Ramsey County
Workforce Solutions (MFIP)
**Community Engagement
Project**

JANUARY
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Executive Summary

Consultants from Strategic Consulting and Coaching (SCC), along with leadership from Ramsey County Workforce Development, developed a strategy to reach current MFIP Workforce Solutions participants to take part in focus groups or individual interviews for the purpose of providing an opportunity for them *"to share their vision for self-sufficiency and family stability to improve the County's understanding of what families need for stability, employment, and wealth-creation."*

We linked to participants via their counselors and through community organizations. SCC consultants sought opportunities in the community to speak with families with limited income who may have received Workforce Solutions currently or in the past. Employment Counselors spoke with participants about the opportunity and a $25 Target gift card was offered as a thank-you for participating in an online or in-person focus group or interview. In all, **we spoke to 131 individuals** in the interviews and focus groups combined. We also spoke with 42 staff from provider agencies and Ramsey County.

A central theme across participant responses was **people's desire for stability**, meaning they wouldn't have to move frequently, and they could rely on their housing, their employment, and their health. They would have the stable circumstances necessary to pursue educational goals. Counselors reinforced this point of view, emphasizing that their role was as much about supporting stability as it was about employment. Keeping a job, pursuing an education, and building wealth are all predicated on stable housing and manageable physical and mental health for yourself and your family, and these are what counselors focus on as the critical pathway to helping people find and keep employment.

Stable housing is viewed by the families and staff interviewed in this project alike as an essential component of stability and upward mobility. It came up again and again across multiple participant questions with a total of 84 mentions that included the words "house," "housing," "eviction," and "stable." Research shows that conversely, unstable housing and housing precarity is linked to instability in employment, mental health, and well-being. Anecdotally staff spoke about families living in very unstable situations, when, for example, if they didn't have a friend or family member to stay with that night, they took their children on the light rail and rode it all night, short of staying in a shelter. **Working in the context of an acute affordable housing shortage means that this presents a significant hurdle for participants and staff alike, and often not one that can**

be solved in the short term, with years' long waiting lists for housing subsidies and public housing.

Many participants talked about **their own behavior and belief systems** and how they felt they needed to think or act to make progress toward their goals and break through internal barriers or beliefs. Their comments reflect a courageous and resilient resolve to rise above considerable adversity. Apart from the daunting logistical challenges that people face in finding a way out of poverty, **the cognitive effects of past and/or ongoing trauma can include anxiety and fear about learning a new skill, interacting with strangers, and difficulties in establishing trust. Yet, many participants may not connect their own struggles with fear, motivation, and executive function with the trauma they have experienced, but instead judge themselves inadequate, further damaging their self-regard.**

Keenly aware of the fragility of their situations, even when things are going well, the fact that services are not readily available without delay if say, they lose their job, transportation or child care falls through, a family member becomes ill… if things fall apart – this sense of uncertainty only heightens the level of stress that families are experiencing. The cumulative effect of this level of stress is to limit an individual's ability to envision and plan for themselves and their future. The report ***"How Poverty Affects People's Decision-making Processes" (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2017)*** summarizes recent (as of 2017) evidence (based on 15 systematic reviews of recent studies) on the relationship between socioeconomic status and the psychological, social, and cultural processes that underpin decision-making:

"Experiencing or growing up in poverty affects people's lifelong decision-making style. People living in poverty make decisions focused on coping with present stressful circumstances, often at the expense of future goals."

This should not be interpreted as a rationale for blaming individuals for poor decisions, in fact, the opposite is true: The context into which people are born shapes the development of cognitive processes in multiple ways. Structural causes of poverty, widening income gaps, and the prevalence of exposure to trauma and violence come together to orient individuals' decision making to the immediate situation, the safety of themselves, and their families.

The importance of the ability of ECs to understand the real challenges and barriers faced by participants and how they consume both time and the mental bandwidth of individuals experiencing them must be considered in thinking about caseloads, job qualifications, and outcomes. Both the need for and the challenges of accommodating that in the employment

counseling process is highlighted by these data. It also speaks to the nature of the work, how success is measured, and the balance needed in service approaches for meeting the range of family needs at given points in time. Helping a family become stable when there are so many challenges, both internal (e.g. past and current trauma, domestic violence, mental health, doubts about self-belief, ability to follow through while experiencing crushing stressors) and external (systemic racism, income inequality, extreme shortage of affordable housing, MFIP policies that often work against family stability) is a bigger job than the title "Employment Counselor" would imply. **The adoption of a Life Long Learning approach is meant to address these issues. Continuing to strengthen and sustain this approach will help counselors and families understand barriers to change and what will be effective for each individual as they look to improve their situation.**

Finally, we should note that the evidence provided in this report is anecdotal, and is not based on a representative sample or a scientific methodology. The opportunity to participate was offered to all recipients of Workforce Solutions services, and in some settings, low-income community members who may or may not have participated in Workforce Solutions programs (Clipboard interviews at Sanneh Foundation, Merrick Community Services and the focus group at Neighborhood House).

When considering the findings, the reader should remember that anecdotes can be valuable for providing insights, but should be weighed alongside empirical data and multiple perspectives. **The brief for collecting this information was to gather community stakeholder perspectives and discern the themes and insights that those provide, not to evaluate the overall effectiveness of Workforce Solutions programming in the broader context of program and population data.** Participants and contracted vendors self-selected, and we don't have any information about the characteristics of this group vs. the characteristics of Workforce Solutions participants overall, except anecdotally from staff.

Engagement Processes

COMMUNITY MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Consultants from Strategic Consulting & Coaching (SCC), along with leadership from Ramsey County Workforce Development, developed a strategy to reach current Workforce Solutions participants to take part in focus groups or individual interviews. We linked to participants via their counselors and through community organizations. SCC consultants sought opportunities in the community to speak with families with limited income who may have participated in Workforce Solutions currently or in the past. Employment Counselors spoke with participants about the opportunity and a $25 Target gift card was offered as a thank-you for participating in an online or in-person focus group or interview. In all, **we spoke to 131 participants and 42 employment counselors/supervisors in the interviews and focus groups combined.**

In several participant focus groups, individuals involved offered advice to each other about problems they reported in the group. Several individuals felt that it would be beneficial to have the opportunity to meet online with other participants to share information and experiences, saying that they not only appreciated the opportunity to give feedback to program administrators, but they also greatly valued the camaraderie and insights offered by other participants in the group.

The participant data in this report is gathered from the following engagements:

- **Sanneh Foundation Event** on November 18, 2023: A family-friendly event at Conway Community Center. SCC Consultants **interviewed 18 adults** and worked with two interpreters, one for Spanish and one for Somali. All but one of these interviews was with first-generation immigrant families, predominantly Somali, as well as several LatinX families and one White family. These families may or may not have participated in Workforce Solutions programs now or in the past.

- **Neighborhood House Focus Group on Wednesday, November 15: 12 enrollees** in their ESL program took part in a focus group after class. These families may or may not have participated in Workforce Solutions programs now or in the past.

- **Online Focus Groups recruited by Employment Counselors:** SCC Consultants conducted three focus group sessions of individuals who were currently participating in Workforce Solutions, one

of which was divided into smaller breakout rooms of 8-10 participants each. On November 27 there were 27 participants; on December 4 there were 23 participants; and on December 8 there were nine participants, for a total of **59 participants.** These groups were predominantly African American and female.

- **Individual Interviews conducted by Goodwill Easter Seals:** SCC provided questions for Goodwill Easter Seals staff to conduct individual interviews with Workforce Solutions participants. They completed a total of **13 interviews** that were individually scheduled.

- **Merrick Community Services Interviews:** SCC Consultants **interviewed 22 people** who had come to the food shelf at Merrick Community Services on December 4.

- **Focus Group of Participants at Hmong American Partnership:** SCC Consultants with the help of HAP staff conducted a focus group of **17 participants** on December 7. This group was exclusively recent Hmong immigrant families and included male and female participants.

- **Focus Group of Participants at Goodwill Easter Seals for FAST program:** SCC Consultants conducted a focus group of **three participants**.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Staff from four of the six contracted agencies (YWCA, HIRED, AVIVO, Goodwill Easter Seals) and in-house (Ramsey County Adult and Young Adult) took part in a focus group for a total of five focus groups. Of these, four were in person, and two (for Young Adult services) were online. Hmong American Partnership staff filled out an online survey with the same questions. Focus Groups included Employment Counselors and Supervisors. Each group had close to 100% participation from staff. The staff included those with a wide range of tenure, from over 20 years to just a few months.

Key Findings

ASPIRATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

We asked participants how they imagined their life five years from now, and in a parallel question, asked staff what they heard from families about their aspirations. The follow-up question was what participants thought were their critical next steps in meeting those aspirations.

STABILITY

A central theme across these comments and topics was people's desire for stability, meaning they wouldn't have to move frequently, and they could rely on their housing, their employment, and their health. They would have the stable circumstances necessary to pursue educational goals. Counselors reinforced this point of view, emphasizing that their role was as much about supporting stability as it was about employment. Keeping a job, pursuing an education, and building wealth are all predicated on stable housing and manageable physical and mental health for yourself and your family, and these are what counselors focus on as the critical pathway to helping people find and keep employment.

While we did not ask participants to describe their current situation, the overwhelming desire for stability can be interpreted as an indication of the uncertain and tenuous nature of their current circumstances.

"I think stability is the biggest part of life. Being stable provides security and the ability to be happy."
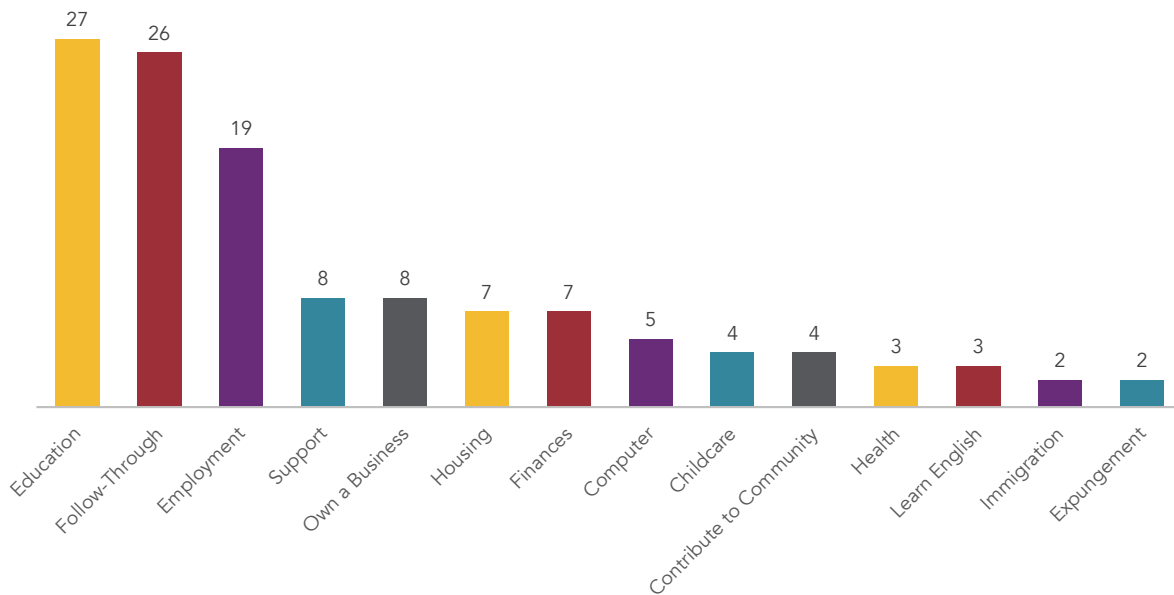
– Workforce Solutions Participant

"I would say that stability is the biggest thing, having housing, reliable transportation, services, and being able to get to the services. Family members needing services. The support to be stable, I think that's what is challenging."

– Employment Counselor

# of individuals mentioning each topic when asked what their next steps were to reach their goals

Families engaged with Workforce Solutions and families with limited income

Topic	Count
Education	27
Follow-Through	26
Employment	19
Support	8
Own a Business	8
Housing	7
Finances	7
Computer	5
Childcare	4
Contribute to Community	4
Health	3
Learn English	3
Immigration	2
Expungement	2

# of individuals mentioning each topic when asked to imagine life five years from now

Families engaged with Workforce Solutions and families with limited income

Topic	Count
Own a home	45
Obtain or improve employment	45
Education for themselves or children	25
Own a business	22
Increased stability	14
Contribute to community	13
Learn English	12
Obtain or improve housing	11
Have more time with family	10
Improve health	7
Safety	4
Reduced stress	4
More supportive services	2
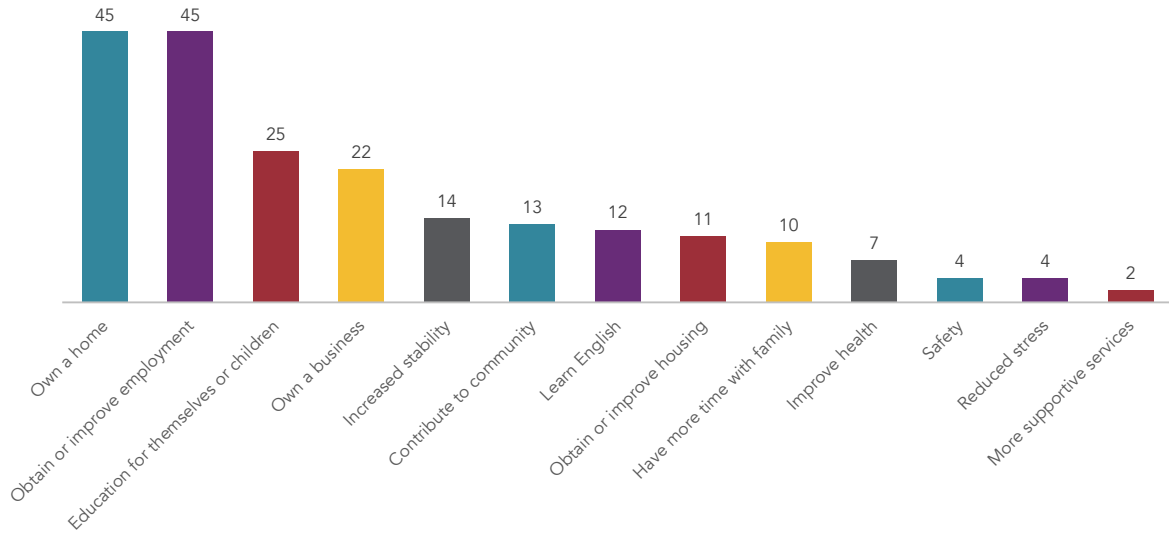
HOMEOWNERSHIP

Homeownership is an aspirational goal for many participants.

The desire for homeownership is closely tied to the desire and need for stability and a reduction in stress. The words "quiet neighborhood," "have two-four acres," and "be relaxed" speak to families' current stress and their desire to transcend it:

Given the current relationship between wages and the cost of housing, without employment that provides a professional level salary and/or a dual earner household, homeownership will continue to be an aspirational goal that is out of reach for those who do not have generational wealth and have limited income. For people who have a low income and no family wealth to inherit there is a steep road full of pitfalls that, for most people, is not navigable. A few people with a bit of luck and tremendous determination do get there, but the housing market as well as

> **"In five years, I would like to own my own home and be relaxed. This whole year has been an April Fool's. I'm still young, I'm only 22. I want to take advantage of Section 8."**

the demands on individuals from the labor market make it tough. The median home price in Ramsey County for 2023 was $293,500, making it affordable for only those households making 80% of Area Median Income (AMI), which for 2023 is calculated by the Metropolitan Council at ~$95,650. This is out of reach for most Workforce Solutions recipients, even those who become employed and move off benefits. Nationally, the average income of working single mothers who had been on TANF in 2020 was ~$20,000, and the federal definition of poverty for a family of three is an income of $23,000 or less.

Short of homeownership, others hoped for at least an improvement in their housing situation. Here again, the removal of worry, stability is a key theme, to which owning a home or having a place that won't be taken away is seen as a core requirement.

"[I will have a] high paying job, helping people look for resources, jobs … I would like my own house in a quiet neighborhood, a wealthy neighborhood."

"I see myself owning my own home and land. I would like to have two-four acres. Having all my children back with me is a priority. I would like to work for myself, making natural medicinal remedies, becoming a grower. I would love to find a partner and get married."

"A few years ago, I was homeless. I need a place where I don't have to worry about losing my housing. Hoping that a job becomes a career. If I look too far into the future, I could trip on the building blocks to my goals."

"Stable housing, whether I am a renter or an owner. What would be important to me is family time and stability within my job and household. I would like a social work job. My girls will be in daycare so I can work full-time."

Stable housing is viewed by the families and staff interviewed in this project alike as a prerequisite to stability and upward mobility. It came up again and again across multiple participant questions with a total of 84 mentions that included the words "house," "housing," "eviction," and "stable." Research shows that unstable housing and housing precarity is linked to instability in employment, mental health, and well-being. According to the article "How does Housing Stability Affect Mental Health," severe mental health issues can adversely affect the ability to retain stable housing. It also cites research indicating that unstable housing can create or exacerbate less severe mental health issues.

"My overall goal is to have stable housing in one to two years. I want to purchase a food truck to build my own business. Financial works should be more supportive, and services should be expanded for single mothers. Too many [county] workers do not tailor services for each person."

"I want my own home – at least I want more than an apartment. I want stable housing for me and my son. Single parents cannot afford stable housing – the options are so limited."

"Getting involved with Housing Stability Services and getting on as many waitlists as I can for public housing. Apply for a job with the school district. Get my daughter into activities and involved in school, also make sure I am spending time with her. The resources that could help me most in getting there are housing lists and an advocate to help with housing; learning about expungement opportunities for my theft on record; have more options for activities that are affordable in the community."

The current affordable housing shortage only exacerbates the hardship and all-consuming stress and worry that families experience, affecting health, mental health, and employment.

According to the "Deeply Affordable and Permanent Supportive Housing Engagement Summary Report" prepared by Saint Paul Planning and Economic Development, and Ramsey County Community and Economic Development, from October 2021:

"The lowest-income residents in our community have the highest housing cost burdens, fewest housing options, and are most vulnerable to homelessness. In Saint Paul, there are 22,335 renter households with incomes at or below 30% of area median income (AMI), with only 11,560 units affordable at this level. According to the Ramsey County Economic Competitiveness and Inclusion Plan, there is a deficit of 15,000 units countywide at 30% AMI or below. Further research is needed to determine the number of units needed per household size. This housing cost burden falls heavily on BIPOC households. Over half of Black and Asian households are at or below 30% AMI in Saint Paul. This trend is mirrored in suburban Ramsey County. Similarly, people who identify as African American, Native American, or multi-racial are disproportionately affected by homelessness. For example, 54% of homeless residents in Ramsey County are Black, while these residents make up only roughly 12% of the total population."

"Rent is so much right now and I'm not bringing in much income. I don't want to end up going back to a shelter."

Living this reality into individual human experience, project participants spoke about housing challenges and aspirations in the context of stability:

> *"I'm currently in the process of moving forward. Housing instability and transportation issues need [to be resolved] to move forward. Basic needs have been met first."*

> *"My own house. I want any housing. Being a single mother doing it alone is hard with children under one."*

> *"Housing – I'm not willing to bring my daughter to a shelter – more of county thing, not necessarily an employment services thing."*

"I have a 17-year-old ready to graduate, I want to be a positive one that she follows. I don't want to be all wrapped up in my housing, those things can consume me so much, so I can be a good positive role model."

It is widely acknowledged when serving individuals who have been homeless that providing housing is the first step to stabilization (Housing First) and that without a reliable home people don't have a platform to build their lives. It was beyond the scope of this project to ask participants what their current housing situation was/is, but anecdotally staff spoke about families living in very unstable situations, when, for example, if they didn't have a friend or family member to stay with that night, they took their children on the light rail and rode it all night, short of staying in a shelter. As mentioned earlier, many participants alluded to their housing challenges in their comments, some of which are shared throughout this report.

54% of homeless residents in Ramsey County are Black, while these residents make up only roughly 12% of the total population.

Workforce Solutions cannot solve the affordable housing shortage, but for policymakers to expect individuals (the majority of whom are BIPOC) who receive assistance to obtain and keep employment that pays a living wage for them and their families without a safe and stable place to live is at best, unrealistic and at worst, cruel and unfair and a manifestation of systemic racism. Likewise, it presents a huge

challenge to Employment Counselors, whose jobs are designed on the premise that finding employment for families is the next step to stability, but who find themselves navigating nearly impossible housing and stability challenges alongside their clients, while their success is measured only in terms of employment and timely system exit.

EMPLOYMENT GOALS

Employment was mentioned equally, and sometimes in the same sentence as housing when participants talked about their future vision.

Notably absent from many answers was any specific career trajectory, or a personal ambition. While **42% of participants mentioned a specific occupation, most (58%) did not specify a particular job** but rather spoke about the need for steady, well-paid employment in general terms as a component of stability.

Again, these responses were largely focused on current stability and for many of them, how they could pave the way for their children to get an education and be in a more secure situation than they are themselves.

> *"Proper planning for the next year and a half so that we are able to make the best choice for both her [daughter's] future goals and where we will live. Having the proper resources to successfully get through this chapter of our life (domestic violence) and get to a point of being stable. Research more into different companies and see what opportunities are available and what extra education is needed."*

> *– Workforce Solutions Participant*

"I want to open up a transitional living/respite site for adolescents and single parents in and aging out of the system. I am currently taking a psychology course and reaching out to local mentors who influence that community in hopes of partnership! Also having personal experience on the other side gives me drive to accomplish this!"

– Workforce Solutions Participant

Mentions of employment in families' answers to the "next steps" question was almost always brought up in the context of other aspects of stability:

> *"It is more important for my kids to go to college and get resources and just learn about the resources. I don't have a job but one of my goals is to have a stable job."*

For women, being able to balance caregiving with employment was a particular challenge.

"I have to take my son to school and have not found a job that would fit my schedule."

"Maintaining employment that works with school, being financially stable where I can be able to have everything in order."

"Child responsibilities take over life. Some family members help. Child care for little one." *(cited as a barrier)*

"My child is in preschool. Next year they will be in Kindergarten, and I will have more time to study and learn English." (cited as a barrier)

Women who have children with mental health issues, chronic disease or disability, the demands of getting their child to doctor appointments, the limited options they have for daycare, and the other challenges these conditions can bring (educational and behavioral) made it very challenging to simultaneously make progress on employment goals.

"My [disabled] son not being able to go to any daycare or center that will fit his needs. Lack of support from my family; guides or links that can lead me in the right directions to the things I need." (cited as a barrier)

"We have stable housing, own our home . . . youngest has a waiver – I am a full-time caretaker of her. Can't find nursing staff to care for my daughter. Being able to meet the challenges of education for my children." (cited as a barrier to employment)

Many participants expressed a desire to give back and help others both in the context of employment and outside of work. Of those responses that talked about a specific career path, participants most often mentioned professions that are considered "helping professions" in education, health care, or human services, including nursing (2), social work (1), teaching or tutoring (2) among others. Others mentioned that require a post-secondary qualification were IT (2), truck driver (2), and auto-tech (1). A few people wanted service jobs, for example, part-time cashier or custodian.

"I am a survivor, an alumni of Breaking Free, a group of people who are survivors, finding employment with other places that can use them with the lived experience that they have. By the time we figure out what we want to do it's too late. We can use the experience we have now to bring back to the community."

Despite facing many obstacles and challenges themselves, or perhaps because of their own experiences, many participants said they would like to contribute to the community and help others experiencing hardship:

"[I would like a] home for my family and have financial freedom and be actively involved in public service."

"Right now, I'm working in nonprofits, and I want to help more with mental health issues in the Latino community."

"My long-term goal is to be a computer engineer. I would like to build an education school to help children overseas with English and learning."

"I would like to help the community through humanitarian and social work."

"[I am in a] transition process, just getting use to the American [ways], [being here] only 16 months. I am a volunteer mentor for Teen Challenge, I want to contribute to my community."

While 42% of participants mentioned a specific occupation, most (58%) did not specify a particular job.

EDUCATION

Education, for both parents and children was also a frequently mentioned topic, although at only about half the frequency of housing and employment when participants were asked to envision life five years from now. While we did not ask people to tell us about their level of education, the overall educational level of MFIP recipients in MN reported to U.S. HHS shows that two in 10 have some post-secondary education, six in 10 have a high school diploma, and more than two in 10 have less than a high school diploma, some with no formal education at all.

Of the 25 mentions in response to the future vision question, close to half (11) included specific mentions of education for their children. This was especially true for the women interviewed who are first-generation immigrants, but the tendency among women overall to put children's education ahead of their own was striking:

> *"My children get educated, go to college, get a job, and start their own life, and help others."*

> *" . . . Get kids to graduate, get kids educated."*

> *"College education for kids is a high priority."*

> *"Working on my own education, high quality education for kids."*

> *"Education, in my opinion, is very important."*

However, as a next step to meeting their goals, education came up as the most frequently mentioned topic:

A few responses (eight) mentioned post-secondary education to support specific goals:

> *"Finishing school to get my RN degree. I have already applied and have to complete the FAFSA and testing processes."*

> *"School—first I have to take classes in auto tech which is the first step to a dream."*

> *"Owning a computer and having computer classes."*

"Go to school and actually finish. Taking a business class and taking other classes on the many different things I am interested in."

Some comments were more general or about finishing high school:

> *"Finishing school, keeping focused while in school, maintaining employment that works with school."*

> *"Finishing school and getting my AA degree."*

> *"Go back to school—graduate from high school."*

> *"Go to school to get a better job."*

> *"Update resume. Get education and training to make it better. Needs to be affordable—most schools are not affordable."*

This grouping also included two responses about the importance of education to their children:

> *"It is more important for my kids to go to college and get resources, and I just learned about the resources."*

> *"Getting a better education for my autistic son. Finding schools that are specially for autistic children."*

The critical next step identified by first-generation immigrants and others for whom English is necessary to employment or education but is not their primary language:

> *"Sometimes one of the hurdles we run into is limited English. If we learned better English they would pay us better. I haven't held a job since the pandemic."*

The 17 individuals/families who attended the focus group at HAP, who were all recent arrivals to the USA, were very clear that learning English was their main priority. However, the barriers for people who do not speak English go beyond the language itself and speak to cultural norms and expectations that have more significant implications:

HAP staff put it this way:

> *"For me and my organization specifically, I would say the language barrier remains the number one barrier to employment or education opportunities as many of our clients here at HAP are refugees or English-language learners. Another barrier to the aspirations of the families I serve is education. Although my clients do view learning English as important to*

finding employment, many feel that taking ELL and ABE courses are not enough or helpful for them to get the jobs they want. This is especially true for my older clients who have limited English. Some have even confided in me that they wish for their children to learn English and to support them instead as it is the cultural view or value. Overall, I have found that my clients are more interested in working than taking ELL or ABE classes. Also, many other training programs require certain English levels, preventing my clients from accessing available education and training programs to get the jobs they want."

"As MN welcomes refugees, we see non-English speakers in MFIP, it's not just a language barrier. Things in place don't align with cultural practices. In communities of color, the idea of receiving something for free, because I'm not able to provide for my own family . . . there is a strong sense of pride, the whole idea of asking for something doesn't align with their values."
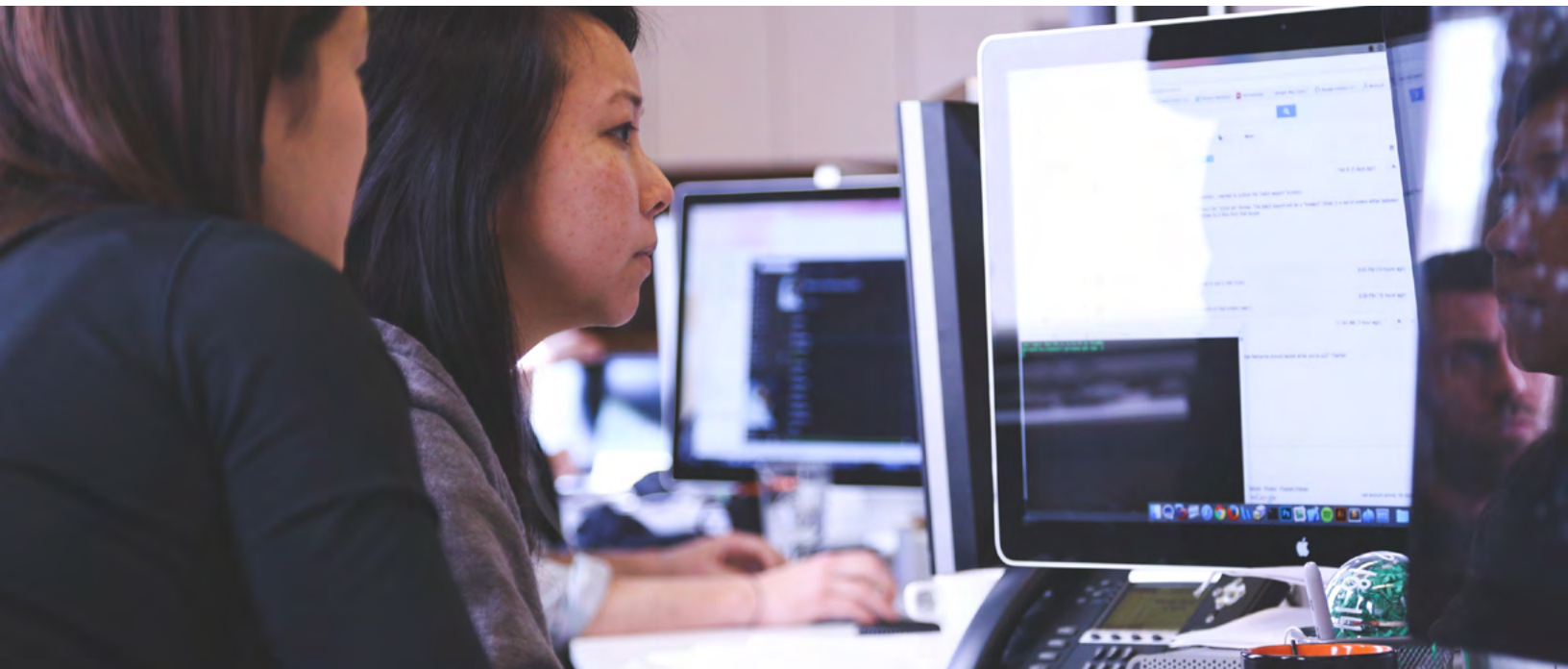
STARTING A BUSINESS

In response to the future vision question, a number of individuals spoke about their desire to start their own business although often they did not specify what type of business. Of those who specified, four mentioned starting their own cleaning business.

"I would like to focus on an RN degree. I would like to open up my own PCA company/ taking in people on ventilators. I am hoping my older kids will follow me to wherever I choose to move."
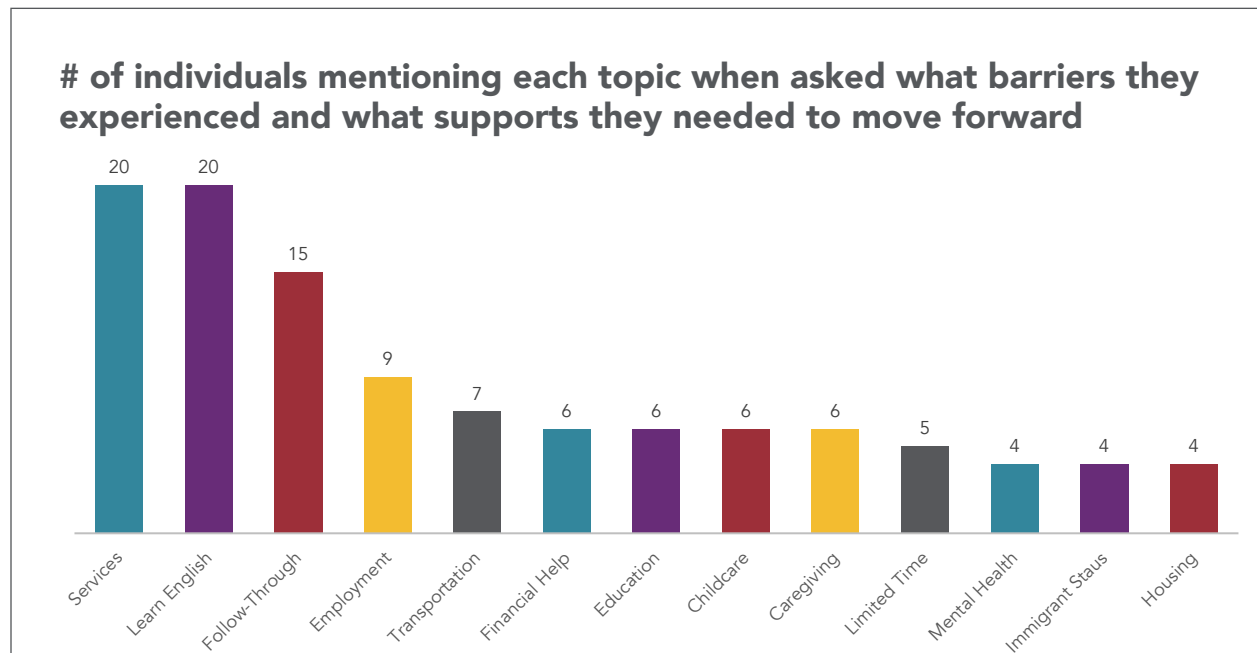
"I would like to be in a house with my kids. Own a cleaning business of my own. My son will be a football player. I will be closer with my family."

"[I would like to] own a jewelry shop so I can help people in my village."

"In five years, I want to be a successful entrepreneur. In two years, I will know the kind of business."

Specific ways of helping people make this reality were talked about by some:

"The resources that would help me most in getting there would be having networking opportunities with people who are already in the business . . . getting a mentor."

# of individuals mentioning each topic when asked what barriers they experienced and what supports they needed to move forward

Topic	Count
Services	20
Learn English	20
Follow-Through	15
Employment	9
Transportation	7
Financial Help	6
Education	6
Childcare	6
Caregiving	6
Limited Time	5
Mental Health	4
Immigrant Staus	4
Housing	4

INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR AND BELIEFS

Many participants talked about their own behavior and belief systems (the category named "Follow-Through" in the chart above) and how they felt they needed to think or act to make progress toward their goals and break through internal barriers or beliefs:

"Aim is to work harder—moving higher up."

"Be a bit more persevering. Continue going to classes."

"Keeping focused while in school."

"Confidence and persistence."

"Stay hopeful and motivated."

"Get rid of toxic people/things holding me back; believe in myself."

"One day at a time. Grew up in alcoholic home and working on moving forward one day at a time."

"Keeping the faith to allow you to move forward."

"Keep an open mind on the journey towards achievement; dedication to the journey and overcoming setbacks on goals."

"Trust myself more, work on self-esteem."

"You have to stay grounded, have to stay focused. Don't let anybody throw you off what you want to do."

"Be thoughtful about other people, more humility. Do a little bit at a time."

"Everything you want in your life, everything you dreamed of, everything you want, is on the other side of fear."

– Workforce Solutions Participant

These comments reflect a courageous and resilient resolve to rise above considerable adversity. Apart from the daunting logistical challenges that people face in finding a way out of poverty, **the cognitive effects of past and/or ongoing trauma can include anxiety and fear about learning a new skill, interacting with strangers, and difficulties in establishing trust. Yet, many participants may not connect their own struggles with fear, motivation, and executive function with the trauma they have experienced, but instead judge themselves inadequate, further damaging their self-regard.**

While the interviewing process and questions used in this project did not ask participants to talk about past trauma, a 2016 study found an increased prevalence of trauma and violence exposure among a group of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants, with more than 35% reporting four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences.[1]

Even if trauma is ruled out, the realities and experiences of being poor may by themselves prevent a person from successfully negotiating their way out of poverty. And many researchers consider long-term poverty itself chronic stress that leads to similar effects.

> A 2016 study found an increased prevalence of trauma and violence exposure among a group of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants, with more than 35% reporting four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Chronic stress, a long-term form of stress, derives from unending feelings of despair/hopelessness, as a result of factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, feelings of helplessness and/or traumatic early childhood experience (APA, 2011). Chronic stressors associated with health disparities include perceived discrimination, neighborhood stress, daily stress, family stress, acculturative stress, environmental stress and maternal stress.[2]

Other research[3] showed the damaging impact on an individual's "cognitive function" by the "the constant and all-consuming effort of coping with the immediate effects of having little money." This results in an individual who has fewer "mental resources" available for education and training. This research concludes that "in designing effective services for individuals living in poverty it is important to accommodate the dominance that poverty has on a person's time and thinking."[4]

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1   un, J., Patel, F., Kirzner, R., Newton-Famous, N., Owens, C., Welles, S. L., & Chilton, M. (2016). The Building Wealth and Health Network: methods and baseline characteristics from a randomized controlled trial for families with young children participating in temporary assistance for needy families (TANF). BMC public health, 16, 583. doi:10.1186/s12889-016-3233-4   Accessed from https://www.communitysolutions.com/research/implementing-trauma-informed-approach-public-assistance-programs/

2   (Djuric et al, 2010; NIH, 2011) Accessed from https://www.apa.org/topics/racism-bias-discrimination/health-disparities-stress

3, 4   How poverty affects people's decision-making processes by Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington and Jessica Rea, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free PDF at www.jrf.org.uk

"I really think we are a bridge for people to get where people need to go. We do a lot of social work. They'll say that we are just supposed to focus on employment, but you can't focus on employment when all of these other things aren't working. We're often the only support that families have. If people walk in and one of us isn't there, they know they will be taken care of."

Employment Counselor

Staff also shared their experiences with families that reflect this reality. Answering the question, "What do you think are the biggest barriers to families fulfilling their aspirations?" Employment Counselors and other staff emphasized the need for comprehensive support and trust building focused on creating stability.

"People are coming in with trauma, their priority is to take care of children and put a roof over their head. We work to be trauma and healing informed and go with the needs of the participant."

"For participants, knowing where you are right now, and where you want to go. How to get out of that basic needs orientation, moving to the next level. Not having that education is one of the biggest barriers. [Participants say] 'I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do next.'"

"I ask them what job they did before and what they liked about it as a way to break down that barrier. If they are having a lot of issues, childcare, transportation, the time that they can think properly [about what they would like to do] is so limited."

"A lot need stable housing and full-time employment. A lot of survival mode things, food, shelter, childcare, work. Many would like to start their own business but are unable to connect the dots from now to their future. Domestic violence is a big concern."

"Building rapport, and building trust before anything else, then you find out a lot more, then you find out about the trauma they have been through."

CHALLENGES

In some cases, services delivery and requirements create challenges for participants.

Financial Services

This effort wasn't centered around Financial Services but around Workforce Solutions. We did not speak to workers or management in Financial Services to get their perspective, so the experiences shared by stakeholders should not form the basis for generalized conclusions. At the same time, it was clear that families struggled with limitations to the supports they can receive and with the delays they experienced in services and supports from financial workers, childcare, and housing, and that these challenges spilled over into their experiences with their employment counselors in Workforce Development:

> *"I received my SNAP benefits and then was told that it would take two months to receive my financial benefit which placed me in jeopardy of losing my housing. These are situations that make it impossible to move forward [because of the extreme level of stress]."*

> *"Even at the office downtown, they're not taking people back there to talk with the financial workers, they want you to call them on the phone. My financial worker wasn't answering my calls. I spoke to other people, and I got to the point of saying I need to talk to a supervisor. I was able to speak to a supervisor that day, but that was just lucky. There's emails, text messaging, and ways to reach out to people besides the U.S. Mail. If you don't check your mail, you get behind, then you will need an extension, but you can't get people on the phone. I felt like I wasn't even adequate to get public assistance from the county, this is bad."*

"Frustrating with the paperwork that they demand, and they don't respond to it for 10 days. Why should it take that long? And they don't answer the phone. My current worker is better than the person before. If I don't get a response, my employment counselor would email."

These situations are extremely stressful, taxing individuals to their limits with the worry about what they will do if they lose their housing or cannot meet their child's basic needs and struggling—making short-term focused decisions that may be at the expense of longer-term goals.

Feeling as if services, specifically financial services, are not responsive or individualized, many people expressed their frustration with delays and perceived impersonal treatment. While this does not reflect directly on the services provided by Workforce Solutions and their community contractors, it has a powerful ripple effect on the progress families can make on their employment and education goals by creating overwhelming stress on families and taking up a significant portion of the limited hours Employment Counselors have to provide other needed services because they spend time trying to sort out financial issues on behalf of participants. Participants commented that:

"There needs to be better communication, more resources, and as much as we need to check in with our financial workers, they should be tailoring services to each person. There are too many limitations, and it feels like we are being punished."

"The relationship with the financial worker is important and often there is no trust built."

Employment Counselors in every focus group mentioned the current challenges and the need to be able to work as a team with the financial workers:

"We need the ability to work as a team with financial workers—clients can't get a hold of financial workers so they call us. If it was easier to communicate between job counselors and financial workers, it would take less of our time."

"Employment Counselors try to call financial workers to get info. If we can reach them, we can solve the problem. If we can't get a hold of the worker, then we call the program manager to try to verify that all information is correct and that there hasn't been a change in financial worker."

"E-mailing gets a better response—often we ask participant to send e-mail to EC which is forwarded to a financial worker, this sometimes gets a better response."

One participant recalled a conversation with her financial worker:

"Their language and responses are based on weaknesses rather than strengths. We are treated like numbers, like our situation is our own fault."

"When I lost my benefits, the new financial worker told me to go to the Capitol and speak to my Congressman."

This is likely indicative of the stress felt by everyone as a result of the limitations and challenges current financial workers have in order to meet the demand.

Maintaining Benefits

Staff and participants alike spoke about the challenges of maintaining benefits. There is a disparity between how people are treated when they are low income and unemployed, vs. when a person is middle or high income and unemployed:

"The childcare application is like 20 pages long. Getting childcare is needed in order to go work, but childcare can take two-three weeks to get started. There are job logs and activity logs, and employment verification. Every time someone starts work they have to have employer verification. If they don't actually start, then the county needs verification that they didn't actually start from the employer. Also, many participants need medical opinion forms; medical provider or therapist to fill out the form, stating if they can work, or if they can work 20 hours a week or less."

"People are trying to manage their household, work, and stay in touch with their workers when they are all working the same business hours. Submit a household report form every single month, by the 8th of the month, or they are going to get a letter saying their benefits will be suspended."

"Paperwork. The county offers support if you sign your life away every single month. The people that are employed are having to take days off work to get paperwork in. They have to report the earnings of their kids, even though those earnings don't affect benefits."

"Whatever you earned in November affects your January benefits. It's backwards thinking—the expectation of people who are already poor, to pay their bills and put food on the table. Whatever you earned in November, now you're going to get less in January. November and December are the worst months, when they are trying to cover the expenses of the holiday and making sure that kids have the clothes they need. It's a cyclical experience. I would love for someone to tell these legislators that if they had the funds from November [subtracted from their income] in January, how that would work for them."

"Medical providers have to fill out a form to verify recertification of participant MFIP forms. Participants are bombarded with forms, and they don't know where to start or where to take them. A lot of people lost their medical because people didn't get their forms in, or the county had a delay. If you're calling for information, you're on hold for 45 minutes to an hour to get the information you need to just submit."

Many participants expressed frustration at the reporting requirements:

"I don't like the monthly household reports—you'll know if my situation changes, or if it doesn't change. I used to hate the job logs. You want me to fill this out? I just need you to trust what I'm doing. I'm dealing with my mental health now, my six-year-old's mental health, and I'm a single mom. I should only have to fill out a monthly report. I don't get any child support. You all are intertwined; you all have the information. Section 8, I don't have to send them anything, I love that. Y'all don't want to do your job. When I was getting paid weekly, that's just too much to do weekly. I sent stuff to my worker, and then she said I have a new worker, but I wasn't notified, and my stuff didn't get forwarded to the new worker. I feel like we should have a grace period when we start a job before they cut off my benefits. I need time to find out if the job is even a fit. Some people start a job, and it isn't a fit, or it's not what was discussed in the job description. How the manager operates--is he or she really involved with their staff? How are the coworkers, how does it feel? There are racial dynamics sometimes that are problems, it has to feel welcoming."

"[ECs] also sometimes lose track of the fact that we as participants don't know all of the rules and regulations and don't deal with them every day, and they sometimes expect us to know things like it's obvious. I'm ok with rules and expectations as long as I can understand them and if the counselor has the decency from time to time to remind or reach out more than once a month."

"There's a lack of communication about what's needed. Sometimes, I don't even know what's needed and all of a sudden I receive a sanction or my benefit ends. Especially with extensions it is hard to communicate and get all things in within the 30-day time period given. Sometimes, it is a delay with the Career Counselor, sometimes the Provider, and sometimes, I don't get a communication right away. Next thing I know, time is up and I'm having to reapply at the county. Do the runaround for post-60 [month extension], a lot of documentation. I understand that all of this is needed, but I think there needs to be more consistency in communication and more follow-ups from the counselor especially because there is so little time. On the positive side, I like the accountability with employment meetings; the fact that I have someone checking in on my progress makes me feel like I need to get things done or makes me notice how much I'm slacking. I am reminded to do things that I am needing to do. It's hard to stay on track sometimes, especially dealing with depression and anxiety. Reminders are always helpful. It's hard to do things when you don't have to, but if the money you get monthly is dependent on the work you do towards your employment plan you feel obligated to do it so you can get your benefit."

Some felt other resources were more reliable than ECs at explaining the requirements:

"I go to family to get information on the rules and system because they know and have been through it before."

Some families were resigned to the reality:

"You have to play by the rules. You have to jump through hoops. Disability services are hoops to jump through continuously. Right now I'm going through an appeal process for things my daughter needs and that becomes a full-time job for mom."

In one of the focus groups which was predominantly Black American women, many expressed their frustration at the limitations of their situation and the system; the reality of systemic racism:

"I feel like I'm handcuffed in chains to the system. Give us the tools that we really need, so that people can understand my budget, my income, so I'm not living beyond my means. I'm a single mom, I can't save. All the programs are limited because everybody is struggling. We have exhausted the emergency funds. I would rather live in a different country. I have friends in Africa—you can buy land. I just feel like the system wants to keep us chained."

"When a person is doing well, they are often penalized. Services are taken away from them and suddenly you cannot afford the services that were taken away and you move two steps back instead of forward."

"[When I was unemployed] unemployment would just call and say are you still job-searching. Literally with no other verification. [In contrast] nothing in this [MFIP] is saying yes, I trust you, you're a human. People are experts in their own life, we can do the best we can to do that, but the program policies work against that."

"The County disregards the cost of kids. They just don't figure in the real cost of living. They just care if I can pay the rent and the utility bills. We have to be able to financially take care of the whole household. They don't see what we're going through. When they put the rules in place, it keeps single moms single. As soon as you get a little bit of income they take your benefits away. I have to pay rent, electricity, gas, garbage. I got to get help with my electricity bill. My two kids had a growth spurt, and I needed money for clothes."

Transitioning Off Benefits

This is a challenge in many ways for families who have no other supports such as extended family with resources. If something goes wrong, there is no safety net except going back to MFIP. Participants had many stories of how this had affected them:

"The time limitation for receiving services is difficult for many of us. You can do well for 10 years and suddenly life takes a turn and if you have used your 60 months, there are no services for you to access."

"I was on maternity leave. I was going to return to work, but they weren't giving me enough hours, and I lost my food benefits, housing. Then I had to quit the job. They take away the benefits, and I'm three months behind on rent."

"During COVID I was working in Maplewood. I live in Saint Paul. They started weaning me off the benefits, and my food stamps started going down too. Housing started to charge more. Then I injured myself at work. Then I lost my job, and my benefits were going down and I was going to lose my housing because of back rent. It took a year during COVID to get paid up, but I haven't worked since then."

"I was working and I do home care for an 81-year-old lady. She ended up in the hospital and then rehab. I told my

"We need the system because our parents and grandparents did not have the structural foundation to send their offspring to four-year colleges. Even if I make $30k I am still going to need the system, because nobody needs to be starving. If the county could help people get a savings plan, so that they can realistically expect to get off the system. You save this $300 a month, and then give them an incentive, so people learn how to become independent."

– Workforce Solutions Participant

worker that I didn't think she would be back. The counselor said that I need a verification that my hours ended. I had to go back to them to get the documentation. If I had been prepared—in home care, things can happen, people die, go to the hospital. There's a lag when you lose employment to have your benefits reflect it, but not when you get the job."

"I moved from Dakota to Ramsey, but my rent is $500 or $600 more, and my utilities are $350 per month. I have to put everything into a spreadsheet to see if I can afford to take the job, because the job won't cover the expenses. With three kids I need $80-100K per year just to cover the expenses. Unless we're making over $50K a year, if we're low income if you look at our system we can't get to where we need to be. With the costs like they are, we can't make it work."

"I just quit my job this September. I had to quit because I lost all county benefits. My rent went up quite a bit, plus my car payment, plus other bills as well. I could barely afford to live where I was at. I was working a lot of hours, 60-hour weeks. Even then all my time was taken up. No time for mental health, haven't put ahead of things before, that can really set me back. Putting mental health first."

"Getting off the system is scary. If I get the job, and if I then lose it, then will I have to wait six months? So there's a fear factor."

Specific barriers that can set people back in their quest for stability and independence include childcare, transportation, health (their own, or their family's) and the increasing costs of living, especially housing costs:

Mental Health: *"When I was working on bettering my mental health, having the ability to fully focus on that without any other expectations, my counselor helped me the most. She allowed my employment plan to be centered on mental health because she recognized that I need to get that under control before I will be successful at any job. What set me back was when I lost that counselor and my employment plan was recentered on finding a job, rather than continuing to focus on my mental health. I needed my counselor to understand that everyone is different; I suffer from major anxiety, and although it may be easy for someone else to focus on both mental health and finding work, for me, that just caused more anxiety and stress, and I ended up giving up on both."*

Transportation: *"I went back to college and was finishing my degree in Phys Ed at the University of WI River Falls. What helped me the most was my initiative to try to obtain a degree despite ongoing obstacles. Who helped: the school staff and teachers. Setback: Not having adequate transportation to and from school. Just some help with transportation and support from the community [might have made it possible to complete]."*

Health: *"I was meeting my goals. I felt good about it. Then I had a major setback when I had to wear an insulin pump and trying to process it, but now I'm ready cause my family has been a big help."*

Childcare: *"I was working really hard, then I had children, and I couldn't work anymore because of childcare."*

Staff also noted the many challenges to families in transitioning to independence:

"Families are afraid to lose that support. They'll get a job, but then they are worried about the benefit cliff, losing the benefits. MFIP is a kind of cushion and they are afraid that they will be cut off. Their parents were on MFIP, and they feel they can rely on it. I tell them you can still stay on SNAP and Medical, and that sometimes helps them."

"[In this program, the] goal is employment and that participants become self-sufficient. [Once employed], their income goes up, and that puts at risk their eligibility for the program. However, just because someone has a paycheck, that doesn't mean they are ready to drive. What is the goal of the program? To go to paycheck to paycheck, or is it the goal that communities thrive? There needs to be a stepping stone, needs a process to make it less hard. Hard transition, especially with a current cost of living—$20 per hour isn't enough to pay rent, support kids, car, etc. Support that is provided is a Band-Aid—family is going to recycle through the systems. People are coming in with trauma and their priority is to take care of children and put a roof over their head. We need services that are trauma and healing informed and go with the needs of the participant. People's lives don't happen on a grant period. Systems want to have results."
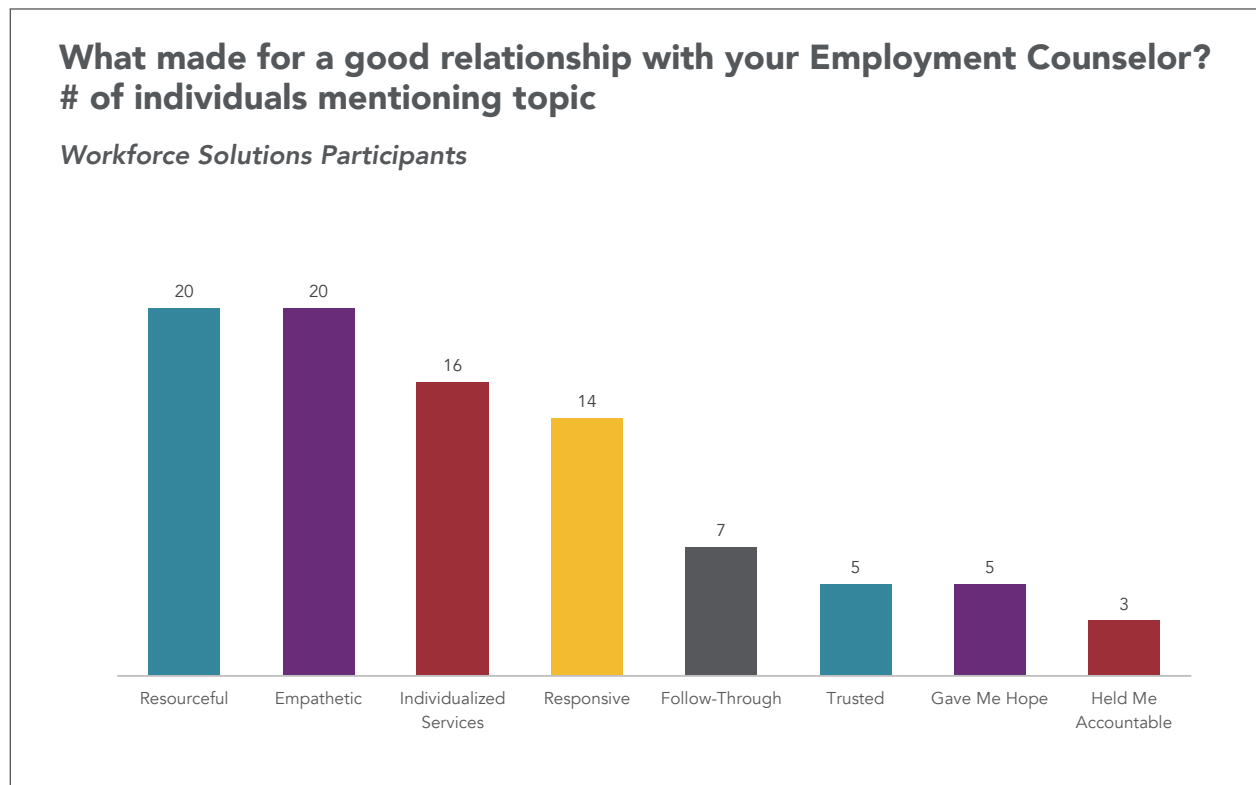
"The majority of [MFIP] participants are female, in programs developed by men. Women are historically caretakers; this isn't taken care of by these programs. It's another layer of experience. They tend to give priority to the person that you are caring for. What about caring for elders? Systems are developed by men that don't match the reality of women in the workplace."

"HUD prevents people from providing childcare in the HUD; can't have a babysitter over because HUD prevents that. One program will create barriers for another. Systems don't talk to each other (health care, housing, employment)."

"Not enough childcare. There is a long waitlist for second shift. There aren't many options for second shift. There is a lot of legalese, it's long and complicated, it's auto-denied. There's a childcare crisis in the state. Especially providers of color. Registered, non-licensed childcare is an option."

PARTICIPANT/EMPLOYMENT COUNSELOR RELATIONSHIPS

Insights into the relationships between participants and their employment counselors:

What made for a good relationship with your Employment Counselor? # of individuals mentioning topic

Workforce Solutions Participants

Resourceful	20
Empathetic	20
Individualized Services	16
Responsive	14
Follow-Through	7
Trusted	5
Gave Me Hope	5
Held Me Accountable	3

Participant Perspective

Participants were almost universally positive about their relationship with their Employment Counselor. They spoke most often about the qualities of resourcefulness, empathy, services feeling individualized for them, and their counselor being responsive and returning calls, emails, and texts.

Clearly, Employment Counselors do far more than what their job title would suggest and are doing their best to help families gain the stability needed to find and keep employment:

"When I met my employment counselor, it was at a time that I was in a very abusive relationship. She helped me find resources to leave that environment. I went into a pregnancy home to survive. She encouraged me saying that you can get through this, you're still young, life is not over, many women have gone through this and have come out the other side. Also gave me the confidence to get back to work."

"From the moment I signed up and was paired with my employment counselors I always felt welcomed and a priority. Three things that made it work: great communication skills, always responded when I reached out, held me accountable, in a non-judgmental yet matter of fact kind of way. Great when it came to resources, always provided the resources that were needed for me to excel. Willing to always go above and beyond no matter what the situation was and listening to what my needs were and always providing great advice and direction."

"She encouraged me saying that you can get through this, you're still young, life is not over, many women have gone through this and have come out the other side. Also gave me the confidence to get back to work."

"I had a really good relationship with my previous employment counselor, felt more genuine, never rushed things. Like if I missed appointments, she was understanding. She asked good questions and to get to know me, have a little a bit of conversation. She cared to know how I was doing, she asked about my daughter."

"When they remember something I told them and then email me about it. I appreciate good communication skills and following up after they said they were going to do something or to just check in, sending me a message, reach out talk to me. I had a worker who remembered I had a newborn. They reached out to see how I was doing. They were a good listener and motivated me to do things."

"All my interactions with my counselors have left me assured there is a hopeful future for work and a ton of resources available. Things that made it work: Workshops, much-needed information, and life skills were provided during workshops. I liked how they were interactive, and she would follow up with the slides and any information/resources that were shared throughout. Referrals: If my counselor didn't have a direct resource, she always helped me find an alternative resource that could help. She got me into my own housing and listened to my needs and walked me through the process."

"Positives: I would not have the career that I have now without the employment service help. Having employment services helps to keep me on track and to ground me and bring me back to what is important. Sometimes I get frazzled with everything going on in my life and my mandatory meetings with my counselor help me to break things down, slow down, and figure out what to focus on. I like being reminded about what I am working on and being held accountable for it. I feel sometimes like I wouldn't do it if my counselor didn't call and bug me every week."

> **"My employment counselor went above and beyond, helped me with my grandson, helped me with disability. My worker helps me with every aspect of my life. She makes it seem like it's part of her job when I know it's not. There's some things that I was late turning in, found out it went to the wrong place. Having the same worker for the long amount of time is important."**

Workforce Solutions Participant

When we asked participants to tell us about a time when their relationship with their Employment Counselor (EC) wasn't good, there were a few instances voiced by a minority of participants. Some were current, but most were referencing work with counselors that participants had interacted with in the past. The same qualities were still necessary: resourcefulness, empathy, responsiveness, and meeting individual needs, all of which build trust and rapport. Participants emphasized it was a lack of these that (had) undermined the relationship:

"My current counselor is very dismissive and has minimal communication. Will email me one time in a month and then not email again. If I didn't see that one email and respond, they would close my case or issue a NOITS. They are not trying to get to know me and are treating me like I'm just a number that they are required to meet with. Not following through on resource sharing or things they say they will follow up on."

The expectation and need for holistic support that works toward stabilization in all aspects of life has been set as a norm by most ECs who, as described above, work with families with authentic care and dedication to their well-being.

When that isn't there, or isn't communicated, it is missed:

"I recently got a new employment counselor and there hasn't really been much communication. I have been wanting to get started working on certain things and completing things but have had to reach out to my ESC to get direction. What makes it difficult: Lack of communication, only reached out once, then when I call back, she never answers; doesn't follow-up or follow through when we are able to talk. Doesn't seem like she cares too much."

"Recently my son's school closed, and she really didn't offer too much help. And when I found somewhere she suggested I send him to a school that wouldn't be able to fit his needs just so I could work. What made it hard to build the relationship, she began not understanding the type of trouble I was having. She became very unhelpful after a while and cares only about me working and not trying to provide any real help when trying to help look for a suitable school for him (almost like careless)."

"[I had a] male employment counselor, and I was with my abusive ex. I was not able to make it in due to experiencing this and I was sanctioned because of this. He couldn't/ wouldn't understand circumstances, would not follow up or check in, and would not show any compassion for the things I go through."
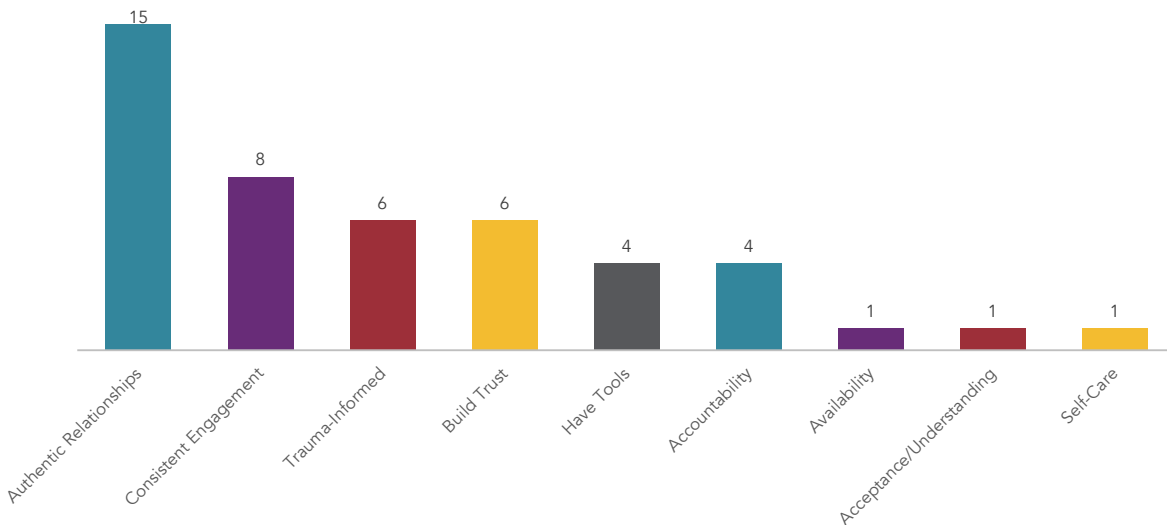
Staff Perspective

When asked, "What are the characteristics you think families want and/or need to have in an employment counselor?", staff perspectives aligned with participant values and needs. Staff emphasized the need for showing empathy and building trust, as well as the need to be knowledgeable about available resources:

"Someone who's non-judgmental, empathetic, and willing to listen and hear their story. A lot of participants are isolated and don't have an outlet. A good listener, someone who communicates, calls them back, answers emails. Financial workers are overwhelmed. With new participants, once you have a relationship with them, we have to be persistent in leaving messages to let them know that we really care."

"Someone who is caring and genuine. You have to build trust. People come in guarded. We (the EC) can tell them where we're from, share some shared lived experience."

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"Clients dealing with SED in their kids, I tell them part of my story, like my son, who is deaf and hard of hearing, he's an adult now, and he's in his 30s, he can cope with a hearing aid and sign language. He would act out in the school, but there wasn't support for that. Now, when clients are talking about their kids acting out, when they have experienced loss, we can share our own stories."

Staff mentions of what is important about the relationship they build with families:

Category	Mentions
Authentic Relationships	15
Consistent Engagement	8
Trauma-Informed	6
Build Trust	6
Have Tools	4
Accountability	4
Availability	1
Acceptance/Understanding	1
Self-Care	1

"We wear many, many hats, not judgmental. I have people who can't fill out housing applications, or have severe mental health issues . . . to give them resource upon resource, to be knowledgeable about how to get things done. Be resourceful."

"I agree too. It's helping people show up in their own life. Whether that's coaching, supporting, or whatever. Equipping them with the tools to be strong in overcoming a lot of the barriers that they may face. Encouraging them to take on tasks that they were too afraid to do. Supporting them in areas that they didn't even think that they had in them."

The importance of the ability of ECs to understand the real challenges and barriers faced by participants and how they consume both time and the mental bandwidth for individuals experiencing them. Both the need for and the challenges of accommodating that in the employment counseling process is highlighted by these data. It also speaks to the nature of the work, how success is measured, and the balance needed in service approaches for meeting the range of family needs at given points in time. Helping a family become stable when there are so many challenges, both internal (e.g. past and current trauma, domestic violence, mental health, doubts about self-belief, ability to follow through while experiencing crushing stressors) and external (systemic racism, income inequality, extreme shortage of affordable housing, benefits policies that often work against family stability) is a bigger job than the title "Employment Counselor" would imply.

"I would say that I see my role as an employment counselor being much greater than 'helping a client find a job.' Some days, I see myself as a therapist. Others, a social worker. I also see myself as a teacher and navigator. I wear many hats to ensure that my clients receive the resources they need to succeed. The most important aspect of what I do is simply being kind and empathetic. When you are kind and open-minded, you can help your client a great deal by simply listening to their needs."

– Employment Counselor

POLICY AND PROGRAM ISSUES

Advocating within the county system

Responding to shortfalls in other departments, many staff felt they helped families most right now by advocating for them within their own systems for basic support, taking up time that should be focused on employment and education.

"Financial workers don't respond to ECs, they are so far behind. It takes six weeks or longer for their application to be approved. It can take three or four months for applications to be approved. Childcare applications take four to five months. We're giving financial and childcare information before we even get to anything else. We end up spending way too much time on that and it's a barrier to what we are trying to do."

"Another barrier that has arisen is that there are so many different ways for the form to get to the financial workers. They can drop it off, use online portals, scan it in, email . . . if they get lost, or delayed, or pages don't get processed, that delays their benefits. If they don't get their benefits, then their rent is late, then they are hit with all these fees. A lot of people have been on assistance for years and they feel like they are providing information for years, but it's never the right information, or what is needed."

Addressing the delay in childcare benefits

"It would be great if the housing stability division could come up with a rapid cash-on-hand program for families while housing and benefits get going. We'd love to see a bridging fund for when childcare is not available so families can go to work."

Staff input into policy changes and decisions

"We see a lot of planning and decisions being made without frontline staff participation. We need to be there as we know the realities."

Caseloads

There was consensus among ECs both at the county and at contracted agencies that the caseload is too high to provide the stabilization and workforce development services that are needed. We did not gather objective records of caseload expectations and there are a wide range of variables that contribute to the discussion on caseloads that was not fully reviewed in this phase of engagement. Workplace turnover and workforce shortages can temporarily increase caseload size and service delivery expectations, which can be very challenging for employees and management as well as for participants.

"Caseloads are fairly large, they see their work as not in-depth case management, so they structure the caseloads as such. But they end up having to be relational. With four employment counselors, 90-100, with about 40 minutes per case. You can use 40 minutes to listen to their story."

"I don't have a set number, but in order to be effective, we need to be able to reach out at least twice a month if not more. My goal is to reach out twice a day, but what is substantive takes more time."

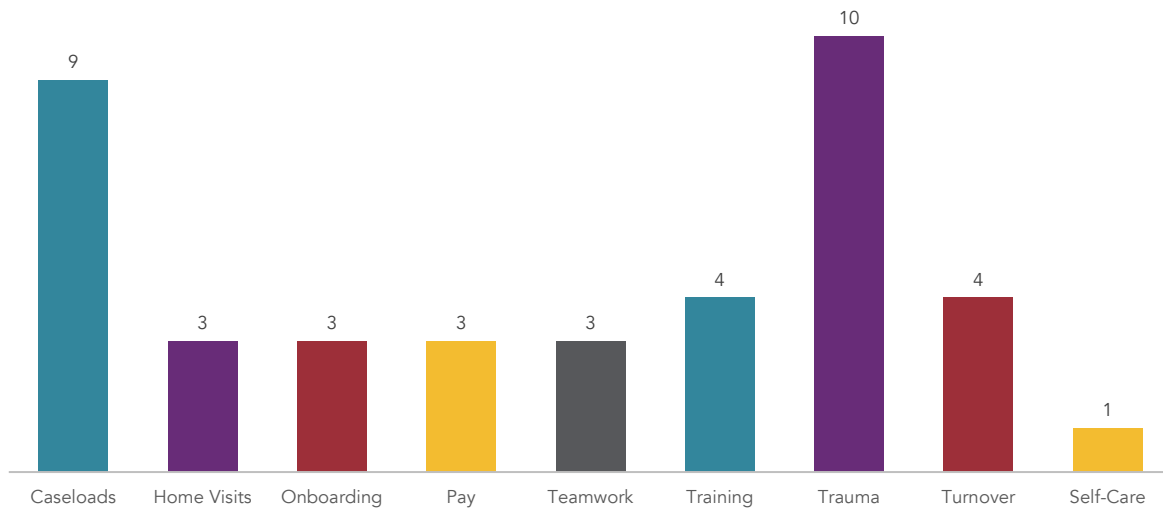*"Ideal [caseload] would be 40, plus new referrals could be 45."*

"Mathematica recommended 40-50 cases per EC for the impact needed for participants to have Motivational Interviewing, EGC (Employment Guidance Counselor) recommendations."

"We are constantly bombarded with communication. They are calling, texting, emails, etc. You want to respond, but it is a lot to case-note. Trying to document everything is difficult. I like to get things done, but I had to be ok with not getting things finished."

"We have slightly lower enrollment than usual. Working with 70-80 people is not sustainable. The caseload right now is about 60 per worker, 60 is manageable. We've heard of agencies going up to 120. We think 30-40 is ideal to really help people, that amount of individual support and case management that can be provided at 20 people. We had a pilot person for navigation, and she was able to really achieve the outcomes."

"Right now, between 60-70 is caseload. When you consider the number of meetings you have and the number of extra things that we do, there is barely enough time to give each participant an hour of engagement time per month, along with case-noting or processing referrals, etc. You have to be very efficient."

Top Staff Issues

Caseloads	Home Visits	Onboarding	Pay	Teamwork	Training	Trauma	Turnover	Self-Care
9	3	3	3	3	4	10	4	1

Training: Trauma and Secondary Trauma

Many staff mentioned the need for a better understanding of trauma and how to work effectively with people who have been through significant trauma, as well as recognizing the effects of secondary trauma on themselves and their co-workers.

"I feel that the training helped me understand my own role as an employment counselor, but not for the other hats that we wear as employment counselors if that makes sense. I feel that trainings on topics like MI, Secondary Trauma, Conflict Management, and courses of this nature would have been helpful because as an employment counselor, you occasionally hear traumatic stories and help clients who are sad, angry, or feeling other strong emotions."

"Repetitive documentation can be re-traumatizing for clients. How long has it been since you've been . . . "

"People don't want to keep revisiting the trauma. People won't ever get an OFP because of reluctance to deal with police."

"We asked the county for more training on domestic violence. We deal with family violence at least a couple of times a week."

"Secondary trauma training was very valuable."

"Some training on trauma has taken place, but more would be useful, as well as secondary trauma. To connect with child support, with school age kids."

"Sometimes we don't know what our triggers are. A trigger can easily backfire on the family. I've seen that happen several times. Let's get that addressed. Who could help get that addressed?"

"We have spent a lot of time learning about how we can help ourselves when we are not ready to help others. We cannot pretend that it is easy to do what we do. To hear that story, and then go into another meeting. Are you taking time off, what is your trigger, are you addressing that when you are working with people, so we can have those conversations, relationships with our coworkers."

"We used to hear more about executive functioning skills, and it would be nice to hear more about that. Sometimes human services professionals don't have the skills to recognize trauma."

Some comments touched on the relationship between staff training and participant experience:

"We don't have a 'Welcome to MFIP' that's easy for clients to read, that goes over the basics: How to get SNAP. I work a lot with Ramsey County Public Health. Even within the county there are silos. As a worker, I have to work to learn about programs. All the contractors have a different overview of what MFIP is. Ramsey County is very hands off. Trainings aren't unified. Some agencies are a lot bigger than others, smaller agencies have the resources to create more training resources. For example, training videos with a sample employment plan. We lose a lot of institutional knowledge when people leave."

Current employment counselor support services aren't designed to address past and current trauma directly and explicitly as a barrier to employment, although each agency has a Domestic Violence specialist. Many counselors are developing the kind of trust with families that creates that safe space where trauma can be shared, at least up to a point. However, this is not consistently sought after, or consistent training provided across all contracted agencies and in-house training. Training is made available twice each year, and plans are underway to provide additional training on family violence and cultural responsiveness. Some contracted agencies are more explicit about providing trauma-informed services than others and have done in-house training.

When people "have unaddressed or unrecognized behavioral health issues and don't get time to work on their own sense of well-being to acknowledge their emotions and learn to manage them or develop a sense of their own goals, as opposed to goals of the employment and training program, they won't perform well on the job."[1]

Many public benefits recipients have experienced significant trauma:

According to researchers, more than 35% of the TANF participants in their study reported four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), compared to 6.2% in a large-scale study of patients in the Kaiser Permanente healthcare system.

Rates of exposure to substance abuse, parental absence, and abuse were particularly elevated. In addition, these researchers found that most TANF participants in their study had experienced community violence, reporting that *"60% of participants reported being slapped, punched, or hit by someone, 30% reported they had been beaten up or mugged, and [more than] 17% reported being attacked or stabbed with a knife. Additionally, witnessing violence was also prevalent, as 86% heard [the] sound of gunfire near their homes, 65% saw a seriously wounded person after an incident of violence, and 27% had seen someone killed."*

Other studies have demonstrated similarly higher ACE scores among the TANF population compared to the general population.

Source: un, J., Patel, F., Kirzner, R., Newton-Famous, N., Owens, C., Welles, S. L., & Chilton, M. (2016). The Building Wealth and Health Network: methods and baseline characteristics from a randomized controlled trial for families with young children participating in temporary assistance for needy families (TANF). BMC public health, 16, 583. doi:10.1186/s12889-016-3233-4

Next Steps

- **Acknowledge and account for the complexity of the Employment Counselors' work in addressing barriers and stabilizing individuals.**
- **Consider a Career Pathways "On-Ramp" lens in program design and development:**

> *"Career pathways, including pathway on-ramp programs, require key community organizations such as employers, government agencies, community-based organizations, school systems, and post-secondary institutions in sustained partnership. Practitioners need to be supported to move from a program model, with referral processes or transactional partnerships, to a multisector partnership model in order to achieve the ultimate goal: increased educational and economic mobility for disparately impacted populations."*

The Center for Post-Secondary and Academic Success (www.clasp.org) published a policy brief in 2017 entitled "Defining On-Ramps" to Adult Career Pathways. Through interviews with various MN providers, a survey, and a research review, they defined three critical service components that align with the findings in this report:

1. **Stabilization and Supportive Services** – to diminish crisis for individuals and to connect individuals to resources and opportunities

2. **Integrated Education & Training** – to build foundational, employment, and occupational skills contextually and simultaneously

3. **Employment, Retention, and Re-Engagement** – to gain work experience, remain connected to work, and re-engage in further education and training

These services aren't conceived of as sequential or hierarchical but are driven by person-centered program design. Critically, these services should be designed with enough transition overlap to support individuals as they move forward. Employment Counselors and program participants alike acknowledge that **stabilization and support services are critical to participant success. Currently, the Employment Counselors work with participants extensively to help them access these services. This shows that the community groundwork is in place for further integration of services.** If it is possible within the funding constraints, consider a system that recognizes this as a part of their role and

measures this as part of the successful outcomes of their work. Without formal systemic linkages and recognition of the important work that goes on to connect participants to housing, financial services, childcare, and behavioral health care, there is a structural misalignment.

Integrated education and training include academic, career and employability skills, and direct workforce preparation. The following framework may be helpful in further evaluation of the strengths and gaps in the current system:

Type of Service:	Examples:
Academic, Career, Employability Skills	effective communication, learning strategies, academic language & skills, numeracy, critical thinking, self-management, development of future pathways, navigating systems, college and career readiness standards, contextualized English language learning
Workforce Preparation	activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in (a) utilizing resources; (b) using information; (c) working with others; (d) understanding systems; (e) skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of post-secondary education or training, or employment; and (f) other employability skills that increase an individual's preparation for the workforce
Resiliency Competencies	critical thinking, adaptability, self-awareness, reflective learning, collaboration
Work-based Training	on-the-job training, customized training, incumbent worker training, registered apprenticeship, and transitional jobs
Workforce Training	May include: (i) occupational skills training; (ii) on-the-job training; (iii) incumbent worker training; (iv) programs that combine workplace training with related instruction; (v) training programs operated by the private sector; (vi) skill upgrading and retraining; (vii) entrepreneurial training; (viii) transitional jobs; (ix) job readiness training provided in combination with services; (x) adult education and literacy activities, including activities of English language acquisition and integrated education and training programs, provided concurrently or in combination with services described in any of clauses (i) through (vii); and (xi); customized training conducted with a commitment by an employer or group of employers to employ an individual upon successful completion of the training

Type of Service:	Examples:
Recognized Postsecondary Credential	a credential consisting of an industry-recognized certificate or certification, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship, a license recognized by the State involved or the Federal government, or an associate or baccalaureate degree
Coaching	motivational coaching, resiliency support, cultural training

(The Center for Post-secondary and Economic Success at CLASP developed this table)[1]

Acknowledge and address the role of trauma in program participant decision-making and executive functioning:

- **Consider integrating a trauma-specific screening tool, such as the ACEs questionnaire or a similar tool, into the enrollment process**, and implement a protocol for employees to employ when trauma experiences are identified. This may include outside referrals to behavioral health providers or other services. These steps would provide an opportunity to identify triggers that may exist for individuals engaged with the system and offer necessary support to help address any symptoms.

- **Provide trauma training for Employment Counselors that address trauma, toxic stress, and related behaviors and health outcomes.** Help individuals who work directly with clients to understand the effects of poverty and trauma on decision-making and executive function, for example: that disengagement or avoidance may not indicate a lack of motivation but rather may be the brain's response to a new or scary situation. This training would provide staff with resources and tools to better interact with individuals who may have experienced trauma and lived with toxic stress and provide a roadmap to avoid re-traumatization.

- **Consider utilizing a trauma-informed organizational assessment** to assess the workplace and the principles applied in working with program participants that can help determine training needs and organizational changes that will inform and influence policies, practices, training, and implementation.

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[1] https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Minnesota-Career-Pathways-On-Ramps.pdf

Appendix

FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTRO – confidentiality, won't affect your benefits, how information will be used . . .

Hello and welcome! First, we want to thank you for being here and sharing your thoughts with us today. Everyone is busy, so we appreciate you taking the time. We are consultants from the company Strategic Consulting and Coaching. We are partnering with Ramsey County Workforce Solutions to help gather feedback from people who have or have had help from Ramsey County with looking for jobs or education.

We'll be recording the session, as well as taking notes, but our records will not include your name. We'll just use your first name in conversation today. We're looking for the themes and ideas that come out of these sessions, especially those that are shared by more than one person, and that's what we'll be reporting back to Ramsey County about. We will create a summary report that won't include any names. They will use the information to help them improve their services. Anything you say will not be connected to you personally. Your input will be kept private and confidential. It won't affect the status or nature of your program, benefits or any other county-related support you receive- in any way. Are there any questions about that?

Participant Questions

FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW: ICEBREAKER

1. What's most important to you in life right now? (Faith, family, learning, community, children, health…)
2. Say a little about yourself (where are you from, how do you identify?)

YOUR WISHES AND GOALS

These first three questions are about your wishes and goals. We're asking about that because your vision of your future is important and understanding it can help Ramsey County do a better job helping you get there.

3. How do you imagine or wish your life to be like, five years from now?

   - What kind of housing will you have?

   - What would be very important to you? (a job, a degree, healthy family members, time spent with family, a business, etc.)

   - What kind of job will you and/or others in your family have?

   - How will things be for other members of your family (children, spouse, extended family)?

4. What do you see as your next steps to moving closer to what you wish for?

5. What gets in the way of you moving forward on your next steps? What kind of support would help you to take those next steps?

YOUR RELATIONSHIP AND EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICES AND BENEFITS

1. Tell me about a time when you felt good about the relationship you had with your employment counselor? What made it work?

2. Tell me about a time when the relationship with an employment counselor wasn't good, or you had problems with getting what you needed. What happened?

3. When you've been in a place where you needed help, we know that help often comes with rules, requirements, and expectations. How have these rules and requirements affected you?

4. OPTIONAL: (if time) Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you were making progress toward your education and/or employment goals? What were the high points? What set you back? What was it? How did you cope with it? Did others help you? What kind of help was the most important?

5. Have you ever turned down a higher paying job or more hours because you would lose housing or other benefits and it wouldn't be worth it?

For Service Providers

INTRO: Hello and welcome! First, we want to thank you for being here and sharing your thoughts with us today. Everyone is busy, so we appreciate you taking the time. We are consultants from the company Strategic Consulting and Coaching. We are partnering with Ramsey County Workforce Solutions to help gather feedback from staff and participants about the MFIP Workforce program, specifically around families' vision for their future, and how that is being supported.

We'll be recording the session, as well as taking notes, but our records will not include your name. We'll just use your first name in conversation today. We're looking for the themes and ideas that come out of these sessions, especially those that come from more than one person, and that's what we'll be reporting back to Ramsey County about. We will create a summary report that won't include any names.

Ramsey County staff will use the information to help them improve their contracting and their services. If it makes sense, Ramsey County may share the findings from this work with state or federal staff or policy makers to advocate for changes. Anything you say will not be connected to you personally or to your organization by name. Your input will be kept private and confidential. It won't affect the status or nature of your employment or your contract. Are there any questions about that?

How long have you worked with families on MFIP providing employment services?

- Less than 12 months
- One to three years (COVID/post COVID)
- Four to eight years (Pre-COVID)
- Nine years or more

What age group are you working with? What's the unique benefit of the YAP program?

YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILIES' EXPERIENCES

1. What do you believe is most important for families to make progress?
2. When you ask families about education and employment aspirations what do you hear?
   - What jumps out when you think about that? Any themes?
   - Have you seen this change over time?

3. What are the ways you support those aspirations?
4. What do you think are the barriers to families fulfilling their aspirations?
   - Have those changed over time?
   - Benefit cliffs?

5. What are the characteristics you think families want or need to have in an employment counselor?

YOUR PERCEPTIONS ABOUT YOUR ROLE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND THE PROGRAM

1. In general, how do you see your role?

   ■ What's the most important aspect of what you do?

2. What kind of relationship do you work to build with families? How do you go about that?

3. Tell me about a time when you had to make a tough decision about sanctioning a participant. What was your thought process? What was the end-result? How did it affect your relationship with them?

4. Has the training you have had prepared you adequately for your role?

   ■ What training would be useful to you going forward?

5. When it comes to referrals or linkages that you think families may need, what gaps are you finding?

6. Is there anything else that you believe is important that we haven't asked you about when it comes to your role with families?