ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance

Applying Trauma-Informed Practices for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Case Workers

Tip Sheet

Trauma-informed practices are those that realize the impact of trauma, recognize its signs and symptoms, respond by integrating this knowledge into policies and practices, and seek ways to resist re-traumatization.[1] Implementing trauma-informed practices helps ensure your engagements with TANF customers are safe and effective. It also helps you build a positive relationship and trust and empower customers in their own journeys to achieve financial stability.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration notes that there are six guiding principles of trauma-informed practice:

- **Safety:** Customers feel physically and psychologically safe in each interaction.
- **Trustworthiness and transparency:** Engagement and decisions are conducted with transparency to build and maintain trust.
- **Peer support:** Programs support mutual self-help between customers to promote recovery and healing.
- **Collaboration and mutuality:** Staff seek to level power differences with customers to meaningfully share decision-making.
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** Customers' individual strengths and experiences are built upon.
- **Cultural, historical, and gender issues:** Staff are aware of cultural, historical, and gender issues and actively work to reaffirm diverse identities through their interactions with customers.

As a case worker, your job roles may include:

- Administering a screening or assessment of the customer to help identify their interests and needs.
- Developing a case plan (or individual responsibility plan or contract) with the customer that articulates the work participation activities with which they must engage to receive cash assistance.
- Conducting ongoing support of the customer's case plan and services provided, and regularly checking in with the customer.
- Helping the customer engage in job search or other job readiness activities.

Use the tips below as you engage with TANF customers. ***Keep in mind that these tips are not about what you do, but how you do it***—they focus on engagement approaches that foster collaboration, promote shared respect, and offer support.

"Keep in mind that these tips are not about what you do, but how you do it."

Trauma-Informed Practice Tips

Show sensitivity when discussing adverse or traumatic experiences

After eligibility is determined, many TANF programs conduct a screening, assessment, or appraisal to understand customers' needs and barriers to employment. Whether this is an online self-assessment or an in-person exchange, many case workers will at some point discuss with the customer what challenges they face to inform support services, referrals, and what should be included in their case plan. When asking about sensitive topics, particularly challenges that may relate to past or current traumatic events, consider adopting these trauma-informed techniques:

- Reflect on current processes, appraisal, or assessment questions to consider—from the customer's perspective—what topics may be difficult or sensitive to discuss.
- Be upfront about why you are asking about these experiences and how you may use the information shared to support the customer and connect them to needed services.
- Be clear about how you will preserve the customer's confidentiality and under what, if any, circumstances you may not be able to.
- Respect the customer's boundaries by not pushing for any information that you do not need. Instead of requesting unnecessary information, refer the customer to needed supports.
- Hold discussions about sensitive topics in a private space (even when virtual) to ensure confidentiality and promote safety.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences and how some individuals may respond to proposed supports. Show respect for customers' autonomy and choices.[2]

Show empathy and build trust and positive relationships

- Welcome customers to the space (physical or virtual) with kindness and sincerity.
- Be patient if customers need time to think through questions or responses and/or need to step away or pause if they are feeling anxiety/stressed or a family member needs assistance.
- Show concern for the whole family by, for example, asking how children are doing.
- Establish compassionate, non-judgmental boundaries if customers miss meetings by explaining program expectations and why those expectations are in place to help customers meet their goals.
- Be mindful of your own subconscious thoughts or biases that place the "blame" on individuals for experiencing financial instability. Strive to be positive and nonjudgmental in communications.

Take actions to embody cultural competency

- Take time to lightly research countries of origin, language, and culture based on self-identifying information customers share.
- Acknowledge the broad impacts of collective or historically experienced trauma, while also leaving space for individuals to express how that collective trauma has impacted them individually and in unique ways.[3]
- Avoid assuming which cultures and customs customers should take part in based on their physical appearance. Ask questions like "Could you please pronounce your name?" followed with "I want to make sure I get it right." If you mispronounce a name and the customer corrects you, respond with "Thank you for correcting me." Write down customer's names phonetically to avoid repeatedly asking them to pronounce it for you.
- Take time to acknowledge and support customer gender identity by noting preferred names and pronouns to use in future interactions.

Provide as much choice as possible in every encounter

Whether as part of your assessment and case planning exchanges or when you have a regularly scheduled check-in—consider what you must control versus what can you leave to the customer's choice. Even affording small flexibilities in these encounters can help create a more collaborative environment where decision-making power is shared, and customers' preferences and needs are respected. To afford more choice in engagements, consider:

- Sharing a list of opportunities, support services, and resources that could help them reach their goals and asking them which they believe would be the best use of their time to connect to work.
- Giving customers the option to decline support services or resources that are not mandatory and that they do not perceive to be helpful.
- Coordinating with customers to establish check-in times that match their availability as well as your own.
- Being flexible in terms of meeting in-person, by video conference (with cameras on or off based on customer preference), by phone, or even via text (if possible).

Ensure plans reflect customers' goals

The customer's case plan, individual responsibility plan, or contract is the shared roadmap you and the customer use to guide the services you offer and the work activities the customer must engage with to continue to receive cash assistance. When developing this plan, focus and document goals that motivate the customer, not just the program's requirements. To adopt a trauma-informed approach when developing and documenting the case plan, consider:

- Engaging the customer in a conversation about their goals. Ensure these goals are reflected in the case plan document.
- Discussing which potential work participation activities may best align with customer goals. Involving the customer in developing a case plan can promote a collaborative planning process.
- Ensuring the customer feels the plan represents their objectives. Provide the customer multiple opportunities to ask questions prior to finalizing and signing the plan.
- Recapping clearly and concisely what the customer's responsibilities are and what specific timeframes they must adhere to before the case plan is finalized and signed.
- Setting a mutually agreed upon schedule for follow-up. At each follow-up, ask the customer if their needs or interests have changed and adjust the case plan accordingly.

"Case workers do not need to act as therapists, but customers want to feel that they care—even if they cannot solve all their problems. Being seen as a human enables customers to see their case workers as human too." –*Former TANF Customer*

Managing a Difficult Exchange

Applying for and adhering to TANF requirements can be difficult for any individual and their family. As a case worker, you may have encounters with customers that may get heated or be difficult. Below are some tips about how to be trauma-informed in these circumstances:

When someone...	Consider...
Begins to raise their voice	Aggressive behavior may have been an effective way for the individual to protect themselves from current or past adverse experiences. Additionally, when people are engaged in a situation in which they feel powerless, they may be triggered by past traumatic experiences. This can activate the "fight or flight" response, where they feel the need to "fight" (or become loud or aggressive) as a method of coping. But your emotional safety and wellbeing must also be prioritized. The individual's capacity to regulate behaviors may be overwhelmed, so offer them a break to allow their nervous system to calm down. The break can give them a moment to gain control. You may say something like, "we have been discussing some difficult topics. Let's take a short break before we continue." You can also tell them that you need a break to decrease the power imbalance by taking some responsibility for the situation. This can help the individual feel more secure with you.
Won't engage or answer questions	Some of the questions you are asking may touch on sensitive information that can elicit feelings of shame, self-criticism, and embarrassment. When people feel judged or "less than," it is human nature to shut down or not respond. Answering sensitive questions, such as those about one's financial stability or personal history, requires a baseline level of trust and security with you. If the individual won't engage or answer your questions, you may say something like, "I want to acknowledge that some of these questions are sensitive and personal. I need to ask them to help you continue to receive your TANF benefits." Consider pausing and asking if they have questions. Seek to address any of their concerns before moving forward. By providing choice, you help create a more inclusive exchange.
Shares information where the sequence of events is hard to follow	If someone is asked to recount a stressful, adverse, or traumatic event, this too may elicit a trauma response. Enduring traumatic experiences can lead to an increase in stress hormones that can shut down parts of the brain responsible for memory and organization of thoughts, which can make it difficult to recall or share a chronology of those events. In this instance, use active listening techniques and let the individual talk without questioning discrepancies and do not place them under pressure to piece together fragmented memories.
Shows nonverbal signs of distress	Tapping feet, biting nails, shutting down, clenching one's teeth, and generally fidgeting can all be signs of distress. If someone is being asked multiple questions that may remind them of past trauma, they may experience an anxiety response. In this instance, consider offering a glass of water (if you are in-person), offering a break in the meeting, slowing your own breathing which the individual may follow, or non-judgmentally pointing out the body language you are seeing and how you are interpreting it. You may say something like, "I see you tapping your feet and I know this can be a hard conversation. Would you like to take a quick break, or do you have any questions for me before we continue?" By verbalizing what you are seeing and using a tone that conveys compassion, you can show concern about the individual's health and safety.

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Brief #1: Laying the Foundation: Trauma-Informed Practices in TANF Programs. This brief is for TANF leadership and administrators to support programs in designing and implementing trauma-informed practices.

Brief #2 Applying Trauma-Informed Practices in Case Management and Supervision. This brief is for TANF case managers and supervisors to design and implement trauma-informed practices when working with customers.

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References

[1] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014. https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf

[2] For example, accessing mental health services might be stigmatized or seen as culturally unacceptable in some settings.

[3] Historical trauma has been defined as a "multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial, or ethnic group. It is related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people because of their status as oppressed, such as slavery, the Holocaust, forced migration, and the violent colonization of Native Americans." Administration for Children and Families website, Trauma webpage. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/trauma-concept#:~:text=Historical%20trauma%20is%20multigenerational%20trauma%20experienced%20by%20a,migration%2C%20and%20the%20violent%20colonization%20of%20Native%20Americans