



Workshop Summary

Title of Event: *Overcoming Barriers to Employment*

Date(s): June 9, 1998

Location: Public Ledger Building, Philadelphia, PA

I. Summary

The ACF Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network coordinated this workshop on behalf of the Philadelphia County Assistance Office. The network is a contract from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The contractors for the network are AFYA, Inc. and Caliber Associates. The purpose of this one day technical assistance event was to identify barriers that large urban areas such as Philadelphia encounter in their efforts to move Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) clients from welfare to meaningful employment, and to explore strategies to overcome these barriers. Two focus groups were set up to obtain information about barriers identified from both an operational perspective and an administrative perspective from within the Philadelphia County Assistance Office. TANF provider representatives from Los Angeles, Chicago, and Indiana shared information about some of the obstacles that they had encountered and successfully addressed within the past year. The workshop concluded with a discussion of strategies that the Philadelphia County Assistance Office could implement, resources available to assist with the implementation of these strategies, and next steps.

II. Participants

Workshop participants included income maintenance case workers and administrative staff from the Philadelphia County Assistance Office, several representatives from both the ACF Region III Office and the ACF Central Office, and state and county TANF program representatives. The following state and county TANF program representatives also participated in the workshop: Ms. Sunny Fischer, Executive Director, City of Chicago-Cook County Welfare Reform Task Force, Mr. James Hmurovich, Director, Division of Family and Children, Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, and Mr. Raul Ramirez, Human Services Administrator III, GAIN Division, Los Angeles County Department of Public Services.

I. Session Summary

A. Focus Group Findings

Two focus groups were conducted to identify barriers to moving TANF clients from welfare to meaningful work, and to offer their recommended strategies (changes to existing practices or new practices). Focus group participants were also asked to suggest resources or supports they believe would be helpful in addressing the barriers identified.

1. Group I—(operational level: a state peer technical assistance provider’s interview of four Philadelphia County Assistance Office income maintenance case workers)

a. *Problems identified:*

- More “face time” is needed between caseworkers and TANF clients. (Incidentally, this was identified as one of the most rewarding aspects of the job).
- Caseworkers need more training on how to simultaneously handle large number of cases.
- A communication breakdown frequently occurs between the various administrative staff levels and the front line workers. This affects the flow of information concerning important issues such as policy decisions and directives.
- TANF clients are not getting the message that time is running out.
- TANF clients are not being adequately oriented about program expectations, medical issues, educational issues, and childcare issues during the intake process.
- TANF clients do not understand, or have not accepted, the fact that they will most likely have to leave their neighborhood and travel to find meaningful employment.
- TANF clients still need more job skills training.
- Not all district offices are located close to the neighborhoods they serve.
- Although comparable in salary to job developers, the case workers feel they handle the bulk of the work for each client’s case.
- Caseworkers are not as automated as they should be. Many routine forms must be manually completed. In some district offices, no job referrals are available on their computers.
- Retention is a problem among newly hired caseworkers. Unrealistic training and the daily stresses of the job were two suggested reasons for this problem.
- Although staff has been recently reorganized, staff feel that the district manager has little authority to make decisions. Staff feel that the majority of the decision-making authority is at the state level.
- Very little training was conducted when selected caseworkers changed jobs and became job developers in March 1997.

b. *Suggested strategies and resources:*

- Determine effective ways to use Welfare-to-Work funds.
- Improve up front diversion.
- Develop economic strategies.
- Improve the computer system available to caseworkers to make it more user friendly as well as offer helpful software programs (i.e., word processing).
- Provide interpersonal skills training.
- Provide intake assessment training.
- Provide training in managing multiple tasks or “how to put it all together”.
- Determine a more efficient method to handle routine administrative tasks (i.e., improved computer system, access to voice mail, job referrals, etc.).
- Develop a communication structure between administrative staff and front line staff that can be maintained.
- Improve the current training program for new hires by making the case load during the first six-month training unit more realistic (i.e., more cases to handle).
- Improve the current training program for new hires by making the practice cases used during training more realistic (i.e., more challenging).
- Improve the current training program by changing the current policy of having front line supervisors provide training to new hires. The caseworkers thought that some supervisors did not want to be trainers and saw this as a distraction to their jobs.

- Improve the current training program to insure that all training policies and directives come directly from the state. Case workers felt they were receiving the “watered down versions” of this information at their district offices.
 - Provide job market skills and job market awareness training to case workers in order for them to be better prepared to explain to their clients “what they will face out in the job market.”
 - Provide caseworkers with an updated citywide resource directory instead of the currently used district only resource directory.
2. Group II—(administrative level: state peer technical assistance providers’ interview of one district administrator and two assistant district administrators from the Philadelphia County Assistance Office)
- a. *Problems identified:*
- Time restrictions affecting clients
 - The volume of cases and their case flow movement
 - Barriers identified
 - childcare
 - education
 - transportation
 - accessibility to data
 - motivating hard to serve clients
 - worker training to accommodate the recent shifts in job duties
 - communication at all levels
- b. *Suggested strategies or resources identified:*
- Work more with clients to provide support to clients.
 - Determine a way to better motivate the clients and help them understand the program requirements.

B. Discussion of Focus Group Findings

1. Raul Ramirez, Human Service Administrator III, GAIN Division, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services.
- Los Angeles has placed over 46,000 clients within the past year using a “Work First” philosophy.
 - L.A. treats clients differently at intake by restructuring the traditional stress on reading, math, and other educational tests—educational components are introduced at a later point in the program.
 - L.A. also separated the responsibilities of employment-focused workers and income maintenance workers.
 - Income maintenance workers are located in separate state of the art buildings, attend different training, and have a different dress code than the employment focused workers in the Gain division.
 - Income maintenance workers are shown motivational tapes during training as well as soft skills training tapes that emphasize basic job skills, body language, customer service, supervisory skills, etc.
 - L.A. has an elaborate provider network of businesses, community colleges, and other resources.
2. Sunny Fischer, Executive Director, City of Chicago- Cook County Welfare Reform Task Force
- Task force has been working closely with the state and county offices to help bring about reforms. They avoid using language such as “self sufficiency.”
 - Task force’s biggest effort has been to get businesses involved and cooperate with them.

C. Lessons Learned from Chicago, Los Angeles, and Indianapolis

1. Sunny Fischer—Chicago’s Cook County Welfare Reform Task Force
- Four guiding principles: protect children, get people to work, avoid unfunded mandates, equity throughout the state.
 - The task force works with the press to respond to negative media reporting on welfare reform and to keep the topic on the front burner.

- The task force holds “business summits” to promote the idea of businesses training businesses on how to work with welfare workers, overcoming stereotypes, and spreading the word on how businesses can support reform efforts.
 - The task force is formulating legislative strategy through the state capital that is in line with other legislative interests such as having businesses address childcare issues and forming partnerships. The hospitality industry has been targeted in Chicago for these initiatives.
2. Raul Ramirez—Los Angeles County’s GAIN Division
- GAIN’s approach involved a reorganization of caseworkers and includes representatives from childcare, transportation, labor, data collection groups, and other key players.
 - Post-employment services are its new focus and involves coordinating with community colleges (short-term job skills training); businesses, faith-based organizations, civic groups (mentoring programs); and other organizations that support its Work First philosophy.
 - Job developers work in state of the art offices with upgraded computers and other tools.
 - Job developers teach basic job skills to clients by following basic rules of office etiquette (such as dress code, timeliness and professionalism during all meetings, phone courtesy, etc.) and expecting the same from the clients.
 - Subsidized employment is not sought after as the clients are trained and expected to compete with anyone off the street in applying for jobs.
 - The GAIN program has a computerized inventory of job training programs available to job developers.
 - Clients are guided through job skills training through motivational tapes and receive a “passport to success” certificate upon completion of the program.
3. James Hmurovich—Division of Family and Children, Indiana Family and Social Services Administration
- Ten years ago Indiana shifted from a county administered system to a state administered system.
 - Created a safe working environment for its staff both physically and emotionally.
 - Eliminated 53 middle management positions by reorganizing its staff. Managers were moved to positions in training, front line supervision, etc.
 - Decentralization of its caseworkers allowed the office to relocate its staff. Its goal is to not have any office staff over 50 people by the year 2000. Workers will be in the neighborhoods.
 - Created local welfare planning councils.
 - Central office’s philosophy is to target all operational goals and push responsibility to the appropriate party. Child care is not handled by the staff—it is contracted out. Caseworker jobs were recently reclassified to minimize their role as “computer data entry personnel” and increase face time with clients.
 - Labor management meetings are division-wide and not delegated.

D. Application of Lessons Learned

Chicago

- Engaging the business community—resolved by:
 - publicity efforts
 - education efforts
- Childcare—resolved by:
 - lobbied for funding from the governor and the mayor’s office
 - used money for training and involved the public schools
- Transportation—resolved by:
 - “taxi medallions”: paying for licenses for clients to become taxi drivers
 - “suburban job links”: program to establish transportation links between the inner city and jobs in the suburbs.
 - clearinghouse
- Communication—resolved by:
 - public awareness campaign

Los Angeles

- Lack of funding—resolved by:
 - legislation efforts
- Change of organizational mind set—resolved by:
 - environmental changes in staff offices
- Operational and logistical challenges—resolved by:
 - phasing in of new cases
- Working with the community—resolved by:
 - public awareness campaign that obtained buy-in from neighborhoods

Indiana

- Performance-based contracts-resolved by:
 - clarifying expectations
- Electronic communication system deficiencies—resolved by:
 - incorporating electronic communication “tips” in newsletter
 - incorporating unifying electronic communication into technology plan
 - highlighting electronic communication “how to” information in training packet
- Training—resolved by:
 - staff development for front line supervisors
 - customer focused training for caseworkers

Philadelphia: Top Problems or Concerns

- Getting the message out on time limits
- Getting the message out to staff about TANF implementation and gaining buy-in from them
- “Wall clients”—clients closing in on the two year time limit
- Job retention
- Maximizing the use of contract slots (resources)
- Marketing to the community the idea of welfare reform and its importance

E. Next Steps Discussed for Philadelphia

1. Consideration of Los Angeles and Chicago communication strategies.
 - strategies suggested to address communication
 - mass mailing to all TANF recipients
 - regional community meetings—12 cycles
 - monthly community meetings in district offices
 - monthly staff meetings
 - town hall meetings for people from various communities
 - regular policy statements to staff
 - regional meetings
 - voice mail available to all staff and regular messages utilized
 - posters displayed on policy issues, directives, etc. in all staff/client areas
 - repetition of welfare reform messages to all staff and clients at as many levels as possible
 - peer to peer communication among all levels of staff and outside the office
 - pro-bono public relations help from the business community
 - encourage peers (neighbors) to communicate and spread the work on reform within the communities
2. Consideration of the Los Angeles emphasis on “changing the organizational mind set”
 - employment is both the goal and the expectation
 - quick job entry is encouraged
 - focus on outcomes
 - performance-based contracts
 - use financial incentives to encourage work
 - encourage combined education and work