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In Washington State, two pilot projects aim to connect refugees with limited English proficiency (LEP) with workforce development opportunities within WorkFirst, Washington’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Specifically, the two pilots:

(1) Provide more subsidized employment opportunities for LEP parents within the WorkFirst program; and

(2) Launch skills training pilots within WorkFirst that target participants with lower levels of English proficiency (Level 3 and below).

Background

Washington State is one of ten states with the largest number of refugee arrivals. In addition, the language gap is increasing for newly-arrived refugees. Historically around 70% of TANF LEP parents in Washington were English as a Second Language (ESL) Level 4\(^1\) or below. According to the State Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance, currently 90% of LEP parents receiving TANF are ESL level 4 or below. This includes many parents who are pre-literate in their native language.

Accessing skills training can be difficult for many LEP clients due to their lack of education and English skills. In the past, Washington WorkFirst service providers have provided skills training opportunities on a limited basis to newly-arrived refugees. Although local community and technical colleges provide vocational education classes, LEP clients generally need to be at ESL Level 4 or higher to access them.

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\(^1\) Washington uses the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) standards to measure English proficiency levels. Individuals at ESL Level 1 are considered to be at Beginning Literacy/Pre-Beginning ESL proficiency and Individuals at ESL Level 6 are considered to be Advanced ESL proficiency.
Innovations

Beginning in April 2013, the State launched two pilots that are currently being implemented and evaluated to measure impacts.

**Provide more subsidized Employment Opportunities within the WorkFirst Program.** The LEP Pathway within WorkFirst provides specialized culturally appropriate services to refugees and other WorkFirst parents with limited English proficiency. The goal of the LEP Pathway is to increase parents’ employability and self-sufficiency. Key features of the Pathway are: use of bi-lingual and culturally appropriate services; ESL instruction; and specialized employment services such as job readiness training, skills training and job placement assistance, work experience and community service.

**Launch Skills Training Pilots within WorkFirst that Target Participants with Lower Levels of English Proficiency (Level 3 and Below).** Skills training will be delivered by a community-based provider with curricula that will be based on the needs of employers in the local area. In some cases, providers will partner with community or technical colleges to deliver the skills training. The classes provide an outcomes-based, contextualized approach that allows participants to increase their English skills quickly. They will also include workplace-specific content areas in preparation for transition to professional technical programs or job placement.

Impact

A review of data showed that many LEP TANF parents who participated in a subsidized employment program were able to subsequently find unsubsidized employment at the same rate as mainstream TANF parents who participated in the subsidized employment program. However, due to their lack of English proficiency, the number of LEP parents who participated in subsidized employment was much smaller than mainstream participants. The State anticipates that increasing access to subsidized employment programs by LEP refugees will increase the number of refugees who find employment with higher wages, and consequently, will reduce their use of public assistance. In addition, by increasing access to skills training classes for clients with low English skills, the State hopes to create greater employability for refugees, provide them with opportunities for career advancement and wage progression, and reduce their dependence on public assistance. A decrease in State’s funding for these piloted activities, as well as lessons learned from the initial pilots, will result in changes in the next iteration of these innovations.