

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Nonprofit Perspectives on Supporting Families Applying to Public Cash Assistance in New Jersey*

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Background

The functioning of the U.S. social safety net as a support for low-income families depends on various means-tested programs and a system of both public agencies and nonprofit organizations. One of these public benefit programs is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provides essential income support for families experiencing poverty but access to the program is not always easy or equitable. Nonprofit organizations form a protective layer of support by providing resources and guidance to those most in need. To gain a deeper understanding of nonprofit experts' experiences and recommendations, the Social Policy Lab conducted a mixed methods research project using New Jersey as a case study. This brief summarizes findings from Holcomb and colleagues (2021)*.

Key Takeaways

- **Nonprofits complementary to public sector:** Nonprofit organizations reported their role as complementary to public assistance programs in supporting low-income families seeking TANF benefits. Nonprofits often assist applicants by promoting program awareness, navigating the application process, filling gaps in program information, and ensuring equitable program access.
- **Challenges during COVID-19:** Nonprofits experienced ongoing difficulties during COVID-19 in addressing families' heightened need for other support services—especially considering New Jersey's relatively low TANF benefit level compared to its cost of living.
- **Pandemic waivers more helpful to existing recipients:** Families that were receiving TANF before COVID-19 benefited from temporary waivers which eased requirements related to redeterminations and work participation. Nonprofit staff differed in opinion on the accessibility of the program during COVID-19, some noting virtual application options as easing application burden and others concerned about the digital divide, but all agreed on the expected increase in need among families.
- **Restricted access for marginalized groups:** Nonprofit staff noted that access for applicants with certain identities and experiences could be particularly restrictive. Non-citizens, applicants with limited English language proficiency, with involvement in the legal system, or with certain racial and ethnic backgrounds encounter difficulties in accessing TANF.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study, several policy and practice changes could enhance the integration of community-based organizations and public assistance programs, better meeting the needs of TANF families in New Jersey. These include:

- Increasing funding to allow for more staffing and smaller caseload sizes for workers at both county welfare offices (CWOs) and nonprofit organizations could enhance both sectors' abilities to provide emergency support to families most in need.
- Establishing a community outreach specialist for each county welfare office could improve cooperation between offices and nonprofits by serving as a central point of contact. Sharing policy documents—such as those on pandemic-related TANF changes—and conducting joint meetings could improve ongoing communication between offices and nonprofits so they can better help families navigate the application process.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of relaxing or suspending application eligibility and compliance requirements to improve program access and equity. Thus, many policy and practice recommendations long offered by nonprofit organizations are of increased importance now. Some of these include:
 - Reducing application and eligibility barriers, such as:
 - Improving communication materials to be understood at all reading levels
 - Reducing the burden of providing required documentation and learning costs for applicants
 - Considering more user-friendly application and service delivery alternatives
 - Improving program access for immigrants, particularly around language barriers and the five-year ban
 - Increasing TANF benefit levels or increasing the child support pass through to clients
 - Reducing work requirements, shifting focus to employment retention, and tracking recipients to see whether jobs offer a sustainable wage and are long term

What More Do We Need to Know?

Nonprofit organizations play an important role in supporting families in accessing and navigating the public benefit system. Increased efforts to learn from community experts is key to understanding the impact nonprofits have on supporting the application process and the efficacy of different types of service models. Additional insight into the experiences and perspectives of applicants, CWO workers, and nonprofit staff is vital in further recognizing areas of improvement to program access and equity.

Note on Research Methodology

This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with staff from five nonprofit agencies including initial and follow-up interviews. Following qualitative analyses of initial interview responses, a survey was fielded to frontline staff from human service organizations serving low-income families. Interviews were conducted from February to March 2020 with follow-up interviews conducted during January 2021. The survey was fielded from July to August 2020. The onset of the pandemic as of March 2020 created significant changes in service delivery. Interview response rate and response timing for this study were also impacted, resulting in fewer interviews than initially planned.

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*Read the full study here:

Holcomb, S., Roman, J. L., Rodriguez, S., & Helting, A. (2021). Securing the Safety Net: Lessons from Nonprofit Organizations on TANF Access During COVID-19. Families in Society.