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The Potential of Home-Based Employment Coaching to Support Economic Stability

While most employment coaching and other employment services are offered in a program office, school, other community location, or virtually, emerging evidence suggests that offering employment services in a participant's home may have some important advantages. It puts the program staff and the participant on a more equal footing and encourages a strong relationship between them; it allows the program staff to gain richer information about participants' strengths and areas of need; and it is easier, less costly, and less time-consuming for participants. Rigorous evaluations of two home-based employment coaching programs provide some evidence that home-based coaching may support economic stability.1 Moreover, parenting and child well-being services are frequently offered in participants' homes and studies have shown that these home-based services can be effective at changing participants' parenting behaviors and health-related outcomes, suggesting that home-based services may also be effective at changing other behaviors more directly related to employment.²

This brief describes why employment coaching programs and employment services practitioners more generally might consider offering services in participants' homes. It is produced as part of the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations (Box 1).

Studies of home-based employment coaching yield some promising findings

Employment coaching involves trained staff working collaboratively with participants to help them set individualized goals—directly or indirectly related to employment—and providing motivation, support, and feedback as participants work toward those goals. It is distinct from case management, a traditional approach for helping participants find and maintain employment, in that it is not directive but

Box 1. About the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations

To learn more about employment coaching, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contracted with Mathematica and its partners, Abt Associates, MDRC, and The Adjacent Possible, to conduct the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations. This evaluation is assessing the effectiveness and implementation of four employment coaching programs designed for users of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other adults with low incomes: Family Development and Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS), Goal4 It!TM, LIFT, and MyGoals for Employment Success. Using an experimental research design, the evaluation is assessing the programs' impacts on participants' self-regulation, employment, earnings, self-sufficiency, and other measures of well-being. It began in 2016 and it is slated to end in 2026.

Visit this website (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/evaluation-employment-coaching-tanf-and-related-populations-2016-2026) for additional information about the evaluation.

rather involves a collaborative relationship between coach and participant. Coaches guide the participants but do not specify goals for participants, develop plans for them to achieve those goals, or tell them what to do next.

While many coaching programs offer coaching in a program office, school, community location (such as a coffee shop or library), or virtually, we know of only two employment coaching programs that offer coaching in participants' homes: (1) Building Nebraska Families (BNF)³ and (2) Family Development and Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS).⁴ The effectiveness of both of these programs has been evaluated with experimental impact studies.





BNF. From 2002 through 2005, BNF offered customized life-skills education in participants' homes. The program was launched by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services in partnership with the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and operated in several rural and semirural areas in Nebraska. It supplemented an existing, concurrent work program and was offered to TANF recipients who were subject to work requirements and were deemed by their caseworkers to have serious challenges to employment (such as mental health conditions or lack of skills or education). Enrolling in BNF was voluntary.

BNF provided customized services in hour-long sessions in participants' homes weekly or twice per month for eight months. Participants could engage with coaches while they were using TANF benefits and for up to six months after leaving TANF. The BNF coaches, who were master's-level educators from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, had caseloads of 12 to 18 participants.

BNF's approach to delivering intensive life skills education through individualized mentoring sessions included key tenets of coaching and can be considered a precursor to today's employment coaching models. The home-based life skills education and support from coaches involved mentoring and informal counseling on goal setting, problem-solving, coping skills, relationship building, and communication skills; family development and wellbeing (such as child development, parenting, and family management); and practical life skills (such as money and time management and nutrition education). On average, a BNF participant spent 25 hours in contact with a coach.⁵

BNF's effectiveness was evaluated using an experimental evaluation design as part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies Demonstration Evaluation. Eligible and consenting BNF applicants between June 2002 and June 2004 were randomly assigned to either a program group that was offered BNF or a control group that was not offered BNF but could receive TANF employment services in the program office or other services in the community. BNF participants also had access to all services available to the control group through the TANF program. Outcomes of members of the program group were compared with outcomes of members of the control group over a period of 30 months.

The study found the program had some positive benefits on average for all study participants. Averaging over all study participants, BNF had positive effects on employment (higher rates of employment, retaining employment longer, and moving from a lower-wage job to a higher-wage job) that were statistically significant, meaning that the impact estimate was larger than would be expected if the program had no effect on participant outcomes. But there was no statistically significant impact on earnings.

Notably, however, BNF had larger impacts among a subgroup of participants who faced more challenges to employment, 7 defined as those who met two or more of five criteria at the time of their BNF enrollment because they: (1) did not have a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) qualification, (2) had a self-reported health condition that limited their activity, (3) had a transportation barrier, (4) had no earnings in the prior year, or (5) had received cash benefits for two or more years in their lifetime. For these study participants, BNF led to statistically significant effects on employment, earnings, and other measures of personal and family well-being. For example, during the last six months of the 30-month follow-up, those facing the most challenges earned on average 56 percent more than their control group counterparts, or about \$200 more per month (in 2004 dollars, or about \$325 in 2023 dollars).8

FaDSS. FaDSS offers employment coaching during home visits and focuses on the family as a whole. It is being evaluated as part of the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations (Box 1). During this evaluation, FaDSS was offered only to users of TANF benefits but was not administered by a TANF agency.9 (This brief describes how FaDSS was offered early in the evaluation period; the ongoing program might change over time.) Participation was voluntary—FaDSS participants also received regular TANF case management, as did all TANF recipients. It is a well-established program: Iowa's Department of Human Rights has operated FaDSS statewide for more than 30 years, through contracts with 17 local social service agencies. FaDSS coaches aimed to meet with program participants in their home at least twice per month during the first three months and monthly thereafter. Participants could receive coaching while using TANF benefits and for seven months after they leave the TANF program.

Unlike BNF, FaDSS coaches did not need to have a masters' degree. However, according to a staff survey, 77 percent of FaDSS coaches had a bachelor's degree and 9 percent had a masters' degree.

FaDSS coaching focused on setting and pursuing goals, tracking progress toward previously set goals, assessing whether new goals are appropriate, and identifying action steps to be taken before the next home visit. Participants could set both personal and family goals. Coaches had caseloads of about 18 families. On average, participants had just over 8 hours of contact with coaches, much less than the average of 25 hours of contact experienced by the average participant in BNF.

To study FaDSS, the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations used random assignment. Between June 2018 and November 2019, in 7 of the 17 local agencies administering FaDSS, eligible and consenting FaDSS applicants were randomly assigned either to be offered participation in FaDSS or to be in a control group that was not offered participation in FaDSS but could continue to receive TANF case management and other employment services in the community. Members of the program and control group are being tracked for about 48 months after study enrollment.

The evaluation, which included a survey, found some favorable effects on FaDSS participants nine months after they enrolled in the study. ¹⁰ FaDSS reduced the number of reported economic hardships—such as going



without medical care because of cost or being unable to afford enough food—by 10 percent (3.0 versus 2.7 economic hardships). This impact estimate was statistically significant. FaDSS also improved participants' goal setting and attainment skills by 5 percent (2.23 versus 2.12 points, a difference that was statistically significant). This suggests that coaches were successful at helping participants set and work toward goals.

The study did not show that FaDSS increased earnings in the first nine months after study enrollment.¹¹ FaDSS increased self-reported earnings by \$89 per month, an increase of about 14 percent. However, this impact was not statistically significant. FaDSS also had no statistically significant impact on earnings in jobs reported to the state unemployment agency.

Future reports on the program's impacts at 21 months, anticipated in 2023, and again at 48 months after study enrollment, will address whether these and other impacts remain the same, and whether new impacts emerge over time.

Parenting and child well-being services are frequently provided in participants' homes and studies have shown they are effective at changing participants' behaviors

While providing employment services in the home is fairly rare, home visiting is widely used to deliver parenting and child well-being services. In general, these programs involve trained home visitors working with families to assess family needs, educate and support parents, and help families access other services in the community. The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program, administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in partnership with ACF, provides funding for evidence-based early childhood home visiting programs. In fiscal year 2022, the MIECHV Program funded about 840,000 home visits to 69,000 families across the United States. 12

These early childhood home visiting services have generally been found effective in improving parenting, maternal and child health, and child development and school readiness. ¹³ To date, a systematic review of early

childhood home visiting models has found 25 evidence-based models, of which 24 improved at least one outcome related to child health or child development and school readiness, 21 improved outcomes related to positive parenting practices or reduced child maltreatment, 15 improved maternal health outcomes, and 6 improved family economic self-sufficiency outcomes including parental income; outcomes related to education and training; and participation in nutrition-related public benefit programs. ¹⁴ Even though most of these outcomes are not directly related to employment, these findings provide some evidence that home-based services can change behavior.

Why home-based services might be an effective service delivery approach for employment coaching

Home-based services have three main advantages over providing services virtually or outside the home.

Home-based services can offer an environment to build a high-quality relationship between a program staff member and a participant

A supportive, responsive relationship between a program staff member and a program participant is a foundational element of effective coaching.¹⁵ Research on early childhood home visiting has similarly observed the importance of a high-quality relationship between the home visitor and the family.¹⁶ Meeting with a family in their home can help set the stage for developing a collaborative and trusting relationship between the program staff member and the participant and their family. For example, FaDSS coaches reported that being in the home, instead of a program office, helped balance the power dynamic between staff and participant such that the interaction felt less like the coach was an authority figure.¹⁷ FaDSS participants reported feeling more comfortable and in control in their home than in a program office. A comfortable relationship can, in turn, provide staff and participants more opportunities to learn about each other and forge a closer relationship, which then encourages participants to be more forthcoming about their goals, needs, and challenges.¹⁸

Employment coaches can access a more holistic view of the family when visiting the home

Visiting a program participant in their home enables program staff to learn more about the participant's circumstances and needs. For example, by observing a participant's home environment, program staff can observe the participant's organization at home and their interactions with their children. This helps the staff member assess family needs and integrate a familycentered approach into services. Doing so can further enhance the quality and trust of the staff-participant relationship and provide an opportunity to address other family needs that might pose a challenge to reaching their employment goals. Visiting a family at home also means the staff member can meet other family members and include them in home-based services. In FaDSS, coaches attempt to include all family members when they deliver services to participants at home. In addition, they observe parent-child interactions and help caregivers increase their knowledge of child development and parenting skills. Similarly, early childhood home visitors commonly observe parent-child interactions.

Home-based delivery can increase participants' access to program services

Delivering coaching in the home can reduce barriers to participants' access to services. It can help participants avoid the cost and time needed to travel to an office or other location. Participants in FaDSS reported appreciating the ease of having coaches visit their homes.¹⁹ Programs that include home-based services can be especially useful and convenient for caregivers who would otherwise need to find care for their child or family member when visiting a program office or take the child or family member with them. Homebased service delivery can also address challenges to access for people in rural areas, where lack of internet connectivity and public transportation pose prevalent challenges to obtaining services virtually or outside the home, according to what early childhood home visiting providers have learned in their field.²⁰

Considerations for employment coaching programs offering home-based services

Despite the advantages of offering services in the home, there are some practical implementation issues.

- Capacity. Home-based service delivery is more labor intensive for staff than in-office or virtual service delivery. Staff spend time in transit (which can be long in sparsely populated areas) and may need to make several trips if participants are not home when the staff arrive. To allow time for this in a provider's schedule, caseloads need to be lower for home-based coaching, which requires more staff and increases costs. For example, FaDSS coaches carried caseloads of about 18 participants, compared to 40 participants in the three office-based employment coaching programs in the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations. Caseloads for BNF coaches ranged from 12 to 18 participants. To gain the benefits of homebased services without having to absorb the full cost of the smaller caseload ratios for staff, programs might consider focusing their home-based services on families who face multiple challenges to employment and would likely benefit from them the most (such as those with caregiving responsibilities or transportation or Internet connectivity barriers), while providing office-based services to other families.
- Privacy. A potential challenge to home-based services is a lack of privacy from other household members. There may be issues the participant does not want to discuss in front of their children or other household members. Home visitors need training to be aware of these privacy issues.²¹ They can suggest finding private places to talk for at least some of the visit or suggest sometimes meeting when other household members are not present.
- Safety. Staff who visit homes need to feel safe to be effective. ²² Although most homes will likely be safe, staff members need to know how to respond if safety concerns arise. The program must have safety protocols in place and staff must be trained to recognize and respond to potential safety concerns.
- Training and supervision. Home-based service providers need training not just in the content or curriculum they deliver, but also in skills related to delivering social

services such as confidentiality, maintaining boundaries, and accounting for past trauma in participants' lives. 23 For example, all FaDSS coaches and supervisors complete an eight-day Family Development Certification training within their first year at FaDSS that emphasizes family-centered practice for frontline workers and covers family development theory, family assessment, interviewing skills, and goal setting. They may also need training specific to delivering home-based services, such as understanding how cultural influences may shape a family's living situation. Administrators of programs that deliver home-based services should consider including skills-based training on how to navigate home visits and having supervisors observe home-based services periodically. In FaDSS, for example, newly hired coaches begin by shadowing more experienced coworkers. As they take on their own caseloads, they are accompanied by other coaches and sometimes supervisors before conducting visits independently. Supervisors observe all coaches on at least two home visits per year.

Many of these issues apply to home-based service delivery generally, regardless of whether the focus is on improving economic stability, parenting and child wellbeing, or other outcomes. Policies developed for early childhood home visiting could be adapted for home-based employment services.²⁴

Concluding thoughts

Considering findings from the evaluations of BNF and FaDSS, and the research literature on early childhood home visiting services, we suggest that providers of employment coaching and other employment services should consider offering services in the home. Because of the higher cost of home-based services, providers may want to consider offering services in the home to participants likely to benefit from them most. Such participants could include those who would find it more challenging to visit a program office, for example, participants with caregiving responsibilities, or those who live in rural areas or have mobility challenges. An understanding of participants' needs and a close relationship between program staff and participants are particularly important to inform the delivery of home-based services.

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- ³ For more information on BNF and the evaluation, see the <u>full report</u> from the ACF-sponsored evaluation of this program at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/teaching-self-sufficiency-impact-and-benefit-cost-analysis-home-visitation-and-life and a corresponding brief at https://www.mathematica.org/publications/teaching-selfsufficiency-through-home-visitation-and-life-skills-education. A summary of BNF and its effectiveness is available at https://pathwaystowork.acf.hhs.gov/intervention-detail/416#effectiveness-section.
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- ⁸ Adjusted for information using the Consumer Price Index. https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.
- ⁹ Since the evaluation, the Iowa Department of Human Rights has merged with the Iowa Department of Human Services, which administers its TANF program. In 2022, FaDSS expanded its eligibility to include families with minor children and with income less than 175 percent of the federal poverty guidelines as well as families receiving TANF benefits.
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