

THE CAREER READINESS PROJECT

CAREER & LIFE COACHING REPORT



THE
PROSPERITY
AGENDA



THE CAREER READINESS PROJECT

With generous support from W. K. Kellogg Foundation, The Career Readiness Project (CRP) was a three-year initiative spearheaded by Cares of Washington and The Prosperity Agenda (TPA) partnering with the Washington State Department of Social & Health Services (DSHS), the Washington State Department of Commerce (Commerce), and others.

The genesis of the CRP was to provide enhanced support and educational structures to parents enrolled in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)¹ program while they were actively looking for work. A core value of the CRP is that engaged parents will participate in career programs more and experience enhanced career outcomes. The two central program components designed for the CRP were Career & Life Coaching (CLC) and Best U.

Parents can also include persons who are caring for a relative's child, or are legal guardians, or are acting in the place of a parent.

About Career & Life Coaching

CLC was a program developed as an adjunctive intervention to partially replace and complement traditional case management services for parents participating in the TANF program in Washington State. The ultimate goal of CLC was to help these parents identify and tap into career motivation, learn how to set and identify personally meaningful goals, and, ultimately, have increased career stability and wages. CLC coaches worked intensively with parents for varying lengths during their enrollment in TANF.

About Best U

Best U was a program designed to support the development of select professional skills to help parents become more easily employed and promoted. The curriculum offers an “inside-out” approach for parents that is informed by research from areas such as mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and executive functioning. Best U helps participants understand and stop negative thought patterns and responses, communicate and work as a team, and set goals that motivate change. Activities in Best U are experiential and collaborative and reinforce the material, skills, and strategies that participants are learning. Best U also has an employer component designed to help employers reinforce and encourage the skills and strategies in participants working in their organizations.



INTRODUCTION

This report provides some background, overview, and highlights of the impact of CLC—a component of the CRP. CLC ran for eight months and went through two evaluation phases. During this time, TPA-trained coaches worked individually with parents in Washington State’s WorkFirst program, which provides support services and activities to parents enrolled in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) so they can find and keep jobs to move forward on a pathway to career readiness and financial capability. These coaches partially took the place of conventional case management, and comparisons were made between coached and non-coached parents on selective outcomes. The CLC pilot program shared the mission of the CRP to empower parents in WorkFirst to obtain and maintain family-sustaining employment.

What follows will provide context for the CRP and one of the programs it gave rise to—CLC. The report also frames the research background and distinctive components of CLC. Finally, the report addresses some important preliminary evaluation results of the CLC pilot program.

Although the CLC pilot program sample was small, the following promising results emerged from the evaluation:

- Parents reported increased understanding of their decision-making abilities
- Parents expressed increased confidence in setting goals and overcoming barriers
- Parents achieved personal milestones established with their coaches
- Parents improved family management and family goal setting
- Parents were more likely to start a job than non-coached parents in the same timeframe

Approaches in Welfare-to-Work Programs

Two dominant strategies in “Welfare-to-Work” programs, like TANF, are **labor force attachment** (LFA) and **human capital development** (HCD)². LFA

approaches focus on helping people get employed as soon as possible, even if it means low wages and a position not suited to their interests or abilities. LFA assumes that through on-the-job learning, people can develop work habits and skills to advance themselves. HCD approaches encourage people to get skills training and education before employment to increase their capacity to get and keep a job. HCD programs often include mentorship alongside training and education.³ Programs that combine both HCD and LFA program elements have been shown to be most effective in promoting long-term job outcomes.⁴ The CRP sought to combine these approaches by providing high levels of support and training for parents in the WorkFirst program, which is designed to get people employed as soon as possible.

Connecting Parent Participation and Parent Engagement

In public assistance programs like TANF, participation in work-related activities is a requirement for states to provide cash assistance to parents. Government agencies and community service providers often use the word “engagement” to describe higher rates of participation. Engagement, used in that way, refers only to physical attendance and participation in program activities. What it misses is a more common-sense understanding of engagement: emotional involvement and a sense of ownership.

There’s a strong connection between these two meanings of engagement. People who feel a sense of ownership and are emotionally and psychologically engaged in an activity are more likely to participate in them. Though it sounds simple, this type of engagement is often overlooked in policy conversations on increasing rates of participation. It is more common for policymakers to focus on barrier removal (i.e., increasing childcare and transportation options) to increase participation. The underlying assumption is that people with low incomes are affected only by material problems.

OVERVIEW OF CAREER & LIFE COACHING

Research studies point to the link between engaging individuals and their families and enhanced program participation.^{5,6} In particular, individualized case planning, frequent and regular contact with parents, flexibility in setting activities, and allowing parents to set goals for themselves are vital ways to increase engagement and overall participation rates.⁷ The CLC approach incorporated these proven elements into its service delivery model. Three core theoretical frameworks lie at the heart of the CLC model: 1) Stages of change, 2) An understanding of executive skills functioning, and 3) Social learning theory.

Stages of Change (Transtheoretical Model)

CLC's approach was informed by Prochaska and DiClemente's transtheoretical model and accompanying stages of change.⁸ The stages of change approach grounds program staff and others in the reality of the process of making and maintaining changes. Change is not linear or unidirectional, particularly when the goals and changes sought pertain to career readiness and financial capability. People experience internal and external resistance and setbacks in the course of making changes. CLC coaches used their understanding of stages of change to work with parents to work through resistance and setbacks.

Executive Functioning Skills

Research on executive functioning skills reveals how the chronic stress of living in poverty can exacerbate the difficulty of moving towards a positive life change.⁹ Problem solving, decision making, and time management—skills that are necessary for success in today's job market—suffer when a person is under constant stress or trauma. These skills play an essential role in goal setting and achievement—critical components of obtaining and advancing in a career while attaining family financial stability. CLC is grounded in an understanding of what executive

functioning skills are, how they can be hindered, and how skilled and empathetic coaches can mitigate these effects in the goal-setting process.

Social Learning

Other studies on social learning show how individuals may learn and adopt behaviors in a supportive environmental context. In an environment of trauma, poverty, and stress, most individuals feel diminished and tend to develop lower self-efficacy and motivation, making even small goals difficult to accomplish. Coaching creates a safe environment in which parents experience positive reinforcement and build self-efficacy that contributes to meeting their goals, while developing coping behaviors that lead to their improved performance in work and family settings.¹⁰

Key Assumptions

The CLC toolkit is the backbone of the CLC model. The toolkit maintains three key assumptions that are foundational to establishing the CLC approach to coaching:¹¹

1. **Every parent is creative, capable, and resourceful.** Though parents may have significant barriers, they are creative and resourceful enough to have their own answers and know what is right for them.
2. **A strengths-based approach**, rather than a deficit-based approach, is more likely to empower parents to achieve long-term stability. Coaching helps parents identify and use their strengths, increases their self-efficacy, and strengthens their executive functioning skills so they can set and attain long-term career goals.
3. **Coaches create environments that make change possible.** Coaching helps foster the possibility of change by building trust and rapport. The quality of the coach-parent relationship is fundamental to the effectiveness of this approach.

KEY FEATURES OF THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP

The beauty of CLC lies in its structured flexibility. CLC coaches have permission to adapt and be responsive to individual parent needs while still holding to a recognizable structure and the specific tools of CLC interventions. CLC coaches reported enjoying this flexibility while appreciating the structure of CLC to keep them grounded and moving forward with parents. The absence of a strict manual-based intervention approach raises the importance of measuring fidelity in CLC coaching. The following key features were assessed for use in coaching sessions to ensure that coaches were maintaining program fidelity in working with parents.

The Coaching Mindset

Figure 1 presents the coaching mindset, which is foundational to the training approach and facilitates the proper use of specific coaching tools and techniques. The CLC coaching mindset consists of seven qualities: focused listening, curiosity, reflection, listening for values, self-management, focus on strengths, and building rapport.

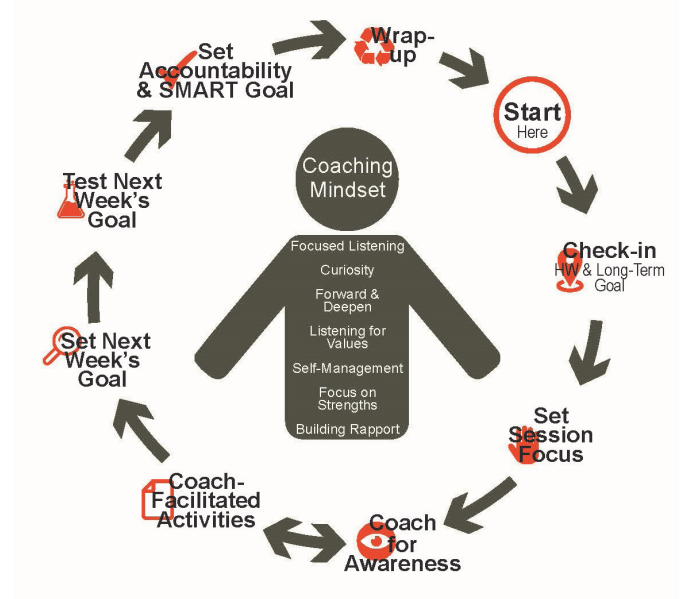
Figure 1



The Coaching Conversation Model

While the coaching mindset provides the necessary foundation for coaching to occur, the coaching conversation model (Figure 2) creates the framework through which coaching actually takes place. The coaching conversation model articulates the process of helping parents to identify, prepare for, and meet their goals. Some steps may be combined, and in practice the steps may not be consecutive or sequential. Nonetheless, coaches are conscious of the importance of each step in taking parents' goals seriously.

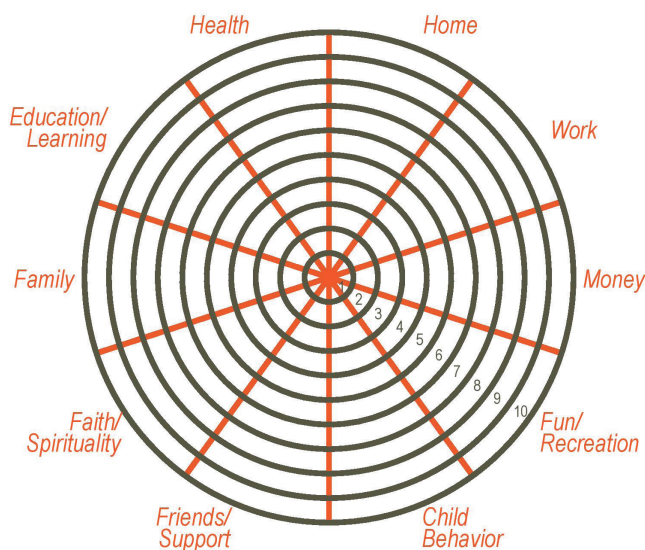
Figure 2



Coaching Tools

Coaches are trained to use both core and targeted coaching tools. Core coaching tools are skills that compose the fabric of the coaching relationship. These are the guidelines for how coaches interact with parents. Examples of core coaching tools include powerful questions, asking permission to engage a topic, reflective listening, holding focus, and celebrating with parents. Targeted coaching tools are collaborative activities that coaches and parents can do together to help parents keep moving towards their stated goals. One of the most powerful examples of a targeted coaching tool is the wheel of life, shown in Figure 3 below. The wheel of life is useful to help parents determine what area(s) of life need attention.

Figure 3



Focus on Nuanced Milestones

The CLC approach, as opposed to a traditional case management method, is designed to support and celebrate parents who achieve nuanced milestones. Daminger and associates (2015) argued that “instead of receiving assistance or being ‘managed’—terms that may reinforce feelings of disempowerment—a parent works with her coach or advocate to set her own goals and track her progress toward them.”¹² In other words, achieving nuanced milestones is just as relevant and important as making progress toward larger goals.

A focus on nuanced milestones, rather than on long-term goals, allows for more realistic achievements. One researcher stated that “low-income individuals may find it difficult to navigate complex systems or processes, and struggle to develop and follow through on long-term plans and goals because their attention and cognitive resources are focused on addressing the challenges of poverty.”¹³

METHODOLOGY

Parents who received coaching were all enrolled in the program in Washington State and had previously received TANF benefits at least twice. Parents with this experience are what the social services literature often refers to as “hard to employ.” To be eligible for coaching, parents had to have had at least six months between their previous TANF enrollments to ensure that cycling on and off was not an administrative procedural issue but due to repeated bouts of extreme economic hardship. Parents who were eligible for coaching were able to opt out and receive standard TANF case management services. Coaching was an augmentation to standard case services, as parents also were assigned a traditional case manager that provided some mandated services.

CLC coaches were existing DSHS case managers and social workers who participated in a two-week immersive training in CLC methodology, tools, and forms. CLC services were delivered at six DSHS Community Service Offices (CSO) around Washington (Columbia River, Everett, Smokey Point, Spokane-Trent, Sunnyside, and Yakima). Data were collected on 35 coached parents, as well as 20 parents that opted out of the coaching program. Parents completed coaching forms that were de-identified and sent to TPA for analysis. Both groups consented to a release to TPA of de-identified personal information on areas such as education, employment, and issue resolution from their time in the program.

TPA used a rapid-cycle learning approach—an implementation and evaluation methodology. Rapid-cycle learning uses frequent feedback early in program implementation to allow for faster program adjustments and changes to promote better fidelity (and outcomes) in expanded implementation. TPA completed an initial three-month implementation period with rapid-cycle learning, which permitted CSO administrators, coach supervisors, and coaches the flexibility to discern how best to handle program

CLC clients were selected from what the research literature often refers to as “hard to employ” individuals. To be eligible for CLC coaching, clients had to have been enrolled in TANF at least twice, indicating repeated, persistent economic hardships.

logistics before expanding the CLC program. TPA was then able to help make programmatic changes that suited the complexity of launching a new program within large governmental systems.

While coaches and other CSO staff were the source of data for the three-month rapid cycle learning phase, TPA used parent data for subsequent evaluation of the CLC program. Under approval of the Washington State Institutional Review Board (designed to protect human subjects in research), TPA was able to collect de-identified copies of completed coaching forms and administrative data. The administrative data were captured by DSHS as part of the protocol for each participant, not just those in the CLC pilot program.

RESULTS

TPA evaluated the CLC pilot program using different types of data. The newly-trained coaches provided primary data during the initial implementation phase (over four months). TPA coach trainers and staff held ongoing, regular phone calls with coaches and supervisory staff to assess coaching fidelity, address implementation issues, and offer ongoing technical support for coaches and coaching sites.

After this initial implementation evaluation phase, TPA conducted a four-month outcome analysis. This short time-frame did not permit evaluating some of the desired long-term impact of CLC, but the short-term results were very encouraging. TPA added the use of coaching forms, exit feedback forms completed by parents, and administrative data (comparing demographics and certain outcomes to parents who opted-out) for the outcome evaluation. The following are highlights of some of the impact of CLC.

Coaching Helps Coaches, Too

Because burnout and retention of case workers is a known problem in social services, TPA wanted to see if CLC benefited not only parents but coaches as well. TPA's training staff conducted monthly one-on-one calls and bi-weekly webinars with group for 12 months to offer support and technical assistance as well as to monitor fidelity to CLC protocol. Part of each call involved coaches responding to an inventory

"I think the most powerful aspect of the intakes I have done so far is the look of surprise on their faces when I bring up their values and strengths, and they weren't aware of them. They really liked the fact that they get to decide what they want to work on each session."

—WorkFirst Coach

"It is so much fun to work with these parents to assist them in determining their goals and then set up an action plan to help them accomplish their dreams. The parent I was working with today said she feels like her goal is more attainable by putting it in writing. She said she likes the [SMART] goal because it was so specific and attainable and she feels like she knows exactly what to do. She said she feels like the program is helping her and is looking forward to meeting with me again to set up another goal when we get back from training."

—WorkFirst Coach

of questions aimed at measuring fidelity and how confident the coaches were in performing coaching. The coaches reported a high degree of ongoing fidelity to using core, targeted coaching tools, utilizing the coaching conversation model, and completing required coaching forms. The coaches also reported a high degree of satisfaction in their work.

Can't Get Too Much of a Good Thing

The longer parents met with their coaches, the more growth parents reported in their understanding decision-making and their confidence levels to attain goals and overcome barriers. The evaluation results indicate coaching had positive impacts for parents with fewer coaching sessions, but the impact was greater with more sessions. Specifically, the evaluation questions focused on parents setting priorities, letting go of limited beliefs, and contributing to meeting long-term career position goals. Coached parents saw additional benefits in employment attainment and duration of employment, initiating education programs, and family management skills.

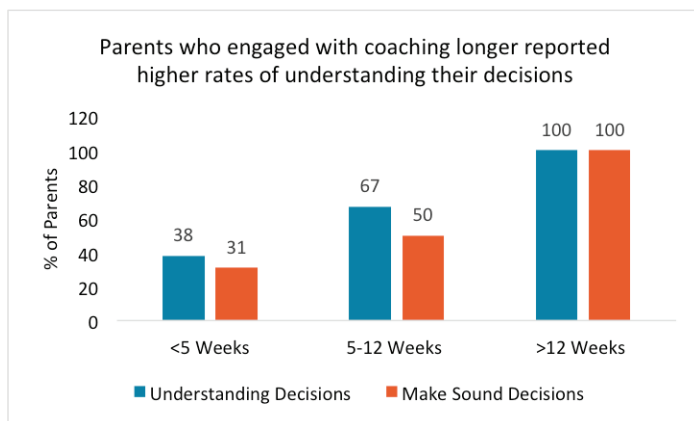
HIGHLIGHTED PARENT OUTCOMES

Parents who received coaching completed forms as part of the relationship, which provided insights into the impact of coaching. Here are some highlights of the results parents in the CLC program experienced:

Increased understanding of their decision-making

Figure 4 shows that, when compared with parents coached for shorter durations, parents coached for longer durations showed a higher propensity to practice decision-making skills and, subsequently, to make sound decisions.

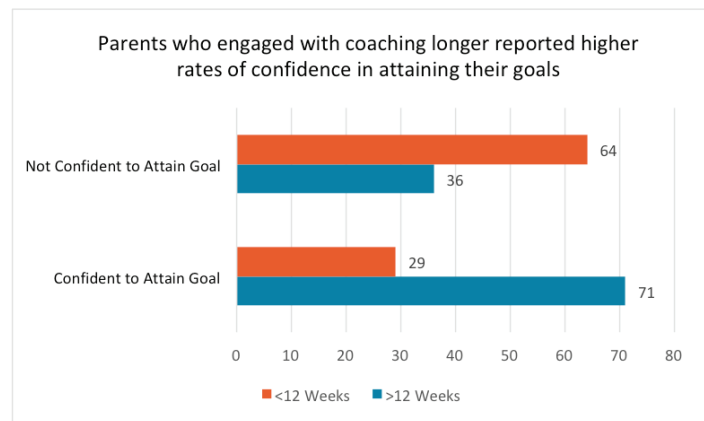
Figure 4



Higher confidence levels in goal setting and overcoming barriers

Figure 5 demonstrates that parents with higher numbers of coaching sessions also reported more confidence in attaining their set goals when compared to parents with lower numbers of coaching sessions.

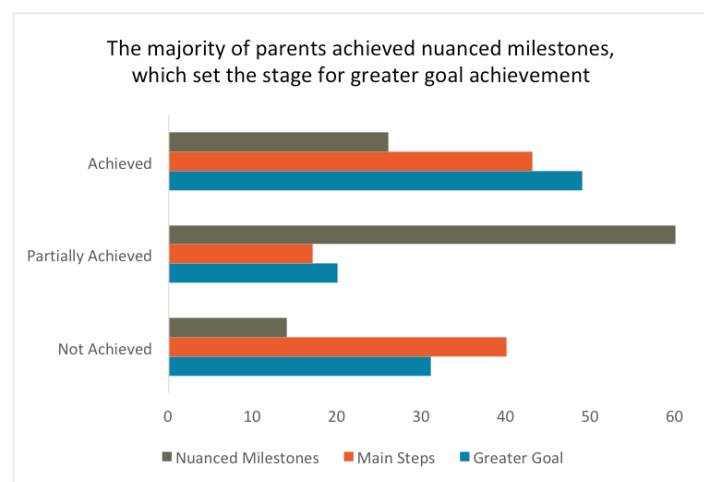
Figure 5



Nuanced milestones achieved towards greater goal achievement

Nuanced (parent-determined, concrete) milestones are the first way in which parents learn to set achievable goals. Goal achievement facilitates increased confidence, a growth mindset, and the confidence to pursue more goals.

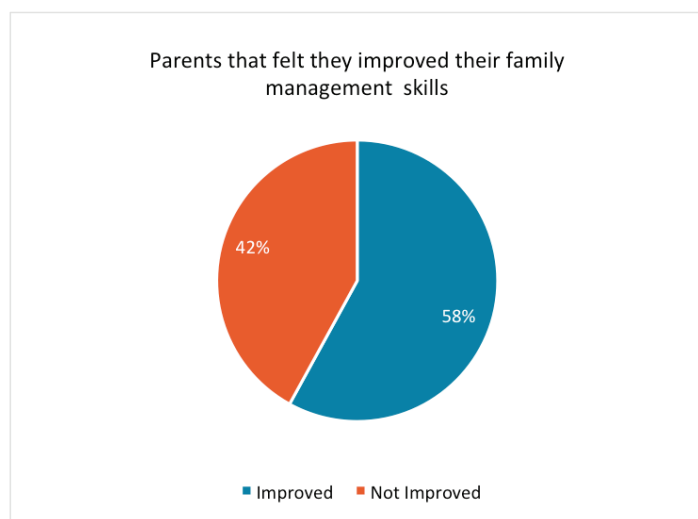
Figure 6



Improved family management and goal setting

Parents who identified the need to improve family management stated higher satisfaction rates in family management skills. Of the sample of parents that identified a desire to increase these skills, over half (58%) felt they improved family and home management skills.

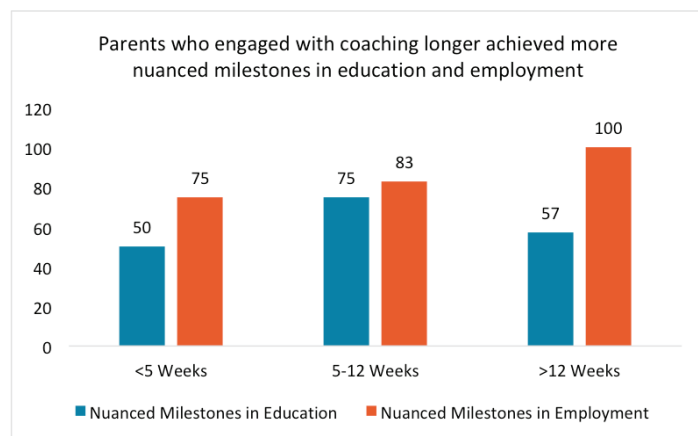
Figure 7



Nuanced milestones in education, employment, and financial stability

Figure 8 reveals that parents who were coached for a greater number of weeks achieved more nuanced milestones toward educational and employment goals.

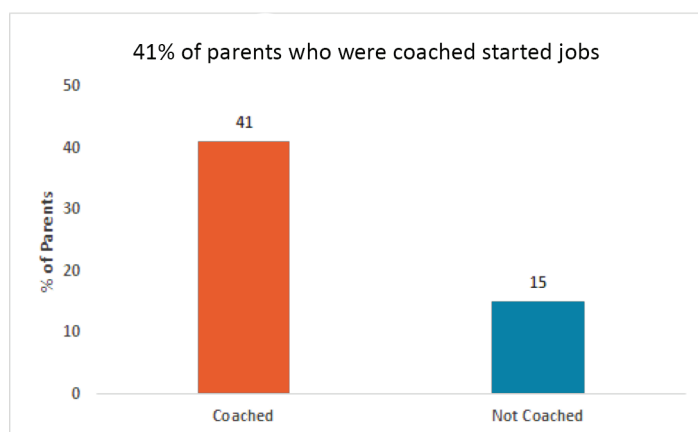
Figure 8



More coached parents started jobs

Figure 9 shows that 41% of coached parents succeeded in starting a job as opposed to 15% of parents that were not coached. These data suggest that CLC coaching may have positively influenced participating parents on their path to acquiring a job when compared against parents that opted out of the program.

Figure 9



CONCLUSION

Parents who participated in the CLC program showed higher levels of confidence, awareness regarding decision making, completion of nuanced milestones, and participation in employment and education. The results, while based on a small sample, are cause for encouragement due to criteria for selection of the parents who participated. These parents had previously received public assistance a minimum of two times, indicating the presence of cyclical or persistent poverty. These parents are sometimes deemed “hard-to-employ” and present challenges for organizations who may be required to attain high program participation rates.

The results seen here reflect TPA’s commitment to ongoing technical assistance and continuous improvement. The CLC program offers the flexibility to be tailored to a variety of service delivery models, populations, and types of organization. TPA has since trained CLC coaches across the country, offering ongoing support to ensure tailored and robust program implementation.

NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Endnotes

1. The federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help families experiencing insecurity gain access to job training, job searching, and other support services. States receive block grants to design and operate programs.
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For more information on the Career Readiness Project, visit The Prosperity Agenda web site at www.theprosperityagenda.org/career-readiness-project.