

Family-Focused Services for TANF Participants Facing Acute Barriers to Work: Pathways to Implementation

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Abstract

In 2014, California implemented the Family Stabilization (FS) program within its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs). FS fills two key service gaps in TANF that have been identified in the literature—namely, addressing participant barriers to work and supporting child well-being. Research on programs addressing these gaps in TANF remains limited. This qualitative policy implementation study describes FS program design and implementation in 11 California county human service agencies and explores links to agency and community context. We find that state-encouraged flexibility resulted in three distinct approaches to FS services, staffing, and structure. Alignment between agency context and program design emerged as central to implementation decisions. These findings yield implications for research, policy, and management practice among welfare-to-work administrators.

Keywords

TANF, welfare-to-work, program implementation, barriers to work, family stabilization

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Introduction

In 2014, California's county human service agencies implemented a new program within welfare-to-work that provides intensive case management and expanded supportive services aimed at stabilizing participant families in crisis. This program, the Family Stabilization (FS) program, addresses two key service gaps in welfare-to-work identified in the broader research literature—namely, the need for enhanced services to address barriers to work experienced by participants and the call for greater service attention to children of participants. Given the limited research on these service gaps, implementation of FS in California offers an opportunity to build understanding

of how other states and localities might achieve similar improvements in their welfare-to-work programs.

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Welfare-to-Work in the United States and California

The U.S. welfare-to-work program—the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program—provides cash assistance as well as employment services (ES) and other supports for very low-income families with children. Created through the 1996 welfare reform legislation (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act), TANF replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, ending the entitlement to aid, imposing work requirements and time limits on benefits, and devolving policy and administrative decision-making from the federal government to the states. Scholars and advocates were hopeful that the TANF reforms would enable states to enhance supportive services and to restructure welfare programs to better meet local needs (Gais & Weaver, 2002; Moffit, 2008). However, many states ultimately took a more punitive approach, imposing greater limits on benefits than required by federal law and emphasizing employment over education or treatment of underlying issues such as mental health or substance abuse issues (Gais & Weaver, 2002; Moffit, 2008). TANF services and benefits were further eroded as the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 tightened federal work participation requirements and the Great Recession of 2008 forced state budget reductions (Brown & Derr, 2015).

California's TANF program—California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs)—has historically been more generous and less punitive than most other state TANF programs. For example, California is among the few states that continue aid to children in cases where parents reach time limits or are noncompliant, and benefit levels are among the highest in the nation. However, during the Great Recession and related state budget crisis, California made significant cuts, including shortening the time limit from 60 to 48 months, and reducing benefit levels and supportive services (Danielson, 2012). More recently, California has made a series of changes aimed at reversing recession-related

cuts and strengthening the program, including introducing the FS program—the focus of this policy implementation study.

Service Gaps in TANF: Addressing Barriers to Work and Supporting Child Well-Being

Researchers and advocates at the national level argue that TANF programs should do more to address the increasing rates of major personal challenges among participants that pose barriers to work, including substance abuse, mental health disorders, and family violence (e.g., Bloom, Loprest, & Zedlewski, 2011). Following TANF implementation, participants experiencing fewer challenges left the programs for work or avoided them altogether (Moffit, 2008), while participants who face personal and family issues that make it difficult to secure and maintain employment remained. Postreform estimates indicate that these barriers to work are extremely common among current and former TANF participants. For example, Dworsky and Courtney (2007) found that 89% of TANF applicants in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin in 1999 reported experiencing at least one barrier to work (e.g., disability or poor health, caring for an infant or a family member with special needs, limited education or work experience, family violence, substance abuse, or mental health issues) while over half reported experiencing two or more barriers. Scholars recommend instituting initial and ongoing assessments for barriers to work, intensive case management, and enhanced services to address barriers (Dworsky & Courtney, 2007). These approaches are relatively common, and several evaluations—despite mixed results—suggest they can improve access to treatment, program engagement, and employment outcomes among TANF participants (Bloom et al., 2011). However, research on approaches to serving TANF participants facing severe or multiple barriers to work remains limited, and few evidence-based programs are available.

Researchers and advocates have also argued that TANF programs should better

support well-being among children of participants (e.g., Schmit, Matthews, & Golden, 2014), based on growing evidence of the negative consequences of extreme stress and poverty for children (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). This evidence of the intrinsic links between parent and child well-being supports the argument that service systems that focus primarily on adults, such as TANF, should take a more “two-generational” approach, promoting both adult and child well-being (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Schmit et al., 2014). Adult-focused programs can support child well-being through providing or facilitating (1) services to children of participants, such as early-childhood or other enrichment programs, and (2) services to adult participants that strengthen parenting capacity, as well as physical, emotional, and economic well-being. Despite need, simultaneous attention to both parents and children remains rare in public safety net programs (Schmit et al., 2014), and few studies have examined two generational approaches in TANF (for an exception, see Collins, Lane, & Stevens, 2003).

Addressing TANF Service Gaps: California’s Family Stabilization (FS) Program

In 2013, California enacted the FS program, aimed at addressing barriers to work and providing family-focused services to CalWORKs participants. Implemented in 2014, the FS program serves CalWORKs participants who are within their first 24 months in the program and experiencing a crisis or situation that is destabilizing their family and interfering with their ability to engage in services or employment (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2014). FS provides up to 6 months of intensive case management, enhanced services aimed at addressing barriers to work, and relief from work participation requirements. In addition, the FS program incorporates a two-generational service approach, funding services to children and other family members to address family issues that pose barriers to program compliance and employment. California enacted FS as part of a broader suite of

CalWORKs reforms intended to more quickly identify and address potential barriers to program engagement and employment, including (1) an in-depth assessment tool, (2) an expanded subsidized employment program, and (3) greater flexibility for TANF participants to pursue education or address personal challenges such as substance abuse or mental health issues (CDSS, 2015; Davis et al., 2016).

CalWORKs is administered locally by 58 county human service agencies. FS implementation guidelines granted counties considerable flexibility in the design and implementation of FS, permitting them to (1) establish specific FS program eligibility criteria by defining “destabilizing crises,” (2) determine the supportive services to be provided through FS, and (3) consider a variety of agency structure and staffing models to provide enhanced FS services (CDSS, 2014). A statewide evaluation provides some evidence of successful FS implementation, including positive perceptions among program administrators of program aims, design, and implementation (Davis et al., 2016). However, Davis et al. focused primarily on other CalWORKs reforms. Thus, information on FS program design and implementation choices made by county agencies, or factors shaping local decisions, remains limited.

Implementing Welfare-to-Work Policy Reforms

TANF involved both first order devolution in which policy making authority was transferred to state governments from the federal government and second order devolution in which states granted substantial discretion to counties to develop program guidelines and services (Kim & Fording, 2010). Early reports of state responses to the new flexibility granted by TANF noted extensive variation reflective of the state’s institutions, political culture, demographics, economic and financial conditions, and management systems (Lurie, 2001). In California, counties advocated strongly for local authority and were allowed to determine program rules related to diversion strategies, work requirements, child care, and exemptions

(Gainsborough, 2003). In light of the variation across states and local jurisdictions resulting from first and second order devolution under TANF, studies of county or regional implementation of TANF and subsequent reforms are essential to understanding welfare-to-work policies and programs, as reflected in a long-standing empirical literature. Early welfare-to-work implementation studies documented multiple challenges to implementation and limited successes (e.g., Pressman & Wildavsky, 1974), while subsequent post-TANF work has reported mixed experiences, identifying successful reform initiatives and specific innovations, as well as continuing challenges (e.g., Prince & Austin, 2001; Ridzi, 2004).

Studies reporting on implementation of welfare-to-work reforms have identified an array of organizational, environmental, and other issues that shape implementation decisions and processes. Ridzi (2004) documented the role played by new program creation, staff buy-in, and performance measurement in TANF implementation efforts at the county level. A study of 11 local welfare systems noted the contribution made by management practices and the structuring of agency responsibilities to implementation (Ricucci, Meyers, Lurie, & Han, 2004). Research continues to highlight implementation challenges, describing (a) organizational issues related to coordinating case management, goal congruence, and interagency communications (Reese & Harding, 2007), and (b) contextual factors such as regional geography and leadership skills that constrain implementation leadership efforts (Tadlock, Tickamyer, White, Henderson, & Pearson-Nelson, 2005). Research examining caseload dynamics shows that policy design, managerial commitment to caseload reduction, and administrative actions linked to governance variables (e.g., environmental factors, client characteristics, treatments, administrative structures, and managerial roles and actions) are associated with caseload reductions (Ewalt & Jennings, 2004). In contrast, a study of administrative exclusion in TANF programs (e.g., application denials, sanctions, and case closures) did not find that environmental factors—namely,

local economic conditions—played a role in caseload dynamics (Sheely, 2013).

Scholars have built upon this empirical work to develop frameworks aimed at guiding research and furthering understanding of policy and program implementation processes. In the specific context of welfare reform implementation in a second order devolution setting (North Carolina), Cho, Kelleher, Wright, and Yackee (2005) propose a framework that highlights three sets of factors deemed to influence implementation: professionalism of central actors in the implementation process (e.g., expertise, experience, and entrepreneurship), empowerment (e.g., degree of devolved authority), and environmental (e.g., social, political, economic, demographic, and geographic context). More broadly, Moulton and Sandfort (2017) construct a strategic action field framework to guide research on social policy implementation that directs attention to the program intervention itself (e.g., processes of change, methods of coordination, changes in system operations, and desired change in target population), the level or scale of the implementation analysis (e.g., policy field, organization, frontline services), and the potential drivers of change and stability (e.g., sources of authority, social skills, exogenous shocks). Key factors identified in these frameworks are consistent with the scholarship on implementation of evidence-based practices emphasizing relevant aspects of agency context that include agency size and resources; staff education, skills, and adaptability; existing organizational structure and work processes; and the number and nature of interagency partnerships (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2012).

The Present Study

The FS program in California addresses two key TANF service gaps identified in the literature—namely, the enhanced, intensive services aimed at addressing barriers to work among participants, and family focused services aimed at improving child well-being. The FS program is consistent with California's

approach to welfare-to-work services, which has historically emphasized services and support over sanctions, and provides an opportunity to examine an innovative, forward-looking service model that may be relevant to other jurisdictions. Given the limited research examining the service enhancements reflected in the FS program, this qualitative study of FS implementation in a sample of northern California county human service agencies contributes to the literature by providing new information on the multiple, distinct design and implementation choices available to county agencies. We focus on the central implementation choices facing agencies, including how to target the FS program, what services to upgrade, and how to staff and structure the program. We also examine how these design and implementation choices relate to agency and community contextual factors. Drawing on empirical studies of welfare-to-work implementation, as well as the conceptual policy implementation frameworks proposed by Cho and colleagues (2005) and Moulton and Sandfort (2017), we pose research questions related to three key domains: (1) What is the specific FS policy instrument, including the broad policy directive issued by the state, as well as individual county program aims and central program components? (2) What organizational factors shaped FS policy implementation, including agency size, internal structures, and staffing models and capacity? (3) What environmental factors shaped FS policy implementation, including political, demographic, and economic conditions?

Data and Methods

This study was conducted in the context of an ongoing partnership between university researchers and 12 county human service agencies that administer CalWORKs (Austin et al., 1999). Study design, as well as aims and findings, were developed in collaboration with partner agencies. Interviews exploring organizational issues with management-level agency staff did not require IRB review.

Study Sites and Sample

Eleven partner county agencies participated, representing a sample that provides variation in contextual factors that could play a role in FS design and implementation. Similar to the state and region, study counties are diverse racially and ethnically, with particularly large Hispanic populations. Study counties include urban, suburban, and suburban-rural geographies and county populations that range from just under 150,000 to almost 2 million (in 2015 estimates by the Census Bureau). On average, both median household income and poverty rates are high in study counties, compared to national statistics. However, economic contexts do vary; 2015 Census Bureau median household income estimates among the sample counties ranged from roughly \$60,000 to \$102,000; and poverty rates ranged from 7.5% to 15.3%. The sample also provides variation with respect to agency size and budget—study agencies range in staff size from under 500 to over 2,500 FTEs, and in budget from around \$100 million to over \$900 million, both in state fiscal year 2015–2016.

Data

The primary data source was a series of 18 in-depth, group, and individual interviews with 30 management-level staff in study counties. The semistructured interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours in length and were conducted between October 2015 and February 2016 by the third author, who has an extensive practice background in public and nonprofit social services. The interview guide covered the following topics: preexisting TANF services and staffing; county choices regarding FS program eligibility, design, and service emphases; and changes counties made to TANF agency structure and staffing in implementing FS. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Several additional data sources served to supplement and triangulate findings from the interview data, including documents and records related to FS provided by the county agencies and publicly available data on agency and county contextual factors.

Analytical Approach

After completing study interviews, the third author conducted a process of manual coding—identifying a set of key aspects of county FS program design and implementation and documenting approaches of the study counties in each of these areas. This process was both deductive, drawing on TANF and policy implementation literatures and insights from the third author's extensive practice experience, and inductive, generating three key themes: (1) the service emphasis of the FS program, (2) changes to agency staffing and structure related to FS, and (3) approaches to defining FS program eligibility. A matrix displaying variation across these themes and related subthemes, by study county, provided the basis for an initial summary of commonalities across counties that was presented to county partners to help check and interpret initial findings. The first author then refined the matrix through a comprehensive re-review of the study data and developed a variety of additional data displays with the goal of identifying any subsets of counties by shared FS design and implementation choices. This analysis identified three groups of counties, each with common and distinct approaches to FS design and implementation. The first author examined potential links between context and implementation by reviewing publicly available quantitative data on agency and county context as well as contextual factors described by respondents. A second round of member checking confirmed these findings related to the groupings of counties and relationships between each group and county and agency context. Throughout, analytical memos and study team meetings helped capture and refine analytical processes, emerging questions, and findings.

Limitations

Study limitations relate to the timing and extent of the data collected as well as the regional focus of the study. First, in order to minimize demands on county agency staff, we did not conduct follow-up interviews that

would have enabled further exploration regarding the validity of the results as well as the relative success and stability of implementation decisions. However, results based on the interview data aligned closely with information from alternate data sources and also underwent two rounds of member checking with county agency leadership. Second, while the study counties vary with regard to agency, economic, and demographic factors, the findings represent the experiences of a single region in a state that provides relatively robust benefits and services, limiting our ability to generalize study findings. However, these findings contribute to the literature by documenting the implementation of an enhanced welfare-to-work services model that could be implemented in other regions and states.

Results

Pathways to FS Implementation: County Choices and Agency Context

The approaches that study counties utilized in the design and implementation of their FS programs varied with respect to (1) the types of services most central to the program, (2) the changes made to agency structure and staffing to accommodate the FS program, and (3) how the county chose to define FS program eligibility. Study counties can be categorized into three broad groups based on FS design and implementation choices in each of these three areas. Respondents described contextual factors at the agency level that were important to FS design and implementation choices in each area, and counties that took similar approaches to FS design and implementation shared key aspects of agency context, including (1) the richness of preexisting supports for CalWORKs participants, (2) the skill level of existing CalWORKs staff, and (3) the size and budget of the agency. The following sections describe the three distinct approaches to FS design and implementation and illustrate the links between implementation and agency and county context, summarized in Figure 1.

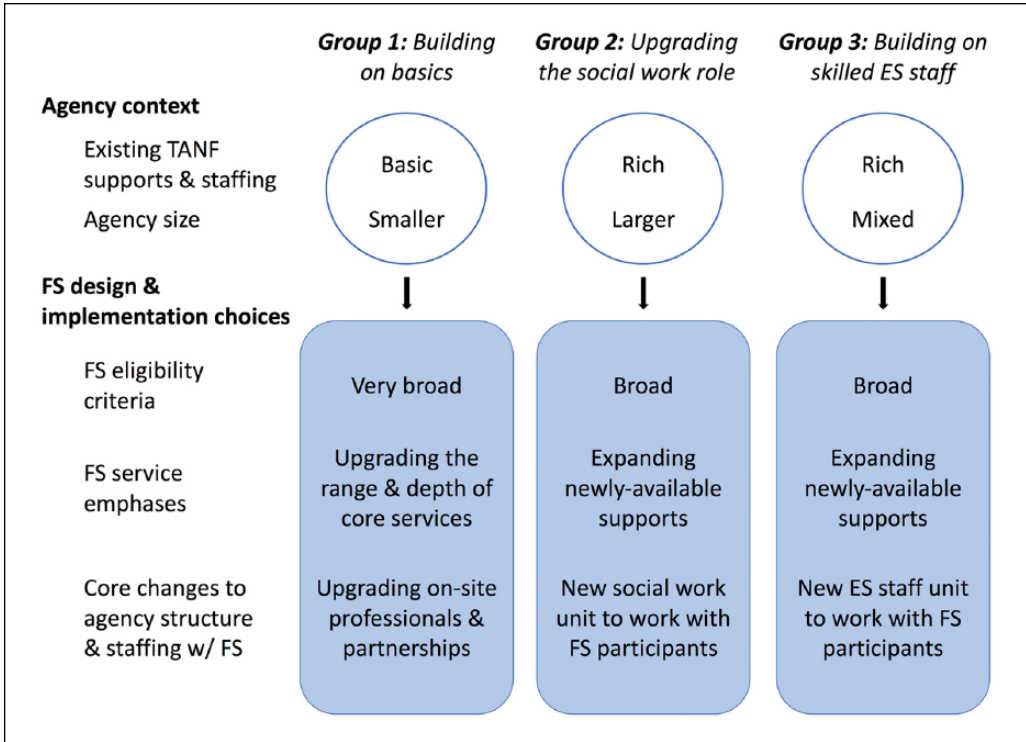


Figure 1. FS Program Design and Implementation Choices and Agency Contexts.

Group 1: Building on basics. The four counties in the first group offered more basic CalWORKs services prior to FS implementation (e.g., assessment, case planning, monitoring activities, and referrals to partner agencies for supportive services). Group 1 counties were least likely to report the existence of on-site professionals (e.g., mental health or substance abuse clinicians or social workers). In general, preexisting CalWORKs programs in these counties were staffed primarily by ES workers, a job category requiring relatively low levels of training or experience. Group 1 agencies were the smallest in the study in terms of total agency staff (mean FTEs = 669) and budget (mean annual budget = \$196.5 million). These counties had also experienced prior agency budget cuts that led to reductions in staff and services, which study respondents noted as providing important context for FS implementation. As one Group 1 respondent explained, “a lot of the services we used to have on site—alcohol and drug counselors

and clinicians ... went away when the economy took the hit that it did.”

In this context, Group 1 counties chose to use the FS program to upgrade the range and depth of core services offered, including mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, learning disabilities, housing, and legal services. Instituting service upgrades through FS helped address what respondents identified as gaps in preexisting support services. As one Group 1 county respondent expressed, “when we really looked at the social, health, and economic issues impacting our customers, what I’ve always known is we have gaps. We have gaps in mental health.” Similarly, a respondent in another Group 1 county described how FS allowed her county to address CalWORKs service gaps: “Now I think we have the resources that we can wrap around clients. Before, I didn’t have the social worker, mental health resources, or housing.” Group 1 counties made these service enhancements primarily through adding or upgrading

on-site professionals, including new on-site mental health clinicians in all four counties. These counties also used FS to expand community partnerships, including those with human services nonprofits, with separate divisions within the agency, and with other county agencies providing health, legal, and other relevant services.

All study counties defined FS eligibility quite broadly in order to preserve the flexibility provided by the state to use the program to serve clients facing diverse and idiosyncratic destabilizing crises. That said, the FS eligibility criteria defining “destabilizing crisis” described by this first group of counties were the most flexible among the study sample. Group 1 respondents reported using the definition suggested by the state—homelessness or risk of homelessness, lack of safety due to domestic violence, and un- or undertreated mental health or substance abuse issues—while also encouraging staff to stay attuned to the array of additional issues that may destabilize participants and their families. As one Group 1 county respondent noted, commonly acknowledged, pervasive challenges such as domestic violence and housing instability trigger FS program eligibility in her county, but program staff also screen for more singular or underlying challenges that may be less visible:

So all those families are looked at [by FS program staff] for what kind of situation is that family in. Are they in crisis? Are they on the verge of becoming homeless or are they homeless? Is there domestic violence? Is there evidence of abuse? What are those big red flags that are showing themselves? And then also there's the undertones. So what you are presenting with is also what are the undertones?

Describing an even broader approach to FS program eligibility in her county, a second Group 1 respondent said, “Any person that walks in our door asking for welfare is in crisis—a situational crisis and they're in need.”

Group 2: Upgrading the social work role. The five counties in this group had already offered CalWORKs participants a rich array of

services in the core areas of mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence through on-site professionals as well as extensive community partnerships. In addition, all but one county in this group employed social workers prior to FS implementation who worked with program participants facing particularly high levels of need. Reflecting a possible link between rich services and agency size and resources, these agencies were, on average, the largest among the study sample (mean FTEs = 1,712; mean annual budget = \$510.4 million). In this context, Group 2 counties used the FS program to expand services in areas emphasized by the FS legislation and implementation guidelines, including (1) supports for participants navigating social service, health, legal, or other complex systems; (2) services to family members; and (3) housing support services. To implement these expanded services, Group 2 counties created specialized units of social workers with increased resources.

While Group 2 respondents identified these three types of service enhancements as the main emphasis of their FS programs, all counties reported improvements in one or more of these areas. Across all three groups, respondents reported dedicating more staff time to supporting CalWORKs participants as they navigated other systems. Respondents described FS staff accompanying CalWORKs participants to medical appointments and court hearings—providing participants with transportation, support, debriefing, and assistance in planning next steps. One Group 2 respondent linked this level of service to the educational background her county determined was important for FS program staff:

Yes, that's [walking participants through issues] actually the expectation. Maybe not literally walk them through, but drive them, and then facilitate the connection. And I think that ... was why we wanted the social work aspect of it, so that they would know the resources, or be more savvy in terms of navigating the various resources available to the families that we serve. And so they [FS program staff] connect the families, basically. And they help take care of

that, even reminders. ... It's to that level of detail. And basically the expectation is: "you make this happen for the family."

In addition to this enhanced support for linkages with other systems, FS allowed county agencies to provide new supportive services to family members of CalWORKs participants. All study counties made enhancements in this area, with most counties focusing primarily on upgraded services to children, including mental health services, child SSI advocacy, working with schools on behavioral and educational issues, and covering enrollment costs for afterschool and other enrichment programs. In discussing the importance of these services, respondents often emphasized that child well-being is linked to a parent's own well-being and ability to successfully engage in CalWORKs and employment. Moving beyond the issues of engagement and employment altogether, one respondent suggested that service attention to children is essential to the purported goals of CalWORKs and FS to assist and stabilize vulnerable families: "If family stabilization is about helping families and responsibility to kids, do we need to look at ... children, not just the parent activities?" Finally, respondents in almost all study counties reported using FS to upgrade housing and homeless services for TANF participants, including emergency housing, housing search assistance, rent subsidies, and landlord outreach.

Group 3: Building on skilled ES staff. Similar to the Group 2 counties, the two counties that make up Group 3 implemented their FS programs in the context of rich preexisting services for CalWORKs participants, with particularly extensive on-site professionals and community partnerships related to core service areas. In terms of size, Group 3 human service agencies varied, with average staff size and budget at the midrange among the study counties (mean FTEs = 1,509; mean annual budget = \$393.0 million). Like Group 2, respondents in Group 3 counties reported using FS primarily to provide enhanced service linkages, services to children, and

housing supports. However, in contrast to Group 2, counties in Group 3 relied on existing ES workers rather than hiring social workers to staff the FS program. Respondents highlighted the role of agency context in facilitating this decision to implement FS primarily with existing staff and partners, reporting that their ES workers had very high levels of education, work experience, and proficiency working with disadvantaged families. In addition, Group 3 respondents suggested that ES workers may be better prepared than social work staff to balance the process of addressing the underlying issues facing TANF participants with the realities of the time-limited, employment-focused program. As one respondent observed, "social workers don't necessarily have the background. They don't think employment. So, I don't think social workers are who you need to move somebody to where they have to go in 48 months. There's no stopping it [the CalWORKs program time limit]."

County Context

While study results suggest agency-level factors were a major driver of FS design and implementation choices, we found that county-level contextual factors played a much more limited role. Respondents rarely mentioned county context when describing factors that shaped FS design and implementation experiences, and our analysis of quantitative measures of county economic and demographic characteristics suggested little correspondence between these factors and design and implementation decisions. However, local rental housing markets were influential, as many respondents cited high rents as contributing to their county's decision to include housing services as part of their FS program. As one Group 1 county respondent explained, "as you know—today—most of the crises that we see coming in the door [are,] 'I just got kicked out of my house and I have no housing.'" This finding held across the three groups and across the range in median rent estimates represented in the sample (approximately \$1,300 to approximately \$2,300).

Perceptions of FS Program Implementation and Aims

Although study counties varied in their approaches to FS design and implementation, study respondents all reported largely positive experiences with FS implementation. Early program implementation challenges identified by respondents included the types of tasks and hurdles common to the process of implementing a new program in a human services agency (Aarons et al., 2012). These included delays in availability of services while agencies and partners increased capacity to provide family-focused services as well as the need to (1) develop training programs to build staff confidence and skills related to responding to substance abuse and domestic violence, (2) adapt participant data tracking systems, and (3) support shifts in staff and agency focus from an employment-centered model to a holistic family-centered model. In many instances, respondents reported that they had already found effective solutions to these implementation challenges or had specific plans for how to resolve them in the future. Study respondents also uniformly reported positive perceptions of FS program aims. Respondents described the changes their agency made through FS—providing more intensive services, filling service gaps, and serving children and other family members—as representing improvements to their CalWORKs programs. Respondents stressed the need for these enhanced services and their value to program participants. For example, one respondent described the importance of intensive case management to enabling participants to successfully connect with essential services:

I was obsessed with the FS model ... that it's not just about finding them a shelter or a chair at the treatment center, but waiting as they walk through the front door ... I think it's critical that they have somebody there to support them.

A respondent from another county expressed similar excitement about the new child and family focus under FS, which she saw as

filling a longstanding service gap in the CalWORKs program in her county: “We’ve always wanted to serve children. We’ve always wanted to serve families more holistically.”

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the implementation of a family-focused program serving TANF participants facing acute barriers to work in 11 northern California human service agencies. The findings contribute to the limited research on strategies for addressing two key TANF service gaps identified in the literature: (1) responding to the concentration of disadvantage among families served by the program (Bloom et al., 2011), and (2) reducing experiences of stress and economic deprivation, and the associated long-term consequences, among children of participants (Schmit et al., 2014). Study results illuminate multiple pathways to meeting these service needs and suggest that responsiveness to agency service and staffing strengths and gaps drives implementation of programs like FS. We identified three distinct FS design and implementation approaches among study counties, with each closely related to key organizational factors. Smaller agencies with basic preexisting support services used the FS program to upgrade supports in core areas such as mental health, substance abuse, and family violence services. In Group 2, larger agencies with more expansive preexisting services used FS to add specialized units of social workers and to expand services in areas promoted by the FS legislation and implementation guidelines: (1) dedicating more staff time to supporting participants as they navigate complex systems, (2) extending services to children and other family members, and (3) enhancing housing services. The third group of agencies pursued similar service upgrades by relying upon the skills of existing TANF staff rather than recruiting new social work staff. Overall, we found that contextual factors internal to the agency played a more significant role in shaping FS design and implementation than external economic or demographic factors.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The study findings broadly highlight the value of promoting and supporting local flexibility in program design and implementation. The managerial respondents in this study shared a perception of largely positive implementation experiences by their agencies, after exercising FS implementation choices based upon assessment of specific service and staffing strengths and gaps. As the human services sector adopts evidence-informed programs and practices, with the associated emphasis on implementation fidelity, this study demonstrates the importance of selecting and implementing evidence-informed programs in ways that respond to local agency contexts. Agency leaders and managers seeking to implement intensive, family-focused services in TANF programs should assess current delivery structures as well as staffing patterns and skill levels at the outset of the design process. Assessment of community needs and resources is also important, to ensure service gaps are addressed and resources maximized in support of program services.

More specifically, the importance of fit between staff skills and FS program requirements in order to ensure appropriate program design highlights the need for supplementing in-service staff training and preservice social work education. Agency-based training to upgrade the skills of ES workers in navigating social service systems and addressing issues like substance abuse and family violence would support implementation of the Group 3 model of enhancing supports relying on existing staff. The Family Development Credential (often offered in community college human service technician programs) could strengthen collaborative, family-focused case management skills among current and future human services workers (Svihula & Austin, 2004). The Group 2 model that relies upon trained social workers suggests the importance of greater emphasis in preservice social work education related to ES and antipoverty programs.

While managers endorsed the opportunity to provide enriched services through FS, it remains unclear whether frontline workers share similar perspectives, as related research identifying positive experiences with FS at the caseworker level has provided little detail (Davis et al., 2016). Additional research on caseworker experiences implementing holistic, family-focused TANF interventions like FS that examines the role that program aims play in shaping worker attitude and motivation would expand our understanding of frontline human services delivery beyond the extant literatures on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) and worker burnout (Maslach, 1982). In addition, research exploring the perspectives of FS participants and their families on service experiences in FS and similar programs is needed to expand our understanding of their diverse characteristics, problems, and strengths (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2000). Lastly, research on FS outcomes will be essential and should incorporate measures of participant, child, and family well-being in addition to the usual indicators of program engagement, employment, and earnings. While FS shows strong promise as a family-focused strategy to address severe barriers to work among TANF participants and improve family well-being, its effectiveness must be demonstrated in order to justify the allocation of increasingly limited public resources to this service model.

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