

MDRC
TDC Video

>> [MUSIC] Improving Outcomes for Families through Better Use of Data: TANF Data Collaborative.

>> Richard Hendra, Director, MDRC Center for Data Insights: Throughout the country, states, and the federal government collect a lot of data on TANF recipients' outcomes, their participation in services. But this data is often used only for accounting purposes and reporting purposes. It's not really used to improve the program. So, our central goal is to help TANF participants by making more efficient use of data and applying modern data science techniques to help states to make better insights from the data they already collect.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

TANF provides a wide range of services—from cash assistance to employment supports for families with low incomes.

>> Melissa Wavelet, Senior Fellow, MDRC: Eight state agencies that administer the TANF program were selected to become part of this 30-month learning experience.

MDRC
TDC Video

Launched in 2020, the TANF Data Collaborative pilot included applied data analytics training, technical assistance, one-on-one coaching, and more.

>> Melissa Wavelet: The 30-month collaborative pilot was as full of activities that this team of staff would engage in with us and with our three organizational partners.

MDRC: Building knowledge to improve social policy
Chapin Hall, AISP, Coleridge Initiative

>> Melissa Wavelet: Across the eight pilot teams, each of them chose a question that mattered to them, which meant we had a variety of questions. And they had different methods or different data in each state that they would then use to analyze, examine the information, and answer the questions that mattered to them.

>> Aynalem Adugna, PhD, Research Scientist, Health Equity Research and Statistics Section, California Department of Public Health: We have worked with data, tons and tons of data, millions of cases, over many years. But

MDRC
TDC Video

generally, it was merging fields or extracting data, not so much about explaining things. Why is this number this way? And if there are changes, why are those changes happening? Typically, we would report on caseload. Caseload goes up; caseload goes down. We never tried to explain why they're up and why they're down.

>> HeeJu Jang-Paulsen, PhD, Senior Research Associate, Office of Research & Planning Department of Social Services: My impression when I was talking with the case workers is that a lot of times, they kind of depend on their gut feelings of what would work and a lot of time that's just assigning whatever employment is at hand, which might not be really long-term successful strategy. Predictive modeling, what it does is we are trying to predict the likelihood that these case leads or head of households are going to be successful after they leave the program. And then based on that predictions, we are trying to kind of characterize them into high risk of not achieving success, medium risk, and low risk. And then for each of these groups, we're going to look at which of these employment and education services that we're going to

MDRC
TDC Video

assign them would be most helpful for them to achieve success after they leave the program. So, in that way we could identify sort of like a pathway to success and then what is the most efficient way to get to them.

>> Megan Kauffmann, PhD, MPP, Evaluator, Division of Economic and Workforce Support, Colorado Office of Economic Security, Department of Human Services: We do have a history of using the unemployment insurance records to understand employment outcomes. But this was a very focused effort to kind of integrate those two datasets in looking at a particular research question. We were comparing a group that did receive a supportive payment with a group that did not receive a supportive payment and comparing their employment outcomes within a year after leaving. And so, we learned that the group that did receive a payment had an 11% higher likelihood of entering employment compared to the group that didn't receive a payment. We're always trying to investigate, you know, which tools within the caseworker's toolbox are going to be effective at leading a client towards employment. And so, very exciting to see those treatment effects.

MDRC
TDC Video

>> Jeff Price, PhD, Director of Research and Planning, Virginia Department of Social Services: These kinds of projects that allow you to create networks, you know, and new friendships and colleagues are always really fun and beneficial, I think. So, for me, that was where a lot of the benefit was. I think for the staff, they enjoyed learning some new analytical techniques and also sharing experiences with colleagues in other states that are doing a lot of the same kind of work that they're doing. For example, when we were going to do the survey, we learned that Colorado also had a TANF exit survey and they shared that with us and we got some insights from them about what worked well and what didn't work well and those sorts of things. There's a lot of satisfaction in finding that you're not the only one that does this, you know. There are 50 other states that all have the same challenges, have the same issues that they have to deal with. And talking with them about how they deal with some of those challenges is really useful, I think.

>> Pamela McCauley, TANF Program Manager, Children and Families Services Department, Minnesota Department of

MDRC
TDC Video

Human Services: We work closely with our counties. But because our program is state-supervised but county and tribal administered, there's 87 counties. So, therefore, there's 87 different ways of administering the program. The rules are the same, but the counties have some flexibility in how they administer the program. So, the opportunity to work with a county around data and program administration is always going to be an opportunity that we will jump at.

>> Ben Jaques-Leslie, Research Scientist, Minnesota Department of Human Services: The capacity to work on data is not the same in all of those different counties. So, having Dakota and Olmsted like stand up and say, "We want to do this kind of data work." The TANF data collaborative provided this sort of place for folks who were newer to doing data analysis to really learn so many great skills quickly. Creating the space to collaborate with them on this project was so valuable because I got to learn so much about what that implementation piece is and also what questions are important to them? So, we could all work together really closely on doing the analysis together. I guess the other thing from a state, my perspective, is that

**MDRC
TDC Video**

we don't have statisticians too much working in state government. There isn't many people I can go to when I have a statistics or analysis question. But having the TDC, I could write to Rick at MDRC and say like, "I'm thinking of doing this. What do you think?" Or "I'm encountering this problem." I could write to people at Chapin Hall and ask them for support. So, having that like wider network of people, and I should also say like also in other states, like learning from other states about what they were doing was super valuable to our analysis and our understanding of how we fit into the wider kind of public assistance system.

>> Leigh Durbahn, Lead Management Analyst, Olmsted County, Minnesota Policy Analysis and Communication: These 30 months was a wonderful foundation to give us those skills that we can use moving forward. I think each of our agencies gained a lot that we could use independently. But our relationship really grew in those 30 months. We've come to really rely on each other's strengths. We are planning to continue this work together moving forward. Maybe pulling in some more colleagues from other areas across the state. Perhaps enhancing our data to beyond TANF to see how

MDRC
TDC Video

TANF and other programs might be interacting. So, we have a lot of goals and ambitions related to that.

>> Michael Billingsley, Special Projects Research Manager II, California Department of Social Services: It was super fun, very interesting, like totally positive. I know we would all do it again. We thought so highly of the applied data analytics class that was provided by Coleridge that we did one for California staff. And we plan on continuing on.

>> Caroline Moyer, Research Project Manager, California Department of Social Services: We had so much help from folks that have statistics degrees and PhD's and are incredibly brilliant and work at academia. And they don't always know what's happening on the ground for program practitioners. And you need both of those folks. We need everybody in the room because somebody might not know the incredibly intricate policies of TANF timeclocks and maximum aid levels and what qualifies you to be on the program and when and how and why. And you have somebody who maybe has never done any statistical work, but has administered this program for 20 years. And that is a swath of knowledge

MDRC
TDC Video

that we really, really need to do anything useful with this data.

>> Michael Billingsley: It's so inspiring to talk to the other TDC members around the country that are efforting in the same way. You know, the world is sometimes depressing, right. You kind of think, "Oh, my God, you know, what's happening?" But then you see all these other people everywhere in the country that we met through the TDC, all of us like striving to make the world a better place. And it helps you get out of bed in the morning, man. It's great.

>> Pamela McCauley: Our primary customer is our participant. It's the families that we work with. So, whatever we can do to improve their experience and improve their outcomes, we want to do that.

The TANF Data Collaborative pilot initiative was funded by OPRE, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Family Assistance

MRDC's partners include: AISP, Chapin Hall, Coleridge Initiative.

MDRC
TDC Video

To learn more, visit acf.hhs.gov/opre and mdrc.org.

MDRC, Building knowledge to improve social policy

[END OF FILE]