



# Issue BRIEF

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## Aligning Federal Performance Indicators Across Programs Promoting Self-Sufficiency: Local Perspectives









Discussions with a range of administrators, supervisors, and frontline staff across select programs in three locations shed light on four areas related to aligning federal performance indicators across programs promoting self-sufficiency:

- The match between the current set of federal performance indicators and program goals**  
 Local staff across the study programs generally agree that their programs share a common goal of improving self-sufficiency but the connection of their services to specific federal indicators, particularly those focused on employment, is varied.
- Local use of measures to inform program management and service delivery**  
 Local practices surrounding the collection and use of data in the three sites reflect the intentional use of indicators to track staff performance, client satisfaction and progress, and program performance that connect to the ultimate goals of federal measures.
- The challenges to aligning performance indicators or service delivery across programs**  
 Local staff view differences in program requirements and the inability to integrate or simply share data as critical challenges to coordinating services or aligning performance measures across programs.
- The opportunities for aligning performance indicators or service delivery across programs**  
 Respondents in all sites found that engaging staff at all levels is important in the development and ongoing use of data to inform service delivery and program performance. In addition, building staff relationships across programs makes a significant contribution to the ability to share information and coordinate services.

Individuals and families frequently qualify for multiple human services and employment programs that are funded, regulated, and administered by different federal agencies (Exhibit 1)—each with their own eligibility criteria, program requirements, and performance indicators. These programs often share similar goals in promoting employment and self-sufficiency, however, they differ in the populations they serve and the types of services

they provide that can lead to self-sufficiency. Implementation can also differ within programs and across programs based on the amount of discretion given to states and localities to design and carry out services within established federal guidelines. Nonetheless, recent steps have been taken at the federal level to align performance indicators across some programs, with the intent of aiding coordinated program management and service delivery approaches.

The EMPOWERED study, conducted on behalf of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the Department of Health and Human Services, examines the use of performance measures, work requirements and child support cooperation requirements across human services programs. This issue brief is based on three local case studies and provides local perspectives on challenges and opportunities for aligning performance indicators across a variety of federal programs promoting self-sufficiency.

	 Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs	 AEFLA	 FSS	 Jobs Plus	 SNAP E&T	 TANF	 VR	 Youth Program
<b>Federal administering agency</b>	DOL	ED	HUD	HUD	USDA FNS	HHS	ED	DOL
<b>Target population</b>	All adults age 18 and older with priority to low-income individuals	Individuals age 16 and older not enrolled in secondary education and lacking mastery of adult basic education skills	Public housing residents	Public housing residents	SNAP recipients between the ages of 16 and 59	Low-income parents	Individuals with disabilities	Low-income out-of-school youth, ages 16–24 and in-school youth, ages 14–24

**Exhibit 1. Programs across federal agencies that promote self-sufficiency and employment included in the study**

The programs of interest included in this study are: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS), Jobs Plus, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, WIOA Title I Youth Program, WIOA Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) program, and WIOA Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program.

Performance measurement is intended to track and improve program accountability and management, ultimately focusing on outcomes for the population served. For performance indicators to inform policy, program management, and service delivery at each level of government, they should be structured to meet the needs and purposes of each level. This study explores the extent to which aligned performance measurement might achieve accountability across programs that share similar goals and maximize efficiencies in program management and service coordination.

This brief provides a summary of site visits conducted in three selected locations. We

selected the sites based on their innovative practices around performance indicators, data use, and coordinated services. The sites differed in the programs of focus (Exhibit 2); only select programs among the eight study programs were the subject of the visit to each of the three locations. The selection of programs for each location was based on information gathered and recommendations received through earlier study activities. Each case study consisted of discussions with local program administrators, program managers, and frontline and data staff from the targeted programs in each site. A team of two research staff conducted each visit in October 2018.

Site	AEFLA	FSS	Jobs Plus	SNAP E&T	TANF	WIOA Adult and DW	WIOA Youth
Site 1	X			X	X	X	X
Site 2			X			X	X
Site 3		X			X		

**Exhibit 2. Select programs of focus in each of three site visit locations<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>We were unable to meet with Vocational Rehabilitation staff at the local level.

Discussions with local staff during these visits covered topics such as the data elements their program collects and with what frequency, the metrics that are most useful in their day-to-day work, whether targets tied to performance indicators are included in staff performance goals, perceptions of what program metrics would best capture goals for program participants, and the degree of service coordination or indicators alignment that exists

across programs. From these discussions, themes around four areas developed: (1) the match between the current set of federal performance indicators and program goals, (2) local use of measures to inform program management and service delivery, (3) the challenges to aligning performance indicators or service delivery across programs, and (4) the opportunities for aligning performance indicators or service delivery across programs.

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## THE MATCH OF FEDERAL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS TO PROGRAM GOALS

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### Programs with aligned federal WIOA performance indicators.

Five of the eight study programs share common federal performance indicators established under WIOA that focus on employment and self-sufficiency: WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker, WIOA Youth, SNAP E&T, AEFLA, and VR. The WIOA indicators include three primary indicators of employment: (1) the percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program, (2) the percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program, and (3) median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program. Two additional WIOA indicators measure credential attainment and skills gains among program participants as shorter-term outcomes, and a sixth indicator measures program effectiveness in serving employers.

Some local staff expressed concern that the underreporting of program participant characteristics after initial intake may have implications for the ability to revise state targets for the WIOA federal indicators based on local economic conditions and the characteristics of program participants.

**Local staff across these programs generally agree that their programs share a common goal of improving self-sufficiency and that performance indicators focused on employment can help capture this progress.** All local staff, however, view the federal indicators that focus on employment and earnings as longer-term outcomes for clients. Few local staff—aside from program administrators—pay close attention on a regular basis to their performance on the federally required indicators that capture longer-term employment outcomes. Rather than attending to the data collected several quarters after their clients have completed their program, local staff involved with program participants on a regular basis pay attention to the federal indicators that are observable in the short term, such as credential attainment and, particularly in AEFLA, measurable skills gains.

**Staff at various levels across the programs agree with the importance of measuring success through employment and earnings indicators, but they question the completeness and accuracy of the data used to track, report, set, and adjust the federal indicators.** Based on discussions with

staff, data on employment and earnings outcomes after program completion can be difficult to obtain, and the methods to do so are inconsistent across the study programs. Programs rely on employment data matching to sources such as Unemployment Insurance wage records or state- or national-level new hires or supplemental wage records, but local staff sometimes need to track down program participants to collect information directly when data are incomplete. Local staff appreciated the data matching to state or national employment data, explaining that independently verifiable data can better produce valid and comparable information than staff follow-up efforts. These staff also explained that following up with clients multiple quarters after exit is difficult, as clients often change their contact information. They noted two challenges with data matching nonetheless: (1) setting up the infrastructure required for accessing the information can be difficult, and (2) data matching may be incomplete or inaccurate for clients who do not provide a valid Social Security number. Staff cautioned that making comparisons across programs or geographic areas on these metrics may not be reliable if there is inconsistency in the quality of the data based on how the data are collected or by whom.

**Staff reported that state WIOA program data systems do not capture client barriers and other characteristics after screening for program eligibility, which may have implications for the establishment of performance targets based on these factors.** Frontline staff of the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs record participant characteristics—such as the presence of a disability, experience with domestic violence, or a criminal record—during the initial assessment for services in state WIOA data systems. Clients, however, often do not disclose this type of sensitive information until they have established a baseline of trust with a program staff member, which may not occur during the initial assessment. When a client discloses barriers to employment after intake, staff report that they document them in case notes, but the information does not get updated in the participant characteristics captured electronically at eligibility. This practice is a mixture of policy guidance that staff have received as well as limitations to add or alter information in the intake and eligibility screens of the data systems.

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## Programs with their own federal performance indicators

The three remaining programs—TANF, FSS, and Jobs Plus—do not share the federal WIOA primary indicators of performance. Staff from these programs focus on reaching their own program's performance indicators and are mixed in the degree to which (if at all) they have considered the usefulness in aligning indicators with other programs serving similar populations. There is variation even within each of these programs regarding the goals they emphasize at the state or local level. The findings reflect only those of the perspectives of the programs in the sites we visited.

**Local TANF staff focus on employment and self-sufficiency as the ultimate goals for program participants.** They emphasize these goals over the prevailing federal indicators of the Work Participation Rate (WPR). In one site, this happens with little thought given to the potential for shared performance indicators with other programs. The second site took a more intentional approach to align performance indicators across programs.

**In both sites, local TANF staff viewed the WPR as an administrative function rather than a measure of program or client success or a means of guiding program delivery.** In one site, staff focus instead on indicators established and required by the state that they find to be more relevant for promoting employment and self-sufficiency. These indicators include reason for case closure; employment support receipt, such as transportation or child care assistance; timeliness of enrollment in work activities, participation in activities, and compliance with the work program requirement; and participation in an activity for those exempt from work program requirements. In the other site, staff focus on the timing of engagement in the TANF work program, the development of work experience sites, and client engagement in work or work experience (as part of meeting the WPR). In this site, the TANF work program measures program and client success based on the same county-developed employment indicators of wage at job entry and six-month sustained employment rate as the SNAP E&T and WIOA programs.

**The housing programs used the federal performance indicators for their programs as a part of a broader effort to collect and understand outcomes for their residents' families.** Although FSS and Jobs Plus do not share any measures between them, both are considered self-sufficiency programs with a strong emphasis on long-term employment and financial independence. In the study sites, staff of both programs take a holistic and long-term approach to supporting families with the ultimate goal of improving the well-being and economic mobility of the children. While they work to improve the self-sufficiency and employment of adults, staff in the study sites reported a primary focus on improving the likelihood that the children can break the cycle of poverty through supports and services that start early and are sustained.

Staff from the housing programs do not see a need to align their indicators with other human services programs because of differences in program goals and service delivery. Local staff perceive their programs as independent systems within public housing that offer a range of services and supports to meet the short- and long-term needs of residents without coordinating with other programs that may work with individuals or families for a shorter period of time. Staff of the housing programs in the two study sites are wary of a short-term focus on the employability of adults as the focal outcome. They perceive that housing is an essential support for families and children that can be provided long-term to promote stability for the family.

## USE OF MEASURES TO INFORM LOCAL LEVEL PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND SERVICE DELIVERY

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The individual programs selected for each case study site are avid users of information and data to inform resource management and service delivery. The local programs build a framework of measures that connect fine-grained indicators that inform service delivery up to the high-level employment and earnings outcomes defined by federal performance indicators to gauge success for their program participants, staff, and programs. Local practices surrounding the collection and use of data in the three

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sites reflect the intentional use of indicators to track staff performance, client satisfaction and progress, and program performance that connect to the ultimate goals of federal measures. These practices include:

- Staff of the WIOA, SNAP E&T, and AEFLA programs agree that the WIOA indicators focused on employment and earnings are good longer-term outcomes for their program participants, but they report that these distal outcomes do not necessarily drive program performance at the local level. Local administrators and frontline staff across the programs and sites recognize the role that federal performance indicators play in focusing programs on accountability and, for most programs, on client outcomes. However, they prefer to use more short-term indicators to inform program management and improvement. For example, one site uses rate of job placement, wage at job entry, and the sustained employment rate at three and six months to gauge yearly performance of the WIOA, TANF, and SNAP E&T programs. Only the six-month sustained employment rate corresponds to the federal WIOA indicators. The site developed these measures, with broad input from staff, to reflect information that would be useful and relevant in guiding performance and improvement.
- In TANF, local programs go further than federal indicators toward the use of outcome measures for clients to drive program performance. As mentioned above, one site aligns TANF client outcomes for job placement and earnings at job entry with those of other programs. In the other site, case managers review information on employment and wages of their clients to assess the quality of the job placement and whether they need to work with the client on developing a longer-term strategy toward self-sufficiency.
- FSS and Jobs Plus, similar to other programs included in this study, use performance indicators that closely align with how they have defined success for their participants, in addition to the federal program requirements. In one site, program staff collected information for site-specific indicators of

short-term progress (such as attending wellness events) as well as the short- and long-term federal performance indicators.

**For all programs, the local sites drill further down to define process indicators to track and inform regular decisions and practices around service delivery.**

Local staff—administrators, supervisors, and frontline—use these measures to continually gauge what they are doing and how well they are doing it. The process indicators tend to capture similar concepts, although they are defined differently across programs within sites and across sites for the same programs based on fit to local context for program administration, data, and service delivery structures. These indicators generally capture information on how many clients are served (such as enrolled in WIOA intensive services, placed in a TANF or SNAP E&T work activity, or enrolled in an AEFLA class), how timely the services or progression of services occur (as indicators of customer service or client engagement), and what services are provided and how well resources are being used (such as visits to a resource center or the balance of cases across frontline workers).

**Different levels of staff use information differently and to a varying extent, but staff at all levels report using data to inform their individual role within the program to help achieve success for the program and its participants.**

For example, administrators use indicators to manage resources for services and report progress to their funding agency and, at one site, the public. Supervisors use indicators to manage caseloads across frontline staff and gauge staff performance, reviewing data for staff evaluations (such as number of enrollments, indicators of client contact or engagement, or number or type of services provided). Frontline staff use certain indicators to target and improve services to clients and, often, to coordinate across programs. Staff performance goals for most programs across the sites are generally connected just to process indicators (such as client enrollment, engagement, or services provided), but WIOA programs often reflect both process and outcome indicators that tie the role of individual staff to program success.

In one site, staff have a dashboard that allows them to see the services clients receive from other programs to better help them coordinate service delivery and avoid duplication.

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## CHALLENGES TO ALIGNING PERFORMANCE MEASURES OR SERVICE DELIVERY

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Across the three sites, local staff identified differences in program requirements and problems with data sharing as the two most significant challenges to aligning performance measures or service delivery.

**Local staff view differences in program requirements as a challenge to coordinating how they administer and deliver programs that focus on shared goals and serve similar populations.** Programs are often required to define similar concepts in different ways based on federal program guidance. For example, staff across programs reported that the federal WIOA indicators track sustained employment by whether clients are employed in the second and fourth quarters after exit, the Jobs Plus program tracks the number of participants continuously employed for 90 and 180 days, and the FSS program tracks whether an individual achieves 12 months of continuous full-time employment with no lapses. Although each measures sustained employment, the inconsistency in the way the term is defined across programs inhibits alignment and consolidation into a common indicator.

In addition, program requirements for clients often do not align and can make it difficult to build connections with other programs. Local staff report that TANF requirements, in particular, can inhibit alignment or coordination with other programs. A respondent in one site gave the example that a TANF client may want to enroll in training supported by the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs in a high-demand industry that requires 25 to 30 hours per week, but the client must also complete a certain number of hours in a work experience placement (a countable work activity) to meet the TANF work participation rate requirement; at times, this may conflict with the training. The respondent noted that this friction between the TANF and WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker program requirements can affect services, as well as the ability to work across programs toward improved client outcomes.

**Local program staff also report that the inability to integrate or simply share data is a critical element that inhibits them from increasing service coordination or performance measure alignment across programs.**

The structure of services, reporting requirements to the state and federal levels, and confidentiality restrictions for different programs have resulted in the use of an array of data systems that are not connected at the local level. For example, local TANF staff in one site reported spending up to 80 percent of their time on data entry to meet program requirements. In another site, the TANF and SNAP E&T staff said they often have to enter the same data into three different systems to meet the requirements of their own program (TANF or SNAP E&T), the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs (for TANF or SNAP E&T clients who are co-enrolled with WIOA Title I programs) and the data-collection needs of the local department for performance measurement.

Confidentiality restrictions also prevent integrating systems and inhibit data sharing across programs. TANF and SNAP E&T data systems in the local study sites are independent from other program's systems because they are connected with eligibility information. Staff in one site noted that they use two different computers; one is a state computer with the eligibility and employment services data system for TANF and SNAP E&T and the other computer is used for the WIOA and county-level data system. Privacy barriers are especially stringent when any health-related data are required due to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 regulations. The lack of data integration creates redundancies in data entry and can inhibit the ability of frontline workers to see a client holistically and spend more time on service delivery.

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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALIGNING PERFORMANCE MEASURES OR SERVICE DELIVERY

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Local staff report willingness to devote time to data collection when they feel that it is purposeful for the program's mission, but they suggest that state and federal agencies need to do more to set up the infrastructure to facilitate coordinated service delivery and performance measurement. One method for strengthening this coordination is through shared policy-making or administrative structures at the state or local levels. In the absence of these shared structures, programs currently use their personal relationships to share information and align services to better serve clients and achieve good

One site has created common indicators across the WIOA, TANF and SNAP E&T programs for performance measurement at the local level despite the lack of data integration. The programs are housed in a large county department that has created its own data system in an attempt to track clients, at least to some degree, across an array of services. Nonetheless, county-level administrators must pull data from three separate systems to compile the data for an annual performance report and it does not reduce data entry.

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outcomes. Staff suggest that it would be beneficial to establish data-sharing agreements and shared systems at the federal level that could be used by states and localities. These types of changes need to occur at the federal level, either to adapt policy or to devote the necessary funding.

**Respondents in all sites found that engaging staff at all levels is important in the development and ongoing use of data to inform service delivery and program performance.**

Local staff support collecting information when they understand the need for data and their use in informing what they do. In one site where data-informed decision making permeates all levels of staff, program administrators have found that staff contribute to solutions. If staff understand the need to collect additional information to inform or expand the process indicators that guide service delivery or refine the outcome measures used across programs within the county department, they will contribute to creating new tools or ways of collecting them.

**Shared administrative structures at the local level facilitate alignment in both service coordination and performance measurement.**

In one site, funding for nearly all the programs of focus for this study flow through a single county department. The department has developed a program performance plan across its divisions and programs to gauge performance and be accountable to the public. This site also has greater ability to integrate program funding by co-locating services and using cost allocation to fund shared space, staff, and services. This site has created a results-based, data-driven culture across programs; has coordinated services; and has aligned a few key measures including employment entry, earnings, and sustained employment rates across the TANF, SNAP E&T, and WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker programs.

**In the absence of shared physical or data infrastructures, service coordination and information sharing is possible through established personal relationships between administrators and staff.**

Coordination across programs (housing and WIOA in one site, TANF and WIOA in another) occurs because of the relationships that administrators and staff have fostered over the years and the

shared culture they have developed to serve clients. Even in the site with co-located and aligned programs, the roadblocks of multiple data systems mean that sharing information, particularly for daily service coordination, remains highly dependent on staff relationships.

**FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS**

Based on information collected from three local sites, there could be greater opportunity to align high-level performance indicators, using the basis of the WIOA statutorily mandated indicators, by improving the consistency in the definition of indicators and the data collection practices with which to measure them across programs. Local staff from six of the eight study programs generally agreed with the federal focus on employment and earnings outcomes. These client outcomes are distal to each program's regular service delivery and some programs are more removed from these outcomes than others (such as AEFLA adult education services or TANF employment services). Nonetheless, local programs can build a series of indicators from fine-grained process measures to short-term client outcomes that can guide service delivery and program management in order to connect to the high-level federal performance measures.

The most significant challenges in building aligned performance measures and coordinated service delivery systems at the local level, based on staff reports, are program siloes at the state and federal levels that outline specific program and reporting requirements and create the need for distinct data systems. Based on information gathered through these local discussions, there appear to be opportunities for federal policy-makers and program administrators to revise and build the infrastructure that could support service coordination and performance measurement alignment across programs that promote employment and self-sufficiency for similar populations. Companion briefs from this study use the findings from these site visits, combined with findings from other data collection activities, to outline considerations for policymakers and actionable steps for program administrators and practitioners toward aligning federal performance indicators across programs that promote self-sufficiency.

Staff reported that they do not have resources at the local level to build integrated data systems; one site attempted this but had to abandon the effort because it was too ambitious. A number of programs also rely on Access databases or Excel spreadsheets specific to their location for data collection or to bridge the gap between multiple existing data systems.

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## Overview of data sources for the EMPOWERED performance measurement study

The EMPOWERED performance measurement study component explored perspectives and practices focused on the question of how performance measurement may achieve accountability across programs that share similar goals and support efficient program management and service coordination. To identify programs to include in the study, we reviewed human services and workforce programs that promote self-sufficiency and employment, serve low-income populations similar to those served by TANF, and rely on established performance indicators at the federal level. Data collection occurred between November 2017 and October 2018 and included these steps:

- A scan of publicly available documents describing human services and workforce programs and policies related to performance indicators to summarize information across programs
- Reviews of federal program administrative data
- Discussions with 29 national and federal stakeholders and 15 state program administrators in three states
- In-depth case studies of approaches to performance measurement across select programs in three localities

