Strategies for Engaging Adults in Welfare-to-Work Activities

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ABSTRACT

The Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 reauthorized the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant program through 2010 and expanded work participation standards by putting increased pressure on states to meet stricter work participation rate requirements. If states fail to meet these requirements or make adequate progress, they will face potentially severe federal fiscal sanctions. This analysis presents the major findings from a literature review on engagement strategies for the welfare-to-work population, with implications for meeting participation requirements and helping families achieve self-sufficiency from a program perspective. Major findings of this review include an effective combination of the labor force attachment (LFA) and the human capital development (HCD) approaches, program models, and participant- and organization-focused strategies.

States have become increasingly concerned about the work participation rates of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) participants. In 2006, the U.S. Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) that reauthorized the TANF block grant program through 2010. In addition to tightening the regulations, the DRA expanded work participation standards for families receiving TANF and put increased pressure on states to meet stricter participation rate requirements. Although the rates of required participation did not change (i.e., 50% of all families and 90% of two-parent families participating in specified work or work-related activities), the calculation of those rates changed to include additional categories of people in the denominator of the rate calculation. If states fail to meet these requirements or make adequate progress, they will face potentially severe federal fiscal sanctions.

Given the increasing urgency to meet federal work requirements among TANF participants, the purpose of this structured literature review is to present research findings on the use of engagement strategies from a program perspective to assist welfare recipients who are required to participate in work or work-related activities. While acknowledging the broader context of labor markets that contributes to employment opportunities, an emphasis is placed on what programs can do to engage welfare-to-work participants alongside changes in labor markets. A review of engagement strategies can provide administrators of welfare-to-work programs with an understanding of innovative strategies to assist them in meeting participation requirements and helping families to achieve self-sufficiency.

Factors Influencing Limited Participation or Nonparticipation

Many adults receiving TANF face barriers that prevent them from obtaining or maintaining a steady job (Kaplan, 2001; Pavetti, Derr, & Hesketh, 2003). These barriers include substance abuse, poor mental and physical health, disability, low educational attainment, limited work experience, limited English proficiency, low basic skills, economic or resource issues such as finding child care, and domestic violence (Baider & Frank, 2006; Kaplan, 2004; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001). Participants who experience one or more barriers, often described as "hard-to-employ" or "hard-to-serve," rely on TANF assistance for long periods of time because of their difficulty finding and sustaining work. For example, a study in Utah found that 92% of longtime TANF families have one or more substantial barriers; 37% were found to have four barriers (Social Research Institute, 1999). As overall TANF caseloads decline, participants with multiple barriers to employment make up a larger proportion of the remaining cases and require additional efforts to engage them in welfare-to-work activities.

Institutional and structural barriers to participation include a lack of (a) welfare-to-work programs, (b) long-term employment opportunities, (c) health care benefits, (d) child care, (e) low-cost housing, (f) transportation assistance, and (g) assistance in dealing with discrimination (Ng, 2004). The welfare system can be overwhelming when trying to navigate the variety of available social services, especially for immigrants and nonnatives who recently became citizens. Difficulty understanding the welfare system and receiving inaccurate information can also create barriers and distrust of governmental agencies (Lincroft, Resner, Leung, & Bussiere, 2006). For example, undocumented or recent legal immigrants may be hesitant to access services such as food stamps or TANF for their children due to concerns about legal consequences (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). Education level is also an issue for many immigrants and nonnative people, given that 69% of nonnative TANF adult participants do not have a high school degree or general equivalency diploma (GED) as compared to 37% of native adult participants (Tumlin & Zimmerman, 2003). Low levels of education make it difficult to find adequate-paying jobs.

Contributing to the barriers to employment are language barriers faced by immigrants and nonnative citizens, many of whom speak little or no English. Limited English proficiency can limit the types of jobs available to immigrant and nonnative TANF participants and thereby

limit their earning potential. Huang (2002) cited a study conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office reporting that adults speaking limited or no English in Los Angeles and New York had a 34% higher poverty rate than immigrant adults who speak English in those cities. Average monthly earnings for a worker with limited English proficiency was $355, considerably less than the monthly wages of $545 that English speakers made.

In addition to institutional and language barriers, many TANF participants also have personal barriers that prevent them from obtaining secure jobs. These include depression or anxiety, stressful events, alcohol and drug use, exposure to domestic violence, and poor health conditions (Norris & Spieglman, 2003). A survey of California TANF participants found that 21% to 23% of the respondents reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, or a recent stressful event within the past year that interfered with their ability to work, care for children, or attend school (London & Mauldon, 2006). The same survey found that 11% of the respondents experienced domestic violence, and 31% had a physical health condition preventing them from working.

It is clear that significant barriers (structural/institutional, language, and personal) impact the ability of TANF participants to meet welfare-to-work requirements and therefore need to be taken into consideration when engaging them in the process of achieving self-sufficiency. Given the potential decrease in caseloads as a result of implementing welfare reform, it can be assumed that those remaining on welfare encounter significant barriers that prevent them from becoming employed and leaving assistance. Indeed, the U.S. General Accounting Office (2001) speculated that the TANF participants who could easily find and keep jobs have left welfare, leaving those with characteristics that impede employment to make up the remaining welfare caseload. Hamilton (2002) found that more disadvantaged TANF participants had a higher likelihood of sanctions that lasted longer than less disadvantaged TANF participants. This may be due to the fact that more disadvantaged people remain on welfare longer, augmenting the amount of time during which noncompliance could occur and increasing the chances of being sanctioned. Although there is some evidence of contradictory results in these findings (Ong & Houston, 2005), engaging all TANF participants, whether they are considered hard-to-employ or not, remains a significant concern for states.

To better assist hard-to-employ TANF participants, engagement strategies need to be evaluated for their effectiveness in moving these participants from welfare to work. This analysis describes the major findings from the research literature on engagement strategies. Because there are limited studies available on this topic, this analysis primarily relies on two major studies that analyze the effectiveness of welfare-to-work programs (Kauf, Derr, & Pavetti, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989–2002). Although individual welfare-to-work programs have been developed and evaluated in communities (e.g., Chow, Bester, & Shinn, 2001), this analysis focuses on studies that evaluate national, multisite programs, which contribute to the generalizability of findings.

Major Findings

In light of the DRA, engagement strategies have become a major concern of administrators who are working to increase participation in work or work-related activities. Although increasing employment and decreasing TANF participation are the broad goals of welfare-to-work agencies, little is known about effective approaches and strategies that can be used by programs to yield high participation rates. A study of engagement strategies involving multiple sites throughout the United States found that relatively few states or counties have specific strategies to engage all or most TANF participants in work or work-related activities (Kauf et al., 2004). It is clear that programs designed to engage TANF participants in federally allowable activities use different approaches. Different state and local strategies are reflected in national studies on workforce participation. Although some of the findings are from the only experimental study available, others emerge from non-experimental studies that use case study data, administrative data, and program evaluation data (Hamilton, 2002).

The National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS) analyzed the effectiveness of 11 mandatory welfare-to-work programs in seven cities: Atlanta, Georgia; Columbus, Ohio; Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Portland, Oregon; and Riverside, California (Hamilton, 2002). Beginning in 1989 and lasting through March 2002, this longitudinal study examined programs implemented under the previous national welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which was replaced by TANF. Because both welfare programs maintain the goal of moving recipients from welfare to work, the legislation change from AFDC to TANF does not affect the results of the study. As a part of the study, comparisons between different types of program approaches were used to analyze their effectiveness in preparing TANF participants for employment. In addition, data from the NEWWS study can be used to assess other program strategies throughout the country that seek to engage TANF participants in welfare-to-work activities.

Programs can be differentiated by their approach to employment, namely, the labor force attachment (LFA) approach or the human capital development approach (HCD). Figure 1 depicts the relationship among program approaches, program models, and engagement strate-

FIGURE 1. *Relationship among program approaches, program models, and engagement strategies.*
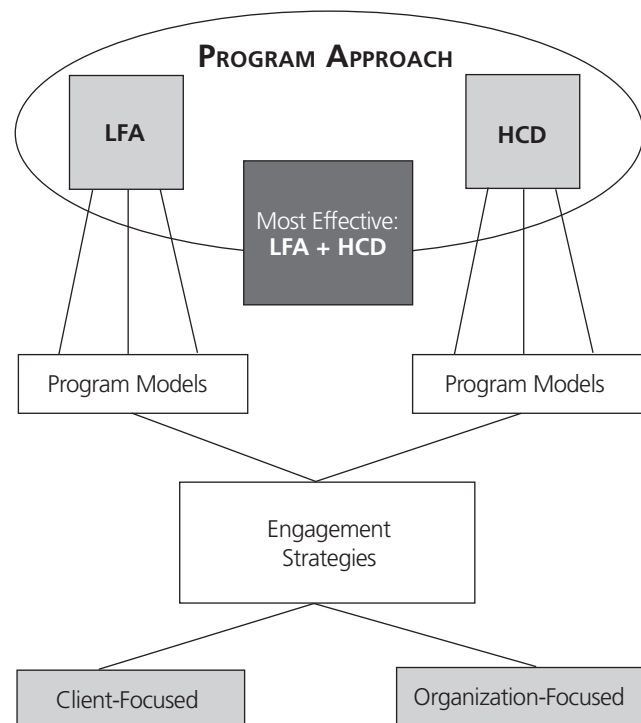
Note. LFA = labor force attachment. HCD = human capital development.

gies. The LFA approach encourages participants to obtain employment as soon as possible, accepting jobs that may pay low wages or that may not be a suitable match of interests. This approach is based on the assumption that participants can develop work habits and skills with on-the-job learning to advance themselves. In the HCD approach, individuals are encouraged to participate in education services and skills training before they begin employment, in order to enhance their capacity to obtain and maintain a job. The most effective program approach incorporates elements of both the LFA and the HCD approaches (Kauf et al., 2004).

Program models reflect different approaches to engagement. For example, programs that use the LFA approach to employment include paid and work experience or job-related supports into their program models. Programs that use the HCD approach focus on training and education, as well as a mentorship model to help participants learn from the experiences of their peers. Specific engagement strategies can be used to recruit and retain program participants in programs that implement different models from either approach.

Engagement Strategies

A number of participant- and organization-focused engagement strategies can be implemented in the context of different program approaches and models. To meet federal requirements, TANF participants must be engaged in one of the activities noted in Table 1 to be counted in the numerator of the federal participation rate.

In addition to the 12 federally approved activities, states can choose to engage participants in activities that are not considered in the federal rate calculations but are allowable under state or county program rules. Although these activities vary by state, examples of these activities include physical or mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence counseling, and child welfare services.

Kauf and colleagues (2004) found that more TANF participants are engaged in welfare-to-work activities than federal participation rates suggest. However, these participants may not be fully meeting federal participation requirements. For example, using administrative data from El Paso County (Colorado) and the state of Utah, they found that the majority of TANF participants (90% and 82%, respectively) were assigned to participate in program activities. However, a significant proportion of these participants were assigned to activities that are not counted in the federal participation rate calculation. In a typical month in El Paso County, the proportion of participants assigned to

non–federally allowable activities was 44%, in Utah the proportion was 62%, and about 6% of participants were assigned to a combination of allowable and nonfederal activities for both study sites. In El Paso County, 46% of the cases and in Utah, 20% of the cases were assigned to allowable-only activities.

The study also found that the majority of participants who were assigned to activities do not participate enough to meet the federal requirements. In El Paso County, for example, individuals participated for about 70% of the time that they were assigned (no similar data were available for Utah). These findings suggest that a significant number of cases are assigned to nonfederal activities or a combination of nonfederal and federal activities. These cases were not included in the federal participation rate because they were either not engaged in any of the 12 approved activities or not involved for the minimum number of hours.

Beyond administrative issues related to assignment of welfare-to-work activities, the literature identifies a variety of helpful engagement strategies for individuals who are not participating in work or work-related activities or not participating to the full extent required. Engagement strategies can be categorized as either participant-focused strategies (e.g., using case management to encourage participation) or organization-focused (e.g., administrative strategies designed to increase engagement). These are listed in Table 2.

Participant-Focused Strategies

Studies on welfare-to-work programs indicate that successful engagement strategies include a high degree of case management that begins with intake (Freedman et al., 2000; Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999; Kauf et al., 2004). Initial comprehensive assessments are critical to identify immediate service needs, determine the capacities of participants to work, and identify any special intensive needs (Kauf et al., 2004). By conducting initial assessments, case managers can identify any immediate needs that might interfere with their participation in work or work-related activities. For example, intake workers can screen participants by asking questions about basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, and clothing), transportation, or child care. Once this information is obtained, appropriate resources and referrals are provided to ensure that barriers to employment are addressed.

Alternatively, comprehensive assessments can be conducted after the initial job search process. Participants who are unable to find a job after a specified period of time are given an additional assessment to identify barriers that may impede participants from finding employment (Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999). More thoroughly assessed participants can be assigned to other activities (e.g., counseling or short-term training) that can help them find jobs. By assessing participants who are unable to find employment after engaging in initial activities, programs can focus on providing additional services specifically to those who demonstrate a need for further assistance.

Comprehensive assessments, whether conducted initially or after job search attempts, can also be used to match participants with appropri-

TABLE 1. *Federally Countable Welfare-to-Work Activities Included in Participation Rate Calculation*

The following activities are included in the participation calculation:
- Unsubsidized employment
- Subsidized private sector employment
- Subsidized public sector employment
- Work experience
- On-the-job training
- Job search and job readiness assistance for up to 6 weeks a year
- Community service programs
- Vocational educational training for up to 12 months
- Providing child-care services to an individual who is participating in a community service program

The activities below can count in the participation rate calculation only after the first 20 hours:
- Job skills training directly related to employment
- Education directly related to employment
- Satisfactory attendance at secondary school or in a course of study leading to a GED

TABLE 2. *Summary of Engagement Strategies by Category*

Participant-Focused Strategies	Organization-Focused Strategies
Comprehensive assessments	Identifying potential participants
Individualized service planning	Emphasizing outreach efforts
Access to other services	Communicating a clear, consistent message
	Defining broad and flexible activities
	Tracking participation
	Sanctioning for noncompliance
	Setting performance standards

ate work activities. These assessments can use formal tools developed to determine participants' interests, education, job skills, work history, and barriers to employment, or they can be in the form of assessment interviews conducted by experienced case managers. Results of the assessment are used to identify employment goals, match appropriate placements, and connect participants with relevant resources and services they may need (child care, transportation, etc.).

More in-depth assessments are needed to detect complex barriers to employment (e.g., mental health issues, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic violence, or learning problems). Once identified, clinical diagnoses and treatment plans are created so that participants receive appropriate services. Services can be provided in a variety of ways depending on the resources and priorities of the counties and states. Kauf and colleagues (2004) found that participants can be screened by specialists to assess for specific barriers either during orientation or case-planning interviews. Specialists then report back to the case manager with a comprehensive evaluation. In other sites, case managers make referrals to specialists for an assessment only if they have reason to suspect that participants are at risk of complex barriers to employment. Thorough assessments are needed for the development of individualized service plans for the hard-to-employ participants.

Case managers play an important role in individualized case planning by helping participants develop employment plans to move them from welfare to work. Kauf et al. (2004) found that programs that sought to engage all participants in work activities used three approaches to create employment plans to meet the needs of participants: (a) a work-focused, participant-centered approach to case management; (b) regular and frequent contact with participants; and (c) formal processes for encouraging progress toward self-sufficiency.

A work-focused, participant-centered approach. This approach to case management emphasizes employment plans that build on the strengths of the participants to meet their needs. Participant-specific plans that address barriers to work are developed by case managers who encourage participants to set their own goals that also include the needs of their families to create effective case plans. In addition, integrated case management has been found to be the most effective way to assist participants in meeting their employment needs. These services are provided by one caseworker who has broad information about programs and access to resources. For example, a 2-year study of mandatory welfare-to-work programs in Columbus, Ohio, found that participants receiving integrated case management had significantly higher rates of participation in program activities and lower welfare payments (in dollars) but had similar employment rates and earnings to participants who received traditional case management (Scrivener, Walter, Brock, & Hamilton, 2001).

Regular and frequent contact. Contact between case managers and participants in individualized case planning (either over the phone or in person) can motivate participants to engage in program activities. This outreach includes checking on eligibility changes, progress on employment goals, additional needs for resources or supports, or other issues that interfere with program activities. Case managers in four of the seven NEWWS sites are required to contact the participants in their relatively low caseloads (ranging from 40 to 80 in Wisconsin and from 70 to 90 in El Paso County) at least once a month (Kauf et al., 2004). Other sites required case managers to contact participants every 90 days or every 6 months, depending on caseloads.

Monitoring of the progress. The third component of individualized case planning is monitoring of participants toward employment. To move participants toward their employment goals, several approaches

were found in different study sites (Kauf et al., 2004). In Wisconsin, for example, an incremental approach is taken, in which case managers slowly move participants from a low amount of work requirements and high levels of support to higher work requirements and lower levels of support. Similarly, Riverside County, California, implements a stepwise program that moves participants through phases depending on the progress of their employment plan. In Oswego County, New York, staff meetings are convened to identify cases that are making progress and cases that need more support.

Embedded in individualized case planning are formal processes for encouraging participants toward self-sufficiency. This can be done initially by assisting participants to identify their skills and strengths. Once identified, case managers and participants can work together to create and focus on realistic goals. To encourage participants to create clear employment goals, case managers may take participants on tours of work sites, organize sessions for representatives from different fields to talk about their jobs, or create shadowing opportunities or internships to expose participants to different types of employment available to them or that they may like (Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999). When employment goals are identified, case managers help participants set realistic short-term goals that are consistent with their long-term objectives.

Peer relations can also be influential in motivating participants. By creating an environment in which participants encourage each other and learn from one another, participants can motivate each other to continue participating in programs. Welfare-to-work programs can facilitate group activities, organize mentor programs, or create support groups that can increase participation and improve program outcomes (Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999). By creating formal processes to encourage progress, case managers are better able to assist participants in achieving their employment goals while building self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment.

In addition to providing comprehensive assessments and individualized service planning, successful programs provide participants with access to an array of other services that they may need during their participation in work and work-related activities. According to several studies, child care and transportation are consistent barriers that individuals face when participating in welfare-to-work activities (Freedman et al., 2000; Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999; Kauf et al., 2004). Child care assistance has been a highly influential factor in program participation. For example, in the NEWWS study of different welfare-to-work sites, 6% of Riverside County participants reported that they did not participate in work programs because they did not have access to adequate child care or any child care at all (Hamilton, 1995). Transportation has also been a limiting factor to participants who have found it difficult to commute to program sites or work due to the different geographic locations of housing and employment (Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999; Ong & Blumenberg, 1994).

To assist participants with child care, transportation, and other needs, counties can locate TANF agencies within one-stop centers that include employment service providers, specialized service providers, and formal interagency collaborations. In Ohio, for example, Montgomery County's Department of Job and Family Services is nationally recognized as one of the leading one-stop centers in the country where more than 50 agencies provide employment and work assistance, education and training programs, and other community-based services (Kauf et al., 2004). Similarly, locating welfare offices near specialized treatment providers (e.g., mental health clinics and substance abuse and domestic violence programs) can be an effective way for case managers, providers, and participants to access resources and services. Although access

to resources and services can reduce the travel due to close proximity, it does not guarantee utilization by participants.

Interagency collaboration can also improve service access as agencies share policy and program information related to best practices used in the delivery of services, program efficiency, and service accessibility (Kauf et al., 2004). For example, in El Paso County the Community Partnership Group consists of approximately 45 agencies that meet quarterly to identify ways to improve service provision and coordination among service providers. TANF agency staff who attend meetings share the information learned from these meetings with their case managers who, in turn, share the information about resources with participants.

Participant-focused case management strategies focus on barriers to work, employment, and other motivational factors that can encourage full participation in work or work-related activities to reduce barriers to employment and resources. Organization-focused strategies, while maintaining the same goal of work engagement, focus on mobilizing administrative resources to engage participants.

Organization-Focused Strategies

Unlike participant-focused strategies that motivate and encourage participation, organization-focused strategies are used within organizations to achieve broad engagement by clearly defining current and potential "participants" and identifying the time period in which participation will be measured. In some states, all adults receiving TANF assistance are required to participate in program activities, while in other states, some people are exempt. Programs can rely on staff members to identify mandatory participants, or they can use automated systems. In contrast, a "case finder" can be employed to periodically review the status of TANF participants and contact them to schedule orientations to participate in mandatory programs (Hamilton et al., 1997). Although this strategy is time-consuming and costly, it compensates for the shortcomings of an automated tracking system.

Active outreach efforts can ensure that participants who need to participate in work or work-related programs are informed about program expectations and the benefits of participation. Programs using a variety of outreach methods can have higher success rates in engaging participants. Although communicating with participants in person and through the mail has been effective in recruiting participants, more proactive measures can be taken in the form of letters, home visits, and repeated follow-up contacts to encourage participants to sign up for orientation, as reflected in the high rate of participation in Grand Rapids (65%) and Riverside (63%; Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999).

Developing outreach materials in multiple languages that are short, direct, visually engaging, and easily understood by people with a range of educational backgrounds can also help reach out to participants who are not fully participating. Keeping the language simple and the messages concise can increase the chance that participants will read the information and understand it. This in turn will make them more inclined to follow through. Hamilton and Scrivener (1999) suggested that outreach materials should have sentences of no more than 10 words, avoid words with more than three syllables, use an active voice, and keep away from acronyms and complicated welfare terminology.

Communicating a clear and consistent message about the mission or purpose of welfare-to-work programs can help participants understand why they are required to participate. This process begins within the organization by communicating the program message to frontline staff who work directly with participants. For example, in El Paso County, to communicate the mission of the TANF program to staff, the mission statement was printed on the back of business cards and on documents and posters throughout the Department of Human Services (Kauf et al., 2004). Community outreach programs can be used to inform agency partners and the general public of the mission of the welfare-to-work program.

Staff need to be encouraged to communicate the mission, goals, and program requirements to the participants in order to engage them in program activities. London and Mauldon (2006) found that TANF participants often do not have a clear understanding of the program, especially about time-limit policies, extensions, and exemptions. Communicating with participants clearly and regularly can help avoid confusion about program requirements, expectations, and policies (e.g., following up letters with phone calls to schedule appointments and posting signs at local supermarkets, welfare offices, and other places where participants are likely to see them). Hamilton and Scrivener (1999) suggested that the more often a message is repeated, the more likely participants will hear the message and participate. They suggest that it may take as many as 15 times before the message is heard and embedded, and action is taken. Effective outreach efforts include a variety of administrative components. Table 3 includes a checklist of questions for administrators to consider when troubleshooting and identifying potential problems that may arise when reaching out to participants in welfare-to-work programs.

Successful programs have been described as using broadly defined and flexible program requirements to engage more participants in program activities. In a study of engagement strategies, six of the seven study sites defined allowable activities broadly (Kauf et al., 2004). These sites gave case managers the power to select the activities that should be included in the employment plans of participants. Four of these six sites also allowed flexibility in the number of hours for some portion of their caseloads. Although case managers are expected to assign participants to federally allowable activities, case managers in sites that use broadly defined activities are encouraged to place participants who are not ready for work in appropriate placements that first meet their needs, before they are placed in federally allowable activities.

Successful programs give participants options within program guidelines (Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999). States can allow participants who work part-time to engage in other federally allowable activities to meet the state's work participation requirements. Participants with low job skills can be given the option of working or enrolling in basic education. A range of options can expose participants to different types of work and enable them to find a job or activity that most fits their interests. Providing participants with choices can also motivate them to gain control over their life situation when that is part of their employment plan.

Another strategy involves tracking participation and provides case managers with the ability to (a) identify nonparticipation immediately, (b) respond to participants by reengaging or addressing reasons for nonparticipation, and (c) document compliance or noncompliance to hold participants accountable (Kauf et al., 2004). The study of full engagement strategies reported that the tracking of timely and consistent information includes the number of participants and hours they participated in program activities during the reporting period (usually monthly). By using information gathered from contracted service providers or self-reports from participants, case managers were able to compile information in a standard summary report that helped them easily identify individual participation as well as noncompliance. Automated tracking programs combine welfare eligibility data with welfare-to-work program information that allows case managers around the state of Ohio to access participant data and communicate with one another (Hamilton & Scrivener, 1999). Automated systems can provide

Table 3. *Organizational Assessment of Work Engagement Strategies*

Participant Considerations

Are participants being asked how they heard about the program so staff can measure what works?

Are materials written at no higher than a sixth-grade reading level?

Are recruits invited to an orientation to hear about benefits before being given paperwork and eligibility guidelines?

Are attendees given complete written and oral information about programs and services as well as alternatives available in the community?

Are participants receiving full information about the benefits of training and / or employment (such as increased wages, steadiness of work, and better life for family) as well as a description of programs and services?

Program Considerations

Does a written recruitment plan exist that contains monthly recruitment goals, target audience each month, medium to reach the target audience?

Are outreach messages focused on benefits (outcomes like earning more money) rather than on program features and services?

Does the program have written materials such as current brochures, fliers, posters, letters, ads, etc. to use in recruitment or are they relying only on word-of-mouth and networking with other agencies?

Are sufficient numbers showing but then not joining? (Orientation is the issue)

Is the number of trips to join the program kept to a minimum?

Is enough time allotted to orientation to present the necessary material and answer attendee's questions?

Is orientation held frequently enough so that the waiting period to attend is no longer than five business days?

Are orientations held at convenient times?

Does staff who conduct orientation have pleasing personalities and make recruits comfortable?

Are staff skilled public presenters?

Are orientation staff knowledgeable about program services as well as other options for education, training and employment?

Is the orientation motivational and uplifting?

Financial Considerations

Have funds been set aside to achieve recruitment goals?

Are cost/benefit results gathered for each outreach activity and used to determine future efforts?

Note. Adapted from Cygnet Associates (n.d)

immediate follow-up on those participants who are not participating and thereby (a) prevent case managers from forgetting participants who did not participate, (b) emphasize participation requirements by showing participants that case managers are actively involved in tracking and enforcing expectations, and (c) help case managers to learn about barriers experienced by participants so that they can assist them in addressing those issues.

Programs can use sanctions to encourage participants to follow through on their work activities. However, the use of sanctions does not necessarily guarantee higher participation rates. The NEWWS study found that although high enforcement programs increase participation rates, higher rates of sanctioning *among those programs* did not necessarily increase participation levels (Hamilton, 2002). High enforcement programs imposing partial-family sanctions on at least one third of TANF participants in the programs were just as successful in engaging people in activities as high-enforcement programs that had more moderate sanctioning rates. In other words, the programs with higher sanctioning rates did not have higher participation rates or larger participation impacts. Consistent with these findings, London and Mauldon (2006) found that California's sanction policies were ineffective due to the lack of enforcement. However, the workers admitted that they often were lenient themselves by giving noncompliant participants more opportunities to come back into compliance than regulations required. It is clear that sanctions need to be presented with a clear message about noncompliance.

Performance standards set by the county or state can encourage staff to focus on participant outcomes (i.e., the number of participants placed at work placements or permanent jobs) and program priorities (i.e., level of engagement for participants). Monitoring caseloads and the efforts of case managers can help managers identify staff who need support. Kauf and colleagues (2004) found that supervisors played an active role in monitoring the performance of case managers (e.g., case management reports, monthly meetings, and case reviews). For example, Utah's performance review involves supervisors thoroughly assessing each case manager's knowledge of basic services, policies, computer services, participant outcomes, and professional conduct. In addition, supervisors review the participant files of case managers on a regular basis depending on the experience level of the case manager.

Peer review systems can also be used to monitor the performance of case managers by exchanging cases to review files for accuracy and appropriateness, as well as to promote a learning environment to discuss problem issues or share new methods of engagement. Such systems need to be assessed to see if there is a return on the investment of time in terms of more engaged participants.

Organization-focused strategies also need to be assessed to see if they facilitate the transition from welfare to work for a wide range of program participants. Much like participant-focused strategies, organization-focused approaches need to assess what is functional in the current system, find ways to build on these strengths, and make recommendations to improve.

Implications for Research and Practice

This review suggests that states need to improve their strategies for engaging hard-to-employ TANF participants if they are to meet federal workforce participation rates. As these participants find it difficult to make the transition toward employment, they may need additional services to participate in work-related activities that are responsive to particular geographic and population needs as well as the service delivery systems.

The literature suggests that the most effective strategy for engaging participants in employment or welfare-to-work activities combines elements of both the LFA and HCD approaches, such as Portland's welfare-to-work program (Hamilton et al., 2001). In comparison to the 10 other NEWWS study sites, the Portland program (a) increased TANF participants' 5-year average earnings by 25%, (b) increased the average number of quarters employed by 21%, and (c) increased stable employment and earnings growth more than any other program evaluated in the NEWWS study (Hamilton, 2002). The success of this program suggests that an employment focus using both job search and short-term education or training (while emphasizing the importance of waiting for a good job) is a key element of an effective program.

Descriptive studies of engagement strategies feature either participant-focused or organization-focused strategies. Although most of these strategies emerged from program experiences, some have been drawn from program evaluations that do not explicitly compare strategies to one another to determine effectiveness. Depending on the program and its goals, different strategies can be used to engage TANF participants in work activities.

Future Studies

The lack of rigorous experimental studies on the effectiveness of specific strategies is a major limitation of this review. There is insufficient research on the effectiveness of each strategy or the combinations of strategies. Given the status of the literature, future studies are needed

to evaluate the effectiveness of engagement strategies, especially in relationship to cost-effective outcomes. The issues described in the following sections need to be built into the design of future studies.

Studies should have an experimental design. Experimental studies that compare the outcomes of specific approaches, program models, and strategies in different study sites are needed to determine which strategies are most effective. For example, an experimental study in Columbus, Ohio, compared the effectiveness of integrated and traditional case management for engaging hard-to-employ TANF participants and found that integrated case management is more effective than traditional case management (Scrivener et al., 2001). Given the diversity of hard-to-employ participants in different jurisdictions, a variety of experimental studies are needed to determine whether strategies can be successfully applied in different settings.

Studies should replicate the mixed strategy. The Portland welfare-to-work program suggests that combining aspects of both the LFA and HCD approaches are most effective at engaging TANF participants in welfare-to-work activities. Additional studies are needed to replicate this combination in different settings (e.g., different demographic characteristics of TANF participants in different localities that reflect different labor markets, in order to learn if this mixed approach is generalizable across different jurisdictions).

Studies on engagement strategies in the private sector should be explored. Although this review focused on the literature in the public and nonprofit sectors, literature on private sector engagement could shed light on other successful engagement strategies. For example, the use of private sector incentives could be applied to hard-to-serve populations. Future experimental studies could compare engagement strategies in both public and for-profit sectors.

Studies on long-term employment outcomes should be more seriously considered. Although most current studies on engagement strategies focus on short-term outcomes to meet federal workforce participation requirements, they do not fully assess the personal barriers experienced by the hard-to-employ. Studies need to focus on strategies that promote long-term sustainable employment and ways to overcome employment barriers. For example, the MDRC (2007a) study on employment retention and advancement uses a random assignment design to examine the effectiveness of program approaches that help TANF participants and other low-income people remain employed and increase their earnings. Another MDRC study (2007b, Bloom; Redcross, Hsueh, Rich, & Martin, 2007) on enhanced services for the hard-to-employ uses an experimental design to test interventions aimed at overcoming common barriers experienced by this population.

In addition to more research, the major practice implication from this review is the need for more discussion among practitioners and others about engagement strategies in order to share knowledge and experience about successful strategies to engage hard-to-employ TANF participants. Similar to the county-wide planning that launched California's TANF program, CalWORKS, community meetings with public agencies, nonprofits, and community members are needed to inform each other about the changing needs and experiences of the hard-to-employ. For example, to engage Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) CalWORKs participants, Chow et al. (2001) suggested including families of participants in the engagement process rather than just the individuals themselves. Whereas most welfare-to-work programs focus on the activities of individual participants, AAPI individuals are likely to frame issues in a family or community context. Knowledge of such cultural norms is useful in developing engagement strategies and can be obtained by including community members in planning activities.

Conclusion

The significant caseload reduction as a result of implementing welfare reform indicates that many individuals who remain on welfare have a particularly difficult time leaving the program. Many TANF participants face multiple and recurring barriers that prevent them from becoming employed. Although immigrants on welfare may face cultural, institutional, and language barriers that limit employability, others face significant personal barriers such as domestic violence, substance addiction, and mental health issues.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 put increased pressure on states and counties to engage TANF participants in work or welfare-to-work activities. However, these participation requirements and the related engagement strategies often lead to short-term workforce participation. Given that TANF participants have significant challenges that make them hard to employ, there is a need to shift from strategies that achieve short-term participation to strategies that address specific barriers in order to help TANF participants overcome their obstacles and become more employable.

Experimental strategies tend to focus on short-term solutions to long-term problems. As a result, meeting workforce participation requirements does not address the larger issue of poverty. There is a need to reassess engagement strategies in order to focus on long-term sustainable employment to assist people in their move out of poverty. Unless more long-term approaches such as these are taken with the hard-to-employ, these TANF participants will most likely continue to cycle back on to the public assistance rolls.

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