

Forum on Strengthening the Employment and Training Components of WorkFirst NJ

Co-sponsored by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and the New Jersey Department of Human Services

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Overview of the WorkFirst NJ Policy Forum

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and the New Jersey Department of Human Services co-sponsored this policy forum to add to the research efforts that will inform a plan of action to improve the employment and training components of WorkFirst NJ (WFNJ).

This one-day forum featured a wide range of more than 160 national and state experts, policymakers, and practitioners, who shared their ideas, perspectives, and promising strategies on how state and local stakeholders, working with the WFNJ (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF], General Assistance [GA], and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program [SNAP]) population, can improve and strengthen the employment and training components of the program.

Workforce development and human services practitioners; policymakers; postsecondary educators; agencies serving TANF, GA, and SNAP participants; civic and nonprofit organizations; legislators; the philanthropic community; and researchers were all in attendance.

Insights, thoughts, and recommendations stemming both from panelists' presentations and attendee feedback received the day of the forum and through a post-forum online survey will inform the blueprint's plan of action. Innovative ideas that gather a lot of traction and are continuously mentioned as needed or feasible in New Jersey will be highlighted in the final blueprint.

Welcome: What Does it Take to Improve Outcomes for WFNJ Recipients?

Carl Van Horn, Ph.D.

Director and Distinguished Professor
Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University

Aaron Fichtner, Ph.D.

Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Elizabeth Connolly

Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Human Services

Dr. Carl Van Horn, Director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, opened the forum; thanked all speakers, panelists, and attendees; and introduced the goals of the forum and project.

New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJLWD) Commissioner Dr. Aaron Fichtner welcomed and thanked the panelists for their willingness to provide their insights and expertise to foster discussions on improving WFNJ. He thanked the attendees and stakeholders for their desire to learn and participate in this important conversation of improving the welfare system in New Jersey. He shared that there are two broad priorities that the stakeholders in the audience possess. The first priority is to ensure that all New Jerseyans have the skills to obtain jobs to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. The second priority is to build a competitive and strong workforce that will drive economic growth in New Jersey.

Commissioner Fichtner explained that the conversations and sharing of information among stakeholders will build the groundwork for innovation and the re-imagining of WFNJ. These efforts have to be grounded in three guiding principles: building on

existing partnerships, customizing approaches to the diverse participant population, and challenging the status quo to reevaluate what success looks like. He believes that maximizing career outcomes means a decreased emphasis on merely enrolling benefit recipients in work activities, and a greater emphasis on the kinds of educational and occupational training that have been proven to work. In sum, he asserted that in working collaboratively and thinking creatively, stakeholders can promote career opportunities for WFNJ clients and create a stronger workforce.

New Jersey Department of Human Services (NJDHS) Commissioner Elizabeth Connolly discussed the recent drop in caseloads and the opportunity it presents to reform broken or neglected practices. This opportunity allowed NJLWD and NJDHS to come together and convene workforce and human services practitioners, policymakers, nonprofit leaders, educators, and other agencies serving TANF, GA, and SNAP participants to learn from other states implementing innovative practices and experts. This is an opportunity to learn from others, reflect, and feel empowered to make the necessary changes. Commissioner Connolly shared a relevant quote from Grace Hopper to conclude, "The most dangerous phrase in the language is 'we've always done it that way.'"

General Session: Strategies to Motivate and Engage TANF/GA/SNAP Employment and Training Recipients in Core Activities and Employment

Discussion Areas: What strategies are being used in other states and New Jersey to better motivate and engage TANF/GA/SNAP employment and training recipients to participate in work activities and move to employment? How have these strategies changed over time? What strategies are working well and producing intended results?

Moderator:

Andrea Hetling, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University

Panelist:

Dena Jardine

Associate Director

Larimer County Workforce Center

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Dena Jardine is the Associate Director at the Larimer County Workforce Center in Colorado. She has worked with federally funded employment and training programs for over 25 years. Located in Fort Collins, Colorado, she currently manages employment

programs associated with TANF, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, and SNAP employment and training. Dena has a Bachelor's degree in Communication from Boise State University and a Master's degree in the same field from the University of Wyoming.

Ms. Jardine presented on strategies to engage TANF recipients. When funding decreased by 43% for Larimer County two years ago, the county found a silver lining in its push to begin reforming its systems. Working with Mathematica, Larimer County learned about executive functioning, toxic stress, and evidence-based achievement goals. The county has moved from a system focused on work participation rate to one focused on goal achievement. While the county still collects data on the work participation rate, it does not discuss it with recipients.

The county's new system uses a combination of one-on-one, in-person coaching and goal-oriented technology to help families reach their goals and achieve economic security. In the standard coaching model, the county uses:

- A Snapshot of My Journey (assessment shown below)
- Goal, Plan, Do, Review, and Apply
- My Roadmap
- Potholes and Detours
- Goal Storming

These tools allow coaches and recipients to remain focused on goals, build trust, learn from experiences, and prepare for any setbacks. Recipients then use "My Journey to Success," an online platform based on behavioral science insights, to respond to common issues. This technology is available 24/7 for individuals to receive information without their coach having to be present. This reduces staff responsibilities by automating data input and client notifications, and frees staff time for more meaningful interactions. In addition to environmental changes such as redesigning interview rooms and the lobby, and new technology platforms, Larimer County staff are trained in WOOP (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan) and motivational interviewing. During her remarks, Ms. Jardine shared a relevant quote from Alexander den Haijer, "When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."

[View Dena Jardine's presentation](#)

Panelist:

Michelle Belitz

Planning and Evaluation Analyst
Ramsey County Workforce Solutions
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Michelle Belitz is the Planning and Evaluation Analyst for Ramsey County in Minnesota. She has worked with TANF programs since authorization in 1996 and has held a variety of positions, including Employment Counselor and Supervisor. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Rehabilitation Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her focus on goal-oriented coaching stems from her experiences as a supervisor guiding a team of employment counselors through the implementation phase of Ramsey County's Lifelong Learning Initiative (LLI). LLI is an approach where employment counselors partner with families to build work and life skills and create opportunities for lifelong learning and economic security through employment. Ramsey County believes that by increasing the engagement of families in determining their own goals and focusing on areas where families already have strengths, success will increase. In this process, the relationship between the employment counselor and the family shifts from one of case management to one that is person-centered, goal-driven, and relationship-based.

Ms. Belitz presented on LLI and its implementation in Ramsey County. This process begins with motivational interviewing (a counseling approach that is person-centered and strengthens a client's ability to achieve their goals) training for staff. Through LLI, staff also learn about toxic stress, how to recognize effort, and using incentives. In the new model, staff spend the same amount of time with participants, but report more meaningful

interactions. In addition to this model change, Ramsey County also made environmental modifications, changing paint colors and removing a glass barrier in the lobby, and switched its group orientation to one-on-one sessions. Ramsey County uses a goal-oriented executive skills questionnaire, “My Bridge of Strength,” and “Task Plan/Do/Review” when working with participants.

For counties interested in a coach approach, Michelle recommends making an investment in staff training and development; when staff are trained to feel more confident in their ability to work with people, participants feel more comfortable opening up. In developing this trust, coaches are better able to serve participants, understand their goals, and help them succeed. Counties must also build relationships with their communities and develop a network of community partners. The graphic below provides an overview of the differences between a case management model and the coaching model.

Next steps for the county include streamlining counselor workload, piloting a stress management coaching approach for participants (Wellness to Work), developing counselor handbooks and fidelity guides, and taking additional steps to prioritize coaching tools.

Ms. Belitz urged the forum participants to build a learning community among themselves and other experts in the field, and other counties or other states. She stressed that it is important to listen and implement what one hears from the community. Be patient and find the one thing that you can start with. For Ramsey County, it was painting the lobby and taking down glass barriers at the front desk of the One-Stop Career Center.

[View Michelle Belitz’s presentation](#)

From: Case Management Model

To: Coaching Model

Conducting an ES Overview to describe policy, procedure, and rules/regulations

Utilizing ES Orientation to build relationship, understand the client’s past/present/future, and set the stage for a more supportive and collaborative relationship

Developing employment plans based on a pre-chosen menu of options and tools dictated by system outcomes (Work Participation Rate) not client outcomes

Developing SMART goals based on our client’s own self-identified, relevant goals and current situation

Utilizing a “one size fits all” approach to a family’s self-sufficiency

Identifying each individual’s strengths and challenges by utilizing My Bridge of Strength, Executive Skills Questionnaire (and other tools) to encourage small steps/progress and considering a “whole family” approach

Maintaining a minimum of monthly contact to collect required documentation

Engaging our families with meaningful, supportive appointments that encourage and foster the established partnership; mutual accountability in the partnership; looking at the relationship differently; the relationship matters as much as the policies; counselor must understand where the client has been, where they are, and where they want to go; the role/skills/approach of the counselor matters

General Session: Promising Approaches to Better Align Work Activities with Recipient Needs/Skills and Local Employment Needs/Demands

Discussion Areas: How have recipients' skills/needs changed over time and what new approaches are needed to better align recipients' skills with employer needs/demands? What new strategies or reform efforts are taking place nationally to better service individuals' employment opportunities while increasing TANF participation and employment rates?

Moderator:

Kathy Krepcio

Executive Director and Senior Researcher
Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University

Panelist:

LaDonna Pavetti, Ph.D.

Vice President, Family Income Support Policy
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
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Dr. LaDonna Pavetti is the Vice President for Family Income Support Policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). In this capacity, she oversees CBPP's work assessing the nation's income support and work programs for public benefit recipients. She is a leading national expert on the TANF program, having studied its implementation since its inception in 1996. She is currently leading a special project to identify how executive function principles and concepts can be used to increase the effectiveness of work programs for disadvantaged individuals. Prior to joining CBPP in 2009, she worked for Mathematica Policy Research for 12 years, served as a researcher at the Urban Institute, was a consultant to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on welfare reform issues, and was a policy analyst for the District of Columbia's Commission on Social Services. In addition, for several years, she was a social worker in Chicago and Washington, D.C. She has an A.M. in Social Work from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in Public Policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Dr. Pavetti discussed the cycle of innovation in welfare reform, noting that when TANF was created, there was incredible enthusiasm in the field that subsided during the recession in the early 2000s. Then, in 2005, the Deficit Reduction Act required counties to focus on the work participation rate. During the Great Recession, when counties were given the ability to offer subsidized employment, there was once again support and enthusiasm for reform. In addition, recent research in the neuroscience field has focused

on how much stress affects children, and how that stays with them in adulthood. This has created a new sense of energy around doing things differently.

Dr. Pavetti noted that given the cushion New Jersey has with the caseload reduction credit, there is room to experiment with new approaches. Caseworkers spend most of their time counting hours, when they could be talking to participants about what their real goals are. The goal achievement framework allows us to meet families where they are, and help them imagine a better life and what steps are needed to get there. This also sets small, achievable steps toward goals, so both the staff and the participant are aware of the plan and what it will take; something as simple as obtaining a Social Security card takes many steps.

Changing the environment is not only about painting the lobby, though that helps. It is also about changing forms. Current systems force staff and customers to focus on bureaucratic processes rather than goals, which drains their energy before they are able to focus on what really matters. Additionally, addressing stress is necessary for success; families are under a tremendous amount of stress and need to build skills to address it. She recommended taking basic, small steps to address mental health, which may require temporarily shifting focus from traditional work activities.

Dr. Pavetti mentioned that there is grant funding available for an eight-week cognitive behavioral therapy program that works with mental health associations and community networks to develop strategies to deal with stress. The Ready for Routines program is part of a two-generation approach, and helps parents establish morning, homework, and evening routines with their children that translate to work-readiness skills. Dr. Pavetti is working on developing a manual for the goal-oriented approach, and has an upcoming webinar to introduce the subject and is able to register individuals who contact her via email.

Panelist:

Sarah Haas

Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Career Services

NYC Human Resources Administration

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Sarah Haas is the Assistant Deputy Commissioner for the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA). Her current role involves managing over \$350 million worth of human services programs that help New Yorkers with economic needs to set individualized goals; access jobs, internships/community service, training, and education; and achieve success. Sarah spearheaded the redesign and oversees implementation of new career-based services for HRA clients, which launched in the Spring of 2017, replacing the agency's work first model with new strengths-based services that focus on longer-term client outcomes and include increased emphasis on training and education. She has worked for the City of New York for over 10 years and has a range of experience

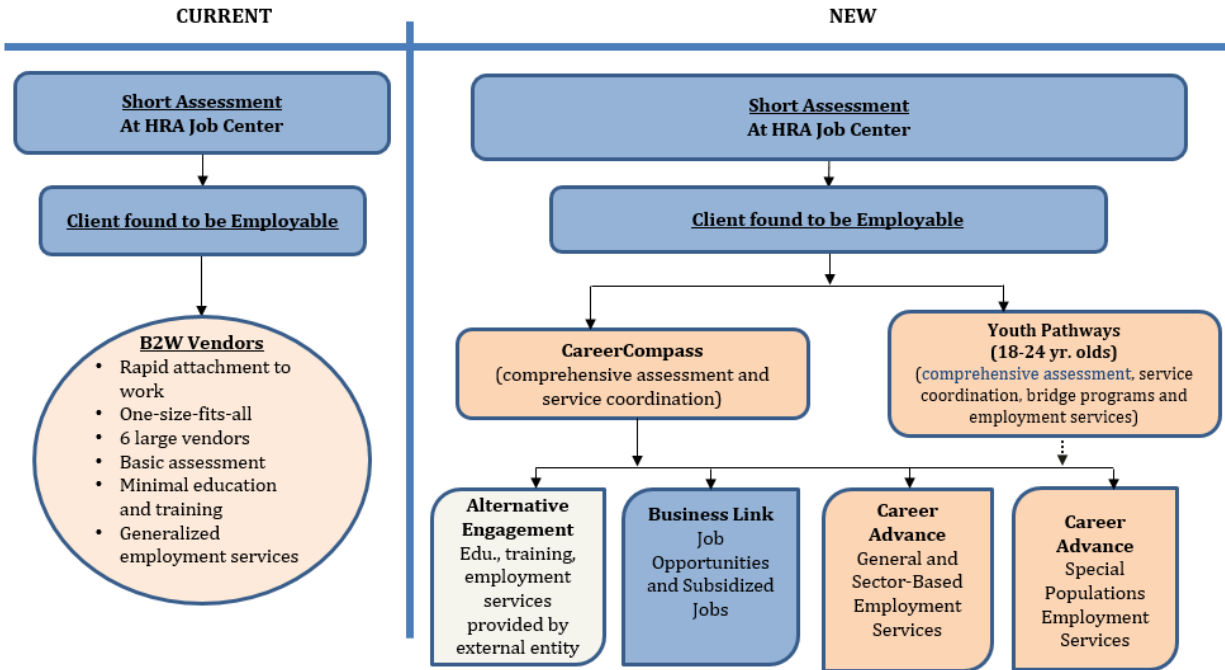
in government and nonprofit settings, including managing performance-based workforce development services, implementing large-scale transitions and change management, conducting evaluation and research, and designing outcomes-based reporting systems. She received a Bachelor's degree from American University and a Master's of Public Administration from New York University.

Ms. Haas presented on career services in New York City. HRA is dedicated to fighting poverty and income inequality by providing New Yorkers in need with essential benefits. Previously, its approach was a one-size-fits-all method, filtering everyone through job search. However, HRA recently moved to a person-centered approach that starts with an improved assessment. In this assessment, clients can explore their goals and form an individualized plan with activities that are customized to their needs. HRA is also focused on career pathways, realizing that immediate employment is not always the most sustainable method. Shifts in this area include counting four-year college as a work activity, encouraging those age 24 and under to focus on education full time, and encouraging those with limited English proficiency to focus on English as a Second Language full time.

HRA is building its capacity to support this new model, and has hired staff to focus on special populations, including a Director of LGBTQI Services, Executive Director of Disability Affairs, Gender Equality Liaison, and a Youth and Young Adult Coordinator. HRA staff also work with other city agencies to develop resources for clients. As shown in the graphic below, HRA's previous system was less flexible, and had a few set activities for those found to be work eligible. In the new system, HRA has a Youth Pathways program to focus on the needs of recipients ages 18 to 24, and Career Compass, which provides a comprehensive assessment for adults and helps service coordination. Career Services also provides one year of post-employment retention services, which was previously provided for six months.

HRA has also developed 34 contracts with community resources based on special populations, locations, and sectors. Career Compass facilitates a service plan, including short- and long-term goals, ensures the services fit the needs, and provides service coordination and placement services. The Youth Pathways program provides wraparound services, including financial counseling and special capital building, and provides in-depth assessments, service plans, service coordination, and bridge programming.

[View Sarah Haas' presentation](#)



General Session: Developing Sound Data and Information Systems to Support Better Engagement and Employment Outcomes

Discussion Areas: What types of data would help service providers/managers/policymakers facilitate better engagement and employment outcomes for TANF/GA/SNAP employment and training recipients? How have states and local areas used data to better manage “to work” activities and engagement that pinpoint problems that may be contributing to poor outcomes?

Moderator:
Andrea Hetling, Ph.D.
 Associate Professor
 Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University

Panelist:
Heather Hahn, Ph.D.
 Senior Fellow
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Dr. Heather Hahn is a Senior Fellow at the Urban Institute’s Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. She is a national TANF expert with more than two decades of

experience conducting nonpartisan research on the wide range of programs and policies related to the well-being of children and families, including TANF, SNAP, and other supports for low-income families. Her research on TANF has included, for example, performance management, aspects of state policy choices, eligibility and participation, outcomes for those with impairments, receipt of supports for sponsored non-citizens and other vulnerable groups, tribal TANF programs, county-administered TANF programs, and TANF for two-parent families. In addition, she co-led the Work Support Strategies evaluation of state efforts to modernize families' access to nutrition assistance, child care, and Medicaid, and co-leads the Kids' Share series of reports examining federal spending and tax expenditures on children. Before joining the Urban Institute, she was an Assistant Director for Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues at the U.S. Government Accountability Office. She received a Master's of Public Policy from Duke University and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University.

Dr. Hahn presented on measuring employment outcomes in TANF. While all states track employment, only a few have an outcome measurement system, which requires deciding program goals and objectives, and developing specific measures for specific populations. These measures typically include benchmarks and performance targets, consequences, and data collection and analysis systems. An important point is that when creating outcomes, you are guiding services and incentives; a focus on work participation rate looks different from a focus on employment retention.

Dr. Hahn highlighted seven states/areas that have employment outcome measures: Colorado, Minnesota, New York City, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, and Washington. Employment outcome measures for these states/cities include entering and having employment, program leavers with employment, employment retention, and increased income or wages. Possible populations for which employment outcomes are being collected include all TANF participants, work-eligible TANF participants, and program leavers. Performance can be analyzed at various levels, including from contractors or vendors, counties, regional service areas, local workforce boards, and the state TANF agency. Some areas, like New York City, pay employment service vendors based on performance. Other states have consequences that range from none at all, to escalating corrective action models or offering incentive payments.

To perform data collection and analysis, states need the system's capacity and staff expertise. Capacity in states currently using employment outcome measures range from legacy systems or separate systems for work activities and eligibility to data warehouses with access to Unemployment Insurance data. Staffing for this area includes one full-time employee, an external contract, or a team of data analysts.

Dr. Hahn concluded that what gets measured gets attention. It is important to think about the program's goals and objectives before deciding the measures. She also recommended learning from other states whenever possible, and noted that measuring

employment outcomes is possible for all states; they have to design their unique system that matches their program design and focus on measures their systems can support.

View Heather Hahn's presentation

Panelist:

Lisa Nicoli, Ph.D.

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Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children
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Dr. Lisa Nicoli is the Assistant Research Director at the Family Welfare Research and Training Group within the Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children at the University of Maryland's School of Social Work. Her research uses administrative data to help program managers, policymakers, and other stakeholders better understand Maryland families who receive TANF. In particular, Dr. Nicoli specializes in employment and earnings outcomes among adults who have left TANF. She has M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Sociology from the University of Arizona and a B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies from Austin College.

Dr. Nicoli discussed using research to improve employment outcomes for TANF families. Maryland develops multiple annual reports to facilitate the analysis of administrative data to highlight and improve program outcomes. These include:

- [Life After Welfare](#): An ongoing report since 1996 that follows families after they leave TANF. This report uses a 5% random sample of cases that closed in a selected search month and reports on employment, recidivism, receipt of transitional benefits, and involvement in the child welfare system.
- [Life on Welfare](#): A report that studies families who received TANF in each state fiscal year. These studies include characteristics of families, and how the profile of families changes over time.
- [Caseload Exits at the Local Level](#): A series of reports that examines the universe of cases that left cash assistance in Maryland in each federal fiscal year.

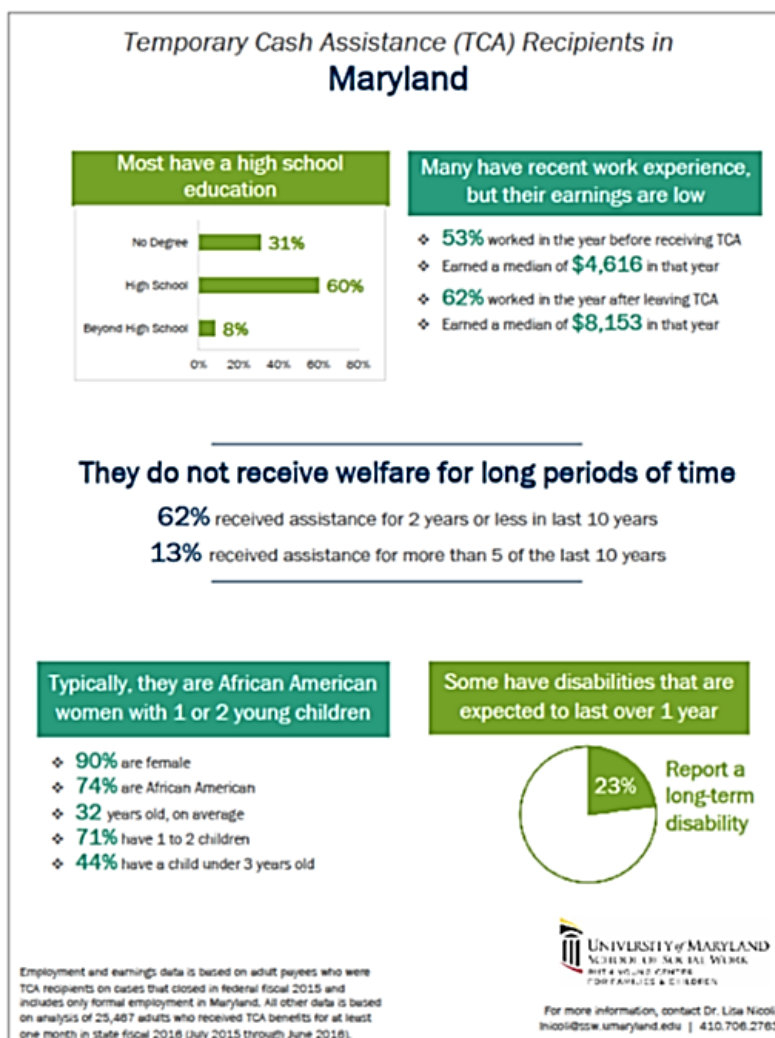
Additional reports include:

- **Good Jobs**: A report that studies individuals who left TANF for a job earning at least \$10 per hour and working at least 30 hours per week.
- **Industries**: Studies which industries support the best outcomes for TANF exiters.

- Employment and Earnings Trajectories: Follows individuals for five years after TANF exit to see how employment and earnings change over time.
- Economic Stability after Leaving Welfare: Analyzes outcomes of individuals who leave welfare, showing that only around 15% of exiters have consistent employment with favorable earnings.

Maryland realized that its workforce partners did not really understand the TANF clients, and developed one-page snapshots (sample shown below) to provide information on demographics, education, employment and earnings, and program participation. Maryland developed one for the entire state, one for youth, and one for each of the 12 workforce areas in the state. This allowed the state to provide employers with basic information about participants, typically showing them that participants had higher education and more work experience than was thought.

View Lisa Nicoli's presentation



About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policy-making and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is also deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- Disability Employment
- Education and Training
- Unemployment and Reemployment
- U.S. Labor Market and Industry
- Workforce Policy and Practice
- Work Trends Surveys

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