



URBAN PARTNERSHIPS FOR WELFARE REFORM LEADERSHIP FORUM: *EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT*

Memphis, TN
July 9–11, 2007



NATIONAL ACADEMY FINAL REPORT

I. Introduction

a. Background on Employer Engagement Forum

Since 2003, the Urban Partnerships Initiative (UPI), designed by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), has been improving outcomes for low-income families by facilitating peer exchange among Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) stakeholders in urban centers. Since its beginning, UPI has convened city representatives from across the country to improve collaboration, foster dialogue among urban partners, and share promising practices to help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency.

ACF has long recognized the importance of empowering families to achieve economic independence through the use of innovative and proven methodologies. Sharing ACF's mission to promote self-sufficiency, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) has been supporting the delivery of sustainable family-focused services through the TANF program since 1996.

The TANF program is operated via block grant funding to States, which allows greater flexibility in program design and spending choices. The flexibility of the TANF program has empowered States and communities to support families in achieving positive outcomes. ACF acknowledged these successes, but realized more work was needed to refocus attention on employment goals, participation standards, and personal responsibility for TANF clients.

In response, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) specifically refocused attention on employment services and engaging all customers in appropriate work activities. DRA required the TANF program to return its focus to improving employment outcomes among participants. Rather than dismissing the value of education and training, for instance, DRA makes it clear that long-term economic security is best fostered by associating that training directly with a specific job.

With a renewed sense of universal engagement through DRA, States are challenged to move TANF participants from welfare to stable employment and have them take part in countable work requirements set forth in DRA. Work participation rates count toward the requirement only if the client reaches 30 hours per week in a countable activity. With recalibration of the caseload reduction credit using FY2005 as the base year, engaging clients has never been more important for State TANF programs. While clients remaining on TANF caseloads continue to need support services to address barriers to employment and reaching self-sufficiency, DRA recognizes there are appropriate work assignments for all TANF clients, and requires States and communities to work with local employers, community resources, and clients themselves to identify and access these opportunities.

Atlanta
Baltimore
Boston
Chicago
Cleveland
Dallas/Fort Worth
Denver
Detroit
Houston
Kansas City
Los Angeles
Memphis
Minneapolis
Newark
New Orleans
New York
Oakland
Omaha
Philadelphia
Phoenix
Pittsburgh
Portland
St. Louis
San Antonio
San Diego
Seattle

Prior to DRA, there was a gap in engaging employers to help promote work among the TANF population. Partnering with employers and supporting workers in the workplace is an increasingly important strategy for urban partners as they work to help TANF participants access and maintain stable employment. TANF agencies can collaborate with employers to increase stable employment among TANF participants. Partnering with employers, however, does not focus only on achieving employment for TANF recipients, but also on providing them with the necessary support while on the job.

b. Memphis Employer Engagement Forum

On July 9–11, 2007, in Memphis, Tennessee, UPI brought together employers and key leadership from 26 cities with the goal of continuing the exchange of innovative strategies and solutions for moving people from welfare to work, and identifying ways to enhance collaboration among TANF stakeholders, employers, and other community resources. During the event, the partners participated in panels, roundtable sessions, and other in-depth discussions about strategies for achieving universal engagement, improving work attachment, promoting job retention, and increasing wage advancement.

c. Updates on Federal Agency Initiatives and Efforts to Engage Employers

At the forum, Federal representatives presented on current initiatives to engage employers and provide effective job training, placement, and retention services to their respective target populations. Josephine Bias Robinson of the Office of Community Services (OCS) described to city representatives how this Federal agency has implemented a \$6 billion employment training and employer outreach program through a mix of discretionary funds and the Community Development Block Grant Program. Part of OCS's funding goes to the Urban and Rural Community Economic Development and Job Opportunities for Low-income Individuals programs. In partnerships with these Federal programs, Community Development Corporations (CDC)—a broad term for nonprofit organizations providing community support—are creating opportunities for job placement and training. CDC activities include connecting TANF clients to local employers, promoting micro-enterprise efforts to create new business owners, and leveraging State and Federal support for local welfare-to-work efforts. CDCs are required to work with State TANF offices, and jobs created through this program must have long-term opportunities.

Coastal Enterprises, a CDC in Maine, recently created a liaison with a major national retailer to better understand the company's employment requirements and identify TANF clients who might meet these needs. Coastal Enterprises found that establishing these relationships and facilitating this type of knowledge exchange improves job retention and satisfaction among new employees.

Eric Blanchette, program specialist from the ACF Region IV office in Atlanta, presented an overview of how Federal systems are supporting employment development in the Southeast. Working in both rural and urban areas, Region IV has implemented 51 projects targeted at low-income families that address service-focused employment preparation, employment-based experiences, skill development, and income and work supports. Some of these programs, like Georgia GoodWorks!, are providing innovative and effective pre-employment services such as job search workshops, skill assessments, and coordination of unsubsidized employment to provide clients with job experiences. Many of these projects are implementing strategies for targeting hard-to-reach populations and improving employability for those with special needs (e.g., mental health or substance abuse issues). Region IV has made great strides

in helping working families achieve self-sufficiency through post-employment assistance, such as wage supplementation, and extending transition periods for individuals exiting Federal assistance programs.

ACF Region IV comprises eight southeastern States: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. As part of its mission to promote the economic well-being of families, individuals, and communities, ACF Region IV offices manage initiatives that support child care programs such as Head Start, perform outreach to minority and refugee populations, encourage responsible fatherhood, and increase services to at-risk youth and people with disabilities.

City representatives also discussed several workforce development activities that are supported through the Federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (ETA). A significant portion of WIA and ETA funding is provided to organizations that provide job training and placement assistance to clients with special needs such as dislocated workers, migrants, immigrants, and people with disabilities. WIA also allocates a portion of grant monies to programs, such as YouthBuild, which support low-income young people in acquiring leadership and job skills.

Representatives of the Business Relations Group (BRG), part of ETA, spoke about creating partnerships within the workforce system. BRG supports collaboration among job seekers, employers, industry leaders, community-based organizations, and the public workforce system to determine the challenges to, needs of, and opportunities for partnership within each sector. By promoting dialogue among these partners, and funding innovative approaches to workforce issues, BRG encourages the sharing of best practices for keeping employees engaged and trained. BRG also partners with community colleges to design courses that respond to education and job training needs. BRG helps large national companies navigate the often complex Federal welfare-to-work systems to better serve the workforce needs of these businesses. As part of a broader poverty alleviation approach, BRG is partnering with TANF and other agencies to reevaluate their workforce system to include a broader sense of economic development.

II. City Spotlight

Representatives of participating cities discussed some of the barriers they faced in engaging employers and shared strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Sites identified some of the major challenges they face to placing TANF clients in long-term employment. Sites noted a strong negative perception among employers about the reliability and work ethic of TANF clients, often including a belief that TANF hires bring few transferable skills to the new job. For clients with past convictions, job placement becomes even more of a challenge. Sites reported that persuading employers to hire these individuals is incredibly difficult. Cities also identified inadequate transportation as a significant barrier to clients finding and keeping a new job. Part of this challenge includes helping clients with very little driving experience obtain their driver's license. Clients with limited access to transportation are especially restricted when considering larger employers who often can only be reached by car. Forum participants recognized the potential benefits of placing clients in union positions (e.g., job security, high wages), although they admitted that until now, little progress has been made toward accomplishing this objective. Part of the challenge in creating jobs in both union and non-union positions

has been assessing and responding to the exact needs of employers and matching these to those of TANF clients. Site representatives added that this issue becomes increasingly problematic when employers themselves are unsure about the type of employees and/or skills they require.

Drawing on their experiences working on job placement and retention, forum participants shared several effective and replicable strategies beneficial for employers and TANF clients during pre- and post-employment. For many sites, creating partnerships with employers was paramount in creating successful job placements. Establishing a working and trusting relationship with employers requires persistence and a well planned outreach strategy. Sites mentioned holding job fairs, working directly with employers' human resources departments, sending e-mails and mailings highlighting free workforce benefits, and conducting face-to-face visits with businesses as effective approaches for conducting employer outreach. Establishing close relationships with employers allowed TANF agencies to identify the types of job skills needed, improve their screening process, and identify clients who matched these requirements. Successful sites also reported employer follow-up as helpful for maintaining and enhancing the employer-TANF agency relationship and enabling future referrals.

Facilitating job placement through solid employer relations was not the only outreach strategy sites reported using; representatives also pointed out the usefulness of building partnerships with local government agencies and community-based organizations. By coordinating with agencies such as Habitat for Humanity, YMCA, chambers of commerce, and city housing authorities, a number of TANF offices established opportunities for their clients to receive valuable work experience through job training and subsidized or unsubsidized employment. Memphis reported that employing TANF clients in temporary positions at State agencies, rather than hiring through a temp agency, allowed some TANF clients to qualify for permanent jobs with the government. Placing clients with non-union employers in the construction field was one strategy sites used to establish a gateway to union jobs.

To respond to the challenges many clients face in securing transportation to and from employment, sites have launched strategies that include both outreach and skills training components. Representatives from Minneapolis described how they have partnered with large employers to secure public transportation for employees, and partnered with nonprofit organizations to provide low-income workers with car loans and automotive repair training.

III. An Innovative Partnership – The FedEx Story

One of the outstanding partnerships highlighted during the Employer Engagement Forum was the long-term working relationship between the Memphis TANF program and FedEx, one of the largest employers in the area. Over the past decade, FedEx has hired more than 2,000 TANF clients in the Memphis area (Shelby County). The positions open to TANF clients are high-wage, part-time jobs with a starting salary around \$11.80. After 90 days, medical benefits are offered at a premium of less than \$20 per month. In addition to offering medical benefits and a competitive salary, FedEx also recognizes the importance of employee training and retention. Since April 1997, FedEx and Shelby County have partnered to implement a five-step process to select, train, and hire former welfare recipients, which includes applicant assessment and job-specific training. Other support services offered by FedEx to TANF clients include

tuition reimbursement, transportation, and loans for personal vehicles. As a result, retention remains high and participants have the opportunity to be promoted to supervisory positions.

IV. Engaging the Workforce Investment System

a. Utilizing Workforce Intermediaries

Workforce intermediaries are nonprofits and other organizations that play a vital role in the welfare-to-work process by connecting employer demand and worker interest, offering multiple funding streams, and providing partners such as community colleges and community-based organizations. At the forum, participants had the opportunity to explore ways that TANF agencies can utilize workforce intermediaries to connect with and leverage the Federal, State, local, and community partners necessary to ensure successful individual and caseload outcomes.

b. Partnering with the Workforce Investment System

Both employers and TANF agencies can leverage the offerings of the workforce investment system and use it as a connection point to partnerships and networks. The publicly funded workforce investment system can be a valuable asset to both TANF agencies and employers. There are more than 3,200 One-Stop Career Centers nationwide, making the system a vast network of information and resources to help TANF stakeholders develop recipients into self-sufficient workers. TANF agencies and employers can work with business service teams at One-Stop Career Centers to post job openings, hold job fairs, train workers, and arrange for screening and referral of candidates, among many other customized workforce solutions. The workforce system can also help TANF agencies and employers learn more about tax credits; connect to customized, funded training programs and supportive services; accommodate workers with disabilities and other special needs; and provide access to career and asset-building strategies and programs.

City representatives had considerable feedback about challenges associated with developing and sustaining relationships with employers and One-Stop Career Centers. Many sites felt that in the environment of One-Stop Career Centers, it was difficult to effectively utilize resources from both TANF and WIA. Cities reported difficulty blending TANF and WIA services, as each uses different funding regulations and performance measures. Another challenge discussed by forum participants was the low rates of client response to phone calls or outreach efforts. Nonrespondents are often sanctioned, which further lowers participation rates. Overall, the workforce intermediary system has very high rates of sanctioned participants. In addition, workforce intermediaries face a number of other barriers including low access to social service supports, a lack of readiness to engage in employment, no case management system, and discrimination from employers who are hesitant to accept clients without high school diplomas or a GED.

From their discussions about the challenges and successes they experienced partnering with workforce intermediaries, participants generated a list of technical assistance needs related to this topic. Building on the peer learning at the UPI forum, cities wanted similar opportunities in the future to continue sharing welfare-to-work ideas and solutions. Participants also cited the importance of tools to alleviate some of the confusion associated with the different systems used by TANF and WIA.

Cities expressed a need for practical guidance on conducting welfare-to-work activities such as job fairs.

Site representatives identified several strategies that could help them contribute to successful workforce intermediary partnerships. Cities expressed the need for more integrated One-Stop Career Centers that comprehensively support client employment searches. Additional supports suggested by forum participants included holding job training workshops and GED classes on-site, providing clients with business attire assistance, and facilitating face-to-face interaction with employers and clients by hosting Employer of the Month and other events. Participants also discussed the value of providing One-Stop Career Center staff with cross-cultural training and using the skills of employees with social service backgrounds to conduct client assessments.

Co-location is another strategy that sites reported using to expand and enhance partnerships and collaboration between TANF and WIA staff. Both Portland and San Diego have combined services into one building, though San Diego uses different receptionists for TANF and WIA.

Within the context of workforce intermediaries, finding effective strategies for engaging high-barrier populations (e.g., people with disabilities, returning military, individuals with mental health challenges, and recently sanctioned clients) can be incredibly difficult for TANF agencies. One approach that cities have found useful is to partner with local intermediaries in reaching out to clients and providing them with valuable services such as job training and pre-employment assessments. In Kansas City, TANF offices are partnering with City Hall personnel to offer clients Community Work Experience Program (CWEP) opportunities, employment mentoring, and job skills classes. Catholic Charities in Cleveland is partnering with TANF agencies to conduct mental health and substance abuse assessments of clients, and Kansas City is engaging local community organizations to assist with job placement.

Participants reiterated the need for tools and assistance for grasping the different languages and systems used by TANF and WIA. After discussing the different approaches that representatives could use to strengthen service delivery at One-Stop Career Centers, participants agreed it would be useful to design a replicable “model office” plan to synthesize the ideas shared at the forum. By integrating the strategies and suggestions outlined during the roundtable sessions into the programmatic work at their home sites, participants hoped to achieve stronger links between WIA and TANF, promote greater self-sufficiency among clients, better engage high-barrier populations, and raise their capacity to create more efficient case management systems.

V. Taking the First Steps to Engage Employers

a. Outreach Strategies

During discussions about the challenges and strategies associated with engaging employers and other key community stakeholders, a number of promising practices emerged for researching local employers and business organizations, conducting outreach to initiate relationships, and developing strategies to forge and maintain these connections.

Providing tax credits to employers, a well-known benefit of hiring TANF clients, received mixed responses from forum participants. Some sites claimed that employers simply did not care about tax credits. However, Pittsburgh reported using an effective outreach strategy that involved hiring a “tax man” to educate employers about the tax credit system and assist with filling out application forms.

In reaching out to potential employers, sites reported that certain business sectors were more receptive to hiring TANF clients than others. Within the health care field, cities discussed positive outcomes they observed, including high demand for clients to work in assisted living centers and nursing homes. New York reported successfully partnering with the Southern Nursing Home Association to provide clients with caregiving certification scholarships. However, high access to positions in the health care industry was not universal. Cleveland commented on its struggle to place clients in jobs within the health care field. Other sectors that are actively partnering with TANF agencies to employ clients include the construction, banking, and biotechnology industries. New Orleans added that placing clients in construction jobs is problematic, as this industry is not currently stable in their city.

One community governance model, the Kansas City Local Investment Commission (LINC), outlined an innovative approach it is using to build partnerships within the context of welfare-to-work. As explained by Terry Ward, a LINC committee co-chair, this program seeks to link job training and welfare to build self-sufficiency for the working poor. LINC leverages the skills of local institutions and individuals and connects them to State agencies to create more informed, joint decisions about how funds are spent in neighborhoods. LINC also works on major policy issues like welfare-to-work on a more national level. In its approach to linking community assets, LINC used a job training program as part of its outreach strategy to local employers.

b. Maximizing Subsidized, Unpaid, Temporary, and CWEP Work Experiences

Many TANF recipients face numerous barriers to long-term employment, including a lack of marketable job skills and little formal education or certifications. Transitional work ensures that individuals with barriers to employment are prepared through experiential learning to successfully join the workforce. This is a workforce strategy designed to overcome employment obstacles by using time-limited, wage-paying jobs and combining real work, skill development, and supportive services to transition participants successfully into the labor market. Over the course of this roundtable session, participants discussed the challenges and strategies for bridging temporary and permanent work and the role that community partners play in expanding and leveraging support for temporary work opportunities.

In handling work opportunities that were unpaid, many TANF agencies admitted it was challenging to convince clients that this type of employment was meaningful and motivate them to remain with the program. In response to this situation, some cities have tied a number of incentives to participation in CWEP. Benefits for participation include gift certificates and referral bonuses for clients who recommend the program to others. Other cities have added new aspects to CWEP positions to increase retention, such as evaluations of worker performance in subsidized and unpaid positions.

Monitoring of vendor contract compliance and CWEP timekeeping are issues sites identified as problematic in trying to maximize the effectiveness of unpaid work experience. In addressing this issue, sites reported using monitoring units that review vendors and go to the workplace to verify

contract compliance, and having small businesses with CWEP agreements agree to monitor CWEP time themselves.

To maximize these types of work experience opportunities, sites identified various areas of technical assistance they felt would provide concrete benefits. City representatives expressed an interest in determining how best to establish partnerships to address vocational rehabilitation, teen parents, and domestic violence. In response to a request for examples of collaboration between TANF offices and domestic violence prevention programs, representatives from Memphis introduced the SMILES program as a strong model for this kind of partnership. Sites were interested in strengthening collaboration between child protective services and TANF.

c. Making Job Placement Happen

Moving from subsidized work activities to full employment poses many challenges for recipients and TANF agencies alike. Over the course of this roundtable, participants discussed challenges and strategies for providing the supports that are critical for ensuring that TANF recipient job placement happens and is successful.

Site representatives reported facing various kinds of challenges and barriers in their attempts to achieve full employment for their clients. The shift in focus from client “eligibility” to “employability” and the change in staff responsibilities brought about by DRA has led to a great need for training and capacity building among TANF office personnel. Site representatives also stated that they need staff who are dedicated to job placement and able to respond to the challenges of working with people from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. Forum participants stressed the difficulty of securing employment for clients with low literacy and little educational background. Echoing this sentiment, New Orleans added that low-skilled clients in the area are especially at risk due to the instability of manual labor that will eventually disappear post-recovery. Shortages of childcare, housing, and transportation, as well as handling clients with special needs, were also mentioned as serious challenges to making job placement happen.

During the roundtable, participants raised specific technical assistance needs they had in addressing the challenges to making job placement happen. City representatives wanted more information concerning intense forms of case management tools with proven records for increasing successful job placement rates. Participants also requested additional assistance for developing strategies to manage performance-based contracts.

While the challenges of finding full employment for clients are daunting, site representatives also identified a number of promising practices for job placement that have emerged in their areas. As part of a strategy for moving from job training to full-time placement, Minneapolis has partnered with contractors to set aside funding for supportive work, where participants receive a salary but also learn skills that are transferable to full-time employment.

Sites have found that community partnerships and “bridge programs” are also effective for moving clients into full-time employment. Oakland has started two positions in the biotech sector in conjunction with training courses offered at local community colleges. These colleges offer a blended bridge

curriculum by teaching remedial courses based on the skills and knowledge used in the local biotech industry. In other outreach efforts to local partners, cities have discovered that rather than focusing on one specific employer, reaching out to a consortium of employers is a more effective means to identify their needs and screening requirements. Additionally, participants addressed the importance of building relationships with community leaders to draw attention to the unique challenges and benefits of the TANF program.

Strategies for asset building were highlighted as Portland described a program that allows certain clients who have entered full-time employment access to an account that provides funding for home ownership. Representatives from Portland explained how at the State level, Oregon has established a safety net in the form of cash stipends, which are available to clients once they become ineligible for TANF benefits.

According to forum participants, one program that has been effectively moving TANF recipients toward self-sufficiency is the Employment, Advancement and Retention Network, known as EARN. This system gives clients 12 months of employment support by providing assessments of their work history and skills, interviewing techniques and job search training, and assistance establishing long-term work goals. Dallas also commented that EARN offers online mentoring for clients when additional support is needed.

VI. Beyond Job Placements

a. Job Retention

Welfare caseloads have dropped dramatically in the past decade, with the majority of leavers exiting TANF for employment. Success on these measures (caseload decline and initial job placement) has come as a result of the creativity and hard work of public TANF agencies, private workforce development organizations, and employers. These stakeholders also share a commitment to helping TANF recipients maintain their employment, advance on the job, and achieve economic self-sufficiency. At this roundtable, participants discussed strategies that cities can use to accomplish this goal.

More than one site addressed the importance of establishing and nurturing close relationships with TANF clients. According to city representatives, this type of contact should be individualized and highly supportive and can take the form of regular site visits, or consistently communicating with clients.

Working in close contact with employers and supporting work-based programs that focus on retention and attachment were also important strategies outlined by forum participants. One approach for offering retention services at the worksite is through subsidized employment. As described by the representatives from Baltimore, this agreement involves paying the TANF client's salary for the first 4 months with an understanding that the employer is required to retain that person after this period is over. Other programs discussed during the forum targeted clients with special needs. These included substance abuse prevention programs and training supervisors at the workplace to better support TANF clients. By utilizing a case management strategy that emphasized pre-assessments, thereby determining early on potential barriers and triggers, the New York representatives reported a rise in retention rates from 40 percent to 75 percent.

In dealing with populations with high barriers, representatives pointed to ex-offenders as one of the most challenging groups to employ. TANF recipients with criminal backgrounds are often a significant percentage of an agency's total client population. In Baltimore, one-third of all female TANF recipients have criminal backgrounds. With such a high number of ex-offenders, the need for technical assistance on facilitating their employment is in great demand.

One concern that was echoed by a number of sites was how best to engage Workforce Investment Boards. In general, the cities found that these organizations' effectiveness is hampered by a lack of communication and cooperation between the Workforce Investment Board offices and by their performance measures, which tend not to serve local populations accurately.

Representatives from Philadelphia spoke about the close connection between job retention and transportation. To ensure that clients are able to go to and from work, Philadelphia is providing interest-free car loans, which are especially beneficial to clients who are employed in locations not served by public transportation.

b. Advanced Training and Education

Apprenticeship is a combination of on-the-job training and related instruction in which workers learn the practical and theoretical aspects of a highly skilled occupation. Apprenticeship programs can be sponsored by individual employers, joint employer and labor groups, and/or employer associations. Apprenticeships and other advanced on-the-job training opportunities can improve a TANF recipient's chances of successful placement and retention by giving real-life work experience that can readily translate into full wage occupations.

During the roundtable discussion devoted to this topic, UPI cities indicated that among the major challenges to implementing successful apprenticeship programs was addressing the needs of individuals who lacked even the most basic transferable job skills, and training them to ensure that they are "work-ready" when they begin a new training program. Forum participants pointed to accurate and early assessment of job skills as being among the most crucial first steps in preparing clients to be work-ready. Another challenge cited by city representatives was that as clients entered the workforce, even as trainees, they required additional assistance to help make the transition out of welfare benefits. Sites also expressed concerns over how to monitor Workforce Participation Rates (WPR), citing the fact that distance learning for Workforce Participation Rates was incredibly challenging due to a lack of supervision.

With a great need for basic job training prior to employment, TANF agencies are using diverse strategies to help meet this demand. One of the most frequently cited strategies for providing training to TANF clients was utilizing local partnerships with organizations such as community colleges, nonprofits and community-based groups, and working directly with union representatives. These organizations provide TANF offices with services such as client skill assessments, connections with local employers, and job training. Working with employers who provided subsidized work site training also helped TANF clients make the successful transition from trainees to full-time employees. Forum participants also stressed the importance of maintaining close communication with clients and their supervisors.

A number of examples illustrated successful collaborations between TANF offices and local organizations. The Memphis TANF office described how it is working with the organization SeedCo to improve worker retention by developing relationships with employers to hire clients for positions that pay more than minimum wage. Representatives from Los Angeles explained that although TANF offices needed to better market union jobs to their clients, they were having success introducing and following through on these opportunities by appointing liaisons to work directly with union personnel.

c. Working with Multi-Barrier Populations

Certain personal circumstances, including low education and work skills, substance abuse, and mental illness, as well as structural issues such as unreliable transportation and a lack of affordable quality childcare, act as barriers to employment. As a result, although millions of TANF recipients have exited welfare and entered the workforce, there is a substantial degree of employment instability among this population and many return to the rolls. Others have difficulty even making the initial transition from welfare to work. During the forum, participants discussed ways to help TANF recipients identify and resolve employment barriers before they are placed into jobs, as well as after they have begun working.

One of the major barriers to employment cited by TANF agencies is providing support and services to clients with disabilities. In response to this challenge, New York is working with the Wellness, Comprehensive Assessment, Rehabilitation and Employment (WeCARE) program. It is designed to assist individuals who, due to clinical conditions, have functional limitations to employment. WeCARE provides assessment, rehabilitation, and employment services to TANF clients to help them attain self-sufficiency and higher quality of life. Outreach through WeCARE also has been highly effective, drawing 25 percent of new clients for New York TANF offices.

For many TANF agents, convincing employers to offer jobs to clients with disabilities is only part of the challenge. In many cases, they must also work to change the mindset of individuals who are resistant to entering the workforce due to having received welfare benefits for such a long period of time. When confronted with this frame of mind, many cities respond by sanctioning these clients. While considered extreme by some, many TANF agents feel that sanctioning enables them to focus on the subset of their caseloads who they feel really want the help and whose families they can actually support to self-sufficiency.

In working with clients with recurrent substance abuse problems, Newark indicated its performance-based contractors found some success helping people with disabilities get to work, but that they also struggled to get other customers engaged in core (countable) work activities. They suggested that those customers who the agency is forced to send out to work do the entire TANF community a disservice, as employers get annoyed with a subgroup and form a negative opinion of the entire TANF population.

VII. From the Employer's Perspective

The UPI forum also gave employers an opportunity to discuss job placement and retention. A panel of employers met with city representatives to answer questions about what is working well for their

companies in moving individuals from welfare to work and to discuss strategies for engaging other employers.

All employers, regardless of their company's size, agreed that the importance of company culture should not be overlooked. The business representatives confirmed the value of training programs to assist new employees in embracing the culture, attitudes, and work style of their new company. As part of its orientation training, one major engineering company requires all new associates to attend sessions at which the culture and ramifications of poverty are discussed. The company hires a large number of TANF clients and understands that in order for these individuals to succeed, all employees need to be sensitive to the challenges poverty presents.

For conducting outreach to prospective employers, company representatives and TANF agencies agreed that the best strategy is not necessarily to approach the most senior individual, but rather to target those people who actually perform hiring duties. For most employers, these individuals are in the human resources department. Company representatives at the forum also stressed that a one-size-fits-all approach is not effective for partnering with prospective employers. Their experience shows it is vital to perform due diligence to understand how the corporate culture of each potential partner operates and determine the best individual to target within the organization.

Additionally, these corporations reported success with other welfare-to-work activities, including subsidized training, assisting employees with transportation needs, and having TANF caseworkers on site. From the employer's perspective, incorporating these types of programs have assisted greatly in creating a more productive and motivated workforce.

VIII. Next Steps and Conclusion – Keeping the Momentum Going

For the city representatives, improving job placement services for their low-income residents is a critical, although extremely challenging, endeavor. Helping low-income individuals become job-ready and ensuring employment retention often require TANF offices to use a wide range of strategies from providing in-depth screening of clients based on the needs expressed by local employers to engaging local community-based organizations to identify potential employment opportunities.

UPI participants have made significant progress in acquiring new tools and ideas to support their work in serving TANF families as they advance toward self-sufficiency. Next steps from the meeting included updating the Urban Partnerships Community of Practice (CoP) with relevant information gathered and developed from the forum, and planning additional technical assistance interventions.