

LOCAL OFFICE TANF FRONTLINE STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

[Note: This guide is intended for respondents identified as line workers (frontline staff) assigned predominantly or in part to the TANF program in local or field offices in the 5 states selected for site visits. Further, to help ensure diversity in responses, the ideal setting for this interview will be in groups of two-to-four frontline respondents. Respondents will be familiar with the day-to-day issues, complexities, and realities of regularly interacting with clients, handling applications, and/or engaging in TANF support services such as job training for clients or potential clients. Wherever "TANF" appears in the guide, the interviewer should use the state-specific TANF and/or SSF program name, if applicable]

Date of Interview:

Interviewer (s):

State:

Respondent Name:

Title:

Respondent Affiliation:

E-Mail:

Phone:

Address:

Fax:

Introduction/Purpose of the Study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today.

My name is _____ and I'm a researcher from the Urban Institute, a non-profit research organization located in Washington, DC. With me today is [name and position].

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (ACF/OPRE) is conducting a study of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program with a focus on two-parent families. The study is not an audit or evaluation of any single program. Rather, the purpose of this study is to provide information about the characteristics of two-parent families on or eligible for TANF; for example, we want to learn:

- What are the characteristics of two-parent families participating in or eligible to receive TANF, including the strengths and challenges of these families;
- What variety of services do two-parent families receive through TANF;
- How do state policies help or hinder participation in TANF among two-parent families with particular characteristics; and

- How do the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of staff and/or eligible families help or hinder two-parent families' participation in TANF?

Privacy Statement *[Interviewer must read this]:*

This data collection effort is intended for the purpose of describing TANF programs' operations and needs specific to two-parent families. We will use what we learn today and from other interviews to contribute to a report to HHS and others interested in TANF programs. Our study began in September 2014 and will end in March 2016. Your participation is voluntary and your statements are private to the extent permitted by law. This interview is not part of an audit or a compliance review. Your comments will not affect the program's management or your involvement with the program.

We know that you are busy and will try to be as brief as possible. We have many questions and are going to talk to many different people, so please do not feel as though we expect you to be able to answer every question. We are interested in learning about your ideas, experiences, and opinions about how to better serve two-parent families on or eligible for TANF. There are no right or wrong answers. We want to know what you think. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just let us know. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. The OMB control number for the described information collection is 0970-XXXX and it expires XX/XX/XXXX.

In addition, before we start, I want to let you know that although we will take notes during these interviews, information is never associated with your name or the name of any respondent in any report, discussions with supervisors or colleagues, or ACF/OPRE. When we write our reports and discuss the study findings, information from all informants is compiled and presented so that no one person is identified. However, although individuals will not be cited as sources, information will be presented in our reports that may enable a user to infer the identity of the information source.

[IF WE WOULD LIKE TO RECORD THIS SESSION:] We value the information you will share with us today and want to make sure we capture all of it. So, with your permission, we will be recording the session and/or [name of person] will be taking notes on a laptop computer. However, we will destroy the recordings as soon as we have made complete notes of the meeting. Do you have an objection for us to proceed with recording?

We have scheduled this meeting for 60 minutes. Is that still convenient? (If yes) Are you willing to participate in this interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin? If you have any questions during the interview, please do not hesitate to ask-- if something is not clear, just let me know.

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[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: The respondent's answers to individual questions may address subsequent questions. Subsequent questions may be skipped or probed as needed to gather complete information.]

I. Background and Context

1. We have asked you to meet with us today because of your role as a worker directly interacting with current or potential TANF clients. We understand that different states, and even different local offices, have varying titles for the type of work you do. As a first question, please describe your position/role as a worker here in [COUNTY].

(Probes:)

- a. What is your job title?
 - b. I would just like to confirm that you, at least in part, currently or in the past, have handled TANF cases.
 - c. What are your responsibilities related to handling or working TANF cases?
 - d. What are your overall responsibilities?
 - e. How long have you held this role?
 - f. In the past, did you have other positions in this department?
 - g. Do you focus on all aspects of a TANF case or, for example, just eligibility or case management?
 - h. Do you handle cases for other assistance programs such as SNAP or Medicaid in addition to TANF?
2. We'll be getting into specifics shortly, but first I wanted to ask, in your view, how would you describe the state's (or county's) overall approach to serving two-parent families, particularly as it might differ from serving single-parent families?
 - a. (Possible responses)
 - i. Degree of inclusiveness: As generous/restrictive as single-parent families, all things equal; less generous/more restrictive (i.e. more difficult to receive assistance); more generous/less restrictive (i.e. less difficult to receive assistance)

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- ii. Specialized non-cash assistance (e.g., targeted support services, job training, or child care)
3. Our understanding is that [STATE] defines two-parent families from a TANF, unit composition standpoint as [BRIEF SUMMARY OF UNIT COMPOSITION REQUIREMENTS]. Does that sound correct?
 - a. IF APPLICABLE: Has same-sex marriage affected the definition of TANF two-parent families?
4. An inherent feature of the TANF program allows individual states to make policy decisions (and in some cases, counties within states) outside of a limited framework of federally-defined rules. Based on your experience handling TANF cases, is there anything specific about [STATE'S] or [COUNTY's] culture, traditions, or shared values that is likely to influence how welfare is provided, especially for two-parent families?

(Probe: What about the culture, traditions, or shared values specific to this part of the state – is there anything specific about this area's cultural fabric that may influence how the welfare program is implemented locally?)

II. Structure and History of Two-Parent TANF Administration

Before asking some questions about the current TANF program here in [COUNTY], I would like to ask briefly about the history of two-parent TANF programs.

1. Have there been any major changes to the state's approach to serving two-parent families through TANF?
2. If you were to think of how [STATE] provides welfare benefits as a story, are there any aspects to this story over time that might be different here locally compared to the rest of the state?

III. Funding Levels and Mechanisms for Serving Two-Parent Families

I would like to focus now on how two-parent families fit in your state's financing of cash assistance.

1. First, based on our preparation work during an earlier task of this study and in an initial interview with state and local administrators, we compiled a snapshot of TANF, SSP-MOE, and SSF caseload information for [STATE]. Our initial understanding is that **two-parent families** are financed here in [STATE] through:

[SELECT AS APPROPRIATE PRIOR TO VISIT:]

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- a. Through federal TANF funds only
- b. Through a mix of federal and SSP-MOE funds
- c. Exclusively through SSP-MOE funds
- d. Through a mix of federal and/or SSP-MOE funding and SSF streams
- e. Exclusively through SSF streams

As you work cases, is it made clear, either implicitly or explicitly, through which method of funding recipients – especially two-parent families – are served?

2. From a resources standpoint, do you feel you are any more or less supported in your ability to serve two-parent families vs. single parents?

(Possible responses: Amount of time budgeted to spend on two-parent cases, the number of workers assigned to handle these cases, specific training, or overtime or other financial benefits for working on these cases)

IV. Data Tracking and Reporting

I would like to focus now on how your state produces and uses data, especially beyond what is required to be reported federally, such as information for decision making. In an initial interview with state-level administrators, we asked about any data tracking and reporting the state does for two-parent or SSF cases. We learned [PROVIDE BRIEF, STATE-SPECIFIC SUMMARY]

1. Do you use any of the data or reports from the state specific to two-parent families? If so, which data or reports? How do you access it (e.g., paper reports or electronic ones such as online or through a data dashboard)? How do you use it?
2. Does your county track any additional outcomes or outputs as a measure of TANF performance, either for two-parent families, SSF cases, or the caseload as a whole?

Probes: **If yes,**

- a. What do the reports or tracking look like?
- b. What are the specific measures?
- c. When were the measures put in place?
- d. What circumstances may have led to the creation of these measures?
- e. Are any of these measures directly connected to workers that handle cases?

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3. Which of the following are measures your local area uses, either formally or informally, for tracking its two-parent TANF or SSF families:
 - a. Program participation (take-up)
 - b. Client engagement
 - c. Official WPR engagement
 - d. Outcome-based measures (e.g., employment, retention, income, self-sufficiency)
 - e. Any others not covered above

4. Are you familiar with or hear of the work participation rate (WPR) – one measure of engagement of TANF clients defined by the federal government?

[IF YES, ONLY] How would you assess the level of institutional importance, shown by the state (or potentially, from your county), on the two-parent work participation rate (compared to the all-families rate)? In other words, how often do your managers or their bosses talk about the WPR?

(Probe: How is that importance expressed or communicated by human services department leadership?)

5. Have you observed changes over time in how much importance is put on the work participation rate, either specifically for two-parent families or for the caseload as a whole?

V. Characteristics of Two-Parent Families On or Eligible for TANF

Now I would like to focus on the characteristics of two-parent families – either currently on or likely eligible in your view for TANF, both confirming information we've already compiled and exploring other aspects.

1. In your view, what are the characteristics of two-parent families specific to [COUNTY OR LOCALITY] participating in or likely eligible to receive TANF? What types of recipients or potential recipients are you most likely to see?

[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Probe these areas if not mentioned explicitly]

- a. Demographics
(Probe: number of children; married or cohabiting status)
- b. Employment histories
(Probe: most-recent workforce attachment, spells of employment, average hours of participation, barriers to employment)
- c. Skill levels

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- d. Incomes
- e. Disability status

2. On a local level, in the above areas (demographics, employment histories, skill levels, incomes, disability status), have you noticed any changes over time?

(Probe: IF YES, possible or likely hypotheses for the changes)

3. Again based on the above areas, how would you describe the typical profile of a two-parent family on or eligible to receive TANF here in [COUNTY/LOCALITY]?
4. How does the typical profile for two-parent families differ from single-parent families?
5. [NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: This question is only for states that serve some two-parent families through TANF and others through SSF. For all other states, skip this question.]

Do the characteristics of families (all families – not just two-parent units) served through SSFs differ from those served through TANF?

(Probe: How is it determined which of these families to serve in SSFs vs. TANF? Which two-parent families are served through SSFs?)

6. In your experience locally, what individual characteristics or family circumstances make it challenging for two-parent families to be self-sufficient? What are their strengths?

[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Probe these areas if not mentioned explicitly]

- a. Employment history
- b. Education and skill level
- c. Disability status
- d. Mental illness
- e. Substance abuse
- f. Criminal record

7. In your view, do two-parent families face the same challenges as single-parent families, or are these barriers likely different?

VI. Characteristics of Participating Families versus Likely Eligible Families

I would like to focus now on how, if at all, the characteristics of participating families differ from those of families who are eligible but not participating. For all of the questions in this part, we are most interested in your perspective specific to this county or region.

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1. Do you have some SNAP or Medicaid clients who do not receive TANF but are likely to be eligible?

[IF YES, ONLY] In your view, for two-parent families, are there any characteristics that likely differentiate families participating in TANF or SSFs versus families likely eligible but not participating?

(Probe: demographics, employment histories, skill levels, disability status, incomes (outside of consistently high income that would make a family ineligible))

2. Are these differences in the characteristics of participating and nonparticipating families true also for single-parent families, or specific to two-parent families?
3. Both for all families and two-parent units, in your view, are the characteristics that likely differentiate participating and non-participating families part of a trend? (Have these indicators arisen recently?)
4. Both for all families and two-parent units, do you have a sense of the extent to which families participating in Medicaid or SNAP are eligible for TANF but choose not to participate in TANF?
 - a. Does this differ based on the number of parents in the unit?
 - b. What are the reasons a family might choose to not participate in TANF?

VII. Variety of Services Two-Parent Families Receive

Now I would like to focus on the variety of services accessed by two-parent families through the TANF program and explore if this range differs from all families. As with the previous section, we would again like to focus on your experience here locally.

Available Services

1. What services are offered to two-parent families receiving cash assistance

(Potential areas: assessments, case management, training, job search, barrier removal, referrals, child care, transportation, etc.)?
2. What services are offered to two-parent families not receiving cash assistance?
3. [NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: both parts of this question are only for states that use both TANF and SSF funding to serve two-parent families; ELSE, SKIP]

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- a. Do services differ depending on whether the family is served through TANF or **SSF**?
- b. Would eligibility staff, caseworkers, or employment service providers know if a family is served through TANF or through SSF?

(Probe: how, so, and what would that look like to a worker in practice?)

4. Can you briefly describe the services provided, if any, in each of the following areas? What does each of the following services look like in [COUNTY/LOCALITY]? [NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: If the services differ by TANF/SSF/no cash, then ask first about services for TANF and then repeat for SSF and/or no cash.]

- a. Outreach/information
- b. Assessments
- c. Case management
- d. Barrier removal
- e. Employment services (training, job search, etc.)
- f. Child care
- g. Transportation
- h. Post-referral follow-up
- i. Post-employment services
- j. Transitional assistance

5. Are these services the same for single-parent and two-parent families?
6. (Probe: Are differences in services offered designed to be dissimilar by explicit policy or instead just due to natural differentiation?)
7. Does your office offer any services specifically targeted or predominantly for two-parent families?
8. To what extent do two-parent families access, take-up, or use the services offered to them?

(Probe: How does this compare to single-parent families?)

9. How do families on assistance learn about how to access services (e.g., outreach, recruitment, etc.)?

(Probe: are any outreach or recruitment efforts specific to two-parent families?)

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10. [If applicable] How do families **not receiving cash assistance** learn about how to access services for which they are eligible?
11. Do the services offered to and accessed by two-parent families vary depending on characteristics of the family (e.g., employment history, barriers to employment, cohabiting, access to child care)?

Do Services Meet Family Needs?

12. From your perspective, how well do you think the services offered meet the families' needs?
 - a. Are the services helpful?
 - b. What do you think the families need more or less of?
 - c. What are the most popular services that families take up?
 - d. Have you heard any feedback from families regarding the services offered?
13. Is it hard to have enough time to provide the needed services to families?
14. Are there any barriers to providing services?

VIII. State Policies and Two-Parent Family Participation

I would like to focus now on how, if at all, state policies help or hinder participation in TANF among two-parent families with particular characteristics.

State Policies

1. I will ask in a moment about a broader range of specific areas of TANF rules, but first I wanted to confirm an initial analysis of your state's TANF rules that we undertook using the HHS-funded Welfare Rules Database (maintained by the Urban Institute) and confirmed in initial state-level interviews.

We have down the following TANF policy areas being different for two-parent families:

- a. [INSTANCES OF ALL TANF POLICY AREAS FOUND]

Do these policy areas sound correct, including the type and magnitude of the rule differences?

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2. As opposed to rules or policies that may be implemented statewide, are you aware of any rules or policies unique to this county/locality or region for two-parent families that may differ from those for single parent families?

(Probe: If so, do these policies apply uniformly to all two-parent families or do they depend on other family characteristics (e.g. work history, education level, etc.)?)

[Potential areas (probe if necessary)]

- a. Non-financial eligibility policy
 - i. Worker supplement program?
 - ii. Maximum or minimum limit on hours worked in a month in order for an applicant to be eligible?
 - iii. Work history test required for eligibility?
 - iv. Waiting period in place before a newly-unemployed family can receive benefits?
 - v. Changes over time/continuation of AFDC-era policy?
- b. Other policy:
 - i. Differences in eligibility levels/standards?
 - ii. Differences in benefit levels?
 - iii. Differences in time limits/time limit exemptions?
 - iv. Differences in activity requirements/activity exemptions?
 - v. Administrative differences vs. single-parent units?
 - 1. Application methods
 - 2. Case management
 - 3. Client tracking

3. In your view, what TANF rules in place here make it easier for two-parent families to become eligible or stay eligible for benefits?

(Probe using the same potential areas as in the question immediately above; what about these rules encourage participation?)

4. On the other hand, are there any TANF rules in place here that make it harder for two-parent families to become eligible or stay eligible for benefits?

(Probe: what about these rules discourage or prevent participation?)

5. [IF APPLICABLE FOR STATES WITH SSFs, ELSE SKIP] Are SSFs designed to include families whose characteristics suggest they would have difficulty meeting the work requirement?

(Probe: If yes, which characteristics?)

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Effect of Policies on Participation

6. What is your sense of how TANF policies affect program participation for two-parent families?
 - a. What policies or practices facilitate their participation?
 - b. What makes it challenging?
 - c. Do you have any specific examples or data that inform your thoughts on this?

7. Do you have a sense of whether TANF policies influence low-income families' behavior or personal decisions in other ways?
(Probes:)
 - a. Employment-related decisions such as whether to work, which types of jobs to pursue, and how many hours to work
 - b. Whether to go back to school or seek new types of training
 - c. Whether to seek childcare outside of your home
 - d. Whether to delay or encourage having children
 - e. Whether to marry or cohabit
 - f. Do you have any specific examples or data that inform your sense of this?

8. Do you believe TANF policies affect two-parent families' participation differently than they affect single-parent families' participation?
 - a. Are differences in participation attributable to differences in policies, families, or both? Please explain.

IX. Staff Beliefs as Facilitating or Hindering Two-Parent Families' Participation

As a final topic area, I would like to focus now on how the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of staff here may affect two-parent families' participation in TANF.

1. In your view, how do the **characteristics, strengths, and challenges of two-parent families on or eligible for TANF** facilitate or hinder the family's ability to meet program requirements and/or achieve self-sufficiency?
 - a. Characteristics (e.g. any characteristics identified in section VI-- demographics, employment histories, skill levels, disability status, incomes--as differentiating two-parent families from single-parent families or nonparticipating families)
 - b. Strengths (e.g. ability to share household and child care responsibilities with partner)
 - c. Challenges
 - d. Stigma specific to two-parent families

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2. How do these compare with your perceptions of single-parent families? In other words, how do the characteristics, strengths, and challenges of **single-parent families on or eligible for TANF** facilitate or hinder the family's ability to meet program requirements and/or achieve self-sufficiency?
3. What characteristics of two-parent families do you believe make it challenging for staff to serve two-parent families?

(Probe: biggest obstacles to self-sufficiency? Importance, if any, of employment status or access to child care.)

X. Wrap-Up - Desired Take-Aways from this Study for Self and Others

Thank you so much for sharing this information with us. As we mentioned at the beginning, we expect this study to result in a report and there may be other opportunities to share selected results. We sincerely hope that this study can be useful to you. So, before we finish, we would like to hear what you would most like others to know about your experiences serving two-parent families, and what you might like to learn from our study when it is completed.

1. In your view, what would you most want the world – either the public, federal policymakers, other state workers, or whomever – to know about your (or your state's) experiences with serving two-parent families through TANF?
2. Is there anything you may immediately think of that you would most like to learn from this study when it is finished?

(Probe: What is the best format for sharing that information?)

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Thank you.

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