# Empowering TANF through Tech:

## Using Technology to Support Engagement and Employment in TANF

### About This Resource

This tip sheet suggests ways TANF leaders can use technology to support program participation and participants' employment outcomes. By investing in technology solutions, TANF agencies may efficiently deliver services that promote participant self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on government benefits.

Technology options discussed in this resource include:

- Virtual service delivery platforms, including digital service hubs, virtual case management tools, and online learning platforms
- Virtual platforms providing access to data and analytics
- Tools powered by artificial intelligence (AI)[1]

This resource also discusses factors for TANF leaders to consider when evaluating potential technology solutions.

## WHY TECHNOLOGY MATTERS FOR TANF PROGRAMS

- **TANF programs are operating in a rapidly evolving labor market.** Some lower-wage jobs are at high risk of automation, which could disproportionately affect TANF participants.[i] TANF programs need to adapt their approaches so that participants have access to training, job placement, and ongoing support that prepares them for employment opportunities less at risk of automation.
- **Some TANF programs struggle to engage participants in meaningful activities**. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, many state TANF agencies eased requirements for participating in work-related activities[ii] and some saw engagement in these activities drop. Since then, both caseworkers' and participants' expectations of services may have shifted. For example, people may be less interested in engaging in in-person activities and prefer virtual service options.
- **Public and nonprofit workforce systems are increasingly using digital tools** to expand access to services and personalize support for participants.[iii] TANF programs can use these tools to:
  - **Expand access to services** through mobile-friendly platforms, online training, and virtual case management.[iv, v] Virtual engagement has helped maintain service continuity during disruptions and improved participant retention in some cases.[vi]
  - **Improve service delivery** by more efficiently triaging participant needs, streamlining case management, offering personalized job recommendations, and using labor market data to align training with in-demand skills.
  - **Do more with less and free up staff time.** Digital tools can automate routine tasks and provide self-service options for participants, which may reduce administrative burden and allow staff to support participants more efficiently.

*[1]AI can be defined as systems capable of interpreting information and making decisions to accomplish defined objectives with some degree of autonomy.[iv]*

# HOW TANF PROGRAMS MIGHT USE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

TANF programs can consider the following strategies to use technology to support **increased engagement** and **improved employment outcomes** for TANF participants.

## MAKE IT EASIER FOR PARTICIPANTS TO ACCESS SERVICES

### Efficiently direct participants to services that meet their needs

Digital navigation hubs and AI-powered chatbots may help agencies more efficiently guide participants to relevant services. This approach is different from providing a static list of resources on a website—instead, it could include an interactive platform where participants describe what they're looking for and receive a tailored response with relevant and current information.

- Minnesota's Department of Employment and Economic Development developed CareerForce, an online platform that asks job seekers questions and guides them to relevant services based on their responses.
- The Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) "Larry the Chat Bot" is an AI-enabled customer service chatbot that can respond to questions about a broad scope of TWC programs.

### Reduce logistical barriers to engagement

Technology may help TANF programs make services more accessible and flexible. Virtual tools and digital platforms allow participants to engage with programs on their own schedule, which can be especially important for those balancing work, childcare, and transportation challenges.

Virtual job fairs, virtual coaching, and online platforms that offer vocational training have become standard in many agencies post-COVID.[vii] TANF programs can also consider using virtual tools that offer job readiness content to participants on demand.

- Public Consulting Group's Virtual Employment Readiness Assistant (VERA) offers 24/7 access to job readiness content that uses approaches to keep users engaged like games, assessments, and awarding badges for achievements. TANF programs can pay for a license for VERA and customize it to their program needs.

## EXPAND AND IMPROVE SERVICES

### Identify potential career pathways and improve job matching

Tech tools can help identify potential career options and improve job matching, which may improve the efficiency and quality of job placements. Job market databases can help TANF program leaders and coaches identify in-demand occupations and their required skills, enabling case managers to help participants access the trainings that support access to these jobs.[i]

- The Missouri Department of Economic Development partnered with Burning Glass Technologies (now Lightcast), a labor market analytics firm that aggregates data from millions of job postings. This partnership provides state agencies with real-time insights into in-demand occupations and skills, helping them better match job seekers' abilities with current job openings.
- The Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade made a grant to Intermountain Health to pilot an initiative using FutureFit AI to provide job-matching supports to job seekers in the healthcare field. The FutureFit AI platform helps participants start the job-matching process, using algorithms to gauge job seekers' skills and help them discover career pathways, relevant learning and resources, and job opportunities.

### Build digital skills for the workplace

Some workforce programs offer self-paced training in AI and digital skills. Free options can be valuable to TANF participants seeking to build skills for today's workplace.

- Goodwill's Digital Career Accelerator offers free access to a Google AI Essentials course, helping participants build foundational AI and digital skills.

### Support coaching and skills development

TANF and workforce programs can use web-based coaching platforms to support participants in achieving employment and life goals. Coaching platforms organize participant goals into personalized pathways with manageable action steps and can help caseworkers efficiently track progress and communicate with participants.

- TANF programs in Michigan and Colorado have used TuaPath in an effort to streamline administrative tasks, improve participant engagement, and maintain service continuity through virtual coaching. TuaPath enables remote coaching and mobile-friendly access to integrated employment resources and can help TANF participants set and pursue employment and life goals.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR TANF PROGRAMS

### Cost

Technology tools, especially custom-designed tools, can be expensive to build and maintain. Free options may be less customizable for TANF programs' needs. Some agencies have found success seeking private funding to pilot technology solutions.

### Privacy

When incorporating any technology tool into program operations, it's important to prioritize privacy and data security from the start. Any tool that might be handling or storing participants' personal information must comply with federal and state privacy regulations, and agencies should follow clear policies for data access and storage. Staff should be trained on how to safeguard participant information, and participants should be informed about how their data will be used.

### Staff skills

TANF program staff need training to use technology tools to support participants, which takes time and resources. It is important for program leaders to factor in time for staff skill development when exploring or piloting technology solutions.

## Using AI in TANF programs

AI can supplement what humans can do, but it can't replace human judgment or decision-making. Programs should consider the limitations of AI in the context in which they'd like to use it, and make their expectations clear for how AI can support staff.

**AI can:**

- Automate routine tasks
- Provide 24/7 support via chatbots
- Analyze large datasets to identify trends
- Use its analysis of trends to target personalized recommendations to individuals

**AI can't:**

- Replace human judgment, especially in complex, sensitive cases
- Build trust and rapport with participants
- Provide empathy, motivation, and emotional support
- Interpret non-verbal cues and context
- Advocate for participants across systems

**AI makes mistakes.** Staff should carefully review AI-generated recommendations to make sure they are accurate. Staff will need training to be able to provide this oversight. AI training for government employees is available through the U.S. General Services Administration, and states may have their own resources.

**AI can give uneven results.** Because generative AI tools learn from large datasets that may reflect historical trends or imbalances, what they produce might unintentionally favor or disadvantage certain groups. Program leaders should review AI-generated content for fairness and alignment with program goals.

**Free tools may store and learn from the information you enter.** Free generative AI tools, like ChatGPT, can be useful but come with important limitations in a program context. These tools often store or process data externally, which can raise privacy concerns if sensitive information is shared. They also can't guarantee accuracy, security, or compliance with federal and state regulations. TANF programs should avoid entering personally identifiable information, verify outputs carefully, and consider whether a paid or enterprise solution with stronger safeguards is more appropriate for their needs.

# HOW TANF PROGRAMS CAN EXPLORE TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

## 1. Identify your program's needs and gaps.

? What work is currently inefficient or not as effective as desired?

? How might technology solutions support efficiency and effectiveness?

## 2. Design a solution.

✓ Research options for addressing the problem, focusing on vendors or partners experienced in human services.

✓ Select a partner with the capabilities and expertise needed to address the identified need or problem, or identify a free solution that meets your needs.

✓ Work with the partner to design or find a solution to test.

✓ Identify the infrastructure, resources, and people you need to implement the solution.

## 3. Start with a pilot or road test.

✓ Try out the solution or tool on a small scale before rolling it out to a bigger group.

✓ Work with staff to build their skills and buy-in to use the new tool/approach.

✓ Ask staff and participants to use the new tool/approach and collect their feedback. Is the tool or approach functioning as you intended? Is it motivating staff or participants to do something unexpected? What might need to change?

## 4. Evaluate and iterate.

✓ Use the feedback you collect to refine your approach and test again.

✓ Scale successful practices to a broader set of staff or participants.

### Before trying a tech solution, consider these questions:

- **Who is this technology meant to serve?** Will participants use the tool, will staff use it, or both? Is the solution designed to improve outcomes for TANF participants, or is it primarily serving administrative efficiency?
- **What problem are we solving? Is technology the right approach?** Is the issue at hand one that technology can meaningfully address, or does the challenge require policy or practice changes instead?
- **How might this technology affect the relationship between staff and participants?** Will the technology enhance trust and communication? Does it risk distancing human connection or compromising privacy?
- **Are there any hidden costs?** Beyond financial investment for the solution itself, what are the costs in terms of training and long-term maintenance? Are we prepared to manage those?

# Tools and Platforms Mentioned in This Resource

***Note:** We share these examples for TANF leaders' awareness and further exploration.* ***OFA does not specifically endorse or recommend any of the tools mentioned below.***

| Tool or platform | Cost | What it does | How TANF programs can use it |
|---|---|---|---|
| FutureFit AI | Paid | FutureFit AI is an AI-powered workforce development platform designed to help organizations and job seekers access career paths and build future-ready skills. It offers career navigation, job matching, and training recommendations, and provides analytics for tracking participant outcomes. | • Help participants identify career pathways based on their skills and local labor market demand.<br>• Offer a "one-stop" digital hub for TANF participants to access job listings, training, and support services.<br>• Connect participants to suitable job opportunities quickly and efficiently.<br>• Reduce barriers like transportation and scheduling by providing remote access to services. |
| Goodwill Digital Career Accelerator® | Free | Offers a free, self-paced Google AI Essentials Training to help people learn how to use AI. | TANF participants can enroll in this free course to build digital skills relevant for today's workplace. |
| Lightcast | Paid | Lightcast is a labor market data platform that aggregates and analyzes data from millions of job postings to provide insights into employment trends, in-demand skills, and wage benchmarks. The company offers different products, like the Career Coach, that help jobseekers find career opportunities based on their interests, skills, and goals. | • Use labor market data to align work activities and training offerings with in-demand occupations.<br>• Help participants identify career options and provide them with information on career path progression, wages, and skill requirements. |
| TuaPath | Paid | TuaPath is a web-based coaching platform designed to help human services programs support participant engagement and goal achievement. It organizes participant goals into personalized and provides tools for real-time progress tracking and communication between participants and coaches. | • Help participants break down employment and life goals into actionable steps.<br>• Offer any-time access so that participants can view and complete tasks as they are available, while coaches monitor progress in real time.<br>• Embed training materials, assessments, and vetted content to reinforce learning. |
| VERA | Paid | VERA (Virtual Employment Readiness Assistant) is a web-based platform developed by Public Consulting Group to expand access to workforce services through virtual delivery. It uses AI, gamification, and interactive modules to provide job readiness training and career services online, like what participants would receive in physical job centers. | • Deliver remote job readiness training to participants who face transportation or scheduling challenges.<br>• Provide career exploration and planning tools to help participants identify employment paths.<br>• Host virtual job fairs and coaching sessions, reducing the need for in-person visits.<br>• Use screening and navigation tools to connect participants to local services and partner agencies. |

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## End Notes

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