



## Promoting Strong Families through TANF

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program plays a key role in promoting strength and stability for families experiencing poverty. By helping families to meet their basic needs, obtain employment, and nurture healthy family relationships, TANF programs can foster long-term family wellbeing and economic independence. States have significant flexibility to use TANF funds to address unique family needs and accomplish any of the four purposes of TANF, including:

1. Assisting families so children can be cared for in their own homes or the homes of relatives;
2. Reducing the dependency of parents in need by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
3. Preventing pregnancies among unmarried persons; and
4. Encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.<sup>1</sup>

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer-Based Training and Technical Assistance (PeerTA) contract, this is one part of a series of briefs that highlight innovative and strategic ways that states are leveraging TANF funds to strengthen families and communities by building capacity for self-sufficiency and economic independence. Other parts of this brief include spotlights on healthy relationship initiatives, child protective services prevention, kinship navigator programs, and connections between TANF & WIC. For additional information on the TANF program and its legislative framework, please refer to the Office of Family Assistance's TANF Laws and Regulations page.

## Stress Management Programs for Mothers and Caregivers

The Mental health Outreach for MotherS (MOMS) Partnership aims to meet the mental health needs of mothers and primary caregivers with low incomes. The partnership is designed to reduce depressive symptoms among women who are over-burdened and under-resourced to improve health and economic outcomes.<sup>2</sup> MOMS Partnerships offer courses in community locations and are facilitated by a mental health clinician and a Community Mental Health Ambassador (CMHA), who is a local parent or caregiver with lived expertise.<sup>3</sup> Addressing the mental health needs of mothers and caregivers supports the first statutory purpose of TANF - to provide assistance to families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives - and can have lasting positive impacts on families and children.

After initial pilots in Connecticut, other states have adopted the MOMS Partnership to support TANF statutory purpose 1 by supporting the mental health needs of mothers so children can be cared for in their own homes.<sup>4</sup> Addressing maternal mental health is also an important factor in longer-term child outcomes. Vermont and the District of Columbia both offer MOMS Partnership courses to eligible TANF recipients.<sup>5</sup>

### Vermont's MOMS Partnership

Run by Vermont's Department for Children and Families (DCF), Economic Services Division (ESD), and the Howard Center in Burlington, VT MOMS serves mothers and female caregivers experiencing emotional challenges. It was designed to promote social and economic independence for families in Vermont by improving the mental health and wellbeing of mothers and female caregivers and has been running since 2020.<sup>6</sup>

The partnership serves women who are at least 18 years old, pregnant or the primary caregiver of a child under 18, and either currently receiving Reach Up (Vermont's TANF Program) or have received Reach Up within the last two years. Participants receive referrals from their Reach Up case managers to sign up for the partnership.<sup>7</sup>

The course facilitated by VT MOMS introduces participants to mental health supports tailored to the needs of mothers, previously a gap in Vermont's mental health services landscape.<sup>8</sup> VT MOMS staff also provide referrals to meet participants' needs in other areas (e.g., benefits programs, child care, healthcare, legal assistance, substance use treatment, and domestic violence services).<sup>9</sup>

An evaluation of the initial VT MOMS partnership was conducted from February 2020 to June 2021. Results from the evaluation include:

- Participants frequently used skills or strategies from the MOMs course (97 percent).
- A significant and sustained decrease in depressive symptoms, depressive severity, and generalized anxiety.
- Significant and sustained decreases in perceived stress and difficulties with emotion regulation.
- A significant and sustained increase in overall functional social support and instrumental social support.<sup>10</sup>

## The District of Columbia's MOMS Partnership

Since 2019, the DC Department of Human Services Economic Security Administration (ESA) has run the DC MOMS Partnership to serve mothers receiving TANF who are experiencing significant life stress. The partnership aligns with DHS's emphasis on two-generation approaches to family and child wellbeing. The DC MOMS Partnership serves mothers and female caregivers who are at least 18 years old, pregnant or the primary caregiver of a child under 18, currently receiving TANF, and experiencing depressive symptoms.<sup>11</sup>

- An evaluation of the initial DC MOMS partnership was conducted from April 2019 to February 2020. Results from the evaluation include:
- A significant decrease in depressive symptoms from baseline to course completion that persisted 3 months after course completion.
- A significant increase in perceived and instrumental social support and instrumental social support from baseline to course completion.
- A significant decrease in the percentage of participants reporting high levels of financial stress from baseline to course completion that persisted 3 months after course completion.<sup>12</sup>

## Lessons Learned and Future Directions for MOMS Partnerships

The evaluations of the Vermont and DC initiatives suggest the MOMS Partnership is an effective mental health intervention that can be implemented by TANF agencies. Although these partnerships started as pilots, they have been offered beyond the pilot phase to continue to fill gaps in mental health services for TANF recipients and fulfill TANF purpose 1 by supporting mothers so children can be cared for in their own homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of Family Assistance. (2024). *About TANF*. <https://acf.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/about>

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<sup>2</sup> Clayton, A., Callinan, L., Klem, K., & Smith, M. (2018). Embracing 2-Gen: Findings from the District of Columbia’s TANF Survey. Yale School of Medicine; MOMS Partnership.

<sup>3</sup> Posner, C. S., Callinan, L. S., & Hahn, H. (2024). *DC MOMS Partnership Pilot Evaluation Report*. Elevate: A Policy Lab to Elevate Mental Health and Disrupt Poverty; Yale School of Medicine. <https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/5d3d8ebf-3aaf-4365-839b-6b9d9c544274>

<sup>4</sup> Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). *About TANF*. <https://acf.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/about>

<sup>5</sup> Posner, Callinan, & Hahn. (2024).

<sup>6</sup> Vermont MOMS Partnership Evaluation Report. (2023). Elevate: A Policy Lab to Elevate Mental Health and Disrupt Poverty; Yale School of Medicine. <https://outside.vermont.gov/dept/DCF/Shared%20Documents/ESD/Reports/VT-MOMS-Eval-Report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Vermont MOMS Partnership. (n.d.). *Department for Children and Families, Vermont Agency of Human Services*. Retrieved April 2, 2025, from <https://dcf.vermont.gov/benefits/reachup/MOMS>

<sup>8</sup> Staff Spotlight: The Vermont MOMS Partnership. (2025, February 28). Yale School of Medicine. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/staff-spotlight-the-vermont-moms-partnership/>

<sup>9</sup> Vermont MOMS Partnership Evaluation Report. (2023).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Posner, Callinan, & Hahn. (2024).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

**PeerTA.** Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), PeerTA provides individual and group technical assistance and other supports to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) implement best practices and ensure compliance with TANF statutory purposes. PeerTA is led by MEF Associates and The Adjacent Possible.