ConnectForward

Ian Daniel Barry

Joey Carr

Cheryl Flowers

University of Tennessee

Howard Baker Policy Challenge
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**Connect Forward:**

“Moving Job Seekers Forward Through Customer Connection”

**Ian Barry  Joey Carr  Cheryl Flowers**

**Introduction**

Throughout America’s history too many American families have been plagued by having inadequate financial means to support themselves. Modern-day America is no different. There are numerous correlating factors that contribute to poverty rates in a community, but perhaps chief among them is unemployment. According to the United Nations social policy and development division unemployment and underemployment lies at the heart of poverty (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). The detriments of poverty and unemployment are not lost on policy makers as these hazards consistently threaten the livelihood of individuals, families, and the American economy as a whole.

In order to end the cycle of poverty, eligible members of the labor force need jobs and the resources to find and access them. At the federal level, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was developed to, among other functions, assistance eligible members in their attempts to secure gainful employment. TANF provides fill-the-gap budgeting payments to eligible assistance groups using a standardized budgeting and payment method that is determined by the size of the assistance group. In order to remain eligible for financial assistance, assistance units (TANF clients) must complete certain tasks (Tennessee TANF State Plan Effective 1/1/15-12/31/15, 2015). The disparaging realities of unemployment and poverty are especially true in Tennessee being that at the end of 2014 Tennessee’s unemployment rate was 6.4%. The national unemployment rate at the end of 2014 was 5.6%. This comparison shows that Tennessee fared worse than the national average. The unemployment rates of states neighboring Tennessee tell a
similar story as Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia all have unemployment rates lower than Tennessee’s (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In an effort to mitigate the suffering of unemployed, disadvantaged, and under-financed Tennesseans, Families First (FF) was developed as the state-level iteration of TANF.

Last year 318 million dollars were spent by FF in the state of Tennessee with 71 million of those dollars allocated to employment services (Falk, 2014). Presently, when an eligible person applies to receive FF assistance, they complete and sign a Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP). The PRP is the agreement signed by FF clients that states the tasks they will complete in order to maintain their financial support in route to self-sufficiency (Tennessee TANF State Plan Effective 1/1/15-12/31/15, 2015). Once enrolled, if a client does not follow the stipulations of their PRP they will be sanctioned and lose part or all of their benefits. FF clients are provided with various supportive services to aid them in meeting their goals. The FF clients are expected to use these resources; therefore, included in the PRP is a promise to go to an employment contractor to receive job services.

The state of Tennessee contracts employment services out to three contractors, Maximus, Work Force Essentials and East Tennessee State University. These contractors are charged with achieving the employment goals the state tells them to prioritize. Tennessee has shifted its focus from job training to finding employment, so this has become the new goal of the employment contractors (DHS, 2014). Once at the employment contractor, the client then creates an individualized career plan (ICP) with a case manager. The ICP is another contract that outlines plans for job training or finding employment (Tennessee TANF State Plan Effective 1/1/15-12/31/15, 2015).
This is a complex system involving thousands of clients, thousands of jobs, and millions of dollars. With so much interest and large amounts of resources being applied to FF, it is of upmost importance to evaluate this system to ensure the best practices are being implemented. Our group set out to do just that and identified three problems within the employment services offered by FF. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, famed Nigerian economist, stated that “when you find problems, you should find solutions.” True to Okonjo-Iweala’s words, we identified a simple, cost-effective solution to these problems and an equally economic implementation plan. Before we explore our solution, we must first identify the problems.

**Problem Statement**

Linking clients to gainful employment and monitoring personal responsibility progress are some of the primary duties of FF. Our team contacted various Tennessee Department of Human Services employees and employment contractor directors across Tennessee. We researched case studies, FF contracts, and state and federal records. Our efforts led us to identifying three major problems in the process of connecting FF clients to gainful employment and evaluating that process. The first problem we identified is FF clients are not adequately connected to job openings.

We found in a recent case study that FF clients sited “no work available” as the second leading reason they were unable to secure a job, as seen in figure one from the 2010 case study by Fox, William,
Cunningham, Vickie, & Hamblen (2011)( p. 93). However, The Bureau of Labor and Statics in Tennessee reported that over 70,000 jobs will become open or be created between 2012 and 2015 (‘Labor Force Data,’ 2014). The 2014 number of FF enrollees was approximately 33,000 (Falk, 2014). This evidence suggests there is a transitional problem in connecting people to jobs, not that the jobs are not available. Not only is this a problem in that people are not finding jobs when they seem to exist, but also in that the state is spending more money on actual job placement instead of training. 

Currently, tax payer dollars are being wasted because they are financing practices that our research has indicated are not working as effectively as it could be. There was a decrease in the number of FF employment assistance enrollees from July 2013 to July 2014 of 8.9% (Tennessee Department of Human Serves, 2014). This shows the new direction the state is taking FF, but this could be further decreased by utilizing all the state’s resources. As you can see in the graph below, over 25% of employment eligible FF adult clients sought job search assistance in 2010 (Fox, William, Cunningham, Vickie, & Hamblen, William R., 2011, p. 78). Providing these clients with adequate service is a must. 

Secondly, after contacting the five employment contractors in Tennessee, before they changed to three on January 1, 2015, we discovered that there is not a uniform method used across the state of connecting individuals to jobs. The current practice does offer the benefit of allowing contractors to implement methods they are most comfortable with, but with 71 million dollars being spent one year alone on employment services in FF, it is important to ensure best practices are being utilized (Falk, 2014). Presently, that is not possible because of the lack of systemized
practices across the state. This is not to say that each part of the state does not have different problems or that they should be subjected to a rigid uniform structure, but establishing a uniform system that is also flexible enough to accommodate each regions’ needs is an important part to analyzing the true nature of the problems the state of Tennessee faces in concerns to employment.

The third problem we found is the difficulty in tracking clients’ progress. The tracking process described by the employment contractors we contacted suggest they count on signed completion forms and self-reports from their clients. These methods are dated and insufficient considering the level of technology available. They lend themselves susceptible to misrepresentations of adherence to PRP’s and ICP’s. It also allows the blame for not finding a job to trickle down to the clients, which further stigmatizes that population and possibly distracts from identifying the true barriers to employment for FF clients. This is not to say that it is the employment contractors to blame either. Finding blame is not the pursuit. Our aim is to develop a system that addresses these three issues in a cost-effective manner and uses current technologies to further advance services rendered to FF clients. All of this is in an effort to connect the Tennessean workforce to available jobs and weaken the grip of unemployment.

Solution

We propose a system that is easily implemented by each contracting zone in Tennessee, provides access to the largest database of job openings for Tennesseans, and allows the clients the ability to clearly reflect their job procurement progress by using resources that they are already familiar with. All of their progress will be readily available for their case managers’ review. We call this concept ConnectForward.
**ConnectForward** mandates FF clients with employment assistance included in their PRP and/or ICP create a Jobs4tn.gov profile and creates the access for employment contractors and case managers to monitor the job search progress of FF clients. This will provide immediate contact to available jobs in the Tennessee and permit DHS, specifically FF, staff to get accurate depictions of their clients’ progress. Our proposed solution allows the state to use a uniform method of connecting clients to open positions and also systematizes how success rates are tracked. The latter benefit creates the opportunity to better analyze factors that strengthen and weaken the likelihood of employment. **ConnectForward** will help modernize the resources used by FF.

Modernizing resources is an endeavor that the state has recently undertaken as evidenced by a similar connectivity in other state agencies. The Department of Labor and Statistics in Tennessee can already access the profiles, search history, and jobs applied for in Jobs4tn.gov. Though it would be largely assistive to the execution of their responsibilities, the DHS is currently lacking connectivity to their clients’ activity on Jobs4tn.gov. Our team identified a resource they presently employ that easily lends itself to such access: Family Assistance’s portal called Case Connect allows DHS users to view monthly benefit amounts and their arrival dates, upcoming appointments, and check the status of applications. We propose the next logical step in the form of ConnectForward which will link Case Connect to FF clients’ Jobs4tn.gov profiles and allow the job search progress to be monitored in the same way that the Department of Labor and Statistics already does. We propose extending this service to DHS and by extension the employment contractors. The information would be used differently by these separate departments, but the information provided would be vital for both.
Training sessions designed to familiarize eligible FF clients with Jobs4tn.gov is already part of the employment services received by hopeful applicants, so both the clients and the case managers are familiar with the system. The system also allows users to customize their profiles to allow them to expand database searches, share jobs through email, and use a career network. The employment contractors’ contract will expire in 3 years. We propose that a clause mandating the use of ConnectForward be included in the next contract negotiation. This will connect clients with a large job pool by having them sign up for Jobs4tn.gov when they go to the employment contractors to complete their ICP.

Each employment contractor across the state will use the same comprehensive tracking system, ConnectForward, to track and evaluate the clients’ employment search. This will allow for best practices to be identified and provided at the same level everywhere in Tennessee. The career manager can be sure the client is applying for jobs; DHS will be able to verify that employment contractors are providing the proper services, and the tax payers will know their 71 million dollars are being spent in the most efficient way possible. It is important that this program meets its full potential to move clients to self-sufficiency.

**Recommendation and Benefits**

We are recommending we use technology and underutilized state resources to solve the problem of connecting FF clients to jobs. ConnectForward simplifies the tasks of tracking progress and knowing the landscape of available jobs both regionally and statewide. Our interviews with employment contractors and case managers revealed that they currently use antiquated methods in their attempts to complete the aforementioned duties. Oftentimes, case managers learn of job openings via word of mouth and count on relationships built with select employers in the area for hearing about open positions. Completion of the employment activities
outlined in a client’s PRP is typically determined by securing signatures on a paper form that suggest the successful completion of employment activities. The tediousness and possibility of misrepresentation are obvious in the current practices. ConnectForward will immediately eradicate these concerns. It also allows DHS to identify reasons clients are not getting hired, such as applying for jobs they are not qualified for, using bad references or not applying to enough jobs. ConnectForward offers numerous advantages in day-to-day functions of FF employment services and aids in advancing the resources provided to FF clients who are trying to stabilize their families through securing gainful employment. However, the benefits of our concept extend to others invested in Tennessee employment trends, as well.

ConnectForward will also be a viable resource for businesses in need of capable employees and a tool in which the state of Tennessee is heavily invested. Per our contact with the program directors of some of the employment contractors, many employers work directly with them instead of using Jobs4tn.gov. Tennessee invested in Jobs4tn.gov and it has not met its goals, such as enrollment or placements as seen in the graph above (Integrated State Plan, 2014, p. 73).

Research also shows that jobs are increasingly being filled through online recruiting and that retention in jobs filled online are higher, suggesting better outcomes for clients who will use Jobs4tn.gov to find a job (Stevenson, 2008). These revelations suggest that the use of ConnectForward’s connectivity to Jobs4tn.gov will benefit Tennessee businesses in that with little effort they will be able to access a pool of competent employees by continuing to post their
open positions on this site. Our proposed resource will also benefit the state entities concerned with the success of Jobs4tn.gov due to the fact that their enrollment and placement rates will increase with each FF client in search of employment assistance.

**Implementation Plan**

The FF contract is renegotiated every couple of years; the next such negotiation being in 2017 to start in 2018. *ConnectForward* will be written into this pending contract making its utilization by employment contractors mandatory. During the two years before the new contract is drafted, the software developers employed by the staff that created the *Case Connect* portal will create a similar link for *ConnectForward*. In the second year DHS will start training employment contractors who plan on making a bid for the upcoming contract on the intricacies of using *ConnectForward*. Incentives will be offered to employment contractors for them to start using *ConnectForward* before the new contract activates, so further testing can be done. Each agency will indicate certain people to be administrators. Relevant DHS and FF administrators will be trained in the system and also learn how to allow case managers to review the clients’ profiles. They then will go back and train the case managers in the use of *ConnectForward*.

**Evaluation Plan**

*ConnectForward* will be evaluated by how many more clients receive jobs, how much money is saved by using technology instead of paper and labor, how many more profiles are created in Jobs4tn.gov and how many people find jobs and are able to leave Families First services.
Campaign Plan

Our proposal affects a large number of stakeholders. Obvious stakeholders are Families First clients, employment contractors, and DHS. Each of these will have the greatest changes. Other less obvious stakeholders are also affected, such as tax payers and employers.

In our proposal we will be requiring FF clients to sign up for Jobs4TN.gov and apply for a minimum amount of jobs with the system. This could require learning new skills such as making a resume or learning a new online system. They will also be subjected to additional scrutiny. Currently, the tracking system largely involves following a paper trail and verbal affirmations of completion given by clients and employers. Our proposal gives the employment contractors the ability to track the jobs their client applies for in Jobs4TN.gov. This additional oversight will be helpful in identifying mistakes the client is making when applying for jobs. However, it is also more invasive than the current process. Invasiveness is often not welcomed and the clients may feel their autonomy is being marginalized. We are aware of this possible reaction, and be that as it may, it is important to focus equally on the benefits of the proposal. Yes it helps track the clients, but it also helps the employment contractor guide their client’s employment search. One concern is the internet access for the clients, but in a 2010 case study 80% of Families First clients had access to the internet, as seen in the table above (Fox, Cunningham and Hamblin, 2011, p. 39).

The employment contractors exist for the purpose of helping clients get jobs. Each contractor does this differently. They follow processes they have found effective and are
comfortable doing. Our proposal will change some of these processes. It is important to remember they will be implementing the changes, and they need to agree our proposal is a good idea. After discussing the proposal with the contractors we interviewed, they agree it would be helpful, but with the added efficiency some jobs could be lost. For this possible reason we understand that not everyone involved will be excited about ConnectForward; therefore, it is important to understand how these changes will affect the employment contractors on a company wide scale.

The Department of Human Services runs the FF program in Tennessee. Any change implemented with affect them. They will be responsible for carrying the objective of the policy out. It is important to understand how this will affect their processes and understanding how they will feel about the change.

The smaller, less obvious stakeholders also need to be considered. They will be affected in different ways and understanding them will be important to building a basis to pass this policy. Taxpayers will likely want to know how their money is being used and that the new resource is a worthy use of their funds. Potential employers of job seekers who are receiving assistance from FF will be interested in the utility of this resource since they will be encouraged to use it.

After considering each of the stakeholders we are able to look towards passing our policy. Since we want to modify an important system within the state, we want to appeal to a large amount of people. Therefore, clearly stating the advantages of our policy is important. We want to emphasize that it is a very small change with the potential for big outcomes. ConnectForward does not call for the overhaul of state departments or building difficult to use software from the ground up. We are not looking to transform a large system. Instead we
propose using existing technology and systems to seamlessly streamline resources for FF clients and employees. Perhaps the most important interest group to consider is the FF clients. Many biases exist about people on welfare. Some people believe they are not giving their best effort to get a job and our policy addresses this by being able to track their activity in Jobs4TN.gov. Others see this population as a marginalized group who needs additional help, which our policy addresses by giving them additional guidance in using technology to apply for jobs, along with a greater ability to identify barriers to work.

Implementing our policy will involve all of the stakeholders identified. The Department of Human Services will need to change their policies requiring all FF clients to use Jobs4TN.gov and also require when the next contract is negotiated that employment contractors use ConnectForward to track the clients. The employment contractors will then need to agree and use the system. Our policy will require them to train their employees, which is not an easy requirement. If we follow our timeline of implementation described earlier, then the training will begin before ConnectForward is required to be used and this will help alleviate some pressure in concerns to training. The FF clients will then be required to use Jobs4TN.gov as their primary mode of applying for jobs. This is a shift from the current structure which is paper application based. Once again we see how our relatively small change is going to have larger social implications. Many clients may not have used a computer in this fashion before and will require guidance, which the employment contractors will be giving.

On a larger scale we see stakeholders who do not seem to be directly involved. Tax payers will benefit and have the important power of elective rights. They elect the people who will be changing the current policies to ConnectForward. Countless Tennesseans stand to benefit from our policy in numerous ways such as, saving money, creating checks and balances in state
departments, and providing more effective services for the clients of Families First. The advantages of ConnectForward are obvious. Perhaps its greatest advantage is its cost effectiveness.

**Funding**

The funding for this system would come from the 71 million dollars already being spent on employment services. The state has already invested in Jobs4tn.gov and the access to the system already exists. We are proposing granting DHS the opportunity to utilize it. Training expenses and software support fees would be paid by the saving in cutting labor and increasing positive outcomes of FF clients. Below is a breakdown of how the state of Tennessee spends its tax dollars on Families First (Falk, 2014, p. 35).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Basic Assistance</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Child Care</th>
<th>Other Work Supports</th>
<th>Other Expenditures</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>108.2</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>318.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, we will need to estimate the amount of training that will be needed to implement our plan. The employment contractors’ budget is already largely made up of FF funds. Because of this it is hard to exactly estimate the cost of training. As an example, if we train a select few employees in each of the three employment contractors, they will then need to spend money sending them to train the employment case workers. Alternatively, the state could host larger training sessions and then the cost would fall on them to pay for the effort. We propose training a select few and then having the employment contractors absorb the cost. If the objectives of ConnectForward are achieved then the employment contractors will save money on labor, because less people will be needed to track progress, and money will be saved because less people will be on FF. If 71 million is continued to be spent on employment services until the program is implemented, then we should not need to seek additional funds for training or
technology cost. After the initial technology and training cost, the 71 million dollar budget will be decreased in proportion with the amount of money being saved by ConnectForward.

**Budget**

The majority of our proposal is already in place. Jobs4TN.gov was an expensive endeavor by the state and should be utilized to its fullest potential to maximize the money spent on it. The access we want to expand in Jobs4TN.gov is also already in place and is being used by the Department of Labor. Since we want to expand this access to allow the employment contractors to track their clients’ progress in Jobs4TN.gov, our budget is based on increasing the technology to handle the additional traffic on the website. In order to allow additional thousands of people to log on and use Jobs4TN.gov, additional servers will need to be bought to ensure the system continues to run smoothly. The amount of existing technology is not known exactly, but after consulting with multiple computer programmers, we estimate between $20,000 and $40,000 additional server space will be needed.

The second part of our funding plan is training the employment contractors to use the new access they will be able to utilize. This is not easily calculated. Technology cost is concrete, but training cost is a little harder to nail down. Our plan is to have the employment contractors absorb some of the cost of the training. We want to train the employment contractors and then have them train themselves. This will place responsibility on the state and the employment contractors. Clients will also need to be trained, so training videos and materials will need to be created for them as well.

**Conclusion**

The beauty of our solution lies within the simplicity of our proposal. We are not trying to create a large new system or dramatically change the current structure of FF. We only propose
changes to this system that utilizes existing resources and technology to help **Connect** the clients with jobs and help the move **Forward** towards self-sufficiency and a life-time success. We believe this small change will positively affect the outcome of thousands of FF clients and millions of tax payer dollars, all by connecting two existing systems for a more integrated service.
References


