



Building a PEER TA Network State by State



Maine Office for Family Independence TA Request #213 TANF Work Participation and Data Management Site Exchange June 13-14, 2012 – Concord, New Hampshire

Summary Report

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office for Family Independence (OFI) and the New Hampshire Division of Family Assistance convened a peer-to-peer site exchange funded by the Welfare Peer TA Network in Concord, New Hampshire to (1) provide cross-site networking between the two States; (2) foster dialogue on strategies for improving work participation among TANF participants; (3) discuss strategies for improving the calculation of work participation rates; and (4) share dialogue on strategies for integrating education and training opportunities into TANF programming. The site exchange was attended by Liz Ray, Brigid Palmer, and Jamie Pruett of the Maine Office for Family Independence, Lynn Wilder of the New Hampshire Division of Family Assistance, Joy Tinker, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) – Region I, and Damon Waters, Welfare Peer TA/ICF International.

Objective

Developed as a result of a peer-technical assistance request generated by the Maine Office for Family Independence, the site exchange provided Maine with the opportunity to observe the data collection methodology and tools utilized by the State of New Hampshire to strengthen its ability to achieve the federally-mandated work participation rate. Through a series of discussions with program, data, and administration staff and a series of site visits to the New Heights Data Management Center and the Combined Services/Community Action Program, Maine learned about New Hampshire's collection, analysis, and reporting methodology. New Hampshire uses these methodologies to achieve its work participation rate and to improve the overall data-driven philosophy of their local TANF program.

New Hampshire's Data-Driven TANF Program

The New Hampshire TANF program was one of the first programs to be redesigned during the welfare reform era. Shortly after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), New Hampshire took aggressive steps to create a new work-oriented and data-driven program framework for providing assistance to low-income families. New Hampshire has built a program that is based on staff accountability, personal responsibility, and continuous engagement by uniquely linking the TANF program goals and activities, not to mention the staff expectation and accountability standards to various federal reporting requirements.

Lynn Wilder of the New Hampshire TANF program, in partnership with representatives from the New Heights program site and the Combined Services-Community Action Program (CAP) Center, provided an overview of the program components that make New Hampshire's program a promising practice. Using a targeted presentation that reviewed the New Hampshire's data management tools, the staff expectation and accountability procedures, and data reporting systems, and two site visits to the New Heights Center and the Combined Services-CAP Center, New Hampshire provided Maine with an understanding of how to build a data-driven TANF program that meets the needs of TANF participants and the needs of fiscal/program reporting.

In an effort to meet the effective higher work participation rates required by the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA), New Hampshire reexamined its policies and procedures and made significant changes to the way it monitored participant and staff activities, participant engagement, and data collection, analysis, and reporting. Using an innovative data warehouse built by the New Heights Center, New Hampshire built its TANF program around various federal reporting requirements. All of the collected TANF data are used in new ways to make timely and accurate decisions about which participants are not meeting work requirements and what supports are necessary to move those participants into countable activities. The data also informs the development of strategies used at the case management, supervisory, and administrative levels to engage participants in work activities thereby ensuring that the State achieves the Federally-mandated work participation standards.

The new data-driven program specifically required that staff remain continuously engaged with participants and staff simultaneously is focused on those activities that count toward the work participation rate and on additional, possibly non-countable activities to improve the possibility that participants are successful. For instance and as needed, participants are linked to barrier reduction and support services in order to make them more apt to succeed in work activities. New Hampshire quickly identified new opportunities for including a variety of participants in the reporting, especially as it relates to those participating in work experience, community service, and on the job training activities. Moreover, New Hampshire required all staff to achieve a 50 percent work participation rate for their caseloads which would ensure that the State would also achieve its required work participation standards.

Maine's Parents as Scholars Program

On the first day, Maine presented its innovative *Parents as Scholars* (PaS) program. The PaS program is a student aid program that helps low-income parents in two or four-year college programs and was created by the Maine Legislature in 1997 as part of Maine's welfare reform plan. PaS is run by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services through the ASPIRE Program. New Hampshire received important insights and information on strategies for creating and/or preserving opportunities for post-secondary education for participants interested and most likely to succeed in that path. Based on the presentation provided by Maine, New Hampshire plans on utilizing some of the key ideas of the PAS program to continue to offer education and training activities to New Hampshire TANF participants.

Outcomes

The key outcomes of the site exchange for Maine was a better understanding of the specific program and program staff expectations, the program monitoring practices, the staff accountability practices, the data processing procedures, the data collection tools and methods, and the overall data use and reporting strategy that New Hampshire has had in place since 1997. The New Hampshire program is uniquely data-driven and program components are aligned with specific performance requirements. For instance, New Hampshire's staff are required to collect and report data on each of the elements in the TANF Data Report. Staff are required to achieve 50 percent in actual hours of participation for each participant and report under which element their participants completed those activities. They are given guidance for developing service plans that are linked to the specific elements on the TANF data report and then monitored for progress and held accountable for results.

As a result of the site exchange, Maine has planned a series of internal discussions to discuss: (1) available and needed resources in order to strengthen internal capacity to collect, analyze, and report data; (2) collaboration with additional partners who can provide work activity opportunities, i.e., work experience, community service, on the job training, etc; (3) current data collection processes and capacity and to determine if Maine needs to seek additional State assistance to invest in a modern data warehouse/infrastructure; (4) the lack of internal scalability, inflexible architecture, and inefficient use of existing computing capacity; and (5) the quality, capabilities, and accountability standards of the current staff that are responsible for service delivery. Maine recognizes that although there is insufficient capital funding to completely revamp the TANF program and competing State priorities relating to the implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, there are potentially opportunities to partner with OFA and others to alter the way in which the program currently maximizes its available TANF data and its current infrastructure to meet the requirements of TANF data reporting.

Next Steps

As a series of next steps, the WPTA team will schedule a follow-up conference call with Maine to discuss the site exchange, their ongoing technical assistance needs, and what immediate (non-fiscal) resources are available through the WPTA network. Maine will work with its data, IT, policy, and program teams to discuss Maine-specific next steps and work with the various partners to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

As a result of this site exchange, Maine has identified the components of its infrastructure; identified the operational capabilities of each component of its infrastructure; identified its benchmarks for achieving its desired goal to increase its work participation rate; and identified the means to improve the collection, analysis, and reporting process in ways that are aligned with the specific data reporting requirements and the data elements.