

Introductory Script

We are conducting the TANF Office Culture study, funded by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its purpose is to understand TANF office cultures, office settings, and agency changes. The information you share today will help the Administration for Children and Families better understand how TANF office cultures affect services for customers.

The Administration for Children and Families hired two outside groups to conduct this study, MEF Associates and MDRC. I work for MEF Associates and am based in [city]. As part of the study, we are visiting a number of TANF offices across the country. We are talking with individuals who help implement or administer TANF programs, contracted partners, and some current and former TANF participants as well. We have a series of questions prepared about your role at [insert agency name], your interactions with clients and other staff, and your perceptions of [insert agency name]’s processes, goals, and organizational culture.

Before beginning our discussion, we want to thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. We know you are busy and will try to be as focused as possible. The interview will take about 90 minutes.

Please take a few minutes to review this consent form [hand respondent consent form]. It notes that your participation is voluntary, and there are no penalties for choosing not to take part in the interview. Although your answers are important to the study, you can refuse to answer any questions or stop the interview at any time. Our aim is to learn from your insights and experience, not to audit or judge your agency or programs.

Every effort will be made to keep information private to the extent permitted by law. However, because of the relatively small number of organizations participating in the study, there is a possibility that a response could be correctly attributed to you. Information you provide will not be shared with any other staff at your program or organization, including your supervisor or colleagues. Only the study team will have access to the information you provide through this interview. Your name will not be listed in any published reports, and comments will not be attributed to you. Instead, your information will be combined with information provided by others.

Once you have taken a minute to review the consent form, please let me know if you have any questions before we begin.

Staff Consent Form
TANF Office Culture Study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today’s discussion. Your participation is very important to this study. MEF Associates is working with [*insert local program name*] and programs like this around the country that provide services to families. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is funding this study. The information you share today will help HHS and TANF agencies better understand how TANF office cultures affect services for customers.

This discussion will last about 90 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and involves no significant risks to you. You can choose not to answer any of the questions or stop the discussion at any time.

We will take notes and audio record the discussion. Only members of the research team will hear the recording. The notes and recording will be destroyed at the end of this study. We will not include your name or any other identifying information in any reports from the study, and we will not use your name or any other personal information in any quotes we use. Information will be kept private to the extent permitted by law.

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research, you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the project director, Mary Farrell, at MEF Associates at 703-838-2723 at any time.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Signing this consent form indicates that you understand and are willing to participate in this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this signed and dated consent form.

Participant Name (please print: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of Researcher obtaining this Authorization: _____

The Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This collection of information is voluntary and will be used to help HHS and TANF agencies understand how TANF office cultures affect services for clients. Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 90 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and reviewing the collection of information. 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 number and expiration date for this collection are OMB #: 0970-XXXX, Exp: XX/XX/XXXX. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Mary Farrell at mary.farrell@mefassociates.com, or call (703) 838-2723.

Interview Questions (Leadership/Supervisors/Planners)

I. Introduction and Respondent Background

- First, could you please state your title, how long you’ve worked for the agency and what, if any, other positions you’ve held?
- How did you get into this field?
- As I mentioned earlier, this study is about organizational culture in TANF offices. People have lots of different ways of thinking about organizational culture. How would you describe your agency’s culture?
 - *Probe: What are some of the informal rules or norms related to “how things go” around here? If you were interviewing a job candidate, how would you describe what it’s like to work here?*

II. Program Structure and Staffing

We’d like to get a sense of the general division of processes across teams or locations in [insert agency name] as well as ways in which those services are coordinated or integrated to help us understand how staff and clients experience the TANF program.

Note to interviewer: We will request this group sends us an organization chart in advance of this interview. Please ask for it if you have not yet received it, and please reference it throughout the following section.

- Please describe the basic program structure and division of labor between different teams throughout [insert agency name], including eligibility, case management, employment services, and any other teams within the agency (refer to org chart).
 - How is work distributed to the different groups/teams?
 - Are tasks distributed geographically across offices in the region? If so, how?
 - How many caseworkers report to each supervisor?
 - Is any of this work contracted to partner agencies? If so, what?
- Are there examples of times when it is appropriate for frontline staff to diverge from typical processes or procedures?
 - *Probe on discretion in various service delivery areas (e.g., developing employment plans; determining how often to meet with clients; determining whether to sanction clients, granting time limit extensions).*
- What is the size of the agency’s [or unit, depending on respondent] caseload?
 - [If applicable] What is the average number of cases processed per day per eligibility worker??
 - [If applicable] What is the average caseload per case manager?

III. Client Experiences

Now I’d like to ask you about clients’ experiences accessing program services.

- What challenges do clients participating in [insert agency name]’s TANF program face?
- Generally speaking, how easy do you think is it for clients to navigate the steps in [insert agency name]’s TANF program?
 - What works well about your program structure, processes, or staffing model for clients?
 - What aspects create challenges for clients?

- o What aspects create challenges for staff?
- Sometimes physical spaces or images can have positive or negative influences on people’s experiences. What do you think clients who come to this office notice or experience?
- What do you think clients notice or experience when they interact with the [insert agency name] program [e.g., use the agency webpage; receive mail from the agency; call the hotline, etc.]?
- What would you like clients to notice or experience when they interact with the agency at these points?

IV. Agency Goals and Performance Management

Now we’d like to talk about the agency’s goals and how you measure progress or performance.

Note to interviewer: Leadership members interviewed may represent different “layers” in the TANF program’s administration and may report to other organizations above theirs, depending on their role. Please note specific agency the respondent describes in this section.

- In your opinion, what are the most important priorities for your [insert agency/office name] as a whole?
 - o Probe: Goals related to the way in which [insert agency name] works with clients (e.g., responsiveness, staff have up-to-date training)? Financial/fiscal goals? Efficiency (e.g., accuracy, timeliness, reducing fraud)? Emphasis on Work Participation Rate? Long-term outcomes such as employment or poverty reduction?
 - o Probe [if part of a larger department or organizational entity]: How do these priorities fit into broader departmental priorities?
- How do the state legislature or other state agencies shape the direction/goals of the program?
 - o [If county-administered] How do state goals interact with local goals?
- Who decides on your agency’s goals and priorities?
 - o Probe: What is your role? Does the agency utilize any specific frameworks or tools in their strategic planning process?
- Have these priorities changed over time since you started working at [insert agency name]? If so, how?
- Once decided, how do you message these priorities to staff?
 - o Probe: Meetings, emails, letterhead slogans, posters
 - o Which of these communication strategies do you think are most effective?
- How do you, as part of the agency’s leadership, support staff toward reaching individual or agency performance goals?
 - o Probe: What trainings, staffing arrangements, incentives, or opportunities for recognition has the agency implemented to enable you to better achieve these goals?
- How do external factors (e.g., budget, political climate, or outside organizations) influence the way [insert agency name] does its work? What other external factors influence the agency’s goals?
 - o Probe: Agency’s history, formal political constraints, public perception, partners/competitors, professional organizations, labor unions
- [Agency leadership only] Are there examples of times when you use your discretion to interpret these external factors (e.g., new federal mandates, state legislature priorities)?
 - To what extent are you able to tailor services to the needs of clients given these policy constraints?
 - Is [insert agency name]’s performance tied to your clients’ wellbeing? If so, how?

V. Organizational Learning and Innovation

Next, we'd like to talk about the agency's approach to change and innovation.

- In general, how would you describe your agency's openness to new ideas?
 - Probe: New ideas from staff? If a frontline staff member had a new idea for a way to improve processes tomorrow, is there a process for him or her to share that idea with supervisors or agency leadership? What would you do with this information?
 - Probe: From outside the agency (e.g., other states, research)?
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to adapt to unexpected circumstances as part of [insert agency name] leadership? What did you do?
 - Probe: Budget changes, staffing changes, rule changes
- Can you provide an example of a recent service delivery improvement the agency has implemented? Who initiated this change?
 - Probe: streamlining client referral processes, eliminating unnecessary paperwork, implementing new work participation programs, technological tools to reduce paperwork or the number of in-person trips to an office, workload or staffing changes to facilitate effective staff-to-client interactions (e.g., specialized units), installing electronic record or tracking systems, modifying decision-making processes, establishing linkages among key personnel in different institutions (e.g., workforce agencies, schools, courts), and improving intake procedures.
 - What did this involve, and how did it affect clients' experience or outcomes?
 - How did this affect staff?

===== Use Section VI below only for sites that have undergone intentional organizational culture change efforts. SKIP to Section VII if no change effort researched in advance. =====

VI. Perception of Organizational Culture Change Initiative

Now we'd like to discuss the [insert local name of change effort/system redesign] that [insert agency name] implemented in [insert year]. Are you familiar with this initiative? [Confirm understanding before proceeding to questions below].

Note to interviewer: Some sites may call this a "process" change initiative rather than a "culture" change initiative. Please adapt to site-specific wording.

- Please describe your role in [insert above listed org culture change effort].
- [If respondent did not initiate] Who initiated this change? Why?
 - Who else was consulted in determining the direction of the change initiative? How?
 - Probe: External consultant framework? Internally directed?
- What was the original goal of the culture change initiative?
- Please walk me through the implementation of the culture change effort and what it involved:
 - Who decided there was a need for change?
 - What kinds of information or input did they seek?

- Who guided the change effort implementation? Designated staff?
- How did agency message the changes?
- What were the core steps involved in the changes?
- How did processes and staffing roles change?

- How did staff participate in the service improvement efforts?
 - Did the agency incorporate staff feedback prior to the changes? If so, how?
 - Did the agency incorporate staff feedback as the changes were being implemented? If so, how?
 - *Probe: Interviews, surveys, focus groups? Specific examples of staff feedback used?*
- How successful was [insert agency name] in achieving its original goals of this culture change initiative?
- [If successful] If you could point to just one thing out of this whole process that was MOST important, what would it be?
 - *Probe: Role of social norms, perceived benefit, involvement/self-efficacy from participating in initiative design?*
- Did you conduct an evaluation or use any tools to measure the change, either quantitatively or qualitatively? If so, what?
- Overall, how do you think this culture change initiative affected the agency?
 - *Probe: Operations and service effectiveness?*
- How do you think this culture change affected staff?
 - *Probe: Staff roles, duties, competency?*
 - *Probe: Staff ability to implement other innovations or best practices?*
 - *Probe: Staff satisfaction, morale, commitment, retention?*
- How do you think this change affected clients' wellbeing?
- What most surprised you about the organizational change process?
- What were some unexpected consequences of the changes?

VII. Cultural Congruence Across Service Providers

Note to interviewer: The following questions apply to interviewees at sites in which cash assistance and employment services are provided by separate agencies.

Before we wrap up, I'd like you to think about the other agencies who serve the same clients you do at [insert agency name].

- [TANF agency staff only] How would you compare your organization's culture to that of your contracted partner agencies? What's the same? Different?
 - [If different] How do you and your staff manage these differences?
- [Contracted employment services staff only] How would you compare your organization's culture to that of the state TANF agency? What's the same? Different?
 - [If different] How do you and your staff manage these differences?

VIII. Conclusion (All Respondents)

- In conclusion, is there anything else you'd like to share with us that you think makes your agency's culture unique?
 - *Probe: What keeps staff working here?*
- Is there anything else you'd like to share, in general?

Thank you for speaking with us about [insert agency name]'s processes, goals, and organizational culture.