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Life After TANF: A Survey of Former Program Enrollees

The Virginia Department of Social Services is responsible for overseeing several benefit programs. Among these, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program benefits tens of thousands of Virginian families with low incomes each year. The agency has a keen interest in improving program effectiveness, and helping families achieve and sustain financial stability.

Toward this goal, the agency's TANF program and Office of Research and Planning collaborated and launched a survey of former participants in TANF Virginia Initiative for Education and Work (VIEW), the state's education and work training program for adult TANF recipients who are able to work. The questions that we strived to answer through our survey follow:

- How did former TANF VIEW enrollees utilize the program?
- Why did they leave TANF VIEW? How many returned?
- What do they think would make the TANF VIEW experience better?
- How did they fare nine months after leaving TANF VIEW? Did the COVID-19 pandemic affect their employment? Did they often worry about their financial situation?

Our study is the first to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected outcomes among TANF leavers in Virginia by leveraging their exit timing. For clients who left TANF VIEW between January and May 2019, the nine-month benchmark occurred prior to March 2020, when COVID-19 became a state and nationwide emergency. For those who exited in June 2019 and later,



the nine-month benchmark occurred during the pandemic, which may have negatively affected their ability to continue working or find employment.

Methodology

We administered the “Virginia TANF VIEW Exit Survey” through Qualtrics XM, a cloud-based survey platform. The survey contained 61 questions and took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

Our sample consists of the case leads that left TANF VIEW between January 1, 2019 and February 28, 2020. We reached out to 2,497 qualifying case leads via postal mail, SMS text messaging, and email—depending on their preferred method of communication recorded in the case management system. The survey link was active from July 21 to August 6, 2021. To ensure confidentiality, the survey was anonymous; no personal information was collected. We also offered

respondents that completed the survey and submitted their name and contact information in a separate raffle entry for the chance to win a \$25 VISA gift card.

Overall, we received 184 valid responses (7.4% response rate). A possible reason for such low participation could be that enrollees' contact information changed very quickly after their exit. It is also plausible that the survey was too long, and people simply did not want to take the time to complete it.

Given the low response rate, the opinions of the survey respondents may not be broadly representative of the opinions of former TANF VIEW enrollees. With this caution, we now turn to the main analysis.

Results

Respondents were allowed to skip a question and to stop the survey at any time if they wanted. For this analysis,

See Life After TANF on page 26

nonresponses are coded as missing. All subsequent percentages are calculated with the total number of respondents who answered the particular question being analyzed as the denominator.

1. TANF VIEW Experience

The survey first asked respondents about their most recent experience with TANF VIEW. Specifically, we inquired about their participation in various VIEW activities. Because former clients might have participated in more than one activity, they could check more than one answer choice.

Less than the majority of respondents (41.3%) participated in any educational activity such as participating in trade school/certification programs, taking college classes, earning a high school diploma, attending an English as a Second Language class, and participating in the Adult Basic Education program. Instead, most complied with the program's work requirement by participating in work-related activities (76%). In particular, more than half of the respondents (56.8%) worked while in TANF VIEW. However, they were less likely to engage in other work-related activities such as skills training (26.2%) or on-the-job training (12.6%).

While in TANF VIEW, respondents may also have received supportive services that helped them return to school, find a job, or stay employed. Among 175 respondents who answered the question, 84.6 percent (n=148) replied that they received at least one type of service. The most popular services were "help with transportation expenses" (48.6%), such as bus tickets and gas vouchers, and "Childcare" (47.4%). These were followed by "help with food and utilities" (37.7%), "help with medical or dental needs" (20%), "help with work-related expenses" (17.1%), and housing assistance (14.3%).

2. Leaving TANF VIEW

Next, the survey asked respondents about their experience leaving TANF VIEW. Exceeding the 24-month state time limit was most often selected as the reason for exit (35.4%). Many respondents (23%) also remarked that

they no longer met program requirements such as having at least one child in the household. Only 18 (11.2%) said that they left because their income was too high.

Returning to the program is one of the possible outcomes for former enrollees, so we asked whether respondents returned after leaving TANF VIEW between January 2019 and February 2020. Among the 157 who answered the question, close to 90 percent of these respondents indicated that they have not returned. Thus, clients generally do not return to the program after they exit.

3. Enhancing TANF VIEW Experience

Seizing the opportunity to garner opinions about the program among former participants, we asked respondents what they thought would make the TANF VIEW experience better. The most popular suggestion was "Longer time limits to receive benefits" (56.5%). This recommendation is not surprising given that most respondents left the program after the 24-month clock ran out.

Respondents also recommended, "More education and training programs" (46%), "Less strict policies" (37.3%), "More help with exploring career pathways" (34.8%), and "Employment and training opportunities closer to where I live" (31.1%).

4. Post-TANF VIEW Outcome

Enrollee participation in the labor force after leaving TANF VIEW is our primary outcome of interest. We first analyzed respondents' employment status at the time of program exit. The majority of respondents (59%) said they were employed when they left the program. On the other hand, about half as many (27.3%) did not have a job when they exited, 13.7 percent of respondents did not remember.

Respondents were also asked whether they were working nine months after leaving the program. The distribution was very similar to the preceding analysis. A little less than 60 percent of respondents had a paying job. About 30 percent were unemployed at that time, and 11 percent could not remember.

To see if the COVID-19 pandemic impacted post-exit employment, we compared the percentages of people with a job nine months after leaving TANF VIEW within each of the five cohorts below defined by their nine-month post-exit follow-up period.

- Fall 2019 cohort: October 2019–November 2019
- Winter 2019–2020 cohort: December 2019–February 2020
- Spring 2020 cohort: March 2020–May 2020
- Summer 2020 cohort: June 2020–August 2020
- Fall 2020 cohort: September 2020–November 2020

Compared to the pre-pandemic Fall 2019 (59.5%) and Winter 2019–2020 (72%) cohorts, the proportion of those employed was substantially lower for the Spring 2020 cohort (43.4%), whose follow-up period coincided with the beginning of the pandemic. The estimate is smaller for the Summer 2020 cohort (50%) as well; their nine-month period occurred when some businesses just started to re-open. Due to the small number of respondents in each cohort, however, the differences were not statistically distinguishable. As a result, the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and employment among former TANF clients remains inconclusive.

Finally, we attempted to gauge former clients' financial well-being after leaving TANF VIEW through the three statements below.

- I worried about paying my monthly bills.
- I worried that there wouldn't be enough money to afford clothing, household items, food, medical care, and child care.
- We never seemed to have enough money to buy something we'd like to have or go somewhere just for fun.

Respondents could appraise each statement using a five-point scale, 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5, "strongly agree." We aggregated answers to create an index ranging from 3 to 15. The most frequent


response was 15 (38.5%), indicating the severest financial distress. Thus, former program enrollees overwhelmingly agreed that their household struggled financially after leaving TANF VIEW.

Summary and Recommendations

Through our survey, we sought to investigate the outcomes among case leads that exited TANF VIEW between January 2019 and February 2020. The vast majority of respondents left TANF VIEW because they exhausted the Virginia time limit of 24 months, even though they were still not able to meet all of their basic needs. Based on this finding, we strongly endorse removal or expansion of the state time limit.

Furthermore, about 40 percent of respondents did not have a job when they exited TANF VIEW. They may have been pushed off the program due

to the state clock mentioned above. The program needs to ensure that customers have the means to support themselves before leaving the program.

It is also clear that former program enrollees continued to struggle financially post exit. It would be beneficial if they could get referred to jobs with higher wages or prospects for raise/promotion in the future. In addition, recall that more than half our respondents worked while in TANF VIEW. However, 46 percent indicated that they would have liked more education and training programs that could have enhanced their future job opportunities and earning potential. We recommend that the program encourage clients to pursue education and training that seem currently underutilized, rather than immediately placing them in a job that does not provide opportunities to help them succeed for the long term. 

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PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST continued from page 23

employee and learned that she had to take 17 different steps to complete just one section of the application. Without an environment where she felt comfortable sharing her frustration and her perspective on how to improve the process, we would never have known about this roadblock and been able to make meaningful change.

This moment can be an inflection point for state agencies to implement better, more transformative ways to serve their constituents. Flush with federal funding, and now with a full grasp of managing through the pandemic, agencies are equipped to address the future head on. To accomplish this, they must take the time to fully understand the problems they experience and consider human-centric solutions before taking steps to change them.

Perform a vision and strategy checkup for your state agency.

A human-centered transformation starts with a health check of the agency vision. Agencies need to ask themselves:


■ **Has the vision of the agency changed, or does it need to**

change? Needs and expectations were changing rapidly even before the pandemic exposed gaps in service delivery. Do the vision and mission of the agency still reflect what the people who use it need and want? To be clear, your services haven't changed, but the way you deliver these government services certainly has. One of my first tasks as Commissioner was to ask the team if our vision was still relevant. After much discussion, we realized that, as an agency, we had already accomplished the stated vision and it was time to think bigger—to push ourselves into even higher performance.

■ **What is the current state and the desired future state of the agency?**

Agencies must ask themselves: Do we really know our current state? We are often moving so quickly that it seems impossible to reflect on the status of operations that seem to be working. But without understanding the current state, agencies cannot dream of a future state of seamless service delivery.

It is critical to identify what the agency wants to be, and how it wants to serve people, before embarking on a transformation. The goal may be total modernization of systems or it may be incremental change of policies. No matter how agencies are considering change, human-centered design should be at the top of the list of must-haves.

■ **Does the agency workforce have the skills and engagement to activate the vision?** To be successful, the agency workforce needs to be engaged and able to achieve the vision and future state. In the era of the Great Resignation, how do agencies continue to attract, upskill, and retain the people they need? Are you checking on the emotional and mental health of employees? And how can you use human-centered design to help eliminate redundancies and make work less frustrating for agency employees? 

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