

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

INFORMATION FOR EVALUATORS, PROGRAM LEADERS, AND POLICYMAKERS

Universal Engagement in Practice: Lessons from the Implementation of the Pathways Case Management System

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THE PATHWAYS CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Pathways Case Management System (Pathways) is a set of protocols and other tools intended to help welfare office staff support cash-assistance recipients in the transition to employment. Pathways was launched in 1995, a year before the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act (PRWORA), by Project Match, a non-profit research and service organization in Chicago. Pathways is based on the belief that all recipients can participate in activities that will help them improve their life circumstances, that they should be required to do so, and that, through this experience, they will eventually become as self-sufficient as possible, given their circumstances. This philosophy, often referred to as “universal engagement,” is central to most recent proposals to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Over the past 10 years, Pathways has been implemented in 22 sites across the country. One welfare office in Chicago served as an “incubator,” and implementation in multiple offices in New York State provided Project Match with an opportunity to refine the system such that it would make regular contact between case managers and recipients feasible. This brief is based on Mathematica Policy Research’s study of the implementation of Pathways in three counties—two in New York State and one in California. The brief offers insight not only into what might be required to achieve universal engagement but also into how Pathways and other case management systems might become a more effective means through which states and local welfare offices could achieve higher work participation rates.

The Impetus for Pathways

Pathways grew out of Project Match’s 10-year experience as the operator of a community-based employment program for disadvantaged adults in a large housing project in Chicago. Through careful analysis of the welfare and employment histories of its clients, Project Match learned that the transition from welfare to work is “a process, not an event.”¹ Individuals appeared to cycle between

welfare and work over an extended period of time, as opposed to taking a one-time, final step to long-term stable employment. Project Match also learned two other lessons from its experience as a service provider for welfare recipients: (1) many of these individuals—especially those deemed “hard-to-serve”—would need ongoing support and guidance if they were to make a lasting transition from welfare to work, and (2) many individuals failed in traditional welfare-based employment programs not because they did not have the potential to succeed, but because they did not have the skills (e.g., time management, problem solving, commu-

¹ Toby Herr and Robert Halpern with Aimee Conrad, *Changing What Counts: Rethinking the Journey Out of Welfare* (Chicago: Project Match, 1991).

nication) to succeed. Through this experience, Project Match staff developed “the incremental ladder to self-sufficiency,”² a framework consisting of a continuum of activities that would support the transition to work by helping recipients to first build basic competencies in “lower-rung activities” critical to long-term success and then to augment these skills, step by step, on the ascent to self-sufficiency.

The Pathways Approach to Case Management

The Pathways approach to case management is underpinned by the belief that all welfare recipients are capable of making progress toward self-support and that they should be held accountable for doing so. In practical terms, this means making it *feasible for all recipients* to participate fully in a self-sufficiency plan geared toward improving their circumstances. Pathways addresses this challenge not only by offering recipients a broad range of work and work-related activities, but also by setting expectations for achievement that are commensurate with each recipient’s circumstances. In contrast, many welfare employment programs or case management systems set identical or similar expectations for all welfare recipients. Pathways also recognizes the importance of helping recipients to identify, and staff to support, small successes. In addition, sustained progress towards self-sufficiency is fostered via monthly contact between welfare office staff and clients, and through monthly review and updating of the Pathways self-sufficiency plan.

The Pathways Toolkit

The Pathways Toolkit was created by Project Match for welfare agency administration and staff seeking to encourage all recipients to participate in activities that would improve their chances of becoming self-sufficient. The toolkit details how Pathways should operate by explaining the procedures for the following activities, which form the core of the program.

- **The monthly group meeting** is where the substantive work of Pathways is conducted. In addition to making it feasible for case managers to see every person on their caseload face to face each month,

the meeting provides a forum for collective problem-solving, peer support, and service coordination. Each month, all welfare recipients assigned to Pathways attend the meeting, which is led by a “facilitation team” of two to three staff from community welfare and employment services agencies. Groups typically consist of 10 to 15 recipients who reflect either a general cross section of the welfare caseload or a sector of the caseload defined, for example, by age or employment status. During the meeting, every recipient has an opportunity to review his or her accomplishments from the previous month and to identify goals and plan activities for the upcoming month. The amount of information shared is left to the discretion of recipients, and the facilitators try to make sure each individual has enough time to cover any and all issues.

- **The activity diary** guides recipients and staff in developing the monthly self-sufficiency plan. For recipients, it not only details their commitments for the month but also makes them accountable for meeting these commitments. For staff, it provides a consistent format for tracking activities. The diary includes a list of more than 100 activities, both traditional and nontraditional, that recipients may include in their monthly self-sufficiency plan. Some typical traditional work activities are job search, work experience, and subsidized employment programs. Nontraditional activities are volunteering, attending parenting classes, or participating in support groups, to name a few examples. Together, the two types of activities are intended to provide the broadest possible set of options for moving toward self-support. To help recipients succeed from the start, the diary breaks down program activities into small steps that can be achieved in a short period of time (e.g., identifying a GED class; registering for a GED class; attending GED class; taking the GED exam).
- **Case reviews and debriefings** have several functions. They provide an opportunity for facilitation teams to prepare for the group meeting, review the progress made in previous meetings, and plan follow-up activities. Staff meet before and after monthly group meetings to update and discuss the status of each recipient. These meetings are intended to generate new ideas for helping recipients set

² Herr and Halpern, 1991.

KEY FEATURES OF THE PATHWAYS APPROACH TO CASE MANAGEMENT

Universal. Pathways is founded on the premise that welfare recipients can and should be required to engage in activities that will help them to become as self-sufficient as possible given their personal circumstances.

Mandatory. Pathways stresses the importance of holding recipients accountable for becoming self-supporting. For TANF recipients, Pathways encourages the use of sanctions or immediate case closure for a failure to participate.

Client-Centered. In the Pathways philosophy, participants are encouraged to chart their own course toward self-sufficiency, taking into account any requirements that are imposed upon them and may therefore be out of their control.

Strengths-Based. Pathways staff are trained to help participants to identify and build on their strengths. However, if shortcomings get in the way, staff encourage and help recipients to seek solutions to the problem.

Holistic. Pathways staff are encouraged to take into account the economic and personal circumstances of the whole family when helping recipients to develop self-sufficiency plans. Pathways acknowledges and supports the important role parents play in helping their children to live healthy and productive lives.

Incremental. Pathways recognizes the importance of helping recipients to identify, and staff to support, the achievement of small steps toward self-sufficiency. A key tenet of the Pathways approach is that parenting and community volunteer activities can be used to teach healthy workplace behaviors such as punctuality, communication, problem-solving, and basic interpersonal skills.

Flexible. Pathways acknowledges that each welfare recipient faces a different set of circumstances and has a different set of skills and resources, internal as well as external. Recipients are therefore encouraged to identify program activities that are consistent with their personal situation, abilities, and goals.

Dynamic. Pathways believes that to be meaningful, self-sufficiency plans must be reviewed and updated monthly. Anything less fails to address a recipient's unique and changing circumstances. In addition, plans that are intended to be in effect for a long period often do not break down program goals and activities into manageable steps.

Supportive. Pathways emphasizes the importance of providing consistent and ongoing support to welfare recipients as they achieve their goals, experience challenges and setbacks, and make the transition into employment. Frequent and consistent recognition for small successes, a practice that is central to Pathways, is intended to make recipients more confident about their ability to make progress towards self-support.

and meet their goals; they are also intended to encourage and support cross-agency collaboration and consultation.

- **The automated tracking system** monitors program participation and progress toward the goals in the self-sufficiency plan. In addition to helping recipients gauge their own progress, this feedback may be used by Pathways staff to plan the group meetings and provides input to welfare offices in terms of evaluating Pathways, and making policy and program planning decisions.

Using Pathways to Encourage Program Participation

Pathways was designed to encourage universal participation in work or work-related activities. While some sites have used it with this purpose in mind, others have used it for a smaller subset of the TANF caseload. For example, while one of the New York counties implemented Pathways so that every recipient of cash assistance (including those who are exempt from participating in work activities) would have contact with his or her case manager each month, the other

county used Pathways to augment its individual case management system for families who were more work ready. Both counties made participation in Pathways an eligibility requirement for cash assistance, making it possible for eligibility staff to close the cases of recipients who did not participate in the monthly case management meetings. The California county used Pathways primarily to encourage participation among recipients who did not appear to be making progress toward self-sufficiency. This group of individuals included some recipients participating in education or training activities and some who were sanctioned for not participating in required work activities. For families who were already sanctioned, additional penalties could not be imposed for not attending Pathways group meetings.

Accomplishments

To date, Pathways has been implemented in many different settings and has made several noteworthy accomplishments. This success speaks to the usefulness of the group meetings and the activity diary and to the conceptual framework underlying the full case management system.

- **Providing case management services in a group makes it administratively feasible for eligibility or case management staff to see all cash assistance recipients every month, especially when staff resources are limited.** Although the Pathways group meetings take far more time to implement than most administrators originally anticipated, the group format makes it administratively feasible for case managers to make face-to-face contact with all recipients every month.³ For

³ Project Match staff recommend that three staff facilitate each group and that 15 minutes be allotted for each participant to present his or her accomplishments and to develop a new plan. With 12 recipients assigned to a group, staff spend an average of one hour per recipient on direct Pathways-related activities per month; this is more time than they originally anticipated spending on Pathways.

instance, because groups are held at the same time every month, the administrative resources needed to schedule the meetings are minimal. In addition, scheduling appointments for groups instead of individuals reduces the disruptions caused by recipients who do not show up for scheduled appointments.

- **The Pathways groups provide a forum in which recipients can share personal and family challenges and successes, and receive information on a broader range of employment**

resources than they would receive from agency staff alone. Participants in the Pathways groups often share a great deal of information about their personal and family challenges. Agency staff, especially those primarily responsible for eligibility determination, are typically not familiar with the

full range of resources or strategies that might help recipients address these issues. On the other hand, other participants, many of whom are experiencing or have experienced similar situations, are eager to provide information on such resources and strategies. The Pathways groups also provide a support network for recipients in other ways. For some, the groups provide the only source of positive social interaction and public recognition for their accomplishments. This peer-to-peer dialogue has another advantage as well: staff report that they know more about their clients' lives than they would if they saw them only individually.

- **The broad range of activities in the activity diary recognizes the importance of taking small steps toward self-sufficiency and encourages recipients and Pathways staff to include these activities in the monthly plan.** Pathways participants' monthly Pathways plans often include activities (especially related to child care and personal or family challenges) beyond what is commonly included in TANF self-sufficiency plans. This expanded list of acceptable activities sends a message to participants about the value of such activities relative to personal and family goals.

- **Facilitation teams composed of welfare and employment services staff foster collaboration between the two.** The Pathways groups often bring staff together who typically work separately. The advantages of this arrangement are twofold: it gives each facilitator a feel for the other's role in his or her agency and an opportunity to learn about key agency policies and procedures that affect the recipients they serve. And to the extent that two or three heads are better than one, the team approach allows the facilitators to brainstorm about the best way to help recipients make progress toward self-sufficiency.

- **Imposing consequences for nonparticipation appears to encourage a high level of participation in Pathways groups.**

In the New York counties, welfare recipients are required to attend monthly Pathways groups as a condition of eligibility for cash assistance. In both counties, the Pathways groups are very well attended, and most recipients arrive on time and stay for the entire meeting (which sometimes runs as long as three hours). In contrast, Pathways groups were not well attended in the California county, where eligibility staff could not use additional sanctions or the possibility of a case closure to encourage participation.

Implementation Challenges

The Pathways designers envisioned the system as a catalyst that would change the way welfare offices approach the task of providing employment services to welfare recipients. However, it became apparent in all three sites that the whole system is more than the sum of its parts in that even when Pathways staff followed the toolkit procedures, the *overall* approach to providing case management and employment services did not always reflect key Pathways principles. The crux of the problem is that Pathways staff were unable to reconcile the system's individualized approach to case planning with the state requirement that recipients would be placed in a standard set of job search and employment activities to ensure that they would meet federal work participation require-

ments. Weak case management skills among program staff exacerbated this problem. Additionally, the tracking system never provided the intended support to the program.

- **Pathways has not always been well integrated into the TANF welfare-to-work system, which frustrated and confused staff and clients alike.**

The study sites have felt significant pressure to place recipients in activities that would count toward the federal work participation rate. For example, New York State requires all nonexempt recipients to participate in a work-experience program if they do not find paid employment within a specified period of time. As a result, Pathways participants have two plans, a self-

sufficiency plan that identifies federally countable activities and a monthly Pathways plan that usually includes a broader range of activities intended to both foster parenting skills and to address other personal and family challenges. In addition, recipients can be sanctioned for not complying with their self-sufficiency plans, but the same is not true for noncompliance with the Pathways plan. To further complicate the issue, TANF recipients' cases could be closed for failing to attend a Pathways meeting but not for continued noncompliance with their TANF self-sufficiency plan. California, on the other hand, does not require recipients to participate in a work-experience program until they have received assistance for 24 months. Before then, participation in job-search and other work-related activities is preferred, but the state encourages placement in alternative activities such as substance abuse treatment and education as well as training for recipients who have not found paid employment. Because Pathways in California is targeted only to recipients not actively participating in traditional program activities, it was expected that participants would be placed in a broad range of activities—even if only as the means to resolving personal and family issues so they could begin participating in activities that would count toward the federal work participation requirement.

"If welfare and employment workers could break down welfare recipients' long-term goals into discrete tasks that build on one another—like good teachers and coaches do—we'd see more recipients make progress."

— Toby Herr, *Pathways Founder*

- **Only the most skilled staff have been able to effectively use the Pathways toolkit to develop plans that both address the circumstances unique to each participant and aim to move them toward self-sufficiency.** The Pathways group facilitators in all three sites follow the meeting structure suggested by Project Match. However, in the two New York counties, where eligibility workers and employment-services technicians serve as facilitators, the groups have been implemented very mechanically. For instance, plans often remain the same from month to month and vary little with individual circumstances. Both staff and participants have expressed frustration with the program—the former because participants have made little progress toward self-sufficiency, and the latter because they feel as if they have gone through the same exercise month after month without seeing any appreciable change in their circumstances. In the California county, however, where the groups have often been facilitated by educators and welfare eligibility staff, the monthly plans are much more individualized, and Pathways staff devote much more time to helping recipients identify not only their goals but also realistic steps to achieve them.

- **Because the Pathways tracking system has been cumbersome to use, it contributed little to the effective implementation of the program.** A number of issues related to the design of the Pathways tracking system have limited its usefulness, especially in the New York counties. The fact that it is a stand-alone system requires staff to input some information already entered in other data systems. In addition, the system does not capture the information counties need to monitor state and federal work participation requirements. It also relies on a database platform rarely used by public agencies. As a result of these limitations and competing demands for staff time, the tracking system was never fully implemented in New York. In the larger of the two New York counties there, staff entered information into the database only when they had time to do so. In the smaller county, information was reportedly entered regularly but never used for planning or monitoring purposes. The California county modified the Pathways

database to make it not only easier to use but more useful as well: it was integrated with existing databases and now provides information that is critical to monitoring program implementation. Once the changes were made, the database became an integral part of the entire Pathways system.

Lessons for Universal Engagement

Pathways was designed and implemented to engage all welfare recipients in activities that could help them to move as close as possible to self-sufficiency, given their individual circumstances. Toward this end, the system accounts for the diversity in the set of families who turn to the welfare system by supporting the use of self-sufficiency plans that reflect the strengths and limitations particular to each family. So while Pathways supports quick entry into the paid labor market for those who are job ready, it also encourages participation in activities like mental health counseling and alcohol and drug abuse treatment for families who need these supports to become job ready. As states move to engage a higher proportion of their TANF caseload in work and work-related activities, the Pathways experience offers important insight into what may be required to engage all TANF recipients in some type of productive activity. Key lessons include the following:

- **Effective individualized case planning requires highly skilled staff.** Effective individualized case planning requires staff who can (1) help recipients to identify their strengths and weaknesses, (2) facilitate the development of self-sufficiency plans that respond to recipients' needs and goals and also break goals down into achievable incremental tasks, and (3) monitor and encourage progress toward self-sufficiency. Many eligibility workers who have case management responsibilities or employment-services case managers lack one or more of these skills. The former do not typically have experience eliciting information about recipients' personal circumstances and are not comfortable doing so, and while the latter are more adept at assessing recipients' circumstances, they typically do not know how to use this information to develop an individualized plan that will promote self-sufficiency. Both often find it especially challenging to break down larger goals into

discrete tasks and to identify strategies for engaging recipients who are sanctioned for noncompliance or are not making progress toward self-sufficiency. To be successful, a universal engagement approach may need to include a greater investment in developing models for training staff to master the skills they need to help all TANF recipients move toward self-sufficiency.

- **Local and state TANF program administrators and line staff are unlikely to fully embrace the concept of an individualized plan if the program's or their own performance is tied to participation in a more narrowly defined set of work-related activities.**

Pathways was designed to provide line staff with the tools they needed to engage all TANF recipients, regardless of their circumstances, in activities that might help them to become self-sufficient.

However, in order to meet federal work participation requirements, staff also were instructed to place all recipients in a predetermined sequence of activities beginning with job search.

Because this emphasis on “countable” work activities is so strong, staff often fail to embrace or even to see the value of developing more-individualized plans. The current system also does not prompt case managers to think creatively about how to encourage and measure small steps towards self-sufficiency.

- **Monitoring program participation and outcomes is more complicated when a broad range of work-related activities is acceptable.** Because Pathways is based on the belief that some recipients will make the transition from welfare to work through a series of small steps over an extended period, traditional measures of program performance (employment placements and job retention) do not adequately capture all aspects of either individual or program success. Additional measures that might be of interest include the extent to which recipients participate in activities that they and their case managers agree on (regardless of whether they are “countable”); the time devoted to various types

of activities and whether participation in “lower rung” activities leads to success in the more traditional work-preparation activities. The Pathways experience suggests that the best approaches for monitoring this broader range of accomplishments will at the very least include updating existing automated systems or developing new systems that can be integrated into existing ones.

Pathways has made several important contributions to our understanding of what it will take to engage all TANF recipients in work or work-related activities. For instance, the activity diary provides a comprehensive list of activities in which TANF recipients might participate to build the competencies they need to succeed in the workplace. The Pathways groups make regular contact administratively feasible. The conceptual framework underlying Pathways and the

toolkit provide a strong foundation for working with TANF recipients to develop individualized self-sufficiency plans that can change as recipients' circumstances change.

Along with these successes, however, the sites that chose to implement Pathways encountered several challenges that

kept the program from realizing its full potential. States or local welfare offices that aim to engage all TANF recipients in productive activities that will increase their chances of finding employment are likely to encounter similar challenges. To increase the chances of success, welfare offices will most likely need to devote additional resources to staff training; they will also need to provide clear guidance on when it is appropriate to engage recipients in program activities other than those that count towards a state's federal work participation rate. As more states and local welfare offices implement innovative strategies to engage all TANF recipients in work and work-related activities, it will be important that they follow Project Match's lead in examining how these strategies play out in practice. This approach will allow states and local welfare offices to build on each others' successes and avoid each others' mistakes.

“You get to a point in life where you just stand still. You don't want to do anything. You don't want to go anywhere. Pathways helps you feel like you can't just be there. You have to move forward.”

— Pathways Participant

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This summary is based on a study of Pathways conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for Project Match. The larger purpose of the study was to provide Project Match with an independent assessment of the implementation of Pathways. Other goals included (1) examining how welfare offices use Pathways to both engage TANF recipients in program activities and monitor their progress, (2) identifying improvements to the Pathways implementation process such that the program goals would be more readily and more fully achieved, and (3) drawing lessons from the implementation of Pathways that might inform efforts to increase engagement in work and work-related activities. Data for the study were collected through interviews with TANF administrators, Pathways facilitators, focus groups with Pathways participants, observations of monthly groups meetings, and case reviews and debriefings. This study was made possible by the Annie E. Casey Foundation through a research grant to Project Match and also through one of the Foundation's Families Count awards, which Project Match received in 2000 in recognition of its work on behalf of poor families and children in the United States.

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