



Interview with Jack Frech

Director, Athens County Job and Family Services

Wendy Patton conducted this interview for "Shrinking aid for Ohio's poorest families," a report released by Policy Matters Ohio in November 2013.

What is Athens County's work participation rate for adult aided families? Has it gone up or down?

Athens County work participation rate for adults in the Cash Assistance program ("Ohio Works First") of Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) ranges from 45 percent to 52 percent, depending on the month. It depends on conditions within the labor market, which in turn depend on conditions within the economy.

How do you provide "work participation" for 30 hours a week?

Work participation can include attendance in educational programs as well as actual work or volunteer work. We encourage attendance in community college, career centers, Joint Vocational Schools – to build skills employers seek. Up to 30 hours per week for one year can be spent on education programs.

The funding for education and training almost all comes from the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). There has been a significant cut in WIA training funds that counties received. At one time, we were able to also use TANF funds for work participation training as well as WIA funds.

TANF reauthorization in 2006 changed program rules to limit the amount of training we could allow. Prior to that, people were allowed to count two years of education and training toward their work participation requirement rather than one, which offered better long term prospects for getting out of poverty and back on their feet. People are far less likely to find decently paying jobs without robust training.

We could help people more in the past in overcoming the barriers to self-sufficiency. The biggest barrier to self-sufficiency is transportation. Eighty percent of the people who need cash assistance have no car – they can't get to job training or to a work participation experience. In the past, we could offer them \$200 per month to help with that. Now we offer \$100 per month. Most counties offer only \$50 or less per month.

Other allowable work participation experiences may include work for local government (townships, cities, villages, county), at not-for-profits, or even at for-profits. Tasks include clerical, reception, community maintenance, outdoor maintenance – entry-level type jobs.

People are protected by federal wage and hour regulations from exploitation under this program. They cannot earn less, in the value of total benefits (cash assistance, transportation subsidy, child care

aid, food stamps) than minimum wage for the number of hours worked. If the value of their 30 hours per week work requirement is greater than the benefits they earn, then the work requirement is reduced to ensure they are not working for less than minimum wage. It is “deemed” that they have met their work requirement.

What is the role of the “One Stop” (Ohio Means Jobs center in the county)?

The “One Stop” has no formal role with Ohio Works First clients, but the Athens County Job and Family Service operates both TANF and WIA programs, so we coordinate. If we have funds through WIA available for education, then TANF clients may take job training – in computer operations, and so forth – and/or may do job search activities at the One Stop office.

Is it labor intensive for your county staff to oversee work participation?

We have drastically cut back on staffing. We can’t do much for clients because we lack the funds. We need to offer more services: helping them find schools or training, think about careers, work through day care or transportation issues – we don’t have staff to help with that, the case managers.

Do you have enough staff to accomplish this? If not, how do you "add on" capacity?

We have a need for both staffing and for more work sites. We now have a contract with the Community Action Agency that serves Athens County. They offer a work site with on-site supervision that offers assistance to clients with the day-to-day barriers they face in succeeding at their work assignment: transportation, meals, and job coaching. They can help them deal with mental health issues or other health problems. Many clients need case management: the work site allows this level of assistance. We look forward to adding an additional work site here at the county office.

When the work participation rate goes up, does this mean that people have gotten jobs and are back on their feet?

No. Across the state – as testified to by the State’s consultant - most people who have left have left for other reasons. When employable people get jobs and leave the system, people with more barriers are left.

Some counties have struggled with this. Reports tell of people being diverted from the program, or 'sanctioned.' Indeed, in Ohio, a large majority of caseload terminations had to do with sanctions yet nationally it is much lower. Why so high in Ohio? Why do counties struggle?

Ohio’s benefits are so low. People in the program can’t keep a car on the road. Eighty percent of them have no car! Benefits need to be higher. Transportation assistance needs to be higher.

Also – Ohio has one of the most complicated application requirements in the nation. When applicants can’t find or get hold of the documents required, they are not served in many places.

Diversion programs have been created on the front end in many places. Some require job search activities. Others require work participation even before a person is getting benefits – up to 30 hours per week. The trouble is that people still have barriers of transportation or childcare that prevent them from succeeding in that first month. Plus, they have no income at all at this point, yet must show up to work or search for a job. This is virtually impossible. They just fall away.

Many counties have achieved their goal of having half the eligible population of adults engaged in work participation, but this is achieved in too many places through caseload reduction.

If the adult in adult-aided families don't meet their 30 hour per week requirement, what happens? Are the kids in the family impacted?

This impacts not just able-bodied adults without dependents, but adult aided families – families with kids. More than 60,000 children have been eliminated from cash assistance since January 2011. Ohio allows whole family sanctions.

Is there a better way to help people get work experience and jobs?

When you set eligibility at 50 percent of poverty, and benefits level at 25 percent of what you need to get by – as we do in Ohio – clients are, in essence, “sanctioned” simply by how low the aid is. Every day is a struggle for survival.

All incentives need to be positive incentives. If a client participates in a job event, you reward that person with cash. Give transportation funding – adequate transportation funding. Provide a refundable EITC that rewards work. Provide a payment for 6 months on a job, one year on a job. Help someone know that she or he really can make it. Reward them for making it. Punishment – sanctions – this does not work.

What policy changes are needed to be more helpful to families at the lowest level of income?

There is a myth out there that people on cash assistance lead a comfortable, luxurious life. This observation is made by people who have never been poor nor known anyone who is poor.

Incentives are the way to go. They work, but only in a context in which the barriers people face are fully understood.

There is no policy change more important than increasing the basic benefit level. It needs to be raised to sustain a family's basic needs. The basic family needs are far, far higher than the federal poverty level. The federal poverty level for a family of 3 is \$1,628 a month. People are eligible for cash assistance when they make half of the federal poverty level. Given how low Ohio's cash assistance and food stamp benefits are, there is no social work policy tweak that matters.

Are there rule changes that would help the program be more helpful to poor families and children?

TANF benefits for a family 3, assuming they have no other income, are about \$458 per month. Raising that by \$300 per month would make the program better. For Food Stamps, it's about \$497. Raising that amount by \$300 per month would make a difference. Nothing else really would.

Medicaid expansion does not help. These folks are already covered by Medicaid, most of them. The promise of Medicaid expansion was that healthy people would do better. But what about the more than 100,000 people we've thrown off cash assistance because they can't meet their work requirements? How healthy can they really be if we have removed their access to housing and food?

In January, adults without a disability will need 20 hours per week of work participation in order to get supplemental food assistance. How will you provide this? Will it strain county resources?

This will have a huge impact on our resources. We have 300 in work participation under TANF. We will have 1,000 more [1,000 that will need work activity in addition to the 300] with the new ruling that requires work participation for able-bodied adults without dependents after January 1.

Based on our knowledge of this population, it is possible up to a third actually have a disability and can't work. Another 15 percent just won't come in. Even so, we would be left with roughly 500 for whom to find work experiences. And the 20 hours per week is a misnomer – for most, to work off the estimated \$200 per month they will get in food stamps will take only 25 hours per month. However, it takes us the same amount of work to get a work experience for someone for 25 hours per week as 25 hours per month. This will be part of the challenge.

The challenge is huge. We have 9,200 families in work participation experience in TANF statewide,, another 134,000 will need these services with the elimination of the waiver.

How will it impact the families - children?

This will not directly impact children, but it will impact extended families. People live in groups. Most of these folks are living in a group. In fact, it will impact everyone in whole low-income communities, as there is less money and less food in neighborhoods, stores, and families.

In House Bill 59, the recent budget bill, the state invested TANF dollars in job training and special, one-time benefits - prevention, retention and contingency (PRC) - to help with unexpected costs of transportation to work, tools, child care - will this make a major difference in the problems with work participation reported in other counties?

The job training funds will go through the WIA boards. It will be for the lowest income of people. It could help. But it is flexible money. It does not have to be spent for job training for TANF. County boards will decide. Not all of them will use this funding for PRC, training.

The PRC funding - \$40 million – will help us expand work sites and build the physical capacity we need. We lost a couple hundred million for this kind of activity. This will help.

What would you do to structure Ohio's TANF and SNAP programs to help people better - given existing federal rules?

It takes an array of services to help people get out of poverty. One, it takes benefits set at a decent level so people can think about something other than survival. Two, you've got to remove barriers to work. Adequate transportation reimbursement, better public transit, less expensive child care – all these services to actually provide a safety net – this is what we need. Voinovich put \$100 million of GRF into making the safety net better.

People who have been sanctioned from the TANF caseloads are not likely to come back on, nor will people diverted or discouraged from applying. The state's consultants came out with a report that documented how people are being harshly sanctioned from assistance, diverted or discouraged from applying. No state rules nor policies, nor directives, nor clarifications, have been issued, however, to

change this. Former director Michael Colbert wrote a letter to the Dispatch saying people were welcome back on – but he offered no official way to get them to know that.

We should be more aggressive in using the hardship exemption to allow people relief from the work participation requirement. People on TANF have unbelievably hard lives. Up to 20 percent of your caseload may be exempted due to hardship. In Athens County, we exempt 18 percent. Statewide, the exemption rate is 2 percent.

In SNAP – we need to lobby congress to raise SNAP benefit levels. Every advocate should be calling for an increase in benefit levels. Here the negotiation is about how much to cut SNAP. How much stronger would the Democrats’ position be if they had gone into the negotiation pointing out that food stamps – SNAP – only provides for 70 percent of the nutritional needs of the poorest families and that the benefit needs to be raised to 100 percent. They should have gone in asking for \$30 or \$40 billion increase. This would have been a far stronger position.¹

If we raised SNAP for a family of 3 by \$300 per month, and TANF by \$300 per month, it would give families just under the poverty level to live on. This is not an unrealistic amount.

We need to ask that the waiver of work requirements for adults on SNAP – food stamps - be left in place for one more year. There are no jobs out there in many places, no work activities that will move people forward.

¹ This discussion refers to the proposed cut of \$40 billion from food stamps going on at present on the federal level.