



# Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network

Sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families

## Identifying and Addressing Learning Disabilities in the New Jersey TANF Population

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants with learning disabilities face unique challenges in progressing from welfare to financial independence. These individuals may have reading, writing or mathematical difficulties; lack organizational skills and executive functioning; and may be more likely to experience high unemployment or underemployment, all of which can hinder their ability to be successful and self-sufficient.

The Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network, as part of its ongoing mission to support the sharing of promising practices in welfare reform, joined with the State of New Jersey to focus on screening, assessment, and appropriate response to learning disabilities in the State's TANF population.

### *Introduction:*

On September 14 and 15, 2006, the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network supported a one and a half day event in New Jersey, focusing on identifying and addressing learning disabilities. Sixty-seven participants, including Federal and State agency staff and representatives from the New Jersey Departments of Social Services and Vocational Rehabilitation, One Stop Centers and local community agencies, attended the meeting.

Information describing learning disabilities and how they impact the WorkFirst environment was provided through education, peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of promising practices. Models for integrating people with learning disabilities into the workforce, as well as the legal and policy requirements relative to accommodating the special needs of TANF clients were discussed. Helpful tools were provided to participants for screening, assessing and interviewing clients, as well as to facilitate the development of local and regional action plans for immediate implementation.

In addition, the New Jersey Department of Vocational Rehabilitation presented information on their referral process and the services they provide to TANF recipients and other clients. The vital importance of community and interagency partnerships was highlighted as counties and localities move forward to integrate learning disabilities into their individual service plans. Additionally, networking sessions, interactive exercises and case studies afforded participants the opportunity to learn first-hand how to conduct screenings and assessments, as well as how to best implement the necessary accommodations for TANF clients with learning disabilities.

### *What's Inside:*

- Understanding Learning Disabilities and the Intersection with TANF
- Screening for Learning Disabilities
- Integrating and Accommodating Workers with Learning Disabilities
- Partnering and Interagency Collaboration
- Lessons to Consider when Addressing Learning Disabilities

## *Understanding Learning Disabilities and the Intersection with TANF:*

According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, a learning disability (LD) is a general term that encompasses a wide variety of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and/or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumably due to a central nervous system dysfunction and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception and social interaction may co-exist with learning disabilities.<sup>1</sup> These disorders can interfere with a broad range of skills and functions and are most frequently observable in the areas of reading, writing, and/or mathematics. Manifestations are also commonly found in attention, reasoning and processing, memory, oral communication, coordination and motor functions, social competencies and executive functioning skills such as organization, problem solving, prioritizing and self-management. It is not uncommon for individuals who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities to have other neurologically based disorders.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Facts About Learning Disabilities:***

- Most people diagnosed with LD have average or above average intelligence
- Learning disabilities often run in families
- Around 15% of the US population have an LD
- 50-80% of adult basic education students have a learning disability
- 25-40% of TANF/Safety Net participants have LD

Fifty-four million Americans, one in five, are living with at least one disability; about twenty-eight million are learning disabled.<sup>3</sup> Approximately twenty-five to forty percent of TANF and Safety Net participants have learning disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Learning disabilities are often overlooked and unidentified, as many low-income individuals enter into the welfare system without having had a formal assessment to detect a learning disability. National studies indicate that individuals who are not able to support themselves through work may be at a higher risk of having a learning disability, making it difficult for them to progress into a career path that would allow them to be independent of TANF financial assistance.<sup>5</sup> Often adults with learning disabilities are unemployed or under-employed. However, if their disability is recognized, individuals with learning disabilities can be quite successful.<sup>6</sup> TANF participants who have or are suspected of having learning disabilities will require reasonable and appropriate accommodations and modifications in the areas of education, training and employment.<sup>7</sup>

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, as well as its recent reauthorization, present new challenges to states to help welfare recipients become self-sufficient. Previous welfare-to-work programs focusing on basic skills and occupational training helped those who could progress into employment obtain higher wage jobs. Most recipients were referred to non-work related adult basic education (ABE) and were less successful in achieving employment or earnings gains. Most ABE programs did not attempt to identify the

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<sup>1</sup> National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Resource: What is a Learning Disability?

<sup>3</sup> Crawford, J. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: TANF Clients and Learning Disabilities.

<sup>4</sup> Vera, M. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: Learning About Learning Disabilities.

<sup>5</sup> Hercik, J. (2000). Peer TA Report: Identification and Development of Referral Systems for TANF Clients with Learning Disabilities.

<sup>6</sup> National Institute for Literacy (1999). Bridges to Practice: Guidebook 1, Preparing to Serve Adults with Learning Disabilities.

<sup>7</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Roundtable Resource

prevalence of learning disabilities in the populations they served. Consequently, many of these participants dropped out and did not pursue further training.<sup>8</sup>

This experience contributed to the shift away from educating and training clients toward a more “work first” approach, emphasizing rapid workforce attachment. Time limits and work requirements under TANF demand that recipients who were formally exempt or had been unsuccessful in welfare-to-work activities acquire and retain employment that will support themselves and their families. Basic skill deficiencies and learning disabilities that might prevent beneficiaries from finding and keeping a job must be addressed within the work context, merging education and employment and making special accommodations for those with learning disabilities that may preclude them from working.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the recalibration of the caseload reduction credit, provisions in the reauthorized TANF law require states to engage significantly higher percentages of their caseload in work or work preparation activities (although it maintains the original 50% caseload requirement), while adding new categories of individuals in the calculation of Federal work participation rates.

Given the renewed emphasis on universal engagement and the recent recalibration of Federal work participation rates, it is critical that TANF clients be identified and assessed as soon as possible, that appropriate referrals to vocational and educational opportunities be completed, and that necessary pre- and post-employment accommodations be made to help learning disabled individuals reach their full potential in the workplace.<sup>10</sup>

### *Screening for Learning Disabilities:*

Screening is a preliminary, systematic procedure that identifies characteristics or signs of a learning disability. It should be considered part of a complete assessment process that includes interviews, observations, surveys and reviews. Screening is not a diagnostic or clinical procedure, but should identify key elements of an individual’s learning disability, as well as their strengths and attributes. A formal evaluation, completed by a qualified professional, should be conducted in order to make an accurate and comprehensive assessment.<sup>11</sup> Screening elements should be valid and developed for use with the target TANF population and criteria for the use of the tool and protocols for maintaining the confidentiality of the results should be established prior to implementation. Staff and agencies should be prepared to address potential co-related factors, such as possible medical conditions, and provide the next level of services necessary. A vital step in providing services is for organizations to have planned in advance on how to refer

#### *New Work Requirements:*

- Education and training must be directly related to a specific job
- Participation in substance abuse, mental health and other rehabilitation services count under “job search/ job readiness”
- At least 20 hours/week of participation must come from “core” activities
- All activities used to satisfy work requirements must be supervised

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<sup>8</sup> National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices (1998). Issue Brief: Serving Welfare Recipients with Learning Disabilities in a Work First Environment.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hercik, J.

<sup>11</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: Screening for Learning Disabilities.

clients to the appropriate resources, services and activities that best suit both their needs and strengths.<sup>12</sup>

It is important that the client understands that screening activities are designed to assist them and that the information gained should be utilized effectively to determine next steps. The data should not be used to make program recommendations or to label the client.<sup>13</sup> It is also important for the caseworker to listen and observe the client, providing positive and personal feedback. Screeners should do their best to remain nonjudgmental and establish a rapport with the participant. By focusing on the positive when gathering information, staff will learn more about the individual and how to better serve him/her. In addition, it is important for the client's own empowerment and sense of agency to target the strengths and individuality of his/her case.<sup>14</sup>

In New Jersey, the *Payne Learning Needs Screening Tool* is used to screen for learning disabilities as part of the Comprehensive Social Assessment. It is a brief, oral interview developed through an intensive research project on a welfare population for the State of Washington Division of Employment and Social Services Disabilities Initiative. It is a voluntary, self-report tool that is best used during the early stages of services. There are some background questions pertaining to demographic information such as gender, age and educational attainment, followed by thirteen questions about school and life experiences that may have impacted the client's education. Scoring on these items indicates whether or not the client should be referred for additional assessment. To access the tool, [click here](#).

In New York, the *Empire State Screen: Learning Needs Screen for Spanish-Speaking Adults* was developed through a national effort evaluating four different scales. Used for screening for learning disabilities among Spanish speakers, the tool consists of eight background questions and eleven assessment questions. Scoring on these items indicates whether or not the client should be referred for additional assessment. To access the tool, [click here](#).

### ***Screening Should Identify:***

- The persistence of the condition
- The significant and consistent interference in education, training and work activities
- That the problem was not solved through education
- The extent of consistent, observable and irregular performance
- The extent of interference with critical life activities

### ***Integrating and Accommodating Workers with Learning Disabilities:***

Many individuals who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities are not very educated about their disability and may have difficulty explaining it or advocating for themselves. This lack of awareness, coupled with a lack of resources and accommodations, may lead to failure, especially in the realms of education, training and work.<sup>15</sup> Because learning disabilities are both persistent and pervasive, individuals suffering with them require a variety of support systems throughout their lives. Participants with learning disabilities need to identify and explore their strengths and weaknesses, be exposed to a variety of work environments and help in

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<sup>12</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Roundtable Resource

<sup>13</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: Screening for Learning Disabilities.

<sup>14</sup> Vera, M.

<sup>15</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Roundtable Resource

developing reasonable accommodations. A strong and well-developed support network fosters independence and self-sufficiency.<sup>16</sup>

When learning disabilities go untreated, there are serious, lifelong consequences, including a loss of self-esteem, delinquency and illiteracy. Learning disabilities are one of the most common obstacles to the employment of welfare recipients. However, when accommodations are made, there is a high probability of success in personal, academic and vocational settings. Adults with learning disabilities have many years of experience in coping with their limitations and have developed skills to help them navigate the world. Case workers need to highlight the importance of these skills and how they can be used to further advance a client's work skills and marketability.<sup>17</sup>

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a disability as a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual," listing specific learning disabilities as possible impairments and learning as a major life activity. The ADA requires that persons with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities, have access to and be accommodated in employment, transportation, public accommodations, state and local government activities, and communication.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, TANF and WorkFirst programs must ensure that individuals with disabilities are not excluded from participation in or denied the benefits of services or programs. Activities must be delivered by service providers who are accessible to individuals with disabilities; this is required in all aspects of service provision, including the application, screening and assessment process, plan development, work activities, sanctions and time limits. Adjustments can take place through advance actions that prepare programs to ensure equal access to services; it can also occur through the provision of accommodations and modifications that remove barriers and minimize the limitations created by disability.<sup>19</sup>

Accommodations are those modifications to the environment or essential functions of the program or job activities that effectively remove or minimize the barriers created by the disability. They do not replace knowledge, skills, abilities or performance requirements, but are meant to equalize one's ability to understand and perform both effectively and efficiently. Participants with disabilities can be, and have been, successful when appropriate accommodations are made. Success for an individual with a disability involves the ability to identify "goodness-of-fit," meaning that there is a positive relationship between the goals and the participant's abilities to perform and have success. The investigation to find this balance may begin with a task analysis. By comparing the strengths of the individual with the essential functions and the requirements of the task at hand, a staff member can predict the likelihood of success. Based upon the analysis of the job functions and how they match with the strengths

### ***When Learning Disabilities Go Untreated:***

- 35% of students with LD drop out of high school
- 50-80% of adults with severe literacy problems have undetected/untreated learning disabilities
- 50% of young criminal offenders were found to have undetected LD
- Up to 60% of teens in treatment for substance abuse have LD

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<sup>16</sup> Vera, M.

<sup>17</sup> Vera, M.

<sup>18</sup> LD Online. (1992). Learning Disabilities and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). [On-line] <http://www.ldonline.org/articles/9733>

<sup>19</sup> Payne, N. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: Best Practices for ADA Service Accommodations.

and abilities of the participant, an adequate assessment of whether or not modifications are needed can be made.<sup>20</sup>

If it is necessary to make service accommodations for clients with learning disabilities, an initial step is to present information in multiple ways. Combinations of oral and written, as well as picture and print materials, may be useful for clients with limited or no reading skills or those with auditory processing deficits. Services should be designed to use with or without technology. It is also important to provide the client with the time to process the information and help with interpretation if needed. Staff should also be prepared to accommodate and modify letters, mailings, phone calls, directions, forms and applications. In the workplace, additional modifications may be required. For example, giving a person one job task at a time, allowing them extra time to complete an examination or placement test or providing a job coach to answer questions. Numerous accommodations such as these can be made, often at little to no cost.

### *Examples of Service Accommodations:*

- When a job position is open, bring it to clients' attention rather than relying on them to read the posting/advertisement
- Provide a video tape for individuals with low reading skills to assist with training
- Assign a job coach to answer questions and provide support
- Use a list of job tasks with words and/or pictures to help clients stay organized and on task

For additional resources on job accommodations, visit the Job Accommodation Network sponsored by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor at <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>.

### *Partnering and Interagency Collaboration:*

In order to best serve clients with learning disabilities, it is important that all issues are addressed directly and appropriately. The surrounding community, including other government agencies, should be examined to determine what services they may offer. Caseworkers should make attempts to work with staff from other agencies to develop case plans that better serve their clients. It is critical that a team environment be encouraged, so staff have, share and utilize information about what services are currently available and where gaps may exist. By identifying additional resources as well as areas for expansion, caseworkers will be able to match their clients' strengths and needs to the appropriate services.<sup>21</sup>

One key for TANF participants with learning disabilities becoming self-sufficient is access to appropriate services and accommodations. For this to occur, programs should be linked together. In the state of New Jersey, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVR) is the lead state agency assisting individuals with disabilities in finding and maintaining jobs. Located within the Department of Labor, DVR requires a client to have a disability that interferes with his/her ability to find and maintain a job. In assisting clients, they try to view them as partners in the process. Diagnostic evaluations are provided at no cost to the client.

Following the assessment and focusing on their strengths and abilities, DVR caseworkers develop an individualized plan. A variety of services exist within the agency, ranging from

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<sup>20</sup> Payne, N. (2004) Roundtable Resource: Thoughts About Accommodations and Modifications

<sup>21</sup> Kelley, M. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: Learning Disabilities in Alameda County

vocational counseling and guidance to job search training and job placement assistance; physical assistance and tuition services to job coaching and on-the-job training. If they are necessary for job retention, follow-up services can be provided.

Despite the high level of services that can be provided for TANF clients through DVR, a disconnect remains between the agencies. Due in part to time constraints and a lack of awareness, staff do not always work together on cases, often not contacting their counterparts in other agencies or organizations. An initial step to help bridge this information and utilization gap took place during the Peer TA Roundtable event where DVR provided additional information on their eligibility standards, their screening process and the services and assistance they provide. Additionally, Project Access, a grant-funded project based out of DVR provided well-trained disability navigators who knew of available resources and accommodations to assist staff and clients in creating and implementing a work plan. Recent funding will allow for a half-time navigator in each of the One-Stop Centers. These centers are also a great strength to the New Jersey welfare system as they assist people in moving from welfare-to-work. However, further collaboration needs to occur in order to better serve the needs of the client and agencies involved.

***Strategies to Improve Interagency Collaboration:***

- Hold monthly meetings to highlight various divisions within partner agencies so staff can gain a greater understanding of available services
- Add vocational rehabilitation, substance abuse, mental health or other staff to cases as the need arises
- Case conference on a weekly basis to examine the plan together and see how to better serve the client across agencies

A representative from Alameda County, California participated in the Roundtable event, providing a front-line experience to how welfare agencies can partner with others to better serve clients. The effort began in 2000 when a state workgroup was convened and made policy recommendations on how to integrate learning disabilities into case planning and management. Screenings for learning disabilities were made mandatory, as was the inclusion of learning disabilities evaluations in any work plan. Assessments are now shared across counties and used to determine the appropriateness of job activities. Recommendations from professional evaluators are made in layman's language, enhancing the usability among agency staff. In assuring that all of the client's issues are dealt with, such as child care or transportation, it is important that all potential barriers are identified. Together with on-site staff, off-site staff, diagnostic partners, community-based organizations, and private contractors, reasonable accommodations can be made for services that meet the needs of the client. A key to bringing all these partners together was to develop a rapport between staff and become familiar with other agency's resources. As this culture of cooperation was built, contracts and MOUs were developed to help propel the institutionalization of collaboration.<sup>22</sup>

*Bridges to Practice: A Research-Based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities* was designed to facilitate programs in developing a systematic approach to learning disabilities, taking programs from preparation and planning to client assessment and instruction. *Program Quality Indicators for TANF Agencies*, developed to accompany the guidebooks, can be used as a general tool to measure a programs current level of preparation

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<sup>22</sup> Kelley, M. (2006). Peer TA Roundtable Presentation: Learning Disabilities in Alameda County

to serve learning disabled clients as well as to assess progress in the context of training and systematic change.<sup>23</sup> To access the indicators, [click here](#).

### *Lessons to Consider when Addressing Learning Disabilities:*

- ❖ The word “disability” often has a negative connotation; by focusing on a client’s strengths and abilities, he/she can be empowered to succeed. Individuals with learning disabilities are unique. Their disorder is life-long, but the condition is manageable with the development of compensating coping skills. However, if the disability is ignored, the accommodations and modifications that may be necessary for success will not be supplied. Screening and assessing the client and then developing and providing the kinds of programs that will assist him/her are critical steps towards self-sufficiency.
- ❖ Many clients, especially those who have been in the system for years, may face multiple barriers, including mental health, substance abuse, and child abuse and neglect, in addition to learning disabilities. When trying to address co-occurring issues, it is important to understand the predominance of learning disabilities and the impact they can have on all aspects of life. Work with the client and take small steps.
- ❖ Examine and inform agency staff about learning disabilities and their impact on TANF clients through research; don’t focus on anecdotal evidence or rumors. Train staff to recognize, screen and accommodate learning disabilities. Agencies should make attempts to change the way staff and the community think about and react to learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities are often overlooked and unidentified among the welfare population, making it more difficult for them to become independent of TANF financial assistance. However, if their disability is recognized, individuals with learning disabilities can be quite successful. Following this critical assessment, appropriate referrals to vocational and educational opportunities must be completed, as well as any necessary accommodations to help learning disabled individuals reach their full potential in the workplace. Change will take time, but through education and the development of partnerships, learning disabilities can be integrated into individual service plans that better serve the clients, the agencies and the community.

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<sup>23</sup> Sherman, D. (2003). Bridges to Practice: Program Quality Indicators for Agencies Providing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).