



Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network



WELFARE PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUMMARY

Employment First Program Review

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SUMMARY

This document details a recent review of Nebraska's new ***Employment First Screening and Assessment Form*** ("Screening Form") **and Guide**, conducted by the staff of the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network. This review involved a document analysis of the Screening Form and the Guide, as well as interviews with an Employment First Program Specialist and two Employment First caseworkers. Our analysis includes the following:

- Background information on the development of the Screening Form and Guide;
- Highlights of the positive aspects of the development and implementation process;
- Recommendations for improvement in the form and the screening and information-gathering process.

BACKGROUND

Employment First is the name of the State of Nebraska's TANF program. The Employment First Screening and Assessment Form was developed through a far-reaching and rigorous process that included the extensive involvement of a workgroup of two Employment First Program Specialists and eight local office staff, and was implemented first in a pilot test conducted in two Service Areas, consisting of 36 rural and urban counties, deemed to be representative of the environments in which most Employment First caseworkers operate. The goals of the Screening Form are as follows:

- ✓ Gather enough data to develop a realistic self-sufficiency plan
- ✓ Provide more direction to case managers on what questions to ask and how to ask them
- ✓ Focus on client strengths and how to build on those strengths to address barriers and get the clients into work

Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, welfare staff across the country have become increasingly concerned with identifying and addressing barriers to work. More and more states have implemented the use of screening protocols to assist in this process. In developing and using screening instruments, what is important is not only the design of the instrument itself, but also the way that staff use the instrument and the nature of their interaction with the client.¹ Nebraska Employment First workers have attempted to address both of these concerns in designing the new Screening and Assessment Form and accompanying Screening and Assessment Guide.

As a first step to address Nebraska's concern regarding the appropriateness of their existing screening forms and protocols, Mr. Dennis Ellis, Nebraska Employment First Program Specialist, attended a number of national and regional conferences and meetings. He gathered research about

¹See: Nakashian, M.R., & Moore, E.A. (2001). "Identifying substance abuse among TANF-eligible families." *Technical Assistance Publication (TAP) Series*, 26. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Hercik, Jeanette and Aracelis Holguin-Pena. (2000). "A Look at State Welfare Reform Efforts to Address Substance Abuse." Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

barriers to employment faced by clients and different approaches taken by various human service agencies to screen for these barriers. Based on the information gathered during this process, he determined that the interview guide currently being used by Employment First case managers to gather information about their clients was insufficient to help caseworkers identify and address the serious and multiple barriers to employment that many of these clients were facing. He then conducted a survey of Employment First case managers to gather information about the type of assessment they felt would be most useful. All those interviewed agreed that the current screening instrument was too simplistic and didn't gather enough information for the case manager to make an accurate assessment of the types of assistance and services needed by their clients. Caseworkers indicated that they wanted an instrument that would be completed by the client prior to the assessment interview. They also wanted more guidance about how the clients' responses to these questions should be used in the development of self-sufficiency plans for the client.

The second step in the development process was to convene a work group in the spring of 2001 that would design the Screening Form. The work group consisted of approximately ten case managers and supervisors from around the state, as well as Mr. Ellis and another State Program Specialist. As a starting point, the work group received copies of screening instruments used by various human service agencies and other States' TANF programs. These participants then convened three- to four-hour conference calls approximately every other week for several months to develop the Screening Form. As a group, they decided what areas they needed to address. After each call, Mr. Ellis made revisions and sent out questions for their review based on the suggestions made during the call. The work group was particularly focused on the following points regarding instrument design:

- Ordering the questions so case workers would know what follow-up questions were appropriate based on client response
- Keeping the instrument to a reasonable length so it could be completed by the client within an hour while still gathering a comprehensive amount of information
- Wording questions and instructions to be accessible to persons with limited reading or English skills.

Throughout this process, workgroup members frequently consulted with their co-workers on particular portions of the Screening Form. Mr. Ellis asked for review on various modules from his counterpart in Iowa, Federal TANF representatives, SAMHSA specialists, and other Nebraska program workers, including colleagues in the State child welfare, workforce development, and vocational rehabilitation offices. In addition, Nebraska's Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition helped develop a separate form for questions regarding possible domestic violence. This Domestic Violence Screening Form is administered by the caseworker during the interview, when the caseworker and the client are alone.

In the fall of 2001, the Screening Forms were piloted in two Service Areas covering rural counties in the central and southeast parts of the state, as well as the capital city of Lincoln. Once the Screening Form was in the pilot test phase, Mr. Ellis developed the accompanying Employment First Screening and Assessment Guide ("the Guide"). The Guide was distributed to all caseworkers along with the Screening Form, and provides basic information about the assessment process as well as more detailed information about what each section of the Screening Form is designed to accomplish. The Guide also addresses how case managers may use the answers given by clients to make determinations about the needs of the client. Prior to roll-out, Mr. Ellis and other staff

conducted training on using these new instruments and protocols to the pilot sites. After feedback from the pilot test was gathered and incorporated, use of the Screening Form was implemented statewide in January 2002, and training on the use of these protocols and instruments was incorporated into new worker training.

The Employment First Program Specialists also worked in collaboration with the Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition to develop detailed, comprehensive Domestic Violence Guide for Employment First case managers. Long distance training was then provided statewide to all Employment First staff on domestic violence and sexual abuse, using the Domestic Violence Guide as a teaching instrument, as well as on how the two agencies will coordinate services for Employment First participants identified as victims of domestic violence.

PROGRAM STRENGTHS

There are several impressive elements to the Screening Form and Guide. They are discussed below.

Development Process. The process that was followed to develop the Screening Form was very well executed. By systematically collecting data, reviewing forms used by other agencies, and soliciting input from professionals with a variety of experiences, Mr. Ellis provided a sound basis for the development of a new screening instrument and Guide. Pilot testing the Screening Form and Guide in both rural and urban areas allowed the TANF administrators to iron out any potential implementation issues. This development process not only ensured that a well-designed document would be produced, but that there would be substantial buy-in from the case managers who would eventually be asked to use the new screening form and protocols.

Screening Form Design. There are two components to the design itself that are worthy of note. First, the attention to the length of the Screening Form and the reading level necessary to use it reflects a focus on the client and her or his ability to use it. Second, the Form is designed so that the least personal and intrusive questions are asked up front, eventually building up to the more difficult subjects to address, such as substance abuse and mental health issues. This was done to help develop trust and rapport between the client and the case manager.

Emphasis on Personal Strengths. It is clear that the Employment First program is succeeding in creating an organizational culture that emphasizes clients' personal strengths and skills. All three interviewees mentioned this as a particular focus for the program. The deliberate inclusion of an extensive module (one of the longest in the entire Screening Form) asks clients to identify their life skills and personal strengths is a very positive element of the process.

Administration of the Domestic Violence Screening Form. This form is administered separately. It is administered only when the case manager is in a private setting with the client and is filed separately from the other paperwork so it is not made public information. This procedure reflects sensitivity to the issues surrounding domestic violence, no doubt influenced in part by the involvement of Nebraska's Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition. Anecdotal evidence from one case manager suggested that this process has increased the number of women willing to admit to and seek protection from a domestic violence situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

Every program has areas for possible improvement. For the most part, the recommendations that follow do not reflect flaws in the design or implementation of the Employment First Screening

and Assessment Form and Guide, but rather indicate ways to build on the strengths of what has been accomplished thus far to create an exemplary process.

Recommendation 1: Seek review from subject-area experts. Professionals from certain related program areas (child welfare, workforce development, vocational rehabilitation, and domestic violence) provided feedback during the Screening Form's development process. However, this input could be extended by seeking a review of each section from an expert in the subject area explored in each module of the Screening Form.

Recommendation 2: Obtain feedback from clients on their use and understanding of the Screening Form. During the development process, there was a great deal of emphasis placed on making this form client-friendly regarding length, reading level, and comfort in providing responses. Presumably, these were emphasized because they are areas of legitimate concern in using an instrument in this manner, and which gathers this type of information. It makes sense, then, to ask clients themselves how well the Screening Form, as designed, meets these objectives. The case managers that were interviewed indicated that a) they weren't sure how long it takes clients to complete the form; b) in many cases clients do not complete the entire form; and c) they get feedback, either from clients' own admission or from their perusal of the completed Screening Form, that some clients do have problems reading and understanding the questions being asked. A more formal data collection process that seeks client input may help inform ongoing revision of the Screening Form.

Recommendation 3: Enhance guidance to case managers on using the Screening Form. One of the stated goals of the development of the Screening Form was to help provide more information to case managers on conducting the interview process. While the Screening Form does help the case manager have a better understanding of what questions to ask and what kind of information to gather, it does not provide guidance about how to use that information to determine what services or supports might be appropriate. The accompanying Screening and Assessment Guide does take some steps to address this issue; unfortunately, it should not be assumed that all case managers have actually *read* the Guide, as the interviews conducted with case managers indicated that some have not.

Systematic training of all case managers could help them understand the purpose of the Screening Form, how it is designed to be used, and how it helps reinforce Employment First's goal of focusing on client strengths to address barriers to employment and move them into work. In addition, it would provide them an opportunity to ask questions about how the information gathered can be used to refer clients to necessary support services. This training has been incorporated into the new worker training provided to Employment First workers, but it is unclear the extent to which existing case managers have participated in similar training.

The Screening and Assessment Guide itself provides basic information about using client responses to make referrals, but in some cases it seems insufficiently detailed. A particularly strong portion of the Guide is the section on Mental Health. This description outlines the additional information a case manager should gather based on client responses, the level of client response that warrants referral to a mental health professional, and how the information gathered in this section may warrant an exemption for the client. Other sections of the Guide could be improved by following a similar pattern. Additionally, all sections could be strengthened by making reference to other information sources that could provide more detail for the worker. In the Mental Health section, this might include a reference to where one could find information on how the diagnosis and level of treatment may affect clients' participation in Employment First.

Recommendation 4: Consider moving the “Personal Strengths” section to the beginning of the Screening Form. Case managers indicated that they use this section to build self-esteem in the client, help them focus on their strengths, and get them in a positive mindset. In considering the way this section is being used, and the fundamental relationship it has with the goals of Employment First, it may make sense to administer this section first, to help clients see their strengths and think about how to use them from the very beginning of the process.

Recommendation 5: Consider the benefit of providing information on available services before asking questions about need. In the Guide, some sections mention providing information about available services, but it often suggests doing so based on answers given by clients. An example is in the section on Parenting Skills/Child Development, which states, “Depending on how they answer the questions in this module, the case manager may want to ask if they would like further information on age-appropriate child development.” In some cases, clients may be more willing to answer the questions honestly if they understand that the questions are not intended to judge the client, but rather to determine the client’s need for support services. If she or he hears first that parenting classes or information on child development are available if needed, answers may be more reflective of the client’s true situation than would otherwise be the case.

Recommendation 6: Gather data about the effectiveness of the screening process. Ultimately, what many people are interested in knowing is how this whole process affects outcomes for clients. While data collection can be a time- and resource-intensive process, it can also be extremely helpful in assessing needs and determining program effectiveness; additionally, it can be used to influence policy and obtain resources. Some questions that are worth exploring, and that could yield basic answers relatively easily, are outlined below.

1. Do clients like the Screening Form and find it easy to use? A few simple questions could be asked of clients when they turn in the forms, responses entered into a database, and a “satisfaction index” could be determined based on responses.
2. Are case managers using the information gathered to make referrals to appropriate services or programs? This could be determined by comparing the answers provided by the client on the Screening Form to the referrals made for that client.
3. Are clients more likely to be referred to a particular type of service than they were before the Screening Form was implemented? A review of case files from one year ago could be compared to the numbers of referrals being made at this point. A more useful, but more difficult, question to answer would be whether clients are more likely to *receive* a particular type of service; meaning not only did they receive a referral, but they actually took advantage of the service available.

CONCLUSION

The Employment First Screening and Assessment Form and Guide are important tools in assessing the needs of Nebraska TANF recipients and providing them the support necessary to move them into work. The intense effort that Employment First workers at all levels have put into the development and implementation of these tools is to be commended, and the recommendations contained in this review are intended only as suggestions that may possibly enhance and improve the process for case managers and for clients.