

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED WITH COLORADO WORKS APPLICANTS AND PARTICIPANTS

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State of Colorado Department of Human Services

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September 10, 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	ES-1
A. Introduction	1
1. Study Background	1
2. Overview of Study Methods	2
B. Findings of Focus Group Participants on Key Topics Related to Receipt of Colorado Works.....	6
1. Topic #1: How Focus Group Participants Heard About Colorado Works and Why They Applied for Assistance	6
2. Topic #2: Views on the Colorado Works Application and Eligibility Determination Process	7
3. Topic #3: Views on Diversion	8
4. Topic #4: Views on Services Provided by Colorado Works Staff	9
5. Topic #5: Views on Services Received Through TANF Local Offices and Workforce Centers	11
6. Topic #6: Views on Work Participation Requirements and Time Limits	14
7. Topic #7: Views on Achieving Long-Term Self-Sufficiency	15
C. Study Conclusions and Implications	18
Appendix A: Discussion Guide	A-1
Appendix B: Participant Data Sheet.....	B-1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report – one of a series of “special topic” reports produced as part of a broader study of the Colorado Works program – summarizes the results of 15 focus groups conducted between December 2006 and March 2007 with a mixture of TANF applicants, current participants, and past recipients in four counties across the state: Denver, El Paso, Mesa, and Larimer Counties. The purposes of these focus group sessions – which were attended by a total of 78 current and past TANF participants – was to obtain direct input from participants concerning their experiences while receiving assistance and how participation in various services offered through the Colorado Works program may have (or have not) contributed to their long-term self-sufficiency.

Overview of Key Findings

- **Topic #1: How Focus Group Participants Heard About Colorado Works and Why They Applied for Assistance:** Most focus group participants first heard about Colorado Works from families or friends. Some participants had received TANF (or AFDC) before in Colorado or other states, and so were aware of the program from their prior experiences. In some instances, individuals initially came to a local office to apply for Food Stamps and/or Medicaid, but then learned more about TANF from an intake worker and decided to apply for it as well. In some instances, focus group participants indicated that they had been referred by case managers from other local human service providers in the community. Most focus group participants indicated that they originally applied for Colorado Works assistance out of financial need – most often, they had recently lost a job and could not find another one. Significant numbers of focus group participants also indicated that they had a health condition or other family circumstance that made it difficult to work (e.g., illness, disability, a child with special needs, or pregnancy).
- **Topic #2: Views on the Colorado Works Application and Eligibility Determination Process:** Most focus group participants indicated that completing the Colorado Works application form was relatively straightforward and undemanding – taking around 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Some focus group participants indicated that providing necessary documentation to support their applications was their main difficulty. With regard to the intake and eligibility process, some focus group participants observed that they had to endure lengthy waits in sometimes overly crowded waiting rooms when they came for their eligibility interviews and/or other meetings with their TANF case managers.

- **Topic #3: Views on Diversion:** Only a small number of participants in our focus groups had applied for or received diversion – so focus group participants generally did not have well-formed views about diversion. Many of the applicants and those already receiving TANF were unaware of diversion as an alternative to receipt of TANF benefits; some were vaguely aware of diversion, but had little specific knowledge of their potential eligibility for diversion or what it would entail to receive a one-time payment under this program option. Several participants indicated the need for TANF workers to be more knowledgeable about diversion and to better inform applicants about the diversion process. The few individuals in the focus groups who had applied for or received diversion had somewhat mixed experiences. Several of these individuals indicated that the process of applying for diversion had been drawn out over a month or longer. Several indicated disappointment that their requests were denied and were unsure why they had been denied.

- **Topic #4: Views on Services Provided by Colorado Works Staff:** Opinions of focus group participants were mixed about the quality and timeliness of services delivered by Colorado Works Staff. Many participants felt their case managers were knowledgeable about the range of services available and worked closely with the participants to assist them in navigating the system and tailoring services to meet their needs. There were, however, some focus group participants who leveled criticisms concerning the timeliness and quality of case manager services. Some areas of concern mentioned during focus groups included the following:
 - There was too much turnover in TANF case management staff – and as a result, TANF case managers lacked specific understanding of their caseloads and the individual circumstances of the families served.
 - Some characterized caseloads of case managers as too large – stretching case managers thin and making it difficult for them to be responsive to client inquiries and needs.
 - Some focus group participants complained that they could not easily reach their case managers by telephone – they mentioned that when they telephoned their case managers they usually ended up leaving a voice message and often did not receive a return call.
 - TANF offices and case managers seemed too lose their paperwork too often (especially Monthly Status Reports)

- Some characterized their TANF case managers as overly focused on work requirements – so much so, that case managers lost track of participants’ interests and limitations when planning services.
- **Topic #5: Views on Services Received Through TANF Local Offices and Workforce Centers:** Overall, TANF local offices were viewed as being generally easy to get to (located centrally and on major bus lines) and offering a breadth of services to facilitate transition from welfare receipt to employment. They noted that TANF case managers provided information and an access point to obtaining services, but it was also important for participants to be proactive in seeking the services they needed. Most observed that the system had a very strong emphasis – more so than in the past – on getting participants into jobs as soon as possible. Some participants felt that perhaps the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of emphasizing work versus being sensitive to special needs of participants (particularly those with disabilities) and providing the types of education/training that would promote long-term self-sufficiency. Participants greatly valued child care and health care coverage that came with their TANF benefits – and feared loss of these benefits once they had a job and left TANF. One source of frustration to focus group participants was loss of documentation and paperwork within local offices. Focus group participants generally did not have much to say about services received through the local Workforce Center. Orientation to Workforce Center services was generally regarded as helpful in terms of improving awareness of job listings and job readiness services available to assist participants in moving off of TANF. Some participants indicated that listings of job openings were of particular interest as they moved forward with job search.
- **Topic #6: Views on Work Participation Requirements and Time Limits:** Many focus group participants viewed work requirements as needed within the system to provide direction to service delivery, to hasten recipients’ departure from the TANF caseload, and generally to keep TANF recipients from taking advantage of the system. Time limits were generally viewed as helping to keep the focus of case managers and participants on goals of securing a job and self-sufficiency, as well as underscoring the fact that TANF was intended to be temporary and short-term in nature. Some focus group participants – particularly those with a disability/illness or desire to receive training – viewed TANF (and case managers) as at times overly stressing work participation requirements and not attentive enough to personal circumstances of the participant.
- **Topic #7: Views on Achieving Long-Term Self-Sufficiency:** To become long-term self-sufficient, focus group participants felt they would need to earn well above minimum wage (in most instances, at least two times minimum wage, along with health care coverage for their families). There was some fear that

leaving Colorado Works could eventually result in loss of child care and health insurance coverage. While participants emphasized finding jobs that provided health insurance and other fringe benefits, they recognized that many of the jobs for which they would likely qualify did not provide such benefits. Two types of assistance identified as contributing to making the transition from Colorado Works to long-term self-sufficiency were: (1) help with overcoming employment barriers and securing a job; and (2) assistance with education and training to build job-related skills.

Study Conclusions

Across the four counties in which focus groups were conducted there was a considerable range of opinion – mostly positive, but some negative – on the services and assistance received through the Colorado Works program. Many of the current and former Colorado Works recipients expressed appreciation for the support they had received and indicated the assistance would help (or had already helped) them in making a transition from public assistance to long-term independence and self-sufficiency. Some focus group participants indicated that the work activities and training they had received while participating in Colorado Works had increased their self-esteem and better positioned them for securing an unsubsidized job. However, there was much concern that available jobs for which Colorado Works participants potentially could qualify would not provide the necessary wages and fringe benefits (especially health insurance and help offsetting the cost of child care) that would enable current (and former) Colorado Works participants to become truly self-sufficient. Further, some participants expressed concerns that under current mandates to meet work requirements and given limits on pursuing post-secondary education and degrees, that building marketable skills and credentials was still very much a challenge. Finally, focus group participants offered several suggestions for possible improvements to the Colorado Works program, such as a need for more emphasis on Colorado Works participants obtaining Associate (two-year) and/or attending training programs that led to certification (e.g., Certified Nursing Assistant) in higher paying occupations that are in high demand in their locality.

Findings from Focus Groups Conducted with Colorado Works Applicants and Participants

A. Introduction

1. Study Background

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) dramatically changed the nature of cash assistance, replacing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) programs with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. PRWORA placed limits on lifetime cash assistance provided by federal funds and imposed stricter work participation requirements on states. PRWORA also increased the flexibility states have to design their TANF programs, allowing for a great deal of variation in state programs. Colorado's TANF program, Colorado Works, is administered by the Colorado Works Division, Office of Self-Sufficiency, within the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). The state has a long tradition of local control of programs and, as a result, its 64 counties have considerable autonomy in the design and implementation of their Colorado Works programs. This level of county control is largely due to the diversity within the state, and ensures that local policies target the specific needs of residents.

CDHS has funded The Lewin Group and its partners – the University of Colorado at Denver and the Health Sciences Center (UCDHSC), The Johns Hopkins University's Institute for Policy Studies (JHU), and Capital Research Corporation (CRC) – to perform an in-depth study of the Colorado Works program. This evaluation effort, initiated in 2005, is aimed at providing administrators with information about program strategies and approaches being used in various counties that others might find useful for improving program implementation, performance, and outcomes. The study's design was developed by the Lewin team in consultation with CDHS officials and an Advisory Committee consisting of representatives of the counties and Colorado's advocacy community.

This report – one of a series of “special topic” reports produced as part of a broader study of the Colorado Works program – summarizes the results of a series of focus groups with Colorado Works applicants, current participants, and former participants.

2. Overview of Study Methods

A total of 15 focus groups were conducted between December 2006 and March 2007 with a mixture of Colorado Works applicants, current participants, and past recipients in four counties across the state: Denver, El Paso, Mesa, and Larimer Counties.² These four counties were selected based on several factors. First, the smallest of counties were eliminated from consideration because they served too few participants to be able to effectively form focus groups. Second, counties needed to be willing to sponsor focus groups and to assist with recruitment of participants. Third, among the remaining counties in the state, we aimed at including two large counties and two mid-sized counties, and, to the extent possible, some geographic spread across the state. This process resulted in the selection of two mid-sized counties – Larimer and Mesa Counties – and the two largest counties (in terms of Colorado Works caseload) – Denver and El Paso Counties.

A total of 78 individuals attended the focus groups (and individual interviews) across the four counties.³ Within each location we sought to recruit a variety of individuals served by the Colorado Works program, including: Colorado Works applicants, current Colorado Works recipients, long-term Colorado Works recipients, former recipients who had left the program for jobs and other reasons, and individuals who had applied for and/or received diversion (see Table 1 for details about the size and composition of the groups conducted in each locality). Discussions during focus groups were guided by a facilitator and tailored to the types of individuals attending each focus group. Several discussion guides that set out a series of open-ended questions for particular types of focus group participants were developed to help structure discussions during focus groups (see Appendix A), but because focus groups were often a mixture of new applicants and current and former participants, discussions were free-flowing and specific questions were directed to individuals or sub-groups within the focus groups. Each of the four counties provided assistance with recruitment, for example, putting up a sign-up sheet for individuals to volunteer for a focus group or requesting that individuals attending an orientation session or job readiness workshop attend the focus group. Each focus group participant was given a \$25 gift card for attending the focus group. Focus groups typically lasted about one hour. An audio tape was made of each focus group, and notes were taken of the session by both the facilitator and a note taker.⁴

² In addition, one-on-one interviews were conducted with four individuals who volunteered to be part of focus groups, but could not attend the focus groups at the time in which they were scheduled.

³ This includes 74 individuals who attended the 15 focus groups and four individuals who attended one-on-one interviews.

⁴ Only the facilitator and a notetaker attended each focus group; no county administrators or staff attended the focus groups.

TABLE 1:

**OVERVIEW OF THE NUMBER AND COMPOSITION OF FOCUS GROUPS
CONDUCTED IN THE FOUR COUNTIES**

Date	Location	Number of Groups Conducted/ Total Participants	Types of Individuals Attending Focus Groups				
			New Applicants	Current Recipients	Long-Term Recipients	Diversion Recipients	Former Recipients
1/17/07	Denver	2/5		X	X	X	
1/18/07	Denver	2/5			X	X	
1/22/07	Ft. Collins	2/13	X				
1/23/07	Loveland	2/8	X				
2/28/07	El Paso	2/6		X	X	X	X
3/01/07	El Paso	5/26	X	X	X	X	
3/14/07	Mesa	2/6		X	X	X	X
3/15/07	Mesa	2/9		X	X	X	X

Table 2 provides an overview of the number and characteristics of focus group participants based on information collected prior to each session (see Appendix B for a copy of the sheet used to collect background characteristics on each focus group participant). As shown in the table, the focus groups provided an opportunity to gain viewpoints from a fairly diverse group of TANF applicants and current/former TANF participants:

- **Gender** – focus group participants were overwhelmingly females (89 percent), but also included some males;
- **Age** – the average age of the focus group participants was 33, with participants ranging from 17 to 55 years of age; the majority of participants were between 22 and 40 years;
- **Ethnicity/Race** – a majority of focus group participants were white (59 percent), about one-third (30 percent) were Latino/Hispanic, and 13 percent were African American (though it should be noted that 14 participants did not indicate an ethnicity/race, and some that did, checked more than one category);
- **Marital Status** – about half (49 percent) of the focus group participants had never been married, 29 percent were separated or divorced, and 10 percent were married;
- **Number of Children** – all participants had one or more children (though two participants did not respond to this question); nearly half (45 percent) had one child and an additional fifth (21 percent) had two children; and
- **Education** – nearly half (46 percent) of focus group participants had completed high school or had a GED; an additional quarter had completed community college or specialized training (17 percent) or a four-year college degree (7 percent); and one-quarter had not completed high school (25 percent).

Overall, a smaller share of the focus group participants were never married relative to the Colorado Works caseload (49 percent of the focus group participants compared with 79 percent of the Colorado Works caseload) and a smaller share had three or more children (28 percent compared with 35 percent). Information on race and education were unavailable for the overall caseload.

TABLE 2:
DEMOGRAPHICS OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

CHARACTERISTICS	NUMBER	RELATIVE
		PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Male	8	11%
Female	68	89%
AGE		
<18	2	3%
18-21	9	12%
22-30	27	36%
31-40	20	26%
>40	18	24%
ETHNICITY/RACE		
White	45	59%
Latino/Hispanic	23	30%
African American	10	13%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	1%
Other	6	8%
No Response	14	18%
MARITAL STATUS		
Never Married	37	49%
Married	10	13%
Separated	13	17%
Divorced	16	21%
# OF CHILDREN		
≤One	35	46%
Two	18	24%
Three	16	21%
≥Four	5	7%
No Response	2	3%
EDUCATION		
<12 th Grade	19	25%
High School Diploma	16	21%
GED or Equivalent	19	25%
Community College/Trade or Specialized	13	17%
4-Year College	5	7%
Other	1	1%
No Response	3	4%

Source: Data is from a written questionnaire completed by focus group participants; participants could select more than one race/ethnicity code. A total of 76 of the 78 focus group participants completed questionnaires; percentages are based on 76 responses on each question (though in some instances, particularly with respect to race/ethnicity, some individuals did not provide a response)

B. Findings of Focus Group Participants on Key Topics Related to Receipt of Colorado Works

This section of the report highlights the views of focus group participants on a range of topics relating to their experiences with receipt of assistance and other services through the Colorado Works program. For example, it examines views of participants on the application and eligibility determination process, work participation requirements, diversion, interactions with local office staff and Workforce Centers, and how assistance received has helped participants move toward self-sufficiency. There was a considerable range of viewpoints expressed on each of the major topics covered below – we have tried to reflect both where there was a consensus and where perspectives of focus group participants diverged, as well as provide examples of perspectives and experiences of individuals involved in the Colorado Works programs.

1. Topic #1: How Focus Group Participants Heard About Colorado Works and Why They Applied for Assistance

Most focus group participants first heard about Colorado Works from families or friends. Some participants had received TANF (or AFDC) before in Colorado or other states, and so were aware of the program from their prior experiences. In some instances, individuals initially came to a local office to apply for Food Stamps and/or Medicaid, but then learned more about TANF from an intake worker and decided to apply for it as well. In some instances, focus group participants indicated that they had been referred by case managers from other local human service providers in the community.

Most focus group participants indicated that they originally applied for Colorado Works assistance out of financial need – most often, they had recently lost a job and could not find another one. Significant numbers of focus group participants also indicated that they had a health condition or other family circumstance that made it difficult to work (e.g., illness, disability, a child with special needs, or pregnancy). Many focus group participants indicated that they first came to a local office to apply for assistance as a temporary stop-gap to see them through a troubling time. At the time of their application, unless they (or someone within their family) had a major health ailment or disability, they typically anticipated that their stay on public assistance would be a short one and they would likely return to work within several months.

Some of the other reasons (other than employment- or disability-related problems) cited for applying for TANF – often cited in combination with one or more other reason – included: having a partner who could no longer work (because he or she was incarcerated or had a disability or illness); being recently separated or divorced; being a single parent coupled with receipt of little or no child support; needing subsidized child care; being unable to get or afford health insurance coverage; and lacking job-related skills or having a need for additional work experience and education/training to

enhance job prospects. Several examples illustrating reasons that focus group participants applied for Colorado Works are shown in Box 1.

Box 1: Examples of Reasons that Focus Group Participants Applied for TANF

- One focus group participant had recently lost her job cleaning houses – she was paid \$10.50 per hour while cleaning houses and \$5.15 per hour while driving between houses. She was fired from her job because her son was sick for a little over a week and she had missed work because she had to stay home with him.
- In his last job, a focus group participant earned \$18.50 per hour (with health benefits) in a construction-related job. He had been injured badly on the job and could no longer work. He had exhausted his Unemployment Insurance benefits, and he and his wife (who does not work) had spent through much of their savings and pension funds. At the time of the focus group he was almost fully healed, but because it was winter, felt it was unlikely that he would be able to find a job in the construction trades until the spring. Because he did not have a GED, he felt his job options were limited to securing another job within the construction industry.
- One focus group participant explained that illness was a major reason for her return to TANF: “My son and I became sick at the same time. I fell back into the system because we became ill at the same time.” She stated that her bills for prescription drugs were mounting (\$600 for her son and \$400 for her).
- One focus group participant stated that because of domestic violence she had left her home state quickly and come to Colorado with virtually nothing. She was in the process of changing her identify and applying for a new Social Security number. She needed TANF temporarily until she could get her new identify and find a job.

2. Topic #2: Views on the Colorado Works Application and Eligibility Determination Process

Focus group participants were asked about their experiences with TANF application process. Most focus group participants indicated that completing the Colorado Works application form was relatively straightforward and undemanding – taking around 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Some focus group participants indicated that providing necessary documentation to support their applications was their main difficulty and sometimes resulted in delays in completing all of the paperwork needed to submit their application for processing. Several focus group participants observed that personal circumstances prevented them from being able to provide the necessary supporting paperwork – for example, they had lost required documents as a result of eviction (or an episode of homelessness) or a domestic violence situation. With regard to the intake and eligibility process, some focus group participants observed that they had to endure lengthy waits in sometimes overly crowded waiting rooms when they came for their eligibility interviews and/or other meetings with their TANF case managers. Several examples of focus group participant views concerning the Colorado Works application/intake process are shown in Box 2.

Box 2: Examples of Views Concerning the Application Process

- Participants at one focus group viewed the initial intake process as reasonable and not time consuming (taking about 30-45 minutes with a technician), though several participants indicated that they waited over an hour for their initial intake interview in what was characterized as a crowded waiting area.
- A Spanish-speaking attendee at one focus group indicated she was having a difficult time understanding how the TANF program operated and was unsure about the various other types of assistance for which she might qualify. She had not yet seen program brochures/materials that explained program offerings and rules written in Spanish nor had she spoken with a Spanish-speaking staff member.
- One focus group participant did not understand why she had to go through the orientation/intake process and all of the paperwork associated with intake, when she had been through this process earlier in the year (when she had been denied TANF assistance). She felt going through orientation a second time in the same year was “ridiculous.”
- Several participants at one focus group complained that they endured lengthy waits (of 2 hours or more) when they had come for their initial intake interviews with TANF workers. Also, one participant noted that applicants should be told upfront about all of the extra meetings they will likely need to attend once they qualified for TANF benefits.

3. Topic #3: Views on Diversion

Only a small number of participants in our focus groups had applied for or received diversion – so focus group participants generally did not have well-formed views about diversion. Many of the applicants and those already receiving TANF were unaware of diversion as an alternative to receipt of TANF benefits; some were vaguely aware of diversion, but had little specific knowledge of their potential eligibility for diversion or what it would entail to receive a one-time payment under this program option. Several participants indicated the need for TANF workers to be more knowledgeable about diversion and to better inform applicants about the diversion process. The few individuals in the focus groups who had applied for or received diversion had somewhat mixed experiences. Several of these individuals indicated that the process of applying for diversion had been drawn out over a month or longer. Several indicated disappointment that their requests were denied and were unsure why they had been denied. Box 3 illustrates several focus group participant experiences with diversion.

Box 3: Examples of Views on Diversion

- There were five new TANF participants in one focus group who had not heard about diversion during the intake process. Several participants pointed out that TANF case managers needed to better explain diversion eligibility and requirements during the application process.
- One focus group participant wanted to apply for diversion to pay for a cosmetology license and rent. She had originally come to apply for diversion in September 2006, but there were delays in getting her application submitted and processed – it was finally filed in November 2006. She applied for diversion (rather than TANF) because she wanted to work, but felt she needed some financial assistance to support her in her efforts to return to work. Her TANF case manager told her that her diversion request would likely be approved. She waited anxiously to find out whether she had been approved for diversion – she called her case manager 5 or 6 times (only getting voice mail), but her calls were not returned. Finally, she received a call from her case manager indicating that her request had been denied. She filed for diversion again in January 2007 – a request that was still pending at the time of the focus group.
- One focus group participant who applied for diversion said she had been “put through hell,” only to be denied. Because her request for diversion had been denied, she had to move to another rental unit.
- One focus group participant indicated that this was his first encounter with the welfare system – he and his wife (and two children) had fallen on hard times after he quit his job to pursue another career opportunity. He was frustrated because he had paid taxes to support the welfare system for 30 years (during which time he worked) and now when he (and his family) needed help, he couldn’t seem to get it. He wanted to obtain diversion to pay for car insurance and new tires, but was denied – he indicated it was “like pulling teeth” to get \$411 to pay his car insurance.

4. Topic #4: Views on Services Provided by Colorado Works Staff

Opinions of focus group participants were mixed about the quality and timeliness of services delivered by Colorado Works staff. Many participants felt their case managers were knowledgeable about the range of services available and worked closely with the participants to assist them in navigating the system and tailoring services to meet their needs. There were, however, some focus group participants who leveled criticisms concerning the timeliness and quality of case manager services. Some areas of concern mentioned during focus groups included the following:

- There was too much turnover in TANF case management staff – and as a result, TANF case managers lacked specific understanding of their caseloads and the individual circumstances of the families served.
- Some characterized caseloads of case managers as too large – stretching case managers thin and making it difficult for them to be responsive to client inquiries and needs.
- Some focus group participants complained that they could not easily reach their case managers by telephone – they mentioned that when they telephoned their case managers they usually ended up leaving a voice message and often did not receive a return call.

- Some characterized their TANF case managers as overly focused on work requirements – so much so, that case managers lost track of participants’ interests and limitations when planning services. Sometimes, case managers did not seem to take into consideration a participant’s disability or need to care for other family members (especially a sick or disabled child).

Some focus group participants talked about leaving messages for their TANF workers’ voice mail and not hearing back for days – and all too often, not hearing back at all. For example, several focus group participants talked about being unable to reach their case managers to discuss receipt of notification of being cut off from services. When they could not get in touch with their case managers in a timely manner by telephone, they could not be sure of their status and, in some instances, indicated that inability to clarify their status (or lost paperwork) had resulted in what they felt to be an unwarranted partial or full loss of a month of benefits. Box 4 illustrates some specific challenges/issues that focus group participants cited with regard to their interactions with TANF case managers.

Finally, a number of focus group participants indicated that a cooperative relationship between TANF caseworkers and recipients can help to ensure that participants receive the range of services needed while receiving TANF to promote long-term self-sufficiency. The caseworkers are the “face” of the system and, as such, greatly affected the client’s experiences and activities undertaken while receiving TANF assistance. Many of the former TANF recipients who attended the focus groups indicated that they had had good, strong relationships with their case managers. Several focus group participants observed that being treated with respect is important, as many recipients enter the TANF system feeling embarrassed about their situations and needing to turn to a public agency for help. For example, several focus group participants said they had to swallow their pride when they applied for TANF. When focus group participants talked about “respect,” they indicated it was important for service providers and caseworkers to understand and be empathetic to their particular situation.

Box 4: Examples of Difficulties Experiences in Interacting with TANF Case Managers

- In one focus group where leavers were interviewed, they indicated their case manager had been very helpful; for example, according to one leaver: “I pretty much knew what I wanted to do but having a case manager made me follow through; it was the biggest help I could have asked for.” Some of these focus group participants still talked with their case managers even though they had terminated from TANF – for example, one leaver noted of her former case manager: “... she'll call and say how are things going? ...She comes up with ideas when I run out of ideas.”
- In another focus group, one participant observed: “I feel like they [TANF staff] are actually trying to help me. I feel like they care.”
- The biggest complaint – voiced by multiple participants in one focus group – was that case managers don't return their phone calls. For example, one focus group participant said that while TANF case managers put demands on you, they don't seem to take the trouble to return calls that are left on their voice mail. Several participants indicated that they nearly always got an answering machine when they called their case managers. For example, one focus group participant observed that if you called your case manager 10 times, without fail each time you would get the case manager's voice mail – and if you were lucky you might get one return call from the case manager. This participant noted that it is very frustrating when you don't know what is going on – especially with your benefits. She also indicated that it would be helpful if a case manager doesn't have an answer to your question that they would at least get back to you with a message that they were checking into the matter. Most participants in this focus group agreed that TANF case managers needed to improve communications with participants – in particular, that TANF case managers needed to answer their phones.
- One focus group participant observed: “You should have someone you can call and give your concern. There is a person at the call center, [but] they just take a message. .. they don't really know about the system or how it works. Maybe 3 out of 10 technicians will call you back.” Another noted: “My caseworker does not return phone calls until I go through her supervisor.”
- Another focus group participant noted that her biggest complaint is that her TANF case manager does not return her calls – for example, she left 12 or more telephone messages in one month and never had a single one returned.
- Two focus group participants mentioned there is a new system for contacting case managers – you call in and you leave a voice message for the caseworker. Then you have to wait 4 days. You are not allowed to call back during the 4 days. If you do not receive a call, you can call back after 4 days. If you call back on day 5, the call will be put on top priority. Then you have to wait another 4 days.

5. Topic #5: Views on Services Received Through TANF Local Offices and Workforce Centers

Overall, TANF local offices were viewed as being generally easy to get to (located centrally and on major bus lines) and offering a breadth of services to facilitate transition from welfare receipt to employment. Many focus group participants observed that there seemed to be a wide array of assistance and supportive services available through the Colorado Works system. They noted that TANF case managers provided information and an access point to obtaining services, but it was also important for participants to be proactive in seeking the services they felt they needed to make an effective transition from TANF to self-sufficiency. Most observed that the system had a very strong emphasis – more so than in the past – on getting participants into jobs as soon as possible. Some participants felt that perhaps the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of emphasizing work versus being sensitive to special

needs of participants (particularly those with disabilities) and providing the types of education/training that would promote long-term self-sufficiency. Participants greatly valued child care and health care coverage that came with their TANF benefits – and feared loss of these benefits once they had a job and left TANF.⁵

One source of frustration to focus group participants was loss of documentation and paperwork within local offices. Some focus group respondents talked about turning in required paperwork that their case managers later claimed was never received. When the topic of lost paperwork came up in the focus groups in response to questions about issues/challenges they had encountered in dealing with their local TANF office, focus group participants were not restrained in dispensing advice to other focus group participants about how to avoid this problem. Some of the advice included being sure to make photocopies of all documents prior to submitting paperwork to the local office, and then, following up with caseworkers to make sure required paperwork had been received. Focus group participants also indicated that local TANF offices and staff should take more care in making sure documents and other paperwork (particularly Monthly Status Reports) are not lost. In one focus group, for example, it was suggested that each case manager should have a mail box rather than one overall mail box into which all TANF participants submitted documents. Box 5 illustrates some of the comments focus group participants had with regard to lost paperwork.

⁵ With regard to Medicaid benefits, some concern was expressed that doctors and medical facilities were unwilling to accept Medicaid payments – limiting places where Medicaid beneficiaries could access services.

Box 5: Examples of Difficulties with Lost Paperwork and Possible Remedies

- Several participants in one focus group suggested that the agency needed to improve its mail routing system because too many Monthly Status Reports and other written correspondences get lost. In addition, when such correspondences or updates are received, TANF case managers need to enter data in a timely and accurate manner into the automated data system, so that TANF participants' benefits are not reduced or cancelled. A principal worry for some focus group participants is they will not find out about lost paperwork until their benefits have been stopped or reduced.
- One focus group participant recommended that each worker have his/her own (physical) mail box (rather than a single mail box for all case managers). This participant also indicated that it would also be good if case managers had e-mail addresses at which they could be contacted.
- One respondent talked about how he had to wait 5 days to resolve a paperwork issue. This made him miss his rent payment: "It's not hurting the adults as much as it's hurting the children."
- One focus group participant noted: "They've lost my paperwork like 3 times. I had to bring new copies of everything and after I did, then they found it. I always found it weird that people don't have mailboxes – there is one big mail basket for everyone's stuff."
- According to some participants in one focus group, caseworkers were quick to "bust you" and had zero tolerance for being late, for not checking all the boxes on a form, for being late turning in time sheet. For example, one participant stated his benefits were cut off because he didn't turn in paperwork he claimed he had never received in the mail: "You get a notice saying you're terminated...no warning...no call by phone with a heads up." Instead of being notified by mail, he would have liked the caseworker to notify him (by telephone) and ask him if he received the paperwork. He also felt it was a burden on the system to have people come to reapply after they had been mistakenly cut off.

Focus group participants generally did not have much to say about services received through the Workforce Center. Orientation to Workforce Center services was generally regarded as helpful in terms of improving awareness of job listings and job readiness services available to assist participants in moving off of TANF. Some participants indicated that listings of job openings were of particular interest as they moved forward with job search. Box 6 highlights experiences of focus group participants in interactions with local Workforce Centers.

Box 6: Views on Interaction with One-Stop Workforce Career Centers

- The job readiness club held at the local workforce center was well received by the four attendees at one focus group – for example, one participant indicated that she had learned something new each day and that what she had learned was practical and something that anyone could use.
- A focus group participant indicated that she had been disappointed in her dealing with the local Workforce Center because she was led to believe by a Workforce Center job developer that the employers she had been referred to for job openings were willing to hire felons. When she went to several job interviews as a result of the referrals provided by the Workforce Center, she found out that this was not the case. She indicated that she would not use this Workforce Center again.
- Focus group participants generally agreed that the orientation session they had just attended at the Workforce Center was helpful, but a little lengthy (at about four hours). Two participants said the presentation could have been quicker; another participant (who is a college graduate) indicated that the presentation seemed to be geared for those who have a low level of education. One focus group participant was impressed with the job listings in the Workforce Center's computer system – though when he checked into one particular job opening in which he was interested, he was disappointed to find that it had already been filled. He wondered whether this would be the case with other job listings in the system.

6. Topic #6: Views on Work Participation Requirements and Time Limits

Many focus group participants viewed work requirements as needed within the system to provide direction to service delivery, to hasten recipients' departure from the TANF caseload, and generally to keep TANF recipients from taking advantage of the system. Time limits were generally viewed as helping to keep the focus of case managers and participants on goals of securing a job and self-sufficiency, as well as underscoring the fact that TANF was intended to be temporary and short-term in nature. Some focus group participants – particularly those with a disability/illness or desire to receive training – viewed TANF (and case managers) as at times overly stressing work participation requirements and not attentive enough to personal circumstances of the participant. Some long-term TANF recipients who planned to apply for or already had submitted an application for Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Income (SSI/SSDI) observed that meeting work requirements under TANF could undermine their chances of qualifying for SSI/SSDI (see Box 7).

Box 7: Challenges to Meeting Work Requirements Because of Disability-Related Issues

- Two focus group participants who had applied for SSI/SSDI indicated that TANF case managers and the agency needed to recognize that pending applications for SSI/SSDI can be adversely affected if participants work too much. One participant who had been previously denied for SSI (and was currently re-applying) said the TANF case manager was constantly urging her to go to Vocation Rehabilitation (VR), to look for a job, and to take classes. This advice came despite her doctor's advice to limit activities and her lawyer's advice that she may be jeopardizing her chances of qualifying for SSI/SSDI benefits by participating in work activities.
- A current TANF recipient with a child with a disability said, "TANF is getting ready to sanction me because I can't [meet work requirement]... because my daughter is bed ridden. Since I can't do 40 hours they're going to take away my benefits and I'm pregnant."

Several focus group participants expressed concern there was not enough emphasis on training and upgrading skills in light of the need for participants to earn wages at a self-sustaining level (well in excess of minimum wage) to avoid long-term welfare dependency. A number of participants suggested that more hours of education/training should count toward meeting work participation requirements. Respondents in several focus groups stated that TANF workers needed to take personal situations more into account when determining work requirements for each participant. Several focus group participants indicated that meeting work requirements in some instances meant they had less time to devote to caring for their children and searching for a job. Box 8 illustrates some of the comments of focus group participants concerning work participation requirements and time limits.

Box 8: Additional Views on Work Participation Requirements and Time Limits

- One focus group participant who had been on AFDC about 10 years ago, indicated that the AFDC program had been much easier to get on and stay on than is the case today. She indicated that today they help you much more to get a job.
- Two individuals who had received assistance in the past in Colorado said that in comparison to the early 2000s, that the Colorado Works program seemed to offer a wider variety of assistance, but appeared to be stricter in terms of program rules – one focus group participant indicated that the TANF program no longer just gives you money and that it now makes you account for your time.
- Several participants in one focus group noted the strong emphasis that TANF case managers placed on finding a job and meeting work participation requirements. Some viewed requirements for work activities per month as overly ambitious and not adjusted in light of disabilities or special circumstances of the client. Several participants felt that TANF case managers were sometime oblivious to children’s disabilities/medical needs when requiring participants to meet work participation requirements.
- Several focus group participants did not think it was fair that TANF case managers were not counting training at the community college toward meeting work requirements. They felt that schooling would enhance chances of long-term self-sufficiency – yet, case managers were emphasizing immediate work and meeting work participation requirements.
- A housewife of 17 years (with five children) felt that her case manager’s emphasis on work was misplaced given her lack of prior work experience and work-related skills. She felt she needed training to find a job that would enable her to support herself and her kids. Her situation was further complicated because she had recently moved to the locality and was not familiar with the job market or employers.
- A TANF recipient indicated that she was sometimes gone from her home 12 hours a day because of time devoted to education, meeting community service requirements under TANF, and travel.
- Knowing that there is a five-year limit on receipt of TANF, one focus group participant said she wanted “to get off as soon as possible so that I have that available to me if I need it later.”

7. Topic #7: Views on Achieving Long-Term Self-Sufficiency

To become long-term self-sufficient, focus group participants felt they would need to earn well above minimum wage (in most instances, at least two times minimum wage, along with health care coverage for their families). There was some fear that leaving Colorado Works could eventually result in loss of child care and health insurance coverage. While participants emphasized finding jobs that provided health insurance and other fringe benefits, they recognized that many of the jobs for which they would likely qualify did not provide such benefits. Box 9 illustrates some comments by focus group participants concerning challenges to transitioning from Colorado Works to self-sufficiency. Two types of assistance identified as contributing to making the transition from Colorado Works to long-term self-sufficiency are discussed in greater detail below: (1) help with overcoming employment barriers and securing a job; and (2) assistance with education and training to build job-related skills.

Box 9: Views on What It Takes to Become Self-Sufficient

- One focus group participant estimated that she would need \$12-13/hr (with benefits) and child care to be self-sufficient. One complicating factor in terms of working is that her child sometimes has breathing problems.
- A number of focus group participants said that child care was essential to finding and keeping a job, but was also very costly. For example, one individual indicated that child care costs were \$140/week; another indicated she had to pay \$200/week because she had a toddler.
- All focus group participants in one group agreed that it was difficult to make ends meet as a single parent and that they would need more than a minimum wage job to achieve self sufficiency. For example, one participant made \$12.75 per hour – but felt this wage was not enough to live on. A particular problem was meeting the high cost of child care.

Help Overcoming Employment Barriers and Securing a Job. Securing a job was considered by many focus group participants to be the watershed event needed to leave TANF – and because of a variety of barriers they faced to securing a job, focus group participants indicated they needed help (from case managers and job developers) tailored to their special needs and circumstances to overcome substantial barriers to employment. The majority of TANF applicants indicated they had had difficulty in the past in securing and/or maintaining a job. Among the main challenges to employability cited by focus group participants were the following: lack of a high school or post-secondary degree/certification; having little or no past work experience; lack of relevant job-related skills; having an illness or disability (or a family member with a disabling condition); or having a felony or misdemeanor conviction. For example, some focus group participants stressed that having a disability or a child with a disability (especially for single parents) particularly complicated efforts to secure a job and meet TANF work requirements. Several focus group participants with disabilities said they were looking for a job they could do from home and that had flexible hours. Several respondents gave examples of employment situations that were sufficiently flexible to accommodate their special needs or those of their children (see Box 10). However, others within the focus groups stressed that it was next to impossible to find a job that could accommodate their disability.

Individuals who had a felony conviction indicated that it was similarly very difficult to find a job – and that they needed assistance from TANF and Workforce Center staff with identifying job openings at employers that would consider hiring ex-offenders. Ex-offenders (especially those with felony convictions) were often screened out by employers before they had a chance to present their credentials in a job interview, and with most employers conducting criminal background checks, it was risky for job applicants to try to conceal their ex-offender status (see Box 10).

Box 10: Examples of Challenges to Finding Work and Overcoming Barriers to Employment

- One focus group participant with a child with a disability said she was able to get a job (and leave TANF) as a bus driver because she was able to bring her child with her to work. She felt this flexibility allowed her to keep working and meet her child's needs.
- Another focus group participant had found a job as a handyman in the apartment complex. While he is not paid for his work, the apartment complex provides a rent-free apartment. This job offers the flexibility needed to be able to pick up his son at school when he has a seizure. The problem for this individual has been finding a job that will tolerate him leaving unexpectedly (sometimes twice a week) to pick up his son at school.
- In several focus groups, individuals convicted of a felony reported that they were sent to employers who would not hire individuals who had a criminal record. They wished the case worker had checked into the employer's hiring policies prior to sending them there. Several focus group participants talked about securing a job initially, only to be released after a criminal background check came back to the employer indicating a prior felony conviction.
- A focus group participant noted that her prison record made it hard for her to get a job in an environment she'd like (e.g. school cafeteria, senior center). As a result, she ended up working at shoe store when she could not get a culinary job. This was a disappointment to her and she felt to her TANF case manager.

Another special circumstance that was cited by a number of focus group participants as complicating job search efforts was domestic violence issues. For example, two domestic violence victims attending the focus groups were in the process of changing their identities which complicated their ability to search for work because they needed to first obtain a change of identity through the courts and then secure new identification documents required by employers during the application process.

One technique that some focus group participants singled out as helpful in terms of establishing a work history, gaining experience, and improving credentials during the job interview process was engaging in community work experience or volunteer work while receiving TANF. Several focus group participants indicated that their volunteer experiences had turned into jobs, when employers for whom they were volunteering discovered they were reliable workers and offered them a paying job. Other focus group participants noted that their volunteer experiences enabled them to build their resumes and provided valuable job references to help them in seeking paid work.

Assistance with Education and Training to Build Job-Related Skills. In all four counties in which focus groups were conducted, focus group respondents talked about the importance of gaining additional education and training qualifications – including at least a high school degree or GED, but preferably a post-secondary degree or certification. Several focus groups participants expressed interest in pursuing an associate or bachelor degrees to enhance their long-term employability and self-sufficiency. These individuals observed that TANF programs need to support single parents strongly in their efforts to obtain high school and post-secondary degrees – and provide the time and support needed for them to do so. Some of those who had been successful in leaving TANF for jobs indicated that undertaking additional education and training while receiving TANF had been a critical factor in enabling them to exit (and stay off) TANF. There were a few focus group participants who had not been able

to pursue education or training during an earlier episode of receiving TANF and they felt that their inability to secure a well-paying job and subsequent return to Colorado Works was at least in part attributable to not upgrading their job-related skills. These individuals felt the chance to pursue additional education and training while receiving benefits this time might allow them to obtain better paying jobs so that down the road so they would not have to rely upon TANF again. Education and training was viewed as important by focus group participants not only from the standpoint of helping to address basic education deficits and providing job-related skills, but also increasing an individual's sense of confidence and self-esteem (see Box 11).

Box 11: Participant Comments Regarding Education and Training

- Several participants in one focus group were interested in obtaining additional training, but were uncertain about the types of training that might be available and whether they would eventually undertake additional training. For example, one participant who lacked his GED planned to take the GED test to see if he could pass it, and if not, then planned to take GED preparation classes. He was interested in possibly undertaking additional training so he could qualify for jobs outside the construction industry, but at this point had no idea of the type of training he might undertake or if he would actually be able to enroll in training. His main focus was on getting a job that paid a decent wage.
- One focus group participant noted that by “going back to school and doing something for yourself, you get an incredible sense of empowerment and can get a job. Lots of single moms don't get to go to college.”
- One focus group participant, who at one point had been homeless, was able to be trained as a nursing assistant while on TANF. She now has a part-time job in that field. TANF was one piece that allowed her to go from homeless to working part-time in a field that pays well.
- In several focus groups, participants felt learning how to budget would help keep them from coming back to TANF. For example, according to one focus group participant: “Now that we're not receiving as much food stamps you don't know how to manage money and don't know how to plan for that. It's really scary.” Another participant said: “Now I'm going into job where I'm getting paid, but what if I don't budget well enough? I was never taught budgeting. . I don't want to run out of diapers.”

Finally, in several focus groups participants asked for education on how to better budget their finances. Interestingly, some focus group participants who were receiving TANF were unable to determine what they would need to earn to be able to leave TANF. Several focus group participants felt learning how to budget effectively and live within the constraints of what they earned was going to be a key to staying off of TANF in the future.

C. Study Conclusions and Implications

Across the four counties in which focus groups were conducted there was a considerable range of opinion – mostly positive, but some negative – on the services and assistance received through the Colorado Works program. Many of the current and former Colorado Works recipients expressed appreciation for the support they had received and indicated the assistance would help (or had already helped) them in making a transition from public assistance to long-term independence and self-

sufficiency. Some focus group participants indicated that the work activities and training they had received while participating in Colorado Works had increased their self-esteem and better positioned them for securing an unsubsidized job. However, there was much concern that available jobs for which Colorado Works participants potentially could qualify would not provide the necessary wages and fringe benefits (especially health insurance and help offsetting the cost of child care) that would enable current (and former) Colorado Works participants to become truly self-sufficient. Further, some participants expressed concerns that under current mandates to meet work requirements and given limits on pursuing post-secondary education and degrees, that building marketable skills and credentials was still very much a challenge.

Focus group participants recognized the fact that public assistance had changed substantially in recent years – offering temporary (time-limited) assistance and a comprehensive range of services targeted on individual needs, but clearly focused on getting welfare recipients into jobs as quickly as feasible and appropriate. While many saw opportunity for being better prepared to search for and find employment through their participation in the Colorado Works program, there were still substantial numbers of participants (particularly those with disabilities, limited education, or felony convictions) that were unsure about whether services provided under the Colorado Works program would be sufficient for them to overcome their particular barrier to finding (and keeping) a well-paying job. In addition to this central concern over their ability to overcome their particular circumstances and generate the kinds of income needed to sustain their families over the long haul, the focus group participants had a number of other key concerns about the way the Colorado Works program operated and, in some instances, suggestions for possible improvements:

- While there was much appreciation for the efforts of local office administrators and staff, an underlying frustration of considerable numbers of focus group participants was that they often experienced *difficulties reaching their case managers by telephone*. Usually when they did try to contact their case managers, they had to leave a voice mail message and too often they felt that this call was not returned in a timely manner (if at all). Focus group participants did not, however, have specific suggestions about how this situation could be rectified. One possibility would be to do a more systematic customer satisfaction study within local offices to determine the extent to which this is perceived by customers to be a problem and then develop procedures at the local office level to resolve the problem – for example, increasing awareness among case managers of this issue through staff training, reducing caseload sizes, and/or setting aside office hours each week for case managers to return calls.
- *Lost paperwork was a second issue* that came up in discussions with some participants. A particular source of concern and frustration is the loss of

Monthly Status Reports and other paperwork that has a particular effect on reduction or termination of benefits. The main suggestions that participants had in this area was that local offices give careful consideration to the routing of mail, perhaps establishing individual mailboxes for case managers, and that case managers check with participants to see if paperwork had been submitted before making decisions that potentially affect receipt of benefits.

- Some focus group participants had concerns that the pendulum had perhaps swung too far in the direction of enforcing *work participation requirements at the expense of participants receiving the types of education and training needed to boost chances of employability and long-term self-sufficiency*. Focus group participants indicated that in some cases the Colorado Works program went overboard in enforcing work requirements at the expense of participants building skills (through additional education and training) and having adequate time to spend with their families and children. Because of the need to earn at least twice (or more) the minimum wage to support a family and rapid changes in technology and skill requirements, focus group participants were in general agreement that it is important to enhance education and skill credentials while participants receive TANF. Some participants suggested a need for more emphasis on Colorado Works participants obtaining Associate (two-year) or higher degrees and/or attending training programs that led to certification (e.g., Certified Nursing Assistant) in higher paying occupations that are in high demand.
- Though diversion programs were active in all four counties in which focus groups were conducted, substantial numbers of focus group participants seemed *to be unaware of or have limited understanding of the potential for receiving a one-time diversion payment* in lieu of receiving TANF benefits. More details about how the diversion program works and who is appropriate for possible receipt of diversion could be provided at orientation sessions, by intake workers, over the Internet (at local office websites), and in documents made available at local offices.
- In all four counties in which focus groups were conducted, there were special populations that had barriers to gaining and maintaining employment. These participants expressed a *need for case managers with an expertise in understanding and overcoming barriers to employment for their special circumstances*. These populations included participants with a disability or a child with a disability, felons, domestic violence victims, and participants with little or no work history.
- Finally, some participants felt that the key to staying off of TANF was to find employment and *learn how to budget finances*. This suggestion came when we asked about self-sufficiency and staying off of TANF.

APPENDIX A:

DISCUSSION GUIDES

COLORADO WORKS EVALUATION

Focus Group Discussion Guide - Individuals Receiving Diversion

A. Introduction (2 minutes)

Thank you very much for taking time to join us here, today. We are hosting this focus group session to learn the views of individuals like you who received diversion payments through the Colorado Works Program [*or substitute other name the program uses in this site*] here in [*name county*]. We will be asking questions of all of you that get at why you decided to seek diversion assistance, how you have used your diversion payment, and what difference the payment made in your life.

My name is _____, and I'm a researcher with the Lewin Group. I will be leading the session today and my associate _____ will take notes during the discussion and may ask some questions too. Your presence, and the opinions, ideas, and feelings of *all of you* are important in a focus group. It is a way to learn what people think through group discussion, to find out what opinions and ideas you have in common, and where some of you may have different opinions.

From what we learn today, combined with other data we are collecting, we will be writing a report to the Colorado Department of Human Services. None of you will ever be quoted by name in that report, and nothing you say here will be repeated to your case managers or other program staff. Everything is kept strictly confidential.

The session today will last up to 90 minutes.

In a group interview like this it is very important that you express yourself openly. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in all your ideas and comments, both positive and negative, and you should feel free to respectfully disagree with one another when that is how you feel. Occasionally, I may ask how many of you agree with a statement one or two of you make.

B. Personal Introductions (3 minutes)

Let's go around the table and have each of you introduce yourself with your first name only and tell us how many children you have.

C. Receipt of Diversion and Participant Experiences (45 minutes)

1. How did you hear about the assistance available through the TANF program? What organization or agency referred you to the program?
2. How did you first hear about the possibility of receiving diversion as an option to receiving a monthly TANF benefit payment?
3. Had any of you received diversion in the past either in this county or another Colorado county?
4. What was appealing about diversion (versus receipt of a monthly TANF payment)? Why did you decide to apply for diversion?
5. Do you have any thoughts about the process of applying for diversion assistance? For example, was the process easy or difficult? If difficult, what did you find difficult or burdensome about the process?
6. What did you use the diversion assistance for (for example, purchase or repair a car, make a rental payment or deposit, to pay for equipment or work clothing, pay past due utilities)?
7. Beside diversion, were there other types of assistance you received from the through the TANF/CW program?
 - a. Did any of you receive help with finding or retaining a job? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?
 - b. Did any of you receive help with obtaining additional education or training? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?
 - c. Aside from your diversion payment, did any of you receive help obtaining supportive services, such as help with childcare, housing, transportation, clothing or food? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?
 - d. Did any of you receive help with improving parenting skills? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?
 - e. Did you receive other types of assistance, such as Medicaid or Food Stamps?

D. Participant Outcomes (30 minutes)

1. How important was the availability of diversion assistance for you avoiding receipt of TANF?
2. How important was the availability of diversion to you in supporting your efforts to find or keep a job?
3. Overall, what difference has diversion, if any, had on your life?
4. Are you currently financially self-sufficient?
 - a. Are any of you planning to or thinking you will need to apply for TANF in the next several months?
 - b. What do you think are the chances that in the next five years you will need to apply for TANF assistance or a diversion payment?
5. Are there any aspects of diversion you found disappointing or not helpful? If so, what are they?
6. Would you recommend diversion to a friend or family member in need of TANF? Why and under what conditions?
7. Do you have any suggestions for improving diversion?
8. Do you have any suggestions for improving the TANF program or services in general?
9. Do you have any last thoughts about diversion or the TANF program that you would like to express that have not already been discussed?

Conclusion and Wrap-up

That concludes our focus group for today. If you have no questions or other concerns about the study, we want to thank you again for coming. Your comments and insight have been very helpful. Thank you and goodbye.

COLORADO WORKS EVALUATION

Focus Group Discussion Guide - Long-Term Participants

A. Introduction (2 minutes)

Thank you very much for taking time to join us here, today. We are hosting this focus group session to learn the views of participants like you about the Colorado Works Program [or substitute other name the program uses in this site] here in [name county]. We will be asking questions of all of you that get at how you learned about the program, what services you asked for and received, what difference it made in your life.

My name is _____, and I'm a researcher with the Lewin Group. I will be leading the session today and my associate _____ will take notes during the discussion and may ask some questions too. Your presence, and the opinions, ideas, and feelings of *all of you* are important in a focus group. It is a way to learn what people think through group discussion, to find out what opinions and ideas you have in common, and where some of you may have different opinions.

From what we learn today, combined with other data we are collecting, we will be writing a report to the Colorado Department of Human Services. None of you will ever be quoted by name in that report, and nothing you say here will be repeated to your case managers or other program staff. Everything is kept strictly confidential.

The session today will last up to 90 minutes.

In a group interview like this it is very important that you express yourself openly. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in all your ideas and comments, both positive and negative, and you should feel free to respectfully disagree with one another when that is how you feel. Occasionally, I may ask how many of you agree with a statement one or two of you make.

B. Personal Introductions (3 minutes)

1. Let's go around the table and have each of you introduce yourself with your first name only and tell us how many children you have.

C. Outreach/Referral/Enrollment (25 minutes)

2. How did you hear about the assistance available through the TANF program?
What organization or agency referred you to the program?

2. Why did you decide to participate in the TANF program?
3. Have you participated in the TANF program in the past? If so, what circumstances or factors are most responsible for you coming back onto TANF this time?
4. Taking into consideration your current receipt of TANF and all past participation in the program (in Colorado and other states), about how many months or years have you received TANF?
5. What do you believe to be the factors that have contributed most to you being unable to leave TANF (during this current episode)?
6. Are there specific circumstances or factors that make it difficult for you to find a job? If so, what are they?
7. About what hourly wage do you believe you will need to become long-term self-sufficient (and not return to the TANF/CW program)?

D. Participation Experiences and Services Received (20 Minutes)

1. What types of services/assistance have you received through the TANF/CW program? Probe in the following areas (if not mentioned by participants):
 - a. *Did any of you receive help with finding or retaining a job? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?*
 - b. *Did any of you receive help with obtaining additional education or training? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?*
 - c. *Did any of you receive help obtaining supportive services, such as help with childcare, housing, transportation, clothing or food? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?*
 - d. *Did any of you receive help with improving parenting skills? Could you tell us some specifics about the kind of assistance you received?*
2. Are there other types of assistance you needed to help you leave TANF that were not available?
3. What do you think it will take for you to leave the TANF program?

4. Are there other things aside from what the TANF program offers that you think you need to do yourself to leave the TANF program?

E. Participant Outcomes (20 minutes)

1. Though you have not yet left the program, we want to hear about what difference the TANF/CW program has made so far in your life. What was especially good about the program, and how has it helped you achieve what you set out to achieve?

Probe: What effects has the program had on your job skills, employment experiences, and educational improvement? What about your financial ability to support yourself and your child(ren)?

Probe: Has the program affected your physical, mental, or emotional health in positive or negative ways?

2. If there are any elements or services of the TANF/CW program you have found disappointing or not at all helpful what are they? How would you recommend changing them to make the program better?
3. Do you have any last thoughts about the TANF/CW program that you would like to express that have not already been discussed?

Conclusion and Wrap-up

That concludes our focus group for today. If you have no questions or other concerns about the study, we want to thank you again for coming. Your comments and insight have been very helpful. Thank you and goodbye.

COLORADO WORKS EVALUATION

Focus Group Discussion Guide – Former CW/TANF Participants Placed in Jobs

A. Introduction (2 minutes)

Thank you very much for taking time to join us here, today. We are hosting this focus group session to learn the views of individuals like you – former Colorado Works participants in [*name county*] who have been successful in securing a job. We will be asking questions of all of you about your current job, how Colorado Works may have helped or hindered you in finding a job, and overall, how things have gone since you left the Colorado Works program.

My name is _____, and I'm a researcher with the Lewin Group. I will be leading the session today and my associate _____ will take notes during the discussion and may ask some questions too. Your presence, and the opinions, ideas, and feelings of *all of you* are important in a focus group. It is a way to learn what people think through group discussion, to find out what opinions and ideas you have in common, and where some of you may have different opinions.

From what we learn today, combined with other data we are collecting, we will be writing a report to the Colorado Department of Human Services. None of you will ever be quoted by name in that report, and nothing you say here will be repeated to your case managers or other program staff. Everything is kept strictly confidential.

The session today will last up to 90 minutes.

In a group interview like this it is very important that you express yourself openly. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in all your ideas and comments, both positive and negative, and you should feel free to respectfully disagree with one another when that is how you feel. Occasionally, I may ask how many of you agree with a statement one or two of you make.

B. Personal Introductions (3 minutes)

1. Let's go around the table and have each of you introduce yourself with your first name only and tell me how many children you have.

C. Job Experiences (Note – Some of these questions could be obtained through a short questionnaire completed by the participant) (40 minutes)

1. I now would like to go around the table again and hear about how long ago you left the TANF/Colorado Works program and whether you have worked the entire time since you left the program.
 - a. For those who have not worked the entire period – about how much of the time have you worked?

2. Since you exited from the TANF/Colorado Works program, how many different jobs have you had? Lets have a show of hands...how many of you have had one job, two jobs, and more than two jobs (if any, inquire, how many)?
 - a. For those of you with more than one job, please tell me a little bit about why you had more than one job – for example, maybe you were laid off or were offered a better job?

3. Now, I would like to learn a little about your current job – let’s go around the table and I would like you to tell me a little about your current job – your position, how long you have been working in that job, and what you generally do in your job?
 - a. In this current job, are you making enough for you and your family to live on? Are you able to save any money?
 - b. Do you receive health care coverage? Other types of benefits (e.g., retirement, educational benefits)?
 - c. Overall, how satisfied are you with your current job?

4. Do any of you continue to receive subsidized child care assistance through the county? What about other types of assistance – such as Medical Assistance/Medicaid, Food Stamps, or other supports?

5. Are any of you currently attending school or a training program?
 - a. If so, what kind of school or training program?
 - b. Did you receive help from either the TANF/CW program or Workforce Centers in enrolling in this education or training program?
 - c. How are you paying for classes – e.g., the employer is paying, have a Pell scholarship, took out a student loan, received help from CW or the Workforce Center?

6. Are any of you looking for a new job right now?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. What type of job and at what hourly wage?
 - c. How are you going about looking for another job?
 - d. Are you getting help from the Workforce Center or TANF/CW program? If so, what kind of help and has it been helpful? Are you receiving help from another organization?

D. TANF/CW Program Experiences (30 minutes)

Now I know it has been perhaps a while for some you, but I would like you to reflect on your general experiences in finding and keeping your job – and how TANF/CW program might have helped...

1. Looking back, did the TANF/CW program help you secure your job (i.e., the original job you obtained when you left the program)? If so, how did the program help?

- a. Did the Workforce Center help you to secure this job? If so, how did the Center help you?
 - b. Did anyone else or any other organization help you to secure this job? If so, who? And how were they helpful?
2. Since you started working, has the TANF/CW program done anything to help you keep your job? If so, how has the program helped you?
- a. Did the Workforce Center help you retain you job? Is so, how did the Center help you?
 - b. Did anyone else or any other organization help you retain your job? If so, who? And how were they helpful?**
3. Overall...as you look back at your experiences with the TANF/CW program, what was especially good or helpful about the program? How did participation in the TANF/CW program help you achieve what you set out to achieve?
- Probe: What effects did participation in the program have on your job skills, employment experiences, and educational improvement? What about your financial ability to support yourself and your child(ren)?*
- Probe: Did the program affect your physical, mental, or emotional health in positive or negative ways?*
4. Were there any elements or services of the TANF/CW program you found disappointing or not at all helpful? If so, what were they? How would you recommend changing them to make the program better?
 5. Were there any types of assistance that you needed, but were not available through the TANF/CW program?
 6. Do you have any last thoughts about the TANF/CW program that you would like to express that have not already been discussed?

E. Conclusion and Wrap-up

That concludes our focus group for today. If you have no questions or other concerns about the study, we want to thank you again for coming. Your comments and insight have been very helpful. Thank you and goodbye.

APPENDIX B:

PARTICIPANT DATA SHEET COMPLETED

AT FOCUS GROUP

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Thank you for participating in this focus group. We are asking for the following information so that we will have a record of the characteristics of the people who participated in the focus groups. This form will not be linked to your responses in the focus group. **DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THIS PAGE**

1. Age: _____
 2. Sex: Male Female
 3. Do you consider yourself Latino or Hispanic?
 Yes, I am Latino/Hispanic No, I am not Latino/Hispanic
 4. Do you consider yourself (CHECK ONE OR MORE):
 White
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 American Indian or Alaska Native
 Asian
 Black/African American
 Other (*write in*): _____
 5. What is your current marital status? (CHECK ONE)
 Never married
 Married, not separated
 Separated
 Divorced
 Widowed
 6. How many children do you care for in your household? _____
 7. How old is the youngest child you care for? _____ months years
 8. What is the highest level of schooling you have completed? (Check one)
 Below 12th grade, no diploma
 High School
 GED or GED equivalent
 Community College/ Trade School or other specialized training
 A 4-year college program
 Other schooling or training.
Specify: _____
 9. Have you gotten a job as a result of TANF?
_____ Yes _____ No
- If you are now working please complete the following section.**
10. How much are you paid?:\$ _____
Per (check one):
 hour week
 month year
 N/A
 11. How many hours do you typically work per week?

 12. How long have you been working at this job?
_____ months _____ years
 13. Place a check next to the benefit type to indicate which of these you receive from this job.
___ Health insurance
___ Dental insurance
___ Retirement plan
___ Vacation, sick time
___ None
___ Other (please specify) _____
 14. Did anyone help you get this job? (check all that apply)
___ TANF Staff
___ Workforce Center staff
___ Other _____