

**South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency (SPIPA)
TA Request No. 207
Summary of Technical Assistance**

In October 2011, Ms. Geene Felix, Program Coordinator of Client Services with the South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency (SPIPA) TANF Program submitted a request to the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network (WPTA) for assistance in providing a training for the entire SPIPA staff called “Reviving the Vision of Cultural Values and Compassion in Client Services” developed by the University of California, Davis Extension (UC Davis). The training is also referred to as “Tribal TANF Town” because it utilizes experiential learning in which participants assume roles and work through the systems that TANF clients must interact with on a daily basis. SPIPA requested this training after a few staff participated in it at the 2011 National Tribal TANF Institute (sponsored by UC Davis) in July 2011.

SPIPA is a consortium of Tribes and there are distinctive needs within each individual Tribe that compose the consortium. SPIPA provides trainings to all staff members on customer service, empathy and poverty on a continual basis; however the SPIPA leadership felt that having staff experience the TANF Town training would result in the improved customer service and staff-wide behavior change that was hoped for through other trainings. Some of the stated objectives for the training included:

- Exposing non-direct service staff to the challenges faced by clients and direct-service staff;
- Experiencing negative customer service to understand the impact it has on the client;
- Encouraging staff to be realistic about demands that are placed on clients and help the client prioritize;
- Recognizing the importance of professional boundaries;
- Fostering empathy toward client barriers; and
- Removing personal judgments, biases and pre-conceived opinions about clients and the client experience.

The Welfare Peer TA Network partnered with UC Davis to lead the event. The event was held on December 9th, 2011 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Little Creek Casino in Shelton, Washington and was facilitated by Barbara Aragon and Dr. Geni Cowan, both of UC Davis. UC Davis outlined the following key learning points for Tribal TANF Town:

○ **Learning Point #1: Providing Service with Compassion**

Empathy = enhanced understanding = greater rapport = better service delivery. Walking in the shoes of the customer/participant may provide an opportunity to increase empathy.

- **Learning Point #2: Communication and Customer Service**

Each staff member has the opportunity to be a role model. What you do, wear, how you act, what you say and how you say it are all opportunities to model behaviors expected in the workplace and community.

Each staff member has the opportunity to set the tone as to whether or not the client believes that the agency intends to be helpful. The quality of the upfront communication and service delivery of staff establishes relationships that impact client behaviors and success.

- **Learning Point #3: Mission**

Our mission is to assist participants to achieve and sustain wellness and to promote the economic, cultural and social well-being of individuals, families, communities and tribes.

- **Learning Point #4: Professionalism and Partnership**

Internal customer service and collaboration between co-workers and partners often results in better customer service, higher productivity, less stress, less client resistance and less duplication of effort. Better collaboration and mutual support directly supports staff's ability to meet the agency mission.

The training started with a prayer led by a SPIPA Tribal member, brief introductions of the facilitators, and an overview of the day's agenda. Each participant was given a role to play. Some played the part of a specific TANF client and some played the role of a specific service provider or community member.

The participants that were designated as TANF clients were provided with specific demographic information about their life, including family size, age of children, living situation, employment history and status, life stressors or current crises, and they were asked to carry around their children all day, which were represented with stuffed animals and dolls. Participants that were assigned to be a TANF client for the day were asked to walk in the shoes of a family member in the Tribal TANF system, read the summary of the "Life" they were provided, and identify the tasks they needed to complete that day, including their scheduled appointments.

Some participants were asked to serve as the staff at the various systems and organizations. These systems and organizations included a local grocery store, post office, Tribal TANF office, mental health/ domestic violence organization, substance abuse organization, housing department, school system, child care, judiciary system, health clinic, WIC office, bank, local casino, Tribal Court, child welfare office, and law enforcement. Each system had its own designated area where TANF clients would travel to for their appointments. Each location was equipped with signs, props, and instructions for the person "staffing" that location. Participants that were assigned to a station were asked to read their job description and prepare to perform the task as assigned, including using the suggested phrasing/ attitude, and distributing the identified props.

After the activity was completed, Ms. Aragon and Dr. Cowan led the approximately 70 participants in a discussion about their experience to help process the event. Based on

evaluations collected at the training, the training was very successful. Ninety-seven percent of participants felt that the training helped them to better understand their client's needs and experiences (3% did not answer the question). Ninety percent of participants felt that the training will help them perform their jobs more effectively (10% did not answer the question). Feedback from participants included statements such as:

- “The experience totally succeeded in helping me to understand things through our clients’ eyes.”
- “I learned and looked at what frustrates me with new eyes. I was humbled. Thanks.”
- “I take with me a renewed commitment to being compassionate in my work.”

Overall, the evaluation results indicated that the training was extremely helpful to participants who gained a greater understanding of what Tribal TANF clients go through and are more prepared to offer compassion and empathy towards their clients. During a debrief conversation with Mr. Clint Hackney, SPIPA Intertribal TANF Program Manager, he indicated that the training genuinely affected SPIPA staff. He explained how staff routinely refers to the training when sharing about client experiences and how they plan to approach a situation. He noted that there has been an increase in the level of empathy and understanding towards TANF clients from staff.

The Welfare Peer TA Network was pleased to partner with SPIPA and UC Davis to make this event possible.