

Moving Participants up the Ladder of Self-Sufficiency: The Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) Tool

What is OWRA?

OWRA is a free, interactive, online resource created to ensure that TANF participants are prepared to seek and/or maintain employment or work activities in accordance with Federal regulations and in an effort to improve self-sufficiency. OWRA is divided into four stages that coincide with the four modules of the tool: (1) the initial interview with TANF participants using the tool's four modules; (2) the development of a tool-based assessment worksheet; (3) an analysis of OWRA data; and (4) the incorporation of OWRA data into individual self-sufficiency planning activities. Each stage is unique and fits into the desired outcome of preparing a TANF participant for self-sufficiency.



- **Intake Module** - is a TANF intake form that captures fundamental information for case decision-making and family independence. Data is collected on demographics, employment, and education.
- **Assessment Module** - uses the information collected in Intake Module to develop a comprehensive assessment of an individual TANF participant's strengths and barriers.
- **Self Sufficiency Plan and Work Readiness Resources Module**- creates an active self-sufficiency plan and provides a work readiness resource that helps case managers and participants prepare for work, from building a resume to identifying work interests, values, and abilities.
- **Reporting Module**- focuses on creating summary and trend analysis of the demographics, barriers, skills assessments, and other work readiness determinants of the TANF population as previously identified and collected in the other three modules.

OWRA is fully customizable and allows for the determination of specific work supports that a TANF participant may need to effectively engage in work activities. It also helps TANF workers, intake staff, and eligibility workers strategically think about how to assist clients gain employment, maintain a job, and/or move toward increased self-sufficiency.

Importance of Conducting Assessments

Case workers affect the needs assessments, referral processes, and the provision of support services that help families reach and maintain self-sufficiency. When case workers are armed with comprehensive tools to make their jobs easier, they are able to more effectively meet the needs of their caseloads. Research indicates that while screening can identify the potential presence of work barriers, assessment is the process of establishing the extent and severity of a limitation and, potentially, what alternative services or accommodations in jobs or work assignments might permit the TANF participant to engage and remain in work.¹ OWRA provides caseworkers with tools for comprehensive assessments, guiding and strengthening the process of identifying, gathering, and weighing information to better understand the significant strengths and barriers affecting an individual's ability to achieve self-sufficiency.

¹ Kramer, F. (2001). *Screening and Assessment for Physical and Mental Health Issues that Impact TANF Recipients' Ability to Work*. Welfare Information Network, Vol. 5, No. 3.
<http://76.12.61.196/publications/physicalandmentallissuenote.htm>

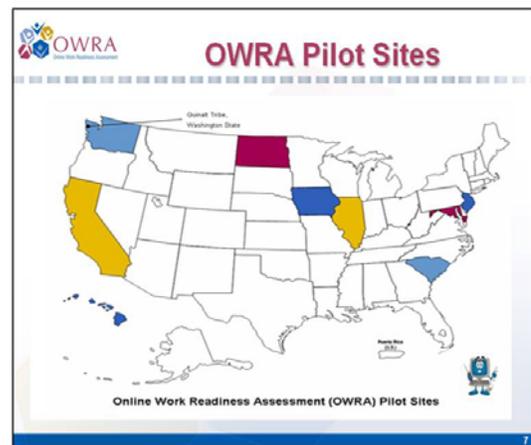
OWRA Background

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 requires that individuals receiving TANF benefits participate in specific work activities. States have used various methods for improving the ability of individuals to seek, gain, and maintain employment. In order to assist localities in their employment assessment and placement activities, the Federal Office of Family Assistance (OFA) developed OWRA as a comprehensive, targeted, online resource used to improve the assessment of TANF participants. OFA envisions OWRA as a key tool in helping meet the main objectives of TANF to promote stronger families, increase employment, and improve self-sufficiency among the most vulnerable populations. To help meet these objectives and ensure successful local replication, OWRA has been developed in partnership with States, Tribes, and county TANF administrators to ensure a more seamless and effective delivery of services to TANF participants, low income, and working individuals.

OWRA has a rich history of field testing and validation from two pilots. An initial pilot of a Maryland only based OWRA tool was conducted by ACF from 2006 to 2007 with the State of Maryland Department of Human Resources Family Investment Administration. It served as the basis of validation for questions, answers, and generated recommendations. Then, from January to July of 2009, OFA worked with five States and the Quinault Indian Nation Tribe in an intensive pilot to gather evidence on the effectiveness of OWRA in streamlining case management activities and modernizing assessments for TANF participants.

Lessons Learned from Piloting the Tool

During the pilot process, 784 cases were logged by 87 case managers across the sixteen pilot localities within the five States and the Quinault Indian Nation Tribe. Evaluations showed that State, Tribal, and county leadership from the pilot sites found the OWRA tool a comprehensive assessment with thorough questions and recommendations that helped create work opportunities for TANF participants. The standardization of assessment is critical when population is transient in nature, and they found consistency across caseworkers in terms of diagnosing untreated barriers among participants. The tool also provided a user-friendly, effective roadmap providing detailed information to guide employment planning for participants.



Additional Information and Accessing the OWRA Tool

OWRA is available to States, counties, and Tribes to host and use (within their own network) at no cost, provided as a courtesy of the Office of Family Assistance. To find out more information or download the OWRA tool, individuals can go to the TANF TechConnections Web site, <http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/tanftc>. For inquiries into upcoming technical assistance events, available training resources, and questions on how OWRA can provide you with a powerful self-sufficiency tool, please contact:

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