

TANF Education and Training

The Oklahoma Special Projects¹



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Oklahoma's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)-funded education and training programs, referred to as "Special Projects," provide a comprehensive range of services to help TANF recipients successfully pursue postsecondary degrees and credentials at Oklahoma's community colleges and technology center campuses. The Special Projects are a collaboration among the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS), which operates the state's TANF program; the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education (ODCTE); and the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE). All TANF cash assistance recipients can participate in the Special Projects, and based on capacity, individuals with children receiving other OKDHS services also are eligible.²

The Special Projects programs are housed at Oklahoma's 13 community colleges (20 campuses) and 20 technology centers (30 campuses). In some urban areas, students may have a choice of programs. Each site usually has a program director/coordinator, a job developer/employment specialist, and sometimes clerical support. In addition to helping TANF clients who pursue certificates, college credits, and credentials, Special Projects staff members also organize workshops on soft skills, life skills and other issues that may affect TANF recipients and provide up to six months of post-training job search and six months of employment retention follow-up.

Every non-exempt TANF recipient in Oklahoma, once approved for benefits, goes through an extensive assessment and battery of tests³, which include vision screening, the Washington State Learning Disabilities Screening Instrument, the Tests of Adult Basic Skills (TABE) Locator and Full Battery, the Career Occupation Preference System (COPS), and KeyTrain pretests.⁴ Carl Albert State College, through a contract with OKDHS, administers all of the assessments. After the assessment, all clients have a "joint staffing" with representatives from Carl Albert, their caseworkers, and their substance abuse assessment provider (when indicated), and a representative of the local Special Projects. The "joint staffing" helps clients create a career pathway plan and determine the appropriate next steps for eventually securing employment. To complete the work requirement, clients can choose from various options

¹ The ODCTE refers to their TANF-funded portion of the program as Work Prep, but OKDHS refers to their contracts with the community and technical colleges as 'Special Projects.' This brief will follow that convention, but may cite Work Prep documents.

² Programs in Oklahoma City and Tulsa metro areas serve recipients of TANF cash assistance only. Other programs may serve individuals receiving Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps), Medical Assistance, Child Only TANF (grandparent, caretaker, etc.), Child Care Assistance, Child Support Services, and Child Welfare Services. See: "Work Prep Vocational Training Program Planning Guide, FY2011," OKDHS and ODCTE, 2010, page 19, <http://www.okcareertech.org/tanf/11%20gb/Guidebook%20FY11.pdf>.

³ Clients may be exempt or granted good cause reasons which may include but are not limited to unavailability of appropriate child care, illness or incapacity of the participant or a household member who cannot give self-care, court appearance or incarceration, parent-teacher conferences, family crisis, the unavailability of planned transportation and the lack of necessary social services. If already in training an exception may be made as well. See: "Work Prep Vocational Training Program Planning Guide, FY2011," page 18.

⁴ For more information about the Career Occupation Preference System (COPSystem) and KeyTrain, visit <http://www.edits.net/component/content/article/40/18-cops.html> and http://www.keytrain.com/wrk_over.asp.

presented to them including job search, earning a GED, or receiving training through the local technology center or community college Special Project.

By The Numbers

- **Year started:** 1996⁵
- **Approximate number of active participants:** 2,600, out of a total TANF cash assistance caseload of approximately 4,300 adults (proportionally split between the technology centers and community colleges)
- **Annual cost:** \$6.7 million
- **Performance Measures:** Completion target for clients served is 80 percent. Placement target for clients completing training is 75 percent.

Special Projects and the TANF Work Requirements

The program staff members at the technology center campuses and community colleges are responsible for ensuring students who receive TANF cash assistance meet work participation rate requirements. There is flexibility in the path that the client can choose once at a Special Projects site. If the client wants to pursue short-term training, the Special Projects staff will ensure additional structured work activities are undertaken through the program that will meet the 30-hour per week requirement.⁶ Clients who decide to work toward a degree or long-term certificate would enroll in the appropriate classes for up to 12 months. Although technology centers require a minimum of 30 hours of participation, the community colleges require all clients to participate for 35 hours a week, allowing the programs to schedule up to five hours a week of workshops that might not meet the work requirements. After a year, clients that wish to continue training or initially had specified a desire to earn an associate

TANF Work Participation Rates

States face financial penalties unless they engage 50 percent of adults in families receiving TANF-funded assistance in a limited number of countable work activities for a specified number of hours per week. Education and training activities only count toward these hours to a certain extent. No more than 30 percent of individuals counting toward a state's work participation rate can be counted in vocational education or high school attendance (for minor parents), and no individual can be counted as participating in vocational education for more than 12 months. After those first 12 months, hours spent in education and training programs can count as job skills training or education related to employment, but only when combined with at least 20 hours of participation a week in employment or another core TANF work activity.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) for the first time imposed the work requirements on recipients of assistance funded with state-only money that is claimed toward the TANF maintenance of effort requirement, and it made other changes that effectively increased the work participation rate targets that states must meet. Additionally, the regulations implementing the DRA require that all hours of participation be verified and documented, which poses significant challenges to institutions educating TANF participants. For more information on the TANF work participation requirements and the changes made by the DRA, please see *Implementing the TANF Changes in the Deficit Reduction Act: "Win-Win" Solutions for Families and States*, available at www.clasp.org/WinWin.

As a result of these restrictions, and a general "work-first" approach, many states allow only very limited access to education and training for TANF recipients. However, some states have found ways to work within the federal requirements and provide valuable educational opportunities to parents receiving TANF. This brief is one in a series that profiles promising approaches to supporting education and training programs under TANF in spite of the limits imposed by the federal rules.

⁵ Oklahoma actually implemented a statewide pilot through the Job Opportunity and Basic Skills (JOBS) program under the Family Support Act of 1988 pre-1996 so by the time the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 passed the community colleges and technology campus centers were ready to gear up and expand the program to the majority of campuses in the state.

⁶ Oklahoma's approved State Plan allows up to a maximum of 1 hour of homework time per credit hour for classes that require homework for *all* students in the course.

degree can do so, but must participate for 20 hours a week in work study or an internship that can count as core hours. The Special Project will assist the client in obtaining this position. Additional vocational training beyond the first twelve months is considered job skills training directly related to employment when the participant is meeting the 20 core hours requirement.

Documentation and Verification Requirements

Program staff members work with local OKDHS staff to document and verify hours. All hours spent in Special Projects are documented and verified. Students' attendance is documented by Special Projects staff. Each program receives an annual review or evaluation by OKDHS and the appropriate partner agency, ODCTE or OSRHE.

Crucial Innovations

Every non-exempt recipient is assessed for skills and career interests, and informed about education and training opportunities. The “joint staffing” allows collaborative and customized attention for each participant and improves awareness of and participation in education and training. Recipients are engaged in the process and have the chance to learn about all of their options at once and to ask questions. This gets the ball rolling much faster as they don't have to schedule separate meetings to learn about the programs with the community colleges, technology center campuses, and his or her case worker. Each recipient who participates in Special Projects receives assistance in developing a career pathway or education plan of study to help them reach their employment goals. Remarkably, the number of active participants in the Special Projects is more than half of the adults on TANF in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's Special Projects provide extensive employment and retention services and follow-up. Fitting with the goals of TANF, obtaining employment is highlighted at the start of Special Projects programs. Advisors and recipients complete a career pathway or education plan of study that fits with the recipient's employment goals. Many students participate in work-study positions or internships, which provide work experience, employment recommendations and sometimes full-time jobs. The program is responsible for employment placement and most of the sites have job developers/employment specialists to assist in the student upon completion of training. Program staff are also responsible for employment follow-up and job retention services, which are provided for six months after employment is obtained.

The Special Projects also pay attention to a broad range of 'life skills', while providing comprehensive support to obstacles that may arise. Workshops cover topics from soft skill attainment and general job search to issues that greatly affect the TANF population, such as domestic violence, with the goal of providing a forum to discuss the issues that can lead to low retention rates in jobs and in school. To be more potent to the audience, oftentimes workshops feature guest speakers, including past Special Project participants. All college programs and many technology centers include an extra five hours a week of participation for these workshops because they are not always on topics that could count toward the work participation rate. Special Projects programs can also provide funding for tools, books and fees, and help the participants with purchasing clothes, finding transportation, and child care.

Challenges

Recipients tend to prioritize immediate work over longer-term training and career advancement. While workers are informed about all the available opportunities for attaining education and training, including longer-term credentials and degrees, most participants sign up for just a few courses and do not get degrees. As a result, they still often wind up in low-wage jobs with high turnover rates, few benefits and high cyclical risks. The sites try to address this issue by articulating the value of longer-term training and highlighting when short-term certificates can build into associate degrees.

The 12 month life-time limit on counting full-time vocational education and training restricts education choices, making some more challenging or even impossible. Recipients are allowed to enroll in longer-term educational programs; however, after 12 months, the participant must combine educational activities with at least 20 hours a week of a core activity, including work, internships or work-study positions. Many of the technical programs with immediate labor market payoff are designed to be full-time programs, so students must combine full-time attendance, study and 20 hours a week of work. In most cases, this exceeds the maximum coverage under the child care subsidy program, requiring students to pay out of pocket or find a free arrangement for the additional hours. Administrators report that students frequently wind up dropping out close to completion, missing out on the benefit of a credential or degree or leaving TANF to try to complete the program, losing the necessary benefits and supports that TANF receipt provides them.

Oklahoma's focus on its Special Projects has caused it to exceed the federal limit on counting participation in vocational education toward the work participation rate requirement. TANF statutes stipulate that no more than 30 percent of participants counted toward a state's work participation rates may be in vocational educational training. Oklahoma has consistently exceeded this cap, which has lowered its reported work participation rate.

For More Information

Visit

Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education's Work Prep website:
<http://www.okcareertech.org/tanf/index.htm>

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