



# Approaches to Assisting Families Experiencing or At Risk of Homelessness with TANF Funds

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The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is a key component in supporting self-sufficiency among families, including those currently experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. TANF agencies can use both TANF and maintenance-of-effort (MOE) funds<sup>1</sup> to support families experiencing homelessness beyond employment support and cash assistance. In 2013, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF)'s Office of Family Assistance issued an Information Memorandum ([TANF-ACF-IM-2013-01](#)) highlighting some ways agencies use TANF funds to serve families experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

Surveyed in 2019, 43 percent of state TANF administrators reported that their agencies serve families experiencing homelessness by designating some TANF funding to provide rental assistance or other housing-related services. Agencies can also tailor the way they provide support. Twenty-eight (28) percent of state TANF administrators reported they reserve housing-related cash assistance (e.g., rental or mortgage assistance or utility payments) *only* for families experiencing homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

This brief details three approaches that TANF agencies may pursue to provide housing and related assistance to families experiencing homelessness:

1. using TANF funds for temporary rental assistance;
2. building partnerships with local organizations that plan and manage housing programs; and
3. providing additional supportive services to homeless families.

To illustrate each of these approaches, this brief uses examples from five communities that took part in a study for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). TANF agencies can use one of these approaches or combine them.

<sup>1</sup> As a condition of the TANF block grant, a state must spend a certain amount of its own funds on TANF-allowable categories. These funds are called maintenance-of-effort (MOE) funds.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Abt's survey of state TANF administrators. N=47 states.

## About the Study

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE, within HHS/ACF) contracted with Abt Associates and its partner MEF Associates to conduct the *How TANF Agencies Support Families Experiencing Homelessness* study. This study considers the extent to which TANF agencies across the country are using TANF funds to support families experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

To understand state TANF agencies' overall philosophies and policies toward addressing family homelessness and the extent to which local TANF programs are implementing these policies, the Abt team conducted a scan of TANF agency practices in 2018 and 2019. The scan included a systematic document review of 25 state TANF plans and an online survey of all state TANF administrators and a sample of three local TANF administrators in each state.

The Abt team also completed five site visits to provide more detailed, in-depth information about how TANF programs use TANF and MOE funds to assist families experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. In November 2018, the Abt team conducted a pilot site visit to Mercer County, New Jersey. In September and October 2020, the Abt team completed virtual site visits with four additional communities: Boulder County, Colorado; Nashville, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia; and Shasta County, California.

Some TANF agencies directly **provide temporary rental assistance** to families experiencing or at risk of homelessness, making cash payments to families to help pay their rent or to their landlords directly. Other TANF agencies **provide funding to local homeless services organizations**, sometimes braided with other federal, state, or local funding streams. A term that has come to describe the temporary rental assistance provided by local homeless

services organizations is **rapid re-housing (RRH)**. In addition to the temporary rent subsidy, RRH includes housing search, move-in assistance, and case management to help families stabilize in permanent housing.

The amount and duration of temporary rental assistance provided by TANF agencies vary. Two common models are fixed short-term rental assistance and tapered rental assistance.<sup>3</sup>

### Fixed short-term rental assistance

TANF agencies use TANF funds to help families bridge the gap until they qualify for a long-term housing subsidy or they increase their earnings through employment. Agencies use their discretion to cover a fixed amount or the entire rental payment and determine the number of months to provide assistance within federal TANF program rules for TANF or MOE funds and other state TANF policies. This is thought of as **fixed short-term rental assistance**.

Sometimes TANF agencies braid TANF funds with other funding streams (including private funding) to provide TANF-funded rental assistance for a set amount of time before shifting to a different funding source for longer-term assistance.

### Examples:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Boulder County** paid 100 percent of the rent for families at risk of homelessness for up to three months using TANF funding. Though TANF agencies could choose to pay landlords directly, Boulder County added the rental assistance funds onto families' Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards.

In **Mercer County**, the local TANF agency covers 70 percent of families' rent for up to one year, with rent paid directly to families' landlords. The agency focuses on using the year to help families find employment and develop connections to community resources related to housing and other programs that contribute to continued family stability. Because the subsidy does not cover 100 percent of the rent, the TANF agency refers to this as "defined contribution" rental assistance.

**Atlanta's** TANF Rapid Re-housing Program uses TANF funds to pay the first four months of rental assistance. By combining TANF funding with private funding, the program provides eight more months of rental assistance to participating families, for a total of one year of assistance. Rent is paid directly to their landlords.

### Tapered rental assistance

In a **tapered rental assistance plan**, TANF agencies start by paying up to 100 percent of rent for families for a set number of months, gradually decreasing the subsidy over a defined time period.

TANF agencies make different choices in determining the initial amount of rent to cover and the period over which rental assistance is reduced.

### Examples:

In **Shasta County**, the local TANF agency structures its rental assistance based on U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines that recommend families assume a portion of their rent. In the county's Homeless Assistance or Housing Support programs, families begin by paying 30 percent of their monthly rent, and then gradually increase their rental contribution over the next six months.

In **Nashville**, families initially contribute \$200 to rent, increasing their share by approximately \$200 each month until they pay the full amount.

<sup>3</sup> Source: L. Dunton and S. Brown, Rapid Re-housing in 2018: Program Features and Assistance Models (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/RRH-CommunityScanReport.pdf>

TANF agencies that provide rental assistance should **consider how that assistance can be linked to the existing system of local housing support**. The community's housing organizations can provide guidance on how to structure and administer rental assistance and make it possible to coordinate the TANF agency's assistance with other programs, including those that provide longer-

term subsidies. Three types of local housing organizations are (1) the public housing agencies that administer the federal Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) and public housing programs; (2) the Continuums of Care (CoCs) that plan and allocate federal homeless assistance funds; and (3) the local homeless services organizations that provide direct service to families experiencing homelessness.

### Public Housing Agencies

**Public housing agencies** (PHAs) are local organizations that manage federal housing assistance programs. Typically, they are created by state law and call themselves public housing "authorities." Sometimes they are part of city, county, or state governments. PHAs manage the HCV and public housing programs, two important sources of long-term housing assistance that enable families to pay affordable rents (30 percent of their incomes, with some adjustments).<sup>4</sup> Partnerships with PHAs allow TANF agencies to provide families with a bridge to long-term housing assistance after their temporary TANF housing assistance ends.

TANF agencies can train new or existing case managers to help families navigate the PHA application process and to locate housing units once they obtain a rental subsidy.

TANF staff can develop relationships with PHA staff to ensure that families receiving TANF can obtain housing assistance.

<sup>4</sup> Other long-term housing assistance that enables families to pay rent equal to 30 percent of their income is privately owned and subsidized directly by HUD. The programs are often funded through Section 8 of the U.S. Housing Act. The HCV program is funded through the same section and so is often called "Section 8."

### Examples:

To achieve better coordination between TANF and housing assistance, **Boulder County** merged its Department of Housing (which included the PHA) and its Department of Human Services into the Department of Housing and Human Services as part of an effort to provide combined housing and employment services. In Boulder, housing and TANF case managers schedule joint meetings with families to coordinate supports.

The local PHAs in **Nashville** and **Shasta County** both have vouchers designated for families experiencing homelessness or have policies through which families experiencing homelessness receive priority access to long-term assistance programs. These PHA policies that target funds to families experiencing homelessness are known as "local preferences" and are established by the PHA leadership in response to local community needs. In communities with local preferences, TANF case managers help families apply for the PHA programs. They provide TANF-funded short-term rental assistance while families are waiting to be accepted into the HCV or public housing programs.

In **Atlanta**, some families need long-term housing support after the short-term rental assistance offered by TANF RRH ends. TANF RRH secured housing vouchers for some of its families through a special program operated by Atlanta Housing, the local PHA.

## Continuums of Care (CoCs)

A *Continuum of Care* (CoC) is a community planning body that funds and coordinates housing and services for families experiencing homelessness within a specific geographic area, often a city and surrounding county area. Nationally, a substantial share of federal homeless assistance funds flows through CoCs. The CoC is also responsible for maintaining a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that collects data on families and individuals who use emergency shelters or homeless assistance programs. CoCs can help TANF agencies serve people experiencing homelessness in two ways: by using the CoC's coordinated entry system to identify families who need housing assistance and by using the CoC to connect TANF families with housing assistance providers. TANF staff can participate in their local CoC's planning meetings or service committees to develop a working relationship.

## Homeless service organizations

Federal and local homeless assistance programs typically are managed by local non-profit "providers" that receive funding through the CoC or other sources. Almost all communities have *rapid re-housing programs* managed by such organizations. TANF agencies can fund these local homeless services providers to deliver temporary rental assistance or other services to families experiencing homelessness. TANF agencies then provide oversight and connections to workforce and employment services while allowing these local organizations flexibility in designing rental subsidies.

### Examples:

TANF program staff in **Atlanta** and **Nashville** rely on their CoC's *coordinated entry system* as a referral source for families experiencing or at risk of homelessness who meet TANF eligibility requirements. The coordinated entry system identifies people experiencing homelessness, assesses their needs, and connects them to housing assistance available within the CoC's planning area. Connecting at-risk families might prevent them from experiencing homelessness.

In **Shasta County**, the local CoC provided advice and support during start-up and design of Shasta's TANF-funded rental assistance programs for families experiencing homelessness.

### Examples:

Georgia's TANF agency funds an RRH program in **Atlanta**, the TANF Rapid Re-housing Program. The program provides short-term rental assistance and case management to move families quickly into permanent housing. Project Community Connections Inc., an Atlanta-area housing provider with a decade of experience implementing RRH programs, received TANF and private funding to implement this program for families experiencing homelessness. Its staff provide housing search assistance, move-in assistance, and housing and employment case management for up to a year.

Tennessee's TANF agency funds the Family Collective, a network of 12 **Nashville**-area community service organizations that provide housing and other supports to families experiencing homelessness. United Way of Greater Nashville manages the grant, and two organizations, Catholic Charities and Safe Haven, provide RRH and coordinate with other Family Collective organizations to refer families to employment and other supportive services.

# APPROACH 3

## Provide Case Management and Fund Services Related to Housing Stability

TANF agencies may **provide additional supportive services to help families remain successfully housed**. This assistance could be in the form of financial assistance or through linking families to available community benefits. Typically, a TANF case manager serves as the central connection

point for families, providing housing-focused case management, to coordinate internally with housing or employment-focused team members and externally with other service providers.

### Housing-related supportive services

In addition to providing rental assistance directly or through a homeless services organization, TANF agencies sometimes provide other housing-related support to help families find, obtain, and maintain housing. In this model, TANF staff can assume new tasks, including engaging with landlords, helping with the housing search, and providing housing-focused case management.



### Examples:

The Family Collective in **Nashville** exemplifies the variety of housing-related supportive services TANF agencies can provide to families:



The Family Collective employs staff focused on **housing search and placement assistance**. These staff develop and foster relationships with landlords and property management companies, match families with available rental opportunities, identify and remove any barriers to housing families have (e.g., prior evictions, unpaid rent, criminal history), and help families apply for housing.



If necessary, the Family Collective **pays rental or utility arrears** to enable new housing opportunities or utility services.



After the housing staff identifies a housing unit, the Family Collective funds **one-time assistance** payments to help families move in. These payments cover the cost of housing applications, security deposits, and furniture and cleaning supplies.



Other Family Collective staff provide **housing-focused case management** to help families successfully maintain their housing. Case management typically involves coordinating with other Family Collective team members and providing referrals to external supports. Case managers help families obtain identification to apply for housing, apply for utility assistance, set and work toward housing goals, develop service plans, and build tenancy skills.

### Additional supportive services

To help families obtain and maintain their housing, TANF agencies can fund supportive services that often cannot be provided using other homeless assistance funds. These services help families remain stably housed after their temporary rental subsidy ends or during crises that sometimes cause families to lose long-term rental assistance.



### Examples:



TANF agencies can provide **child care assistance** by locating and offering subsidies to pay for assistance. Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services partners with the Georgia Department of Care and Early Learning to give participants in **Atlanta's** TANF Rapid Re-housing Program child care scholarships and priority access to child care openings.



Often related to employment or child care, TANF agencies can provide **transportation assistance** via gas or bus passes to cover the cost of transportation. In **Shasta County**, families in the Homeless Assistance or Housing Support programs receive transportation subsidies or passes to cover transportation costs related to accessing employment and child care.



TANF agencies can provide **financial counseling** and budgeting assistance to participating families. In **Nashville**, Family Collective staff provide assistance to help families develop budgets, develop saving skills, and learn how to build credit.



TANF agencies can make referrals to community service providers for **health services** including behavioral health treatment and counseling. These referrals allow participants to access health services but observes the statutory prohibition against using federal TANF funds for medical services. In **Mercer County**, some Family Housing Initiative participants attend mental health counseling as part of the housing support program. **Atlanta** and **Nashville's** programs refer participating families to external mental and physical health providers.

## Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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