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### TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES(TANF): INVESTIGATIVE REPORT ON THE CURRENT EFFECTIVENESS OF CASE MANAGEMENT AND THE JUSTIFICATION FOR CONTINUED EDUCATION TRAININGS

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University of Northern Colorado  
Greeley, Colorado

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES(TANF):  
INVESTIGATIVE REPORT ON THE CURRENT EFFECTIVENESS OF CASE  
MANAGEMENT AND THE JUSTIFICATION FOR CONTINUED EDUCATION  
TRAININGS

A Thesis/Capstone  
Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences

May 1, 2023

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): An Investigative Report on the Current Effectiveness of Case Management and the Justification for Continued Education Trainings

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**ABSTRACT**

In 1996, as part of larger legislation under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act's (PRWORA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Under TANF, U.S. families with children are being capped at 60 months nationwide in program participation, consecutively or intermittently. TANF's primary goal for single mothers, living at or below the poverty level, to obtain self-sufficiency through the support of case management. Previous research suggests, TANF case managers are impacted by program policy and the expectations TANF recipients have, to gain employment. These factors influence the identity of the case manager and how they provide services (Taylor et al., 2016). For this qualitative study, I conducted an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of TANF case management for short-term and long-term recipients within a Northern Colorado county. My findings indicate TANF case management in Weld County is effective by how case managers provide an individualized, strengths-based approach. Through evidence-based practices and research, I discuss recommendations for improving case management.

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I dedicate this to my nephew Diego and my nieces, Bianca, and Belen. They are the reason I want to create a better future. You are all the reason I continue to exist and the inspiration behind my success.

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## INTRODUCTION

For vulnerable populations, a path to economic and social stability can feel unobtainable, creating a cycle of poverty and internal struggles. As part of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) welfare reform, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was created as a welfare -to- work program to eliminate welfare dependency, by mandating a 60-month time limit and requiring intensive, caseworker management, while closely monitoring eligibility and compliance reporting (Handler 2005). In hindsight, the federal government believed this was the quickest way to decrease welfare dependency and poverty. However, mental health, physical health, substance use, and lack of self-efficacy remained barriers to obtain self-sufficiency. After Congress passed welfare reform, Colorado used the TANF block grant to create the Colorado Works (CW) program to administer benefits, adhere to time-limits, and implement the welfare to work model. Today, among CW clients, 67% are single-parent, majority being single mothers; in addition, 38% of CW participants left the program after gaining employment, but 12% of CW participants reached the mandated 60-month time limit (Public Consulting Group 2023). In this qualitative study, an in-depth analysis on the effectiveness of TANF, past and present, is examined. I investigate the effectiveness of case management single mothers and long term TANF recipients receive.

## **BACKGROUND**

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a federal program, which administers financial aid to economically vulnerable families with children under the age of 18. States are responsible for administering federal rule and regulations; however, they also define how to utilize the block grant programs to help meet TANF's goal of obtaining self-sufficiency for families. In addition to a monthly cash allotment, TANF requires case management for all adult participants. Case managers are crucial to the program, they keep TANF recipients accountable for their participation, assist with obtaining employment, address barriers, and can provide resources to other services, such as counseling or parenting classes. With a combination of case management, assistance in job searching, and program incentives, the government expects families to exit welfare and maintain self-sufficiency. The caveat to TANF is, program benefits are limited to 60 months over a lifetime. In Colorado, TANF benefits are managed by Colorado Works (CW). The premise of the program is to build a family's self-sufficiency by providing the tools and resources needed to reach economic and social stability.

As a result of the 60-month time limit TANF case management became time intensive compared to the expectations for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) case workers. AFDC was the cash assistance program American's utilized before TANF went into effect. Today, TANF continues to support families with some of their basic needs while promoting a path to self-sufficiency. The program can be an important tool for a family to reach economic stability, however there are other structures in place that can hinder a family's ability to be successful. Barriers such as lack of childcare, a criminal back ground, housing instability, poor mental health, poor physical health, and a lack of work experience can impact one's ability to obtain stability. Social stratifications and bureaucratic entities also impact the success a TANF



recipient can have. For example, TANF does have sanctions put in place for if a participant fails to comply with their work readiness plan or if they miss meetings with their case manager.

Sanctions are just one method of holding a recipient accountable. Hildebrandt states, “In context of TANF policy, sanctioning refers to the punishment for noncompliance in job training or work. Cash benefits are withheld or participants are terminated for infractions of TANF rules”

(Hildebrandt 2016:163). In more severe circumstances, some families do max out TANF, which means a family failed to gain self-sufficiency in 60 months consecutively or intermittently.

Colorado Works (CW) effectiveness on addressing clients’ barriers to self-sufficiency within 5 years has positive results. Participant survey data from Public Consulting Group (2023) indicates of the 17% needing assistance with GED, 49% received their GED, of the 39% who required help with housing, 43% received assistance with housing, of the 14% needing assistance with applying for disability, 29% received assistance with a disability application, and of the 29% who reported needing help with referrals to other services, 52% received services for referrals (Public Consulting Group, 2023). In addition, 8 out of 10 CW participants reported to be satisfied with their CW case manager and they felt expectations about the program were met. For Colorado, data demonstrates that more participants received help with resources and services than the amount reported needing the assistance. Case managers are identifying the needs of recipients. Ensuring that each participant becomes successful while on the program.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***The Effectiveness of TANF***

For nearly 60 years, families living below the poverty level used AFDC for financial support, which had several benefits. Families could receive cash assistance, which varied

depending on number of children, until their last child turned 18; hypothetically, a family could receive this cash assistance for more than 10 years. AFDC was open-ended with little accountability needed from the recipient. In 1996 welfare recipients saw several changes under TANF. Replacing AFDC permanently and tightening the laws on how long one can receive welfare by adding restrictions and mandated requirements. In the years following the introduction of TANF, evidence suggested the way legislation intended the program to work was working. “The descriptive evidence alone provides a compelling case in favor of the employment effects of welfare reform: the fraction of single mothers working without welfare increased from 59% in 1990 to 76% in 2000, 2 years after the last state (California) implemented its reform plan” (Herbst, 2012:204). The first set of studies published regarding TANF provided clear results of program effectiveness. TANF recipients became work motivated, employment rates increased, and welfare caseloads reduced (Herbst, 2012:233).

In its infancy, TANF quickly increased employment rates and program recipients improved economic stability. Early studies showed promising results for the future of TANF. As the program matured and waves of new recipients entered the program, new evidence started highlighting the parts of TANF that did not support full self-sufficiency. Researchers and legislators began to learn TANFs work-first model was not addressing long term self-sufficiency. Some recipients who left the program for gaining employment returned and some even began to time out of TANF. For example, in one study, researcher LaDonna Pavetti, examined 13 different work-first programs from 7 different states. All 13 programs were tied to each state’s TANF assistance. Results were surprising given the promising results from TANFs first few years into effect. Her first finding showed employment among recipients faded over time. The employment that was being obtained was a short-term safety net. Another finding showed

recipients who had significant barriers to employment failed to become employed while participating in the work-first programs. Pavetti states, “Physical and mental health conditions that limit an individual’s ability to work or limit the amount or kind of work the individual can do are much more common among public benefit recipients than among the general population, research shows.” (Pavetti, 2016:7) This finding suggests different pathways to employment are required for some recipients. Lastly, another finding showed individuals subject to work requirements remained in poverty. Due to program sanctions and other bureaucratic entities, adhering to work requirements became another barrier causing some recipients to lose benefits. (Pavetti, 2016:9) Even though this is just one study, results are providing a profound amount of evidence into what the program has become since its birth in 1996.

### ***Case Management Effectiveness***

Case Managers are an important aspect to the TANF program. Not only do they help facilitate the rules and regulations that come with the program, they also help the recipient by keeping them accountable by developing a road map or a contract. They make referrals to other agencies that can help be part of the recipients’ path to self-sufficiency. Monetary supportive services, like assistance with a car repair or extra funds to help pay for work attire are issued. The most significant piece of a case managers role is identifying a client’s barriers and helping them create goals to achieve self-sufficiency (Public Consulting Group 2023). On the other hand, case managers also enforce program rules and regulations. Whether it is completing job searches, acquiring childcare, applying for social security benefits, completing their GED, or attending parenting classes; each participate is given goals to complete and if those goals are not met, their case can be sanctioned, meaning recipients will not receive their cash allotment for the month. “The metaphor of “carrots and sticks” is often invoked to describe the nature of the current work-

based system, whereby supports such as child care, transportation assistance, and increased earned income disregards are incentives (“carrots”) to clients who comply with work requirements, and sanctions are punishment (“sticks”) for clients not meeting their obligations.” (Kalil et al., 2002). Therefore, due to the case managers ability to sanction or close a case, case managers have a bad reputation. They can be seen as rule enforcers rather than program helpers.

In Colorado, TANF case managers have a high-rating for client satisfaction. For instance, 93% of CW recipients found their case manager to be respectful. 88% felt like their case manager explained their responsibilities in an easy manner to understand. (Public Consulting Group, 2023). In terms of satisfaction with their case plan or road map, 83% of single parent households were satisfied with the availability of their case worker and 88% felt that their plan was manageable (Public Consulting Group, 2023).

TANF case managers are described as inefficient and inadequate for their role and previous research highlights ways to improve case management. In one qualitative study, case managers in North Carolina revealed they felt pressure to bend program rules to meet state reporting requirements. Taylor (2014) discovered case managers feared losing block grant funding for their county due to not meeting policy requirements. This caused the case managers to feel like they were unable to balance their ability to help their clients and police them at the same time (Taylor, 2014). Consequently, bureaucratic constraints impacted the case manager’s ability to perform their role well and in turn, it also impacted the recipient’s success.

In another study, TANF case managers in Ohio were interviewed and observed to identify case management styles and how those styles impacted program outcomes. Researchers asked two questions that would help identify case manager identity: “What are the challenges in helping people become self-sufficient?” and “What do you see are your program’s main barrier

in reaching self-sufficiency goals?” (Taylor et al., 2016). Taylor et al (2016) identified a ‘holistic’ case manager focuses on structural barriers to self-sufficiency. A second type of manager- ‘efficiency engineers’- are far more rules-minded and focused on clients’ individual barriers. They found support for a third category of managers- ‘conflicted’ who discuss both structural and individual – level barriers to self-sufficiency (Taylor et al., 2016). They discovered what it means to be self-sufficient was subjective to each case worker.

Subjectivity heavily influenced case manager type. For example, ‘efficiency engineers’ cite individual barriers must be overcome to be self-sufficient, where ‘social work’ case managers define self-sufficiency as having independence from financial and social supports (Taylor et al., 2016). Additionally, they identified the most effective case manager type was the ‘conflicted’ type. The ‘conflicted’ type identified both structural and individual barriers as factors impacting program success. This manager type was also the most passionate about their roles as case managers. They expressed equal frustration with the program and the client and were also cited as being the most involved with their client. Studies like these can help law makers with identifying inconsistencies within the program’s expectations for TANF case managers. It also provides a framework for what type of case manager is most likely to help a recipient obtain self-sufficiency.

## **VULNERABLE POPULATIONS**

### ***Single Mothers***

In Colorado, 67% of TANF participants, are single-parent households with single mothers being the most common. The majority of people on TANF are single mothers (Hildebrandt and Kelber 2012). Based off the program’s framework, TANF eligible participants

enter the program with active hardships and barriers to economic and social stability. For single mothers, those hardships are amplified, making their path to self-sufficiency much harder to reach over other household types. CW recipients reported their highest barrier to stability to be housing, with 4 in 10 participants reporting this as a barrier. For single mothers on CW, 44% needed help with housing and only 19% received the actual help. The second highest barrier for all CW participants was transportation with 31% of recipients needing transportation. For single mothers in Colorado, 36% reported needing help with transportation, while only 23% received the actual help (Public Consulting Group, 2023). These numbers demonstrate the obstacles the majority of TANF recipients face, thus single mothers are the most vulnerable population with the most barriers.

In order for TANF and case management to be effective, it is imperative to identify the hardships and barriers the programs' most vulnerable population experiences. Studies indicate single mothers lack work history, affordable housing, childcare, education, reliable transportation, and support from the father of their children. Internal factors like substance abuse, depression, anxiety, domestic violence, childhood trauma, and low self-efficacy also hold back a single mother's ability to become self-sufficient (Ellerbe et al., 2011). In one of the studies, researchers interviewed 106 women on TANF to compare their experiences at different stages of the program. The group was divided into three groups depending on what stage of TANF they were on. Stage one consisted of participants who left the program early due to becoming employed and having few barriers. Stage two were recipients who were terminated from the program due to punishments, like sanctions. The third group were those who maxed out the program with multiple barriers to employment. Results from the study identified education, socio-economic marginalization, and the TANF program itself as the most common barriers to

self-sufficiency for single mothers (Hildebrandt & Kelber, 2012:133). This specific study was a call to action for case management improvement. Hildebrandt and Kelber state, “Because participants’ strengths and barriers could be expected to change over time during the women’s involvement with TANF, case management with early and ongoing assessment of needs and identification of appropriate interventions is imperative for program effectiveness and outcomes.” (Hildebrandt & Kelber, 2012:139).

### ***Clients Reaching TANF Time Limits***

In Maryland, on average, 5% of TANF recipients surpass the programs 60-month time limit (Hall et al., 2020). Findings also indicated the 5% who maxed out the program were three times more likely to be long term disabled and had been on the program for at least 45 months. In contrast, recipients who did not exceed their TANF time clock, were on the program for an average of 13 months (Hall et al., 2020). In Colorado, 12% of CW recipients reached their time limit. For those 12%, half still had two months of the program left and were not aware they could request an extension to receive more support (Public Consulting Group, 2023). From the programs creation in 1996, a quarter million families had already maxed out TANF by 2005 (Weigt, 2023:2). Although, the time out rates are low in many states, timing out does impact the most vulnerable populations by pushing them further in poverty and unstable conditions.

Statistically, recipients who max out of TANF are female, older, less educated, African American, and less likely to have young children (Weigt, 2023:2). It demonstrates the demographics are those who have been in and out of TANF for several years as their children aged and it also exhibits the difficulty African American women continue to have with their path towards upward social mobility. Current studies have also identified life factors and barriers are more prevalent in families who have maxed out TANF. Weigt (2023) reports, “Compared to

other welfare recipients, those who time out report greater likelihood of dealing with mental or physical health issues, caring for a family member with such issues, experiencing hardships such as homelessness and recent domestic violence, and poorer work histories.” (Weigt, 2023:2-3). They are the most disadvantaged population receiving welfare. For single mothers who time out of TANF, they are left to survive with the little resources they have obtained or they exit the program with even more barriers to self-sufficiency. For this specific population, they may find themselves with child welfare involvement, domestic violence, substance abuse, or mental health symptoms like depression or anxiety. Single mothers who have timed out of TANF may also find themselves defaulting into risky behaviors as a way to survive and earn money (Hildebrandt, 2016:162). TANF recipients who reach their time clock are the most vulnerable population exhibiting multiple barriers to self-sufficiency. Understanding them can help create methods for preventing a family from maxing out. Lastly, internal resources such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, coping skills, and self-care are minimized in this welfare population. Addressing these factors at entrance and exit of the program can prepare single mothers for survival.

### ***Clients’ Mental Health and Self-Efficacy***

In Colorado 52% of women on TANF received assistance with referrals to services such as counseling, therapy, support groups, or parenting classes and for single mothers, 31% reported to need help with service referrals. In contrast, 25% two parent households reported needing assistance with service referrals (Public Consulting Group, 2023). Several studies indicate that there are direct links to the mental health impacts living in poverty can have on a person. TANF recipients live below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and for single mothers below the FPL, their mental health impacts can be greater. Compared to two parent households, single mothers are twice as likely to experience depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and other negative



health factors (Long et al., 2019). The combination of living in poverty and experiencing negative mental health factors can severely impede the ability to gain self-sufficiency. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Utah conducted a study which compared single mothers receiving TANF participating in Family Employment Program (FEP) to middle class women who had Kaiser Permanente for a health insurance. Both groups participated in a questionnaire that measured their Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs measure any traumatic events that occur during childhood, such as neglect, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, death of a parent and violence in the home (Long et al., 2019:221). Results for single mothers on TANF reveal 54% reported emotional abuse, 43% reported physical abuse, and 42% reported sexual abuse as children. In comparison to women in Kaiser Permanente 14% reported emotional abuse, 29% physical abuse, and 24% sexual abuse. ACEs were higher for women in poverty. “For low-income women, ACE-informed research has shown an association between childhood abuse and reporting mental health as the biggest barrier to finding employment.” (Long et al., 2019:222) For these TANF recipients obtaining and keeping employment is much harder than someone who is not on TANF. Mental health can hinder one’s ability to believe obstacles like depression and poverty can be overcome. Those below the FPL are aware of their disadvantages in society and the state of their mental health is a significant barrier which can impact their ability to see a way out of their circumstance.

Raising children as a single parent comes with a variety of complex factors that can impact the quality of life for the family. For single mothers below the FPL, greater barriers can present themselves through a lack of resources, social support, low self-efficacy, and mental health symptoms. These barriers manifest dependency on government programs. Even though TANF can be the bridge from welfare dependency to self-sustainability, it is crucial that single

mothers believe in their ability to overcome these barriers. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capability to change a behavior, it predicts their ability to make the changes they need to succeed in specific life circumstances. It impacts one's resiliency and how one copes with stress or depression. It can impact choices made and the efforts people invest towards life's endeavors (Jackson and Preston, 2018). For single mothers on TANF low self-efficacy can be a barrier towards welfare independence. Researchers have identified, psychological well-being such as perceived locus of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and level of optimism play a substantial role in whether welfare recipients are capable of entering the labor force (Sullivan et al., 2004). Additional research has also acknowledged single mothers who feel supported have higher levels of internal resources that help support coping skills and positive mental health (Taylor and Conger, 2017). "Internal resources such as optimism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are linked to effective coping strategies that can be fostered through psychosocial intervention and have the potential to help individuals manage stress and avoid compromising their mental health." (Taylor and Conger, 2017:354). Effective TANF case management can help boost internal resources. Correlations between TANF participation, mental health, and self-efficacy are compelling in how the individual is able to navigate the system and how they exit. Understanding these connections can promote wellbeing and a way to understand one's self during challenging circumstances.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

This research will investigate the effectiveness of case management styles and barriers TANF recipients continue to face. By interviewing case managers about their approach to clients, I expect to be able to distinguish the types of constraints case managers have with their clients and with the agency. I hope to answer, how is TANF case management effective? How do

case managers support clients with mental health barriers? How do they strengthen client self-efficacy? Do case managers feel supported in their role? I hope to identify the types of trainings they received and how those trainings support their management styles. I also hope to answer, how do continued education trainings promote effective case management? Overall, this study will provide recommendations to improve TANF case management and how TANF case managers can be supported in their roles.

## **PROJECT DESIGN**

### *Methodology*

For this qualitative study, an investigation was conducted to learn about TANF case management effectiveness and the experiences case managers have in their role. The goal was to identify methods of effective TANF case management, how case managers are supported, and if further supports such as trainings or procedures are needed. In order to gain insight into case management, further research was conducted by learning about TANF program rules, guidelines, and procedures. Studies from different states were examined and quantitative data about CW was collected from Colorado Department of Human Service's (CDHS).

### *Ethical Approval*

At the start of this study, permission from the director of human services was requested. The procedures, protocol, and purpose of the study was provided to the director to obtain approval. Since I would be doing human research, I also had to obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I met an exempt status with IRB based off interviews that would be conducted at a government agency. Approval was granted from the director and IRB.

### *Setting*

Research took place at Weld County Department of Human services (WCDHS) in Greeley, Colorado. The department handles all public assistance cases as well as other human services such as the Area Agency on Aging or child support. TANF case managers are also located at WCDHS. Case managers were interviewed in the building they are housed in, in private interview rooms or offices.

### *Subjects*

Subjects of this research are TANF case managers. For anonymity, case managers are identified as such: CM1, CM2, and CM3. Case managers were interviewed on site during their preferred time and location during the week of March 20, 2023. Subjects were recruited by email and consent forms were provided at the start of their interview. Subjects selected had a rapport with this researcher, making the recruitment process easy. WCDHS granted permission to interview 3 TANF case managers, I originally asked for 4. I was also asked to interview them during my lunch hour or outside of work hours. Interviews took place in secure locations that required badge access. As an employee at WCDHS, this researcher did not need access to the building or interview rooms. All 3 case managers are Caucasian women between the ages of 30 and 40 years. All 3 case managers have experience working with all populations of the TANF program. Two case managers had a bachelor's degree, and one had a master degree. Furthermore, all 3 case managers have been employed with the department doing TANF case management for more than 5 years each.

### ***Measures***

For this study, interviews were conducted to gather data. Ice breaker questions were used to get to know the case managers. Questions such as: How long have you been a TANF case manager? And what is your highest level of education, provided insight into their background. The interview covered 4 different themes of research. The first theme was about overall case management and their experience as a case manager. Questions included: How would you describe your case management style? And, what does your day as a TANF case manager look like? The second theme pertained to barriers case managers encounter with their clients. Questions such as: What are the most common barriers to self-sufficiency do you see in your clients? And, what types of strengths do you see in your clients that help build self-sufficiency? The next theme of the interview pertained to case management experience and trainings they receive. Questions like: What does success look like for a case manager? How do you approach clients who have been on and off TANF? And, how does your case management change for clients who have reached 48 months of TANF? These questions helped understand their level of experience as a case manager. Lastly, what type of trainings would you like to take, helped understand trainings they would like to take or if they have taken any. The last set of questions focused on clients who max out TANF. For example, what barriers do you see in clients who max out TANF? This helped identify the ways they alter their case management for this specific population. Lastly, I asked, how do you wish you were supported as a case manager? This was the last question of the interview that helped understand their overall needs to manage cases.

### ***Data Collection***

Data was collected using a recording application on my phone during the interviews. To access the recording, biometric access was required, making me the only person to have access

to my data. In addition, at the start of each interview, consent forms were provided to each case manager. Once interviews were completed, the recording was transcribed. Additionally, once transcription was completed, interviews were then deleted from the phone application. For the first interview CM1 and CM2 were interviewed together. This first set of interviews were brief and took place during everyone's lunch hour. Both case managers took turns answering questions and they provided brief answers pertaining to the question. The first set of interviews took 40 mins to complete. The last interview, with CM3, took an hour and was conducted at the end of the day at 5 p.m.. This case manager had 10 years of experience in her field. Her answers were detailed, which provided a wealth of data. All case managers were thanked for their time, and they were excited for the opportunity to participate in this study. Incentives were not provided.

## **FINDINGS**

I originally intended to interview four case managers and to observe a case manager with two of their clients in order to collect a variety of perspectives. In addition, I wanted to observe a case manager with two clients on their last 12 months of TANF, hoping to observe interactions and mannerisms towards each other and to learn more about how long-term client's meeting differ from short-term recipients. Instead, I was given permission to interview three case managers either during lunch or after work. Unfortunately, observations for this study were never conducted. The day I was scheduled to observe a meeting, the case manager's client never showed up. This turned into a reoccurring situation. Ultimately, I decided to move on from observations and just focus on my interviews.

Results from the transcripts provided surprising data. For case managers, I was expecting to find results leaning towards barriers case managers experienced and I assumed case managers

would report trainings were not available for them. Instead, all three case managers provided results surrounding the supports and trainings case managers receive and self-care was identified as being an important factor to perform their roles well. Data surrounding TANF recipients also provided surprising results. I anticipated to observe a common characteristic TANF recipients have that impact their self-sufficiency and I estimated recipients to lack positive qualities. Instead, case managers reported TANF recipients are resilient and know how to advocate for themselves and each client is unique to their situation, so barriers are different for everyone. However, all subjects reported the recipient's mental health as a contributing factor to self-efficacy.

### *Case Managers*

#### **Experience and Trainings**

Results from this study contradict previous research about case management trainings and experience. In one previous study Tiffany Taylor (2014), found case managers lacked professional credentials to provide case management and most only had a high school diploma or associates degree. She identified a disconnect in the relationship, causing case managers to appear unqualified for their roles. Outcomes from this study indicate otherwise. All three case managers had higher education, two had a bachelor's degree and one had a master's degree. Researchers have noted case managers with higher degrees in human service fields, provide effective management due to their training and experience (Ellerbe et al., 2011). In addition, all three had more than five years of TANF case management experience. During the interviews, I discovered their expertise within their field. It was also revealed case managers in Weld County receive a plethora of trainings every year in addition to what they are already required to attend. Employees at WCDHS are all required to attend 20 hours a year of trainings. Furthermore, in

order for specialized TANF case managers to keep their child welfare certification, they are required to have 40 more hours of trainings every year. Data showed case managers attend domestic violence trainings, motivational interviewing, social work foundations, trauma informed trainings, job coach training, leadership training, Bridges Out of Poverty, and de-escalation trainings, just to name a few. In fact, the day I met with case managers during lunch, they completed a human trafficking training. As an employee at WCDHS, for my role in Community Outreach, I have also had the privilege of attending Bridges Out of Poverty and leadership training. It is conclusive case managers in Weld County are well equipped with education and trainings for the role they have with TANF recipients and the agency provides supports for it's employees.

### **Case Management Style**

Findings from this study identified all three case managers have an individualized, strengths-based approach to their case management. They all expressed the importance of identifying the strengths their recipients have. They stated this method helps the recipient by providing a positive outlook to their circumstances. CM1, stated she modifies her case management for each of her clients. She recognizes all her clients are different and what works for one family, does not work for the other. CM2, finds it important to be open minded and non-judgmental towards her clients. This exhibits her ability to be empathetic with her clients. CM3, has learned that many women have a hard time identifying the strengths they have, so celebrating the strengths of her clients has become a normal practice for CM3. All 3 case managers can be described as 'conflicted' case managers, based off of Taylor et al (2016) study. In addition to providing an individualized strengths-based approach case management style, all 3 subjects identified structural barriers, such as lack of child care centers and transportation issues, to be



factors out of their client's control. As a result, these case managers are flexible and understanding if their clients cannot find child care or if they miss an appointment because they missed the bus. Like 'conflicted' case managers from Taylor et al (2016) study, these case managers interact and communicate with their clients often strengthening the relationship case manager and client have.

### ***TANF Recipients***

#### **TANF Clients are Resilient**

Observing how the subjects described their clients as resilient was refreshing. They all recognized how their own clients have taught them lessons about how to survive and be strong during moments of vulnerability. It provided a positive outlook on who their clients are and how they are perceived. In comparison to previous research, TANF recipients are often described with negative connotations such as, uneducated, unemployed, poor, or unmotivated (Hildebrandt, 2016). However, findings from this study revealed rather than focusing on what they lack in, these case managers focused on their strengths. They described their clients as motivated, resilient, and strong. They recognized their clients can advocate for themselves and they also look out for each other. CM3 described how her clients will bring new community resources to their meeting and ask her to provide it to other clients. CM2 mentioned some of her past clients still reach out to her for help with community resources such as where to get a bus pass, she described this as their ability to ask for help. These results do align with other findings. TANF recipients learned how to survive by asking for child support, asking family or friends for food or shelter, going to food pantries, earning money through sex work or other informal work (Hildebrandt and Kelber 2012). Concluding from data, TANF recipients are resilient and strong, they provide a sense of community by empowering each other.

## **Mental Health Impacts Self-efficacy**

A significant portion of this study was to gain some insight into how case managers help identify barriers to self-sufficiency. All three case managers reported mental health as the biggest barrier TANF recipients have, at all stages of participation. Data revealed many clients struggle with poor mental health and are often resistant to seek help for it, trauma is linked with depression, anxiety, mood disorders, and chronic illnesses. So, treating mental health can help cope with traumas. It is recommended case managers support their clients with a trauma informed approach to help recognize triggers and coping skills but to also encourage mental health treatment (Dugan et al. 2020). With mental health impacting their level of success, self-efficacy is impacted the most. “As proposed by Bandura, the higher the perceived self-efficacy, the more vigorous and persistent will be the effort to perform a behavior, even faced with obstacles and aversive experiences which serve as impediments, determining health habits.” (Atkins 2010). CM2 revealed how some clients struggle with depression and feel unmotivated to accomplish goals. She also described how some continuously experience triggers from unaddressed trauma and their success is being impacted by their inability to cope. In addition, data identified when recipients become open to addressing their poor mental health an increase in their self-efficacy is noted by their level of motivation. “Enhanced self-efficacy beliefs are posited to directly and indirectly impact on health behaviors by influencing goals, outcome expectations and perception of socio-structural facilitators and impediments to behavior change.” (Atkins 2010). All 3 case managers reported it is important to meet recipients with where they are at with their needs because forcing them to seek help for their mental health will make them resistant to accomplishing their goals. Mental health is a contributing factor to program success.

A client's mental health impacts the amount of time spent on TANF and what they accomplish while on the program.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

The inspiration for this project manifested from experiences I had working with case managers and their clients on TANF. I became curious to know if TANF case management was effective for those new to the program and those who maxed out of the program. I questioned how are TANF case managers meeting the needs of their clients and why are TANF recipients timing out with no success. For TANF leavers, I wanted to understand the barriers they had preventing them from obtaining self-sufficiency. For case managers, I wanted to investigate if they were equipped to understand their clients and if they were effective in providing them the resources they need to become self-sufficient. I expected my research to reveal areas of improvement needed for TANF case management.

Previous research indicated TANF recipients perceived their case managers to be ill-prepared to understand their needs and felt like their case manager did not know what they were doing (Hildebrandt and Kelber, 2012). Other studies also reported case managers disagreed with the welfare-to-work framework due to the complex needs some recipient have (Taylor et al., 2016). I was surprised by how well Weld County and the state of Colorado manage its TANF program. For instance, past research reported that case managers used sanctions as a way to control and punish their clients for not participating in the program (Wu et al., 2014). However, for Weld County, the sanctioning process is avoided as much as possible. Case managers are understanding that many of their clients have barriers, such as lack of transportation to make it their meeting or poor mental health is a factor impacting their ability to participate actively. So, case managers will work with their clients and provide other options or opportunities to make it

to their appointment. Additionally, previous, and current research aligned with the fact TANF recipients who are either disabled, caring for an adult who is disabled, or has a child with a disability are the most disadvantaged recipients. This population has the most barriers and are the most likely to time out of TANF (Hall et al., 2020). Overall, I was impressed and proud to find out how effective and compassionate case managers are in Weld County.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Results identified case managers in this study provide a strengths-based approach to their case management style. Their style bolsters the client's strengths by giving them a sense of confidence. For long-term TANF recipients this positive case management style may not be enough for them to have a successful TANF exit. Subjects all agreed for TANF recipients who have a disability or care for a disabled adult or child, the 60-month time frame is not enough to gain self-sufficiency. Structural barriers with the Social Security Administration (SSA) have been identified as a common factor to why this specific TANF recipient is meeting the TANF time limit (Parish et al., 2010). Applications with SSA can take years before an approval is met, making women with disabilities raising children to meet their TANF time limit.

Recommendations for this study focuses on long-term TANF recipients. Based off of previous and current research, the TANF time limit is too short for single mothers who have a disability or care for a disabled adult or child, it is recommended TANF extensions are provided to these recipients when they meet their 60-month time limit. This will allow supports to continue but it also provides the time needed for this specific population to acquire more supports from the community and state. For this population of TANF leavers, bureaucratic constraints are their biggest barrier. It is important for agencies and case managers to recognize that for when TANF extensions are requested.

The topic of mental health became a reoccurring theme. Case managers reported mental health to be a significant barrier impacting their clients on a multitude of levels. Mental health was identified as a significant barrier to success, program participation, and program exits. Case managers recognize how mental health can be a determinant in program outcomes and participation, however, they cannot make or require a TANF recipient to seek mental health services. Instead, they believe their clients will be open to mental health treatments or supports when they are ready. As shame and stigmas surrounding mental health continue to exist, it continues to be an ongoing societal issue globally. For single mother's on TANF, their mental health can be a determinant to their livelihood and ability to parent. Researchers recommend case managers provide an ACE informed framework for their clients (Cambron et al., 2014). With an ACE informed framework, TANF case managers and their clients can begin normalizing conversations about mental health. By education clients on the importance of addressing their mental health, they may become more open to seeking the supports they need. "We suggest that allowing a window of opportunity for physical and psychological healing before enforcement of federal TANF work requirements would likely allow for an improved percentage of caseloads moving toward employment and a reduction in work requirement exceptions due to physical and mental health issues." (Cambron et al., 2014:228). Educating single mothers about the impacts poor mental health can have on their overall wellbeing, can help create a safe space to begin those conversations about the importance of improving mental health. Normalizing the importance of treating poor mental health can align with other common conversations had, such as importance of obtaining a GED. The more mental health treatment is discussed the more open those who need it will seek it. Resulting in an increase in welfare independence.

## **LIMITATIONS**

In this study, I have identified a variety of limitations. In total there are about 8 TANF case managers at the department. I only interviewed 3, so I do believe the data provided may not be a full representation of case management effectiveness. If more time was allowed, I would have liked to interview all TANF case managers at WCDHS. I also believe a survey would provide more accurate and consistent data, so I wish I had more time to conduct a survey. Observing case managers was unsuccessful during the research. Some clients did not show up to their scheduled appointment, which turned out to be common, and my schedule conflicted with appointments that did take place. Observing case managers with clients who are timing out would have given me snapshot into client participation. Another limitation is my employment with WCDHS. Due to the nature of what I do with assisting case managers and vulnerable populations, I do believe a bias exists within the context of this research. If I could have observed and interviewed TANF case managers from another county a bias would not exist. If given the opportunity to continue this research, I would like observe and interview case managers from another county and I would also like to conclude my research with WCDHS by observing case managers. As well as interviewing the remaining case managers. Comparing data from two different counties would offer insight into differences and similarities within case management and it would offer a different perspective into how different counties regulate TANF in the state of Colorado.

## **CONCLUSION**

At the start of this study, an investigation into the overall effectiveness of TANF case management was the focal point. As prior research was explored, additional questions came into view. How are TANF case managers qualified for their position? Are trainings provided to

support their role? Why are TANF recipients timing out of TANF? What types of barriers do they have? By examining case management styles, the barriers case managers encounter with their clients, and understanding their back ground; case manager effectiveness was revealed. Findings showed case management is effective. It is effective for those entering the program for the first time and for those leaving the program for the last time. Case managers demonstrated a level of expertise and qualifications beyond what was presumed. All subjects have college degrees. They also receive a variety of trainings that help support their role. WCDHS and Colorado have shown to be prime examples of how a program like TANF can be beneficial in supporting vulnerable populations. Specifically in Weld County, the department offers a mixture of supports for case managers. WCDHS case managers are passionate about the work they do. They showcased a genuine level of care and understanding for their clients. All subjects reported to provide strength-based case management. This style supports the client with the resources they already have and through a partnership, client and case manager formulate a plan to further improve their strengths that will lead them to self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, clients were identified to be resilient and strong through their ability to ask for help by applying for TANF. Case managers focus on these strengths to create a plan on how to obtain self-sufficiency. Mental health also has an impact greater than most think it does. For clients, their mental health can determine how successful or unsuccessful they will be while on the program. For TANF recipients, their ability to believe in the success they are capable of is clouded by the state of their mental health. Findings showed case managers do their best to address the state of their mental health, however, they are understanding the topic is not always easy to address. Overall, TANF case managers and TANF recipients become a team. Case managers allow their clients to lead the way towards their own self-sufficiency by providing the

tools and resources they need to get there. In turn, clients humble their case managers. Clients are educating case managers about their lived experiences and helping them understand the barriers they all face. Case managers are inspired by their clients and TANF recipients are empowered by their case managers.



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**APPENDIX A: Consent Form****Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research**

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**Title of Research Study:** Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF): An Investigative Report on the Current Effectiveness of Case Management and the Justification for Continued Education Trainings

**Researcher:** Karina Martinez, Department of Sociology  
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**Research Advisor:** Sandra Harmon  
Phone Number: (970) 351-2307      email: [sandra.harmon@unco.edu](mailto:sandra.harmon@unco.edu)

**Procedures:** We would like to ask you to participate in a research study. For this study I am asking to conduct an interview with you. The interview will be about your experience as a TANF case worker. The purpose of this interview will be to gain some insight on TANF case managers and to understand if current practices are effective and to identify areas of improvement. The interview will take place at the case managers availability in a secure location. The interview will last between 30-45 mins. During the interview, an audio recording will take place. The recording will be transcribed and deleted. Anonymity will be honored should the case manager not want to be identified. All responses will be confidential and secured in a location only the researcher will have access too. The audio recording of the interview will be secured on a device that requires biometric verification to access. TANF recipients are not part of this study.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Karina Martinez at 970-405-5904. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the University of Northern Colorado IRB at [irb@unco.edu](mailto:irb@unco.edu) or 970-351-1910.

**Voluntary Participation:** Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in any consequences.

<p><b>Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.</b></p>
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If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.**

If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep this form for your records.

## **APPENDIX B: Interview Guide**

Thank you for agreeing to participate. As you know, this study will investigate the effectiveness of TANF case management. Today, I hope to have a conversation with you about your experiences and perceptions as a TANF case manager. This interview will be confidential. Your experiences are important to me, and there are no right or wrong answers.

**Before we begin, I would like to restate key points from the signed consent form.**

1. The interview will take about 30-45 minutes to complete.
2. You can answer the questions however you want and you do not have to answer all questions.
3. You can end the interview without any consequences, at any time.
4. I will be recording the interview. If you would like me to stop the recording at any time, let me know.
5. Your responses will be kept confidential. Your real name and identifying information will not be associated with this interview.

[Start recording]

Now it is time to get started. Before we begin, I would like to give you some time to introduce yourself. I will then ask you some questions regarding your experiences in the TANF program as a case manager.

### **ICEBREAKER QUESTIONS-**

- How long have you been employed with DHS?

- How long have you been a TANF case manager?
- What is your highest level of education?
- What is your favorite part about being a case manager?
- What type of trainings have you received while in your position?

Thank you for answering those questions.

### **Overall Case Management**

The following questions will now be about your experience as a case manager.

1. What does a day for a TANF case manager look like?
2. How would you describe your case management style?

### **Case Management Barriers to Improve Self-Sufficiency**

The next set of questions will be about the barriers you encounter as a case manager with your clients.

3. What are the most common barriers to self-sufficiency do you see in your clients?
  - Which are the hardest barriers to address?
4. As a case manager, what are your biggest barriers within current program rules that hinder your ability to support TANF recipients?
5. What types of strengths do you see in your clients that help build self-sufficiency?
  - How do you support those strengths?

### **Case Management Effectiveness**

**These questions will be about your case management experience and trainings.**

6. What does success look like for a case manager? For you?



7. When one of your clients enters their last 12 months of TANF, how do you prepare yourself and your client with that transition?
  - Is there anything you wish you could have done different?
  - Clients with 1-2 years on TANF
    - i. What does your case management look like for early TANF recipients?
    - ii. What attributes do you see in these clients?
  - Clients with 2-3 years on TANF
    - i. How do you approach clients who have been on and off TANF?
    - ii. For these clients, what types of supports do you think are best?
  - Clients with 4 years on TANF
    - i. How does your case management change for clients who have reached 48 months?
    - ii. How do you wish you were supported working with these clients?
8. What type of trainings would you like to take to help support self-sufficiency?
9. Do you think you would benefit from continued trainings to improve your case management style and process?
10. What areas in TANF case management would you like to see improve?

#### For Specialized TANF Case Managers

1. What barriers do you see with these clients who are at the end of the TANF time clock?
2. What characteristics do you see that bolster a successful TANF exit?
3. What are early interventions that can prevent someone from timing out TANF?
  - a. What characteristics do you see in a client that would prolong their time on TANF?

- b. What are the biggest strengths you see in clients when they enter the program and leave the program?
4. How would you like to be supported in your role?
5. How do you feel supported?