

**Survey of State TANF Client Assessment Policies and Practices
Executive Summary for the August 2000
Satellite Videoconference**

**TANF Client Assessments: A View from the States
October 31, 2000
2:00- 3:30 PM Eastern Time**

Purpose of Study

This survey is part of a larger project funded by the Joyce Foundation exploring state TANF client assessment policies and practices. The project also includes state case studies, a satellite videoconference, and a formal monograph. The purpose of the survey is to gain an overall understanding of TANF client assessment in the states—who, when, where, what, why, and how. Topics included:

- State uniformity or flexibility
- States' TANF philosophies and goals
- Staffing of client assessments
- Tools and Instruments
- TANF Client Information Sharing
- Uses of client assessment information
- Sequencing of the Client Assessment Process
- Criteria for Selecting the Assessment Process
- Changes, Promising Practices, and Lessons Learned

Study Methodology

- Study Period – Winter 2000 in the field.
- Data Collection Method –Mailed survey of 8 pages with 12 questions.
- Sample Frame –State Human Services agencies with the responsibility for administering TANF programs, including all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and three US territories, hereafter referred to as "states."
- Survey Response Rate – 52 of 54 mailed surveys returned (96 percent).
- Definition –Client assessment was defined in the survey as "the process of gathering information about a client and her/his family that allows a worker and a client to determine what it will take for the client to become employed and remain employed." No distinction was made between screening and assessment.

Survey Findings

Uniformity and Flexibility of Assessment Processes

- States allow greater flexibility to local agencies/contractors around processes for specialized assessment areas (e.g., substance abuse; mental health; domestic violence) than general assessment areas (e.g., family strengths and needs; work and educational background). See figure on page two.

- There is a wider distribution of flexibility for assessments in specialized areas compared to general assessments.
- Differences in state systems are, as one would predict—state-administered states require more uniformity than locally administered states, particularly for general assessments.

Types of Assessment Conducted

- States are collecting a great deal of assessment data. All 52 states are conducting client assessments in the following areas:
 - ◆ TANF Eligibility
 - ◆ Employment History
 - ◆ Vocational Skills and Aptitudes
 - ◆ Literacy Levels and Education
 - ◆ Family strengths and supports
 - ◆ Family needs and problems
 - ◆ Child-care needs
 - ◆ Transportation needs
 - ◆ Substance abuse status
 - ◆ Physical health/disabilities
 - ◆ Domestic Violence
- 50 states are conducting assessments for Learning Disabilities and English Language proficiency.
- 49 states are conducting assessments for Housing needs and Mental Health concerns.

Workers Conducting Client Assessments

- TANF caseworkers/case managers are the primary or most important type of worker conducting client assessments in 14 of 15 assessment areas; eligibility workers predominate as the primary worker for the general TANF eligibility/intake assessment area.
- When looking at the primary worker and up to three additional workers conducting assessments (see table below):
 - Three-quarters of responsibility for conducting TANF client assessments is assigned to the following types of workers: TANF caseworker/case manager, private agency worker/contractor, TANF eligibility worker, other public agency worker (outside of TANF program), and TANF employment worker/job counselor.
 - States identified other public agency workers outside the TANF office (e.g., domestic violence specialists, child welfare workers, certified substance abuse counselors) as frequently as they identified TANF social workers as conducting assessments.

Total Number of All Workers Conducting TANF Client Assessments

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Type of Worker	n	%
TANF caseworker/case manager	416	23.6
Private agency worker (e.g. contractor)	279	15.8
TANF eligibility worker	255	14.5
Other public agency worker (outside of TANF office)	180	10.2
TANF employment worker/job counselor	179	10.1
Workforce agency worker	145	8.2
Other worker	122	6.9
TANF social worker	118	6.7
Team of workers	36	2.0
Too much variability to differentiate	35	2.0
Totals	1765	100.00

- When grouping the primary and up to three additional assessment workers by type of agency, we find (see figure below):
 - Over half of all workers conducting client assessments are located within the TANF agency.
 - One third of all workers conducting client assessments are other public or private agency workers.
 - One in ten of workers conducting client assessments is part of team, an “other” type of worker, or there is too much variability across the state to differentiate.

Two Most Important Client Assessment Information Sources

- Across 15 specific assessment areas, states overwhelmingly n=1,675 the use of structured client interviews to collect assessment information—43 percent of the time (see figure below).
- Sixteen percent of assessments are conducted through informal client-worker interactions.
- An additional 16 percent of assessments are from forms/tools completed by the client outside of interaction with a worker.
- Home visits, behavior observation checklists, and other site visits are each given as the first or second most important source of information in only three percent or less of the responses.

Types of Tools and Instruments

- Overall, tools and instruments developed by or for the states are the most important types of tools being used to conduct client assessments –29 percent of those identified among three most important (Figure below).
 - ❖ 35 states have created a general TANF assessments (often inclusive of many areas).
 - ❖ 29 states have created a child-care needs assessment.
 - ❖ 26 states have created transportation needs assessment.
 - ❖ 25 states have created a domestic violence assessment.
 - ❖ 25 states have created a housing needs assessment.
- Collecting assessment information without a formal tool is second most important—22 percent.
- Fifteen percent of assessment forms/tools are created by or for service contractors, or twice the percentage of forms/tools developed by or for local offices.
- Nationally standardized tools and instruments are only identified eight percent of the time, and nationally standardized tools and instruments that have been modified by states are identified only 2 percent of the time. Nationally standardized tools are the most important instruments used for three specific employability assessment areas: math, reading, and writing proficiency; vocational skills and aptitudes; and career interests.

Staff related changes and actions to accomplish TANF client assessments better

- States are most frequently providing training for staff—45 states have indicated that they have provided training for general assessments and 41 states have provided staff training around specialized assessments (see figure below).
- Interestingly, only 13 states hired additional staff to conduct assessments, and only three states created an “assessment specialist” position.
- States are primarily making staff related changes and actions to increase the capability of their state to conduct high quality assessments. The next most frequent reason states have made these changes is to increase the consistency of assessments across the state.
- Less frequently, states have made staff-related changes in order to increase the capacity (i.e., number of assessments conducted) and to increase the consistency of assessments within agencies.

TANF Program Philosophies and Goals as Context for Client Assessment

- States report that a number of philosophies and goals are a high or moderate priority for their TANF program.
- States' highest rated priority goals are client economic self-sufficiency (2.9 out of a maximum of 3.0) and client labor force attachment—work first (2.8).
- Following closely were client job retention (2.7) and job placement of hard to employ clients (2.7).
- These four philosophies/goals were rated as “higher priority” by 70 percent or more of all states.
- The goal of reducing the TANF caseload was rated last (1.9), but this is still a moderate level priority.

Sequencing of Client Assessment Process

- Overwhelmingly, two-thirds of states (33) are using a tiered sequence process to conduct client assessments for both new and returning TANF clients. This sequencing approach entails all TANF clients being given a general TANF assessment, and based upon these assessments, clients may seek employment, have further in-depth assessments, or be provided with services as needed. These events happen concurrently and different clients may take different paths.
- Nine states use a labor market test sequencing where clients seek employment immediately upon TANF application and clients not achieving employment are given in-depth assessments and services as needed.
- Four states front-load assessments where clients receive TANF and specialized assessments and client and worker focus on addressing problems/barriers to employment, with services being provided and the client then seeking employment.

Importance and Achievement of Criteria States Use to Select Assessment Processes

Importance of Criteria

- As with TANF program philosophies and goals, states are using a wide array of important criteria to select their client assessment processes (see figure below).
- States are relying mostly importantly on staff-related factors in selecting client assessment processes, with staff fully competency to conduct client assessments rated 9.9 on a 10-point scale.
- States also rated accuracy and thoroughness of information collected (9.6) and creation of client responsibility plans (9.3) as highly important.

- Of lesser importance in selecting client assessment processes is whether or not the assessment is of cultural/ethnic/gender appropriateness (7.4) and the assessment is cost effective (5.8).

Degree of Achievement of Criteria

- States have focused on achieving those criteria that immediately impact TANF priorities—creation of client responsibility plans (7.5 on 10 point scale), followed by timely completion of assessments (7.0) and ensuring information collected is accurate and thorough (6.6).
- States have least achieved the criteria also rated as less important—cultural/ethnic/gender appropriate assessments (4.5) and cost-effective assessments (5.0).

Individual and Aggregate Uses of Information Gathered during Client Assessments

Uses of Individual Assessment Data

- States indicate that a number of uses of individual client assessment data are highly important, particularly those that assist in service delivery (see figure below).
- The two most important uses of this data are to identify client need, barriers, strengths and coping and to establish an individual's responsibility/employability plan (both 2.9 on a 3-point scale).
- States also indicated that client assessment data is importantly used as a foundation for on-going case management (2.7).
- The least important use of client assessment data is to divert applicants from TANF caseloads (1.5). Twenty-one states indicated that this item is of less importance to their state.

Uses of Aggregate Client Assessment Data

- Overall, states rated aggregate client assessment data to be less important than individual assessment data (see figure below).
- States rated only one of the five possible aggregate uses offered as relatively highly important—to plan or develop programs to meet service needs and gaps (2.5 on 3-point scale).
- Somewhat surprisingly states rated the use of aggregate assessment data to evaluate staff performance as the least important use (1.6)

Changes and Modifications to State Client Assessments

The APHSA survey asked states an open-ended question about what changes or modifications the state is implementing or planning to implement to make TANF client assessments more effective. Some of the examples of the changes and modifications are listed below:

Specialized Assessments

- Plans are in development to establish and co-locate specialized assessment workers in our local offices who would specialize in conducting assessments for substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health.
- Tools and methods used by other agencies and states are being adapted as screening tools for domestic violence, learning disabilities, and mental/behavioral health issues and substance abuse.

Team approaches and collaborations

- The development of a "hard to serve collaboration" involving the state's TANF agency, Labor Department, Mental health and Substance Abuse agency, Child Welfare agency and several other community partners in an attempt to identify barriers to employment as early as possible.

Case Management

- Modifications are in place to focus our case management on career coaching that will extend services to working TANF families and other non-TANF families in order to identify job retention and wage enhancement issues.
- Modifications are in place to formalize a process/procedure for assessment that provides more information through the use of contracted assessments, home visits, and multi-disciplinary teams.

Staff Training

- The state agency will continue staff training regarding identification and supervision of persons with substance abuse, domestic violence, learning disabilities and mental health issues. This training will be held with experts in each field.

Promising Practices

An additional open-ended question asked states to identify the most promising practices (e.g. approaches, techniques, and instruments) that have been adopted with regards to TANF client assessments. Examples of responses to this question are provided below:

Case Management

- As many TANF recipients have multiple barriers to employment, the use of a multi-disciplinary team composed of service providers from various fields is an effective intervention that aids client success.
- Individuals applying for or renewing their TANF benefits must first register with the Department of Labor prior to (re)-certification. This sends these individuals a message that although they may receive public assistance, other services are available to assist them and efforts must be exerted on their part.

Tools and Guides

- The development and implementation of an interview assessment guide and referral protocol greatly assists workers in conducting client assessments.

Collaborations

- Success is greatest where there are good relationships with professionals in other disciplines.
- The number and quality of assessments is increased with the use of contracted agencies (public and private) to assess individuals with multiple barriers to employment.

Lessons Learned

A final open-ended question asked states to identify the most important lessons learned regarding client assessments. Examples are provided below:

APHSA Summary of Findings

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Assessment Structure

- Adding an assessment process to an eligibility interview is not an effective way of eliciting information about personal barriers to employment as clients usually only disclose information about personal barriers once they have developed a relationship with a worker.
- Assessment is an on-going process and needs to be conducted on an informal and formal basis at eligibility reviews, other scheduled meetings, work sites, and participants' homes. In the past, too much emphasis has been put on up-front assessment, however, with participants' lives changing at such a rapid pace, assessment must be a continuous process.

Clients

- Holistic assessment based on family involvement is necessary in identifying strengths and challenges and is crucial for the family's success.
- An assessment process is very effective for clients that are motivated to help themselves, but has limited value for clients with significant barriers and a reluctance to disclose or address these issues.
- The client must be fully involved in the process and in the decision making process in regard to the activities and goals that make up their self-sufficiency plan. Client ownership and investment greatly increases the outcomes.

Assessment Tools and Guides

- Assessment practices need to be flexible enough to meet the changing characteristics of the client population over time. This includes the re-defining of assessment practices on a periodic basis.
- There is a need for a comprehensive assessment guide that includes the best practices and resources from other agencies (JPTA, Job Service, Department of Labor, and Welfare Division).

Further Information about APHSA's Client Assessment Project

Detailed findings from the *Survey of State TANF Client Assessment Practices* are available in two issues of APHSA's *Research Notes* series, on the American Public Human Services Association's web page site at:

<http://www.aphsa.org/opd/research/research.html>

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APHSA would like to thank the following states for participation in the *Survey of State TANF Client Assessment Practices*

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Arkansas	New Jersey
California	New Mexico
Colorado	New York
Connecticut	North Carolina
District of Columbia	North Dakota
Georgia	Ohio
Guam	Oklahoma
Hawaii	Oregon
Idaho	Pennsylvania
Illinois	Puerto Rico
Indiana	Rhode Island
Iowa	South Carolina
Kansas	South Dakota
Kentucky	Tennessee
Louisiana	Texas
Maine	Utah
Maryland	Vermont
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