

# EVERY SYSTEM PLAYS A ROLE IN WORKING TO END HOMELESSNESS

## How the TANF System Can Support Economic Opportunity for Families Experiencing Homelessness

April 2016, Stakeholder Resource

The resources and services available through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program are critical to addressing and ending family homelessness.

Most families experiencing homelessness are eligible for TANF assistance, which can be used for a variety of income support, employment, education, training, and work support services that can help stabilize these families. However, research indicates that only 41 percent of families who are experiencing homelessness receive income and employment support from the TANF program.

This resource offers ways that state and local TANF systems can increase employment and economic opportunity for homeless jobseekers and ensure that families are connected with income supports. This resource also provides current examples of innovative ways state TANF resources have been leveraged to support the needs of homeless families.

---

***In no state does TANF provide cash benefits equal to even half of the federal poverty level. In 16 states, it provides benefits of less than 20 percent of the federal poverty level—\$325 per month for a family of three, which is far below local rental rates in nearly every part of the country.***

---

## **Background: TANF & Families Experiencing Homelessness**

The resources and services available through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program are critical to addressing and ending family homelessness. State TANF programs can be leveraged to provide access to work opportunities and support services for families experiencing homelessness, thus reducing hardship, mitigating the effects of homelessness, and supporting families in charting a pathway to work and opportunity.

Families experiencing homelessness are usually headed by a single woman who, on average, is in her late 20s with approximately two children, one or both under six years of age. Among all homeless women, 60 percent have children under the age of 18, making most homeless families eligible for TANF assistance. Nationwide, homeless families comprise over one third of the total homeless population.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 206,286 people in families were counted as homeless on a single night in January 2015.<sup>2</sup> Public schools reported that 1.3 million students experienced homelessness at some point during the 2013-2014 school year,<sup>3</sup> a figure that includes students who were sharing housing with other people due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, or living in hotels or motels due to the lack of adequate alternate accommodations.

Because state TANF block grant funds can be used for a variety of income support, employment, education, training, and work support services, these funds represent a critical resource in stabilizing families experiencing homelessness and supporting participation in employment. Indeed, states can use their TANF block grant to support child care, transportation, work appropriate clothing or tools, work preparation and job search, subsidized employment activities, and other services including rental assistance for homeless families. Despite significant need among homeless families, research indicates that only 41 percent of families who are experiencing homelessness receive income and employment support from the TANF program.<sup>4</sup>

State and local variance in the kinds of services and supports available through the TANF program, as well as equity in accessing TANF services, can be challenges to receiving support through the TANF system for families experiencing homelessness. Access to TANF programs and services for

***Most families experiencing homelessness are eligible for TANF assistance, which can be used for a variety of income support, employment, education, training, and work support services that can help stabilize these families. However, research indicates that only 41 percent of families who are experiencing homelessness receive income and employment support from the TANF program.***

---

***Access to TANF programs and services for people experiencing homelessness may be limited as a result of many factors.***

---

people experiencing homelessness may be limited as a result of many factors, including:

- limited access to TANF offices due to proximity or transportation barriers;
- TANF office hours of operation that may be misaligned with family shelter and work schedules;
- limited or non-existent access to the internet by families experiencing homelessness in order to complete online application forms;
- having certain criminal convictions that prevent access to benefits;
- TANF agency staff who are not trained in or comfortable providing services to people experiencing homelessness;
- time limits imposed on the receipt of TANF benefits;
- Missing documentation needed to apply for benefits such as a driver's license.

Finally, TANF block grant resources are used for a variety of purposes in states and localities and information about what services are available may not be readily available or widely publicized in the places where families experiencing homelessness seek shelter or other housing-related services.

---

***There are a number of employment models that have shown promise in meeting the employment needs and interests of homeless jobseekers, and many of these models could be funded through TANF.***

---

## **How the TANF System Can Improve Employment and Access to the Safety Net for Families Experiencing Homelessness**

The TANF program has an important role to play in mitigating homelessness and hardship among families and supporting access to employment and economic opportunity. Here are a few ways that state and local TANF systems can increase employment and economic opportunity for homeless jobseekers and ensure that families are connected with income supports.

### **Leverage TANF Resources as a Springboard to Employment**

**#1: Fund employment programs to serve families experiencing homelessness.** Employment is a critical element in the fight to prevent and end homelessness. TANF block grant programs should fund employment services for homeless families specifically and contract with community-based organizations with experience serving homeless jobseekers and employment programs to implement these models. There are a number of employment models that have shown promise in meeting the employment needs and interests of homeless jobseekers, and many of these models could be funded through TANF block grant funding.

**#2: Support the success of Rapid Re-Housing programs by funding work supports and employment programs.** Access to employment is critical for Rapid Re-Housing programs across the country to be successful and for families to transition successfully to unsubsidized housing. TANF program resources could be deployed to fund critical work supports such as work appropriate clothing and transportation. TANF resources could also fund employment services that offer immediate attachment to work and earnings, such as subsidized employment and transitional jobs.

# EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD:

## How TANF Resources Have Been Used to Support Homeless Families

TANF block grant funds have been leveraged to support homeless families in a variety of ways including the provision of rental assistance, housing subsidies in addition to cash assistance, and support for re-housing costs including first and last months' rent, utility deposits, furnishings, and other things. TANF funds have also been used to implement subsidized employment programs in conjunction with Rapid Re-Housing Programs to support pathways to employment for homeless families. Here are four current examples of innovative ways state TANF resources have been leveraged to support the needs of homeless families.

The Washington State Community Services Division and the Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery are implementing a *Supported Employment Pilot (IPS)* for TANF recipients with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. A subset of participants are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Medicaid funding is used to provide life skills, case management, and counseling and psychotherapy. TANF funding is used to implement the IPS model, job development, and job skill training.

Click [here](#) for more information.

The Massachusetts Secure Jobs Initiative immediately enrolls eligible families into the state TANF program in order to connect families with child care and transportation vouchers as well as cash assistance.

Homeless services in Massachusetts are accessed through TANF offices, increasing the likelihood that families are quickly connected to TANF supports.

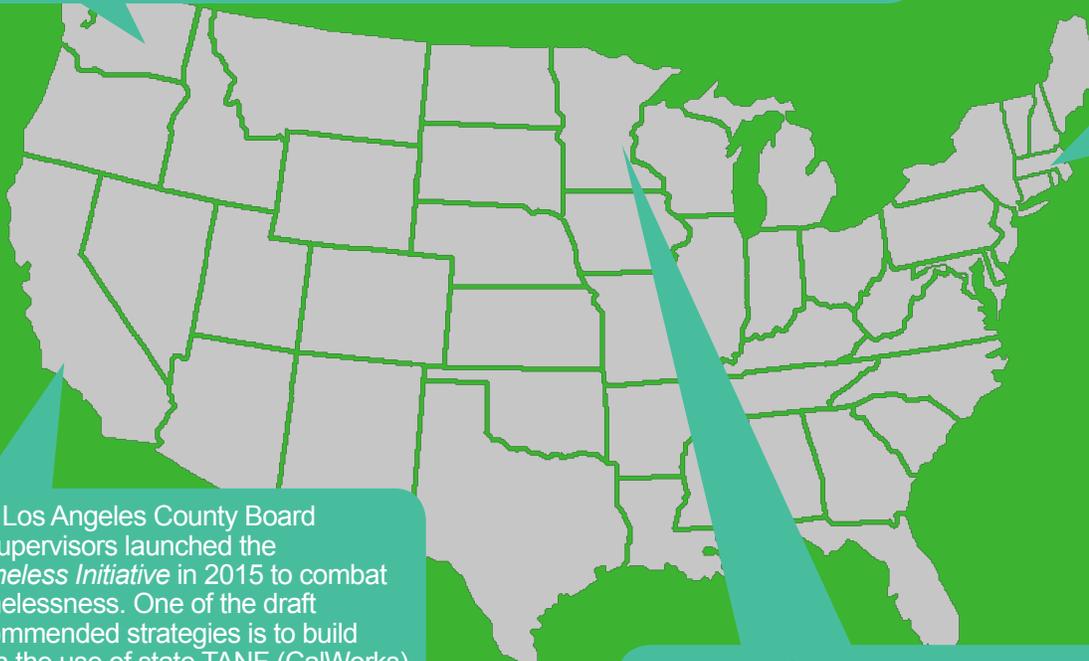
Click [here](#) for more information.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors launched the *Homeless Initiative* in 2015 to combat homelessness. One of the draft recommended strategies is to build upon the use of state TANF (CalWORKs) funds for subsidized employment in conjunction with Rapid Re-Housing strategies. The plan directs the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) to enhance the existing DPSS CalWORKs Employment Program for homeless CalWORKs Families and CalWORKs families housed through a Department of Children and Family Services Housing Subsidy.

Click [here](#) for more information.

In Hennepin County, Minnesota, a pilot project called the *Stable Families Initiative* seeks to reduce the number of families who receive TANF from being repeat shelter users. The project uses holistic services funded by the state's TANF block grant including homelessness prevention, coordinated and intensive employment services, and an intensive case management model paired with a two-year rent subsidy and employment services for a cohort of young parents.

Click [here](#) for more information.



---

***Co-locating TANF staff at shelters and within community-based homeless service providers can go a long way toward increasing access to eligible resources for families experiencing homelessness.***

---

---

***Unstable housing is a significant barrier to stable employment. Families should be able to apply time spent searching for housing as a barrier removal activity countable toward a state's work participation rate.***

---

**Address Access Issues to Receiving TANF Benefits for TANF Families**

**#1: Assess equity of access at TANF offices and make changes if needed.** Take a broad look across many elements of the TANF offices including space, rules, allowance of alternative forms of identification and mailing addresses, hours of operation, and cultural competence of staff, among other things.

**#2: Deploy TANF screeners through multiple engagement channels to increase access to TANF-funded resources.** Every family experiencing homelessness should be assessed for TANF eligibility. Communities could co-locate staff at shelters and at homeless service providers in the community, add roving staff with expertise in screening for TANF eligibility, or screen for TANF benefit eligibility as part of street outreach teams and within the Coordinated Entry system. Co-locating TANF staff at shelters and within community-based homeless service providers can go a long way toward increasing access to eligible resources for families experiencing homelessness and helping educate families about the TANF-funded resources in the community. In some cases, co-location of staff may not be feasible and so communities should deploy roving staff to organizations that can screen for benefits eligibility and/or assign an eligibility case worker to homeless street outreach teams. Additionally, ensuring that Coordinated Entry systems screen for TANF eligibility upfront and refer eligible families for services should be standard practice within Coordinated Entry systems.

**Review and Augment State and Local TANF Policy to Ensure Success for Homeless Families**

**#1: Review state and local policies as they relate to the availability of cash assistance, support services such as child care, transportation, and employment supports, and prioritize families experiencing homelessness.** States and localities have broad discretion with regard to how they use the TANF block grant. A thorough review of current policies can help shed light on the degree to which TANF services and supports are being offered to and prioritized for families experiencing homelessness and if available services match the employment and service needs of homeless families. TANF administrators should review these policies and current supports offered and make changes as needed to align TANF supports with the needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

**#2: Make housing search a barrier removal activity countable for states' TANF work participation rate.** Unstable housing is a significant barrier to stable employment. States and localities should allow a family to apply the time spent participating in housing search as a barrier removal activity countable toward states' work participation rate. States should review the list of barrier removal activities and add housing search to the list of allowable activities.

**#3: If a family is experiencing homelessness, stop the clock on their receipt of TANF benefits.** A family experiencing homelessness is in a period of crisis and should not be penalized for receiving supports that help them get stably housed. States should examine their policies as they relate to the lifetime limit on TANF benefits for families and stop the clock for those who are experiencing homelessness.

---

***By coordinating with the public workforce system, the TANF system can increase the availability of employment, education, and training supports for homeless jobseekers.***

---

***Maximize Coordination Among TANF and Multiple Systems***

**#1: Coordinate with workforce programs and systems.** Current public workforce law requires that localities place a priority on serving low-income individuals in the community. By coordinating with the public workforce system, the TANF system can increase the availability of employment, education, and training supports for homeless jobseekers. Likewise, the TANF block grant can support the development of intensive employment programs and support services, such as transitional jobs programs and child care. Communities should assess the availability of intensive employment programs and support services for jobseekers experiencing homelessness and determine how best to leverage Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and TANF resources. Resources such as this [Community Asset Mapping guide](#) as well as gap analysis processes lead by Continuum of Care can help shed light on the resources available in the community, capacity, and unmet need.

**#2: Participate in the local homeless coalition/system/Continuum of Care.** Homeless systems are creating new streamlined ways to educate people about what services are available and to engage them in those services. The TANF system can participate in the development of this coordinated assessment process and help compile and maintain information about available resources through the TANF system. TANF administrators should participate in the coordinated assessment/entry processes underway by attending meetings to learn about resources and strategize with the homeless system on ways both systems can support the needs of families experiencing homelessness. Additionally, TANF administrators can participate in a variety of Continuum of Care activities, workgroups, or committees such as those focused on income stability or employment.

**#3: Explore and implement shared data systems.** Sharing system-level data with regard to families that are experiencing homelessness and eligibility and receipt of TANF benefits ensures that case managers from both systems know what resources families are accessing or eligible to receive, if they are receiving those resources, and prevents duplication of screening and referral efforts. In Washington State, for example, the integrated [TANF and HMIS](#) data system has allowed state workers to confirm eligibility, services, and participation in both systems among families in order to better coordinate services.

***Washington State's integrated TANF and Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) [data system](#) has allowed state workers to confirm eligibility, services, and participation in both systems among families in order to better coordinate services.***

---

**Families experiencing homelessness often have complex housing, income, and support service needs. Having a specialized staff person with experience working with homeless families can help ensure families receive culturally competent services and supports.**

---

### **Build Internal Capacity Within TANF Offices to Serve Homeless Families**

**#1: Prioritize staff training and professional development.** Front line TANF office staff can be critical gatekeepers to accessing TANF benefits for homeless families. Educating these staff about families experiencing homelessness can help ensure families access all forms of benefits they are eligible to receive. TANF administrators should organize workshops and coordinate with Continua of Care and human services agencies in the local area to educate TANF office staff about homelessness, domestic violence, and behavioral and mental health issues that can increase the risk of homelessness. Likewise, TANF agency staff can help educate homeless service organizations and the Continua of Care about available TANF resources in the community.

**#2: Designate or hire a member of the staff to have expertise with people experiencing homelessness.** Families experiencing homelessness often have complex housing, income, and support service needs. Having a specialized staff person with experience working with homeless families can go a long way toward ensuring that families access services and supports in a culturally competent manner. Roles could range from a specialist in matters related to homelessness or housing instability who serves as a resource person for other employees, a liaison between the TANF office and various homeless shelters, or a social worker to assist with the needs of TANF applicants who are experiencing homelessness. Another function of this role might be to track and monitor families that are close to reaching their time limit for TANF benefits, as these families may be at high risk of homelessness if they lose benefits.

#### **References**

1. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (n.d). *Families with children*. Retrieved from <https://www.usich.gov/goals/families>
2. Henry, M., Shivji, A., de Sousa, T., Cohen, R. (2015). *The 2015 annual homeless assessment report (AHAR) to Congress*. Retrieved from The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development website: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/4832/2015-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness/>
3. Endres, C., & Cidade, M. (2015). *Federal data summary school years 2011-12 to 2013-14*. Retrieved from the National Center for Homeless Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro website: <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1112-1314.pdf>
4. Abt Associates, Inc. (2012). *The impact of housing and services interventions on homeless families*. Unpublished study. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.

#### **Image Attribution (page 4)**

Spitfire19. (2008). *Blank map USA*. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons website: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BlankMap-USA.png>

33 W. Grand Avenue, Suite 500, Chicago, IL 60654 | 312.870.4949 | [ni@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:ni@heartlandalliance.org)  
[www.heartlandalliance.org/nationalinitiatives](http://www.heartlandalliance.org/nationalinitiatives) | [@NIheartland](https://twitter.com/NIheartland) | <http://bit.ly/NIFacebook>



**HEARTLAND ALLIANCE**  
NATIONAL INITIATIVES

**HEARTLAND  
ALLIANCE**  
ENDING POVERTY