

## TANF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

### Introduction/Informed Consent for TANF Program Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this [interview/focus group] 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].

We are conducting a study of how [STATE] changed the [STATE TANF PROGRAM] program to respond to COVID-19 and how program participants, like you, experienced those changes. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how COVID-19 related changes to [STATE TANF PROGRAM] policy and practice were implemented in one state, and how those changes were experienced by participants from different racial and ethnic groups.

This [interview/focus group] is completely voluntary. You can choose to not answer any questions. You can [stop the interview/leave the focus group] at any time. Program staff will not see these responses and your responses will not affect decisions about your case.

[If in person] 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?

The research team working on the project will summarize all responses. In sharing what we learn from talking with you and others, we will never use your name or identify you. We may use quotes, but we will not include your name. [IF FOCUS GROUP] We ask that you not share anything that is said here outside of this group. However, we cannot guarantee that others will not do so.

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

[IF VIRTUAL] We want to assure you that we will make every effort to protect the privacy of the information you share. However, given the technical challenges presented by Zoom and similar internet platforms, Urban staff cannot guarantee the confidentiality of what might be shared.

[PRIOR TO RECORDING] 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 [name of person] will be taking notes on a laptop computer. Do you have an objection for us to proceed with recording?

[IF INTERVIEW] Our conversation today will last for about 60 minutes.

[IF FOCUS GROUP] Our conversation today will last for about 90 minutes.

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

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

[IF IN-PERSON] Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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.

Please read over the consent form. Then we can get started.

### **Informed Consent: Participant Interviews and Focus Groups**

#### **What is the study about?**

The Urban Institute, a nonprofit social policy research organizations, is conducting a study of how [STATE] changed the [STATE TANF PROGRAM] program to respond to COVID-19 and how program participants, like you, experienced those changes. 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.

#### **What will I need to do?**

We are talking with people who are currently participating in [STATE TANF PROGRAM] or likely eligible to participate and asking them to share their thoughts and experiences.

[If interview] This interview will take up to 1 hour and gives you an opportunity to share your perspective.

[If focus group] This focus group will take up to 90 minutes and gives you an opportunity to share your perspective.

#### **Does the [interview/focus group] involve any risk to me?**

There are no major risks from participating. The main risk is possibly feeling uncomfortable discussing your experiences. You can choose not to answer any of the questions that make you uncomfortable. We have very strong security measures in place and will make every effort to protect your privacy. There is a small possibility of someone outside of the study staff hearing or seeing your responses [or someone in the focus group repeating your answers].

[If focus group/interview is in-person]: Since these [focus groups/interviews] are taking place in-person, the research team has taken 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 will take COVID-19 tests prior to traveling to [STATE]. Research team members will also wear masks during the [focus group/interview] if preferred by any participant. The team will also offer masks to any participants who want to wear one. [If focus group: Please note that other participants may choose not to wear masks during the conversation.] We also ask that if you are feeling ill prior to the [interview/focus group] that you do not participate in person. The research team can set up a virtual session for those who are not able to meet in person.

### **Will the [interview/focus group] help me?**

Participating in the [interview/focus group] will probably not help you directly, but sharing your thoughts and experiences may help improve the experiences of future individuals and families.

### **Do I have to [do the interview/participate in the focus group]?**

You do not have to [do the interview/participate in the focus group] if you do not want to. You can [stop the interview/leave the focus group] at any time. Your participation in the [interview/focus group] will have no effect on services you or your family receive.

[If interview/focus group is virtual: If you take part in an interview using Zoom, you will have the option to share video or keep it off if you wish for your image or background to remain private.]

We would like to record the [interview/focus group] so we can concentrate on what you are saying and to help with our notes. However, if you do not want us to record, we will not. If there is anything you would like to say without being recorded, you can ask to pause the recording at any time.

### **Will I receive anything for my participation?**

To express our appreciation for your participation, we will give you a \$50 gift card for participating in the [interview/focus group].

### **Will you tell people what I say?**

The study team will not share your answers with anyone, unless you say something about hurting yourself or others or if you describe someone else being hurt. [Focus group only: There is a possibility of someone in the focus group repeating your answers, but we are asking all participants to keep this conversation private.] Otherwise, only the study team will read the notes or listen to the recording and no one at [state TANF office], including your caseworker will hear your answers. We may use some specific quotes, but we won't include anyone's name. When the project is over, we will destroy our notes and recordings.

### **Questions:**

If you have questions about the study, you can call the project director, Marla McDaniel at the Urban Institute at 202-261-5678.

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (Pub. L. 104-13), 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

[Focus group only] To get us started, let's each introduce ourselves with your first name, how long you have been receiving [STATE TANF PROGRAM], and one word that describes how you are feeling.

And since we are interested in understanding different experiences that people of different racial and ethnic background may have, we'd also like to ask how you each identify. I'll start, I consider myself [interviewer and note-taker say their race and ethnicity here.]

[Interview only] To get us started, we would like to learn a little more about your family and the assistance you might receive.

1. [Interview only]: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
  - a. [Interview only] How many children do you have, and how old are they?
2. Tell us about what was going on for you and your family when you first started receiving [STATE TANF PROGRAM]? Why did you decide to apply for [STATE TANF PROGRAM]? Did you have any concerns or hesitations in applying for [STATE TANF PROGRAM]? (Probe: If enrolled before or during COVID-19)
  - a. *If enrolled in TANF both before COVID-19 and during COVID-19*: Did your interactions with the [STATE TANF PROGRAM] program change due to COVID-19? If so, how?
3. [Interview only] How long have you been receiving TANF cash assistance? Have there been times when you stopped assistance for a while and then started again? (Probe: Whether enrolled in TANF before COVID-19 or during COVID-19)
4. [Interview only] We are interested in understanding how families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds may have different experiences. Do you mind sharing what race or ethnicity do you identify as?
5. [Interview only] Tell us about the racial and ethnic makeup of your immediate neighborhood or community.

## II. Virtual Services During COVID-19 Pandemic

*We are really interested in how TANF and TANF providers have interacted with families during the COVID-19 pandemic, both early in the pandemic and more recently. We understand that [STATE] changed some of its services to be more virtual and require less in-person contact. I'd like to ask about your experiences and contact with the program during the pandemic, including in-person and virtual communication and virtual services.*

1. Currently today, what activities or other TANF services or requirements involve, allow, or require you to meet with someone in-person? What current activities involve, allow, or require telephone or could be handled online or in a video conference?

- a. [For those who have been on TANF prior to COVID] How is this different than your previous experience on TANF? Are there aspects of any services or requirements now that are easier or harder than they were when you were previously on TANF?
- b. For you and your family, which ways of communicating (e.g., in person, telephone, text, online, mail, etc.) with TANF staff are most convenient for you Why?
- c. Which modes of communication (i.e., in-person, telephone, online, mail etc.) are most challenging, and why? (Probe: Challenges including access to transportation, access to internet, access to printer, access to child care)
- d. What would make communication with the TANF office easier?
- e. Are there services you prefer to receive in-person?

### III. Tablet Program

*We understand that DSS in [STATE] has made tablets, cell phone, and internet available [through a provider called Standup Wireless] for some TANF participants. [include name and description of program that recipients might recognize]*

1. Do you, or anyone in your household, have a tablet or computer, cell phone, and internet access?
  - a. If yes, who is the provider?
  - b. If yes, do you pay full cost or is it covered/paid through some other way?
2. Have you heard of [name for tablet/internet program]?
  - a. If yes, how did you hear about the program? What did you think when you first heard of the program?
3. Right now, do you have a tablet (cell phone and/or internet) that you received from Standup Wireless or a program offered by TANF?
  - a. If no, have you applied for the tablet program?
    - i. If yes, what was the process (what was required, how easy or difficult was it to apply? Did you qualify, and if so, when do you expect to receive the tablet and/or cell phone?)
    - ii. If no, why not?
      1. *If reason for not applying is because unaware, probe:*
        - a. Does this sound like a program that would interest you? Why or why not?

- b. What is a typical way that you get information from the TANF office about services or other supports or programs? What is your preferred way to get information like that from the TANF office?
- b. If yes, when did you apply for it? What made you decide to apply? What was the process (what was required, how easy or difficult was it to apply?)
  - i. How long did it take after you applied to get the tablet and/or cell phone and internet service? When did you receive the tablet?
  - ii. What do you use the tablet for? Can you use it for purposes other than TANF?
  - iii. What has been helpful about the tablet?
  - iv. Have there been any limitations or downsides?

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

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

1. What did you have to do to figure out if you were eligible for TANF? How easy or challenging was the process?
2. Do you think the program is generally fair and available to all who need it?
3. Are there some people who have a harder time getting and receiving services than others?
  - a. *If yes:* What kinds of circumstances might make it harder for some to get and keep TANF?
4. We are interested in understanding different families' experiences with the TANF program, including if families of different races may have different experiences. Do you think people of different races and ethnicities have similar or different experiences in [STATE or 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 [STATE or 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?

- b. Do you notice any differences in the types of services families may receive or be offered?
6. Do you think TANF is sensitive to you as a person and respects or acknowledges your culture, your race or ethnicity, gender, your health or health needs, or employment circumstances (e.g. criminal background, disability, etc.)?

**V. 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 experience with TANF in [STATE], particularly 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?