

Promoting a Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices: Final Report



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PROMOTING A POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN TANF OFFICES: FINAL REPORT

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- Mesa County's Workforce Center (Colorado);
- New York City's Human Resources Administration (New York);
- Owens Valley Career Development Center's Tribal TANF Program (California);
- Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (California); and
- Utah Department of Workforce Services.

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Overview

A. Introduction

Established in 1996 by the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency by providing cash assistance and by promoting job preparation, work, marriage, and the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. States, territories, and tribes receive block grants from the federal government to design and operate TANF cash assistance programs in addition to funding other services that promote these goals. 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 TANF policies are implemented and how staff and clients experience the program.¹

Aside from some studies immediately following the passage of PRWORA, little research has focused on how TANF and other human services agencies promote or change their organizational cultures to support positive experiences for clients and staff. This study defines organizational culture based on concepts from the literature as *a durable set of behavioral expectations or norms that guides individuals' actions within an organization and affects how individuals outside the organization interact with the organization*.

To address this gap, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contracted MEF Associates to examine the organizational culture of TANF offices.² Building off findings from a foundational literature review, this report documents how six TANF programs around the country implemented practices associated with a positive organizational culture—that is, *an organizational culture that is client-centric at its core, guiding staff behavior through goals, processes, and settings designed to effect positive staff and client experiences*

B. Primary Research Questions

- Are there TANF offices that have made conscious attempts at organizational culture change and how have they approached that process? How have agencies and offices evaluated the effects of these changes?
- What are exemplars of productive client-oriented office settings and organizational processes and culture?
- What is the day-to-day influence of the various agencies' organizational culture on clients and frontline workers?

C. Purpose

This report explores how organizational culture, office design, and office procedures contribute to shaping clients' experiences with TANF, the services provided to them, and potentially their outcomes. To date, little prior research has focused on what state and local TANF programs are doing to promote organizational cultures that support positive experiences for clients and staff. To contribute to filling this gap, this report discusses the broader literature on practices

¹ "Local TANF offices" refers to offices that provide TANF cash assistance.

² This work is being conducted under the *Understanding Poverty: Childhood and Family Experiences and TANF Office Culture* project. For more information, including the TANF Office Culture literature review, visit: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/understanding-poverty-up-childhood-and-family-experiences-and-tanf-office-culture>.

associated with positive organizational culture, generally, and highlights specific practices that six TANF programs have implemented to promote a positive organizational culture.

The findings in this report provide concrete examples for human services practitioners and policymakers interested in improving service delivery. They also provide insights for researchers interested in building evidence about organizational culture change initiatives in TANF programs and their implications for clients, staff, and overall agency performance.

D. Key Findings and Highlights

We examined how six TANF programs approached organizational change as well as the ways they sought to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture. This report documents examples, from across the six programs of organizational culture change initiative strategies; practices to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture; and challenges associated with these changes or approaches that staff and clients experienced. Overall, we identified several key lessons for human service practitioners and policymakers based on our fieldwork:

- Promoting a positive organizational culture involves demonstrating
 - Respect for clients in goal setting, employment services, and in everyday administrative requirements, as well as
 - Respect for staff by investing in training, involving staff in innovation, and offering opportunities for internal promotions.
- Programs can promote positive staff experiences as a way to improve client experiences.
- TANF program requirements might limit programs' ability to alter client experiences to some extent, but progress is possible.
- Clearly defined goals help staff translate agency-wide initiatives into actionable steps.
- Leaders can shape organizational culture in human services programs.

E. Methods

We began the project by conducting a foundational literature review and holding discussions with experts in the fields of organizational culture change and TANF program innovation. This approach informed the selection of six TANF programs for inclusion in the study that made conscious attempts at organizational change and sought to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture. Fieldwork with those programs included interviews with program staff and leadership, client focus groups, observation of client and staff activities, and observations of the physical space. The sites for the six TANF programs included in the study are:

- Fairfax County's Department of Family Services (Virginia),
- Mesa County's Workforce Center (Colorado),
- New York City's Human Resources Administration (New York),
- Owens Valley Career Development Center's Tribal TANF Program (California),
- Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (California), and
- Utah Department of Workforce Services.

Executive Summary

A. Study Overview

Established in 1996 by the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency by providing cash assistance and promoting job preparation, work, marriage, and the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Overseen by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, TANF is implemented locally by states, tribes, and territories to design and operate TANF cash assistance programs in addition to other services that promote these goals. Given TANF's flexibility, states, territories, and tribes vary in how they implement their TANF programs locally. Some state TANF programs are county administered, which can lead to additional variation in local implementation. In addition to state and local policies, the organizational culture of the local TANF offices might affect how TANF programs are implemented and how staff and clients experience the program.

Except for some studies immediately following the passage of PRWORA, little research has focused on how TANF and other human services agencies have promoted or changed their organizational cultures to support positive experiences for clients and staff. To address this gap, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in ACF contracted MEF Associates to examine the organizational culture of TANF offices. Building off findings from a foundational literature review, this report documents how six TANF programs around the country implemented practices associated with a positive organizational culture.

This study defines organizational culture based on concepts from the literature *as a durable set of behavioral expectations or norms that guides individuals' actions within an organization and affects how individuals outside the organization interact with the organization.*

The study was guided by three research questions:

- Are there TANF offices that have made conscious attempts at organizational culture change and how have they approached that process? How have agencies and offices evaluated the effects of these changes?
- What are exemplars of productive client-oriented office settings and organizational processes and culture?
- What is the day-to-day influence of the various agencies' organizational culture on clients and frontline workers?

The study involved expert consultations, a literature review, and in-depth qualitative fieldwork at six TANF sites:

- Fairfax County's Department of Family Services (Virginia),
- Mesa County's Workforce Center (Colorado),
- New York City's Human Resources Administration (New York),
- Owens Valley Career Development Center's Tribal TANF Program (California),
- Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (California), and
- Utah Department of Workforce Services.

Fieldwork included interviews with program staff and leadership, client focus groups, observation of client and staff activities, and observations of the physical space.

B. Key Findings

The findings in this report come from data collected during site visits to the six TANF programs noted previously. During these visits, we examined how the programs approached organizational change as well as the ways they sought to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture. We also discuss some of the challenges clients and staff experienced related to these approaches.

Organizational Culture Change Strategies

We observed what TANF programs did when trying to *change* their organizational processes or goals and, in turn, their organizational culture. These change strategies align with those the team identified from the literature review. Examples of change strategies observed during fieldwork are summarized below.

- **Develop and communicate a clear vision that motivates staff.** Leadership in several programs developed a new vision for their program as part of their change initiatives. This strategy involved setting new goals that often focused on supporting client well-being, such as individualized employment services, customer service, and promoting family stability. The goals aligned with staff's motivation for entering the human services field, which helped build staff buy-in for the change initiatives. Developing and expressing a clear vision in which staff were eager to participate helped propel these change initiatives.
- **Build buy-in and enthusiasm among frontline staff for a change initiative.** Agency leaders reported that successfully changing processes and goals required buy-in among frontline staff responsible for implementing the changes. Programs built buy-in by branding the initiative, involving staff to lead aspects of the initiative, and cultivating a sense of partnership between the agency and staff implementing the initiative.
- **Invest in training.** Training ensured that all staff knew how to implement new processes and how these new processes fit into the organization's broader mission, vision, and goals.
- **Enlist external perspectives.** Some programs enlisted consultants to provide expertise when trying to change existing processes or structures. Consultants developed materials, redesigned office spaces, and trained staff on new goals, procedures, or continuous improvement frameworks associated with organizational change.
- **Use performance management systems and surveys to monitor implementation.** Leaders used performance management systems to track whether the changes were being implemented consistently by frontline staff and in the manner they had intended. Other programs relied on surveys to assess how staff and clients were experiencing the changes.

Key Concepts Used in this Report

Organizational Culture Change

Strategies: Approaches programs used when trying to change their organizational culture to a more positive, client-centric one.

Practices to Promote and Sustain a Positive Organizational Culture: Everyday practices programs implemented in support of positive organizational culture.

Practices to Promote and Sustain a Positive Organizational Culture

Even when these programs were not actively pursuing organizational change initiatives, they used multiple practices to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture. For example, these practices were often implemented after an organizational culture change initiative to

sustain the changes made. These practices reflected those associated with positive organizational culture that the team identified from the literature review. Examples of practices to promote and sustain positive organizational culture observed during fieldwork are summarized below.

- **Ensure consistent understanding of mission and goals.** One way programs set clear and consistent program mission and goals is by ensuring frontline staff understood and could describe the goals. Some programs incorporated steps into strategic planning processes to help staff at all levels understand agency goals, including linking division or department goals to broader agency goals.
- **Involve frontline staff in process improvements.** Programs prioritized frontline staff involvement in process improvements to encourage innovation. For example, they convened work groups with frontline staff to address issues related to process improvements or workplace morale. In addition to providing a sense of ownership over improvement efforts, incorporating frontline staff's expertise facilitated positive client experiences because frontline staff interact with clients most frequently.
- **Use staff training to build skills and reinforce agency goals.** Several programs focused on providing training opportunities for staff, either by developing such opportunities in-house or by soliciting outside consultants. Training that increases frontline staff's professional skills, as opposed to training focused solely on implementing top-down initiatives, contributed to staff's professional development and promoted retention.
- **Create advancement opportunities for frontline staff and former clients.** Prioritizing internal promotion contributed to staff retention, signaling the programs' investment in their staff. One program hired former clients to facilitate a non-judgmental client-staff dynamic.
- **Simplify processes.** Programs simplified processes to make accessing services easier for clients. Some programs did so by reducing paperwork, streamlining phone-based services, and co-locating eligibility and case management teams.
- **Design client-oriented spaces.** Programs paid attention to the effect physical space can have on clients. Some programs designed their office space to make it welcoming and easy for clients to navigate. Programs also offered resources and amenities such as childcare and device chargers in their lobbies to make clients' time at the agency more comfortable and to make accessing benefits easier.
- **Increase client choice in employment services.** Programs expanded employment service choices, incorporating clients' input on which services they receive and encouraging staff to create individualized, tailored employment plans.

Challenges Staff and Clients Experienced

Staff and clients also experienced challenges when programs attempted to change or sustain organizational practices in support of positive organizational culture. Examples of these challenges based on our fieldwork include the following:

- **Ensuring consistent implementation across locations.** Some TANF programs with multiple service locations experienced challenges deploying new policies or operating procedures to staff in different offices and ensuring buy-in from employment services providers.
- **Pressure on staff workload and time.** Required training and other activities to implement change efforts put pressure on staff already faced with high caseloads and time-sensitive tasks to remain compliant with federal policies.

- **Client frustration with process changes.** Agencies made changes aiming to render services easier and more accessible. For example, some agencies switched from having a dedicated case manager complete all necessary tasks for determining an individual's eligibility for benefits to instead using a team approach. However, these changes sometimes had the unintended consequence of frustrating or confusing clients.
- **Client frustration with eligibility processes.** Business process improvements focused solely on case management and not on eligibility processes created an inconsistent and, at times, frustrating experience for clients. Limited room for discretion in TANF eligibility processes created tension between clients and eligibility workers.
- **Limits of physical space.** Programs can make changes to physical spaces to improve service delivery flow or to create a more welcoming space. However, limitations were based on either existing building layouts or funding constraints.
- **Evaluating the change.** Some programs attempted to collect data on the degree to which the change initiative had been implemented fully. However, they faced challenges in doing so because programs' existing data collection systems were sometimes insufficient to descriptively assess the degree to which the culture changed through changed staff behavior or staff buy-in toward the new goals.

Lessons for Human Services Practitioners and Policymakers

Several key lessons emerged based on our fieldwork, many of which resonate with the findings about organizational culture in public agencies identified in our literature review.

- **Promoting a positive organizational culture involves demonstrating respect for clients in goal setting, employment services, and everyday administrative requirements.** TANF programs can demonstrate respect for clients by creating client-centered goals such as exceptional customer service or family stability. They can also give clients choices in service delivery as opposed to promoting a one-size-fits-all approach to employment services. Moreover, programs can simplify processes clients must navigate to receive and maintain benefits.
- **Promoting a positive organizational culture also involves demonstrating respect for staff by investing in training, involving staff in innovation, and offering opportunities for internal promotion.** Programs demonstrate respect for staff by investing in their professional development through training focused on skill development; convening staff work groups for brainstorming solutions to agency issues; and signaling their investment in staff by offering opportunities for internal promotions.
- **Programs can promote positive staff experiences as a way to improve positive client experiences.** Clients' interactions with frontline staff influence how clients view the agency. High staff morale can lead to positive client experiences and a positive, client-centered organizational culture.
- **TANF program requirements might limit programs' ability to alter client experiences to some extent, but progress is possible.** Although some tension between clients and program requirements might be inevitable, programs can take steps to streamline processes and minimize client stress associated with these requirements.
- **Clearly defined goals help staff translate agency-wide initiatives into actionable steps.** Clear goals can help staff understand how their role fits into the organization's mission or goals of the organization, reduce uncertainty during a time of change, and clarify expectations for them in the workplace, making it more likely that staff will act on those goals.
- **Leaders can shape organizational culture in TANF programs.** Staff in the six TANF programs cited agency leaders as a driving force behind organizational changes and

efforts to promote a positive organizational culture. They can make financial investments in professional development and provide explicit guidance to frontline staff to focus on new priorities, empowering them to focus on new goals.

This information can inform human services practitioners and policymakers interested in improving service delivery and researchers interested in building the evidence about organization change initiatives and the implications for clients, staff, and overall agency performance.

Chapter 1. Background and Study Overview

A. Introduction

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency by providing cash assistance and promoting job preparation, work, marriage, and the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. States, tribes, and territories receive block grants from the federal government to design and operate TANF cash assistance programs in addition to funding other services that promote these goals. Following passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, the TANF program replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. TANF represented a shift in how the federal government funded welfare programs, the level of control states had in operating their programs, as well as the goals and priorities for welfare agencies.

This shift in goals and priorities included emphasizing 1) the temporary nature of cash welfare programs through time limits and 2) compliance with work participation requirements to support families' transition to self-sufficiency through employment. The shift placed an increased emphasis on employment service delivery and on an imperative to increase participation in work activities and limit families' time on TANF.

This change also resulted in changes to staff roles and business processes across the country. The current structure requires clients to interact with two sets of services, or "sides" of the program: eligibility and case management. Eligibility services focus on collecting and processing applications and supporting documentation to demonstrate initial and ongoing program eligibility and to ensure ongoing benefit receipt. Case management services focus on assessing clients and supporting client efforts to become self-sufficient, including through employment services and other support services.³ Often, but not always, these two sets of services are split between different units or teams within the same agency, or case management services are provided by contractors or vendors at a different agency.

Given TANF's flexibility, states, tribes, and territories vary in how they implement their TANF programs. Some state TANF programs are county-administered, which can lead to additional variation in local implementation. The organizational culture of local TANF offices might also affect how TANF programs are implemented and how staff and clients experience the program in addition to local policies, administrative structures, or other external factors shaping programs' implementation.

Scholars present a broad range of definitions for the concept of organizational culture. For example, Cameron & Quinn (2011) have presented organizational culture as a combination of observable and unobservable characteristics difficult to detect until they are challenged by incompatible assumptions or behaviors. Deal & Kennedy (1982) describe it more colloquially as "the way we do things around here." This study defines "organizational culture" based on concepts found in the literature as *a durable set of behavioral expectations or norms that guides individuals' actions within an organization and affects how individuals outside the organization interact with the organization*. Organizational culture encompasses the organization's mission and vision and the shared objectives guiding its

What is Organizational Culture? A durable set of behavioral expectations or norms that guides individuals' actions within an organization and affects how individuals outside the organization interact with the organization.

³ Some programs visited referred to the case management services as "employment services" given their focus on providing those services.

work as well as values, attitudes, expectations, assumptions, and norms. It also manifests in more concrete ways—such as physical location and office design, staff training, staffing decisions, staff autonomy, and written procedures and materials.

For the purposes of this study, we also draw from the literature to define a positive organizational culture in TANF offices as one that is *client-centric at its core, guiding staff behavior through goals, processes, and spaces designed to improve staff and client experiences*. Efforts to promote positive staff experiences can be client-centric if they equip and motivate staff to provide client-centric services.

What does a *Positive Organizational Culture in TANF offices look like?* An organizational culture that is client-centric at its core, guiding staff behavior through goals, processes, and spaces designed to affect positive staff and client experiences.

Scholars have attempted to establish a causal relationship between organizational culture and staff and agency experiences more rigorously in private firm or industry sector studies than in public sector studies (Gaffney, Glosser, & Agoncillo, 2018). Limited empirical evidence finds that features such as goals, processes, and spaces *cause* a particular type of culture, or vice versa. However, the literature does identify aspects of organizations *associated* with positive staff and client experiences, suggesting that organizations can change aspects of their organization (e.g., goals, processes) to promote a more client-centered culture.

Human services agencies that attempt to change their organizational culture often do so by changing processes and goals to change staff behavior. These changes might lead to concrete improvements in staff's experience at work, helping staff feel respected, valued, and better equipped to serve clients. Such changes might in turn make clients feel respected, valued, and welcomed in TANF programs.

A robust literature focuses on theoretical approaches to defining, measuring, or assessing organizational culture across a range of sectors. A smaller number of qualitative studies examine organizational culture's role in local TANF programs following welfare reform in 1996, specifically. Since then, little research has documented organizational culture in TANF agencies and other human services agencies or what these agencies have done more recently to promote or change their organizational cultures to support positive experiences for clients and staff.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' is dedicated to promoting the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals and communities.⁴ ACF is particularly interested in understanding the experiences of families accessing the systems designed to support them. To that end, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in ACF contracted with MEF Associates in partnership with MDRC to conduct the *Understanding Poverty: Childhood and Family Experiences and TANF Office Culture* study to examine the organizational culture of TANF offices and the perspectives of families and children living in poverty. The study is comprised of two sub-studies: 1) the TANF Office Culture study (the focus of this report) and 2) the Childhood and Family Experiences study, which in a separate report will examine the experiences and

⁴ Administration for Children and Families Home Page. Retrieved June 24, 2020, from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/>.

perspectives of children and families living in poverty, including those who apply for and access TANF and other safety net benefits.⁵

The TANF Office Culture study explores how organizational culture— including office design and office procedures— contributes to shaping clients' experiences with TANF and the services provided to them. The TANF Office Culture study was guided by three research questions:

- Are there TANF offices that have made conscious attempts at organizational culture change and how have they approached that process? How have agencies and offices evaluated the effects of these changes?
- What are exemplars of productive client-oriented office settings and organizational processes and culture?
- What is the day-to-day influence of the various agencies' organizational culture on clients and frontline workers?

The study involved expert consultations, a literature review, and in-depth qualitative fieldwork at six TANF programs throughout the United States. Fieldwork focused on TANF programs that had tried to create client-oriented office settings and organizational processes or that had made conscious attempts at organizational culture change.

This report presents the study's findings from fieldwork in those six TANF programs. The findings describe practices the programs have used to promote a positive organizational culture as well as the implications for other practitioners and policymakers.

B. Methodology

We undertook several activities to address the study's key research questions:

- **Literature review.** We conducted a literature review on topics related to organizational culture in TANF programs and other human services more broadly (Gaffney, Glosser, & Agoncillo, 2018). The literature review summarizes relevant research on the role that organizational culture plays in the delivery of TANF and other human services and its implications for clients and frontline staffs' experiences. Overall, it identifies four guiding principles regarding practices associated with positive organizational culture and strategies for changing organizational culture in public sector agencies, though evaluations of organizational change efforts from human services agencies, specifically, remain limited to date.
- **Consultations with non-federal experts and federal staff.** We sought input from a group of researchers, academics, practitioners, and policymakers with expertise in public-sector organizational culture, program innovation, and organizational culture change. Experts identified practices associated with positive organizational culture in TANF programs. They also suggested specific TANF programs that used these practices or had made conscious attempts at organizational culture change to feature in the study's subsequent fieldwork.
- **Site visits to six TANF programs.** We conducted one, multi-day site visit to each of the six programs. Fieldwork included interviews with TANF program leadership staff, frontline staff (e.g., case managers, call center staff), and supervisors; client focus groups; observations of client or staff activities or both; and observations of the physical space.

⁵ For more information about the Understanding Poverty project, visit: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/understanding-poverty-up-childhood-and-family-experiences-and-tanf-office-culture>.

Through preliminary calls with TANF programs and reviewing documents before the six sites were selected, we identified practices each program was using to support a positive organizational culture. We then selected programs that were using one or more of the four guiding principles associated with positive organizational culture that we identified in the literature (see **Figure 1** below). Subsequent site visits enabled us to investigate how the programs implemented these practices and the influence these practices had on staff and client experiences. The findings in this report come from data collected during the visits to the six programs.

We also considered diversity across multiple factors when selecting sites, including: region of the country, program size, program administration type (state-, county-, or tribally administered TANF programs), and population served. The six sites are not necessarily representative of how TANF programs are administered across the United States, but they do reflect the varied approaches states, counties, and tribes take to administer their TANF programs.

The following section summarizes the findings from the literature review conducted as part of this study. For more information, see the full report available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/understanding-poverty-up-childhood-and-family-experiences-and-tanf-office-culture>.

C. Organizational Culture in Human Services Agencies: A Review of the Literature

Prior studies have examined approaches to measuring, defining, or assessing organizational culture and the role that organizational culture plays in the operation of public agencies, including some focused specifically on TANF programs. No consistent or standardized approach has been taken among researchers to define or measure organizational culture. As previously noted, the literature suggests organizational culture can be understood as *a durable set of behavioral expectations or norms that guides individuals' actions within an organization and affects how individuals outside the organization interact with the organization*.

Some correlational studies describe how organizational culture influences performance, staff characteristics, leadership qualities, and other organizational characteristics in the public sector (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Glisson & Williams, 2015; Riccucci, Meyers, Lurie, & Han, 2004). Some of the studies posit the direction of association, but the causal arrow might just as often point in the other direction. These factors affect and are affected by staff behavior and have implications for the way in which clients interact with the agency and its services. Empirical work on the causal nature of organizational culture in the public sector is limited.

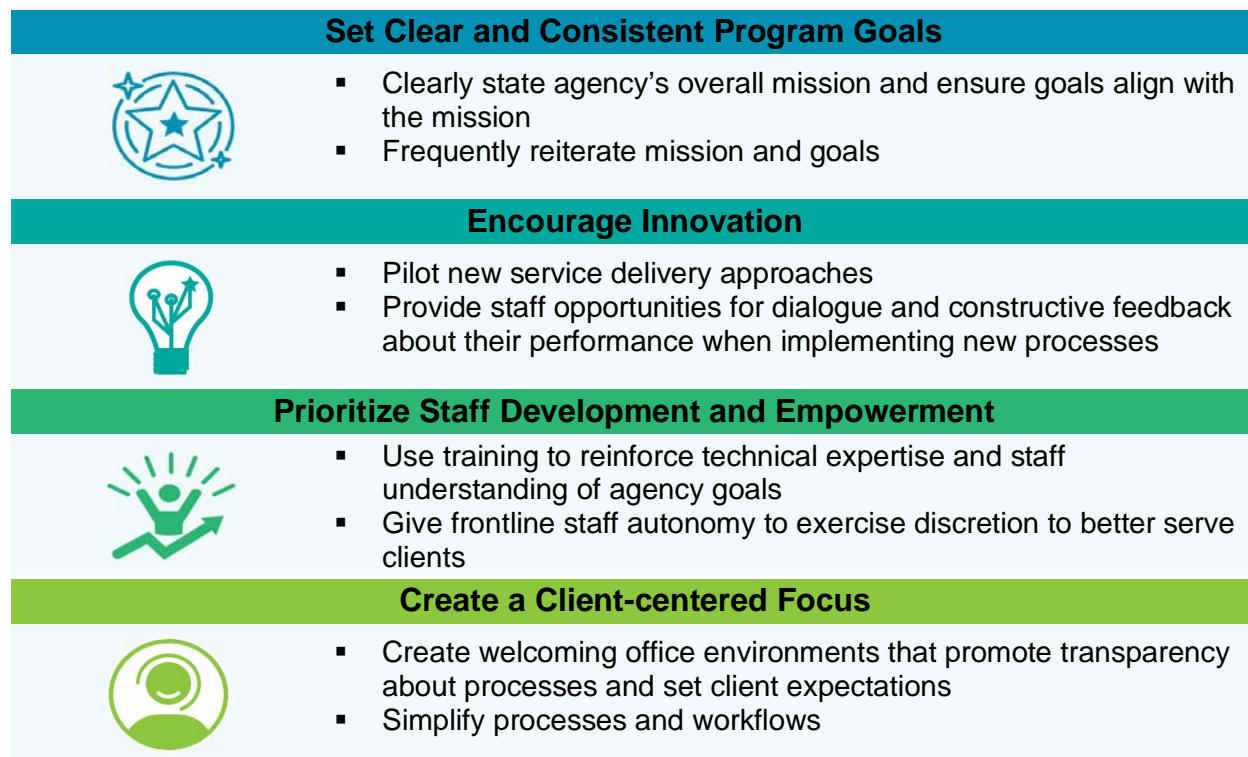
Attention to the role that organizational culture plays in public assistance agencies, specifically, is limited but was most pronounced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, following PRWORA's passage in 1996. At that time, scholars studied TANF's implementation, including the way in which organizational culture contributed to or inhibited its implementation in programs throughout the country. Little research has described the characteristics of positive, client-oriented organizational cultures in TANF programs, specifically. Moreover, with some exceptions, little research has focused on states and localities that have actively sought to change their organizational cultures in support of improved staff or client experiences.

However, the literature does identify practices associated with organizational culture and ways in which those practices can influence positive staff and client experiences in the public sector and in TANF offices, specifically. Although some factors associated with organizational culture—including external political environment, economic climate, and budgetary constraints—are outside TANF agencies' control, these practices are within agencies' control and can be used to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture.

Organizational Culture in TANF Offices: Practices That Influence Client and Staff Experiences

Overall, the literature identifies four guiding principles to promote and sustain positive organizational culture in TANF offices. **Figure 1** illustrates these practices and associated examples.⁶

Figure 1. Practicing Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices, Lessons from the Literature



Set Clear and Consistent Program Goals

Organizations with simple goals and a clear statement of the organization's aims and values are associated with higher staff performance, motivation, and perceptions of organizational effectiveness compared with organizations hampered by multiple, conflicting goals (Wilson, 1989; Meyers, Riccucci, & Lurie, 2001; Moynihan & Pandey, 2005; Fife, 2013; Moynihan, Pandey, & Wright, 2014). Organizations that consistently and frequently communicate a shared vision are associated with improvements in individual and team performance, elevated levels of staff motivation and resilience amid organizational restructuring, and elevated stakeholder engagement and public confidence in the organization's operations (Hahn, Gearing, Katz, & Amin, 2015).

The nature of agency goals can also influence staff and client experiences. Specifically, client-centered goals as opposed to goals that focus on process or compliance support positive implementation and client experiences (Treskon, Millenky, & Freedman, 2017). In addition to clearly defined goals at the agency level, the literature also emphasizes the importance of linking local offices or departments' goals with the broader organization's goals. As with the

⁶ For a printable, one-page version of this infographic, visit: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/practicing-positive-organizational-culture-in-tanf-offices>.

imperative to align the goals of all levels within the organization, defining and regularly monitoring clear outcomes and staff performance measures focused on these outcomes can support a positive staff experience.

Encourage Innovation

Organizational cultures that value learning and innovating are positively associated with job satisfaction, higher organizational performance, and fewer workers intending to leave the organization (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004; Watkins & Marsick, 2003).

Providing staff opportunities for dialogue and constructive feedback about their performance during times of innovation and change also benefits staff. For example, Fife (2013) described several California TANF offices' efforts to change to a client-service-oriented culture. She found that offices providing their program staff with mandatory training, ongoing feedback, and culture-specific performance evaluations saw stark improvements in organizational performance, staff satisfaction, and client satisfaction. Although agency leaders can support innovation and learning, organizational cultures defined by highly centralized decision-making, excessive regulation, and low levels of staff discretion are negatively associated with innovation (Glisson et al., 2008; Welch & Pandey, 2006). Organizations that prioritize innovation at all levels by promoting and supporting staff discretion to pilot new ways to better serve clients are more likely to produce positive staff and client experiences.

Prioritize Staff Development and Empowerment

Critical for organizational effectiveness, investing in training ensures all staff members have the necessary resources and technical expertise to succeed in their roles. Investing time and funds in training can also reduce employee turnover, reduce work-related stress, and improve client satisfaction. For example, TANF caseworkers who believe they received insufficient training reported higher levels of occupational stress and lower-quality service to clients (Esbenshade, Vidal, Fascilla, & Ono, 2016). Empowering frontline staff by giving them autonomy to exercise discretion to better serve clients is also associated with positive staff experiences. Training is especially helpful when organizations implement innovations such as process changes or are attempting to change their organizational culture.

Create a Client-centered Focus

Organizations can create welcoming office environments that promote transparency about processes and set client expectations to improve client experiences. Offices with comfortable, spacious seating arrangements, welcoming staff, and lobby spaces designed to make processes clear to clients convey a client-centered culture to all who enter the space. Physical spaces also convey important cues about the agency's goals for clients. For example, one study details how California's TANF system transformed its public offices to resemble employment offices by exhibiting "Welcome Job Seekers!" signs and other such visual aids that underscore the importance of working to achieve financial stability (Fife, 2013).

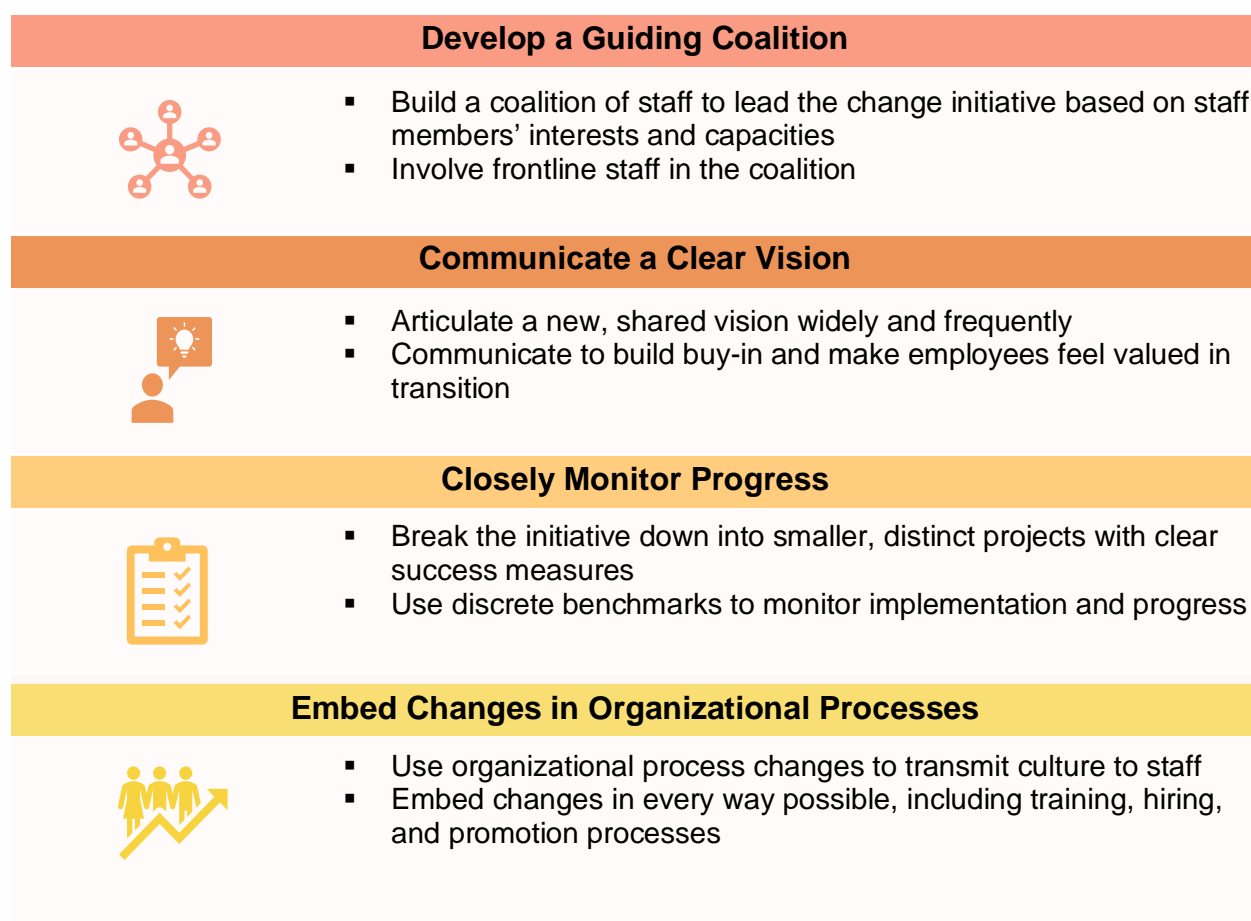
In addition to physical space, organizational processes—agency rules and the way staff execute their roles—represent tangible expressions of organizational culture that affect how clients perceive and navigate their local TANF programs. The literature emphasizes the ways burdensome processes can negatively affect staff and client experiences, but efforts to redesign agency workflows to prioritize client service can improve experiences (Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2014; Brodtkin & Majmundar, 2010). Organizations can structure processes in ways that create burdensome systemic barriers or in ways that maximize access and reduce barriers for clients.

Simplifying processes and workflows is one way organizations can improve client outcomes. Changes to business processes in prior studies include redesigning the eligibility determination process; simplifying application and renewal processes; eliminating burdensome procedural requirements (e.g., redundant documentation, office visits); staffing an in-person help desk to efficiently direct clients to the appropriate counter or service; and implementing new web-based technologies to enable electronic transactions (Isaacs, Katz, & Amin, 2016).

Organizational Culture Change Efforts in Human Services Programs

In our literature review, we identified several specific change strategies that human services agencies can adopt if they want to change their organizational culture. **Figure 2** illustrates the guiding principles of these change strategies.

Figure 2. Changing Organizational Culture, Lessons from the Literature



Organizational culture change initiatives in human services agencies primarily aim to change staff behavior as the mechanism to change underlying values and assumptions. Evidence exists that observable behavioral expectations can be more important than deeper values or assumptions in transmitting culture to staff (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot, & Falkus, 2000; Hofstede, 1998; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Glisson, Dukes, & Green, 2006). These attempts to change organizational culture are often concurrent with business process redesign

efforts aiming to improve client service or operational efficiency (Lurie & Riccucci, 2003). These change efforts might be in response to shifting policy and regulation or might be an intrinsic desire to improve agency performance, client outcomes, or both.

Many of these strategies build on Kotter's (1995) framework that organizations can use to succeed in changing their organizational culture. Several studies since have built on and reinforced Kotter's framework. The evolution of this literature suggests a shared understanding of key strategies necessary to change organizational culture. These studies also emphasize the importance of closely tracking performance through discrete, measurable benchmarks (Garvin & Roberto, 2005; Hirschhorn, 2002; Lurie & Riccucci, 2003).

Despite growing research on intentional organizational culture change efforts in the private-sector, evidence from public-sector change initiatives is more limited. The literature describes the empirical results of several organizational process and change efforts across a range of human service agencies, though examples from TANF offices specifically are limited. A small number of empirical studies have shown positive results related to efficiency in service delivery, client well-being, and benefit receipt; staff morale and retention; and overall agency performance (Fife, 2013; Hahn, Amin, Kassabian, & Gearing, 2016; Isaacs, Katz, & Amin, 2016).

D. Report Overview

Subsequent chapters in this report summarize our findings across the six sites visited, based on observations during fieldwork.

Chapter 2 summarizes each of the six TANF programs visited, including their locations, administrative structures, highlights of organizational changes made to promote a positive organizational culture, as well as staff and client experiences.

Chapter 3 describes concrete change strategies the six programs used when they tried to change their organizational culture.

Chapter 4 describes promising practices the six programs used to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture.

Chapter 5 discusses the challenges programs reported facing when they tried to change or sustain practices associated with positive organizational culture, and how they addressed those challenges.

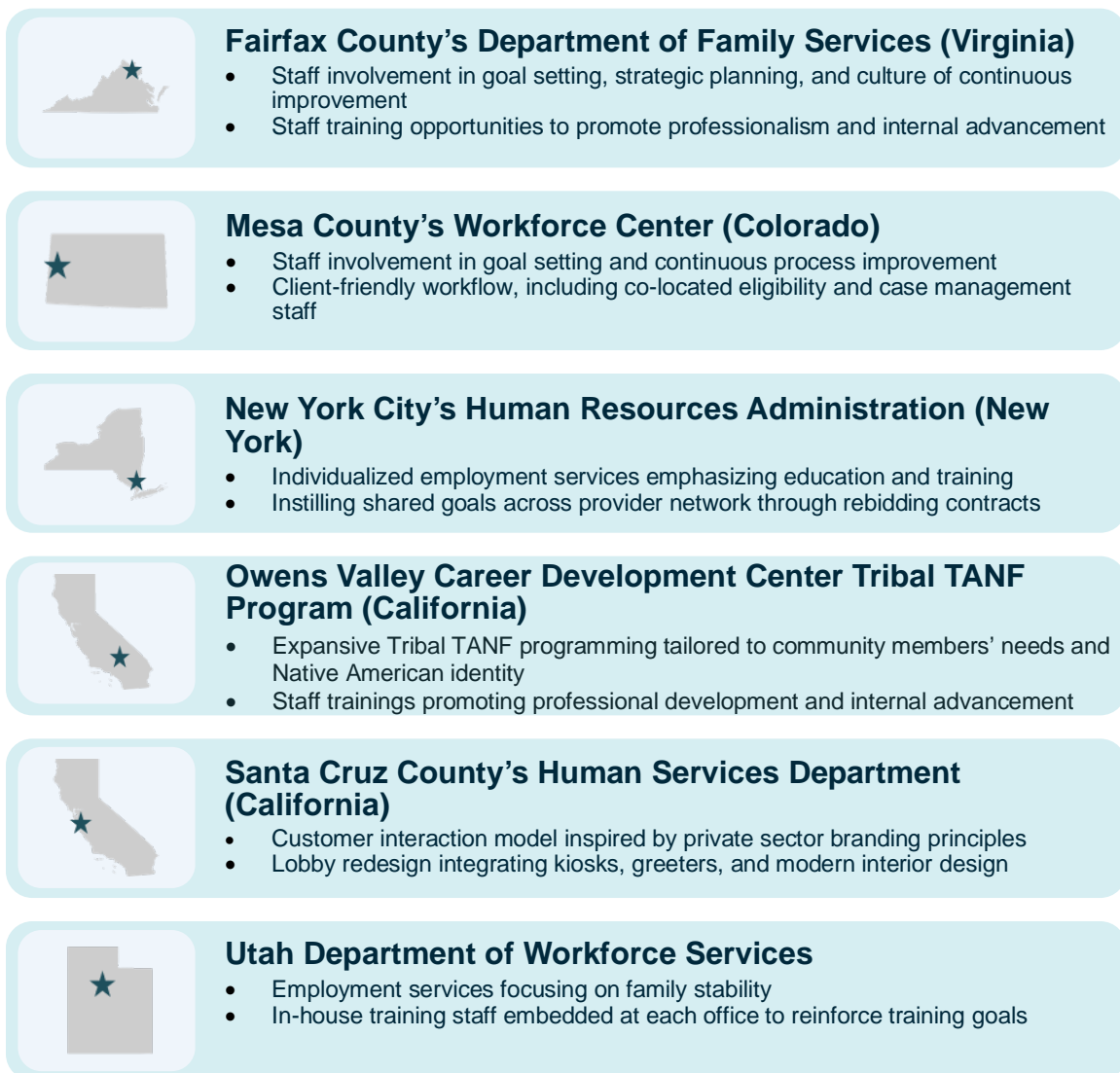
Chapter 6 synthesizes lessons learned across all programs.

Chapter 2. Program Overviews

For inclusion in this study, we selected six TANF programs that were using one or more of the practices associated with positive organizational culture identified in the literature review.⁷ The study's subsequent fieldwork identified specific ways each of the six TANF programs used to implement these practices.

This chapter provides an overview of each program, including its location, administrative structure, approaches used to promote positive organizational culture, efforts to change the organization in support of a positive organizational culture, and staff and client experiences. **Figure 3** summarizes select approaches programs used to promote positive organizational culture. Subsequent chapters provide additional details about these programs and the ways they implemented the practices associated with positive organizational culture.

Figure 3. Overview of Study Sites and Select Approaches Used to Promote Positive Organizational Culture



⁷ We included TANF programs administered by state, county, city, and tribal organizations.



Fairfax County's Department of Family Services (Virginia)

Program Overview

Fairfax County is an affluent, urban county outside Washington D.C. in Virginia. The county's Division of Self-Sufficiency (the TANF program) administers TANF as well as other financial and medical assistance services. It is housed under the county's Department of Family Services (DFS). Staff empowerment is a key organizational goal. Agency leadership involve frontline staff in goal setting, strategic planning, and other activities designed to promote a culture of continuous improvement. In addition, the program has developed multiple, in-house staff training opportunities to promote professional development and internal advancement for frontline staff.

Organizational Changes to Promote Positive Organizational Culture

The DFS director used a scheduled strategic planning period in 2012 as an opportunity to re-think the department's goals, mission, and vision. The director's philosophy behind the change initiative was that "the workforce is the foundation of all we do." The director sought resources through professional networks for specific strategies on how to create an inclusive organization that values input from staff and creates opportunities for staff to improve their skills. The TANF program director also used the opportunity to ensure the TANF programs' goals aligned with the department's new goals. These changes led to an environment that supports internal staff development by improving staff skills and encouraging a culture of continuous program improvement.

Staff and Client Experiences

Staff felt they were offered many development opportunities and encouragement from DFS and TANF program leadership to improve themselves and their work. In addition to formal staff development opportunities, staff spoke about the more informal office culture and how interactions with peers have contributed to their job satisfaction and have reduced turnover. DFS formally evaluates staff satisfaction in a biennial employee survey, which has shown high levels of staff satisfaction, with these measures improving over time. Multiple clients of Fairfax County's TANF program who participated in a focus group reported that their interactions with the agency have improved over time. They also reported feeling that their case manager really knew them, and that they felt comfortable asking questions or reaching out to their case manager for help or advice, especially around applying to and interviewing for jobs.





Mesa County's Workforce Center (Colorado)



Program Overview

Mesa County is an urban county in western Colorado whose largest city is Grand Junction. Mesa County's Workforce Center houses the county's TANF program in addition to other employment services and operates within the broader Department of Human Services. Mesa County prioritizes staff involvement in goal setting and continuous process improvement. In addition, the program has designed a client-friendly workflow within the Workforce Center, including co-located eligibility and case management staff to streamline communication.

Organizational Changes to Promote Positive Organizational Culture

In 2015, the executive director of the Department of Human Services brought in a company that specializes in providing training and consulting to businesses to train staff on its Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX) model (see text box) for organizational goal setting. 4DX is designed to help all levels of an organization work in tandem to achieve an annual common goal by having frontline staff define and commit to specific actions to help meet that goal. Although staff were initially apprehensive to embrace the new 4DX system, staff across the department appreciated the weekly opportunities to reflect on the department-wide goal and how their actions can help support it.

Staff and Client Experiences

Staff at all levels shared an intense appreciation for the organizational culture at the Workforce Center. They described coming to work as fun, family-oriented, supportive, and giving. They cited informal institutions such as frequent potlucks and "get well soon" cards, in addition to formal institutions that supervisors and leaders had developed to improve staff morale and ability to provide client service. The latter included Case Management Support Time, which is designated time for frontline staff to share and discuss some of the more difficult things about their jobs without a supervisor present. TANF clients who participated in a focus group appreciated case managers' desire to tailor services to their needs, noting that the employment plans clients made in partnership with their case managers prioritized their stability as parents. Some clients discussed their ability to focus on mental health and substance use disorder treatment, while others were allowed the opportunity to focus on their children with medical needs.

Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX)

Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important. Department leadership sets the overarching goal for the whole department, called the "Wildly Important Goal" (WIG) annually.

Discipline 2: Act on Lead Measures. Each Division, with the input of frontline staff, defines which measures they are going to take as a Division that will lead to the achievement of the Department WIG. Each team within the division then sets their own even more specific measures.

Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard. Each team works together to create their own scoreboard to help track their progress towards their lead measures.

Discipline 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability. Teams meet weekly as an opportunity for staff to set their weekly commitments, specific actions they can take to help influence the lead measures, and ultimately the WIG.

Source: McChesney, Chris, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling. 2016. The Four Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals.



New York City's Human Resources Administration (New York)

Program Overview

The Human Resources Administration (HRA) administers New York City's TANF program as well as other social programs in the city including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, energy assistance, public health insurance, and child support enforcement. HRA serves the five boroughs of New York City, serving more than 300,000 individuals in April of 2019. The research team interviewed staff within HRA's Career Services division in addition to staff at three employment services contractors in New York City. With a broad network of employment service providers, HRA used its contract rebidding process to instill shared goals among this network. These goals include an emphasis on individualized employment services with an increased focus on education and training opportunities to build career pathways.

Organizational Changes to Promote Positive Organizational Culture

In 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio outlined a strategy to overhaul New York City's workforce system, including an overhaul of the service delivery model for career services provided to TANF clients. HRA rebid all career services contracts for the TANF program's employment services. In doing so, it used this process to ensure alignment between its new goals and its contracted service providers' goals. The new contracts changed the system from one focused on rapid job attachment (i.e. a "work-first" approach) to one focused on individualized services that emphasizes education, training, and career pathways to increase long-term self-sufficiency. HRA redesigned the service delivery model from one in which clients received job search services from one provider to one in which clients now complete a more thorough assessment with one provider who then refers them to another provider based on their chosen pathway. HRA also made changes to its sanction policy and extended the amount of time youth can participate in education and training. Many employment services contractors also reported a shift in their relationship with HRA, resulting in a perceived collaboration.

Staff and Client Experiences

The new focus on individualized employment services allows frontline staff to feel as though they have discretion regarding some aspects of employment services. Frontline staff reported that they have increased freedom to encourage their clients to pursue education and training opportunities, which was not emphasized during the previous "work-first" system. However, they may refer clients only to HRA-approved providers, which is largely the same network of providers contracted under the previous employment services system. Clients shared in a focus group that they believe their case managers determine their service delivery plan based on their individual goals and that staff take the time to get to know them.





Owens Valley Career Development Center Tribal TANF Program (California)

Program Overview

Owens Valley Career Development Center (OVCDC) is a tribal consortium that administers Tribal TANF and a broad range of economic, social, and cultural services for Native Americans across seven counties in Central and Southern California.¹ At its 14 office locations, clients can apply for and receive services in-person across its expansive and diverse geographic service area, which encompasses both remote rural locations and large urban areas. The Tribal TANF program supports a broad set of services through its “prevention” activities, designed to strengthen life skills and healthy decision making, as well as to reinforce clients’ Native American culture. Case managers draw on the expansive service offerings to tailor services for clients’ needs and Native American identity. OVCDC also supports a broad range of staff training opportunities for its geographically dispersed staff, to promote professional development and internal advancement.



Organizational Changes to Promote Positive Organizational Culture

OVCDC has instituted business processes and service delivery approaches that have altered its organizational culture. In part spurred by the need to ensure compliance with federal rules in the early 2000s, the agency has focused on developing and implementing standard operating procedures that align both with federal requirements and the needs of its geographically dispersed staff. For example, these procedures include steps for developing new programming to ensure it aligns with TANF program goals or procedures for internal processes such as staff onboarding checklists. This focus on developing standardized processes has helped create shared norms and cohesion across the agency’s 14 offices. More recent organizational changes have focused on aligning departmental goals and, to some extent, staff performance evaluations with the organization’s strategic goals. This approach began with a consultant-led strategic planning process in 2014.

Staff and Client Experiences

Staff expressed a sense of respect and appreciation for the agency’s approach to attentive, tailored service delivery and emphasis on internal promotion. In addition, staff at all levels cited a heavy reliance on processes and standard operating procedures, yet frontline staff felt that they are encouraged to use their discretion to ensure services meet client needs. Staff shared that the focus on process also gave them a clear sense of expectations, which they appreciated. They cited, as well, several aspects of operating in a tribal context that influence organizational culture and, in turn, staff and client experiences. These include limited separation and sometimes even overlap among staff, clients, and tribal leadership that created a sense of “family” and shared responsibility for client outcomes.

Clients who participated in a focus group expressed positive experiences in their interactions with OVCDC, particularly when compared to their prior experiences with other TANF programs. Specifically, they felt that OVCDC staff were warmer, more attentive, and adept at fostering a more personal relationship. Respondents used phrases like “non-judgmental,” “supportive,” and “they’re on my side” when describing their perception of OVCDC staff. Participants emphasized the ease of accessing OVCDC services and appreciated the way OVCDC validated their identities as Native Americans, both during intake and through programming.

¹ This includes Fresno, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Tulare, Ventura, and Mono counties.



Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (California)

Program Overview

Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (HSD) oversees the county's TANF program as well as all food, medical, and social services in the county. The agency has two office locations (in urban Santa Cruz and semi-rural Watsonville), where clients can apply for services in-person, as well as one call center. Santa Cruz County is a relatively affluent county in coastal California, located near Silicon Valley and home to a University of California campus.



At the time of the visit, HSD had a TANF caseload of approximately 1,300, which is relatively small compared with larger counties in the state. Since 2015, the department has integrated the WE CARE client interaction model into its hiring, onboarding, staff training, service delivery, and performance monitoring standards.

Organizational Changes to Promote Positive Organizational Culture

Beginning in 2013, HSD initiated an organizational culture change that corresponded with the impending implementation of the Affordable Care Act in California. The HSD director viewed this likely increase in applicants seeking medical benefits as an opportunity to change processes and enhance the client experience across all programs, inspired by private-sector branding and customer interaction models. HSD leadership then sought staff input to develop the WE CARE customer experience model (see text box). WE CARE provides a roadmap for staff to navigate the beginning, middle, and end of phone or in-person client interactions as well as a framework against which to monitor service quality and agency performance.

The WE CARE Model

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

Source: Santa Cruz County WE CARE Desk Reference booklet

HSD contracted with marketing, public relations, and design firms to redesign the physical lobby space and develop professional-quality training materials. The county IT department developed a real-time operations dashboard that monitors lobby wait times and application processing times. It enables supervisors to make real-time staffing decisions to enhance the client experience. At the same time, HSD transitioned from a case-based to a task-based workflow system, in which clients interact with the first available staff member to process the tasks necessary to complete their eligibility determination rather than interacting with one dedicated case manager. WE CARE implementation also coincided with increased cross-training among staff and increased technology use designed to make processes easier for clients.

Staff and Client Experiences

When asked about the agency's goals and priorities, staff at all levels described the goals and values laid out by HSD leadership, emphasizing excellent service and compassion. Staff also said they felt supported in reaching those goals. They believed they received extensive training on customer service and cultural awareness and were encouraged to participate in ongoing training opportunities and work groups. Clients who participated in a focus group generally felt that staff were very supportive and tried to connect them to all available resources. However, some clients did not like the shift to a task-based system in which they did not have a dedicated eligibility caseworker.



Utah Department of Workforce Services

Program Overview

The Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) administers the TANF program, called the Family Engagement Program (FEP) statewide. The research team interviewed state-level DWS leadership and staff in two Employment Centers where clients access FEP services. FEP employment services focus on family stability, with provisions for a wide range of activities to promote this goal. Utah trained all frontline staff on motivational interviewing and other tactics to develop family-focused plans. In addition, the agency uses in-house training staff embedded at each office to provide refresher trainings and sustain the focus on family stability.

Organizational Changes to Promote Positive Organizational Culture

In 2012, the Utah state legislature required DWS to collect and analyze data on the causes of intergenerational poverty in the state. As part of their research, DWS ran a pilot program that tested a shift from a case management approach that focuses on the compliance of the individual receiving benefits to one that focuses on the whole family's needs. Based on the anecdotal success of this pilot, DWS decided to shift case management toward this approach statewide. A core work group of staff from all levels within the department developed a training curriculum for all FEP staff focused on topics and skills department leadership identified as being aligned with the more family-focused approach, such as motivational interviewing and trauma-informed care. The state also contracted with the University of Utah's Social Research Institute (SRI) to help develop and tailor these trainings and concepts to render them relevant for frontline staff.

After first training supervisors and incorporating their feedback, department leadership and the SRI researchers delivered the training to all FEP staff over 10 months starting in February 2016. The Operational Program Specialists embedded in each Employment Center who are responsible for training staff and ensuring all staff are up to date on any policy changes helped facilitate these trainings locally. After the initial large-scale training, the Operational Program Specialists continue to administer refresher trainings quarterly as well as administer the core training for new staff.

Staff and Client Experiences

Both frontline staff and supervisors discussed their offices' collaborative atmosphere. Generally, FEP staff felt the team was cohesive and frontline staff believed they could reach out to any one of their FEP colleagues if they had a question or needed support. Frontline staff felt they had many opportunities to interact socially with their colleagues through potlucks or other break room activities. However, some supervisors thought the trainings and new responsibilities that came with the shift to the family-focused approach were overwhelming. They felt stressed by balancing all of the trainings and meetings with providing the support necessary for their staff to implement the new case management style. Clients who have had multiple case managers over the years reported in a focus group that they could name at least one who they felt went out of their way to help them, recommending and connecting them to resources.



Chapter 3. What Strategies Did Programs Use to Change Their Organizational Culture?

TANF programs strive to improve their agencies' performance for a number of reasons, including better serving low-income families; improving on federal performance metrics; complying with a legislative mandate; responding to a punitive action; or improving the agency's perception among stakeholders. TANF programs also have latitude in terms of how to improve their performance. Attempting to change the organization's culture is one way TANF programs can pursue improvement.

Changing staff behavior is often the main way to change organizational culture in human services agencies, according to the literature. Programs can attempt to change staff behavior by changing the goals or processes of the organization. These changes alter the behavioral expectations and norms that guide individuals' actions within their organization, which in turn can affect client experiences. As a result, agencies that aim to improve staff and client experiences through process changes can in turn change organizational culture.

Culture change can take many different forms. Overall, the literature on organizational culture change emphasizes four guiding principles to successfully change organizational culture as detailed in Chapter 1 and summarized in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4. Changing Organizational Culture, Lessons from the Literature



We identified several steps TANF programs took to change their processes and goals, and, in turn, change their organizational culture. These change strategies illustrate real-world examples of similar strategies we identified in the literature. We use the icons from **Figure 4** to indicate how our observations in the sites align with the change strategies identified in the literature.

Change Strategy 1. Develop and Communicate a Clear Vision That Motivates Staff



Leadership in several programs developed a new vision for their program as part of their change initiatives. This approach involved setting new goals, which often focused on supporting client well-being, such as individualized employment services, customer service, and promoting family stability. These goals aligned with staff's motivation for entering the human services field, which helped build staff buy-in for the change initiatives. Developing and articulating a clear vision in which staff were eager to participate helped propel these change initiatives.

- The goal of **Santa Cruz County's** WE CARE initiative was to provide “consistent and exceptional customer service” whether clients accessed services in-person, by phone, or online. This goal aligned with staff's own goals for their work. As one frontline staff member noted, “It reminds you you're doing this for a reason.”
- **Utah** shifted from an approach that prioritized rapid job attachment for their clients to creating family-focused services. Employment Center leadership, supervisors, and frontline staff emphasized the importance of high-quality interactions with clients to help address families' needs. This family-focused approach encouraged frontline staff to use their discretion when interacting with clients, allowing them to customize their approach and “think outside the box” to develop and provide an employment services plan to promote family stability. For example, staff discussed conducting more home visits, meeting at the school of the client's child, and generally going above and beyond to support clients experiencing crises.
- In **New York City**, HRA wanted its providers to prioritize client choice in employment services. According to contractor staff, setting these goals created an environment supportive of frontline staff discretion and client choice. This approach led to clients feeling that their case managers took their goals into account when deciding where to refer them.

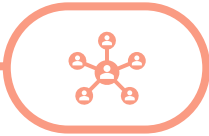
“Now we get to case manage the way we've always wanted to.”

-Frontline staff member in Utah, commenting on the new family-focused approach to service delivery

Change Strategy 2. Build Buy-in and Enthusiasm among Frontline Staff for the Change Initiative



In order to effectively communicate its vision and to build buy-in among frontline staff, one program relied on branding a new initiative to create something shared and tangible for frontline staff to refer to and build excitement.



The programs we visited included frontline staff as part of the coalition of staff leading the change initiatives in different ways. Some programs sought input from frontline staff on the new goals or identified individual staff “champions” to participate in the planning or implementation of change initiatives to help provide a sense of ownership over the initiative. Another cultivated a sense of partnership between the initiating TANF agency and the contractors implementing it.

- In **Santa Cruz County**, HSD branded its change initiative “WE CARE” and created associated marketing materials for internal staff use (e.g., posters or training materials using a distinct aesthetic style and color scheme). In addition, leadership used inspiring language during the WE CARE implementation to appeal to staff on an emotional level and to build enthusiasm for enhancing the customer service experience.

“4DX provided us a structure to stay hyper-focused on what our goals are down to the frontline staff. Every single person every single week is talking about our goals and making steps to make those goals. [4DX] engages every single person from our Executive Director to the person that was hired last week.”

-Leadership in Mesa

- The TANF program director in **Fairfax County** focused on getting staff input on division priorities and aligning them with broader department goals. After hearing from staff what they felt the most important priorities should be, the director picked the four most often cited priorities to serve as “cornerstones” for the division, making sure they aligned with the department’s goals and values.
- In **Mesa County**, the 4DX initiative sought to help all levels of the organization work to achieve a common goal.⁸ It involved frontline staff defining and committing to specific actions to help meet that goal. Staff described how participating in the weekly huddles

made clear how their actions can influence the department’s direction.

- In **New York City**, HRA treated contractors as its partners, seeking their opinions on new ideas during the organizational shift. Staff at contracting agencies shared that HRA staff were receptive to and encouraging of creative ideas from the contractors as well, which the contractors appreciated.
- In **Santa Cruz County**, leadership involved staff they felt were less likely to embrace the model in the planning process to understand and overcome potential sources of resistance to change.
- In **Fairfax County**, leadership designated individual staff members to serve as the lead for cornerstone work groups tasked with discussing and brainstorming ways to achieve specific goals within these cornerstones.

⁸ See Chapter 2 for more information about the 4DX initiative in Mesa County.

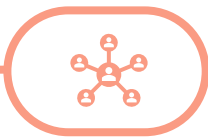
Change Strategy 3. Invest in Training



Programs made significant investments in staff training at the outset of the change initiatives. This training focused on how to implement the new processes and how these new processes fit into the organization's broader mission, vision, and goals.

- In **Utah**'s shift to family-focused services, a core work group of department staff from all levels developed a statewide training curriculum for all FEP staff focused on topics and skills to help staff emphasize a more family-focused approach (see Chapter 2). This training program, combined with adjustments to client assessments and tools for supervisors, shifted the approach to service delivery and the underlying office culture within Employment Centers across the state. The department had an existing infrastructure for staff development statewide through its Operational Program Specialists who supported the initial roll-out of family-focused case management trainings. In addition to the Operational Program Specialists, Utah enlisted a professor from the University of Utah to conduct training on motivational interviewing in each office around the state. This staff development included facilitating all-staff trainings which contributed to greater consistency in implementation statewide.
- In **Santa Cruz County**, the staff development division created new training to teach staff how to use the WE CARE customer experience model, including opportunities for role play and observation.
- **OVDC** developed standard operating procedures to ensure consistent services for clients across its multiple offices. The procedures allow staff in local offices to retain flexibility so they could tailor services to the needs of specific tribes and languages. This approach included steps outlining the way staff work with clients, as well as how they conduct intra-agency business (e.g., developing a proposal for a new service improvement, onboarding new hires). According to leadership, strong processes and standard operating procedures helped the organization mitigate challenges associated with implementing standard services across multiple offices and a broad geographic area.

Change Strategy 4. Enlist External Perspectives



In addition to enlisting frontline staff, some programs enlisted external consultants to provide professional expertise when trying to change existing processes or structures. Two programs used consultants to help develop training materials associated with the organizational change. A third program brought in consultants to train staff on a new goal setting process.

- In **Santa Cruz County**, HSD contracted with marketing and public relations firms to develop professional-quality training materials associated with the new WE CARE model. The staff development department worked with a marketing firm to develop standardized staff training materials and desk aids outlining the core pillars and associated processes within the WE CARE model, which training staff use during the initial training and training refreshers.
- In **Utah**, the state contracted with SRI to tailor trainings and concepts to make them relevant for frontline staff.
- In **Mesa County**, department leadership brought in an external organization to train staff on its 4DX model for organizational goal setting.

“It was a very intentional effort to not just teach those concepts but to teach them in a way that would connect with what staff were doing.”

- Department leadership in Utah on tailoring trainings

Change Strategy 5. Use Performance Management Systems and Surveys to Monitor Implementation



Leaders used performance management systems to help implement and evaluate organizational change initiatives. One program altered its performance management approach to assess whether frontline staff were implementing the initiative’s new goals consistently. Another program developed a new system for tracking client-oriented outcomes. Some programs relied on surveys to assess how staff and clients were experiencing the changes.

- In **Utah**, leadership changed their frontline staff performance evaluations to determine whether frontline staff were using the new family-focused services techniques they learned during trainings, such as asking questions using motivational interviewing. The department gave supervisors and center managers a coaching guide on how to identify and assess quality in case managers’ work, how to reinforce training concepts, and how to support ongoing implementation.
- **Santa Cruz County** developed a Key Indicator System Dashboard, where supervisors and leadership now monitor client-focused performance metrics aligned with the WE CARE model. These metrics include lobby wait times, abandoned call rates, average call wait times, application

“It’s infiltrated all parts of our job. Not just the verbal conversations. Even how we capture a narrative in our [case management system]. You can tell on some level based on how they narrated a case whether or not they’re exercising or consistently implementing motivational interviewing.”

-Center Manager in Utah, commenting on the new family-focused approach to service delivery

processing times, application-related task completion rates, and program outcomes. Leadership and supervisors use the dashboard to compare service levels and help show staff progress on periodic initiatives such as reducing task-processing time for a specific task throughout a given month. Agency leadership also redesigned their quality assurance monitoring checklists and client surveys around the goals and steps outlined in the WE CARE model. Call center supervisors used a WE CARE–based checklist when listening in on calls to ensure staff were providing a welcoming, personalized greeting; were engaged in the conversation; and were clear about the expectations for the call. The agency also includes customer service surveys in all application and renewal packets to collect feedback on whether staff answered clients' questions and whether clients were satisfied overall.

- **Fairfax County** conducts biennial staff and client surveys and regularly assesses staff retention rates. Leadership used these surveys to help understand the degree to which staff experiences aligned with the goals of the staff development-oriented organizational change. The department saw improved results from its biennial employee satisfaction survey, as well as an increase in staff retention. DFS also saw an increase in the number of clients reporting that they are “highly satisfied.” The department instituted “pulse checks” where staff meet with leadership and provide feedback at the end of their first and fourth years with the department, critical points for staff turnover.

Chapter 4. What Practices Did Programs Implement to Promote and Sustain Positive Organizational Culture?

Even when these programs were not actively pursuing organizational change initiatives, they used multiple practices to promote and sustain a positive organizational culture. The specific practices we observed aligned with four guiding principles identified in the literature, as discussed in Chapter 1 and summarized in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5. Practicing Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices, Lessons from the Literature



Below, we describe examples of these practices from our site visits. We use the icons from **Figure 5** to indicate how our observations align with the guiding principles identified in the literature.

Practice 1: Ensure Consistent Understanding of Mission and Goals



Programs ensured that frontline staff understood and could articulate the goals set out by agency leaders. This approach required leaders to think strategically about how to translate goals set at the overall agency level to resonate with frontline staff. Some programs explicitly linked division or department goals to broader agency goals, while one program asked staff to make their own weekly commitments to actions that would help achieve department goals.

- In **Fairfax County**, the TANF program chose four guiding “cornerstones” (i.e., goals to help guide the division’s work) that align with the broader department’s overall goals. According to the department’s staff survey, 97 percent of staff feel they know how their job fits within the department’s overall mission.

- **OVDC**'s department goals were linked to broader agency goals through the annual strategic planning process. Management and supervisory staff reported feeling engaged in this process and the organization's broader mission and core values by setting action-oriented departmental goals.
- In **Mesa County**, staff participated in weekly 4DX huddles, or team meetings, where they commit to one action per week that helped serve the larger department goals. Staff discussed how these huddles made clear to them the ways in which their actions can influence the department's direction. Previously, staff felt the department operated in silos; however, with every division working toward a common goal, frontline staff felt they knew what staff in other divisions were doing.



OVDC's Mission Statement Outside Bakersfield Office

Practice 2: Involve Frontline Staff in Process Improvements



Programs encouraged innovation by allowing frontline staff a voice in process improvements, which helped provide a sense of ownership over those efforts.



Programs convened work groups made up of staff from all levels, several departments, and in some cases, multiple locations. These work groups provided opportunities for frontline staff to offer their 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 staff input and expertise, and frontline staff across several departments shared their appreciation for opportunities to participate in these work groups.



These work groups drew on the experience and expertise of frontline staff, who interact with clients most frequently, to improve processes in a way that better met client needs.

- In **Fairfax County**, staff could participate in a monthly *Rapid Improvement Event*. Participating staff met for five days throughout a month to examine a particular process within the agency using the American Public Human Services Association's "Define, Assess, Plan, Implement, Monitor" model (Rubin, 2009). Staff worked to identify root causes of performance issues and make recommendations to improve the process. They presented their findings to agency leadership, an event that all staff were invited to attend.
- In **Mesa County**, frontline staff helped plan the agency's shift to the eligibility team, from a case-based system to a task-based system.
- In **OVCDC**, a work group focused on changes to employee performance evaluation, resulting in changes to both the evaluation content and method. Staff evaluations shifted to focus on how staff behavior aligned with the agency's core values, and the agency began using a new performance management software. When work groups resulted in a process or policy shift for the agency, staff from all offices who were involved in the work group were given the opportunity to present at all-staff meetings about what changed and why. This approach encouraged other staff to ask their supervisor whether they could participate in the work groups too when they saw the opportunity to have their voices heard.
- In **Santa Cruz County**, HSD convened an intra-departmental work group of staff to identify ways to make physical spaces more welcoming to clients, as well as an all-male staff work group to brainstorm ways to make services and physical spaces friendlier for fathers.

"We learned our lesson as far as leadership coming and saying this is what we're doing. It's a lot more powerful when the team comes up with it."

-Supervisor in Mesa, commenting on staff involvement in change processes

Practice 3: Use Staff Training to Build 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.



Trainings helped build capacity among staff to lead future trainings or change processes internally.



Programs also used training to reinforce the agency's mission, goals, or motivation for the organizational change initiative.

- **Fairfax County** established formal, in-house professional development initiatives open to staff across the department. The Data Analytics Fellowship Academy, a 10-month training program, taught staff to use data analysis to examine research questions relevant to the department.
- **OVCDC's** staff training activities emphasized cultural competence for Native American and non-Native American staff during initial staff onboarding and beyond. OVCDC leadership estimated that across its offices, approximately 50 percent of all staff are Native Americans. Onboarding trainings provided new employees with a foundational understanding of historical trauma to help staff appreciate the broader context facing the Native American communities OVCDC serves.
- **Mesa County** enlisted an external organization that specializes in providing training and consulting to businesses to train staff on a framework for continuous improvement processes. Staff who were trained could then lead their own continuous improvement processes to approach new challenges.
- In **Utah**, dedicated training staff at each office led refresher trainings to remind staff how to implement the techniques learned and to sustain the shift to family-focused services.
- **Santa Cruz County** used staff trainings to maintain the organization's focus on exceptional customer service. The Staff Development Unit delivered trainings on poverty and the history of social services during the onboarding period for new staff. Designed to instill a sense of shared goals and values, these trainings underscored the importance of using the WE CARE model in every client interaction, particularly because of the broader circumstances facing clients living in poverty.

Practice 4: Create Advancement Opportunities for Frontline Staff and Former Clients



Programs that promoted staff internally offered them the opportunity to develop new 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.



Program leaders and staff at one program felt that hiring former clients as staff promoted positive staff and client experiences by facilitating a non-judgmental staff-client dynamic and improving staff morale.

- Staff tenure at **OV CDC** was high; internal advancement was common; and staff appreciated the opportunity to advance. Leadership—many of whom had been promoted internally themselves from previous direct service positions—believed OV CDC’s strong staff retention was based largely on the training and internal promotion opportunities staff received. Staff appreciated the fact that several members of management had advanced through the agency or had been cross-trained to understand frontline staff responsibilities. In addition, several staff members were former OV CDC clients. Leadership and staff felt this type of internal advancement contributed to a non-judgmental client-staff dynamic.
- **Fairfax County** designed its Leadership Academy to develop future leaders from within the department. The Academy, open to staff throughout the department, included biweekly all-day classroom learning experiences; a group project that ended in a presentation to a senior management team; job coaching; and the opportunity to shadow events throughout the department in areas outside participating staff members’ teams.

“A lot of people in those leadership roles have worked down here. They know what it’s like to do our jobs.”

-OV CDC frontline staff member

Practice 5: Simplify Processes



Programs described concrete steps to reduce paperwork, streamline phone trees, and co-locate eligibility and case management teams to make processes easier for clients to navigate. One program also took steps to make services more accessible by removing, where possible, eligibility barriers for group-based family services.

- **Santa Cruz County** created a designated phone queue option within their call center system for TANF cash assistance clients to speak directly to TANF caseworkers located at field offices. This ensured that clients could speak to a trained TANF caseworker in real time rather than leaving a voice message for their assigned caseworker if they were away from their desk, since staff at the central call center are trained to handle primarily food and medical assistance. At the time of the site visit, the agency had also implemented voice and electronic signature options for food and medical assistance cases, enabling clients to get approved for benefits via phone on the same day they apply. In addition, clients can scan and upload some documents through their online accounts rather than submitting them in person or by mail.
- **Mesa County's** physical staffing arrangement in the office increased communication among staff and simplified processes for clients. Eligibility and employment services case management staff sat side-by-side in Mesa County's Workforce Center, which allowed staff on both teams to easily communicate if they have a question on a specific case. Case managers were also quickly able to answer clients' questions regarding their cases, as opposed to having to refer them to a separate eligibility department.
- At the time of the site visit, **OVCDC** was in the process of simplifying its eligibility processes to better reflect their tribal communities' intergenerational and community-based view of family and household.

Practice 6: Design Client-Oriented Spaces



Multiple programs designed their physical spaces to make them welcoming and easy for clients to navigate. Programs used check-in kiosks, arrowed signs, or listed wait times to provide visual cues and personal assistance. This approach helped clarify expectations for clients beginning with the moment they enter the lobby door. When possible, programs also used their space and resources to provide childcare, device chargers, or other amenities that make clients' time at the agency more comfortable and make accessing benefits easier.

- **Santa Cruz County** invested in changes to its lobby design to streamline services and reduce wait times. HSD added a greeter position and check-in kiosk in both office lobbies. Greeters welcomed clients and helped sign them in to the kiosk queue based on

their identified need. Once clients entered the queue, the office displayed visible wait times. HSD also hired designers and contractors to renovate one of its offices to incorporate a modern design, including a new reception desk in the lobby akin to a hotel reception desk without a plexiglass window. The redesign also added amenities for clients waiting in the lobby (e.g., device-charging stations, public-access computers).

- **Utah** used navigators, greeters, and a large, open office format to create a welcoming environment that fosters transparent processes at each of its Employment Centers. Front-desk staff greeted clients and guided them to the appropriate part of the office depending on their needs. Staff discussed how the openness of the office allows clients to see the camaraderie among staff, which they feel contributes to the office’s overall warmth.
- The **Mesa County** Workforce Center is housed in a large, new facility that hosts several employment-related services, including PlayCare, a free childcare service staffed with licensed professionals that clients could use while at the Workforce Center. The front lobby was bright and open with plenty of chairs, without partitions between the intake workers and clients.
- Office lobby design in **New York City** varied by employment services contractor.



PlayCare Childcare in Mesa County's Lobby

One contractor’s modern office offered a well-lit, colorful, comfortable lobby without partitions and a front desk open to clients. In another contractor’s large office space, staff installed “street signs” marking all the hallways to help people navigate the space and demarcate where one program ends and another program begins.



Contractor's Lobby in New York City

Practice 7: Increase Client Choice in Employment Services



Giving clients choice is one way programs showed that the agency respected and valued them. Staff and focus group clients appreciated programs that provided individualized, tailored employment services and that allowed clients genuine input on which services they receive rather than promoting a one-size-fits-all approach. For some frontline staff, the ability to work with clients one-on-one and develop tailored employment services was invigorating and kept them engaged with their work.

- The reforms to **New York City's** employment services focused on increasing service options and prioritizing client choice in service delivery. Previously, contractors were responsible for providing all career services (mostly job search assistance) to the TANF clients referred to them in what contractors referred to as a "one-size-fits-all" approach. The reforms increased the network of partners (particularly education and training providers) to which clients could be referred, with the goal of increasing client options. The reforms also introduced a more thorough initial assessment of clients' strengths and needs to help clients and staff decide which employment services to pursue. Frontline staff reported feeling free to encourage their clients to pursue education and training opportunities if they choose, which was not emphasized under the previous work-first system.

"If you're not going to give everyone the same set of services it means you need to do a better job of assessing folks up front."

-HRA leadership, commenting on the new assessments

"I was working and then I decided after my last job I wanted to get my GED, but I couldn't do both. My employment counselor was okay with that. She understood that I have anxiety and I don't want to take on a whole lot. That's what I'm doing right now. After my GED is done, I'm going to start looking for a job."

-Client in Utah

- **Utah's** changes centered on customized case management and increasing activities in employment plans that focus on families' stabilization as opposed to immediate employment. Although employment and economic mobility remain the long-term goal, this approach acknowledged the array of supports families might need and the increased choice for staff and parents alike when developing employment plans.

- At **OVCDC**, staff and focus group clients cited the breadth and culturally tailored nature of program offerings as a key organizational strength. Frontline staff and supervisors felt they can pull from the varied prevention and employment programs to meet clients' requests and needs. Staff and focus group clients appreciated OV CDC's effort to tailor services to specific tribal customs, despite the organization serving clients from a range of tribal backgrounds. For example, program staff in more urban areas tailored their services to acknowledge the varied cultures of individuals living off-reservation (e.g., by honoring sacred foods or animals in prevention programming).



OV CDC Lobby Signage Displaying Culturally Tailored Prevention Programming Options to Clients

Chapter 5. What Challenges Did Staff and Clients Experience?

Staff and clients interviewed during site visits discussed challenges they experienced when programs attempted to change or sustain organizational practices in support of positive organizational culture. Respondents varied in how they experienced the challenges by role. For example, leaders sometimes struggled to ensure consistent implementation of change initiatives across dispersed locations, whereas frontline staff experienced challenges related to the time required to participate in culture change activities relative to their daily caseload duties. In some cases, clients expressed confusion about newly redesigned processes intended to streamline agency operations. Program staff and leadership also discussed strategies used to mitigate some of these challenges.

Challenge 1: Ensuring Consistent Implementation across Locations

Implementing a centralized organizational change effort across multiple office locations requires clear messaging, extensive staff training, and frequent monitoring to ensure staff follow consistent practices aligned with the change's goals. Some TANF programs experienced challenges related to consistent implementation of organizational changes across their service locations including extensive travel to introduce new standard operating procedures or policies to staff in different offices, ensuring buy-in from employment services providers, and staff experiencing the tradeoffs between client-facing consistency and using their professional discretion. To mitigate some of these challenges, programs developed new standard operating procedures or used technology to address distance-based challenges.

- Although **New York City's** HRA rebid the career services contracts to structurally emphasize individualized services and education, the extent to which contractors adopted that new philosophy was mixed. HRA felt that some providers fully embraced the shift while others, many of whom had been contracted providers for years, had to undergo their own internal organizational changes before being ready to adopt the city's new goals.
- In **Santa Cruz County**, leadership prioritized promoting a consistent "look and feel" across all the agency's interactions with clients, including the office lobbies, agency website, and call center. Using the WE CARE acronym, leadership developed highly standardized processes for staff in any location or role to follow (see text box on page 14). The standardized processes of WE CARE helped promote client-facing consistency. However, the tradeoff was that staff felt that they had limited discretion based on specific client circumstances.
- With 14 offices across seven counties in southern California, **OVDC** serves an expansive geographic service area. Moreover, many of these offices, including OVDC's headquarters, are in remote locations. This has required extensive driving among leadership staff when meeting with local offices about new procedures, which can be a burden to those staff members' time. OVDC's leadership are increasingly using virtual trainings and meetings through videoconferencing to communicate with staff and ensure all offices implement new policies and procedures.

Challenge 2: Pressure on Staff Workload and Time

The organizational change initiatives we studied required time and attention from TANF program staff already faced with high caseloads and tasks requiring timely completion to remain in compliance with federal policies. Some staff interviewed expressed frustration with the

tradeoffs required by participating in new trainings or other activities associated with the organizational change initiatives.

- In **Mesa County**, staff noted that tracking progress toward 4DX commitments and goals was time-consuming in addition to their existing workload. The process involved tracking the weekly commitments made during huddles, consistently generating new commitments, and tracking progress toward those commitments. Although staff acknowledged that in many ways the commitments made them better case managers, it also added to their already heavy workload and tracking requirements.
- In **Utah**, some staff interviewed were overwhelmed by the number of new trainings they were required to attend and the new responsibilities that came with the trainings. Some staff and supervisors discussed the stress of balancing attendance at all the trainings and meetings with finding time to incorporate new approaches to case management given their already heavy workload.

Challenge 3: Client Frustration with Process Changes

Some clients experienced unintended consequences of process changes designed to make services more accessible for them. Some clients we interviewed expressed frustration with a shift from a case-based to a task-based system for eligibility processes, and some clients expressed confusion about attending services at multiple provider locations.

- In **Santa Cruz County**, the shift to task-based processes from case-based processes in eligibility work created challenges for some clients. In a task-based system, clients interact with multiple staff who each process different aspects of a client's eligibility determination. In a case-based system, clients interact with one dedicated eligibility worker. Agency leaders and staff felt that this shift decreased wait times by allowing the first available staff member to serve a given client and allowed services to be more consistently delivered across all types of client interactions. However, several focus group clients felt that having a dedicated eligibility worker was preferable.
- In **New York City**, organizational changes split up the employment services such that clients must visit multiple providers once they leave the HRA office. The first provider conducts an assessment and refers them to a second provider for employment services. Even though this arrangement allowed for more opportunities to tailor clients' services, it also created confusion and inconvenience for clients. Staff also shared that clients often complained about having to leave their initial assessment provider "just as they're getting comfortable."

Challenge 4: Client Frustration with Eligibility Processes

Business process improvements focused solely on case management and not on eligibility processes created inconsistent and, at times, frustrating experiences for clients. TANF programs are typically structured in a way that clients must interact with both an eligibility team and a case management team. Limited room for discretion in TANF eligibility processes can create tension between clients and eligibility workers. Some clients' experiences with initial and ongoing eligibility determination affected their perceptions of the agency and services overall, regardless of how streamlined, friendly, or client-centric the case management services were.

- For some clients in **New York City**, the application process was burdensome with implications for how they felt about the program generally and their subsequent engagement with the contracting agencies providing employment services. Staff at one of the contracting agencies discussed how some clients find the eligibility process frustrating, and how they felt they had to win clients' trust once they arrived at the

employment program. Staff from HRA noted that New York City has implemented a number of changes in recent years to improve the application process and make it more streamlined, within the constraints of federal and state regulations. This includes the introduction and continued enhancement of web-based tools and mobile applications that make it easier for New Yorkers to complete and track the progress of cash assistance applications and appointment requirements.

- In **Utah**, focus group clients discussed how their initial experience applying for assistance could be a long, confusing, and frustrating process, and that their interactions with eligibility workers rarely went smoothly. However, their experiences with their case managers often were positive, and they sometimes failed to understand why a discrepancy occurred.
- In **Mesa County**, although the eligibility and case management teams were co-located, the initial eligibility process still confused clients, who must interact with several different members of the eligibility team. Aware of this confusion, staff tried to address the issue by maintaining open lines of communication between the two teams.

Challenge 5: Limits of Physical Space

The limits of physical space or infrastructure at one TANF program inhibited the ability to redesign client-centered office environments and workflows. Because TANF funds may not be used for constructing or purchasing facilities or buildings, some TANF agencies operate from leased units where client-centric renovation is not possible.

- **OVCDC's** headquarters are located on the Bishop Paiute reservation in Bishop, California, near where many clients live. Several prefabricated units house multiple OV CDC programs. Leaders indicated that the heavy reliance on grant funding, which typically limits the type of capital expenditures required to build and maintain physical infrastructure, has resulted in a less cohesive and less permanent-feeling office complex. Made to feel welcoming, all physical spaces were all well-illuminated and presented relevant information. However, staff indicated that the use of separate prefabricated modules for different program areas can inhibit easy communication across departments and reduce clients' ability to navigate services from different departments. Staff attempt to mitigate the limitations of the physical infrastructure by escorting clients between activities.

Challenge 6: Evaluating the Change

Some programs attempted to collect data on the degree to which the change initiative had been implemented. However, they faced challenges in doing so since the existing data collection systems were often insufficient to descriptively assess the degree to which the change effort affected staff behavior or staff buy-in toward the new goals (i.e., the extent to which the culture changed). Despite these challenges, programs found some tools (e.g., quality assurance monitoring checklists, client service surveys) and outcomes (e.g., staff retention rates) especially useful for assessing progress and implementing the initiatives' goals.

- In **New York City**, the existing performance management systems failed to track the degree to which contractors had truly embraced the new focus of the employment services reforms. Instead of capturing metrics associated with the previous work-first program goals, leadership reported that the system would have to be updated to track details related to contractors' case management activities. At the time of the site visit, HRA was developing a new case management tool to capture data more closely related to the goals of the individualized, career pathways-oriented shift.

- **Utah** contracted with SRI to conduct client and staff focus groups to evaluate the implementation of the changes made. However, they found it difficult to measure the degree to which staff had embraced the shift to family-focused case management and the extent to which staff were using the techniques covered in training consistently.

Chapter 6. Lessons for Human Services Practitioners and Policymakers

Existing literature about organizational culture in public agencies focuses largely on defining organizational culture, what influences it, and what it can influence. It also provides some information about the aspects of organizational culture associated with positive staff and client experiences, though examples from TANF programs are limited. Moreover, little research has focused on states, tribes, and county TANF programs that have actively sought to change their organizational cultures in support of improved client outcomes.

This study provides an increased understanding of how organizational culture in TANF programs can affect staff and client experiences. It documents promising strategies and practices observed in six TANF sites around the country to improve and promote positive organizational culture. Several key lessons emerged based on our fieldwork, many of which resonate with the findings about organizational culture identified in our literature review. These lessons can inform TANF and other human service practitioners as well as policymakers interested in improving service delivery.

Lesson 1. Promoting a positive organizational culture involves demonstrating respect for clients in goal setting, employment services, and administrative requirements.

Programs demonstrate respect for clients by creating client-centered goals, giving clients choices in service delivery, and simplifying processes clients must navigate to receive and maintain benefits.

- **Client-centered goals.** Client-centered goals such as “exceptional customer service” or “family-focused services” can demonstrate to clients that programs care about their experience with the program and their family’s well-being. Listing these goals in program literature or on visuals throughout the office is only a first step. Programs must also convey those goals to staff in a way that affects how they approach their work with clients. This includes integrating these goals into staff training, performance monitoring, and other organizational processes.
- **Client choice.** Giving clients choice in their employment service activities is another way TANF programs can show respect and esteem for clients. Focus group clients appreciated programs that provided individualized, tailored employment services and allowed them to offer input regarding services in which they participated rather than promoting a one-size-fits-all approach to employment services.
- **Barrier or burden reduction.** Programs can take concrete steps to reduce or eliminate barriers or burden for clients, demonstrating their respect for client’s time. Such steps include reducing paperwork requirements, streamlining phone tree options, and increasing options for digital document submission.

Lesson 2. Promoting a positive organizational culture also involves demonstrating respect for staff by investing in training, involving staff in innovation, and offering opportunities for internal promotions.

Programs demonstrate respect for staff by investing in their professional development through training, empowering them to contribute to innovation, and promoting staff internally. More broadly, agencies can practice treating staff as “internal customers” by applying the same set of client service standards they would for clients to everyday management-staff interactions. This approach can help staff feel valued and can improve staff morale.

- **Professional development trainings.** Training efforts that emphasize building staff professional skills, as opposed to training focused solely on implementing new processes, can make staff feel valued and can promote retention.
- **Social and historical context trainings.** Training focused on educating staff about the history of the communities they serve is one way to increase staff professionalism while enabling them to take a more culturally competent approach when working with clients. Trainings focused on the socioeconomic factors influencing communities' participation in the TANF program or on the history of communities' interaction with social service programs more generally can build both knowledge and empathy.
- **Staff work groups.** Work groups comprising staff at various levels increase staff involvement in and ownership of innovation. Whether as standing institutions or convened ad hoc, these institutions can propel innovation overall.
- **Internal promotion.** Internal promotion accompanied by professional skills trainings can signal an agency's investment in its workforce, which contributes to staff morale. Staff appreciated learning new management skills and being offered the opportunity to advance within the agency.
- **Hiring former clients.** Hiring former clients reduces the disconnect between staff and clients and might shift the power dynamic between staff and clients, contributing to a compassionate, supportive organizational culture.

Lesson 3. Programs can promote positive staff experiences as a way to improve client experiences.

Clients' interactions with frontline staff influence how clients view the agency, and clients notice when frontline staff morale is high. Professionalizing the agency's workforce and encouraging innovation can improve staff experiences and morale, which can in turn shape positive client experiences as well.

- **Customized services.** In addition to making staff feel valued and promoting retention, staff training focused on professional skills development can improve staff's ability to customize employment services for clients and help them navigate the TANF program.
- **Innovation.** Involving frontline staff in innovation efforts recognizes staff's expertise and can develop approaches better suited to meet clients' needs. Because frontline staff interact with clients most frequently, they can provide insights on issues leadership or other management staff might not have considered.

Lesson 4. TANF program requirements might limit programs' ability to alter client experiences to some extent, but progress is possible.

Limited room for discretion in TANF eligibility processes can create tension between clients and eligibility workers. Case management staff must also follow state and federal guidelines. However, clients described a lower degree of tension in their relationship with case management staff compared with interactions with eligibility workers. As a result, clients who interact with both eligibility and case management processes sometimes experienced a disconnect between the two sides of the program, which negatively affected clients' perceptions of and engagement with the TANF program overall. Although some of the tension between clients and eligibility processes might be inevitable, programs can take steps to streamline processes and minimize client stress associated with these requirements.

- **Remote and digital document submission.** Programs can make eligibility processes easier for clients by increasing remote interviews or digital document submission.

- **Co-locating eligibility and case management teams.** TANF programs can promote a consistent client experience between the eligibility and case management sides through co-location. In one site, eligibility and case management staff sit side by side and can easily communicate about cases. In addition, increased interaction between eligibility and case management staff enables eligibility workers to better communicate expectations about employment services with clients, which reduces confusion about the eligibility process.
- **Eligibility as a focal point for continuous improvement.** Programs can focus their ongoing innovation efforts on eligibility challenges. Staff can think creatively about what changes their agencies can make to promote initial positive client experiences. For example, staff in one site used Rapid Improvement Events to focus on eligibility-related issues such as identifying reasons eligible households' cases were closing for failure to provide proper documentation.

Lesson 5. Clearly defined goals help staff translate agency-wide initiatives into actionable steps.

Clearly defined goals can help staff understand how their work fits into the organization's broader mission, clarify expectations of them in the workplace, and increase the likelihood that staff will act on those goals. Clear goals are especially important because frontline staff might feel their day-to-day activities are removed from organizational change initiated at the broader agency level.

- **Shared language.** Goals that can easily be distilled to a short phrase, such as "exceptional customer service" or "family-focused" create a shared understanding that affects how staff approach their work. This shared understanding can help frontline staff internalize and routinely act in support of these goals.
- **Goal alignment within an organization.** Identifying clear goals at the agency level makes strategic planning processes more straightforward for supervisors and staff when thinking through how their work contributes to these goals. Aligning division and team goals with the agency goals makes it easier for frontline staff to see how their day-to-day activities contribute to broader agency goals, and more likely that they will act in alignment with those goals.

Lesson 6. Leaders can shape organization culture in human services programs.

TANF programs often operate in a bureaucratic context governed by formal policies and processes. As a result, TANF and other public-sector program leaders do not have unilateral control over their organizations nor complete ability to change the organizational culture. Yet across the TANF programs visited, staff consistently cited their program's leaders as the driving force in sparking and sustaining changes to promote a positive organizational culture. Leaders initiated many of the organizational change initiatives, sometimes because of a book they read, a conference they attended, or in response to a local policy directive. TANF leaders played a key role in shaping their organizations' culture, both developing the specific change initiatives and by authorizing the use of resources to achieve those changes. This role includes authorizing financial resources (e.g., for new training initiatives) as well as empowering staff to use their time and energy toward developing new initiatives or approaches.

- **Financial investments in professional development.** Staff training can be critical in supporting organizational change. Professional development, whether delivered internally or by external experts, requires organizations to make financial investments, which compels agency leadership to prioritize professional development.

- **Staff empowerment to focus on new goals.** Frontline staff often face with high caseloads and many competing tasks. As a result, staff might not feel empowered to shift their focus from task-based goals to new agency priorities unless they are explicitly encouraged to do so. Staff appreciated leaders' explicit guidance to focus on new priorities, including providing exceptional customer service or spending as much time with clients as needed.
- **Behavior change modeling.** Frontline staff appreciate leaders' demonstrated commitment to the agency mission or goals of an organizational change effort. Frontline staff felt that leaders were the "champions" of goals (e.g., exceptional customer service), inspiring them and their supervisors to prioritize these goals, as well. Staff appreciated leaders who modeled certain behaviors, such as an open-door policy—an openness to staff visiting their offices to provide input on or ask questions about agency operations—and felt that it showed the agency valued staff input. In this sense, leaders can influence organizational culture throughout the agency by articulating values and modeling the behavior change.

Future Research Directions

This study describes practices of six TANF programs used to promote positive organizational culture, including organizational change initiatives designed to improve staff and client experiences. Although staff and clients spoke to the value of these efforts and some programs measured outcomes related to staff or client experiences, none of the programs was able to rigorously evaluate these initiatives to determine whether the organizational change efforts *caused* changes in program outcomes.

Even if rigorous tests designed to measure the causal impact of broad organizational change initiatives might be challenging or seem impossible to implement, programs interested in understanding the effects of their organizational culture changes can invest in valuable evaluation efforts, nonetheless. If they have yet to do so, they could develop tools to track efforts at implementing organizational changes. For example, tracking efforts might mean measuring aspects of staff's behavior, client satisfaction levels, or staff retention rates. This approach would help programs understand the extent to which the intended changes occurred and the extent to which those changes might be linked to changes in staff and client outcomes over time. Programs could also continue to conduct client focus groups and surveys to better understand which aspects of the implemented approaches staff and clients value.

Additional research could shed light on specific approaches associated with positive staff and client experiences in a broader range of TANF programs. This study highlights TANF programs that were using one or more of the broader practices identified in the literature review as being associated with positive organizational culture prior to our site visits. A broader sampling strategy would consider approaches used across a range of TANF programs beyond those that exhibited one of the practices identified through this study. Researchers could then use this variation to examine associations between the approaches and staff and client outcomes.

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