

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

To describe efforts to assess family needs and provide support services to low-income families receiving Head Start, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies.

BACKGROUND

Family Needs Assessments and Support Services

Welfare recipients and other low-income families may need help in order to enter the workforce and remain self-sufficient. The replacement of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with TANF block grants heightens the importance of providing services that will enhance the employment outcomes for welfare participants. Federal legislation requires that both TANF and Head Start agencies assess participants' needs to help them address barriers to employment and self-sufficiency. There is no formal requirement that CCDF-funded child care programs or Child Care Resource and Referral agencies who administer subsidies assess family needs or offer support services.

This report examines needs assessments and support services in these three programs in order to learn how to maximize efforts to help families reach and maintain self-sufficiency. It draws on interviews and reviews of case files, policies and procedures of Head Start grantees, TANF agencies and child care providers in six communities as well as with their respective State offices. We interviewed 77 parents or guardians of young children receiving Head Start, TANF and/or CCDF subsidized child care.

We define support services as those which help low-income families overcome barriers to employment such as emergency assistance (e.g. food, housing, clothing), intervention (e.g. mental health, substance abuse, child abuse and domestic violence), child care, transportation and health care.

FINDINGS

Head Start uses needs assessments to help low-income families move towards self-sufficiency

All Head Start grantees we visited conduct an individual family needs assessment to determine the need for support services and provide a variety of referrals and services for families. Nearly all Head Start families we interviewed report receiving information, referrals and some services from Head Start grantees.

State and local TANF agency policies, as well as caseworker discretion, affect the needs assessments, referral processes and the provision of support services that help families reach and maintain self-sufficiency

The TANF offices we visited focus almost exclusively on vocational needs. Most TANF agency policies indicate and staff respondents report that their focus is on assisting recipients make the transition from welfare to work. Support services to help families attain self-sufficiency are lacking in most cases.

Individual child care programs do not assess family needs. Although Child Care Resource and Referral agencies are not required to assess family needs, some may make informal assessments and refer families to needed services

Some low income families may get referral assistance for support services if they make their families' needs known when they call a child care resource and referral agency (CCR&R) for child care information or child care subsidy. The Federal CCDF block grant does not require child care programs or providers to assess family needs or offer additional services. Additionally, States we visited do not require families using CCDF child care subsidies be assessed for support needs.

The Head Start grantees, TANF agencies, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies and child care providers we visited do not coordinate around individual families' needs assessments. However, in some sites we visited, these agencies will make referrals to other agencies and frequently work together on community issues

Although they all serve low-income families, some of whom are the same families, none of the Head Start, TANF, CCR&Rs and child care providers we visited coordinate around an individual family's needs. Lack of coordination around a family's needs assessment may affect families' access to resources. In some States we visited, Head Start, TANF and CCR&R agencies communicate on matters not directly related to individual families and their needs assessments. While families enrolled in the Head Start program are more likely to have their needs assessed, be referred and access services than the families we interviewed receiving TANF or CCDF benefits, we found families in these three programs often lack knowledge about services when they are available in their communities.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Head Start, TANF and child care programs serve many of the same low-income families who are trying to reach or maintain self-sufficiency. Both Head Start grantees and TANF agencies are required by law to assess families' needs and provide families with support services. Head Start grantees are also required to partner with other agencies. In order to maximize efforts to help families reach and maintain self-sufficiency, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) could:

Explore strategies that encourage and facilitate coordination between agencies around needs, referrals and provision of services for families

As economic conditions change or the pool of easier-to-serve clients diminish, agencies will face increased demands on their resources, both in the numbers of families needing services as well as the extent of their needs. Coordination between Head Start, TANF and child care programs, as well as with other community agencies, will become more important in providing needed services to families trying to attain self-sufficiency.

The ACF could address current issues involving the coordination of families' needs, referrals and provision of services and anticipate future trends that may require additional interagency coordination. The ACF could devise ongoing methods to assist State, local and community agencies with communication and coordination in providing services based on family needs. For example, ACF could develop technical guidance on information sharing, convene regional or national conferences on coordination and communication between agencies, and disseminate best practices of coordination. The TANF and child care programs may be able to use Head Start grantees as resources to help them improve needs identification.

Encourage Head Start grantees, TANF offices, and child care programs to increase parent awareness about the resources they and other community agencies provide

The ACF could encourage Head Start grantees, TANF agencies and child care programs to train front-line staff to act as resources to identify community services. Many parents do not know where to find needed services. They are unaware that Head Start, TANF offices and child care programs are resources that may help them identify services that may be available to them in their communities.

In addition to these opportunities for improvement, there is one other area that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) will evaluate. Since both agency and family interviews indicated that in most TANF agencies we visited, needs assessments and referrals to support services are not regularly being offered, the OIG will examine the degree to which

States are complying with the law requiring them to “make an initial assessment of the skills, prior work experience and employability of each [TANF] recipient”¹ and “to conduct a program ... that... provides parents with support services to enable them to leave the program and become self-sufficient.”²

AGENCY COMMENTS

In their written comments, ACF wanted to distinguish between their legal authority to require State compliance and their encouragement for States to move in directions viewed as model practices. They also wanted to document certain actions they had already taken to address some of the underlying concerns expressed in our report. The full ACF comments are contained in the Appendix. Where appropriate, we changed the report to reflect their comments and concerns.

We recognize that the nature of the relationship between ACF and States has significantly changed since the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). The ACF’s primary role is to ensure States’ compliance with TANF and CCDF regulations, while PRWORA gives the States unprecedented authority to administer the programs according to their own policy choices. The State’s TANF programs that have emerged are in various stages of development. States are still experimenting with ways to meet the PRWORA goals of reducing welfare dependency and helping participants reach and maintain self-sufficiency.

We agree with ACF that the nature, mission and goal of each State’s TANF program is not centered on family assessments. We further agree with ACF that TANF does not require States to enter into an individual responsibility plan with their clients. Our intent in the report is not to become overly-focused on a certain kind of formal needs assessment, but rather to meet the self-sufficiency needs of low-income parents and families served by these three programs. In order to help clients become self-sufficient, States first have to know what needs have to be met. In reviewing case files and discussing individual parent and family needs, we did not find, for the most part, that needs were being appropriately identified, either in a formal or informal way. Therefore, we have maintained our first suggested action but deleted the word “assessment” to avoid the impression we are encouraging TANF agencies and Child Care programs to conduct the same type of formal assessments as Head Start grantees.

¹ Public Law 104-193, Section 408(b)1

²Public Law 104-193, Section 402(a)(1)(A)(i)

The ACF supports the concept that all child care providers have information on community resources to assist families with assessments. We agree that many child care providers are not trained to do the assessment themselves, nor that they have sufficient resources to hire support service staff. However, we did not find examples of child care programs or State agencies in the sites we visited which emphasize linking families to community services which can provide assessments or needed services. We believe further attention should be focused on ensuring that parents receiving subsidized care have access to information about community resources.

The ACF stated that some collaboration among these three programs takes place. We support this collaboration. We emphasize that focusing local-level collaboration around identifying and providing for families' needs remains an opportunity for improvement. If families participate in two or three of these programs, local-level coordination can ensure a more focused plan for individual families and improve the efficiency of resource utilization.

Finally, as welfare caseloads continue to drop, States are increasingly looking for ways to help remaining recipients make the transition from welfare to work. Many of the recipients remaining on the rolls face myriad personal and family problems which may hinder rapid employment and long-term attachment to the labor force. Appropriate identification of needs can enable States to provide or refer recipients to the services which will help facilitate a successful transition to employment and self-sufficiency.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Management and Budget also commented on the report. They conceptually agree with the report, but point out that limited funding and the reduced Federal role in welfare administration may hamper the coordination efforts we recommend.

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do to help families move to work. And, third, while finding a job does not equate with self-sufficiency in all cases, in many cases it does. Clearly, it is a huge step in that process and one that seems to be minimized in your report. Your note at the bottom of page 9 in Methodology about not making national projections is not adequately conveyed in the rest of your report.

Assessment Tools:

Many of the assessment instruments (and those that the report seems to describe) focus on "shortcomings or barriers" rather than strengths. The Work First Model (that many States have adopted) emphasizes letting the marketplace "test" or "assess" clients. Clearly in the hiring process, some client's personality and drive overcome major shortcomings; while some, who have good credentials, still cannot get employed. While agencies trying to find all of the problems is one strategy for helping families, focusing on strengths, responsibility and self-advocacy is another approach that has been used successfully.

Specific Comments

Page 17, footnote 7 - Since the Final Rules are now published, you may wish to cite the Final Rule rather than the NPRM.

Page 20, Technical Assistance - We agree that more work needs to be done with regard to collaboration and coordination of services. It is a subject that we try to use every opportunity to promote. Over the past year, ACF sponsored five Promising Practices conferences throughout the country, highlighting best practices, including those with a focus on community outreach and collaboration, substance abuse, depression, mental health, domestic violence, learning disabilities, child care, urban and rural transportation, and many more. They were very well attended by a variety of agencies and groups that work with welfare recipients, including child care providers and Head Start grantees. Overall attendance ranged from 300 to 500 for each conference.

We also devoted one of our monthly Family Independence Forums to "TANF and Head Start Collaboration." The focus of the forum specifically addressed family needs, encouraging coordination and collaboration between Head Start and TANF agencies. These forums are interactive discussions and that are lead by either experts in the field or practitioners who operate programs that are recognized as successful or promising. In this case, our discussion leaders included Head Start Collaboration Directors from two States and a Head Start Director. Attendance in these these video/audio conferences generally includes a variety of participants from 25 to 30 States.

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ACF created the Peer Technical Assistance network to enable States and local TANF officials to exchange information and to conduct on-site visits to model programs. The overarching goal of the Peer Technical Assistance network is to highlight promising programs, promote the exchange of information on successful programs, and to provide "hands-on" technical experience - all in the context of assessing families' needs and bringing those services together in a coordinated manner. Issues surrounding child care have been a priority for States and Head Start is always included as part of that discussion. Please see our web site at <http://www.calib.com/peerta/>.

In addition, ACF is providing funding, through 16 grants, to promote intensive joint planning activities at the local level that would reinforce the concept of the temporary nature of welfare and promote self-sufficiency and employment. These grants provide local communities seed money to convene planning meetings to develop alternative methods to reduce welfare dependency, facilitate partnership building and strengthen community support for families in need.

Finally, because we believe "that no family be left behind" in the successful move to self-sufficiency, we have devoted resources to addressing the needs (with an emphasis on child care needs) of children with disabilities. The Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD) in ACF has targeted a significant portion of its funding to their Projects of National Significance to develop and establish a national Family Support Program for families of children with disabilities. These grants allow States maximum opportunities for systems change through the collaboration with and strengthening of generic community action service organizations (including child care agencies) in order to ensure the provision of family support to families of children with developmental disabilities.

Additionally, these programs allow the establishment or utilization of a State policy council to assess the needs of children with disabilities and their families and provide a comprehensive statewide system of family-centered supports. While statewide systems help ensure the availability of services, the assessments and coordination of services are focused on the individual family needs. These projects address the needs of children from families participating in State's TANF, welfare-to-work, and/or SSI program, veterans with families having children with disabilities, parents with cognitive disabilities who have children, and adoptive/foster families of children with disabilities.