



Building a PEER TA Network State by State



FINAL REPORT for Peer TA Activity

Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Focus Group TANF/Child Support Enforcement Collaboration Summary Report

Anaheim, California
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Prepared for:

The Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance



I. EVENT OVERVIEW

The Welfare Peer Technical Assistance (TA) Network is a federally funded initiative sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of Welfare Peer TA is to provide peer-to-peer technical assistance to public agencies and private organizations operating the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs. Welfare Peer TA facilitates the sharing of information between and among States and localities to establish linkages between organizations serving the needs of welfare recipients. The Focus Group in Anaheim, California was titled *TANF/Child Support Enforcement Collaboration* and emphasized the need for collaboration between the child support enforcement and TANF agencies, and the need for solutions to identify gaps in services for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants.

The interaction between child support and TANF is vital for the success of not only each program, but also, and more importantly, each client's success. As a result of this focus group and the strategic planning, participants gained the following:

1. Participants' level of understanding, increased interest, and desire to collaborate were improved. Participants gained a better knowledge of the intersections of child support and TANF and the important role that child support plays in promoting of self-sufficiency among TANF clients.
2. Participants gained a more clear understanding of how to increase child support enforcement among TANF participants and how to strategically use those resources to improve self-sufficiency among participants.
3. Participants gained a more clear understanding of the ways to integrate child support activities into comprehensive case management activities among TANF participants that improve self-sufficiency; meet program goals; ensure program success; and foster program effects.

II. FOCUS GROUP BACKGROUND

Over the last three decades, child support and welfare have been closely intertwined. Child support payments have become an important income source for many families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Research shows that the receipt of child support payments may be the most critical income source for single-mothers as they transition off TANF.ⁱ Among some low-income custodial parents, child support payments can represent over 60 percent of their annual income.ⁱⁱ

Given a common set of clients, the critical role of child support in the lives of low-income families, and a shared emphasis on building self-sufficiency, understanding the connection between TANF and child support is critically important. While recent child support legislation has emphasized self-sufficiency over cost-recovery and prioritized the distribution of more payments to families on welfare, demographic studies have shown that over the last decade, TANF participants comprise a dwindling percentage of child support recipients.

Child support remains an important source of income for many TANF families and can be a major factor in increasing self-sufficiency among low-income families. Research has shown that child support can reduce rates of poverty among children by nearly five percent, and can reduce the overall poverty gap by nearly ten percent. Effective child support collection has been shown to increase the likelihood that non-custodial parents will exit welfare and not experience TANF recidivism, thereby improving the path to self-sufficiency. Child support and TANF are linked by their stakeholders, desired outcomes and legislative mandates and there are many places where both can coordinate efforts in order to improve self-sufficiency.

Since the passage of welfare reform, there has been a greater emphasis on the role of child support in a TANF household. The purpose of this focus group was to discuss collaboration issues between TANF and Child Support Enforcement offices and to explore ways that the two programs can work collaboratively to meet the common goal of family self-sufficiency. As TANF caseloads have continued to decline nationally, regular child support payments are a crucial source of income for low-income families. For families leaving TANF, the regular receipt of child support can make that transition a success and help more families become self-sufficient.

On August 18, 2008, the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network convened a group of approximately 30 TANF eligibility workers at the National Eligibility Workers Association's *NEW: PATHS 33rd ANNUAL TRAINING CONFERENCE* for a ninety-minute focus group session to brainstorm solutions to gaps in services for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) participants when it comes to collaboration between the TANF agency and the Child Support Enforcement agency.

Seven key questions were discussed during the focus group and are outlined below:

- How well do TANF workers understand the goals and operations of the child support program?

- Do TANF workers perceive that the child support program is effective in establishing and collecting child support?
- Do TANF workers feel they know what happens after a case is sent to child support?
- Would feedback from Child Support be appreciated?
- Do TANF workers understand the purpose behind the information they are asked to collect for child support?
- Would it be preferable for child support workers to participate in the client interviews to ensure that the information they need is collected?
- Have any agencies had experience with this type of staffing arrangement?
- Are there other staffing arrangements that might help promote TANF-Child Support Cooperation and communication?
- Would worker specialization or co-location enhance TANF/child support collaboration?
- In some programs, child support workers insist that the information they need to work cases is often missing when the case is sent to them. What barriers do TANF workers face in collecting the information? What might help improve the quality of the information that is forwarded to child support?
- Do TANF workers believe child support should prioritize cases to emphasize families that are nearing the end of TANF benefits? Has this recommendation been discussed with child support?

The following report describes the Focus Group event that was designed to provide insight into collaborative efforts.

III. FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

3.1 Introductions

Lisa Washington-Thomas, Technical Assistance Branch Chief, Office of Family Assistance, opened the session and explained that the role of the Technical Assistance Branch within the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) is to encourage collaborative relationships and brainstorm solutions to challenges and gaps in services. The purpose of the focus group was to discuss the challenges that are in direct conflict with a collaborative relationship between TANF and child support enforcement (CSE).

According to Ms. Washington-Thomas, typical remarks from CSE agencies are that they do not receive correct information from the TANF agencies. TANF agencies typically remark that while they believe they are supplying appropriate information, they are not informed about the outcomes of CSE's procedures. In response to these concerns, the National Eligibility Workers (NEW) Association received an OFA grant to produce a best practices handbook. Ms. Washington-Thomas explained that this grant helped initiate the opportunity to conduct this focus group to talk with TANF workers about how to overcome barriers to child support. She also discussed the challenges of trying to resolve these issues at the Federal level and understand front line staffs' first-hand experience. She explained that the goal of this focus group is to get information from workers and front line staff, not managers or regional people.

Ms. Washington-Thomas introduced Mr. Kent Peterson, the facilitator for the focus group; Mr. David Camporeale from OFA, Ms. Alexis Flanagan, the Dixon Group and Mr. Damon Waters, ICF International. She also introduced the Welfare Peer TA Web site and invited participants to visit the Web site for helpful resources (www.peerta.acf.hhs.gov).

3.2 Focus Group Session

Mr. Peterson distributed a chart with suggested solutions to improve collaboration between child support and TANF (see Appendix A) and asked participants to read through the statements in groups and evaluate if these solutions would make little, moderate, or significant difference to collaboration between the two agencies. Participants discussed the viability of each solution and indicated their opinions on their grids.

The majority of the group acknowledged they were able to identify at least some solutions they thought would make a *significant* difference and an equal number were able to identify suggestions that they thought would make *little* difference.

Mr. Peterson then asked the group to choose the four or five topics they believed should be discussed thoroughly during the session. He asked each small group to identify *significant* issues that they had information to share about. The proposed solutions were prioritized as shown in the chart below.

Based on the choices of the group, six solutions were chosen that best reflected the consensus in the room around their viability. Participants broke into six groups and were given a large chart with one of the six viable solutions and three areas of focus. Participants discussed examples of the solutions that participants were familiar with, potential outcomes and other relevant ideas. . The six solutions are :

- 1) TANF workers having better understanding of the child support program and operations in my state or area.
- 2) TANF workers getting more feedback about cases sent to the child support system.
- 3) TANF workers understanding the information about families that child support workers need.
- 4) TANF and child support workers jointly participating in family interviews.
- 5) TANF and child support participating in cross-training programs together.
- 6) TANF and child support using a shared data and information management system.

After each group had a chance to evaluate the solutions, Mr. Peterson summarized content from the charts and emphasized that this information from the front line workers was valuable and gives the best picture of what will matter to improve collaboration. At the fourth rotation of the charts, groups were asked to read information the three previous groups had written, circle the best idea on that topic, and reach a consensus on the ideas that would have the most impact on improving collaboration between the agencies?

The groups identified the following best ideas for each solution:

Proposed Solution	Best Idea Contributed by the Group
A. TANF workers having better understanding of the child support program and operations in my state or area.	The county had a screen that would allow Eligibility to review the system to see when child support has been enforced.
B. TANF workers getting more feedback about cases sent to the child support system.	Computer systems interfacing and sharing information. It does not need to be face to face contact, but some electronic interface between agencies.
C. TANF workers understanding the information about families that child support workers need.	Simplification, eliminate clutter. Systems are in place that frustrate both workers and clients because there is duplication of efforts. A more uniform process is required that does not bog the system down. Simplification of accessing nationwide child support data. Worker from Alaska discussed transient population and a state where most residents are not born and raised there.
E. TANF workers and child support workers jointly	Joint interviews 1-2 months after benefits begin. (After initial interview with participants, and share accessible

participating in family interviews.	information electronically between workers.)
F. TANF and child support participating in cross-training programs together.	Workshop on child support for TANF workers, and cross-training on new regulations. If CSE/TANF workers knew what the other needs, it would be helpful for the other agency to know what the other can do, i.e., impose vs. recommend a sanction. This was placed in the category of something already happening. Existing program had a workshop where they were given literature about what the district attorney does, what they can do, Omani, California.
H. TANF and child support using a shared data and information management system.	Having a system that can interface participants' information between both agencies.

3.3 General Discussion

Participants discussed the need to share information between agencies. This includes information about clients, and about the procedures and needs of each agency. For example, a participant mentioned that form numbers and language needs to be consistent. When acronyms and form numbers differ between agencies, it is difficult for workers to understand what is going on even if the data is in a shared system.

TANF workers were frustrated that child support workers do not understand that sanctions are not issued solely because child support determines that a participant is non-compliant. TANF workers provided examples of sanction and child support case closure reasons:

- ✓ Failure to show for an appointment
- ✓ not knowing or unwilling to provide a partners social security number
- ✓ not being able to identify the father
- ✓ transportation difficulties that are not sanctionable

Agency staff in both places needs to understand how these decisions are made on each end.

A worker from New York State shared that she does not have problems with clients showing up for appointments with OCSE (Child Support Enforcement Agency) because of the way she works with her clients. She creates a safe atmosphere and her clients “come clean with her”. A worker from the Virgin Islands shared that they send information by transmittal to the child support agency. Child support enforcement sets up its own appointment with the client and there is never any feedback to the TANF agency.

The group concluded that it is insufficient to say that cross training matters. The trainings must specifically address the conditions of people and families and what they deal with. "Cross-training matters" is too big of an idea. It must be localized. There was a call for availability of cross training nationwide to all agencies. Documents should be scanned and electronically available to anyone who needs it.

The group was divided on two issues: co-locating the two agencies and shared delivery of case management systems. Mr. Peterson brought the discussion back to these topics, as the group was split down the middle about whether these solutions are *useful* or *absolutely not useful*. A worker described a co-location situation in which the TANF worker walks a client over to Family Support (CSE) when they complete their intake with them. As long as workers remember to escort an individual over to Family Support, this system works well.

There was an equal number who said that co-location was not a significant issue to discuss because, as one worker shared, "it is just not feasible." One worker who had been co-located in the past said that when it was there it was wonderful; when it went away, it was difficult. Availability and access has really mattered for the families.

3.4 Closing Remarks

Mr. Peterson thanked participants for engaging in the exercise. Ms. Lisa Washington-Thomas thanked Mr. Peterson and the participants. She advised participants that a report from the focus group would be posted to the Welfare Peer TA Web site within 2-3 months. She invited anyone with additional ideas to please send comments via the Welfare Peer TA Web site.

Appendix A: Complete Group Responses to Proposed Solutions

This table summarizes Focus Group participants' responses to proposed solutions. Prior to the strategic planning process, participants prioritized a series of self-identified needs and program priorities. As a group, the program priorities were assigned a letter (A-J). The group then voted on the top program priorities and each group worked together to develop a series of solutions applicable to each program priority.

B. Improving program interactions

An example about doing this I know about...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interface to child support but limited. • Child support fraud reports to TANF fraud re: findings. • Child support and TANF computer systems interface and share needed information about clients, resources, and necessary activities.
I'd like to see us do...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of staffing and intake. • More willing to communicate with TANF Staff. • Sharing child support payments with breakdown of disregard, pass-on, current and arrears. • More automation provides quicker and better feedback. • TANF more access to child support information.
Other related ideas...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time limits for child support referrals – notice of action, action status report. • Having child support staff in same office.

E. Staff Co-location

An example about doing this I know about...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location. All interviews one after the other.
I'd like to see us do...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real time information shared by both divisions. • Increase joint interviews between TANF and child support at the most 1 to 2 months after TANF benefits begin. In Alaska, joint interviews are scheduled during the 3rd trimester of a mother's pregnancy. • At times, joint interviews intimidate customers, but they are needed to ensure program integration.

Other related ideas...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We do TANF interview followed by child support interview. Good. With two interviews get different information. Separate interviews because too much time with large caseloads.
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H. Interagency Information Sharing

An example about doing this I know about...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not applicable. • Only have payment interface.
I'd like to see us do...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly reports that target unmarried couples or single parent households. • Various computer systems are in place to improve data sharing and information transmittal and systems that can interface participant's information between both agencies is vital to improving collaboration and improve outputs. • Monthly report re: \$ current, arrears and by child. • Easy cross-state reporting access.
Other related ideas...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time sensitive. • Access on outcomes of child support compliance. • Monthly active child support payment going out to TANF families.

F. Training

An example about doing this I know about...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many times staff are unaware of the duties of their colleagues at the other agency. Workshops and trainings on Child Support for TANF workers and vice versa are important and should be conducted whenever there are new regulations. Moreover, co-training/cross-training activities are needed to ensure that colleagues know the current status of the other agency. Training on essential documentation needed by both agencies on daily contact.
I'd like to see us do...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be correlated directly to case for effect. Doing X leads to Y. • Everything computerized.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More training. • Time sensitive. • Collaboration among workers from both agencies. • Assigned DC staff on-site in TANF office. • Child support intake referral.
Other related ideas...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General program knowledge. • Basic knowledge of child support. • Workers who know what to do are overburdened. • Way to track clients' child support. • Share information.

C. Communication and Program Development

An example about doing this I know about...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about NCP (A/P), i.e., knowing what info child support needs to know. • Informed choice: eligibility workers make benefits of each program clear.
I'd like to see us do...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with customer about benefit to their family providing information child support needs. • TANF workers need more training. • Educate clients about paternity. • At times processes are difficult, so simplification is important to ensure improve service delivery. Streamlined processes will help to eliminate clutter; eliminate repetitive forms with limited delivery timelines; and improve initial child support referral interviews.
Other related ideas...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time limits equal in every state.

A. Importance of CSE for Self-Sufficiency among TANF Clients

An example about doing this I know about...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ND – excellent communication. Stark County, Berlin – co-located. • Sharing information from both interviews. • Access to CSE system.
I'd like to see us do...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More collocation with good communication. • Develop a system to improve statewide access to CSE data and information.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on CSE system. • National communication –open collecting cases. Email access/shared computer access. • All cases computerized/cross information for other agencies. • “Buddy” system = Pair TANF and CSE workers together.
Other related ideas...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to know about child support payments. • TANF and CSE should always be allowed to contact each other.

ⁱ Miller, C. et al. (2007, January). *The Interaction of Child Support and TANF: Evidence from Samples of Current and Former Welfare Recipients*.

ⁱⁱ Grall, T. (2007, August). *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and their Child support: 2005*. U.S. Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/p60-234.pdf>