



# KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER:

## How TANF Programs Can Provide Concrete Supports to Keep More Children at Home

### HOW CAN CONCRETE SUPPORTS HELP KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER?

Families that receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance are often in a state of crisis. They face immediate material needs—like food, housing, or childcare. These unmet basic needs put families at an increased risk for both neglect and physical abuse investigations in the child welfare system<sup>i</sup>. Addressing unmet material needs among TANF participants, through providing concrete supports, can help prevent child maltreatment and ultimately keep children in their homes.

This tipsheet is intended for state, county, and Tribal TANF leaders who make program-level decisions about the types of resources and services that their programs offer to TANF participants.

### What Are Concrete Supports?

Concrete supports are resources or services that support the material needs of families, such as:

- Quality childcare
- Transportation and gas subsidies, including for car maintenance and insurance
- Work clothes and tools subsidies
- Work-related moving expenses
- School supplies and clothes for children
- Subsidies for family essentials, like diapers
- Emergency housing assistance
- Utilities assistance
- Purchase of propane

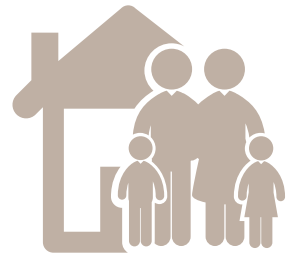
### WHY DO CONCRETE SUPPORTS MATTER FOR TANF PURPOSES?

As outlined in 42 U.S.C § 601(a), TANF and Tribal TANF programs seek to meet four purposes. Providing concrete supports serves the statutory purposes in the following ways.

| Purpose                                                                                                                                                                          | Connection To Concrete Supports                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Purpose 1:</b><br>Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.                                     | Concrete supports are one way to address unmet material needs among TANF participants, which can help prevent child maltreatment and ultimately keep children in their homes <sup>ii,iii</sup> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Purpose 2:</b><br>End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage.                                                | Providing concrete supports can help stabilize families to avoid deeper crises and system involvement <sup>iv</sup> , which can ultimately be more costly for programs <sup>v</sup> . This initial stabilization for TANF participants in crisis can remove key challenges that prevent families from engaging in work or preparing for employment and can reduce long-term program dependence. This initial stabilization can also enable participants to focus on work activities and longer-term economic independence goals, so that future needs are met through employment rather than benefits. |
| <b>Purpose 3:</b><br>Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies.<br><br><b>Purpose 4:</b><br>Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. | By stabilizing families so they can focus on employment, earnings, and economic security, concrete supports may also create conditions for more two-parent families and fewer unmarried or teen pregnancies. Economic security is linked to stronger, more stable relationship between parents <sup>vi,vii</sup> , and reduced incidence of teen pregnancy <sup>viii</sup> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |



## CONNECT WITH TANF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN AT RISK OF SEPARATION



### Create Referral Processes To TANF So That Families Receive Concrete Supports Before Children Are Removed From Their Homes.

TANF and child welfare programs can partner to create a referral process in which child welfare programs can refer families to TANF programs. For families that lack resources to meet basic needs, the resources and services that TANF programs provide, whether cash assistance or other benefits, can help prevent children from being removed from their homes.

### Electronic Referral System To Identify Real-Time Needs

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services developed an electronic referral system between their TANF and child welfare programs so that TANF programs can track data to provide real-time understanding of the concrete needs of families and prevent the families' escalated involvement with the child welfare system<sup>ix</sup>.

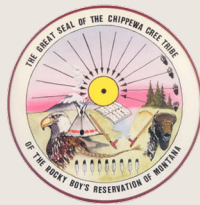


### Develop Data-Sharing Agreements And Systems To Identify Families That Receive Services From Both TANF And Child Welfare Agencies.

TANF and child welfare agencies often serve the same families. TANF and child welfare programs can work together to identify families that may benefit from concrete supports so that children can be cared for in their homes.

### Referral Process For Comprehensive Case Management Services

The Chippewa Cree Tribal TANF and Social Services programs developed a referral process for families identified by Social Services for their family preservation services<sup>x</sup>. These families are referred to the Tribal TANF program to receive comprehensive case management support to address the families' needs and goals.



### Connect Participants Who Are Sanctioned Or At Risk Of Sanction With Wraparound Services.

Families facing TANF sanctions are at risk of deepening economic insecurity<sup>xi</sup>. TANF programs can connect these participants with services that will address barriers to employment and provide concrete supports to prevent child welfare system involvement. If sanctions are implemented, TANF program staff can follow up with participants to understand their barriers and needed supports.

## UNDERSTAND AND MEET FAMILIES' NEEDS

### Utilize Participant-Driven Needs Assessments

TANF programs can conduct participant-driven needs assessments to identify families' unmet basic needs at intake and regular intervals. Participant-driven needs assessments help identify needs and goals that are most urgent and important to the participant<sup>xii</sup>. Checking in often with families about their needs can help program staff identify emerging needs and changing family circumstances.

### Goal Achievement Coaching To Support Participant-Defined Goals

The Larimer County Works Program in Colorado developed a goal achievement coaching model and web-based platform to help participants progress towards their goals through actionable steps<sup>xiii</sup>. Some goals in the platform relate to family stability, such as housing, childcare, and transportation needs. Addressing these goals upfront can help ensure participants can make meaningful progress towards longer-term economic independence goals, such as securing employment.





### Monthly Diaper Subsidy

California's TANF program, CalWORKs, provides families that receive TANF benefits with a monthly \$30 subsidy for the cost of diapers per child under 36 months of age<sup>xiv</sup>.



### Clothing Allowances For Children

The New Mexico Department of Human Services issues clothing allowances to families to assist in preparing children for school<sup>xv</sup>.



### Match Concrete Supports To Families' Unique Needs

Concrete supports, such as quality childcare and transportation services, help meet the material needs of families so that TANF participants can focus on pursuing job opportunities and self-sufficiency. Providing supports that align with families' specific needs can make it more likely the supports remove their particular barriers to work and economic independence.

### Use Non-Recurrent Short-Term (NRST) Benefits To Prevent Crises From Worsening

TANF programs can use NRST benefits to meet the needs of families experiencing acute and immediate crises or a one-time episode of need. Programs can administer NSRT benefits, which are:

1. designed to address a specific crisis or episode of need,
2. not intended to meet recurrent needs, and
3. limited to a duration of no more than four months<sup>xvi</sup>.

Examples include cash assistance, expense programs supporting vehicle repair for employment transportation, emergency housing assistance, and back-to-school allowances to support children's educational needs.

### Emergency Relief For Families Impacted By Wildfires

Using NRST payments, the Hawai'i Department of Human Services' TANF program in Maui, Hawai'i, provided emergency housing assistance to families served by TANF that were impacted by the devastating 2023 wildfires<sup>xvii</sup>.



### Combine Funding Streams With TANF Dollars To Provide More Comprehensive Services

Some states combine TANF funds with other federal funds, such as funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Child Care and Development Fund, or the Social Services Block Grant, or with state funds appropriated by their state legislatures to provide additional services to TANF participants and their families<sup>xviii</sup>. TANF programs may be able to leverage other funding sources for participants by establishing or deepening relationships with key partner programs that administer those funds. The flexibility of the TANF block grant, when paired with other funding streams, can help programs provide a wider range of services. For example, states may leverage WIOA funds to support additional education or training activities (such as college coursework) for TANF participants or provide emergency rental assistance through other state funding sources.

**For more information on this topic, please visit our website!**

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

**This product was developed by BLH Technologies and Mathematica under Contract No. 75ACF122C00029 with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.**

**Janelle Jones and Damon Waters, Federal Project Officers  
Steve McLaine and Jeanette Holdbrook, Project Managers  
Brittany Tabora, Lead Author**

## End Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Anderson, C. and Y. Grewal-Kök. (July 2023). [The Role of TANF in Economic Stability and Family Well-Being and Child Safety](#). Chapin Hall.
- <sup>ii</sup> Yang, M. (2014). [The effect of material hardship on child protective service involvement](#). *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 41:113-125.
- <sup>iii</sup> Akers, L., J. Tippins, S. Hauan, and M. Lynch-Smith. (2023). [Key Findings from an HHS Convening on Advancing Primary Prevention in Human Services \(Issue Brief\)](#). Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>iv</sup> Baumgartner, S., N. Fung, and J. Tippins. (2024). [Case Studies in Supporting Prevention through Program Integration \(Issue Brief\)](#). Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>v</sup> Chapin Hall. (2024). [A Preventable Cost: The Economic Burden of Child Maltreatment and Child Welfare Involvement](#). Chapin Hall.
- <sup>vi</sup> Lewin, A. C. (2005). [The Effect of Economic Stability on Family Stability among Welfare Recipients](#). *Evaluation Review*, 29(3): 223-240.
- <sup>vii</sup> McLanahan, S., and A. N. Beck. (2010). [Parental relationships in fragile families](#). *The Future of children*, 20(2): 17–37.
- <sup>viii</sup> Kearney, M. and P. Levin. (2012). [Why is the Teen Birth Rate in the United States So High and Why Does It Matter?](#) *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 26:141-166.
- <sup>ix</sup> Office of Family Assistance (2024). [Families Are Stronger Together: TANF & Child Welfare Partnering for Prevention Learning Community: Michigan Site Journey](#).
- <sup>x</sup> Office of Family Assistance (2024). [Families Are Stronger Together: TANF & Child Welfare Partnering for Prevention Learning Community: Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy's Reservation Site Journey](#).
- <sup>xi</sup> Wu, C. (2007). [Severity, timing, and duration of welfare sanctions and the economic well-being of TANF families with children](#). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30:26-44.
- <sup>xii</sup> Friend, D., G. Rowe, J. Mabli, L. Shiferaw. (2024). [Using Participant-Driven Assessments in SNAP E&T Programs: Lessons from the SNAP E&T Rapid Cycle Evaluation](#). USDA.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Office of Family Assistance (2018). [Technology Initiatives that Support Employment Outcomes: Colorado: Web-based Technology for Coaching TANF Participants](#).
- <sup>xiv</sup> California Legislative Information (2018). [An act to amend Section 11323.2 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, relating to CalWORKs](#). California Legislative Information.
- <sup>xv</sup> New Mexico Human Services Department (2017). [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) Clothing Allowance Fact Sheet](#). New Mexico Human Services Department.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Office of Family Assistance (2023). [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program Instruction - Supporting families who are victims of Electronic Benefit Transfer \(EBT\) theft due to card skimming, cloning, and similar fraudulent methods](#).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Maui Economic Opportunity, Inc. (2023). [Maui Relief TANF Program](#).
- <sup>xviii</sup> United States Government Accountability Office (2025). [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – HHS Could Facilitate Information Sharing to Improve States' Use of Data on Job Training and Other Services](#).