

Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network

**Essex County Division of Training and Employment Follow-up Call
TA Request No. 206**

Tuesday, August 14, 2012 – 1:00 p.m. eastern time

Call Summary

Participants

Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

- *Lisa Washington-Thomas*, Chief, Technical Assistance Branch, Office of Family Assistance (OFA)
- *Frank Ceruto*, Acting TANF Program Manager, Region II, ACF
- *Maysee Yang Jacobs*, TANF Program Specialist, Region II, ACF
- *John Disque*, TANF Program Specialist, Region VI, ACF
- *Carol Sedanko*, TANF Program Specialist, Region VI, ACF

Essex County (New Jersey) Division of Training and Employment

- *Arlene Steinbacher*, Director, Essex County Division of Training and Employment (DTE)
- *Aleksandra Adamczyk*, Senior Employment Specialist, Essex County Division of Training and Employment (DTE)
- *Mary Alexander*, Senior Employment Specialist, Essex County Division of Training and Employment (DTE)
- *Aminah Bey*, Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Youth Services
- *Julius Montford*, Manager, Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Adults Clients Services
- *Dawn Morris*, Essex County Division of Training and Employment (DTE)
- *Russ Zimmerman*, Operations Manager, Essex County Division of Training and Employment (DTE)

New Jersey Department of Human Services

- *Joe Maag*, Office of County Operations

Oklahoma Department of Human Services

- *Linda Hughes*, Director
- *Sandy Ellidge*, Program Field Representative
- *Karen Rynearson*, Program Field Representative

Welfare Peer Technical Assistance (WPTA) Team

- *Janet Kreitman*, Health Writer/Editor, BLH Technologies, Inc.
- *Steve McLaine*, Deputy Project Director, BLH Technologies, Inc.
- *Lesley Smith*, Subcontract Manager, ICF International
- *Negar Avaregan*, Analyst, ICF International

Lisa Washington-Thomas established that all participants had joined the call. The team will e-mail those who were not able to participate on the call.

Opening

Ms. Washington-Thomas introduced all call participants and stated that the purpose of this follow-up call was to follow up discussion of the Essex County Division of Training and Employment technical assistance request that focused on increasing the adult literacy rates of its TANF work-eligible participants.

Discussion

New Jersey said that many of its program's participants enter with a 4th – 5th grade reading level, and program staff have found that these reading levels are due to poor education. Staff question if 15 hours per week of non-core adult basic education (ABE) is sufficient to bring up reading levels, and if funds other than TANF funds are available. The program would like to move participants up to 6th or 7th grade reading levels, but they are having difficulty. New Jersey would like to hear from Oklahoma on how their program works.

Oklahoma said that its State has several contracts: one is with the Department of Libraries for clients 6th grade and below reading level. This contract pays for 30 hours of classes per week, and six to seven classes are provided in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Also, the Department of Education provides basic literacy through adult literacy and GED preparation. Oklahoma also contracts with one State college to provide statewide learning disability screenings and standardized assessments, learning disability advocacy, and accommodations for the participants. Regular TANF funds are used for these non-core courses, and Oklahoma has a 50% participation rate. Oklahoma is a statewide program. There are less than 9,000 TANF participants in Oklahoma; approximately 300 individuals receive literacy services, and 1,000 receive adult basic education and basic GED services. New Jersey asked if other programs are provided in Oklahoma; other programs include vocational training, special project training (career pathway), community partnerships, and assistance with job searches. The unemployment rate in Oklahoma is around 5.5%. Participants can receive one-on-one assistance with structured job searches. For children under six, the parent has to do 20 core hours and can only do 15 more hours. Vocational education runs more than one year and can only do 15 more hours. At least 20 hours can go towards worksite training (internship). Part of the contract is to see participants through employment and retention services.

New Jersey asked about Oklahoma's literacy program and how long it takes to bring participants up to a 6th grade reading level. It depends on the entrance level of the participants—some come

in at a very low reading level, and some have learning disability issues. The length of stay in the program varies from one month to one year. Referrals are made to SSI and legal assistance when needed. In some cases, it is difficult to get compliance with 30 hours per week for the literacy program since some participants are dealing with domestic violence and substance abuse issues; if compliance is an issue, some participants are sanctioned. A lot of participants go on and off the TANF program, depending on whether they can get jobs, which makes it difficult to track success. Some participants show up late to jobs or do not show at all, and the sanction penalty is two weeks for the first sanction and a reduction of the benefit, and one month or six weeks in the case of repeat sanctions. Decisions about sanctions are made on an individual basis in Oklahoma.

Ms. Washington-Thomas asked what percentage of participants uses their Work Experience program; in Oklahoma, that percentage is very small. The first program in which participants are placed provides a full battery of assessments. Some participants attend programs on job search strategies first while others start with improving their literacy. Where a participant starts is very individualized.

Ms. Smith asked New Jersey if that State has engaged the Newark Community College system. New Jersey said that Essex Community College is a current vendor. TANF participants receive an aptitude test. New Jersey's Department of Labor Workforce Development funds came late in July, which resulted in Essex County getting their RFP out late, which then resulted in a slight delay in services. They are currently working through the determination process of hiring vendors. New Jersey provides assistance with job searches and job readiness.

Oklahoma has approximately 300 cases engaged in literacy per year, and 1,000 in adult basic education; 165 of the 300 stayed in the program long enough for follow-up assessment, and 48% went on to adult basic education. Around 70,000 hours of instruction were provided per year. They have a contract for the classes and pay a flat amount per class per month; around 47% of the 1,000 participants increased at least one grade level, and 60% passed their GED exam. Students are engaged by incorporating topics that impact their life situations such as budgets, recipes, and fractions. Regarding family literacy, participants are provided with children's books that they can take home to read to their children. Since the numbers have come down for English as a Second Language (ESL), there is not enough justification for having a class just for ESL participants.

Ms. Smith mentioned that call participants might find helpful the two documents that the WPTA team attached to the call notice: the environmental scan of literacy programs in TANF organizations drafted by the WPTA team and an article that CLASP wrote on Oklahoma.

Follow-Up Action Steps

- *WPTA Team:*
 - Create and send summary notes to all call participants from today's meeting.