



MECKLENBURG COUNTY
Department of Social Services
Economic Services Division
The Wallace H. Kuralt Centre

March 27, 2023

United States House of Representatives
The Honorable Darin LaHood
Chairman, Subcommittee on Work and Welfare
Committee on Ways and Means
1139 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman LaHood,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the current Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program from my perspective as a Social Worker Supervisor in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. In my current role I manage a team of social workers with active caseloads. I am also responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and implementing current TANF processes. The following written remarks describe our engagement approach, measurement challenges, observations, and success, based on my front line and supervisory experiences.

Universal Engagement and Process

The Mecklenburg County Department of Community Resources through the Work First Employment Services Program provides social work services to eligible participants of the TANF program. Our County is in one of the nine states that delegate TANF administration, including Maintenance of Effort (MOE) requirements, to counties. These services include removing barriers to employment such as assisting with referrals and connection to community resources such as housing, behavioral / physical health, substance use, food, transportation, childcare, and other daily needs.

Each participant is engaged in an initial assessment in which a Personal Information Form is used to gather pertinent information regarding the customer's family, educational, health, and employment

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background. A mutual responsibility agreement (MRA) is completed with participants that indicates activities the participant is required to complete to receive their monthly benefits and the actions the social worker will take to assist the customer in reaching their full potential within the program. The MRA outlines the required hours the participant must complete each month which correlates with the required monthly rate. The MRA also specifically spells out the hours required each week along with the participant's assigned component. For example: on the MRA an L-code (family with children ages 5 and under) plan will denote 30-hours/week of job search / job readiness and notate in the comments what partner agency the participant is assigned to or if they are assigned to individually job search.

Program Measurement Challenges

The Work First program currently uses a participation rate to measure the success of participants within the program. The Work First customer must participate in a set number of core components including independent job search, job readiness classes, vocational training, work experience, and other activities regulated through State and Federal guidelines. Measuring a participant's performance by the number of hours completed only provides data for half the story. For instance, a customer can job search for eighty-six hours a month and meet the rate but remain unable to obtain a job to support their family. Focusing on the rate as the only means of measurement for success within the Work First program removes the human aspect of the program.

Participants in the program are often overcoming immense obstacles, such as trauma, homelessness, mental and physical health issues, substance use issues, and yet are required to fully participate in the program, and meet the rate, immediately after being approved to receive Work First benefits. The current participation rate does not measure comprehensive family success. It does not measure a customer successfully completing substance abuse treatment and family unification, nor does the participation rate measure a family securing housing to stabilize their family to be able to work. These types of actions by a participant indicate successful movement towards self-sustainability.

Many individuals enter the TANF program ready to immediately participate in employment activities with little to no barriers and may simply need assistance with connecting to job leads, vocational training, etc. These individuals once assessed and deemed work ready are placed into activities such as vocational training courses or educational courses to obtain a certification within a specific field. However, as mentioned previously, there are participants who have barriers that need to be addressed prior to becoming employment ready. Unfortunately, these participants are required to meet the monthly mandatory participation rate while at the same time having to address their barriers towards stability. This can be stressful for participants resulting in them being unable to fully participate in the program.

Mandatory Participation Rate Challenges

Having a mandatory participation rate can hinder a family from becoming successful when the focus is only on work related activities and neglects the family's mental and physical well-being. The participation rate does not motivate or encourage our customers to secure jobs with living wages or employment with stability. The participation rate places stress on customers to find a job quickly and

many accept low paying jobs as a short-term solution. This often leads to customers returning to the program after a job loss with more pressure to secure a “job” and less time to participate in job training opportunities through the TANF program.

Component Effectiveness Challenges

Another struggle within the TANF program is the effectiveness of the TANF components. The components are arranged between countable and noncountable activities. Some of these countable activities can only be used for a short period of time. For example: a TANF participant is only allowed to complete two hundred-forty hours of job Search / job readiness activities within a twelve-month period. Capping the amount of job search / job readiness hours available to a customer does not benefit participants in a downward economy or an individual who has limited educational or employment skill sets. Substance Use Treatment (after job search hours are exhausted), General Education Diploma (GED), and other components that will assist families with overcoming barriers to employment are considered non-countable towards the rate. Therefore, families are progressing towards a better outcome by participating in these activities, however, this progress is unable to be used towards participation rate metrics.

Challenges for Social Workers

Social workers are evaluated on a yearly basis. One of the areas that is evaluated is the ability of social workers to get their customers to meet the State and Federal participation rate guidelines. Each month the agency calculates how many TANF participants meet the rate and whether 50% of all families and 90% of two parents have successfully met the rate. Social workers can feel pressured to place customers in other countable activities once the customer has run out of job search / job readiness hours even though the customers may still need assistance in areas that falls within the job search / job readiness component.

To best serve our customers some social workers may resolve to “take a hit” knowing that their customer will not meet the monthly rate, however, the customer is participating in an activity that will eventually lead to stability for the entire family and provide the customer with the ability eventually to fully participate in the Work First.

Observations

Statistical measurements of the Work First program would benefit from focusing on tangible successes of participants rather than a set number or rate. These tangible successes could include the measurement of the number of participants who obtain employment within a set period time from their entrance into the Work First program.

Participants who successfully complete vocational training or increase their educational status while participating in the TANF program would be a more accurate measurement of the success of the program. These efforts directly show that applicants are indeed participating in the Work First program and have obtained a tangible skill that will enhance their employment opportunities while directly correlating to the success of the family. These activities will still allow participants to complete hourly

work requirement however will focus more on their achievement rather than their ability to complete a set rate per month.

Success within the Work First program hinges on the integrated wrap-around services provided to participants. Participants who enter the Work First program are assigned to partner agencies to assist them with such activities as resume writing, learning skills on how to communicate in the workplace, workplace etiquette, money management, self-esteem building, and various other techniques. These techniques assist the participate with understanding workplace expectations.

Within Mecklenburg County, integrated services are provided to county citizens through Community Resource Centers. These Centers provide a central location to access such services as Child Support Services, the Workforce Development program (upward mobility), Veteran Services, Homeless Services, Financial Assistance, Adult and Child protective services, Community Social Work, and Public Health Services.

Other community partners that Work First participants can be referred to include the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Acts program (WIOA) through NCWorks which offers job leads and financial support for participants to obtain certifications in in-demand occupations such as construction, HVAC, fiber optics, medical coding, and other industry leading vocations. These trainings are specific to the needs of the employers within Mecklenburg County and therefore will result in Work First participants obtaining sustainable employment. Work First program also partners with the local Community College which provides a wealth of classes, training, and certificate programs that Work First participants can enroll in and gain direct training that will assist them in obtaining employment.

Although it is known that participating in a vocational training or job readiness program will assist a participant with moving toward self-sufficiency, often participants are unable to participate due to having exhausted job readiness or vocational training hours are placed in an activity that is not beneficial to their financial growth simply to meet the rate.

Success Stories

A 25-year-old mother of one applied for TANF assistance in January 2022. The customer was seeking financial assistance, assistance securing employment and childcare. The customer was approved for \$236 in TANF funding which is the standard monthly benefit for a household size of two. The customer had little family support and reported relocating to the city to find better job opportunities. Her career focus was on health care, customer service and clerical. She received assistance from a Work First Employment social worker. After assessing her situation, she was assisted with childcare, mileage reimbursement and connected to a mental health professional. The customer participated in job readiness and job search assistance through NC Works/EQUUS. She was successful in addressing her mental health needs and secured full-time employment earning \$22 per hours or \$42,000 per year.

A 32-year-old mother of two applied for TANF in 2021. The customer was justice involved and was seeking financial assistance, childcare, employment, and mental health services. She was assessed by a Work First Social worker and assisted with securing childcare, bus passes, and mental health services.

Upon customer's participation in counseling, she secured the strength to seek employment. The customer was connected to the Center for Communities in Transition for specialized assistance for those that are justice involved. This program provided customer with job preparation classes, Working Smart, and networking skills. She successfully secured employment upon graduation from the program as an assistant manager earning \$23 per hour or \$44,160.

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Thank you,



Shakirah Francis

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Shakirah Francis is an Employment Services Social Work Supervisor within the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services Employment Services Division and has been employed with the County since January 2012. Shakirah holds a Bachelor of Social Work Degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A&T) and a Master of Social Work Degree from the Joint Master of Social Work program between University of North Carolina Greensboro and NC A&T. In her first role with the County, Shakirah worked directly with TANF customers as a Work First Employment social worker assisting families with removing barriers and moving them towards self-sufficiency.

Shakirah was promoted to Quality and Training Specialist within the Employment Services Division in 2016 where she developed trainings, trained new social workers on the Work First Employment Services program while maintaining a Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) caseload. Shakirah was promoted to Social Worker Supervisor in 2022 and supervises social workers. As an Employment Social Work Supervisor, she reviews, analyzes, and revises current Work First processes to ensure the agency continues to meet the needs of participants while simultaneously meeting the goals outlined by State and Federal policies.