

Understanding Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

A flexible source for funding healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) is a flexible source of government money for programs that support families. TANF is distributed from the federal government to states in fixed amounts each year (called “block grants”). States are then left to decide how best to use the money. TANF block grants were created in 1996 as a replacement for the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) and the Emergency Assistance (EA) programs which were commonly referred to as “welfare.” Historically, AFDC was a program that provided cash assistance to poor parents with children.

All TANF-Funded Services Must Meet One of Four TANF Goals:

Goal 1: Provide assistance to *needy families* so that children can be cared for in their homes, or the homes of relatives.

Goal 2: End dependence of *needy families* on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work and marriage.

Goal 3: Prevent and reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

Goal 4: Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

TANF is not a traditional federal program that has one uniform eligibility criteria nor does it have a menu of services from which states can choose. Rather, all TANF services are left for states to determine as long as they address one or more of the goals of TANF (see Text Box). Although there is no federal requirement that TANF money be spent to support marriage/relationship or responsible fatherhood programs, state policymakers are given sole authority to determine the appropriate balance between TANF investments in their cash assistance programs and support for other types of services.

The purpose of this Tip Sheet is to provide marriage and relationship education practitioners with an overview of TANF’s four goals so that they better understand how TANF can be used as a possible source of funding for healthy marriage and relationship services. It is important to note that TANF regulations vary by state and practitioners are encouraged to research their particular state’s policies.



The Goals of TANF

The Text Box above lists the specific TANF goals. In general terms, programs and services must be designed to do at least one of the following: provide assistance to needy families, promote employment and marriage, prevent and reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancy and/or encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Each state may create services that will meet one of these goals (or all of them).

Services designed to meet TANF goals one and two require *eligibility* based on living with a specified relative and financial status (this includes the provision of cash assistance for parents with children). TANF provides states the flexibility to establish both the income threshold (i.e. amount of income and resources) and the process for determining whether financial eligibility is met (i.e. the proof needed to verify income). Services designed to address these goals must also have a process to document that participants are the specified relatives of a minor child. Parents that do not live with their child, such as non-resident fathers, can still be eligible. The documentation process may vary by service.

Goals three and four have no financial-eligibility requirement, nor do they require that participants be specified relatives of a minor child (ren). This flexibility allows for services to be offered to a much wider group of people—mothers, fathers, teens, children, married couples, unmarried couples and single parents, regardless of whether they are, or have been, receiving cash assistance. Many marriage-related services are designed to meet goals three or four.

These goals provide states with the flexibility to develop programs and services best suited

to address the unique circumstances of local populations. Thus, TANF encourages (not requires) states to think creatively about services to help individuals form and maintain healthy marriages. TANF allows for wide latitude for defining the type of services and eligible populations for states that choose to use TANF funds for healthy marriage services.

Examples of TANF-Funded Services

- Creation of marriage education services to couples
- Relationship skills to teens and young adults
- Training for service providers to deliver healthy marriage services
- Conferences, meetings and events designed to educate stakeholders about healthy marriage initiatives
- Surveys and studies to determine attitudes, barriers and perceptions about marriage
- Handbooks, flyers and brochures about the benefits of marriage and how to increase skills for a healthy marriage
- Public service materials to raise awareness for what constitutes healthy marriage, benefits of healthy marriage and where to access services to support healthy marriage skills
- Support for healthy marriage coalitions or commissions

TANF-Funded Services

State examples of TANF-funded services have accumulated over a decade, including great examples for healthy marriage strategies. However, there is no “approved list” of programs or services. Healthy marriage, relationship education and responsible fatherhood programs and services can vary from single site programs to comprehensive statewide service initiatives. They can include research to examine attitudes toward marriage and family structure, provide training on marriage education curricula for service delivery professionals, public awareness or the creation of informational materials to educate people about relationship skills. The Text Box above contains examples of how states have supported the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Summary

TANF funds include cash assistance and employment assistance, but are not limited to them. The federal TANF regulations provide states with the flexibility to deliver services to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families and prevent/reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies. As practitioners and administrators begin to think about the sustainability of marriage/relationship education programs, it is helpful to consider TANF as a potential resource for supporting similar activities and services. States are responsible for designing service delivery strategies that meet: 1) the TANF goals; and 2) the needs of families in their state.

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