



Health Profession Opportunity Grant and TANF Partnerships: Lessons Learned in Engaging TANF Participants



Building Pathways to a Brighter Future

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INTRODUCTION

The [Health Profession Opportunity Grants](#) (HPOG) Program, authorized by the Affordable Care Act, and administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, funds health care education and training programs targeting Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants and other low-income individuals to prepare them for high-demand health care occupations. Five year grants (October 2010–September 2015) were awarded to 32 HPOG grantees in 23 states. Grantee programs represent a range of organizational types, including four state agencies, nine Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), 12 institutions of higher education, two community-based organizations, one Tribal council, and four Tribal colleges.

Grantees focus on serving the most in-need individuals, both those on TANF or other public assistance, including those who may have timed out of TANF or are otherwise not eligible. As of September 2014, HPOG grantees have served more than 4,743 TANF participants, many of whom have faced multiple barriers to becoming self-sufficient. Each grantee sets a targeted TANF enrollment goal for its program based on the program’s capacity, local TANF policies, and TANF caseloads. Thirteen grantees have met their TANF participation goal, and of these grantees, seven have exceeded it. Many grantees, however, have struggled to meet their TANF enrollment goals.

This paper offers peer technical assistance to HPOG programs on implementing effective strategies to build strong partnerships with TANF agencies and guide TANF participants along a career pathway. It can also be used by workforce development, training, and educational institutions that work with TANF populations, such as WIBs, community colleges, and community-based organizations. It provides tips about collaborating with state and local TANF offices, creating formal agreements, tailoring services to TANF participant needs, and reconciling TANF work participation rate requirements. Guidance in the paper reflects information gathered from six HPOG grantees and their TANF agency counterparts that have built strong collaborations and established effective practices. Grantees highlighted have met their TANF enrollment goals and/or have successfully implemented creative strategies to partner with TANF agencies or engage TANF participants. HPOG programs interviewed include:

Checklist of Effective Strategies between HPOG and TANF

Collaboration between programs:

- Include TANF partners early.
- Establish formal agreements.
- Align service approaches between HPOG and TANF.
- Co-locate services.
- Share success stories.

Engagement of participants:

- Create structured identification and referral processes.
- Provide intensive case management supports.
- Address TANF work participation requirements.

- **Buffalo and Erie County Workforce Development Consortium, Inc. (NY)** (Buffalo & Erie WDC) — a WIB-based program that offers paid training to eligible candidates for a range of health care occupations, such as licensed practical nursing, certified nursing aides, and pharmacy technicians.
- **Central Community College (NE)** (Central CC) — a community college-based program that assists income-eligible students with education, training, and supportive services to place them on a career pathway to jobs.
- **Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc. (AK)** (Cook Inlet) — a Tribal-based program serving Alaska Native and American Indian people residing in the Cook Inlet Region of south central Alaska. It offers health care training opportunities as part of its comprehensive employment services and training program.
- **Edmonds Community College (WA)** (Edmonds CC) — a multi-consortia community college-based program that provides all-expense paid certificate programs for select health care professions at Edmonds and Everett community colleges to low-income adults. Programs of study include phlebotomy technician, EKG technician, and emergency medical technician.
- **San Diego Workforce Partnership, Inc. (CA)** (San Diego WP)— a multi-agency-based program training TANF recipients and other low-income individuals in the health care career pathways of patient care, technical, and administrative occupations.
- **Workforce Development Council of Seattle King County (WA)** (WDC of Seattle-King County) — a multi-agency-based program that integrates social-service and training systems to provide comprehensive services to local people who are on public assistance or who are otherwise economically disadvantaged. Participants receive career exploration and planning and individual support as they move along a health care career pathway.

Understanding the TANF Environment

Although there are federal requirements under TANF, states have flexibility in how they implement their program, said Seanna Ruvkun of the WDC of Seattle-King County. HPOG programs, therefore should, “understand policy priorities within their state, as well as their state laws and rules,” she said. In the wake of the Great Recession and states’ changing economies, state TANF policies are in flux, agreed Charles Thompson of Edmonds CC. HPOG programs, he advised, must stay in constant contact with their TANF partners to understand current policy priorities and anticipate when those priorities will change.

BUILDING STRONG COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN HPOG AND TANF

To successfully engage TANF participants, HPOG programs have undertaken a multi-layered approach to connecting with and maintaining strong partnerships with their TANF agency counterparts. An essential aspect to the success of these relationships is the high level of communication and contact between HPOG grantees and TANF partners. All grantees highlighted have had frequent contact with their TANF partners at a leadership and planning level and at a case manager level. Most programs also

established these relationships very early in the program's lifespan, in many instances as part of the development of their HPOG grant proposal. Ongoing success can also be tied to thoughtful alignment between case management approaches to assure TANF participants receive the right level of support.

Include TANF Partners Early

A first step in building a successful HPOG program targeted to TANF participants is engaging early with the local TANF agency. Most grantees interviewed contacted and worked with their TANF counterparts during the grant proposal process. This became an important first step in building a collaborative partnership and beginning to delegate responsibilities and tasks between the two organizations. This early coordination also helped each organization understand the other's programmatic mission and goals. For HPOG grantees it also offered important opportunities to understand the TANF landscape in their states and communities, including work participation requirements, TANF caseload data, and TANF participant demographics, which helped develop a sound approach to identifying, recruiting, and engaging TANF participants.

For example, the WDC of Seattle-King County and its local TANF agency have been long-time partners. During the proposal development, they met to establish potential participation rates, and processes for identifying and referring potential participants. Shortly after award, the WDC Seattle-King County established a project steering committee, which included the TANF agency and established clear information sharing processes between the organizations. Similarly, prior to the HPOG award, the San Diego WP and TANF organizations clarified their referral and communication processes. This helped ensure that all parties understood their roles and responsibilities and that both sides knew the status of a referral to prevent duplication, errors, and delays in services.

Establish Formal Agreements

Once grants were awarded, the relationship between many HPOG grantees and TANF organizations moved from informal to formal, via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other formal agreement that outlined structured roles and responsibilities. The HPOG award and its requirements to formalize a relationship with the TANF agency created an important vehicle through which many HPOG grantees developed a systematic approach to working collaboratively with their local TANF agencies. For example, after Central CC received the HPOG grant, it informed the state TANF agency, which coordinated with the local TANF office to create an MOU with the HPOG program. The local TANF program and Central CC met several times to identify organizational roles and create a clear TANF participant recruitment pipeline. During this time, the organizations discussed potential challenges and how to overcome them, such as counting and verifying participation hours required under TANF. Likewise, San Diego WP, created a formal, standardized approach with its TANF counterpart that clearly outlines the referral process and communication between agency staff, and



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allows for regular meetings between organizations to provide case management and participation updates.

Align Service Approaches between HPOG and TANF

“To keep participants engaged . . . [HPOG programs] must create linkages between HPOG staff and TANF counselors . . . to keep on top of the TANF student before training begins, during and after. . . this creates a more collaborative effort to share information.” – *Leslie Ayer, Buffalo & Erie WDC*

Several HPOG/TANF program partnerships have created a streamlined approach to service delivery that avoids duplication of effort between the organizations and uses the expertise each entity brings to the collaboration. Many partners have used the MOU or a formal agreement to articulate this systematic approach to align services and processes. Service alignment has provided multiple benefits to HPOG programs, TANF agencies, and, importantly, TANF participants. In many instances, this has also required a high level of coordination and communication at the case management level to ensure that they are sharing information where appropriate and coordinating supportive services.

To ensure services were aligned, San Diego WP created a common customer workgroup between the HPOG program, TANF agency, Housing board, and WIB. The group meets once a week and discusses common case management supports and strategies to assure the systems are aligned and do not duplicate efforts. The group has also created a matrix of support services, looking at which partners offer what services. Through this matrix exercise, the HPOG program learned that TANF agencies use a lot of funds for supportive services, but less for tuition support. In response, the HPOG program decided to pool more resources to support tuition reimbursement and rely more heavily on TANF to offer supportive services. Likewise, Central CC meets quarterly with its TANF counterpart to discuss supportive service alignment to ensure the programs aren't duplicating efforts and wasting limited funds or resources.

Co-locate Services

“Because we are co-located, working with TANF is easy . . . We have a good working relationship and understand what each program offers . . . TANF uses their resources to offer supportive services and we offer the training and education opportunities.” – *Mark Hiratsuka, Cook Inlet Tribal Council*

Co-location of HPOG programs with their TANF partners and other human service agencies helps develop and maintain partnerships, facilitates communication and information, and helps better meet the needs of TANF participants. Co-location provides opportunities for HPOG liaisons, leads, or onsite navigators to work directly with TANF participants, starting as early as the TANF intake interview. Co-location may take the form of HPOG staff being at the TANF site several days a week to the programs sharing the same office space. In some instances co-location may have existed before the HPOG grant and the program is able to reap the benefits. Edmonds CC, Cook Inlet, and the WDC of Seattle-King



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County, for example, have various types of co-located staff, which allows easy communication and access to their TANF partners and participants. Edmonds CC has a TANF office on campus that offers services to students receiving TANF; the WDC of Seattle-King County has navigators with dedicated office space in many TANF offices, which they work from at least once a week. Cook Inlet's HPOG program and the Tribal TANF administrator are located within the same building. The HPOG program receives direct referrals from TANF, and participants receive joint case management services. Because the programs are co-located, the programs are also familiar with services available from each and can complement and coordinate approaches. Participants do not have to apply multiple times for different services, since the programs have common applications and staffs coordinate almost daily.

Share Success Stories

An important component to a strong, long-lasting collaboration between HPOG programs and TANF agencies is celebrating and sharing successes—whether they relate to individual participants' successes or promising, collaborative approaches. Sharing these milestones helps maintain long-lasting partnerships and provides opportunities for the organizations to share their accomplishments with other community partners and potential funders. HPOG programs may use their regular check-in meetings with TANF agencies to discuss what is working well and why and identify ways to showcase their positive outcomes.

The WDC of Seattle-King County frequently shares success stories with its TANF partner to keep the program fresh in the minds of frontline referral staff, especially when there is staff turnover. The program will also try to highlight stories that resonate with the current interests and priorities of the TANF agency, such as the percentage of HPOG graduates coming off of public assistance.

Cook Inlet publishes marketing materials when cohorts graduate, features HPOG program graduates in Cook Inlet's organization-wide monthly newsletter, and invites recent graduates to speak at Cook Inlet Board of Directors meetings. The program also highlights program graduate successes in the co-located TANF agency's daily staff bulletin. Similarly, Central CC, shares participant successes with the college's Board of Directors and shares success stories via its website and Facebook page, the latter of which has proven very successful in getting the word out about program and student successes.

ENGAGING TANF PARTICIPANTS

A strong partnership between HPOG programs and TANF agencies will facilitate the development of a seamless and responsive service delivery system that addresses the unique needs and challenges of TANF participants. HPOG programs have worked closely with TANF agency partners to identify and recruit the right individuals to participate in the HPOG program. They have also offered a range of intensive case management supports and implemented creative solutions to ensure TANF participants can maintain their benefits during longer periods of education or training.

Create Structured Identification and Referral Processes

Whether fully articulated in a formal agreement, or not, all HPOG programs emphasized the importance of developing a clear process by which the TANF and HPOG organizations identified and referred TANF participants to the HPOG program. In many instances this required a close examination of how the TANF agency manages its intake and assessment procedures. HPOG programs had to become familiar with TANF rules and practices, either through communication with the TANF agency or independent research, to understand who may participate in the HPOG program and how to identify and recruit them. To maintain a seamless identification and referral process, most HPOG programs meet regularly with their local TANF agency to overcome any barriers and assure the pipeline of participants remains intact.

Each HPOG program has individualized and tailored its TANF referral process to meet the needs of the HPOG program, its TANF agency counterpart, and participants. Generally, programs that are seeing more success in this area focus on collaborative ways that HPOG and TANF can work together, such as referring TANF participants to HPOG programs; holding joint meetings between HPOG, TANF, and participants during the recruitment process; and/or using TANF assessments or Job Clubs (TANF referral service to help participants prepare for work) to identify eligible participants.

For example, potential participants for San Diego WP's HPOG program are identified at Job Clubs. To maintain a seamless process, San Diego WP's project director meets one-on-one with her TANF agency counterpart every two to three months to discuss goals, activities, and timelines for dual HPOG and TANF program success. The HPOG program's community liaison, career coach, and case managers have quarterly team meetings with TANF

Creating a Referral Pipeline within a Random Assignment Evaluation

Because the HPOG program involves a random assignment evaluation, programs have had to work closely with their TANF partners to explain the process and how it affects their ability to refer potential HPOG participants. "The biggest challenge when we started was that random assignment wasn't there...then when we had it we had to really work on educating our TANF staff on the approach...they were used to referrals, but not the 50/50 chance." – *Dung Nguyen, Washington Department of Social and Health Services, working with WDC of Seattle-King County*

HPOG programs suggest the following to ensure continued TANF referrals during a random assignment evaluation:

- Maintain interest among TANF staff by staying in regular contact about the importance and impact of random assignment.
- Acknowledge that it may be hard for staff to place participants in the control group.
- Ensure TANF agency leadership understands the long-term impacts of the study.
- Show how data being collected is helping improve the overall HPOG program.
- Make sure potential participants understand what random assignment entails for them.
- Be specific with TANF agency staff about how the evaluation affects intake and referrals to the HPOG program.
- Consider sharing flowcharts or other materials that explain the random assignment process.

agency sites to discuss updates to referral processes and/or additional resources to offer participants. This allows both organizations to maintain a working knowledge of the other's efforts to ensure efficient and timely identification and recruitment. Likewise, Edmonds CC meets weekly with the local TANF office to review referral procedures. It aims to reach all levels of professionals in the TANF system (administrators, social workers, case managers), and explain the HPOG program and its benefits and to remind staff to refer eligible TANF participants. Establishing a lead point of contact or liaison has helped Buffalo & Erie WDC improve its identification of TANF participants by working closely with TANF staff and targeting information to different TANF and TANF-eligible populations about the HPOG program. Buffalo's liaison provides presentations to potential TANF participants at TANF offices.

The WDC of Seattle-King County navigators go to local TANF offices once a week for a full or half-day. They work closely during this time with TANF staff to support referrals to the HPOG program. Some navigators work with TANF staff to identify the best candidates during the referral process, and others work with TANF staff and the participant after a referral has been made. The WDC Seattle-King County also created a short video used by TANF staff to encourage participants to consider the HPOG program, showcasing the successes they may achieve through it.

Provide Intensive Case Management Supports

"We work really hard to establish trust . . . it's really one of the biggest hurdles to overcome, particularly for TANF students, given all that they may have dealt with in the past with government and human service systems." – *Charles Thompson, Edmonds CC*

The overarching goal of HPOG is to guide TANF and other low-income individuals into in-demand health care jobs. TANF participants, however, often face literacy, education, employment, and health-related challenges that can impede professional opportunities in the health care sector. Persistence to completion and other obstacles relating to participants' personal, educational, and family circumstances can also be significant barriers with non-traditional students.¹ Other challenges HPOG programs may face related to TANF participants include the following:

- **Prior negative experiences with human service organizations.** TANF participants who have dealt with past government and human service systems may not trust or easily engage with TANF or HPOG program staff.

¹ Tough, P. (2014). *Who gets to graduate?* New York, NY: New York Times Magazine. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html?_r=0; Burt, M., & Nightingale, D. S. (2010). *Repairing the U.S. social safety net.* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.urban.org/books/repairingUSsafetynet/>

- **Fear or hesitancy in education/training settings.** TANF participants may be fearful or hesitant to enroll in an education or training program if they have struggled previously in school or have been unsuccessful in other training programs.
- **Need or desire to find work immediately.** TANF participants may have a limited understanding of the long-term benefits of vocational training and feel a sense of urgency to find employment to support daily self-sufficiency needs and to meet TANF work activity requirements.
- **Transience and/or lack of soft skills.** TANF participants may lack stable housing and the soft skills needed to succeed in a career, which may manifest as failing to show up for the initial HPOG orientation.

To overcome these challenges, HPOG programs offer intensive case management supports to assure the success of TANF participants. Underlying these approaches is a focus on identifying and supporting an individual's strengths, while addressing barriers. These supports may begin as early as the TANF assessment when HPOG staff will be available to provide information and support about the HPOG program. Many programs also require frequent interactions between HPOG staff and TANF participants to develop rapport and coordination with the TANF case manager to identify problems early. For example, Edmonds CC created an "Early Alert System" for students—a communication tool between support staff and faculty to identify potential issues quickly and efficiently. Advisors meet with each student three times or more during the program to establish rapport. There are also partner meetings where the student, advisor, community navigator, case worker, TANF staffing manager, advisor, and a faculty member meet to ensure the student is on the right track and can overcome any challenges. This process helps establish trust and shows participants how the different system players work together on their behalf. Likewise, Central CC has its staff meet weekly with participants, often at the TANF office, so a participant can see how both organizations work together to help him or her succeed.

In many programs students are also connected to navigators who assist in or help coordinate support services between the HPOG and TANF programs. These services include academic support, transportation, child care, housing, and other intensive case management services like substance abuse, mental health, or domestic violence counseling. The underlying goal of this process is to ensure

Adapting HPOG Program Materials to a TANF Audience

To ensure potential TANF participants understand and can access the HPOG program, several programs have adapted their general marketing materials and brochures to reach this specific audience. For example, the WDC of Seattle-King County, based on feedback received from its local TANF agency, created a TANF-specific flyer that includes TANF agency contact information so that TANF can better track HPOG referrals and include HPOG in case planning goals. Edmonds CC has also adapted its intake materials and brochures to ensure potential TANF participants understand what the HPOG program is and what the random assignment aspect of the program entails.

that both HPOG and TANF agency staff work together to support each TANF participant's success in the program. For example, at San Diego WP navigators work closely with TANF participants to identify potential issues or challenges and coordinate with the TANF agency to mitigate them. They also use staff observation time and review participant self-disclosure forms to identify issues. In coordination with the TANF agency, San Diego WP will then offer individualized support services through referrals or direct services, such as transportation, child care, substance abuse and mental health resources, domestic violence, work supports, and books. Buffalo & Erie WDC, in addition to offering supportive services, provides a twice-a-month peer support group for licensed practical nurse and medical billing program participants who are chosen through the random assignment process. Through these support groups, participants can share how things are going and learn from each other's experiences. Workshops are also built into the sessions, based on participants' interests, which helps keep students engaged in the support group and the HPOG training program.

Address TANF Work Participation Requirements

It is important to understand how TANF rules and requirements affect individuals' participation in education and training programs. Some policies/regulations are federally-mandated, but states also have latitude in implementing their TANF programs. Understanding state rules and laws will help HPOG programs see how they fit into this context.

Some HPOG training programs may last a few weeks; others may be several months and up to a year or longer. Particularly for participants enrolling in longer-term training programs, HPOG grantees must address TANF's 12-month limit on vocational education as a "countable" activity so participants can continue to receive benefits and avoid being sanctioned.

For individuals pursuing longer-term trainings, the WDC of Seattle-King County's navigators work early with TANF students to ensure they understand the 12-month limit on vocational education. Navigators will work with their TANF partners to explain the different components of the program's long-term training and how to appropriately code them. For example, health care trainings that include a clinical externship component may be coded, in part, as work experience in addition to vocational education. The WDC of Seattle-King County will also help participants identify internship, community service, or job opportunities they can participate in while taking training courses. At Cook Inlet, HPOG training goals are included within TANF's Family Self Sufficiency Plans, and HPOG program participation is

Maintaining TANF Benefits Before or In Between HPOG Classes

There is often a gap in time between an individual applying for and beginning a HPOG training or education program. There also may be gaps between training programs for individuals pursuing multiple stacked credentials. TANF recipients may risk being sanctioned if they are not engaged during these periods. To address this issue, HPOG and TANF partners suggest the following:

- Find on-the-job training opportunities and externship or internship opportunities or other short-term activities that count toward TANF work participation.
- Anticipate challenges participants may face and offer supportive services to keep them focused on their health care career goals.

considered a “Supportive Work Experience,” allowing participants to take advantage of longer-term health care education and training programs. San Diego WP also works closely with students to ensure they stay in compliance and don’t exhaust the 12-month limit. For participants that have not exhausted the “countable” activity timeline for vocational education, they can count the training as a “core” TANF work activity.² With proper planning, San Diego WP also helps participants count their time as a “non-core” activity, which can extend the clock to 24 months.

SUMMARY OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

“This relationship is about employment . . . we work with individuals to reach the highest level of self-sufficiency they can reach and the greatest benefit is that there is so much growth potential in the health care professions.” – *Shawna Alloway, Rescare Workforce Services, working with Central CC.*

Common challenges facing HPOG programs include building strong partnerships with TANF programs that allow frequent communication and information sharing, creating a continuous pipeline of TANF participant referrals, and maintaining TANF participant engagement in long-term HPOG training programs. To respond to these challenges HPOG programs have created structured and coordinated efforts between HPOG and TANF, with regular communication at various program levels, from leadership to frontline staff. Many HPOG and TANF organizations have been surprised by the great number of TANF participants who want to pursue a health care career. Formal established processes and a strong understanding of each organization’s goals and service approaches has been critical to making this a reality for TANF participants. Effective strategies used by HPOG programs include the following:

Build strong collaborations by:

- **Including TANF partners early.** This may entail coordinating with state and local TANF agencies during the grant writing process or shortly after to assure the HPOG grantee has a clear understanding of the TANF agency’s work in the community, participant demographics, needs, and work participation requirements.

² For more information on “core” versus “non-core” activities see Lower-Basch, E. & Ridley N. (2013). *Navigating Federal programs to build sustainable career pathways in the health profession: A guide for HPOG programs*. Washington, DC: CLASP. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/navigating_tanf_and_wia_to_build_health_profession_career_pathways_a.pdf; Hahn, H., Kassabian, D. & Zedlewski, S. (2012). *TANF work requirements and state strategies to fulfill them*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Retrieved from: <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412563-TANF-Work-Requirements-and-State-Strategies-to-Fulfill-Them.pdf> (explaining that work-eligible TANF participants must participate in work “activities” for a certain period of time and that this includes “core” activities (such as employment) for a minimum number of hours per week and the option to participate in “non-core” activities (such as education) for the remaining hours)

- **Establishing formal agreements.** Many HPOG programs have developed MOUs or formal agreements between HPOG and TANF to create a structured approach to identify and refer participants and outline how the organizations will communicate.
- **Aligning service approaches.** Many HPOG programs have worked with their TANF counterparts to assure the services both organizations offer do not duplicate or conflict. Doing so helps streamline supports for participants, conserves resources, and ensures the partners are relying on the strengths and expertise each organization offers.
- **Co-locating services.** Several HPOG programs have co-located their services or their entire programs with their TANF and other community partners. This has facilitated increased communication and information sharing. It helps the organizations more quickly and successfully meet the needs of TANF participants.
- **Sharing success stories.** Including time to discuss individual client successes and best practices helps build longer-standing relationships between TANF and HPOG and offers opportunities to showcase those accomplishments in the community and with potential funders.

Better engage TANF participants by:

- **Creating structured identification and referral processes.** Whether articulated in a formal agreement or not, each HPOG program undertakes efforts to ensure that a clear and structured process is employed to identify and refer TANF participants to their programs. In some instances, HPOG program staff participates in TANF intakes or assessments and/or regularly provides information to TANF staff to ensure they promote the program during early meetings with TANF clients.
- **Providing intensive case management supports.** Many HPOG programs offer or coordinate with TANF to provide a range of supportive services to TANF participants, such as childcare, health referrals, transportation, and housing support. Many employ staff to regularly check in with TANF participants or offer peer support groups.
- **Addressing TANF work participation requirements.** It is important to understand and address early participants' TANF work requirements. HPOG programs work closely with their TANF students and the TANF agencies to ensure students are not sanctioned or lose their benefits when participating in longer-term training programs. This may entail working with TANF to properly code training-related activities or arranging for participants to simultaneously work and attend trainings.

Incorporating the above elements into their approaches can help HPOG programs effectively work with TANF and TANF-eligible participants.