

Lisa Washington-Thomas Hello, and welcome to the Office of Family Assistance podcast series "*TANF Talks*." I am **Lisa Washington-Thomas, Director of Self-Sufficiency Technical Assistance at the Office of Family Assistance**, also known as OFA. OFA administers several key federal grant programs, including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, program. TANF programs help families to meet their basic needs and provide education and training opportunities for the well-being and long-term success of children and families.

OFA is an office within the Administration for Children and Families, which is an operating division in the United States Department of Health and Human Services. OFA "TANF Talks" podcast amplifies effective messages and strategies in advancing families' ability for the states, tribes and territories administering TANF programs. In the first three-part "TANF Talks" series, Agency Resilience in the Face of the Unexpected, we examined TANF as a disaster-response mechanism and highlight TANF agencies' response to unexpected crises, such as the COVID-19 public health emergency, wildfires, and flash floods. We speak with disaster-response experts, TANF program leaders, and policy researchers who share strategies to better equip TANF agencies in supporting their staff and participants during times of uncertainty. We hope you enjoy listening.

In today's episode, our host, Lizeth Hester from the Office of Family Assistance, will talk with Alex Lauritzen, TANF Program Manager for the Maine Office of Family Independence, Department of Health and Human Services, and Erin Oalican, Director for the Vermont TANF program Reach Up at the Vermont Department of Children and Families. The two Q and A conversations will cover their respective disaster-relief programs, their most recent developments as well as how COVID-19 has affected the way they approach relief efforts. Ms. Lauritzen and Ms. Oalican will discuss how Maine and Vermont's TANF programs pivoted funds, staff, and procedures to accommodate increased demands on services, such as emergency shelter, food, short-term employment and one-time TANF payments to effected families. Let's get started. To begin, we have Lizeth's chat with Alex Lauritzen, who talks to us about what disasters have looked like in the past for the state of Maine and how the state has responded to provide immediate assistance to those who need it during a disaster.

Lizeth Hester Hi. I'm Lizeth Hester, Program Specialist for the Office of Family Assistance within the Administration for Children and Families in HHS. Today I'm here with Alex, who will be talking about what disaster-response policies and responses have traditionally looked like for the state of Maine. Alex, can you start by introducing yourself?

Alex Lauritzen I'm Alex Lauritzen. I'm the TANF Program Manager for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services Office for Family Independence. Thank you for having me.

Lizeth Hester Thank you for joining us today, Alex. So our first question, what does a disaster typically look like for Maine? Does it typically mean natural disasters?

Alex Lauritzen So we have a traditional snowstorm and ice storm, but in most recent years, we've been getting some really intense windstorms, and one in particular was in 2017. A windstorm knocked out power to nearly 1/2 million people for more than a week due to down trees and wires, and with a population of only 1.3 million at that time, it was a pretty crazy event for October for us.

Lizeth Hester When we see the environmental changes that are occurring with climate change, do you think that emergency programs are most needed during a disaster in Maine, and which ones do you think are needed the most?

Alex Lauritzen One emergency program that we do utilize quite often is the SNAP emergency replacement, and those are quite critical anytime we have extended power outages here in Maine.

Lizeth Hester For listeners, these emergency replacement waivers are for the Supplemental Nutrient Assistance Program, also known as SNAP, or food stamps. Think about when a bad storm hits. This can cause a power outage, and often people's food may expire in their fridges and freezers. The program allows for SNAP households to replace any food that they may have lost resulting from a storm. Thanks, Alex, for this information. Are there any emergency TANF non-reoccurring short-term benefits or any other short-term protocols that come into play during a disaster in Maine?

Alex Lauritzen So two programs that we do currently have to assist in those disaster times are emergency assistance, and that can be used to assist in paying for damage to a home that's not covered by the homeowner's insurance as well as alternative aid. Alternative aid can assist with work-related expenses, for example, damage to a vehicle, and most recently we have updated program rules to allow for any required interviews to be completed over the phone rather than in particular to help expedite those processes.

Lizeth Hester How has the Office for Family Independence initiated benefits based on federal funding in the past? When we talk about CARES Act or ARP or ARRA, what was initiated?

Alex Lauritzen With the ARRA funds, Maine had provided assistance to low-income families by paying toward electrical bills that were in arrears. We had done that previously by a data-matching process and paid the vendor directly. For the ARP funds, Maine utilized the Pandemic Emergency Assistance Funds to provide a cash payment to low-income families to help them in purchasing back-to-school supplies, clothing, cold weather gear, etc., and \$100 was issued per eligible child in this last allotment.

Lizeth Hester Thanks for this information, Alex. It sounds like the funds can be pretty flexible, which I'm sure is useful for different families and unique needs in the situations. Now can you please describe how the state of Maine has activated disaster response in the past?

Alex Lauritzen Our emergency assistance and alternative aid programs exist year-round and don't require any kind of activation, but the flexibilities that we were able to enact during the pandemic were dependent on the public health emergency as well as a governor-issued civil state of emergency, and currently we have a commissioner-issued public health emergency. Some of those flexibilities include things like the SNAP max allotments and interview waivers for SNAP that are contingent on those declarations.

Lizeth Hester I see, and I'm guessing that some of these flexibilities were different than what has been enacted in the past for natural disasters. Given that, can you share with us any new programs Maine created to respond to COVID?

Alex Lauritzen One program that Maine has created is the COVID Social Support Project. The project provides Mainers who are COVID-positive or close contacts the necessary items that they need to remain safely in isolation or quarantine as well as community education about COVID-19 and vaccinations, and this could include any kind of assistance like applying for unemployment or applying for SNAP or general assistance. It could also include things such as delivering groceries or baby items or a thermometer, anything that they need to remain safely in isolation or quarantine.

Some other items that have ... that we have arranged include arranging for a hotel room in one of our quarantine shelters. The quarantine shelters have been stood up in collaboration with area hotels and

Maine State Housing Authority. In an instance where an individual is homeless or if they live in dense housing and they don't have a way to safely quarantine or isolate themselves from noninfected members of their household, we've been able to arrange for a room in one of the quarantine shelters.

In spring of 2021, the program was also expanded to include vaccine education outreach as well as vaccine clinics and expanded COVID-19 testing efforts, but the program itself was made possible by a collaboration with the department and community action agencies across the state as well as a large number of ethnic community-based organizations.

Lizeth Hester How did Maine pivot to ease operational stress?

Alex Lauritzen So our previous investments in technology allowed us to transition really quickly and efficiently to a work-from-home model. Our caseload was already entirely digital and integrated at the time that the pandemic hit, including case files and kind of a determination for MaineCare, SNAP and TANF, so our computer systems allow us to work in a one-state, one-caseload-type model, allowing for any worker in the state to log into our system and work the next piece of available work, and that's regardless of where they are.

We complete annual privacy and security trainings as well as annual HIPAA and confidentiality trainings. That way, our staff are prepared to work in a private, safe space and how to keep all of the information that we work with on a daily basis confidential and private. It also made it so that at the time that the pandemic hit we didn't have an interruption in the services we provide. We were able to get a majority of our workforce working from home within a matter of weeks. We are super grateful for that. Also, some temporary changes that we were able to enact to ease some of the operational stress was to temporarily allow for health attestation of certain eligibility factors and apply good cause anytime it's appropriate and waive verifications at any time that it's appropriate.

We moved away from face-to-face interview requirements as well, allowing all interviews to be completed over the phone as well as our TANF orientation that is completed over the phone or by Zoom. We have also created a telephonic signature program, so we invested in some technology to provide us the ability to save and store those telephonic signatures so individuals can complete their application and review for all of the programs, MaineCare, SNAP and TANF, all over the phone in one call to help both our staff as well as the people of Maine allowing them to get everything done all in one fell swoop, and we also moved all of our required and commonly used forms into digital formats and allowed for electronic signatures. We've been able to accept applications online for quite some time, but we really made sure to add all of our forms onto our website so that we have folks complete them often and mail them in to allow them to just electronically sign them and email them in.

Lizeth Hester It sounds like Maine was really flexible in its application of services to its customers. Did Maine initiate any staff wellness programming?

Alex Lauritzen We did initiate some wellness programming. We created a wellness series for our staff and encouraged them to attend during their workday. It included topics for stress management and meditation. We've also started a program called StrengthenME, and that program is available not only to state employees but to everyone, and the StrengthenME program. It provides free stress management and resiliency resources, and we also have additional resources available to frontline workers. It's a really great program. They'll do in-office trainings for anybody who requests one, which is really ... It's been a great resource for the whole state.

Lizeth Hester Alex, post-COVID-19, do you think that your agency will continue this programming for wellness with your staff?

Alex Lauritzen The wellness series that we complete in-house, I do believe so. For the StrengthenME contracts, that I'm not sure of.

Lizeth Hester How has your program changed data collection to respond quickly to disasters if at all?

Alex Lauritzen We have not made any large adjustments to the way that we collect information.

Lizeth Hester Is there any data that you wish was collected during a disaster response for long-term tracking and outcomes?

Alex Lauritzen It would be nice if we were able to analyze further the family circumstances and how any kind of pandemic-related relief may or may not have affected their households. That would be the most helpful information.

Lizeth Hester Could you give us an overview of the tools that are utilized in Maine to collect data as well as maybe the types of data that are collected from clients, and how do you keep in touch with those said clients?

Alex Lauritzen Our computer system is fully integrated between all of the programs that we administer for the Office of Family Independence, so we're able to design queries based on any of the data points that we enter into the system. There are certain reports that we do run on a weekly and monthly basis. Many of those reports are published on maine.gov for individuals to review, and some common reports include enrollment numbers and the monthly expenditures. We also have a report that is available for view. It's the COVID Impacts Dashboard, and that's maine.gov/dhhs/datareports/covid-19impactsondhsservices. So it has a lot of great information.

Lizeth Hester Thank you for those references and resources, Alex. Once the data is collected, how does Maine use it to collect information or inform TANF programming?

Alex Lauritzen The data collected helps us to inform fiscal estimates as well as potential community impact. One very large report that the Department of Health and Human Services assembles each year is called the LIFT Report. That acronym stands for Leveraging Investments so Families can Thrive, and that report we submit to the legislature each year, and the main focus of that report is to improve program performance and reduce barriers for eligible families, so it has a lot of great information about how our programs are performing across the state as well as making sure that our programs are reaching the families who need it the most.

Lizeth Hester Are there some successes and challenges your program has experienced from responding to disasters, and could you share some?

Alex Lauritzen One recent success was moving away from the face-to-face requirement for TANF applications and recertifications. It has helped to increase efficiency and the safety of our staff in that application and recertification process, and we have received feedback from applicants that it helped reduce the stigma-based fear of applying for TANF.

Lizeth Hester For programs that are still ramping up disaster-response policies and protocols, what advice could you share that was helpful for Maine?

Alex Lauritzen I think the largest piece of advice for anybody looking to create or restructure a program is to work with your community partners and the other benefits programs within your state. A program created with the best of intentions may have some really crazy, unintended consequences for another program, so while your idea may be super great, it may not be super great for someone else, so that's always something to take into consideration.

Lizeth Hester Well, thank you, Alex. We appreciate your time and sharing the programmatic outcomes of Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

Alex Lauritzen And thank you very much for having me. I appreciate it.

Lisa Washington-Thomas Up next, Lizeth sits down and chats with Erin Oalican, who speaks to us about Reach Up, Vermont's TANF program.

Lizeth Hester As we begin this podcast, we know that, aside from COVID-19, the most recent large-scale disaster in Vermont was Hurricane Irene in 2011. What did the Reach Up program look like then, and what strategies, if any, were carried over to respond to COVID?

Erin Oalican Reach Up has actually changed quite a bit since 2011. In 2011, the Reach Up program was a much more compliance-based program that was pretty strict about participating in federally defined activities, not as flexible. Though we did have a good basis in strength-based approach, we didn't really have a good understanding of trauma-informed care, racial equity, and what that means in the context of TANF and behavioral science and kind of an approach to our work in that way. And since then, we've been working a lot on a greater understanding of those things and applying it to our work and our programming, and I think we're a lot further along now but still learning and growing every day.

During the hurricane, we deferred many people from the work requirement, and the same was true for the pandemic, so we deferred automatically, actually deferred everyone from the work requirement and offered more support for things that they needed at that moment, and these were things that we had certainly been doing along the way but probably not in such a large-scale kind of concerted effort. So whether it was transportation not just to an activity but to get to the store or to get to a vaccination site or into town to do your laundry or if a family needed a Chromebook to be able to keep in touch with their case manager, family members, for their kids, and also just kind of cash that people could use for whatever they needed, masks, hand sanitizer, transportation, any of those kind of extra expenses that happened because of COVID.

Lizeth Hester Are there any emergency programs that seem to be universally needed during various crises that Vermont can name?

Erin Oalican Well, I would say the first thing, I guess, isn't really a program, but I think anytime during a crisis states and programs just need funding that's flexible, that doesn't come with a lot of strings attached, that we can use in a nimble way to be able to address whatever those specific needs are at the moment, and in terms of specific programs, I think it's incredibly important to have programs that meet the mental and emotional need of both service providers and people accessing those services.

Lizeth Hester It's noted that Vermont launched two programs during COVID, the Yale MOMS Partnership and the Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance Program. Could you talk about how the programs came into fruition and the services they provide, and how did these programs add to Vermont's overall disaster-response strategy?

Erin Oalican Sure, yeah, so I'm particularly excited about these two programs because of the way that I think that they were able to contribute to our disaster-response strategy. The MOMS Partnership Program is the first one in that. It's a stress-reduction program created by Yale University that treats depressive symptoms and stress in mothers with low income and uses a group cohort model with cognitive behavioral therapy.

It's cofacilitated by a community mental health ambassador who's a mom with lived experience and a clinician, and we had been working on implementing this specifically for the Reach Up program, which is Vermont's TANF program, prior to March of 2020 with Yale University providing technical assistance in curriculum and training. We initially thought that we would have to delay the first class because it was slated to start in March of 2020, and that was ... We thought at first it's pretty bad timing but because it was supposed to start in particular.

It was going to be an in-person class with child care and in a location where moms frequent, so we had chosen a grocery store in the Burlington area with kind of an upstairs room that had some privacy, and what we did was, we figured out how to do it virtually through Zoom and kind of jump through the hoops that we needed to make sure that all of the requirements were met for HIPAA and things like that and were able to launch it in March of 2020 when we had initially thought we would have to basically put it off indefinitely, and it has had an interesting ... Being able to do that via Zoom has created opportunities that we hadn't thought possible, and so we were able to expand to different geographic areas quicker than we thought we would have. And also it just helps people to be able to participate when they don't have to get all their kids in the car and get to a location and try to figure out all of those pieces and scheduling and things like that.

And so that was kind of an exciting turn of events that we were able to do that, and of course it addressed mental health needs of moms who in the best of times without a pandemic it's a stressful job to be a mom and even more stressful when you are experiencing poverty, and so it's really exciting to be able to continue to provide that for moms participating in Reach Up.

And then the second thing, the Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance Program came about using funding from the federal ERAP funds, the Emergency Rental Assistance Program funds, which are federal. And we asked ... When these funds were distributed to the states, we asked if we could have a portion of the state's total amount carved out so that we could administer our own program specifically for families enrolled in Reach Up, and we wanted to break down some of the barriers that families face in applying for funds like this and make it as simple as possible and reach as many families as we could, and so we've been running that program now since April of 2021, and that program provides the rent for thousands of families across Vermont who are enrolled in the Reach Up program every month that is a direct payment to the landlord and just really has addressed one of the main things, housing, which is a crisis all over the country and particularly in Vermont.

So I think that both of these programs address some critical needs in our communities, things that are always necessary as a building block for healthy communities, mental health, and housing, but even more important over the last 2 years, and because these two issues in particular have been so challenging for families in the midst of the pandemic.

Lizeth Hester With program adaptations, we know that during natural disasters it can be difficult to respond to clients, and so were there any new services offered, or were there any flexibilities to existing requirements that Vermont implemented, and could you share some of those?

Alex Lauritzen Sure. In the early months of the pandemic, we waived many of the verification rules for eligibility, which made applying for Reach Up easier and hopefully enabled families to get benefits that they needed more quickly. We also ... As I mentioned earlier, we deferred everyone from the work requirement and encouraged case managers to focus on staying in touch with participants and building those relationships and just to ensure that they're okay, that their families have what they need and get people connected to mental health resources, additional food, whatever it happened to be that they need.

We also did a widespread vaccination outreach, so that's something that was never even within the realm of what case managers would've done prior, and they called everybody that they were working with, offered rides to the vaccination clinics, incentives for getting vaccinations, information resources, kind of anything. It was kind of all hands on deck. Anything that you need that would help you to get you and your family vaccinated, we will try to connect you with that.

Lizeth Hester How have your clients been impacted by natural disasters and public health emergencies?

Erin Oalican People experiencing poverty, especially deep poverty as families enrolled in Reach Up, are always disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and public health emergencies, and they just have less buffer for an emergency and tend to have fewer social connections who have resources, and Vermont is very rural, so some people may live 30 minutes or an hour from the nearest town, so if you don't have a car, you can imagine how difficult it would be to get an entire family vaccinated, or if the laundromats are shut down and you don't own a washer or dryer, how do you get your clothes clean? Simple things like that I think that most of us take for granted can become major obstacles. I also really worry about the kids in many of these families who didn't have adequate access to broadband and technology so that they could do their remote schooling. So I think overall anytime something like this happens, it is these families who are experiencing this poverty that are the ones who are most impacted and suffer the most.

Lizeth Hester Were education and training programs adapted during business shutdowns?

Erin Oalican They were. It depended on the type of training, I think, but a lot of the trainings shifted to a virtual format, and so, as I mentioned with the MOMS Partnership, that also happened with a lot of the other kinds of job training programs, education programs, and we actually started a partnership with an organization called the Center for Women and Enterprise, and that program was also a group cohort model, and we're looking for ways in Reach Up to help people get more connected to each other and build those connections and social capital. I think, in a way, it was really because of COVID that forced us into this virtual world that enabled us to kind of develop this partnership and be able to provide this class for entrepreneurship for women in the Reach Up program.

Lizeth Hester How did Vermont pivot to ease operational stress on staff during either a natural disaster or with the pandemic?

Erin Oalican With the pandemic, we immediately went to providing remote services, and within a couple of days, everyone had a laptop, a cell phone, was able to do their jobs 100 percent remote, so the flexibility in schedules also allowed for child care and school closures. People were allowed to use their time off if they had to be doing homeschooling or child ... taking care of their young kids because their day care was closed. I just kind of tried to keep telling staff that I understand you're doing the best you can. We arranged a few wellness webinars for staff where there was actually time built into the webinar to take care of themselves so they could take a walk, read a book, do a puzzle, really anything that would kind of help them wind down and come back just a little bit more refreshed.

Lizeth Hester Now were there any particular resources that were provided for staff. As you were stating, they were encouraged to engage in self-care, but was there any particular tools that you utilized?

Erin Oalican We did. There were pretty frequent connections with the Employee Assistance Program, EAP, and we have ... Our agency has a person who is the Trauma Prevention and Resilience Development Director, and she came in and really gave people a lot of information about things as simple as kind of, "Here's how your brain reacts to trauma. This is what vicarious trauma is," and though I think a lot of people were already pretty familiar with that, just kind of having that reminder of validation and saying, "This really is normal, and this is a hard time for all of us, and we're all in this together, and how you might be feeling is really normal, but here are some things that you can do, so there's deep breathing. Take time off if you can." Things like that, I think, were the main things that staff were given.

Lizeth Hester How are response programs funded and sustained in your state?

Erin Oalican It depends on what the program is, but it could be a combination of state and federal funding. Our state legislature did quickly put funding into COVID response for small businesses and communities and also the Reach Up program, and we did have a combination coming directly from the federal government, the Pandemic Emergency Assistance Funds that, of course, every state and tribal TANF organization received, and we used that, and in terms of sustaining, that's always a tough question because there has of course been this huge influx of money.

And there definitely is a kind of question, what is going to happen when this money dries up? Because some of this is not sustainable without additional federal funds coming in. For example, the Rental Assistance Program; it's such a huge program. We wouldn't be able to do that without additional money coming in from the federal government. So unfortunately I think that that will end when that funding ends. Other things we're able to kind of figure out as we go and reallocate, but this is such an unprecedented time and such an unprecedented amount of money that has come into this state because of COVID that I don't think most of it is really sustainable.

Lizeth Hester I see. I agree with you that these are such unprecedented times that bring with them really complex problems. There are likely to be more challenges that come as we move out of the pandemic, and we'll have to do our best to respond and adapt to these changes too. So our next few questions are about data. What sorts of data would you recommend states to collect, particularly during natural disasters? How did COVID highlight the need for this kind of data?

Erin Oalican Well, for eligibility in the program, I think it's important to have a sense of how many applications we are seeing. How quickly we're getting benefits to people who need them? What is the gap between who is eligible and who is actually enrolled in the programs, demographic data, such as race, age, gender, plus data on number of homeless in the state, rate of unemployment, food insecurity? That's kind of just the tip of the iceberg, but I also think that the information we need is much more than data. I think it's really important that we ask families what they need and what will work and then really listen to what it is that we say. I think COVID made everything more urgent, so we needed to be able to see the impact of a disaster like this on the people that we're working with.

And the data that I mentioned when we look at it compared to prior to COVID, there is often a discrepancy, and so you can really see, for example, so many more applications, and it just shows that the need in the community is so great.

Lizeth Hester Is there any data especially important during disasters, and why would you suggest that that data is in particularly important to collect?

Erin Oalican This question made me think about the beginning of the pandemic, and there were kind of all these tweets going out saying things like, "COVID doesn't discriminate," and then the data started coming in, and the fact is that we all know that people who are Black, Indigenous and people of color do get COVID at a higher rate or certainly were at the beginning of the pandemic, and this is all tied to massive inequities in our health care system and economic system. I think it's that data that helps us put those pieces together and can help lead us to creating better programs, figuring out what does and doesn't work—seeing where those inequities lie so that we can really work for positive change.

Lizeth Hester Could you name some successes and challenges your program experienced in Vermont when responding to disasters?

Erin Oalican So, I think one of the biggest successes was going virtual with training and programs and meetings with case managers. As I mentioned, one of the other programs that we started in the pandemic for self-employment, I think it was really the pandemic that helped us get there in an odd way because of the shifting to this virtual environment, and it's really given us the opportunity to build more of that into Reach Up for participants.

Because Vermont is such a rural state, although we don't have a lot of people on TANF comparatively to ... We have a pretty small population in general, but the people who are enrolled in Reach Up are all over the state, and so they could be really far away from each other, and trying to build ways that they can connect with each other and find support with each other, I think, is really important, so that to me has been a success.

In terms of challenges, I really think burnout is one of the biggest challenges that we've had to face both with frontline staff and central office staff who were all pulled in a lot of different directions; sometimes reassigned to different ... to the Department of Health or to different areas to do COVID response, and people were incredibly gracious about it. It was really a sense of altruism and just kind of, what can we do to help? How can we ... Can we deliver food to people? Just whatever it took really. But I think people are just tired. I think that really takes a toll, really not getting much of a break, and everyone is short-staffed, and so we're all kind of having to do more with less, and so I think that combination of being kind of chronically short-staffed with some burnout of just kind of, when will this ever end? Will it ever end? This has been a real challenge for everyone.

Lizeth Hester What is the outlook for Vermont program adaptations that were implemented during COVID as restrictions start to dwindle down? Which adaptations live on, and which will return to pre-COVID norms?

Erin Oalican I think the biggest thing that will live on is being able to communicate with people through online meetings. It's definitely a trend here, being able to hold classes this way, the virtual communication and remote work also. So Vermont continues to allow staff to telework part of the time, and this was not allowed at all in the past for case managers prior to the pandemic, so that's a big shift, and I think despite the fact that because of COVID people are kind of burning out, the ability to telework and kind of balance things a little bit more, I think, has been really helpful and in the future will help with morale and just kind of helping people balance the work and life responsibilities.

Adaptations that will return, the work requirement has returned, and most of the rule waivers have ended. One of the things though that we've worked on in the last couple of years is really moving from a compliance-based program of one where we kind of said, "You have to meet this work requirement, and here are the activities that you can do to make this work requirement to more of a goal achievement model."

And so we've been doing a lot of training on the goal plan, do, review, revise method, and the priority is really shifting from meeting the work requirement to the participant's self-defined goal and really seeing families as the experts in what they need for their own families at that given moment and building on that intrinsic motivation and what is meaningful to them to be able to kind of progress towards employment and other goals that they might have for their family.

And I think this is a method that really honors that expertise of families, and so although we have officially brought back the work requirement, we are still really ... We still really have made that shift and continue to make that shift because it's really an ongoing learning process to just really walking alongside families and being there with them to kind of help them when they need it and set goals and move forward in that way.

Lizeth Hester For programs that are still ramping up disaster response or future programs, what policies and protocols could you share or advice for those future programs?

Erin Oalican I think that ... I'm not sure that I could share any specific policies and protocols, but I guess my advice would be to try to be as flexible as possible, and don't create something that's going to box you into a corner. I think sometimes you don't really know what you need until you're in that moment, and I do think it's good to ask ourselves kind of as we go in these situations, "How can we do things differently next time?" and make sure that we think about that and as much as possible plan for that, but I also think it's important to not get too caught up in that question of: How can we do things differently? Because usually you do the best you can at any given moment, and so it's important to move forward and then at that moment that you're in when you know you know better than to do better.

Lizeth Hester Well, thank you, Erin. We appreciate your time, and we appreciate your insight on what Vermont Department of Children and Families is implementing. Thank you.

Erin Oalican Thank you, Lizeth. It was really great to be here, and I really enjoyed talking with you.

Lizeth Hester I found these two conversations really valuable because they help us to understand the variety of policy adaptations that states have taken. While we've all been effected by the pandemic, we've all been effected in different ways, and states have a good deal of flexibility in how they provided disaster assistance. I think it's also helpful to think about COVID in the context of other disasters that have happened in the past.

While the pandemic certainly brought new challenges to how we all operate and communicate, the need for rapid emergency response is not a new one. It's always helpful to learn how historical responses have informed how we respond to today's emergencies. By the way, we'll be posting links to specific resources and policies that were mentioned on today's episode, such as Maine's COVID Social Support Project, the MOMS Partnership and Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance Program. Maybe some of the resources can be useful when thinking about your own state's policy in context. You can find this resource page on the PeerTA website by going to peerta.acf.hhs.gov.

Lisa Washington-Thomas Thanks again to both of our amazing guests, Alex and Erin, for joining us today, and thank you for turning in to the second episode of The Office of Family Assistance podcast "TANF Talks." We hope you listen in to episode three, which will explore strategies for connecting TANF clients with limited access to technology and pivoting workforce development offerings during labor-market shifts.