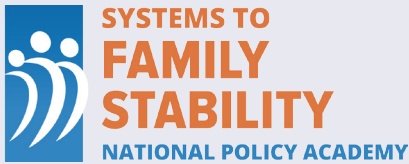




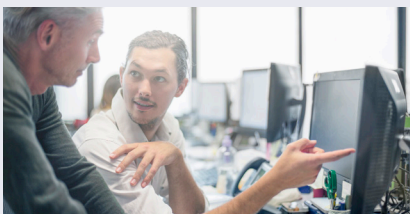
NORTH CAROLINA

Modernizing TANF for American Families



Supportive Technical Assistance and Coaching Through the Policy Academy Model

When Jack Rogers, former Deputy Director, North Carolina Department of Social Services, Department of Health and Human Services, was asked about the technical assistance offered through the Policy Academy, he said, “Working with our technical assistance providers was incredible. I think it was the strength of the Policy Academy. Our coach and the experts provided whatever we needed, from assistance organizing the Work First Conference to information about best practices and evidence-based assessment tools.” The North Carolina team also saw great benefit in the Policy Academy’s in-person convenings. “The education and exposure to evidence-based practice was most helpful for our state,” said Rogers, “and the Policy Academy meetings also provided incredible networking opportunities. The value that we got out of those events really motivated us to create something similar to [the Work First Conference] for our colleagues in North Carolina.”



The Office of Family Assistance’s (OFA) Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy (Policy Academy) was an 18-month intensive technical assistance (TA) initiative in 2015–2016 for seven states and one county interested in modernizing and improving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) practice. During the initiative, sites received dedicated coaches, onsite strategic planning, access to expert consultants, and tailored written resources. Additionally, they participated in several in-person convenings, peer exchanges, and virtual training.

The 2014 passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) “brought employment and workforce development to the forefront—presenting us with a new opportunity,” said Jack Rogers, former Deputy Director, North Carolina Division of Social Services (DSS), Department of Health and Human Services. WIOA made DSS’s Work First (TANF) program a mandatory partner for NC Works—the state’s American Job Centers—and focused new energy and attention on employing North Carolina’s hardest-to-serve residents, many of whom are TANF participants. The Act’s prioritization of out-of-school youth (for example, 16–24 years old, not in school, with a WIOA-specified barrier) gave DSS an opening to focus attention on what it considered a particularly vulnerable subset—those who had aged out of foster care. With strong existing relationships with the state’s job centers, workforce agency, and community college system, DSS felt well-positioned to leverage WIOA to expand its workforce partnerships and enhance the resources available to its TANF participants.

Rogers and his colleagues saw the Policy Academy, with its focus on TANF–WIOA alignment, as an ideal forum for developing their workforce partnership strategy. North Carolina’s Policy Academy team members were also drawn to “the opportunity to educate ourselves on the latest promising practices, particularly two-generation approaches,” said Rogers. “It was our chance to revisit the Work First program that North Carolina had established 20 years earlier. We also recognized that as a state-supervised, county-administered department, DSS had a built-in structure for piloting two-generation approaches and WIOA–TANF alignment: our counties could function as innovation labs.”

➤ ***One of the team’s top priorities was to build strong, state-level partnerships that county-level “innovation labs” could leverage.***

After laying the groundwork, DSS planned to release a request for proposals (RFP) inviting counties to apply for funding to develop and pilot two-generation approaches, TANF–WIOA alignment, and services for youth aging out of the foster care system. Internally, DSS increased its engagement with county DSS executive directors, in part through popular monthly webinars led by state-level staff on Policy Academy topics, such as toxic stress, executive functioning, and multigenerational strategies.

Team members recognized that sharing Policy Academy information with local executive directors and their direct service staff was key to enhancing service delivery, securing local buy-in, and inspiring pilot efforts. They organized a statewide summit—the Work First Conference—modeled on the first of two Policy Academy convenings. Held in June 2016 in Greensboro, North Carolina, “the Work First Conference brought together leaders and direct service staff from nearly all of the state’s 100 counties. It provided them with



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the same information that we had learned at the Policy Academy, which they could take back and apply to support their work with families,” said Rogers. Leveraging expertise and technical assistance from the Policy Academy, the Work First Conference featured presentations on family-centered case management, WIOA, two-generation implementation, and other topics. Participants rated the presentations favorably, giving exceptionally high marks to those addressing two-generation programs and work-based learning. Following the conference, attendees expressed strong interest in continuing to explore and learn about Work First/WIOA integration, two-generation approaches, identifying career pathways, and work-based learning options. The Summit gave counties space to learn and reflect on innovative strategies. Following the success of the Work First Conference, DSS wanted to harness this drive for innovation by giving counties the opportunity to pilot different models at the local level.

Bolstered by post-conference momentum, the North Carolina team was on track to begin developing its RFP for local pilots. It dedicated time at the second Policy Academy convening to lay the groundwork, including plans for funding, recruitment, and evaluation. Then, in October 2016, Hurricane Matthew brought record flooding to the state, leaving thousands of its residents homeless and causing \$1.5 billion in damage. “It is difficult to capture the storm’s impact on the state and on DSS,” said Rogers. “For 2 months, we were 100 percent focused on disaster response and recovery.” After recovery efforts, the team began to outreach to state leadership and foster buy-in for its efforts around two-generation approaches, TANF–WIOA alignment, and youths aging out of foster care. DSS is making progress on integrating two-generation approaches into Work First. It has introduced an informal tool to screen for child well-being and health, developed a two-generation case management training model, and is identifying potential content developers to deliver the training.

Looking ahead, Rogers and the North Carolina team are intent on continuing to move toward their goals. At the second in-person Policy Academy convening, the team members crafted a vision statement for their work going forward: “Improve the Work First service delivery system by adopting a multi-generational approach that simultaneously focuses on goal achievement, parental employability, and youth well-being and development.” Specifically, DSS plans to partner with WIOA youth programs to deliver targeted services to youth who are receiving/eligible for Work First benefits, particularly those who are aging out of foster care. Team members are also exploring innovative ways to partner with NC Works to improve participant experience. As a step toward that goal, DSS and NC Works are collaborating to survey staff members in North Carolina’s 100 county Work First offices about their knowledge of and engagement with NC Works. “We have not always been able to move as quickly as we would like, but we see the opportunity that the local and national focus on workforce provides, and we want to take advantage of it,” said Rogers.



Highlights from Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy Sites

Reflecting on bright spots in North Carolina’s Policy Academy experience, Jack Rogers, former Deputy Director, North Carolina Division of Social Services (DSS), Department of Health and Human Services, highlighted the Work First Conference, which was attended by approximately 200 stakeholders from across DSS’s 100 county offices. Intentionally mirroring the Policy Academy’s content and format, it “gave local leaders and direct service workers access to the information that had been so helpful to us—it really brought everyone up to speed and got them engaged in thinking about two-generation approaches and partnering with workforce organizations at the local level,” said Rogers.