



Working with you to enhance our quality of life

# Ramsey County

---

**Prepared for**

Ramsey County Workforce Solutions  
160 E Kellogg Blvd  
St Paul, MN 55101  
P 651.266.9890  
[www.ramseycounty.us](http://www.ramseycounty.us)

**Prepared by**

ACET, Inc  
10700 Normandale Blvd., Ste 201  
Minneapolis, MN 55437  
P 952.922.1811  
F 952.922.1911  
[www.acetinc.com](http://www.acetinc.com)  
[info@acetinc.com](mailto:info@acetinc.com)

## Introduction

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) is a jointly funded, federal-state program that provides income assistance to eligible low-income families. MFIP is partly funded by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a federal block grant program to states. To qualify for MFIP, Minnesotans must be U.S. citizens or legally residing noncitizens; have children or be pregnant, and meet an initial income test and asset limitation. Most families have a lifetime limit of 60 months on MFIP, with extensions offered for employed and hard-to-employ circumstances. In the fiscal year 2022, an estimated 29,385 families were enrolled statewide in MFIP in an average month, and a total of 81,676 participants were receiving MFIP assistance<sup>1</sup>.

The program's overarching goal is to help families move to work. In support of that goal, the program provides families with a monthly benefit that includes cash and food assistance, and with employment services. As part of the MFIP employment program, MFIP participants are required to spend a specified number of hours every week engaged in work or work activities. Examples of acceptable activities include job search activities, unsubsidized employment, and on-the-job training. Most work with a job counselor to create an employment plan and search for work opportunities.

Ramsey County delivers the MFIP employment program services by offering employment counseling either directly through its Workforce Solutions (WFS) department or through community vendor partners. In the summer of 2022, there were approximately 3,450 families receiving MFIP services in Ramsey County; those families were all at or below 200% of the poverty level and represented as:

- 85% single-parent households
- 83% female, 17% male
- 22% white, 51% African American, 13% Asian, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 4% American Indian, and 3% others
- 40% of individuals with a documented physical or mental health condition

Of those nearly 3,500 MFIP families, just over 1,100 were served directly by WFS employment counselors. WFS employs approximately 20 counselors who support clients programmatically as young adults (age 18-25), and adults (age 26 and up). Employment counseling services range from developing employment plans to job search assistance, training support, case management, community resources referrals, and work experience opportunities.

In the summer of 2022, Ramsey County WFS contracted with ACET, Inc., an independent research and evaluation firm, to plan and conduct an assessment of how MFIP families want to be engaged with their employment counselors and with programmatic aspects such as service delivery, customer service, and future program design.

---

<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Family Investment Program, Minnesota House Research, August 2022 [Minnesota Family Investment Program](#)

## **Project scope and overview**

Ramsey County WFS and ACET, Inc. worked together to develop a community engagement plan and timeline to identify best practices and strategies on how to engage MFIP families. The effort was initially conceived to examine all Ramsey County MFIP clients (those who received employment counseling through WFS and those who received employment services through a community vendor partner). The scope of the assessment was narrowed to include only WFS clients in the Adult Parent and Young Adult Parent program in order to ensure that resulting strategies and recommendations are focused on factors that WFS program managers and staff can directly impact.

**Project questions.** Ramsey County is interested in understanding how they can improve service delivery, process, and communications around the experiences of residents working with WFS. With these goals in mind, ACET identified evaluation questions for the project, including:

- How effective is the enrollment and onboarding process for clients?
- What are clients' perceptions of the most valued services they received from WFS?
- What are clients' perceptions of their experiences and communication with their employment counselor?
- How could the program better meet clients' needs?

**Methods.** To answer the evaluation questions, ACET developed two data-gathering instruments:

- **Client survey.** ACET developed a client survey and hosted a table at a community fair co-organized by WFS, where ACET staff encouraged MFIP clients with employment counselors from WFS to provide feedback via the survey, all 22 respondents answered seven questions:
  1. *My employment counselor understands my employment goals.*
  2. *The services available through employment services are clear to me.*
  3. *Resources to help me with my employment goals are available when I need them.*
  4. *I have access to technology to communicate with my counselor.*
  5. *I am comfortable using technology to communicate with my counselor.*
  6. *I am comfortable asking my employment counselor questions.*
  7. *I prefer to mostly communicate through: (In-person, via Email, WIFI connect app, Text message, Phone call, Mail, or Virtual (zoom, teams, etc.))*
- **Focus groups.** ACET developed and conducted focus groups with current MFIP clients who have employment counselors from WFS. The script included 10 questions related to the four evaluation questions above. Five focus groups

were held from September through November 2022, and a total of seven clients participated.

### **Findings: How effective is the enrollment and onboarding process for clients?**

Focus group participants indicated that they felt confident in their knowledge of the MFIP program. All seven reported that they understood the employment service requirements. When asked how well the program was explained to them when they first met their WFS employment counselor, they were fairly evenly split on whether the program was well-explained to them or not.

Four said that the MFIP program was not well-explained to them by their counselors, but one of them also indicated that they did understand the scope of the program:

*"Well, for me it wasn't really explained to me. It was more showed to me and like how the benefits work and the different types of . . . guidance programs you could go through. And so there's obviously financial benefits . . . like rent helping, SNAP benefits, and daycare and stuff like that. So it was more showed to me than explained. . . It was really simply put and understandable and very like the basics that we want."*

Two participants said the program was well explained:

*"He explained to me that this is a program for families who's in need of assistance temporarily and who are seeking employment, and just that we would have to just fill out work search forms to just verify that we are trying to look for work and that's pretty much it."*

*"She explained everything to me. . . we [were] on the phone for like an hour but she explained everything to me which I already knew everything at the time because I did it once before."*

Another indicated that the program had been explained in detail but the client felt overwhelmed by the amount of information:

*"It's just so many things that they can help you with whether it's employment opportunities, coaching opportunities, mental health opportunities, and so many other things that she told me about. There was so many details . . . that's why I can't pinpoint it right now because there was so many things."*

When asked what else they would have liked to know when they entered the program, only one had a wish, and that was that he wished he had asked more questions about what he might qualify for as a single dad. When asked what they would tell friends who were applying for MFIP, nearly all suggested maintaining frequent contact and transparency with their counselors. Comments included:

*"Make sure that you keep in contact with your worker, being transparent, if you do anything, to reach out to them. Because for me, my worker is pretty hands-on and easy to access and good with communication and pretty understanding."*

*"Email. Email, email, email. Everybody responds super quick on their email and that's something that I really appreciate."*

Two participants described experiences of being paired initially with a counselor who they felt was not a good fit, and then being re-assigned to a better-fit counselor. Both said they would urge a friend to make sure to communicate their dissatisfaction with the supervisor who could pair them with a different counselor.

### **Findings: What are clients' perceptions of the most valued services they received from WFS?**

Participants articulated many benefits they received and appreciated, but several also indicated that while they were helpful, the benefits "weren't enough." The participant who was most positive about the program described their experience:

*"I've received all types of different services. As soon as I open my mouth and ask for help the help is given automatically. I've gotten help as far as like rental assistance. I've gotten help with getting my child into childcare. I've gotten help with obviously fixing up my resume. As soon as I told my guidance counselor that I needed help with getting gas in order to get to interviews and stuff like that, she reached out and she got that taken care of for me as well. So I've been getting help with anything and everything that I can possibly think of and it's pretty easy doing so."*

Another described a more mixed reaction to the program's benefits:

*"It's not enough, but it's enough to get by. I mean, honestly, the services have made it so that I can provide a good meal for my family and be there full-time for my family. So I would say on that part, but as far as the financial part, no, it's not enough."*

Specific benefits mentioned by clients included:

- Gas cards
- SNAP /food assistance
- Resume assistance
- Childcare placement
- Cash assistance
- General support and guidance

Gas cards were the most frequently mentioned benefit (mentioned by four clients). They indicated that the cards were very helpful for them (or, in one case, their husband) to get back and forth from work. But one participant was frustrated that post-pandemic, they could no longer pick up the cards in person, and instead, they were mailed out on Fridays. *"I usually don't get it until the next week, which is a Thursday. So therefore I have to find other resources to get back and forth to work. When it wasn't pandemic, we were allowed to go down there and pick it up. So that was frustrating. I couldn't pick up any extra hours because I was limited with gas."*

**Food assistance** was also frequently mentioned, with two participants saying they

receive SNAP benefits and others describing that the program allowed them to *“provide a good meal for my family.”* One said that their family was currently not receiving any benefits other than SNAP *“because I guess right now the household is making too much, I don’t see how that’s possible because we’re so struggling, but I’m just receiving SNAP right now.”*

One participant described how the biggest benefit they received was **general support and guidance**.

*“For me, it helped me stay on track. Like it very—like being in the program and having someone who knows the steps to your success, especially when you’re in the time of need or in a blurred situation where you don’t really know what to do next, having that guidance is really good. I’ve been in communications with my employment counselor about hundreds of other things that have nothing to do with my employment and it’s been great. She’s more like a therapist than just a counselor.”*

### **Findings: What are clients’ perceptions of their experiences and communication with their employment counselor?**

Overall, clients reported high satisfaction with their employment counselor. When asked about their experiences with the services and assistance provided by their employment counselor, all 22 survey respondents checked either “strongly agree” or “agree.” The highest proportion of “strongly agree” statements were in relation to their employment counselor. Their responses below are in order of how many checked “strongly agree.”

- *My employment counselor understands my employment goals (90%)*
- *The services available through employment services are clear to me (70%)*
- *Resources to help me with my employment goals are available when I need them (70%)*
- *I have access to technology to communicate with my counselor (85%)*
- *I am comfortable using technology to communicate with my counselor (85%)*
- *I am comfortable asking my employment counselor questions (75%)*

Focus group participants described the ways that their counselor had helped them. They discussed receiving help with their educational and job search, emotional support, and help with essential items.

Four participants mentioned receiving support and assistance with obtaining credentials or other **educational goals** from their counselor:

*“Financial aid for college, getting into college, calling the right people in order for my applications and whatnot to go through on time.”*

*“She has helped me get into CNA, free CNA programs.”*

*“My counselor has helped me with getting certificates for phlebotomy and stuff like that. But I’m also a full-time college student, too, so they’ve helped with that.”*

Three participants described how they received **emotional support** and guidance

from their counselors:

*"She's been really like a security blanket for emotional things."*

*"She just has helped me mentally as well. . . she was like a therapist as well."*

*"Sometimes I was so stressed out that I just called and talked to her and explained my situation."*

Three participants mentioned specific **job search assistance** they received, with one explaining:

*"She helped me with my resume, helped me edit it and just fix it up the right way and then a couple days later I got a call from my job now and it's the best paying job I've ever had."*

*"Sending me leads to jobs and different outreach groups. . . my employment counselor is pretty much on it."*

Three participants also described how their counselors helped them with **essential needs** such as gas cards, interview clothing, and gift cards.

*"If you need help with interview clothes, you just call and let them know, they'll either send you to one of these places that will help you get interview clothes or give you a gift card so you can go to Target or somewhere like that."*

### **Findings: How could the program better meet clients' needs?**

Generally, focus group participants indicated that they were satisfied with the program and their interactions with their employment counselors. When asked to describe program aspects that made it more difficult for them to reach their goals, they mostly focused on personal and logistical complexities such as transportation and time management. One said *"It's hard to get documents over when they're absolutely needed for people to continue having their benefits and being enrolled in certain things,"* and another said they wished that men were made to feel more comfortable.

Participants also described the frequency and types of meetings they would find most beneficial when meeting with their counselor. Two said they would prefer once a month and two said they would prefer two to three times a month. As far as meeting format, one said they were fine with a phone, virtual, or in-person, and three said they would prefer to meet in person at a coffee shop or bookstore.

Participants did offer several suggestions for how MFIP could be better for them. Several said that increasing benefit amounts (for gas cards, food assistance, etc.) would be the most helpful. As they described:



*'Increase on the MFIP.'*

*"I mean, increasing everything because like I said—the economy's gone up, so it's going up."*

*"If they can decrease the limit for you to not be able to receive anything and increase the portion as what you get, that would be helpful."*

*"I wish I just had more resources with housing because I'm having this housing issue right now and it's affecting me and I tried all my resources and I seemed to not get a good outcome."*

Several participants discussed the importance of the connections between the program/counselors and with the community. One said that *"the best way for Ramsey County to express themselves or to come out to those types of communities is through whoever is already in the community because we're the best advocates for the people who are in the same community."* Another emphasized that it's up to the community members to want to change. Another suggested that increased follow-up from counselors might be beneficial:

*"I know you can't check in with your clients on a day-to-day basis like you do with a friend, but just check in on them, see if they need anything instead of them calling, asking, "Well, can I get a gas card? Can I get a bus card? Do you have any funds?" Like, just call and check in on them, you know?"*

Finally, one participant was very concerned about what he perceived as a lack of support and resources for men. As he described: *"There needs to be more resources put towards men [especially] men who has felonies because it's hard for them to be in a household and they cannot. Their records, their criminal records, their background hinders them from having a home and I feel like there needs to be more resources for the men. There's so many resources out there for the women."*



## Report Limitations

Some limitations apply to these findings:

- 1) **Limited sample size.** ACET planned to host 5 focus groups with approximately 6 participants each, for a total of 30 participants, but recruiting difficulties resulted in a total of seven participants: one event had four participants, one had two, one had one, and no participants showed up for the other two scheduled focus groups.
- 2) **Limited ability to analyze based on length of time in the program and other characteristics.** ACET planned to facilitate separate focus groups (for those who had been MFIP clients for less than two years, those who had been clients between 2 and 4 years, and those who had been enrolled in MFIP for a total of more than four years). Due to limited attendance, it wasn't possible to hold separate focus groups or to analyze data based on how long participants had been MFIP clients.
- 3) **Virtual-only format.** The data collection process was limited to one survey at a community event and several virtual focus groups, so the potential for more robust conversations that might have accompanied in-person interviews and focus groups was not available.

**Recommendations.** Although data collection was limited in scope, both survey and focus group participants indicated overall satisfaction with the service delivery, process, and communication they have experienced with WFS career counselors. Focus group participants identified some challenges and requested some additional resources. The recommendation of this report is to further explore these suggestions, potentially seek more input from clients, and determine whether there are action steps to take involving either changes to service delivery or changes to methods of communicating those services that are already available. Suggestions included:

- **Offer more opportunities to engage MFIP clients.** Specifically, some participants noted they would like to learn more from current and past MFIP clients about what to expect, what they appreciated, and what didn't work well for them in the MFIP program. Furthermore, feedback can be process oriented and embedded into operations between employment counselors and MFIP clients.
- **Examine enrollment and orientation processes** to ensure complex information is communicated smoothly. Some participants indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of information they received during the enrollment process. Reviewing the information delivery and any collateral materials might help to ensure the information is effective and efficient.
- **Explore offering additional support, resources, or referrals to outside resources for specific populations** including men, people with criminal records, and those whose income or assets place them at or near the cut-off limit for receiving some benefits.
- **Consider resuming some in-person services** for those who are most comfortable with this service-delivery method. One specific request was to be able to pick up gas cars in person for a more timely delivery.