

# Exploring Remaining Needs and Opportunities for Improvement in Rural Communities: A Focus on the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program

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Rural areas have consistently experienced higher rates of poverty compared with the general U.S. population. As of 2020, nearly one in three people in the United States who experience persistent poverty live in rural areas, while only 14 percent of the U.S. population live in rural areas (Dobis et al., 2021). The geographic isolation of some rural communities can also contribute to a lack of adequate resources and economic opportunities.

Against this backdrop, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program's role in fostering economic security and stability for low-income families is all the more important to rural communities. TANF staff and practitioners use the funds to design and operate programs that support needy families trying to achieve self-sufficiency.

## Key Findings

- TANF cash assistance spending and Tribal TANF funding is uneven across rural areas. There appears to be more remaining need in Southern states, rural areas in the Northeast, and locations throughout the Midwest and West. Many of the areas of very high remaining need in the West and in Alaska coincide with Native Lands.
- Rural human service providers reported that TANF programs are increasingly shifting to a coaching model that accommodates multiple factors of the client's life to provide services geared toward achieving long-term outcomes.
- Opportunities for strengthening TANF and related human services programs in rural contexts include increasing flexibility in federal and state guidelines, leveraging nonprofit partners to fill gaps in delivery, offering learning communities to program staff, providing staff training, integrating staff and services into the community, enabling flexible program delivery and local adaptations, and unifying human services programs.

In this brief, we highlight the *Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts* Study's findings on TANF programs in rural contexts, drawing on our analysis of TANF administrative data and secondary survey sources alongside interviews with rural services providers across 11 sites.<sup>1</sup> We provide a series of lessons learned and practitioner recommendations that contain implications for policymakers, TANF program administrators, TANF staff, and partners engaged in human services that promote self-sufficiency. Taken together, these findings are of particular importance given the impact of ongoing challenges like limited broadband access and transportation barriers in rural communities. To note, some of the findings of this study are applicable to non-rural contexts as well. However, our purpose was to provide a rich description of human services as they exist in rural contexts, not to compare rural and non-rural human services nor to limit the scope of our investigation to challenges unique to rural contexts.

### Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts Study

This brief is part of a study focused more broadly on human services programs in rural contexts. Through a mixed methods research design that includes administrative and secondary data alongside 12 site visits, in tandem with engagement from human service practitioners and other subject matter experts, this project achieved the following: 1) provided an in-depth description of human services programs in rural contexts; 2) determined the remaining need for human services in rural communities; and 3) identified opportunities for strengthening the capacity of human services programs to promote the economic and social well-being of individuals, families, and communities in rural contexts. The study examined several human services programs administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, including Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRP); Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV); Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); and other programs focused on early childhood development, family development, employment, and higher education and technical training.

### Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program

Since 1996, TANF has provided a block grant of approximately \$16.5 billion every year to states, U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia.<sup>2</sup> To receive federal block grant funds, states are required to spend specified amounts of state funds, which are called maintenance-of-effort (MOE), on allowable TANF-related activities. Federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native organizations can offer TANF through the Tribal TANF program.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lake County, MT; Costilla County, CO; Bethel Census Area, AK; Montgomery County, KS; Marshall County, IA; Wilcox County, AL; Georgetown County, SC; Magoffin County, KY; Gallia County, OH; Hamilton County, NY; Clinton County, PA.

<sup>2</sup> Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. 2022. "About TANF." <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/about>

TANF funds must be spent on activities designed to address at least one of the program's four broad purposes:

- Provide assistance so children can receive care in their homes or the homes of relatives
- Promote job preparation, work, and marriage
- Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies
- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families

The activities funded by the TANF block grants are diverse and vary from state-to-state (Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2020). However, administrative data capturing all these activities are not consistently available. The most consistent and comprehensive data available are for TANF cash assistance, which covers benefits provided through cash payments, vouchers, or other forms designed to meet ongoing basic needs. Due to data limitations, this study focuses on TANF cash assistance.

To be eligible for TANF, applicants must be a resident of the state in which they apply, and they must also be a U.S. citizen, legal alien, or qualified alien. They must also meet one of the following criteria:

- Have a child 18 years of age or younger
- Be pregnant
- Be 18 years of age or younger and the head of their household

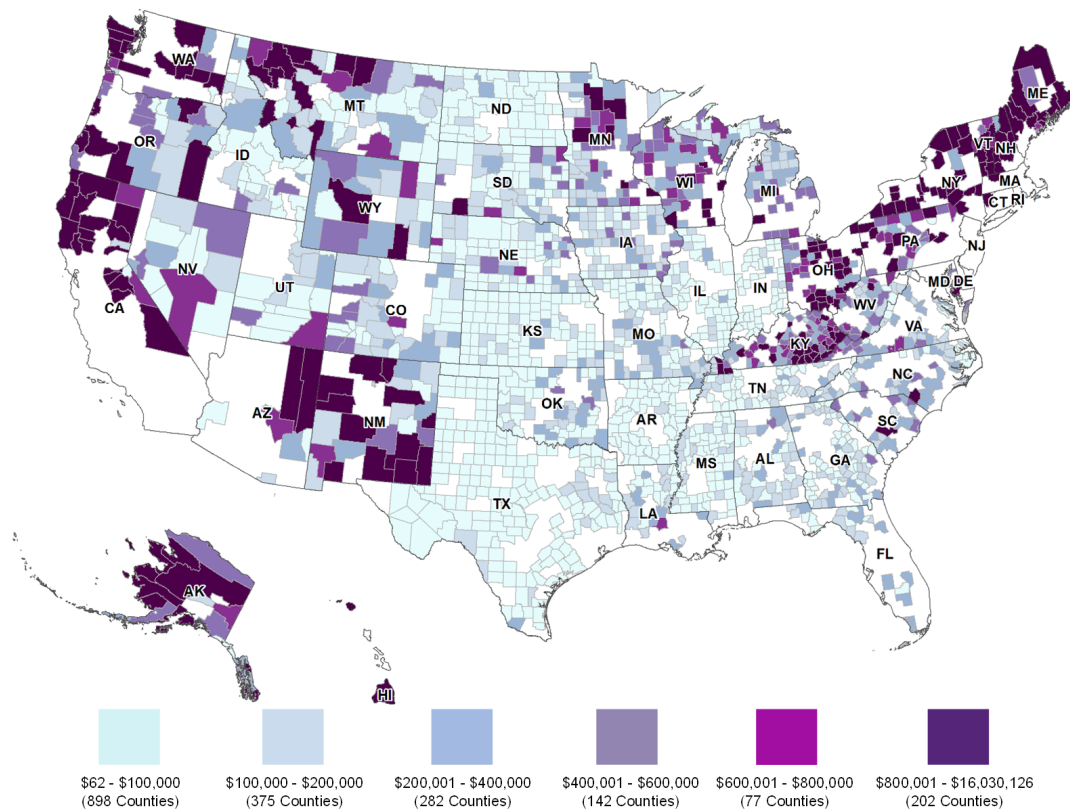
Eligible applicants have low or very low income, but states have flexibility to determine financial eligibility for the TANF program as well as the provided levels of benefit. Most states limit the amount of assets families can have while remaining eligible for assistance and have set income eligibility thresholds that are below half the federal poverty line (Dehry et al., 2022). To be eligible for TANF, participants also must meet work requirements, cooperate with child support enforcement efforts, and comply with other program rules.

In fiscal year (FY) 2018, states spent \$6.3 billion in federal TANF and state MOE funds for ongoing support of needy families through TANF cash assistance and \$200 million was awarded to Tribal TANF programs. Combined, we estimate a total of \$6.5 billion in TANF basic assistance spending and Tribal TANF grant award amounts in FY 2018. Data are unavailable to show the spending distribution within states. However, if states spent their federal TANF and state MOE funds and Tribal TANF grants were awarded evenly across all families with incomes below the federal poverty level, an estimated \$724.9 million would have been spent in rural counties (11.2 percent). This estimate is not meant to give exact amounts of funding for each rural county but rather to show the overall distribution of TANF dollars in rural counties in the U.S.

As shown in Exhibit 1, TANF spending in FY 2018 was greatest in rural counties in the Northeast; the Appalachian region of rural Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio; and the West and Rocky Mountain region of the country. States in the South spent much less on TANF cash assistance. TANF spending on

cash assistance varies by state for several reasons. Firstly, TANF block grant amounts and MOE requirements are not based on population or families in need but rather on historical spending on welfare-related activities prior to the implementation of TANF. Additionally, U.S. states that spent more on welfare-related activities in the mid-1990s generally receive larger federal TANF block grants and have larger state MOE spending requirements (Falk, 2017). Secondly, states make different choices about how much of their TANF spending will be allocated to cash assistance. In FY 2020, states spent a total of about 22 percent of their federal and state TANF funds on basic assistance, including cash assistance, but individually this share ranged from 4.4 percent in Illinois to more than 68 percent in Kentucky.<sup>3</sup> A third factor contributing to the variation observed in Exhibit 1 is the fact that poverty is unevenly distributed within states. Our methodological assumption that TANF spending is proportional to the number of families experiencing poverty in each county results in counties with higher poverty levels appearing to spend more on TANF cash assistance.

**Exhibit 1. Map of FY 2018 Funding for TANF Cash Assistance and Tribal TANF in Rural Counties**



**Note:** The amount allocated to each rural county was estimated by weighting statewide program funding by the number of low-income families in each county. See section 7.2.3 of the [Comprehensive Report](#) for the methods used to estimate funding at the county level.

**Sources:** ACF OFA administrative Data; U.S. Census Bureau (2018)

<sup>3</sup> Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. “TANF and MOE Spending and Transfers by Activity, FY 2020,” <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/data/tanf-and-moe-spending-and-transfers-activity-fy-2020>

## Delivering TANF in Rural Contexts

In interviews TANF program staff and members of community partner organizations described various caseload management approaches, service delivery models, and adaptations for their rural contexts.

TANF program staff discussed two primary approaches to caseload management and their perceived strengths and weaknesses: 1) a case-based model in which each caseworker is responsible for their own caseload of families and handles all aspects of their cases over time; and 2) a task-based model, in which each caseworker is responsible for specific tasks (e.g., accepting applications or processing case changes) that they handle for any case. In general, case-based models were perceived to allow for stronger personal connections between caseworkers and families while task-based models were seen as more efficient in meeting families' needs. Despite the pros and cons of each model, the results of each usually depend on context (Hahn et al., 2016). TANF program staff noted that face-to-face meetings with clients are especially helpful in rural areas where people often experience social isolation and expressed a preference for case-based models in their rural contexts. They also felt that the task-based model diminished accountability and led to a lack of ownership of the work and provided services. One respondent took issue with the lack of face-to-face client meetings in favor of telephone meetings in their agency's implementation of a task-based model, which they found to be less impactful to the client.

TANF respondents also reported that TANF programs are increasingly shifting to a coaching model that accommodates multiple factors of the client's life (such as living in a rural area) to provide services geared toward achieving long-term outcomes. This model allows staff to become knowledgeable of the areas in which participants need support including rural-specific challenges such as transportation challenges, social isolation, and lack of suitable job opportunities. Multiple interviewees noted that their TANF programs were considering implementing a coaching model that focuses on barrier remediation and long-term outcomes as opposed to immediate employment that may not lead to long-term self-sufficiency. One interviewee stated that the coaching model allows participants to feel more at ease in the program and they described the approach as "more customer service-driven . . . more engaging . . . and we speak conversationally rather [having an] inquisition."

Program staff identified ways in which their programs made adaptations to service delivery in response to the needs of rural contexts. Some examples of these adaptations include the following:

- **Providing transportation:** Throughout our interviews, program staff explained that many participants lack access to a vehicle and/or reliable public transportation. A TANF program overcame clients' lack of access to transportation by purchasing vans to transport participants to employment trainings or meetings with their case management team. They innovated further by developing video learning programs in which clients could engage during travel time, thereby allowing this time to count toward the client's weekly work participation hours.
- **Meeting with clients outside standard office hours:** TANF staff met with participants or offered make-up case management sessions outside standard office hours to accommodate scheduling issues around their client's strict working hours and lack of transportation (or travel time to the area where services are provided).

- **Shifting to virtual/hybrid delivery:** TANF program staff reported that they adapted their service delivery to include virtual components in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., in the case of job training). Several staff noted that their programs have continued to offer both virtual and in-person components after the post-pandemic opening of TANF offices.

## Remaining Need Associated with TANF Cash Assistance and Tribal TANF in Rural Contexts

In addition to examining the functioning and delivery of TANF programs in rural areas, this study sought to gain better insight into areas of remaining need for TANF cash assistance and Tribal TANF services.

**We defined remaining need for TANF cash assistance and Tribal TANF services as the difference between the number of families with incomes below the state's maximum income for eligibility for a family of three<sup>4</sup> and the number of families receiving TANF cash assistance or Tribal TANF services (as measured in administrative and secondary survey data).<sup>5</sup> The greater the difference the greater the remaining need. We also accounted for the level of non-federal human services funding and the baseline level of need for TANF cash assistance in our calculation of remaining need.<sup>6</sup>**

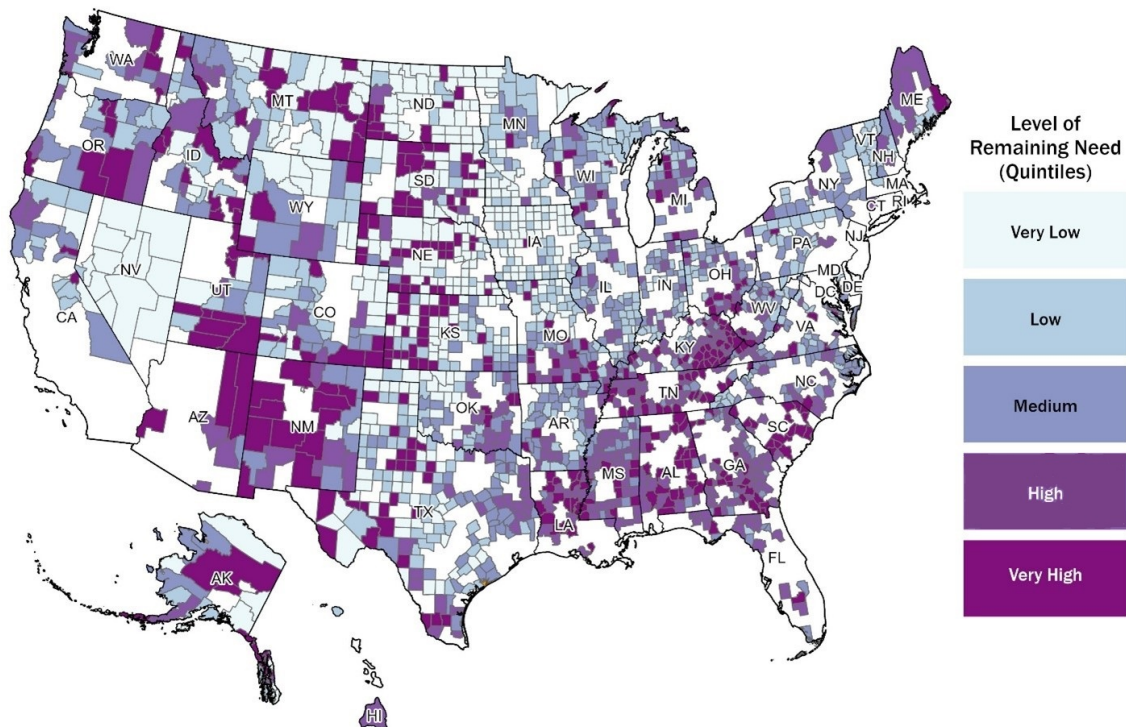
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<sup>4</sup> To determine maximum incomes for eligibility in each state, we consulted the Welfare Rules Database (<https://wrd.urban.org/wrd/Query/query.cfm>). We then estimated the number of families with incomes below the maximum using the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). The ACS PUMS data are reported at the Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) level. PUMAs generally span more than one county. To estimate the number of families at the county level, we calculated the ratio of each county's land area in the PUMA and used this ratio as a weight to apportion the number of families to the county.

<sup>5</sup> Excel spreadsheets from the ACF OFA website detailing the spending of federal TANF and state Maintenance of Effort funds and Tribal TANF funds for FY 2018 were the data sources used to estimate TANF funding.

<sup>6</sup> See Section 7.3 of the Comprehensive Report for detailed processes of estimating remaining need.

**Exhibit 2. Quintiles of Remaining Need for TANF Cash Assistance and Tribal TANF in Rural Counties**



We found that some rural counties have high levels of remaining need for TANF cash assistance and Tribal TANF (Exhibit 2). There appears to be more remaining need in Southern states, rural areas in the Northeast, and locations throughout the Midwest and West. Many of the areas of very high remaining need in the West and in Alaska coincide with Native Lands.

Since we define remaining need as the difference between the number of families with incomes below the state’s maximum income for eligibility and the number of families receiving TANF cash assistance and Tribal TANF services, some of the remaining need likely reflects state TANF eligibility policies (which may vary widely). In Alabama, the state with the lowest income eligibility threshold, a family of three with income greater than \$268 a month would be ineligible for TANF cash assistance. In Minnesota, by contrast, TANF-eligible families can have income up to \$2,359 a month. Minnesota is the only state in which a family of three with income at 100 percent of the federal poverty level in 2020 (\$1,810) would be eligible for TANF cash assistance, assuming they met all other eligibility criteria (Dehry et al., 2022).<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, much of the remaining need may result from families not receiving the TANF cash assistance or Tribal TANF services for which they are eligible. Nationally, only about one in four families receives the TANF cash assistance grant for which they are eligible (Giannarelli, 2019). Families may be

<sup>7</sup> Determining actual eligibility for TANF is a complex process that includes examination of a client’s household structure, income, assets, citizenship or immigration status, and other factors defined by each state.

unaware of their eligibility, may choose to not participate, or may have difficulty complying with program requirements. In the remaining sections of this brief, we discuss suggestions from staff of TANF and other human services programs about how to strengthen TANF programs in rural areas to address remaining need.

## Opportunities for Strengthening TANF in Rural Contexts

Program staff and members of community partner organizations who were interviewed identified several opportunities for strengthening TANF programs to better meet the needs of their clients in rural contexts.

### MORE FLEXIBLE FEDERAL AND STATE GUIDELINES FOR PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY WOULD IMPROVE THE CAPACITY OF PROGRAMS TO SERVE POPULATIONS IN NEED

TANF program staff described state and federal guidelines for program eligibility as a factor limiting the ability to meet the needs of their rural communities. The chief concern expressed by staff was that eligibility requirements are frequently misaligned with the needs of their community's members. For example, a low-income couple with qualifying needs who could truly benefit from the program will often apply for assistance, but they are restricted from eligibility because they have no children. As another example, multiple TANF staff expressed concern about the program's income requirements. Although the goal of their program is to help families become monetarily self-sufficient, many clients in their view are unable to become employed without losing their benefits. Staff suggested that a step-down approach would greatly benefit participants. This would imply that "you incrementally decrease the benefits as individuals start earning more." TANF staff also felt the requirements contribute to a lack of mutual trust in the program among rural communities. One staff member disclosed that people perceive eligibility requirements as a message akin to the following: "We're here to help, but you have to do what we tell you to do or we're going to kick you off the program." Staff felt that their program was one of the few employment-related resources available to their community and that the program's eligibility requirements, alongside the limited employment opportunities often characteristic of available in rural areas, contribute to their community's remaining need.

### PEER LEARNING COMMUNITIES ALLOW PROGRAM STAFF TO SHARE BEST PRACTICES AND ENGAGE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Program staff shared that engaging with other human service professionals allowed for continued professional development and learning. Several rural communities have structures in place to allow for collaboration between staff members located in different counties. Two notable examples include the system of Intermediate Units in Pennsylvania and the Workforce Boards in South Carolina. These systems allow staff located in different areas to connect and share knowledge of best practices. One TANF program staff noted, "If . . . a smaller county . . . figures out how to do something really well, if another county is struggling, sometimes that peer-to-peer connection can be even stronger than . . . state-level supervisory guidance to walk through some details." Such networks of human services providers have, thus far, been largely consigned to specific regions. However, current technology could

easily allow greater collaboration between providers on a national level. Considering the shift to virtual learning and community-building during the COVID era, some program staff suggested it would be helpful to have broader sources of virtual professional development, peer networks, and, in the words of one TANF program staff, “information on demand . . . either written materials with a way to follow up, to ask more in-depth questions, or a learning community . . . something that’s interactive.”

#### STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY AND ADDITIONAL TRAINING ON HOW TO ADDRESS BARRIERS IN RURAL CONTEXTS MAY IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

In both tribal and non-tribal contexts, practitioners stressed the importance of having staff that are involved in the community. In practice, this means that staff are familiar with community culture and norms, have a network of community contacts, are aware of local barriers to uptake, and can devise community-appropriate outreach strategies. Practitioners provided a variety of examples of how staff can best involve themselves within the community, including the following: engaging in face-to-face meetings with participants and partners; observing local culture and approaching the community without judgment; and conducting outreach at places of community importance such as school sporting events and community spaces. Program staff across various sites noted that staff must often consider the needs of a program participant when delivering services to marginalized groups that may be dealing with historical trauma, substance use disorders, mental health challenges, and other issues related to the challenges often experienced in rural communities as described by program staff. These challenges include geographical and social isolation, lack of access to transportation, lack of access to broadband internet and limited employment opportunities. As a result, respondents suggested it would be helpful for staff to have access to additional training on how best to address these barriers and related topics, such as mental health training and trauma-informed training.

#### FLEXIBILITY IN PROGRAM DELIVERY AND GREATER AUTONOMY COULD HELP LEVERAGE THE STRENGTHS OF EACH COMMUNITY TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES

Program staff believed service delivery could be improved if programs were allowed greater flexibility in meeting regulatory, evaluative, and data recording standards. What’s more, program staff believed that service delivery would be improved if human services programs had greater autonomy in deciding how TANF and other human service program funds are applied. Greater autonomy in this regard would allow programs to better leverage their knowledge of the unique strengths and challenges of each individual community, thereby improving service delivery. For example, TANF program staff mentioned that allocating funding to increase pay for program staff could potentially resolve staffing challenges. In their view, improved pay may lead to greater retention and less turnover rates, allowing them to recruit higher-quality candidates for longer periods of time. This would also allow rural program jobs to compete with private sector jobs in rural areas or with program jobs in non-rural areas.

#### HIGHLY CONTEXTUAL AND LOCAL ADAPTATIONS MAY IMPROVE CAPACITY OF TANF AND OTHER HUMAN SERVICE PROGRAMS

Program staff suggested that local adaptations and innovations can be valuable in helping human services programs meet the needs of their participants. Additionally, staff believed that the federal

government should incentivize local program staff to develop, pilot, and share highly effective adaptations to address remaining need. Policymakers may consider how to both allow and encourage these local adaptations and innovations. Many of the other practitioner recommendations suggest ways in which various flexibilities may incentivize innovation. For example, staff suggested allowing greater flexibility regarding funding use and allocation so that funds can more effectively meet participants needs (e.g., buying mobile Wi-Fi hotspots to address lack of broadband access in rural areas or covering vehicle repairs to enable adequate work-related transportation to address rural transportation challenges).

#### NONPROFIT PARTNERS OFTEN FUNCTION AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND FEDERALLY FUNDED HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS, HELPING TO ESTABLISH TRUST AND REFLECT COMMUNITY NEEDS

Non-federally funded community partners may not have many of the barriers to trust and/or cultural barriers within rural communities that agencies administering government programs like TANF often experience. This means they can connect more easily with community members and help to establish trust with government programs. This in turn helps to establish a clear sense of the community's needs. Rural communities benefit from a reciprocal relationship between non-federally funded community partners and federally funded human services programs, with each able to provide support for the other. A TANF staff member noted, "Any program that you do . . . it takes a community to do it . . . if a human services agency believes that they're going to be able to go out and provide services on their own without getting different organizations and partners involved . . . [they are mistaken]."

#### CO-LOCATION OF TANF AND OTHER HUMAN SERVICE PROGRAMS, ALIGNMENT OF ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS, AND EXPANSION OF PARTNERSHIPS WITH RELATED NONPROFITS ARE EXAMPLES OF BENEFICIAL EFFORTS TO UNIFY PROGRAMS IN RURAL AREAS

Many human services providers and community partners noted that efforts to unify programs are particularly beneficial in rural areas. These efforts include co-locating services, aligning eligibility and application requirements, and establishing formal partnerships between human services programs and related nonprofits. In several locations, human services staff suggested that co-location of program offices and/or service delivery sites would be an effective way to ensure that participants have access to all eligible services under one roof. Such integration would not only improve delivery and save resources, but also help to overcome transportation challenges that are common across rural communities. One site highlighted the development of a community center in a disused big box store where they were able to co-locate their Head Start programs, senior services, work ready services, and an application center for other social services—all with the goal of improving access.

## Conclusion

Overall, the study's interviews with staff from the TANF program and community partner organizations provided key insight into the functioning and delivery of TANF programs in rural contexts. They also identified key areas of potential improvement. These findings present avenues to strengthen TANF as a

safety net for people living in rural areas where communities are often geographically isolated and lack resources and economic opportunities. These avenues include using a step-down approach to incrementally decrease benefits as program participants start earning more; building strong partnerships with nonprofit partners to mitigate access barriers and establish trust and cultural capital; establishing virtual learning communities where program staff share best practices; integrating staff and services throughout the community; enabling flexibility in program delivery; and allowing local adaptations to improve program capacity. Future research might build on this study by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of participants and exploring the effect of rural TANF programs on issues like long-term self-sufficiency among participants.

Additional analysis of the other programs of focus—Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV); Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG); and Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF)—is available in their respective program area briefs as well as the Comprehensive Report for this study.

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