



Promising Practice

Minnesota Provides Refugees with Intensive Support Prior to Entry into the Core TANF Program

State of Minnesota

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The State of Minnesota offers refugees a longer “settling in” period for English acquisition and community integration before being subject to workforce participation rules. As a result, long-term employment outcomes are positive.

Background

Strong collaborations between the State Refugee Director and the State TANF program have helped shepherd positive outcomes connecting refugees to public benefits and long-term employment in Minnesota. Innovations for serving low-literacy refugees were brought about due to a true understanding of their needs for an initial “settling in” period for language and cultural acquisition.

Minnesota’s TANF Program is called the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). The State of Minnesota supervises the MFIP, but each of the state’s eighty-seven counties has flexibility to administer and implement the program within the parameters of Minnesota law. The front-end of MFIP is called the Diversionary Work Program, is four months in length and focuses on helping clients become quickly engaged in work activities. Refugees do not enter the MFIP four-month work program. Instead, they go directly to Minnesota Family Stabilization Services (FSS), paid for by state non-MOE funds. After the first year and a language assessment, most refugees transfer to MFIP and its workforce participation requirements. Some will remain in FSS until it is determined they are ready to transfer.

Prior to the State’s decision to use FSS to offer refugees intensive support, refugees were struggling to succeed in MFIP. Low-levels of English language proficiency and the challenges of adapting to American workplace culture were making it extremely challenging for refugee participants to meet the program’s month-to-month workforce participation goals.

Challenge

TANF workforce participation rates did not fit for newly arriving refugees that had very low literacy levels and a scant understanding of how to integrate into American society. The state-funded FSS service track serves refugee families for at least 12 months before they enter the MFIP program and are subject to the Federal work participation rate.

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Innovation

Intensive Support to Refugees through FSS. To address this challenge and provide refugees with the services that they need to gain long-term, sustainable employment, refugees now enter the State-funded FSS track prior to their entry in the MFIP program. This gives them adequate time to develop literacy and cultural competency skills before being subject to Federal work participation rates. FSS is not treated as completely separate program from MFIP; rather it is thought of as a State-funded track within MFIP. The FSS track is for families with low literacy or other special circumstances, and it allows counties to provide different services for refugee families for between four and twelve months. While refugees as a group who are new to the country qualify for FSS, refugees may also qualify for FSS due to mental and physical health issues, or their children's' mental or physical health issues. These families are also funded by state non MOE funding and are therefore not part of the state's work participation rate. The 12-month limit does not apply to families with mental and/or physical health problems.

FSS is an example of how a state uses flexibility to provide accommodations to people who face additional challenges under TANF. FSS is state funded and as such, the state has the option of excluding some participants from work participation rates. While in FSS, the program helps refugees focus on finding housing, understanding American culture, and acquiring language skills. Once it is determined that they are ready, program participants are then transferred into the MFIP TANF program.

Impact

Both the State TANF office and State Refugee Coordinator understand the importance of meeting the specific needs of refugee populations. As a result of the coordination between the two offices, both FSS and MFIP reflect a deeper understanding of how best to support strong self-sufficiency outcomes for refugees. They recognize the importance of considering the unique needs of refugees for language services, multi-cultural workers, cultural sensitivity and appreciation of diversity.