

TANF and Child Support Moving Forward Project

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

TANF participant interview guide

Introductory Statement and Consent

Thank you so much for talking with me today. My name is _____ and my colleague, _____, is on the call as well. I am with an organization called [Mathematica/MEF]. We are assisting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in learning about the changes that TANF programs made in response to the challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this study, we are talking to people like you to better understand people's experiences with the TANF program now that many of these programs have made changes because of the pandemic.

During this interview, we will ask you questions about:

- Your background and involvement with the TANF program
- How you experienced the pandemic and its disruptions, and
- Experiences you or your family had with the changes implemented in the TANF program during the pandemic

Our conversation will take about one hour. During our conversation, anything you say will be private, except if you say something that suggests you are very likely to harm yourself, that you are planning to hurt another person or child, or that someone is likely to harm you. We may use what you say during the interview in our reports, but we won't use your name or any other identifying information when we report the results of our study. We also won't share what you say with [name of program] or any other program.

Please remember that we are interested in your experiences and opinions; there are no right or wrong answers. In appreciation for participating in this discussion, we will give you a \$30 gift card.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, it will not affect any benefits or services you receive now or may receive in the future. It is possible that some questions may be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer any question you don't want to. We can skip any question or stop the interview at any time if you don't want to continue. If you stop the interview, you will still receive the gift card.

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0970-0531 and the expiration date is XX/XX/2025.

I would like to record our conversation so I don't miss anything. No one will hear the recording except for members of the research team. Once we finalize our notes, we will delete the recording. Is it okay with you if I record this conversation? If anyone wants me to turn the recorder off for any reason or at any time, just say so. We also request that everyone here today keep this conversation confidential and not share what you've heard today with others outside this group.

[INTERVIEWER: WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS.]

[INTERVIEWER: PRESS RECORD IN THE WEBEX AND ASK, “JUST TO CONFIRM, BEFORE WE FORMALLY BEGIN THE INTERVIEW, DOES ANYONE IN THE GROUP OBJECT TO ME RECORDING THIS INTERVIEW?”]

[INTERVIEWER: SPECIFY YOUR NAME, THE DATE, THE STATE THAT PARTICIPANTS ARE AFFILIATED WITH, AND THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE DISCUSSION.]

Interview Questions

Respondent background

- Why don't we start with you telling me a little bit about yourselves and your families?
 - Your first name
 - How long have you been participating in the TANF program?
 - Why did you apply to the TANF program?

Pandemic disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable challenges to all aspects of our lives.

- What were the most significant disruptions for you and your families?
 - How did the pandemic affect your employment?
 - Were you working when the pandemic started? Are you currently working? Are you working remotely or in person?
 - Did you lose your job at any point?
 - Did you have the option to work from home? Did you have to continue to go to work in person?
 - How did the pandemic affect your children's schools or childcare?
 - At any point, did the pandemic affect your ability to meet the requirements of the TANF program? [INTERVIEWER: PROBE FOR SPECIFIC TIME FRAMES AS THE DISCUSSION WARRANTS]. What requirements of the TANF program became more difficult?
- To what extent do you still deal with these challenges to program requirements?

TANF changes

[INTERVIEWER: REVIEW STATE RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND ANY OTHER INTERVIEWS THAT HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED IN THE STATE SO FAR AND PROBE ON RESPONSES TO SPECIFIC CHANGES].

TANF program operations and policies were also disrupted during the pandemic, and many of these programs made changes to how they serve families. I want to understand how you all might have experienced these changes. If you've been involved with the TANF program for a long time, you might think about what the program is like now compared to how it was when you first started participating. If you've just started participating in the TANF program, you can just talk about your experiences with how the program is currently serving you.

- We know that office closures and ongoing health concerns led many TANF programs to **offer services online or virtually** (e.g., electronic applications, video conferencing for case management meetings). We are particularly interested in learning about your experiences with these changes.
 - What was your experience with the program's virtual application or recertification process?
 - Did you complete and submit forms online?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful or more convenient? Did it create challenges to getting assistance?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
 - Did you ever sign forms electronically?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful or more convenient? Did it create challenges to getting assistance?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
 - Were there other ways that you were able to complete application or recertification tasks (like turning in documentation) without going to a TANF office? If so, what was that experience like for you?
 - How do you meet with TANF staff (i.e., your case manager)? Is that virtually, over the phone, through an app, video conferencing, etc.?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful or more convenient or did it create challenges?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?

Some states also changed **policies related to eligibility requirements, participation requirements, benefit levels, sanctions** and more. [Mention any state-specific policy changes]

- [If state changed the eligibility and determination process] What was your experience with the changes to the eligibility and determination process [mention the state-specific policy changes]?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful? Did it create challenges for you?
 - Did it affect your participation in the TANF program? If so, how?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
- [If state changed the TANF benefit level] What was your experience with the changes to TANF benefit levels [mention the state-specific policy changes]?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful? Did it create challenges for you?
 - Did it affect your participation in the TANF program? If so, how?
- [If state changed work participation requirement] What was your experience with the changes to work participation requirements [mention the state-specific policy changes]?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful? Did it create challenges for you?
 - Did it affect your participation in the TANF program? If so, how?
 - Did you receive or were you connected to any online employment-related courses or trainings?
 - How was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
- [If state changed service delivery] What was your experience with the changes to service delivery [mention the state-specific policy changes]?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful? Did it create challenges for you?
 - Did it affect your participation in the TANF program? If so, how?

- o If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
- [If state made changes to sanctions] What was your experience with changes to sanctions [mention the state-specific policy changes]?
 - o What was that like for you?
 - o Was this helpful? Did it create challenges for you?
- How did the TANF program communicate these changes and flexibilities to program requirements to you?
 - o Did you hear about these changes in advance?

Now I'm curious to hear whether the TANF program assisted you with receiving other services, besides those provided by the TANF program.

- Have these changes [mention specific changes discussed] to the TANF program addressed the pandemic disruptions you experienced (i.e., have the changes helped address your challenges and/or improved your access to services)?
- Have you received assistance from the TANF program to support you in seeking and receiving other supports and services?
- If so, how were you connected to these services? What other benefits programs provided you support during the pandemic?
 - o How did these other programs supplement support from the TANF program?
 - o How did the application processes and program requirements compare to the TANF program?

I'd like to understand your opinion of the TANF program and whether your perspective has changed during the pandemic.

- What is your opinion of the TANF program?
- How has that changed since the pandemic began and why?
- At this point in the pandemic, what is the TANF program currently doing to help you meet your needs that you'd like to see them continue?
- What is the program not doing but you'd like to see them do in the future to better meet your needs?

Conclusion

- Is there anything else about your experience with TANF program responses to the pandemic that we haven't talked about yet that you think we should know for our study?

Later today we will be sending you a \$30 virtual gift card to thank you for your participation. The email will also include any special instructions that you need to activate the gift card. I will use the email address that I used to contact you and arrange this interview. Does that email work okay for me to send the gift card or does anyone prefer that I send the gift card to a different email address?

[INTERVIEWER: COLLECT AND CONFIRM EMAIL ADDRESSES THAT WE HAVE ON FILE AND MAKE UPDATES AS NEEDED. SHORTLY AFTER THE INTERVIEW, SEND THE GIFT CARDS TO PARTICIPATING RESPONDENTS.]

Great, thank you. If you don't receive the email by the end of the day tomorrow, then please check your junk folder.

Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate all that you have shared.