



Interview with Anthony Trotman

Director, Franklin 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 Franklin County's work participation rate for adult aided families? Has it gone up or down?

For the past few months, we have seen a steady increase in the rate. In the month of September, Franklin County's work participation rate was 53.46 percent. It's gone up a lot over time. We are one county that made a lot of improvements, started doing things differently.

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

We achieve this with the help of our community partners. Actually, the work experience program is run through four community partners. When it started, we had 8,500 recipients. Most were not working. They needed to, but we lacked capacity. We have added capacity through four primary partners. The partners developed workforce experience sites and manage the participants there. They supervise and handle the time sheets. There is a comprehensive system. They enter the hours worked per day. These agencies enter the cumulative figures into CRIS-E (the state database system).

The record keeping of this program is very demanding. We are one of only a few who manage work participation on a daily basis. In the past, we would get the time sheet at the end of the month. We would not know until a month and a half, or two months later, if someone was struggling or failing to meet their work participation requirements. We had no way to intervene.

Now we can intervene. Our "Intervention Specialist" helps with barriers – childcare, transportation.

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

It is labor intensive. We have 80 employees. We keep a number of functions in-house: eligibility determination, development of individual contracts/work plans, work supports determination and provision, like childcare and transportation, and the data entry into CRIS-E.

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

At this point in time, we do not have enough staff to accomplish this. These days, our caseload is between 2,300 and 2,400 – it is down, far below where it was. We boost capacity by expanding contracted services.

If we could bring it all in-house and control the entire process, end to end, we could further improve the system. But we cannot afford to do that. Some years we get more money, some years we get less. You cannot bring functions in-house under those conditions.

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

No, it does not mean that, necessarily. The rate can go up when people are sanctioned; or when they reach their time limits, or when they are in education and training, or when they are employed, get a job – it can mean good things or it can mean bad things.

We are very proud of the number of people who have entered a job, gotten employed. More than 3,000. We are required to report on that. This is part of standard reporting.

Some counties have struggled with getting the work participation rate up to the required level. Reports tell of people being diverted from the program, or 'sanctioned.' Indeed, in Ohio, a large majority of caseload terminations had to do with failure to meet program rules. Why so high in Ohio? Why do counties struggle?

When I arrived here, I found Franklin County was struggling because of the structure of the program. There were 7 work locations. In some of these places a client could get a benefit determination and assignment to a work force experience location. But it could take 2 to 4 weeks to get that assignment. In the interim, there was a lack of participation. This counted against us.

There was no seamless process. Now, you get your eligibility determination and work assignment on the same day. There was no intervention or childcare specialist. Now we have staff in place to get clients supports immediately.

From a contracting standpoint: we had multiple contracts throughout the community, but no daily contact or tracking. Now we have centralized daily tracking of workflow.

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

There are a few things that can take happen, if the adult does not meet requirements for work or other requirements, there are three tiers of sanctions (removal from benefits). They co-escalate – if requirements are not met – with childcare sanctions.

- Ohio Works First – you have a whole family sanction, so the kids are impacted when the adult is sanctioned.
- SNAP – only the individual may be sanctioned, not the kids.
- Medicaid – only the individual may be sanctioned.

Is there a better way to help people get work experience and jobs? What would that be?

This is a community issue. We are working closely with Columbus 20/20 planning process and the county commissioners. We are working with the business community to identify jobs for people.

Whenever we give tax abatements or incentives, it should be linked to Ohio Works First cash assistance recipients – getting them into jobs.

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

Benefit cliffs are a major problem for people using public assistance. You cannot move up or forward because the costs of living are so high. We must figure out a better way of handling the cliff. Childcare benefits are particularly difficult. The subsidy phases out at 200 percent of poverty, but at

200 percent of poverty you are not making enough to pay for childcare.

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

You know, when you move into a private sector job, it can take 4 weeks to get paid. What do you live on in the interim? We need ‘transitional benefits.’ This would help people actually make it in real jobs and reduce recidivism.

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?

Yes, the new work requirements in the SNAP program will be very difficult for us. In Franklin County, 15,000 adults will need to work for food stamps. We’ll need 15,000 work participation slots for 20 hours per week. We have \$300,000 to make that work, \$500,000 for work supports.

The \$300,000 is not enough to outsource effectively to meet the need. The documentation needed for that program is very intensive. There are lots of pieces and parts to it – it is a difficult program to administer.

We reached out to the Benefit Bank. They will act as a work site offering training and community service as work experience. We don’t yet know how many slots that will be.

How will it impact the families - children?

This is very difficult and complicated. This is a lot of people to serve in a complex program. We need to take advantage of the waiver for another year, let the economy improve; get ready to serve these people.

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 - 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 funding under HB 59 will make some difference. We are able to contract with new providers to better serve disabled, victims of domestic violence. It is a good thing to be able to serve these populations better.

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

The state has done a fine job collaborating with counties. The compliance period prior to benefits helped us meet targets for work participation. The additional dollars were reinvested in the program. There are dollars to incentivize the OWF programs in the counties to work with the One-Stops – the Workforce Investment Boards – on job placement. This is helpful.

One of the problems with the program is this: It is process driven, not outcome based. This is a federal problem. We now have funds to provide incentives for people to get employment – the state provided funding from the TANF block grant – and this will help people move to jobs. But the federal program should be changed to focus on outcomes versus process – did you get a job rather

than did you engage in work experience participation – and how is the program impacting the family, including the children? Only adults with children are eligible. Therefore, their time in the program gives an opportunity to assess the condition of the kids and to figure out how to break the cycle of poverty.

In terms of SNAP – we need that waiver, we need to waive adult participants from work requirements for another year. Caseloads are very high.

We need to stop cutting the food stamp program.

The federal Department of Agriculture does not value the administrative process like the Department of Health and Human Services does – it has similar requirements for compliance, but does not provide the funding necessary to accomplish it. Funding must be attached in a labor-intensive program.