



Case Study

Illinois Special Units Office Provides Culturally Competent and Linguistically Appropriate TANF Services for Refugee Participants

Special Units Office, Department of Human Services; Chicago, IL

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The State of Illinois has a Special Units Office to support Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants that would especially benefit from case management that reflects special needs. The Special Units staff collaborates with the VOLAG Chicago Refugee Employment Workgroup to place refugees into optimal work situations.

Background

The Special Units Office is housed within the Human Capital Development Office in the Illinois Department of Human Services. The state's Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs) provide reception and placement services for refugees arriving in the United States. When connecting refugees to the TANF program, VOLAGs not only work with refugees to complete applications for enrollment, but also set up an appointment on behalf of the refugee client with the Special Units Office to ensure that refugees receive culturally competent, linguistically appropriate support.

Innovations

Referrals to TANF Special Units Office Staff that Are Trained in Working with Refugees. The VOLAGs provide information about refugee culture, languages spoken, and common refugee mental and physical health issues, so that Special Units Office staff can provide culturally sensitive assistance. The Special Units Office augments its culturally competent staff with a bank of translators. If the VOLAG cannot bring an interpreter with them when they accompany refugees to the public benefits interview, the Office provides one.

The Special Units staff works hard to place refugees into optimal work situations. For example, if a refugee was a doctor in his or her home country, Special Units staff tries to get him or her into the medical field in Illinois. The staff would also work with that refugee to get the necessary certifications, take the necessary exams, and get licensure.

Preparing Refugees for WorkFirst. WorkFirst is a workforce development program designed to help TANF participants who live in the State of Illinois and who have multiple employment barriers gain the training and skills they need to become employed and to retain employment. WorkFirst contractors provide clinical assessments, case management, and follow up, treatment and treatment linkages, and an intensive array of services designed to address the individual's self-sufficiency barriers. In WorkFirst, participants are assigned to

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specific work or training activities in order to gain valuable employment skills. In addition, clients are assisted with supportive services such as child care, transportation, and clothing funds.

The Special Units Office can place refugees into WorkFirst as soon as four months after arrival, depending on the refugee's literacy level. Refugees who have at least a fourth grade English literacy level may qualify for WorkFirst. For refugees that have not yet achieved that level of English proficiency, VOLAGs provide the intensive English language training needed to help them access the program.

Impact

The VOLAGs and Special Units Office have found frequent communication to be critical to successful collaboration. VOLAG and Special Units Office staff meet at least quarterly to ensure that cultural competency and needs are discussed and addressed.