

## Strategies for Engaging Adults in Welfare-to-Work Programs

**Reader Note:** The essential feature of a literature review is its identification of the most recent, relevant, and rigorous research in order to categorize what is known, to date, about an area of interest. It focuses on the past in order to inform the future. It does not address the present in which emerging and promising practices are being implemented by practitioners. These current practices do not yet have the benefit of either formal evaluations or the availability of published reports on the nature of the activities, lessons learned, or research findings. As a result, a literature review is designed to foster critical thinking about current practices, but it is not designed to stop or derail current efforts to experiment with new approaches designed to meet the needs of children and families in areas where research is lacking.

A specific kind of search strategy was used for this review. Formal published and unpublished research studies were identified through a structured process that involved predetermined search terms and research resources. This type of review facilitates a more thorough and less biased selection of materials than does a standard narrative literature review (A detailed description of the search strategy is provided in the full report available at [www.bassc.net](http://www.bassc.net)).

### Introduction

States have become increasingly concerned about the work participation rates of TANF participants. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which replaced the cash assistance program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with block grants from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), mandated that states engage 50 percent of all families and 90 percent of two-parent families in specified work or work-related activities. Until recently, states have met all or most of their federal work participation rates. A number of states, including California, used loopholes in the federal law to fulfill their requirements. In 2006, however, Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA), reauthorizing the TANF block grant program through 2010. In addition to tightening the regulations, the DRA expanded work participation standards for families receiving TANF, putting increased pressure on states to meet stricter participation rate requirements. Although the actual rates of required participation did not change, the calculation of those rates changed to include additional categories of people in the denominator of the rate calculation. If states fail to meet these requirements or make adequate progress, they will face potentially severe federal fiscal sanctions.

The intent behind participation requirements in welfare-to-work programs is to alter TANF participants' perceptions and behaviors in several ways.<sup>1</sup> First, participation requirements convey to participants that welfare is no longer an open-ended universal entitlement. If capable, individuals must work in order to receive benefits. Second, participation requirements reduce the value of welfare benefits in comparison to that of employment income. Participation mandates support the labor-force attachment approach by

encouraging participants to find employment as soon as possible. The alternative is to enroll in the time-consuming process of program activities and requirements that are designed to be a less desirable route. Third, they motivate some people who normally would not participate in activities to do so in order to improve their employment skills and increase self-sufficiency. In addition to conveying these messages to participants, Congress made clear to the states that the federal government would hold states accountable for making progress in moving TANF participants from dependence on cash aid to self-sufficiency through employment by passing the DRA.

Given the increasing urgency to meet federal work requirements among TANF participants, the purpose of this structured review is to present the major findings of studies on engagement strategies for the welfare-to-work population. A review of engagement strategies can provide administrators with an understanding of innovative programs to assist them in meeting participation requirements and helping families to reach self-sufficiency.

### ***Factors Influencing Limited Participation or Non-Participation***

While some participants are readily willing to participate in program activities, others may be more difficult to engage for a variety of reasons. Many adults receiving TANF face barriers that prevent them from obtaining or maintaining a steady job.<sup>2</sup> Barriers may include factors such as substance abuse, poor mental health and physical health, disability, low educational attainment, limited work experience, limited English proficiency, low basic skills, economic/resources issues such as difficulty finding childcare, and domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> Participants who have one or more barriers, often described as “hard to employ” or “hard to serve,” have difficulty finding and sustaining work, therefore causing them to rely on TANF assistance for long periods of time. For example, a Utah study found that 92% of long-time TANF families have one or more substantial barriers; 37% were found to have four barriers.<sup>4</sup> As overall caseloads decline, participants with multiple barriers to employment make up a larger proportion of the remaining cases and require additional efforts to engage them in welfare-to-work activities and extra assistance in finding employment.

Institutional and structural barriers to participation include lack of access to welfare-to-work programs, long-term employment opportunities, health care benefits, and childcare. Other related factors include high

housing costs, insufficient transportation assistance, and discrimination.<sup>5</sup> The welfare system may be overwhelming to immigrants and non-natives who recently became citizens, complicating attempts to navigate the variety of available social services. Difficulty understanding and navigating the welfare system can further lead to insufficient outreach or inaccurate communication of crucial information and may also create barriers and distrust of governmental agencies.<sup>6</sup> For example, undocumented or recent legal immigrants may be hesitant to access certain services such as food stamps or TANF on behalf of their children due to concerns about legal and immigration consequences.<sup>7</sup> Access to education is also an issue for many immigrants and non-native people. The Urban Institute reported that 69% of non-native TANF adult participants do not have a high school degree or GED as compared to 37% of native adult participants.<sup>8</sup> Low levels of education make it difficult to find adequate-paying jobs.

Contributing to the barriers to employment are language barriers faced by immigrants and non-native citizens, many of whom speak little or no English. Limited English proficiency can limit the types of jobs available to immigrant and non-native TANF participants, thereby limiting their earning potential. Huang (2002) cites a study conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office reporting that adults speaking limited or no English in Los Angeles and New York had a 34% higher poverty rate than immigrant adults who speak English in those cities. TANF participants with limited education, work experience and English skills are concentrated in low-wage industries such as the service, food service, light manufacturing, and low-skilled healthcare sectors.<sup>9</sup> Average monthly earnings for a worker with limited English proficiency is \$355, considerably less than the \$545 that English speakers make per month.

In addition to institutional and language barriers, many TANF participants also have personal barriers preventing them from obtaining secure job placements. Personal barriers such as depression or anxiety, stressful events, alcohol and drug use, exposure to domestic violence, and poor health conditions are important predictors of not working.<sup>10</sup> A survey of California TANF participants found that 21% to 23% of respondents self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, or a recent stressful event within the past year that interfered with their ability to work, care for children, or attend school.<sup>11</sup> The same survey found that 11% of respondents experienced domestic violence while 31% had a physical health condition preventing them from work-

ing. Only 4.6% of respondents stated that drug and alcohol use impeded their ability to work.

Structural/institutional barriers, language barriers, and personal barriers may significantly impact the ability of TANF participants to meet welfare-to-work requirements. These barriers must be taken into consideration when trying to engage this population and assist them in obtaining self-sufficiency. Particularly given that TANF participants with multiple barriers will make up a larger proportion of the remaining cases, engagement strategies must reflect an understanding of the effect of obstacles to employment.

Given that welfare caseloads have decreased drastically since welfare reform, it can be reasonably assumed that those who currently remain on welfare have more significant barriers that prevent them from leaving assistance, hence their categorization of “hard-to-employ.” Indeed, the United States Government Accountability Office (2001) speculates that the TANF participants who could easily find and keep jobs have left welfare, leaving those with characteristics that impede employment to make up the remaining welfare caseload. These participants will face increasing pressure from welfare-to-work programs to meet requirements. Hamilton (2002) found that participants who had significant barriers are more likely to be sanctioned in welfare-to-work programs. The study found that more disadvantaged TANF participants had a higher likelihood of sanctions that lasted longer than less disadvantaged TANF participants. This may be due to the fact that more disadvantaged people remain on welfare longer, augmenting the amount of time during which non-compliance could occur and increasing the chances of being sanctioned. While there may be some evidence of contradictory results to these findings,<sup>12</sup> the importance of engaging all TANF participants, whether they are considered hard-to-employ or not, remains a significant concern for states.

In order to better assist hard-to-employ TANF participants, engagement strategies must be evaluated for their effectiveness in moving hard-to-employ participants from welfare to work. The remainder of this report discusses the major findings on engagement strategies in the current literature.

### **Major Findings**

In light of the Deficit Reduction Act, engagement strategies have become a major concern of administrators who are working to increase participation in work or work-related activities. While increasing employment and decreasing TANF participation are the broad

goals of welfare-to-work agencies, little is known about approaches and strategies used by programs with high participation rates. A study of engagement strategies involving multiple sites throughout the U.S found that relatively few states or counties have specific strategies in place to engage all or most TANF participants in work or work-related activities.<sup>13</sup> In addition, programs that do have the goal of engaging TANF participants in federally allowable activities have different approaches to achieving this goal. Knowledge of other state and local strategies used to engage TANF participants is useful to share with programs that have similar participation goals. This section describes findings from national studies conducted to identify ways to promote participation in welfare-to-work programs. While some of the findings are from the only experimental study available, others have been documented from non-experimental studies using data such as case studies, administrative data, and program experiences.<sup>14</sup>

The National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS) analyzed the effectiveness of eleven mandatory welfare-to-work programs in seven cities: Atlanta, Georgia; Columbus, Ohio; Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Portland, Oregon; and Riverside, California.<sup>15</sup> Beginning in 1989 and lasting through March 2002, this longitudinal study examined programs implemented under the previous national welfare program, AFDC, which was replaced by TANF. Because both welfare programs maintain the goal of moving participants from welfare to work, the legislation change from AFDC to TANF does not affect the results of the study. As a part of the study, comparisons between different types of program approaches were used to analyze their effectiveness of preparing TANF participants for employment. In addition, data from the NEWWS study can be used to examine successful strategies that programs throughout the country have used to engage TANF participants in welfare-to-work activities.

Programs can be differentiated by their approach to employment, namely the labor force attachment (LFA) approach or the human capital development approach (HCD). The effects of the LFA and the HCD approaches were compared in three sites (Atlanta, Grand Rapids, and Riverside) to determine the effects on TANF participants’ preparation for employment. Figure 1 is a conceptual map that depicts the differences between a program approach, program models, and engagement strategies. Programs may take the LFA approach or the HCD approach to assist participants to transition from welfare to work. The LFA approach

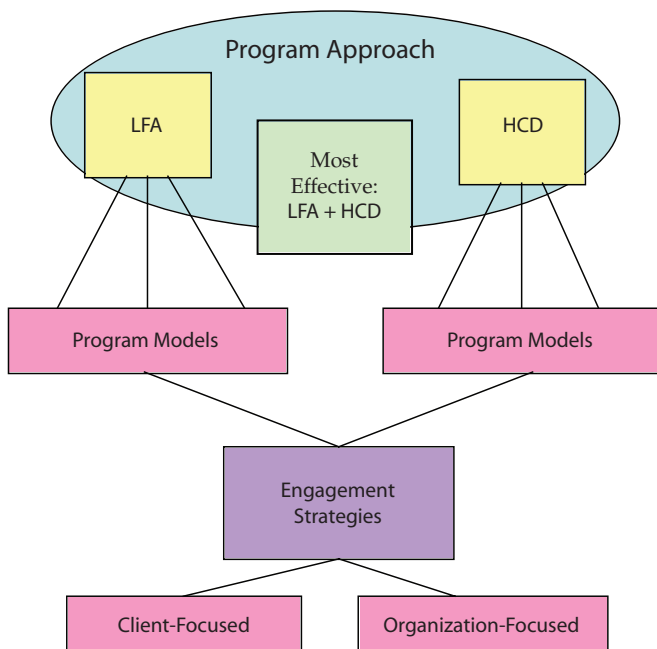
encourages participants to obtain employment as soon as possible, accepting jobs that may pay low wages or may not be a suitable match of interests. This approach is based on the assumption that participants can develop work habits and skills with on-the-job learning to advance themselves. In the HCD approach, individuals are encouraged to participate in education services and skills training before they begin employment. The assumption behind this approach is that participants will be more qualified and prepared to obtain and maintain a job and keep the job longer. The most effective program approach incorporates elements of both the LFA and the HCD approaches.<sup>16</sup>

Program models are different ways in which programs can implement their approach. For example, programs that use the LFA approach to focus on employment can incorporate paid and unpaid work experience or job-related supports into their program models. Programs using the HCD approach to focus on training and education can use a mentorship model to help participants learn from the experiences of their peers. Specific engagement strategies can be used to recruit and retain participants in programs that implement different models from either approach.

### Engagement Strategies

A number of client-focused and organization-focused engagement strategies can be implemented in

Figure 1: Relationship between Program Approaches, Program Models, and Engagement Strategies



the context of different program approaches and models. In order to meet federal requirements, TANF participants must be engaged in one of the following activities to be counted in the numerator of the federal participation rate:

- Unsubsidized employment;
- Subsidized private sector employment;
- Subsidized public sector employment;
- Work experience;
- On-the-job training;
- Job search and job readiness assistance for up to six weeks a year;
- Community service programs;
- Vocational educational training for up to twelve months;
- Providing child care services to an individual who is participating in a community service program.

Other federally approved activities include:

- Job skills training directly related to employment;
- Education directly related to employment;
- Satisfactory attendance at secondary school or in a course of study leading to a GED.

These last three activities count in the participation rate calculation only after the first 20 hours.

In addition to the 12 federally approved activities, states can choose to engage participants in activities that are not considered in the federal rate calculations but are allowable under state or county program rules. While these activities can vary by state, examples of these activities include physical or mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence counseling, and child welfare services.

Kauf and colleagues (2004) found that more TANF participants are engaged in welfare-to-work activities than federal participation rates suggest. However, these participants may not be fully participating (i.e., meeting federal participation requirements) for several reasons. Using administrative data from El Paso County, Colorado and Utah, Kauf and colleagues found that the majority of TANF participants (90 percent and 82 percent, respectively) are assigned to participate in program activities. However, a significant proportion of these participants are assigned to activities that are not counted in the federal participation rate calculation. For example, in a typical month in El Paso County, the proportion of participants assigned to non-federally allowable activities is 44% and in Utah the proportion is

62%, while about 6% of participants are assigned to a combination of allowable and non-federal activities for both study sites in a typical month. Forty-six percent of cases in El Paso County and 20 percent of cases in Utah are assigned to allowable-only activities.

The study also found that, of the participants who are assigned to activities, most actually participate for the majority of the time they are assigned. In other words, the study found that individuals do participate in their assigned activities, however, they may not participate fully enough to meet the federal requirements. In El Paso County, individuals participate for about 70 percent of the time they are assigned (there is no data available for actual participation hours in Utah). These findings suggest that most participants who are assigned to program activities do indeed participate; however, a significant number of cases are assigned to non-federal activities or combine non-federal with federal activities. This scenario precludes these cases from the federal participation rate either because they are not engaged in one of the 12 approved activities or because they are not involved in one of these 12 activities for the minimum number of required hours.

Beyond administrative issues related to assignment of welfare-to-work activities, the literature identifies a variety of specific engagement strategies that may be helpful to administrators who aim to engage TANF participants. Strategies identified in the literature aim to engage individuals who are not participating in work or work-related activities as well as individuals who participate, but not to the full extent.

Engagement strategies can be grouped into two different categories: 1) client-focused strategies that focus on case management to encourage participation, and 2) organization-focused strategies designed to increase engagement. Client-focused strategies are services that staff provide to better assist and encourage

participants to participate in work or work-related activities. Organization-focused strategies are administrative strategies that organizations can implement to increase engagement. Examples of client-focused and organization-focused strategies are summarized in Table 1.

**Client-Focused Strategies.** Studies on welfare-to-work programs and engagement strategies indicate that most successful programs have a high degree of case management from the beginning of the case.<sup>17</sup> Initial comprehensive assessments are critical to identify immediate service needs, determine participants' capacity to work, and to identify any special intensive needs.<sup>18</sup> By conducting thorough initial assessments, case managers can identify any immediate needs participants may have that would interfere with their participation in work or work-related activities. For example, intake workers can screen participants by asking questions about basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, and clothing), transportation, or child care. Appropriate resources and referrals are given to participants once this knowledge is obtained to ensure that barriers to employment are addressed.

Alternatively, comprehensive assessments can be conducted after the initial job search process. Participants who are unable to find a job after a specified amount of time can be further assessed to identify barriers that may impede participants from finding employment. Hamilton and Scrivener (1999) describe programs that thoroughly assess clients who do not find employment after they engage in initial activities. These clients are assessed more carefully and may be assigned to other activities that may be more helpful in assisting them to find jobs. This could include counseling or short-term training. By assessing clients who are unable to find employment after engaging in initial activities, programs can focus on providing additional

Table 1: Summary of Engagement Strategies by Category

<b>Client-Focused Strategies</b>	<b>Organization-Focused Strategies</b>
Comprehensive Assessments Individualized Service Planning Access to Other Services	Identifying Potential Participants Emphasizing Outreach Efforts Defining Broad and Flexible Activities Communicating a Clear, Consistent Message Sanctioning for Non-Compliance Tracking Participation Setting Performance Standards

services specifically to those who demonstrate a need for further assistance.

Comprehensive assessments, whether conducted initially or after job search attempts, can also be used to match participants with appropriate work activities. These assessments can be formal tools developed to determine participants' interests, education, job skills, work history, and barriers to employment, or they can be in the form of informal conversations during which case managers use their professional experience to gather information. Results of the assessment can be used to identify employment goals, match appropriate placements, and connect participants to other resources and services they may need (i.e., child care, transportation, etc). This will enable the case to move more quickly and smoothly as case managers place participants in suitable work and work-related activities.

Comprehensive assessments further detect more complex barriers to employment such as mental health issues, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic violence, or learning problems. Once identified, clinical diagnoses and treatment plans are created so that participants receive appropriate services. Services can be provided in a variety of ways depending on the resources and priorities of the counties and states. Kauf and colleagues (2004) found that in Utah, El Paso County, and Montgomery County, participants are screened by specialists to assess for specific barriers such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, and learning disabilities either during orientation or during case-planning interviews. Specialists then report back to the case manager with an in-depth evaluation. In other sites, case managers make referrals to specialists for an assessment only if they have reason to suspect that participants are at-risk of these barriers to employment. Thorough comprehensive assessments are helpful when developing an individualized service plan that will meet the specific needs of the participants.

Case managers play an important role in individualized case planning as they help participants develop employment plans to move them from welfare to work. Kauf et al. (2004) found that programs that sought to engage all participants in work activities used three approaches to create employment plans to meet the needs of participants: 1) work-focused, client-centered approach to case management, 2) regular and frequent contact with participants, and 3) formal processes for encouraging progress toward self-sufficiency.

The work-focused, client-centered emphasis to case management advocates that economic indepen-

dence is based on work and that the work capacity of each participant varies. Thus, in order to transition people to work, employment plans must be created to meet participants' needs and make the most of participants' strengths. In order to create effective employment plans, case managers must be innovative and client-specific when addressing barriers to work, allowing participants to set their own goals, and including the needs of the family unit when creating case plans. In addition, an integrated approach to case management can better assist participants' employment needs by providing them with one case worker who has broad information about programs and access to resources. Integrated case management has been shown to have positive outcomes. For example, a two-year study of mandatory welfare-to-work programs in Columbus, Ohio found that clients receiving integrated case management had significantly higher rates of participation in program activities and lower welfare payments but had similar employment rates and earnings to clients who received traditional case management.<sup>20</sup>

Regular and frequent contact between case managers and participants in individualized case planning can motivate participants to engage in program activities. Either over the phone or in person, case managers can check in with participants on any eligibility changes, progress on employment goals, additional resources or supports that may be needed, or any other issue that may interfere with program activities. In a study of full engagement strategies, Kauf et al. (2004) found that case managers in four of the seven sites are required to contact the participants on their caseloads at least once a month. The case managers in these sites had relatively low caseloads (ranging from 40 to 80 in Wisconsin to 70 to 90 in El Paso County).<sup>21</sup> Other sites required case managers to contact participants every 90 days or every six months, depending on caseloads.

The third component of individualized case planning is the monitoring of the progress of participants toward employment. In order to move participants forward in their employment goals, several approaches were found in different study sites.<sup>22</sup> In Wisconsin, for example, an incremental approach is taken where case-workers slowly move participants from a low amount of work requirements and high levels of support, to higher work requirements and lower levels of support. Similarly, Riverside County, California moves participants through phases depending on the progress of their employment plan. In Oswego County, staff meetings are convened to determine cases that are making progress and cases that need more support.

Embedded in individualized case planning are formal processes for encouraging participants toward self-sufficiency. This can be done initially by assisting participants to identify their skills and strengths. Once identified, case managers and participants can work together to create and focus on realistic goals. To encourage participants to create clear employment goals, case managers can take participants on tours of work sites, organize sessions for employees from different fields to talk about their jobs, or create shadowing opportunities or internships for participants that expose them to different fields so they have a better idea of the types of employment available to them or that they may like.<sup>23</sup> When employment goals are identified, case managers can help participants set realistic short-term goals that are consistent with their long-term objectives.

Peer relations can also be influential in motivating participants. By creating an environment in which participants can encourage each other and learn from one another, participants can motivate each other to continue participating in programs. Welfare-to-work programs can facilitate group activities, organize mentor programs, or create support groups, all of which can increase participation and improve program outcomes.<sup>24</sup> By creating formal processes to encourage progress, case managers are better able to assist participants to successfully achieve their employment goals while building self-esteem and giving participants a feeling of accomplishment.

In addition to providing comprehensive assessments and individualized service planning, programs should provide participants with access to an array of other services they may need during their participation in work and work-related activities. According to several studies, childcare and transportation are consistent barriers that individuals face when participating in welfare-to-work activities.<sup>25</sup> Childcare assistance has been a highly influential factor in participation in programs. For example, in the NEWS study of different welfare-to-work sites, 6 percent of Riverside county participants reported that they did not participate in work programs because they did not have access to adequate childcare or any childcare at all.<sup>26</sup> Transportation has also been a limiting factor to participants. Since the PRWORA does not require states and counties to provide transportation assistance, participants have found it difficult to commute to program sites or work due to the geographic locations where participants live and where jobs are available.<sup>27</sup>

In order to assist participants with childcare, transportation, and other needs, counties have made an effort to locate TANF agencies with “one-stop” centers or employment service providers, specialized service providers, and formal interagency collaborations. One-stop centers improve access to employment and training resources by taking advantage of existing resources in the community. Participants benefit from readily available services located in one location at one-stop centers. For example, Montgomery County’s Department of Job and Family Services is nationally recognized as one of the leading one-stop centers in the country.<sup>28</sup> The Department is located in the Job Center which houses more than 50 agencies that provide employment and work assistance, education and training programs, and other community-based services for people looking for jobs.

Locating welfare offices near specialized treatment providers allows case managers to refer hard-to-employ participants to services that address personal and family obstacles. Treatment providers can specialize in mental health treatment, substance abuse and domestic violence programs, learning disabilities and other problems. Locating welfare offices near specialized treatment providers not only benefits case managers, but also participants who may have difficulty getting to services or trying to find services on their own. This improves participants’ access to resources and services while reducing the travel time needed to access services because they are conveniently located in close proximity of one another, however it does not guarantee utilization.

Interagency collaboration can also improve participants’ access to services as agencies share policy and program information to identify “best practices” in service delivery, program strategies that promote efficiency, and expand accessibility of existing services.<sup>29</sup> For example, the El Paso County Community Partnership Group consists of 40 to 50 agencies that meet quarterly to talk about ways to improve service provision and coordination among service providers. These meetings last for half a day and are led by professional facilitators. TANF agency staff who attend meetings share the information learned from these meetings with case managers who pass on the resources to their clients.

Client-focused case management strategies direct attention to barriers to work, employment and other motivational factors that can encourage full participation in work or work-related activities. Such strategies attend to individual client concerns such as barriers to employment and resources issues. Organization-

focused strategies, while maintaining the same goal of work engagement, aim to mobilize administrative resources to engage clients.

**Organization-Focused Strategies.** A variety of internal organizational strategies have been implemented to assist administrators in engaging participants in welfare-to-work activities. Organization-focused strategies are administrative procedures that aim to increase engagement among participants. Unlike client-focused strategies that are generally services provided for participants to motivate and encourage participation, organization-focused strategies are used within organizations to achieve broad engagement. The following strategies have been described in the literature as administrative practices to increase engagement: identifying potential participants, emphasizing outreach efforts, defining broad and flexible requirements, communicating a clear and consistent message, sanctioning for non-compliance, and tracking participation in program activities.

One of the first strategies administrators should consider is determining the range of their efforts by clearly defining “participant” and identifying potential participants and the period of time over which participation will be measured. This is important in determining the scope of individuals who will be involved and how much time will be needed to engage these individuals. In some states, all adults receiving TANF assistance are required to participate in program activities while in other states, some people are exempt. Programs can rely on staff members to identify mandatory participants or they can use automated systems to determine mandatory individuals. Other programs have taken additional steps to identify potential participants. For example, in the NEWWS study,<sup>30</sup> the Grand Rapids site employed a “case finder” to periodically review the status of TANF participants and contact them to schedule orientations to participate in mandatory programs. While this strategy is time consuming and costly, it compensated for the shortcomings of their automated tracking system.

Identifying potential participants and determining participation requirements will help shape the outreach effort needed to engage the participants. A strong outreach effort ensures that participants who need to participate in work or work-related programs are informed about program expectations and the benefits of participation. Programs that use a variety of outreach methods can potentially have higher success rates in engaging participants. While income maintenance workers communicating with clients in person and through the mail

have been effective in recruiting participants, more proactive measures can be taken to engage participants. In the NEWWS evaluation, The Grand Rapid and Riverside sites used letters, home visits, and repeated follow-up contacts to encourage participants to sign up for orientation. Both sites had a high rate of participants show up at orientations as a result: 65% in Grand Rapids and 63% in Riverside.<sup>31</sup> Box 1 describes a similarly proactive approach that the New Hope Program in Wisconsin took to engage a large number of participants in its welfare-to-work program.<sup>32</sup>

Developing outreach materials in multiple languages that are short, direct, visually engaging, and can be easily understood by people with a range of educational backgrounds can also help reach out to participants who are not fully participating or participating at all. Keeping the language simple and the messages concise increases the chance that participants will read the information and understand it more clearly. This in turn will make them more inclined to follow through. Hamilton and Scrivener (1999) suggest that sentences be limited to no more than 10 words, avoid words with more than three syllables, use an active voice, and keep away from acronyms and complicated welfare terminology.

### **Box 1: The New Hope Program**

The New Hope program in Milwaukee has been successful in engaging participants. The program sent letters to targeted groups who were likely to be eligible for employment services, including those on public assistance. They conducted community outreach to local social service agencies, churches, and other community groups. Consistent exposure in the community increased New Hope’s presence and resulted in a steady flow of participants in the program. In addition, New Hope hired staff to hand out flyers in public places, used the local media to make announcements, set up a voicemail system to have questions answered, and offered a \$5 gift certificate to current participants who introduced friends to the program.

Table 2: Organizational Assessment of Work Engagement Strategies

**Client Considerations**

- Are customers being asked how they heard about the program so staff can measure what works?
- Are materials written at no higher than a sixth-grade reading level?
- Are recruits invited to an orientation to hear about benefits before being given paperwork and eligibility guidelines?
- Are attendees given complete written and oral information about programs and services as well as alternatives available in the community?
- Are attendees receiving full information about the benefits of training and /or employment (such as increased wages, steadiness of work, better life for family) as well as a description of programs and services?

**Program Considerations**

- Does a written recruitment plan exist that contains monthly recruitment goals, target audience each month, medium to reach the target audience?
- Are outreach messages focused on benefits (outcomes like earning more money) rather than on program features and services?
- Does the program have written materials such as current brochures, fliers, posters, letters, ads, etc. to use in recruitment or are they relying only on word-of-mouth and networking with other agencies?
- Are sufficient numbers showing but then not joining? (Orientation is the issue)
- Is the number of trips to join the program kept to a minimum?
- Is enough time allotted to orientation to present the necessary material and answer attendee's questions?
- Is orientation held frequently enough so that the waiting period to attend is no longer than five business days?
- Are orientations held at convenient times?
- Does staff who conduct orientation have pleasing personalities and make recruits comfortable?
- Are staff skilled public presenters?
- Are orientation staff knowledgeable about program services as well as other options for education, training and employment?
- Is the orientation motivational and uplifting?

**Financial Considerations**

- Have funds been set aside to achieve recruitment goals?
- Are cost/benefit results gathered for each outreach activity and used to determine future efforts?

Adapted from Cygnet Associates (n.d ).

Communicating a clear and consistent message about the mission or purpose of welfare-to-work programs can be helpful for participants to understand why they are required to participate. This process begins within the organization by communicating the program message to front-line staff who work directly with participants. For example, in order to communicate the mission of the TANF program to their staff, El Paso County printed the mission on the back of business cards and on documents and posters throughout the Department of Human Services.<sup>33</sup> Community outreach programs were conducted by administrators to inform agency partners and the general public of their mission.

Staff should be encouraged to communicate the mission, goals, and program requirements to their clients in order to engage them to participate in program activities. London and Mauldon (2006) found that TANF participants often do not have a clear understanding of the program. Surveying participants who had timed-out of the CalWORKs program, the researchers found that a significant number of respondents were unclear about time-limit policies, extensions, and exemptions. Communicating with participants clearly and regularly can help avoid confusion about program requirements, expectations, and policies. Many programs send letters to participants and others follow-up letters with phone calls to schedule appointments. Still others use a variety of methods such as communicating information at local supermarkets, welfare offices, and other places where participants are likely to see them. Hamilton and Scrivener (1999) suggest that the more often a message is repeated, the more likely participants will hear the message and participate. They suggest that it may take as many as 15 times before the message is heard, embedded, and action is taken.

Effective outreach efforts include a variety of administrative components that should be considered. Table 2 contains a checklist of questions for administrators to consider when troubleshooting and identifying potential problems that may arise when reaching out to participants in welfare-to-work programs. A negative response to the questions suggests an area that may benefit from improvement.

Successful programs have been described as using broadly defined and flexible program requirements to engage more participants in program activities. In a study of engagement strategies, six of the seven study sites define allowable activities broadly.<sup>34</sup> These sites give case managers the power to select the activities that should be included in the employment plans of par-

## **BOX 2: Ohio State's CRIS-E System**

Ohio's automated tracking system, CRIS-E, allows every County Department of Social Services in the state to connect to a central computer system. The system combines welfare eligibility data with welfare-to-work program information. CRIS-E allows workers statewide to communicate with one another as well as access client data. Features of CRIS-E include caseload management support, maintenance and consolidation of client participation in program activities, and records of client case histories.

ticipants. Four of the six sites also allowed flexibility in the number of hours for some portion of their caseloads. While case managers are expected to assign participants in federally allowable activities, case managers in sites that use broadly defined activities are encouraged to place participants who are not ready for work in appropriate placements that meet their needs first, before placing them in federally allowable activities.

Successful programs also give participants options within program guidelines.<sup>35</sup> States can allow participants who work part-time to engage in other federally allowable activities in order to meet the state's work participation requirements. States can also allow participants with low job skills the option between working or basic education. A range of options will expose participants to different types of work and enable them to find a job or activity that most fits their interests. Allowing participants to choose activities can also motivate them by giving them control over their situation, inviting them to invest in their employment plan.

Another internal strategy used by several sites in the study of engagement strategies is tracking participation. Tracking allows case managers to: 1) identify non-participation immediately, 2) respond to participants by re-engaging or addressing reasons for non-participation, and 3) document compliance or non-compliance to hold participants accountable.<sup>36</sup> The study on full engagement strategies reported that tracking of information by study sites was generally timely and consistent.<sup>37</sup> All sites used a variety of procedures to track participation information. The sites gathered information on participation and the number of hours they par-

ticipated in program activities during the reporting period (usually monthly). The frequency of reports alerted case managers to participant non-compliance. Using information gathered from contracted service providers or self-reports from participants, case managers compile the information in a standard summary report that helps them easily identify individuals who are participating and those who are non-compliant in program activities. While tracking participants may be time-consuming and costly, automated programs (such as the CRIS-E system highlighted in Box 2) have been developed to assist case managers in tracking participation information.<sup>38</sup>

Case managers need to follow up immediately when they are notified of participants' non-compliance because: 1) it prevents case managers from forgetting participants who did not participate, 2) it emphasizes participation requirements by showing participants that case managers are actively involved in tracking and enforcing expectations, and 3) tracking allows case managers to learn about obstacles or barriers experienced by participants so that they can assist them in addressing those issues.

For participants who are not meeting requirements, sanctions have been used to encourage participants to follow-through on their work activities. However, the use of sanctions does not necessarily guarantee higher participation rates. The NEWWS study found that while high enforcement programs increase participation rates, higher rates of sanctioning *among those programs* did not necessarily increase participation levels.<sup>39</sup> High enforcement programs imposing partial-family sanctions on at least one-third of TANF participants in the programs were just as successful in engaging people in activities as high-enforcement programs that had more moderate sanctioning rates. In other words, the programs with higher sanctioning rates did not have higher participation rates or larger participation impacts. Consistent with these findings were those found by London and Mauldon (2006). Their survey of California county workers found that workers felt California's sanction policies were ineffective due to the lack of enforcement. However, the same workers admitted that they often were lenient themselves, giving non-compliant participants more opportunities to come back into compliance than regulations required. Combining sanctions with a clear message about non-compliance may be a more effective strategy to engage participants. Case managers should be consistent about the consequences of non-compliance and present the sanctions in such a way that participants

will believe that they will be imposed. Hamilton and Scrivener (1999) suggest that programs need to find ways to make the threat of sanctions more effective since many participants believe that the sanctions will not be applied.

Performance standards set by the county or state can also be used to encourage staff to engage large numbers of participants in welfare-to-work programs. Performance standards give local social and human service departments benchmarks that workers can aim to achieve. Standards can be set for preferred participant outcomes (i.e., the number of participants placed at work placements or permanent jobs) and program priorities (i.e., level of engagement for participants). Holding case managers accountable for reaching these standards can encourage them to closely monitor their caseloads. In addition, monitoring the efforts of case managers can help managers identify staff who need support and quickly address those needs.

In the study of full engagement strategies, Kauf and colleagues (2004) found that supervisors played an active role in monitoring the performance of case managers. In several sites, supervisors used formal performance reviews to evaluate the work of case managers. Supervisors at other sites implemented various other processes to review performance (e.g. case management reports, monthly meetings, and case reviews). For example, Utah's performance review involves supervisors thoroughly assessing each case manager's knowledge of basic services, policies, and computer services, participant outcomes, and professional conduct. In addition, supervisors review the client files of case managers on a regular basis depending on the experience level of the case manager.

Peer review systems can also be used to evaluate the performance of case managers. In this process, case managers exchange cases and review files for accuracy and appropriateness. This system is helpful because it fosters a learning environment in which case managers are able to discuss problem issues clients or share new methods of engagement. A cost/benefit analysis of the review system would help determine if there is a quantifiable return on the investment in terms of more engaged participants.

Organization-focused strategies for engagement require administrators to examine the processes of service delivery that can be improved to facilitate the transition from welfare to work for a wide range of clients with different strengths and needs. Much like client-focused strategies, organization-focused approaches

assess what is functional in the current system, build upon these strengths, and recommend adaptations in areas that do not function to full potential. Several regional examples identified in the literature provide practical illustrations of specific approaches. A review of the implications of identified models, programs, and strategies for welfare-to-work practice is discussed below.

### **Implications for Welfare-to-Work Practice**

This structured review identified research that points to the need for states to improve strategies to engage a wide range of TANF participants if they are to meet federal workforce participation rates and help families reach and maintain self-sufficiency. In particular, as many participants make the transition toward employment, individuals remaining on the caseload will likely require additional services and support to participate in work or work-related activities. Given considerable variation in the administration of welfare-to-work programs, strategies need to be responsive to particular geographic and population needs as well as the unique structure of the service delivery system. However, as the review indicates, some strategies may be effective regardless of the distinct differences of the region. Certainly, these approaches, program models, and strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in preliminary studies warrant further consideration.

The available literature suggests that while the labor force attachment approach may be more effective and efficient at engaging participants in employment or welfare to work activities in the short term, the human capital development approach may have more positive employment sustainability in the long term. The most effective programs combine both LFA and HCD approaches. Portland's welfare-to-work program, which includes elements of both approaches, is the most effective welfare-to-work program evaluated to date. In comparison to the ten other NEWWS study sites, the Portland program: 1) increased TANF participants' five year average earnings by 25 percent, 2) increased the average number of quarters employed by 21 percent, and 3) increased stable employment and earnings growth more than any other program evaluated in the NEWWS study.<sup>40</sup> The success of this program suggests that an employment focus, using both job search and short-term education or training, and emphasizing the importance of waiting for a good job are key elements of a very effective program.

In terms of program models, those that utilize the LFA approach can also incorporate paid and/or work experience as well as support services into their pro-

grams. HCD programs employ mentors, make use of peer groups to encourage participation in training, or include educational programs. Because studies indicate that the LFA approach has been shown to be more effective at meeting near term participation and employment goals, most program models operate within this approach. However, as is the case with the Portland program, the most successful programs include elements of both approaches and both program models.

Descriptive studies of engagement strategies feature either client-focused strategies or organization-focused strategies. Most of these strategies emerge from program experiences while some have been drawn from research studies. The literature does not explicitly compare strategies to one another to determine which strategies are more effective; instead, positive outcomes are presented in the context of program approaches and models. Depending on the type of program and its goals, different strategies can be used to engage TANF participants in work activities.

While the literature on program approaches, program models, and engagement strategies related to engaging TANF participants in work and work-related activities is helpful, there is insufficient research on the effectiveness of each strategy or the combinations of strategies. This lack of rigorous experimental studies on the effectiveness of specific strategies is a major limitation of this review. For example, there are no known studies that compare the effectiveness of client-focused strategies with one another at different sites, nor are there comparative studies of organization-focused strategies.

Given the status of the literature, future studies need to be developed to evaluate the usefulness of engagement strategies, especially to determine if a given strategy improves outcomes of interest in a cost-effective fashion. The following issues should be considered when designing studies to evaluate engagement strategies for the hard-to-employ.

- ***Studies should have an experimental design.*** Experimental studies that compare the outcomes of specific approaches, program models and strategies in different study sites would be useful to determine which strategies are most appropriate for counties. For example, an experimental study in Columbus, Ohio compared the effectiveness of integrated and traditional case management as a strategy to engage hard-to-employ TANF participants. The study showed that integrated case management is more effective at engaging participants in welfare-to-work

programs than traditional case management.<sup>41</sup> Given the variation of the hard-to-employ participants in different jurisdictions, administrators need the results of different experimental studies to determine whether strategies can be successfully applied to their constituency.

- ***Evaluation of mixed approaches should be further studied for their generalizability.*** The Portland welfare-to-work program in the NEWWS study suggests that programs that combine aspects of the labor force attachment approach and the human capital development approach are most effective at engaging TANF participants in welfare-to-work activities. Additional studies are needed to replicate this combination in different settings (i.e., with TANF participants reflecting different demographic characteristics and in localities with different labor markets). In this fashion, program administrators can learn whether this mixed approach will work equally well at engaging the hard-to-employ in their jurisdictions.
- ***Engagement in the private sector should be explored.*** While this review focused on the literature in the public and non-profit sectors, literature on private sector engagement could shed light on other successful engagement strategies. For example, the use of private sector incentives as an engagement strategy could be applied to hard-to-serve populations. In addition, future experimental studies on engagement strategies can be conducted in both the non-profit and private sector to determine the different aspects of successful engagement in both sectors. Comparisons between engagement strategies used in the different sectors can help administrators think about creative ways to engage people in participation to meet their goals.
- ***Strategies that promote long-term employment should be more seriously considered.*** While most current studies on engagement strategies focus on short term outcomes to meet federal workforce participation requirements, they fail to address the personal barriers experienced by the hard-to-employ. Research studies need to focus on strategies that promote long-term sustainable employment and the related barriers to employment. For example, the MDRC (2007a) study on employment retention and advancement uses a random assignment design to examine the effectiveness of program approaches aimed at helping TANF participants and other low-income people remain employed and increase their earnings. Another MDRC study (2007b) on

enhanced services for the hard-to-employ uses an experimental design to test interventions aimed at overcoming common barriers experienced by the hard-to-employ.<sup>42</sup> These studies, and others that use similarly rigorous experimental designs can increase our knowledge about ways to help hard-to-employ TANF participants overcome barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment. In doing so, these research studies can inform policy makers who seek to address the long-term reduction of poverty instead of the short-term reduction of caseloads. Administrators can then focus on alleviating poverty for their constituents instead of simply meeting workforce participation requirements.

In addition to more research, the major practice implication from this review is the need for further discussion about engagement strategies among major stakeholders in order to share knowledge and experience about successful strategies to engage hard-to-employ TANF participants. Similar to the county-wide planning that launched the CalWORKs program in 1997 community meetings with public agencies, non-profits, and community members are needed to inform each other about the changing needs and experiences of the hard-to-employ. For example, in order to engage Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) CalWORKs participants, Chow, Bester, and Shinn (2001) suggest including the families of participants in the engagement process rather than just the individuals themselves. Whereas most welfare-to-work programs focus on the activities of individual participants, AAPIs are likely to frame issues in the family or community context. Knowledge of such cultural norms is useful in developing engagement strategies and can be obtained by including community members.

The drastic caseload reduction in the wake of welfare reform indicates that many of those who remain on welfare have had a particularly difficult time leaving the program. Many of the TANF participants face multiple and recurring obstacles that prevent them from becoming employed. For example, immigrants on welfare may face cultural, institutional, and language barriers that keep them from being employable. Others may face significant personal barriers such as domestic violence, substance addiction, and mental health issues that prevent them from obtaining or maintaining adequate employment. When these barriers cannot be overcome, participants rely on welfare to provide minimal subsistence.

The Deficit Reduction Act, signed into law in February 2006, puts increasing pressure on states and

counties to engage TANF participants in work or welfare-to-work activities. However, these participation requirements and the engagement strategies used to achieve the requirements focus on getting participants into employment that is often short-term. Given that TANF participants have significant challenges that make them hard to employ, there is a need to shift from strategies that achieve short-term participation to strategies that address specific barriers in order to help TANF participants overcome their obstacles and become more employable.

Strategies that focus on meeting workforce participation requirements do not address the larger issue of poverty. Instead, such strategies focus on short-term solutions to long-term problems. A look at strategies focusing on long-term sustainable employment should be revisited to assist people out of poverty. Unless a long-term approach is taken with the hard-to-employ, these TANF participants will continue to cycle back on to public assistance.

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