboration. The workgroup identified a first step of strengthening its understanding of the family experience with HHS services. The workgroup also identified a need to better understand frontline staff experiences and how services are delivered. This effort to hear from families and frontline staff began with the TANF and child welfare programs. Families and frontline staff provided concrete ideas where services and processes could be improved. Frontline staff feedback also affirmed that staff, regardless of where they sit in the organization, share a desire to better serve Iowans.

Prevention Innovations

Iowa's FAST-LC catalogued current prevention initiatives across the department with a goal of reducing duplication and strengthening communication structures, data sharing agreements, and decision-making processes to better serve families and support frontline staff more effectively.

About Iowa

The Iowa Department of Human Services and the Iowa Department of Public Health merged to form one agency, the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (Iowa HHS) in July 2023. Under this alignment, two new divisions were developed: the Division of Community Access and Eligibility and the Division of Family Well-being and Protection.

As of July 2023, the newly restructured Iowa HHS houses prevention, early intervention, child welfare, and comprehensive concrete and economic support under joint leadership.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, Iowa's estimated population in 2020 was 3,190,369 of which 11.0% lived below the poverty level. Iowa HHS currently invests TANF Block Grant funds to support several child welfare programs. In addition, Iowa transfers approximately \$15 million to the Social Services Block Grant to assist individuals or families to become independent, safe, and stable.



The next step for the Iowa team is to meet with division leaders for an internal strategic planning workshop and build consensus around at least one program improvement initiative that directly addresses the feedback gathered from families and staff. The team will then work with others to set up a plan to test out the idea.

Lessons Learned

The Iowa FAST-LC team gained several important lessons, including:

- Shared motivation can be a solid foundation for collaborative change.
- Surveys and listening sessions are helpful methods for incorporating the voices of families and staff into a process improvement initiative, such as Iowa's.
- Families and frontline staff have many great suggestions for how to improve programming, so much so that choosing where to start can be challenging. For example, frontline staff advocated for easing the accessibility of public assistance programs, increasing funding, and centralizing resources to simplify families' experiences with the agency. The Iowa team embraced starting small to build momentum for the larger systems change it desired.
- Mapping and coordinating the various initiatives of a newly merged and complex agency with the goal of strengthening prevention takes time, communication, collaborative relationships, and trust.