



The Role of Positive Organizational Culture in a Pandemic Response

Lessons from Five TANF Programs

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In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States. Nearly the entire country went into lockdown as public health experts scrambled to provide guidance on preventing the spread of the virus. Many businesses, schools, and government agencies, including those implementing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs, closed their doors. As cases began to rise across the country, TANF programs faced the challenge of providing services in ways they never had before. With their lobbies closed and staff largely working from home, TANF program leadership and staff had to adapt to continue serving their clients. This brief explores how five TANF programs responded to the pandemic and the role that their organizational culture played in those responses. It addresses three research questions.

TANF Office Culture Study

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help families achieve self-sufficiency by providing cash assistance and by promoting job preparation, work, marriage, and the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Given TANF's flexibility, states, territories, and tribes vary in how they implement their TANF cash assistance programs locally. In addition to local policies and procedures, the organizational culture of local TANF offices might also affect how policies are implemented and how staff and clients experience the program.

The Understanding Poverty: TANF Office Culture Study explored how organizational culture, office design, and office procedures shape clients' experiences with TANF, services provided to clients, and staff experiences. The study's [final report](#) focuses on organizational culture in six TANF programs, five of which are featured in this brief.

1. How have the programs' processes and organizational priorities changed or persisted because of the pandemic?
2. How did the programs' existing organizational cultures influence their response to the pandemic?
3. How has the pandemic affected the organizations' cultures?

Findings in this brief are based on interviews conducted between September and November 2020 with leadership from Fairfax County's Department of Family Services (Virginia), Mesa County's Workforce Center (Colorado), New York City's Human Resources Administration and one of its contractors (New York), Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (California), and Utah Department of Workforce Services. The findings in this brief are drawn from our interviews with 11 leadership staff in five of these sites. The findings may not be representative of the experiences of all staff at these programs or staff at other TANF programs.

Before the pandemic, these programs used one or more of the four principles associated with positive organizational culture identified as part of the TANF Office Culture Study, presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Principles of Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices



How Programs Changed Their Processes in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Beginning in March 2020, all five TANF programs implemented changes to protect client and staff health and safety and to adapt to TANF participants' changing needs. This brief focuses on the adaptations programs made between March 2020 and the time of the interviews.

Discontinuing in-person services. Four programs closed their offices to clients in March 2020 and by mid-April, all five programs had closed their offices, encouraging staff to work from

home and clients to access phone- or web-based services. Although all programs required most staff to work from home initially, four programs kept a few staff in the office to serve clients who arrived with an emergency. For example, although most staff in **Santa Cruz County** worked remotely, especially individuals at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19, a staff subset responsible for eligibility determinations took turns going to the office. Three programs also strongly encouraged clients to use the drop-off boxes outside their buildings when submitting paper applications or documents, limiting the number of people in the offices. By July 2020, all had reopened their offices and lobbies to at least a limited capacity, although some **Utah** offices were closed until the time of the interview in September. Although the programs reopened their offices during the time of the interviews, they encouraged clients to use their remote phone or web-based services.

Transitioning to remote work. Transition to remote work represented a major shift for human services programs accustomed to offering in-office services. Many programs initially experienced challenges obtaining laptop computers and other IT equipment to support remote work. Additionally, agencies had to adjust their IT policies and infrastructure to support staff's network access.

Changing the eligibility process. States granted local or county-run TANF programs permission to accept applications virtually and to conduct application interviews remotely by phone or video conference instead of in person as was previously required. To meet the growing volume of virtual interactions, **Utah** set up a phone center for people to call in, and they worked with their community partners to help people complete applications online. **Mesa County** saw a large increase in applications submitted through email and asked potential clients to complete intake assessments using a Google Form instead of paper. The county also revamped the intake assessment to reduce redundancy by ensuring eligibility and case management teams were asking different questions. Staff could access these forms online, including at home.

Reassigning staff. Several programs reassigned some TANF staff to other roles within the county or state to respond to the influx in unemployment claims, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applications, or other emergency service requests. For example, **Utah** shifted staff members from family support services programs to their unemployment insurance division to help take phone calls amidst a tenfold increase in the division's workload. **New York City's** Human Resources Administration temporarily reassigned nearly 1,300 internal staff from other programs and recruited approximately 200 staff from other City agencies to address substantial increases in applications for SNAP and cash assistance.

Changing employment services delivery. Before the pandemic, states required TANF participants to engage in work activities or be sanctioned for failing to meet work requirements without good cause. Although the states of the TANF programs with which we talked waived work requirements at the pandemic's onset, programs found creative ways to continue providing employment services to interested clients. Three of the programs conducted orientations for employment services virtually and either posted recordings of orientations on their YouTube channel or emailed a PowerPoint presentation to clients and reviewed it with them by phone. Some programs used virtual platforms so clients could access employment services more easily. **Utah** converted its rapid response workshops, which traditionally

connected clients with employers in person, to a virtual format. A **New York City** vendor pivoted quickly to providing career advising and employment services over virtual platforms and phone calls and gave clients free licenses to online job skills–building courses, available through LinkedIn. **Santa Cruz County** used TANF funds to purchase computers for clients who did not have one, enabling clients without access to one to communicate with the agency and participate in virtual employment services.

Returning to the office. Programs reopened at least some of their lobbies as early as April 2020, and by July 2020 all programs had done so. As of September 2020, all programs continued to allow staff to work from home, at least part-time. For example, **Fairfax County's** county administration requires a 40% in-office presence and staff are working in a hybrid environment. Staff could continue working from home based on their roles, caretaking responsibilities, and other such factors. Case managers at one site expressed a desire to resume in-person meetings, although eligibility staff at two programs with which we spoke preferred to continue meeting with participants virtually. Some programs allowed staff to work at home full-time while caring for their children, instead of requiring them to request formal leave.

How Programs' Existing Organizational Cultures Influenced Their Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The TANF Office Culture Study identified four principles organizations can use to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture (Figure 1). The study's final report documents examples of programs implementing these principles, based on observations from site visits conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. In this brief, site specific examples below discuss which principles of the existing organizational culture helped programs promote positive staff and client experiences before the pandemic and how those principles informed their pandemic responses. Programs' commitment to maintaining a positive organizational culture helped the programs adapt to challenges the pandemic presented.



Ensuring Consistent Understanding of Goals throughout a Period of Change

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, programs ensured that frontline staff understood and could describe the goals set out by agency leaders. Some programs explicitly linked division or department goals to broader agency goals, and one program asked staff to make their own weekly commitments to actions that would help achieve department goals.

As part of their pandemic response, **Santa Cruz County** found ways to monitor its adherence to existing agency goals, despite changes to service delivery methods. **Fairfax County** focused on increasing transparency and improving internal communications to help staff understand the new goals and how their roles supported them.

Santa Cruz County leadership remained focused on exceptional customer service as their primary goal and continued to use its WE CARE framework (see textbox) to monitor primarily phone-based interactions. Supervisors monitored staff conducting calls using WE CARE quality assurance checklists.

Fairfax County used its existing “Quality Triad,” which includes its Quality Control, Quality Improvement, and Quality Assurance teams, to develop an emergency operations framework, and communicated its goals regularly to staff. This framework included weekly incident action plans to keep staff and leadership focused on their goals. Fairfax leadership expressed that sharing information, being transparent, and making processes more participatory have all led to improved staff performance.

WE CARE is a customer interaction model designed to guide the beginning, middle, and end of all interactions with customers.

OPEN

Welcome and Personalize Greeting

Engage and Clarify Expectations

MIDDLE

Communicate and Gather Information

Address Customer Needs

CLOSE

Review and Resolve Questions and Concerns

End on a Positive Note



Encouraging Frontline Staff-Led Innovation

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple TANF programs convened work groups with diverse staff representation to encourage innovation and empower staff. These work groups provided frontline staff opportunities to offer input about process and service improvements and better client service coordination as well as to share information. The work groups empowered staff by demonstrating that leaders valued their input and expertise, and frontline staff across several departments shared their appreciation for opportunities to participate in the work groups. In addition, programs prioritized giving staff autonomy to exercise discretion to better serve clients.

During the pandemic, encouraging staff autonomy and staff-led innovation remained a priority because many programs retained their work groups in the remote work environment to increase staff voice, empowerment, and innovation. Staff who made up these work groups met regularly using virtual platforms to collaborate on pandemic-related projects, remote work, and effective service to clients in a remote setting. Having the existing work groups in place allowed the organizations to leverage staff expertise to effectively respond to changing conditions.

Santa Cruz County's staff-led work groups devised innovative solutions, such as shortening their career assessment workshop and making it virtual, making multiple forms more accessible, and streamlining co-enrollment between Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and CalWORKs (TANF).

Although **Mesa County** shifted its goals during the pandemic, the organization retained its Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX) goal-setting model to work on those new goals. For example, multiple teams of eligibility staff focused their process improvements on making applications and other case-working materials available online.

“Service delivery might look a little different in how it's administered currently, but [clients are] still getting the help and support that they need. That's due to staff being adaptive and creative as they ask themselves, ‘how do we work through the constraints that we [have] to still make this happen and help people be better off in the end?’” – Utah leadership

Utah's focus on family-centric employment services before the pandemic led leadership to encourage case managers' creativity when thinking about participation activities for clients. For example, case managers began encouraging clients to practice using virtual meeting platforms and to enroll in online workshops to prepare them for a workforce in which virtual meetings are increasingly becoming the norm. Utah leadership also examined every case closure to ensure that cases were not being closed because people lacked access to the Internet or laptop computers.



Prioritizing Staff Development, Empowerment, and Well-Being

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, programs often used training to build staff skills and reinforce agency goals. Programs' investments in staff development and leaders' encouragement to take advantage of training opportunities made staff feel valued and promoted retention. Programs offered trainings that built new skills to help staff progress in their careers as well as trainings that provided historical context about the communities they serve. Programs also promoted staff internally, offering them the opportunity to develop technical and management skills in new positions throughout their careers. Staff appreciated when leadership prioritized internal promotion, feeling it increased their commitment to the organization.

As staff began to work from home because of the pandemic, programs placed increased emphasis on staff development, empowerment, and well-being. Programs continued to support staff development through remote trainings and introduced programming to support staff well-being, including self-care and peer support programming. Leadership at most sites described an increased sense of camaraderie, resiliency, and teamwork among staff.

Fairfax County's professional development unit held remote self-care webinars, book clubs, and team-building exercises for staff. Given the stressors caused by the pandemic, leadership conducted well-being check-ins with every team and learned that staff appreciated remote work because it provided flexibility to be with their families. Leadership at Fairfax County also felt that their larger virtual staff meetings, which they began holding during the pandemic, streamlined internal communication and created a more relaxed atmosphere.

Leadership in **Utah** expressed that many staff were dealing with anxiety and stress caused by the pandemic, increased caseload, and various natural disasters. To address this concern, Utah included a new section on self-care in its staff newsletter and held virtual group meetings on staff self-care.

Santa Cruz County leadership described staff's appreciation for added flexibility in work hours and ability to work from home. These accommodations helped protect staff from potential COVID-19 transmission and increased their ability to balance work responsibilities with childcare and remote schooling for their children.

A **New York City** employment services contractor held webinars for staff on compassion fatigue, how to work from home, and other such topics. The contractor purchased access to a mental health app that staff could use for free mental health support. Staff also received monthly trainings from leadership, which aimed to give them the tools to cope with the stress and mental and emotional burdens that accompany their work.

"Our director did an employee engagement survey to see how we were doing in responding to COVID...It was overwhelmingly positive, [as staff were] saying that 'I felt cared for and informed and had what I needed.'" – Fairfax County leadership



Creating a Client-Centered Focus through Welcoming Office Environments and Simplified Processes

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, programs created welcoming office environments and simplified processes and workflows to make services more accessible for clients. These accommodations included reducing paperwork, streamlining phone trees, and co-locating eligibility and case management teams to make processes easier for clients to navigate.

As programs closed their offices and later reopened to a reduced capacity, they began to think of innovative ways to continue their client-centered focus in a remote environment or a modified office space that had to adhere to new health and social distancing guidelines. Two programs received permission from their respective counties to open their offices as soon as possible to serve clients in person. Their focus on client accessibility pushed them to develop ways to keep physical spaces open and to continue to provide services while also ensuring staff and client safety. When programs had clients in their offices, they followed new public health guidelines, such as mandating mask-wearing, installing plexiglass, putting social distancing stickers on the floor, and blocking off seats to encourage space between clients.

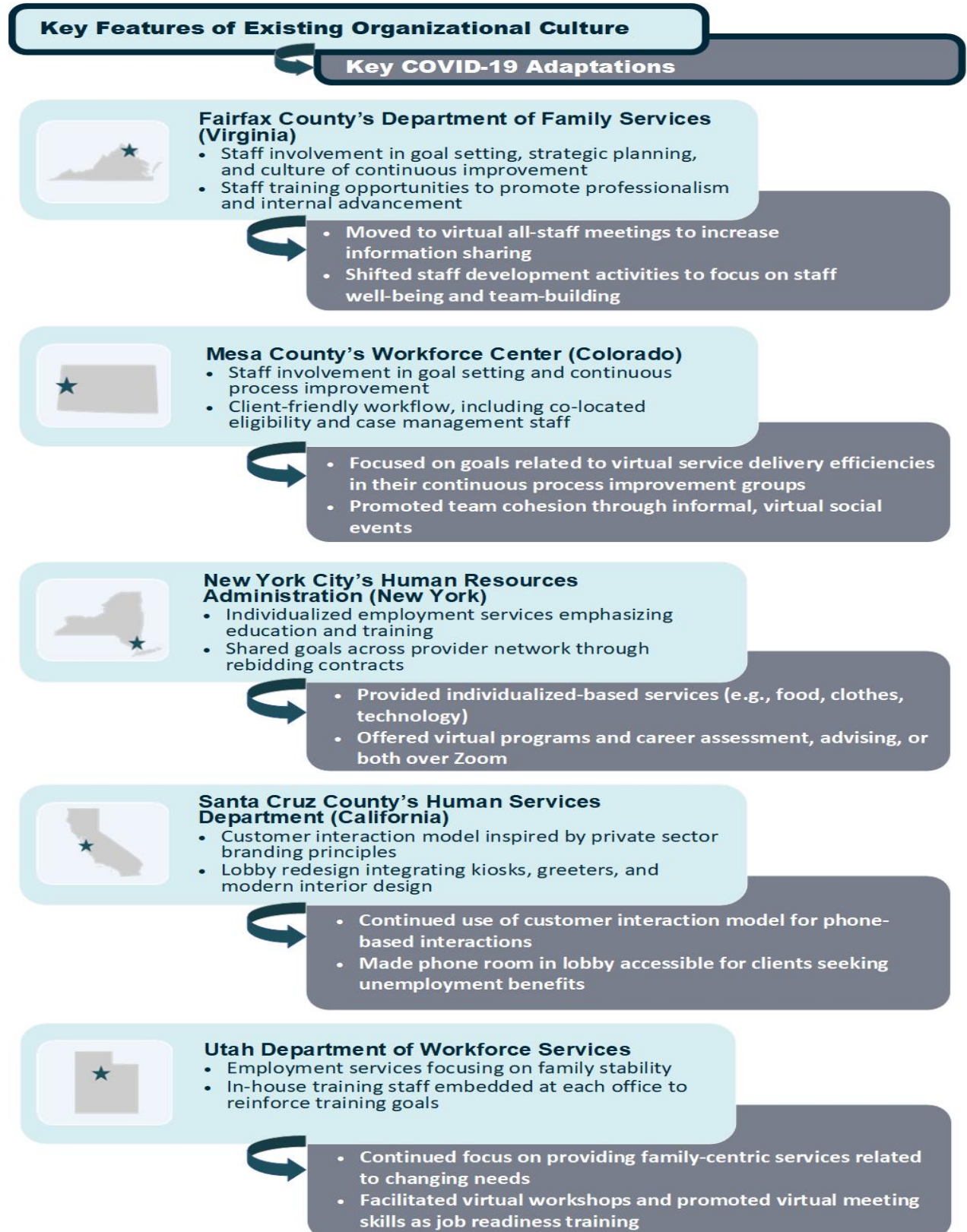
While other California counties closed their offices completely, **Santa Cruz County** kept its lobby and resource room open. Leadership felt this approach was a natural extension of their existing commitment to client-centered services and accessibility. During the pandemic's first few months, Santa Cruz County leadership noticed a high demand among clients waiting to use their resource room to contact the unemployment benefits office. To prevent people from gathering and waiting in line for hours, the county purchased a wait list management system like ones used in restaurants to text diners when their table is ready.

**"We realized during the pandemic that the basic needs of these youth are real; it's a real battle when it comes to our population... we're seeing a lot of mental health, parenting needs. A lot of these youth really need their basic needs taken care of."
- NYC contractor**

An employment services contractor in **New York City** prioritized opening its Career Services vendor sites as early as possible to offer a space that clients could access during the day when they needed a place to go. Contractor leadership emphasized the importance of providing this space during a pandemic when other offices and community centers are closed. The contractor also shifted to focus on providing individualized basic needs (e.g., food, clothes, technology) for clients with whom it had contact because the availability of these resources usually provided by other agencies essentially evaporated during the pandemic.

Faced with disruption and change, the programs remained committed to delivering client-centered services and ensuring staff well-being. Figure 2 summarizes the key features of programs' organizational cultures before the pandemic as well as adaptations each program made during the pandemic.

Figure 2: TANF Program Approaches to Promote Positive Organizational Culture and Key COVID-19 Adaptations



Challenges Programs Faced during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges for TANF programs, and leadership have identified some aspects of their organizations' principles that translated poorly to the pandemic environment.

COVID-19 made maintaining their welcoming physical environment (e.g., shaking hands, inviting people into cubicles, offering onsite childcare, meeting people face-to-face) difficult for programs, forcing the office and staff to operate differently from their pre-COVID-19 practices to support positive client experiences. One program's leadership acknowledged that office modifications to maintain physical distance and reduce the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., plexiglass, blocked off seating, social distancing stickers on the floor where clients should stand) are unwelcoming to clients. As a result, they felt that their office environment had taken significant steps back in terms of comfort and that their customer service quality had declined.

Some programs experienced technology-related challenges going from in-person to remote work. They had to figure out how to provide staff with the proper IT equipment to function in a remote work environment when remote work was previously uncommon. Programs where remote work was more common before the pandemic, however, experienced less difficulty with IT equipment.

Staff accustomed to interacting with clients face-to-face experienced challenges transitioning to remote interactions. Case management and eligibility teams, though, often had different experiences with, and preferences for, work location.

- According to leadership at one site, case management staff wanted to return to the office and meet with people face-to-face. They reported that working from home in their roles while serving clients was frustrating.
- After offices began reopening and staff had the option to return to the office, another program's eligibility team felt they could work from home effectively and chose to continue working remotely. However, the case managers preferred working in the office because they believed doing so was necessary for building relationships to support their clients.

Many programs experienced challenges remotely training staff reassigned to new roles and onboarding newly hired staff.

- Staff at one program who were redeployed to TANF and SNAP eligibility faced steeper learning curves and had less support compared with their experience before the pandemic. Normal training for new staff typically lasted several months, but the reassigned staff only watched a two-hour video.
- Opportunities for structured staff onboarding also were often limited for new staff. Another program's eligibility team hired new staff at the beginning of the pandemic, but they had no opportunities to shadow senior staff, which leadership felt negatively impacted their onboarding experience.

The pandemic, coupled with the challenges of working from home, made maintaining staff morale difficult. Some staff had negative experiences because of the changes the pandemic brought.

- Leadership at one program reported that TANF staff who had shifted to assist with unemployment benefits said the switch from their usual client-focused culture to a more clerical role was hard on morale. However, some staff preferred this more clerical work and decided to transition roles permanently.
- Being away from coworkers and unable to interact with people one-on-one was also emotionally difficult for staff at multiple programs. Staff at one program left their positions after being able to work only from home.
- On the other hand, some staff who went to the office occasionally expressed feeling vulnerable or expendable, especially when they met with clients who openly admitted they were exposed to or had COVID-19.

Lessons for Human Services Practitioners

TANF programs made major changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the ways and locations where staff worked, the ways the programs delivered services to clients, and the ways broader program rules were applied. Program leadership reported that they planned to retain some of these changes even as programs started reopening their offices and began delivering services the way they did before the pandemic. The changes that these five TANF programs adopted could help inform how other TANF programs adapt their service delivery for future crises.



Allow remote work flexibility to promote staff retention. Agencies realized that allowing flexibility for staff to work remotely aligned with retaining a high-quality workforce. As offices begin reopening and some staff return to meet with clients face-to-face, programs plan to continue allowing staff to work from home, at least part-time. This approach likely will apply to staff on eligibility teams who have voiced their preference for conducting eligibility interviews over the phone, staff who have health concerns, and staff who wish to continue working from home to care for their children. Staff have expressed appreciation for the ability to work from home because they feel leadership is doing their part to prioritize their well-being.



Streamline staff meetings to cultivate inclusive communication and improve morale. Programs shared that they will continue holding virtual staff meetings to increase transparency, to share information more effectively, and to save time by reducing the number of meetings with each individual team. Leadership reported that maintaining a culture of transparency and inclusiveness has carried through the pandemic and has played a significant role in increasing staff morale.



Maintain a consistent commitment to client-centered services through periods of change. Even as programs faced new challenges brought on by the pandemic, they have remained committed to ensuring high-quality client-centered customer service. They plan to continue holding virtual client orientations and information sessions because the programs expressed that they can reach more people using virtual platforms. Programs will also continue providing employment services virtually alongside more traditional forms of service delivery.



Foster staff empowerment and innovation by leveraging staff expertise. Programs have continued fostering staff-led innovations in virtual spaces as leadership have adopted changes and solutions that staff work groups have developed. As offices reopen, programs will continue leveraging their staff expertise through these virtual work groups to encourage innovation and respond to future crises that might arise.

Alongside the adaptations implemented to adjust to the changing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, programs also shared some action items that will help them prepare for a future crisis. Two programs expressed that investing in laptop computers and other IT equipment for all staff is imperative because one of the biggest challenges at the onset of the pandemic was obtaining the equipment needed for staff to work from home. One program also noted the importance of increasing cloud-based access to key forms and processes so staff at all levels can have access from anywhere.

The five TANF programs' commitment to maintaining a positive organizational culture has allowed them to pivot and adapt effectively during the pandemic. Their focus has remained on ensuring consistent goals, increasing transparency, and improving internal communications. Encouraging staff-led innovation has empowered staff, allowing them to develop new approaches to best serve clients. Prioritizing staff well-being during a time of crisis has increased staff morale, camaraderie, and teamwork. Finally, programs remain committed to maintaining a client-centered focus in newer virtual settings to ensure high-quality service. The existing positive organizational cultures that these programs fostered before the pandemic gave them the tools to promote resiliency and to contribute to positive staff and client experiences during an emergency and beyond.

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