Lessons from Nudgers

What can TANF learn from dentists?

We may not go to the dentist seeking inspiration for social policy, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there.

If you’ve been to the dentist recently, you may recall the receptionist asking about your availability six months into the future. Even if you protested scheduling anything that far in advance, you were probably persuaded to “put something on the calendar” anyway. If not for this encouragement, that routine teeth cleaning might slip down your list of priorities as other matters claim your attention. Scheduling the appointment in advance reduces the hassle of having to call at a later date. Dentists’ offices also know that you’ll probably forget about the appointment, so they send you reminders, confirm the date and time, and help you to reschedule if necessary.

For Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program recipients, it doesn’t always work this way. What’s more, a missed appointment can result in significant consequences for TANF clients including sanctions (reductions to or terminations of benefits). After getting approved for benefits, clients in many TANF programs are required to meet with a caseworker to develop a plan for becoming self-sufficient, which might include participating in activities like job club, community service, or vocational training. Unlike a teeth cleaning, these activities are not optional. Yet participants may receive a date and time for the mandatory meeting by mail without being consulted in advance about their availability or how they would get to the appointment. Some get reminders for these appointments, but many do not. The phone-based process for rescheduling appointments can be challenging, requiring participants to reach the correct staff person or leave a message and hope that someone returns the call.

These meetings come with challenges for TANF staff, too. While your dentist’s office may respond to a missed appointment with an auto-generated email or a small fee, TANF offices often rely on staff to respond. When a client fails to attend a meeting, staff conduct intensive outreach efforts to reschedule before determining if the client should be sanctioned. For example, in the Los Angeles TANF program, if staff cannot reach recipients by phone, a home visiting unit contacts the client and encourages them to come in. These home visits are time-consuming and costly for the county. If a participant is sanctioned, but later takes steps to meet the
requirements, the staff have to enact an often cumbersome and lengthy process to reinstate his or her benefits, which can be burdensome for both staff and clients.

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self Sufficiency-Next Generation (BIAS-NG) project is currently working with three TANF programs—Los Angeles County, Monroe County (New York), and Washington State—to design and test initiatives intended to increase engagement in their welfare-to-work programs. Based on analysis of the three programs involved in the BIAS-NG project, at least half of TANF participants in these programs fail to show up for initial or subsequent required meetings. As shown below, there are a few potential bottlenecks to showing up for meetings and sticking to a self-sufficiency plan. Based on what we know from behavioral science about these bottlenecks, we present below some early ideas that TANF administrators may be able to use to address this common challenge of helping clients keep their appointments.
Craft Reminders and Create Plans

While limited research has tested behavioral interventions to improve TANF meeting attendance specifically, we can look to efforts in other settings designed to help people attend doctor appointments, vote in an election, or show up for court dates. Reminders have been shown to increase attendance, especially if they help individuals make concrete plans to attend. Some of these strategies may be applicable in a TANF setting, for example:

**Letters.** [Milkman et al. (2011)](Milkman2011) found that when a reminder letter prompted people to write down the date and time that they would get vaccinated at a free on-site clinic, vaccination rates increased 4.2 percentage points.

**Phone calls.** In a study of unlikely voters, [Nickerson and Rogers (2010)](Nickerson2010) found that a reminder call including questions such as *What time will you vote?*, *How will you get there?*, and *Where will you be coming from?* led to a 9.1 percentage point increase in voter turnout among single-voter households.

**Text messages.** [Cooke et al. (2018)](Cooke2018) tested a series of carefully designed reminder messages among individuals who were summoned to appear in court in New York City. Text messages that emphasized the consequences of not appearing in court and encouraged individuals to develop concrete plans for appearing reduced the number who failed to appear in court by 12 percentage points.

**Insights for TANF programs:** Based on these findings, reminding recipients and prompting them to make concrete plans to attend the meeting may be a relatively simple and low-cost approach to improving attendance at TANF meetings and activities.

Reducing Hassle Factors

Most TANF clients have young children, and many lack reliable transportation, which means attending an in-person meeting involves potentially daunting coordination. Agencies could mitigate some of the hassle factors associated with attending meetings by reducing the distance between participants and offices, allowing participants to conduct meetings remotely, or even eliminating unnecessary meetings. Some successful strategies may include:

**More service locations.** [Bulman (2015)](Bulman2015) examined SAT test-taking around the country and found that adding new test centers increased the percentage of students who took the SAT. Adding new test centers at high schools generated an increase of 4 percentage points for high school students at the host school and an increase of 1.4 percentage points for students attending a nearby high school.

**Co-located services.** Most TANF recipients in the District of Columbia are required to travel to the child support office after they apply for TANF benefits, but research in the early 2000s found that few TANF recipients made the trip to the child support office. [Farrell et al. (2007)](Farrell2007) tested an intervention that co-located child support staff in a TANF office to meet with TANF applicants when they applied and found that this change increased the number of individuals who attended
the required meeting by 63 percentage points within six months of applying for TANF.

**Insights for TANF programs:** To reduce the distance recipients have to travel, some TANF programs are creating smaller satellite offices or co-locating staff in other program offices or American Job Centers (US Department of Labor-funded centers providing career resources). Some programs address hassle factors like finding childcare by offering on-site daycare so recipients can bring their children with them, or by replacing meetings with phone calls.

**Framing the Message: Motivate and Support**

Framing the message and using motivational language can provide recipients with a better understanding of why they need to attend the meeting and how it relates to their goals, what will happen in the meeting, and the benefits and consequences of attending or not attending. Behavioral research has shown that how information is presented can greatly affect decision-making. Examples include:

**Simplified language and loss framing.** In the first BIAS project, the team developed an intervention designed to increase the number of TANF recipients in Los Angeles who engaged in the county’s welfare-to-work program. The intervention tested a new, behaviorally informed reminder letter that provided a simplified and more pertinent summary of complex material that had been sent to participants previously. The behaviorally informed materials increased engagement within 30 days by 3.6 percentage points. Materials that used loss framing to highlight the benefits that participants might lose by not attending the meeting increased attendance by 4.4 percentage points.

**Motivational language.** In a working paper, Chande et al. (2017) reported that sending text messages that included motivational language and planning reminders to adult students in the United Kingdom led to a 7.3 percentage point increase in class attendance over the trial period.

**Insights for TANF programs:** TANF programs may be able to borrow these communication strategies to increase parents’ understanding of the TANF program and the benefits of participating, which could increase attendance. Some TANF programs have simplified key forms or flyers given to parents at the end of the TANF application appointment, and some are experimenting with motivational interviewing techniques to draw on participants’ strengths, elicit their goals, and tie TANF program participation to achieving those goals.

*Does your agency want to work with the BIAS-NG team? If so, or for more information on this topic, please contact beinfo@mdrc.org.*

**Coming Attractions**

MDRC federal behavioral projects will be featured at Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management Conference (APPAM) on November 8-10, 2018. Check out the following sessions:
The Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services Project: RCT Findings and Perspectives from the Field (November 8 at 1:45 p.m.)
Beyond Form Completion and Meeting Reminders: What Is the Next Generation of Public Sector Behavioral Interventions (November 8 at 4:30 p.m.)
Using Field Experiments to Examine Parent and Provider Decisions in the ECE Market (November 9 at 1:45 p.m.)

The BIAS-NG team will also be testing behavioral interventions designed to increase engagement in three TANF programs starting in 2018. Stay tuned!

News and Resources

Check out this video from the original Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project: Applying Behavioral Science to Human Services Programs: