

TANF and Child Support Moving Forward Project

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Local 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: RECORD 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 state [child support/TANF] program participated in a short web-based questionnaire that provided information about their 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, AND NAME OF COUNTY/LOCAL AREA BEING DISCUSSED IN THIS INTERVIEW]

Interview Questions

COVID-19 disruptions

[INTERVIEWER: DO NOT SPEND MORE THAN 10 MINUTES ON THIS SECTION SO WE CAN ENSURE WE HAVE TIME AVAILABLE FOR OTHER TOPICS]

The COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable disruptions to all program aspects. I have a few questions that will help us understand those disruptions.

- What were the most significant disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on your program?
- Which of these would you consider to be the most significant disruption?
 - How did this disruption affect your program? Why did it have such an impact on your program?
 - Does it continue to cause challenges for or disrupt your program currently?
 - If yes, how and why does this challenge persist?

Pandemic Related Changes

[INTERVIEWER: PRIOR TO AND DURING THE INTERVIEW, REVIEW AND REFERENCE THE QUESTIONNAIRE ANSWERS AND JUSTIFICATION FOR SELECTING THE LOCAL AREA. TAILOR THIS SECTION ACCORDINGLY TO FOCUS THE DISCUSSION ON SPECIFIC CHANGES RELEVANT TO THIS LOCAL AREA.] Now I'd like to talk about a few specific changes in greater detail that were implemented in your [COUNTY/LOCALITY].

- Your [COUNTY/LOCALITY] was identified because we were told by your state program that you had implemented the following changes that were likely to be sustained into the foreseeable future: [INSERT CHANGES OF INTEREST IDENTIFIED IN QUESTIONNAIRE OR STATE-LEVEL DISCUSSION].
- [For each change, ask] Thinking about [specific change]:
 - Can you confirm that this is a change you implemented and that you expect it to be sustained into the foreseeable future? **[INTERVIEWER: IF IT ISN'T, GO TO THE NEXT SPECIFIC CHANGE. IF YOU RUN OUT OF PRE-IDENTIFIED SPECIFIC CHANGES THAT HAVE BEEN SUSTAINED, ASK THEM WHAT, IF ANY, CHANGES HAVE THEY MADE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC THAT THEY HAVE SUSTAINED. FOCUS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ON EACH OF THOSE CHANGES.]**
 - Can you provide some more details about this change?

- o Was this change particularly important or helpful to your agency's pandemic response?
 - Why was this change important?
- o Why did you make the decision to prioritize this change over others?
- o What has been the customer/client's response to this change?
 - [Child Support only] How did custodial parents (CPs) versus noncustodial parents (NCPs) respond to this change?
 - [TANF only] How did parents of child-only TANF cases respond to this change?
- o What was the experience of [TANF/child support] staff who were implementing this change?
 - Did the experience vary by staff position (i.e., case worker versus manager versus administrator)? If yes, how?
- We are also interested in changes to your program that you may have made in response to the pandemic that have since ended. Can you think of any changes like these? If yes, what are they?
 - o *For each:* Why did you make the decision to end this change?

External Guidance and Resources

- o 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?

[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.]

- Did you receive or seek guidance from professional associations (such as American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) or National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA) when making program decisions? If yes, what guidance did you find most helpful?
- What guidance did you find most helpful from your state agency?
 - Thinking back since the pandemic began, is there additional guidance that you wish you had received from your state agency?
 - Thinking about the future, in what ways could your state agency support your agency as you continue to adapt to the pandemic?

Staffing Throughout the Pandemic

Now, I have a few questions about staffing throughout the pandemic. I want to understand how staff responded to the changes, what supports were provided to staff, and any challenges you have had with staff retention and hiring.

- How have staff (at all levels) responded to the pandemic-related changes to office operations?
 - 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 the county/local area 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?

- o What changes do you think were most important to impacting customer service?
- Did you collect any feedback from customers/families during the pandemic?
 - o If yes, how did you collect this feedback?
 - o Were you able to incorporate this feedback into the program? If yes, how?

Additional COVID-Related Supports

- [TANF only] Did the TANF program interact or collaborate with other benefits programs specifically during the pandemic?
 - o 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?
 - o Did the TANF program specifically provide broadband for families?
 - If so, how has this supported families in other realms of their lives (such as homeschooling)?
- [TANF only] How is your program using resources from the Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund (PEAF)?
 - o What was the process to access and receive those funds?
 - o How did you decide to use the extra funds to support TANF participants?
 - What was the eligibility criteria to receive PEAF funded supports? How did you determine eligibility? Who ended up receiving the funds?
- In what ways could [OFA/OCSE] support your agency as we continue to adapt to COVID?
- In what ways could your state agency support your agency as we continue to adapt to COVID?

Lessons learned

- What are the key lessons that you learned during the pandemic?
- Reflecting on 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?
- How do you view the responsiveness of the [TANF/child support] program to the pandemic, specifically related to families' engagement and interaction with the program?
- What do you see as the changes that are still needed for your program as you go forward?

Client/customer outreach

As part of this study, we will also be conducting some virtual small group interviews with [child support/TANF] clients/customers to better understand how they are experiencing the programs during the pandemic. The small group interviews should take about one hour and will ideally include 4-5 participants. As a thank you for participating, we will provide each participant with a \$30 gift card after the discussion is over.

- Would you be willing to help us identify and recruit customers who might be interested in participating in a virtual small group interview? I can provide some additional information about what that would entail.
- [If yes]
 - Our hope is that recruitment can be done via an email that you send to possible participants with details about the small group interview opportunity. Do you foresee any challenges reaching out to or connecting with participants via email?
 - We will provide you with an email template for your outreach that will describe the small group interview and instruct them to reply if they are interested. If they reply and express interest, we will proceed with scheduling the participant.
 - Mathematica can facilitate any follow up after the initial outreach. We can include a Mathematica email and phone number for them to reach out to if they are interested in participating. You can also CC a Mathematica staff member in case participants reply directly to the email.
 - As we think about identifying a time for the interview, are there certain times or days that may work well for participants to attend the small group interview?
 - We hope to conduct the interviews using a platform such as WebEx. Do you anticipate participants facing technological or connectivity barriers?

[INTERVIEWER: IF THE RESPONDENT AGREES, THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME AND TELL THEM THAT WE WILL BE IN TOUCH TO PROVIDE THEM WITH ADDITIONAL DETAILS AND TO SHARE THE OUTREACH EMAIL FOR THEM TO SEND TO SELECT PARTICIPANTS].

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.