

## **LOCAL TANF FRONTLINE STAFF INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP GUIDE**

### **Introduction/Informed Consent for TANF Frontline Staff**

Before we begin, I want to tell you a few things about this study and your participation. Please feel free to ask me any questions you might have.

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

The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (ACF/OPRE) has contracted with Urban to conduct a study of COVID-19 changes to TANF policy and practice in [STATE]. The study is not an audit or evaluation of any program. Rather, the purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how COVID-19 related changes to TANF policy and practice were implemented in one state, and how those changes were experienced by TANF recipients from different racial and ethnic groups.

As part of this process, we are conducting [interviews/focus groups] with staff to speak with you to better understand the work you do, virtual services and other TANF policy and program changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic including the tablet program. We are also interested in the TANF program's capacity to meet families' needs including families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

You can expect this discussion to last no more than [60 minutes if interview/90 minutes if focus group]. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to participate, skip any questions you would prefer not to answer, or end the discussion at any time without penalty.

[If VIRTUAL and FOCUS GROUP] This focus group is a private meeting. By that we mean, only the people invited to attend should be logged in to the meeting and/or able to hear you and your fellow participants.

We need your help in keeping the meeting private and ask that you please participate in a private setting away from earshot or viewing by other people to include family members.

If you are in a room with other people, then we ask that you please pick up your handset or put on a headset or ask others to leave the room so that only invited participants can hear what other participants are saying.

- Are you in a private space where no one else can see your screen, see what others are writing in chat, or hear what other participants are saying?

**[If someone says no**, discuss whether they can fix the situation. If no, explain that we will need for them to exit the meeting. We will follow up after the meeting to let them know if it may be possible for them to join another meeting.]

**[If yes, then continue]**

[VIRTUAL OR IN-PERSON] Though we take notes and may – with your permission – record this conversation, information is never shared outside of our research team that identifies you or any other people we interview by name. When we write our reports and discuss our findings, we present information aggregated from across our discussions in order to shield the identities of individual people. However, if you are in a position that makes it so that you are the only person who could know a certain piece of information, it is possible someone reading a report might infer the source of the information. We make every effort to avoid this, but you should be aware of the possibility.

*Everyone who works on this study has signed a Staff Confidentiality Pledge prohibiting disclosure of anything you say during the discussion that would allow someone outside the study team to identify you.*

[IF VIRTUAL] *But, please understand that given technical limitations with zoom and similar internet platforms, we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of what might be said.*

[IF VIRTUAL AND FOCUS GROUP] Please do not repeat anything heard in this discussion outside the group. We also request that participants do not take screenshots or record the conversation. While the research team pledges to keep your responses private, other participants in this discussion may not.

[IF IN-PERSON and FOCUS GROUP] While the research team pledges to keep your responses private, other participants in this discussion may not.

**[VIRTUAL OR IN-PERSON] The risks associated with participating in this discussion are minimal.** This discussion will be focused on your role at [state TANF office], and you will not be asked to disclose any personal or sensitive information. *We hope you will speak frankly about your work and perspectives, which we understand can be sensitive information that could impose risks if revealed. We want to assure you that we will make every effort to protect the privacy of the information you share.*

Since this [focus group/interview] is taking place in-person, the research team has taken proper precautions to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection but cannot eliminate all risk of exposure. All research team members are fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19 and have taken COVID-19 tests prior to traveling to [STATE]. To try to make this a comfortable space for everyone, we are wearing masks. Masks are optional for you.

**Would you prefer for us to wear masks during this conversation?**

TANF staff will receive no direct benefits for participating in the study. However, there is the opportunity to inform [state TANF office] on how to identify and mitigate potential racial and ethnic disparities in their programs in the future.

If you are comfortable, we would also like to record the conversation. The recordings being made are only for our own notes and will be destroyed at the termination of the project. We also ask that you refrain from sharing anything we discuss today with others outside this [group/ interview] to help us ensure your privacy.

Finally, I would like to remind you that participation is completely voluntary.

DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?

DO YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

DO YOU AGREE TO BE RECORDED?

If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact: Marla McDaniel, Urban Institute, 202-261-5678, [mmcdaniel@urban.org](mailto:mmcdaniel@urban.org)

If you agree to participate in this study and feel that your rights have been violated or that you have not been treated fairly, contact: Office of Human Research Protections, The Urban Institute, 500 L'Enfant Plaza SW, Washington, DC 20024 / (202-261-5632)

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 0970-0597 and it expires 10/31/2025.

## **I. Background and Context**

1. [Focus group only]: Please go around and briefly introduce yourself.
2. Please describe your position/role(s) in the TANF program. (Probe: What is your job title? What are your responsibilities related to TANF? What are your overall responsibilities? How long have you held this role? In the past, did you have other positions in this department? Listen for before/during the pandemic.)
3. We'll be getting into specifics shortly, but first I wanted to ask, could you give us a general sense of the demographics of TANF clients in this area (e.g. race, age, household structure, etc.)
4. Is there anything about local conditions or [local area] generally that is important for us to know in order to really understand how TANF works here and how it changed during the pandemic? (e.g., local industries, work opportunities, political conditions, major events)
5. Is there anything about [STATE'S] culture, traditions, or shared values that is likely to influence the provision of TANF?

## **II. [STATE] TANF During COVID-19 Pandemic**

*I would like to ask some questions about challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to the TANF program, and your perspectives.*

1. In your experience, how has demand for TANF and workforce services in [local area] changed over the course of the pandemic? (Probe: Differences by race and ethnicity)
2. When the COVID-19 pandemic started what were the most immediate challenges to tackle? What were the most difficult challenges to tackle?
3. How did your local office work to address those challenges? (Probe if mentioned: What was involved in transitioning to virtual services?)

## **III. Requirement Changes and Virtual Services During COVID-19 Pandemic**

*I'd like to dig into some of these policy and practice changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

1. [For any requirement changes or virtual services discussed in previous section] Tell us about the local implementation of [policy change/practice change]. [Probe: Local challenges or successes.]
2. What have been the outcomes or results of [policy change/practice change]? How has it changed your work, if at all?
3. Are you still providing or offering [policy change/practice change]? If not, when did it stop? If yes, how much longer do you anticipate offering it?

4. How did TANF recipients respond to [policy change/practice change]? Have some recipients had a harder or easier time with the change? (Probe: Reasons for challenges, differences by race and ethnicity)

#### **IV. Tablet Program**

*I would like to ask some questions about the tablet program in [STATE] to understand the implementation of the program, challenges and successes, and any emerging outcomes.*

1. Tell us about the program's implementation when it was first rolled out and in its early months. (Probe: Variations in implementation by location, unique challenges or successes by location, differences by race and ethnicity)
  - a. What kind of feedback have you received so far?
  - b. Are you collecting any data or metrics on program involvement?
2. Have you seen any outcomes or results from the tablet program? How has it changed your work, if at all?
3. Any additional changes planned? Any plans to change further as concerns about COVID change? If yes, what changes?
4. (If not previously mentioned) How do clients refer to the program and the devices?

#### **V. Capacity and Fairness of the TANF Program**

*Now I would like to turn now to some questions about the TANF program and its capacity to meet families' needs.*

1. Do you think the program is generally fair and available to all who need it?
2. Are there some people who have a harder time getting and receiving services than others? (If yes: Who has a harder time, in your experience?)
3. What kinds of circumstances might make it harder for some to get and keep TANF?
4. Do you think people of different races and ethnicities have similar or different experiences in [LOCAL AREA] on TANF?
  - a. *If different*, have you observed any differences, and can you give me an example of what you've seen?
    - i. Why do you think that difference is happening?
5. When you think of families needing TANF in [LOCAL AREA], do you tend to see differences in the types of needs or the level of needs for families of different races? What are some of the differences you've seen?

- a. *If you see differences*, in your opinion how well does the TANF program respond to those differences?
  - i. If not as well as it should, what do you think are some of the challenges? What solutions would you recommend, if any?

## **VI. Wrap-Up**

*Thank you so much for taking the time to share this information with us. We sincerely hope that this study can be useful to you. Before we finish, we would like to hear what you would most like others to know about your experiences with TANF during the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual services 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 administrators, or whomever – to know about your state’s experiences with virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Is there anything you may immediately think of that you would most like to learn from this study when it is finished?

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