

TANF and Child Support Moving Forward Project

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

State TANF and child support staff interview guide

Introductory Statement and Consent

Thank you so much for talking with me today. My name is _____ and my colleague, _____, is on the call as well. I am with an organization called [Mathematica/MEF]. We are assisting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in learning about the changes that [child support/TANF] programs made to adapt to the challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are especially interested in learning about changes made during the pandemic that are likely to continue as time goes on. The goal of this study is to learn about the lasting innovations that may inform and improve [child support/ TANF] programs in the future.

Throughout this discussion, I will refer to the families (i.e., customers/clients) that you serve. Just for my own knowledge, how do you refer to the individuals that you serve?

[INTERVIEWER: NOTE THEIR RESPONSE AND TRY TO ADAPT YOUR LANGUAGE ACCORDINGLY THROUGHOUT THE INTERVIEW] Thank you – I will try to use that term throughout our conversation.

Prior to this discussion, your program participated in a short web-based questionnaire that provided information about your program’s practices that were newly implemented or expanded during the pandemic. Those responses helped us develop our questions that we will be asking you today.

Our conversation will take about one hour. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question you do not want to answer. We will incorporate findings from this study into public documents in which we may identify your state as a contributor to the study, but we will not include the names of individual respondents in any reporting.

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0970-0531 and the expiration date is XX/XX/2025.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Is it alright if we record this conversation? The recording will not be shared with anyone outside our research team. Once we finalize our notes, we will delete the recording.

[INTERVIEWER: IF ALL RESPONDENTS SAY IT IS ALRIGHT TO RECORD, PRESS RECORD IN THE WEBEX AND ASK, “JUST TO CONFIRM, DO ALL OF YOU GIVE YOUR PERMISSION FOR ME TO BEGIN THE INTERVIEW AND START RECORDING AT THIS TIME?”]

[INTERVIEWER: SPECIFY YOUR NAME, THE RESPONDENTS' FIRST NAMES, DATE, STATE BEING DISCUSSED IN THIS INTERVIEW]

Interview Questions

COVID-19 disruptions

[INTERVIEWER: DO NOT SPEND MORE THAN 7 MINUTES ON THIS SECTION SO WE CAN ENSURE WE HAVE TIME AVAILABLE FOR OTHER TOPICS]

We understand that the COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable disruptions to all aspects of your program. I would like to start by asking you about the initial disruption to your agency in the early months of the pandemic.

- What were the immediate steps your agency took after hearing the declaration of the public health emergency?
 - How was your program affected?
- Did the initial impact vary across your state? For example, was it different in certain areas compared to others?
 - *If it varied:* How and why did it vary across the state?
- At this point, is your program still managing challenges caused by the pandemic? If yes, how is it still affecting your program?

Pandemic Related Changes

[INTERVIEWER: PRIOR TO AND DURING THE INTERVIEW, REVIEW AND REFERENCE THE STATE RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND TAILOR THIS SECTION ACCORDINGLY TO FOCUS THE DISCUSSION ON SPECIFIC CHANGES.]

- On the questionnaire you completed for this study, you indicated that the following changes are likely to continue: [populate key information from the questionnaire]. Thinking about [specific change] [Repeat this set of questions for each specific change]:
 - [If you need additional information about this specific change] Can you provide additional information about this change?
 - Why did you make the decision to prioritize this change over others?
 - Why do you expect this change to continue?
 - What, if any, are the downsides of this change?
 - How do you think this change affected families' engagement and interaction with the program?
- What resources are needed to continue this change? You identified several changes that were implemented during the pandemic that have since ended, including [populate key information from the questionnaire].
 - Can you provide additional information about each change?
 - Why did you make the decision to end this change?

- How did the agency consider diversity, equity, and inclusion when deciding which changes to continue?

External Guidance and Resources

- Did you receive guidance from the federal [Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE)/Office of Family Assistance (OFA)]?
 - If yes, what guidance did you find most helpful from [OCSE/OFA]?
 - Thinking back since the pandemic began, is there additional guidance that you wish you had received from [OCSE/OFA]? If yes, what?
 - Thinking about the future, is there any new guidance from [OCSE/OFA] that you could benefit from that would help your agency continue to adapt to the pandemic? If yes, what?
 - Are there other ways, besides guidance, that [OFA/OCSE] could support your agency as you continue to adapt to the pandemic? If yes, what are they?

[INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT IS NOT FAMILIAR WITH THESE AGENCIES, YOU CAN PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING DETAILS: The Office of Child Support Enforcement partners with and provides support for state, tribal, and local child support agencies to help them develop, manage, and operate their programs according to federal law; The Office of Family Assistance provides Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) to state, tribal, and local TANF programs.]

- [If Governor or umbrella agency were not mentioned above] Did you receive guidance from your Governor or your umbrella agency? [If yes, or Governor or umbrella agency was mentioned above] What guidance did you find most helpful from your Governor or umbrella agency?
- Did you receive or seek guidance from any professional associations (such as American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) or National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA)) when making program decisions? [If yes, or a professional organization was mentioned above] Do you recall what guidance you found most helpful from [name of professional organization]? If yes, what was that guidance?
- Did you receive guidance from any other sources, internally or externally, that helped your program make decisions or learn about flexibilities?
- Can you think of any other guidance or resources that your agency could benefit from as you continue to adapt to COVID? If yes, what?

Staffing Throughout the Pandemic

Now, I have a few questions about staffing throughout the pandemic.

- How have staff (at all levels) responded to the pandemic-related changes to office operations? [e.g., moving away from in-person contact with customers]
 - What was this change like for staff?
 - How was this different from office operations before the pandemic?
- [TANF ONLY] Were there any changes or considerations that were unique to performance-based contractors that [STATE NAME] works with for TANF service delivery?
- What types of supports, if any, did you institute for staff (i.e., increased flexibility, training, materials, cell phones)? Which do you intend to sustain into the foreseeable future?
 - Is your program providing any supports or services to assist with the mental health needs of staff? If so, please describe what you are doing.
- Have you faced any challenges related to staff retention and hiring throughout the pandemic?
 - If yes, what type of changes, if any, have been made to address these challenges?

Serving Families

We are interested in understanding how families responded to the changes that were made during the pandemic and how you may have collected feedback from families you serve.

- From your perspective, have families' perceptions of the [TANF/child support] program changed as a result of your agency's recent changes?
 - Why do you think customer perceptions have changed?
 - What changes do you think were most important to impacting customer perceptions?
- Did you collect any feedback from customers/families during the pandemic?
 - If yes, how did you collect this feedback?
 - Were you able to incorporate this feedback into the program? If yes, how?

Additional COVID-Related Supports

- [TANF only] Did your program interact or collaborate with other benefits programs specifically during the pandemic?
 - Were these pre-existing connections with other programs, or any newly developed in response to the pandemic?

- Was there a process for jointly serving TANF customers who were also being served by other programs?
- Did your program provide broadband for families?
 - If so, how has this supported families in other realms of their lives (such as homeschooling)?
- [TANF only] Turning to the Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund (PEAF):
 - What was the process to access and receive those funds?
 - How did you decide to use the extra funds to support TANF participants?
 - What was the eligibility criteria to receive PEAFF funded supports? How did you determine eligibility? Who ended up receiving the funds?

Lessons Learned

- What are the key lessons that you learned during the pandemic?
- Reflecting on the early months of the pandemic and what you know now, would you change anything about how you responded? Would you make any different decisions about the changes you implemented? Are you more equipped to respond now?
- What do you see as the changes that are still needed for your program as you go forward?

Local-Level Interview Outreach

As part of this study, we will also be conducting virtual interviews with some [local/county]-level staff over the next few weeks. We are especially interested in speaking to programs that implemented noteworthy changes, particularly sustained changes, in response to the pandemic.

- Are there any local or county agencies in your program that you think we should contact about participating in an interview? **[INTERVIEWER: POPULATE THE INFORMATION FROM THE WEB-BASED QUESTIONNAIRE]**
 - What prompted you to suggest these particular local agencies?
 - What, if any, sustained or noteworthy changes have they implemented?
 - Would you be able to introduce us to the local/county staff via email or share their contact information with us so that we can contact them directly?

Conclusion

- Is there anything else about your agency's changes in response to the pandemic that we haven't talked about but that you think we should know for our study?

Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate all that you have shared.