



2021 Regions IV-VIII Tribal TANF and NEW Program Virtual Meeting: Moving Forward: Weaving Stories of Perseverance During COVID-19



On March 16, 2021 through March 18, 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA), held the Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Native Employment Works (NEW) virtual meeting, Moving Forward: Weaving Stories of Perseverance During COVID-19. The meeting brought together Tribal TANF and NEW program representatives from OFA Regions IV-VIII.

The meeting focused on how programs can best address the needs of families during the pandemic and beyond. This tip sheet provides a synthesis of key takeaways from the meeting. It is intended for Tribal TANF and NEW program administrators, supervisors, and frontline staff.

TIP SHEET

The COVID-19 pandemic re-shaped how Tribal TANF and NEW programs communicate and provide programs and services to their customers. Across the country, programs adapted to best meet the needs of the families they serve. This tip sheet offers strategies for how programs can create new opportunities and move forward in creating bridges to the future while addressing pandemic challenges.

Tip 1: Embrace Flexibility and Leverage Resources. Many TANF and NEW programs leveraged opportunities during the pandemic to ensure flexibility while still meeting program requirements to address the needs of families. Programs can be flexible by:

- Offering in-person or virtual delivery service or training opportunities.
- Providing non-recurrent, short term (NRST) benefits to customers struggling with emergency housing, homelessness, food aid, utility fees, burial assistance, clothing, and back to school payments.
- Extending case management services.
- Increasing work activity options when possible.

With recent CARES Act funding, and the [Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund \(PEAF\)](#) which resulted from the American Rescue Plan, Tribal TANF and NEW programs have an opportunity to expand services to meet growing levels of need. In doing so, TANF and NEW programs should seek feedback, support, and preliminary approval for program amendments from ACF by communicating with their regional point of contact.¹ Programs should also consider their capacity to sustain new programs as pandemic relief assistance slows.

For federal guidance on flexibilities in Tribal TANF and NEW, see:

- [TANF-ACF-PI-2020-01](#)
- [TANF-ACF-PI-2020-02](#)

Tip 2: Reflect On and Rethink Services. During the COVID-19 pandemic programs have made many lasting adaptations, including:

Utilizing various communication methods with families. Platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom can be used for virtual meetings with families. Some programs found that Facebook and other social media platforms helped connect with and update families. Using a variety of communication methods – phone, text, email, and traditional mail – is key for reaching more families and addressing various needs.

¹ 477 tribes should contact their Bureau of Indian Affairs Awarding Official Technical Representatives (AOTRs).



Consider using technology in place of in-person interactions. Several programs created online applications and allowed virtual signatures to help families apply. Programs can also consider office drop boxes to receive participant information in a contactless format. Many programs also offered online case management and training options; sending packets to customers' homes helped enhance participation.

Consider "no cost" ways to enhance programs. For example, intentionally rethink language to create a more strengths-based, customer-centered environment. Re-evaluate staff roles and workloads regularly to ensure caseloads and tasks are equitable, reasonable, and contribute to positive customer experiences.

Offer incentives to keep participants motivated and engaged. Incentives can focus on meeting work requirement goals, graduating from high school, GED, or other education programs, improving grades, and/or developing career plans.

Tip 3: Network and Build Partnerships. Partnerships between agencies and organizations can expand services and resources. Tips for growing partnership networks include:

Identify and partner with programs that have shared goals and serve similar customers. For example, tribes with both TANF and NEW programs can enhance collaboration by sharing ideas on activities to improve work participation rates.

Leverage resources to expand broadband access in tribal communities. Developing existing or new relationships with potential partners and funders can help tribes bring reliable Internet and broadband access to their members. For example, NEW programs and educational institution partnerships helped secure laptops for transitioning to online activities.

Tip 4: Address the Mental Health Needs of Staff. The pandemic exacerbated mental health problems for staff and customers. Programs can support their staff's mental health needs and build resilience at three organizational levels:

- **Individual:** Individuals can focus on eating well, getting adequate sleep, taking walks, setting work-life boundaries, engaging in mindfulness training, taking vacations, and meditating.
- **Supervisory:** Supervisors can support resilience building by encouraging staff to take breaks and vacations, holding weekly check-ins, and engaging in reflective supervision.
- **Organizational:** Leaders can provide social supports to staff, send out weekly coping tips and self-care reminders, acknowledge difficult situations, and set up a safe space for listening sessions among staff. Leaders set the climate and should be open to suggestions, proactive about addressing and preventing stress, and sensitive to staff needs.

To learn more about these tips, programs, or the entire virtual meeting, a full meeting summary report is available on the PeerTA website at: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/2021-ofa-regions-iv-viii-tribal-tanf-and-new-program-virtual-meeting>.

Special acknowledgement to the speakers at the virtual convenings, whose remarks formed the basis of this Tip Sheet: **Jennifer Rackliff**, Stratem Consulting; **Ashley Waupekenay**, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin; **Jamie Awonohopay**, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin; **Delia Smith**, Oneida Tribal TANF and NEW; **George Goggeye**, Chippewa Tribe; **Denise Edwards**, OFA; **Sandy Cloer**, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; **Katy Ciotti**, Morongo Band of Mission Indians; **Samantha Hansen**, Cook Inlet Tribal Council; **Mark Pendergrass**, Muscogee Creek Nation; **Scott Boyle**, Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria; **Kisha Russell**, OFA; **Marjorie Hudspeth**, OFA; **Dr. Nicole Bossard**, ICF; **Dr. Barbara Pierce**, Indiana University's School of Social Work; **Bill Travitz**, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; **Crystal Hottowe**, Makah Tribe; **Jonathan Crittenden**, Cherokee Nation Career Services; **Matthew Rantanen**, Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association; **Kathryn de Wit**, Pew Charitable Trusts.

Do not operate alone. There are plenty of resources and programs to rely on that have done this before. Remember that we are coming out a pandemic and 'normal' will look different. The connection to the home is going to be more important than it has ever been. We need to be prepared and be relevant as we keep moving forward.

- Matthew Rantanen, Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association

Tools to support the mental health of staff:

- [Compassion Fatigue Workbook](#)
- [Self-Awareness Break Activities](#)
- [Stress Thermometer](#)
- [Resiliency Wheel](#)
- [Trauma Informed Workforce Wellness Strategies](#)
- [Building Trauma Informed Workplaces](#)
- [Self-Care Wheel](#)
- [Reducing Secondary Trauma among Child Welfare Staff](#)