

Site Visit Report: Next Steps Program of Rockland County, New York

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Cluster: Collaboration Between TANF and Child Welfare to Improve Child Welfare Program Outcomes

Grantee: County of Rockland (NY), Department of Social Services

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SUMMARY

A number of mothers, heading low-income households at risk for or involved with child welfare services in Rockland County, NY, have benefited from a program designed to integrate services from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare. Using funding from a Federal Children's Bureau (CB) grant awarded in 2006, the county's Department of Social Services (DSS) expanded its welfare-to-work program, Next Steps. Drawing from best practices in both TANF and child welfare programs, Next Steps is a 6-month weekday program that helps participants develop and work toward accomplishing goals in academics, employment readiness, computer skills, behavioral therapy, and parenting. The CB grant expanded Next Steps to include child welfare services and improve child safety, father involvement and family stability and self-sufficiency. Mothers who participate often have learning disabilities that have impacted their employment, and a significant number have not earned a high school diploma. They often lack support from their family and from their children's father, who may be incarcerated or have a history of incarceration. The program's focus on academic, employment, parenting, and relationship goals seeks to address these barriers to family stability and self-sufficiency. Participants document weekly progress toward accomplishing their goals and discuss their progress with Next Steps staff.

Next Steps consists of four components that help participants reach their goals:

1. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) helps mothers learn to examine and manage their behaviors and feelings, problem-solve, and manage stress in order to improve relationships and develop conflict resolutions skills.
2. Parenting education is modeled on the Every Person Influences Children (EPIC) Families in Transition model and includes lecture, discussion, observation, and coaching to improve parenting skills. Mothers complete daily activities with their children and track their children's development with videos and journals.
3. Father involvement is encouraged and facilitated by the Next Steps Male Coordinator, who helps mothers understand the importance of father involvement and helps fathers feel welcomed by the program.
4. Mentoring is provided by volunteers, many of whom are DSS workers who serve as information resources for their mentees.

While the program has experienced some challenges, including enrollment barriers and resistance to father involvement, Next Steps staff have developed strategies for addressing these challenges. Their keys to success have included engaging participants in planning, co-locating

the Next Steps program with the county's health services program, providing onsite child care, and modeling recreational activities, among others.

At the time of the site visit, the Next Steps program had served 35 mothers and their children. While formal evaluation of the program outcomes is currently underway, anecdotal evidence from staff points to positive findings. Staff note that they receive three or four phone calls each week from former participants who want to connect or ask for advice or support. In informal discussions, participants have listed the benefits that Next Steps has provided, including increased support and confidence, knowledge of child development and parenting, and a collaborative culture with the opportunity to make their voice heard.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Next Steps Program" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

The Rockland County (NY) Department of Social Services' Next Steps program is a 5-day-per-week, 6-month program for mothers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits who have very young children. The project seeks to integrate core services and components of best practices from both [TANF and child welfare practice models](#). Next Steps aims to improve child safety and increase family stability and self-sufficiency.

Each participant works with the Next Steps Coordinator to [develop goals](#) in five primary areas:

1. **Academic development.** Goals are individualized and may include earning a high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree (GED), gathering academic records to enroll in an appropriate program, or identifying learning disabilities and securing resources to address challenges.
2. **Computer skills.** Participants attend computer classes twice per week. These classes offer training in Microsoft Office programs, typing and keyboarding, and basic computer skills such as saving, organizing, and mapping files.
3. **Employment readiness.** Participants complete two assessments to increase their self-knowledge related to job and career preferences. Additional assignments may include developing a cover letter and resume, strengthening interviewing skills, identifying appropriate job opportunities, and applying for open positions.
4. **Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.** This group education and counseling program helps increase mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotional regulation.
5. **Parenting education.** Next Steps uses the Families in Transition model for parent education, which includes two parts: (1) formal education on child care and child development topics and (2) staff observation and coaching while mothers care for their children in Next Steps' classrooms.

Participants complete a blend of standardized and self-identified activities toward these goals and document weekly progress on worksheets that they discuss with the Next Steps Coordinator. Program activities often are interdisciplinary. For example, a parenting education activity might require participants to create a presentation in PowerPoint, which helps strengthen computer skills.

While mothers participate in these intensive services, their children receive onsite child care.

Need for This Service

Participating families face many challenges, including:

- **Poverty.** Families must have incomes at or below 200 percent of the Federal poverty level to qualify.
- **Learning disabilities.** A high percentage of the mothers have learning disabilities that may have impacted their educational attainment and job prospects.
- **Barriers to employment.** Thirty-seven percent of mothers had issues with self-esteem and/or social skills; 31 percent had a poor work record, no work record, or limited job-seeking skills; and 17 percent reported that lack of access to employment was a barrier. A small number of participants had language, communication, basic needs, housing, legal, health, or dependent care issues that created barriers to employment. Many Next Steps participants have little formal knowledge of computer systems as they relate to the professional world.
- **Lack of educational achievement.** Forty-six percent of participating mothers have no high school diploma; 51 percent entered with a high school diploma or GED. Only 3 percent of participants had a 2-year degree or credential.¹
- **Lack of father involvement.** While some children in the Next Steps program have active and involved fathers, most do not. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many fathers are incarcerated at the time that their children are enrolled in Next Steps or that they have a history of incarceration.
- **Lack of family support.** Very few mothers in the Next Steps program had active fathers in their lives throughout their own childhoods, and between 75 percent and 80 percent report some history of sexual abuse.

Mothers excluded from participating in the Next Steps program include those with:

- **Active addictions to drugs or alcohol.** They are welcome and encouraged to return to Next Steps when their conditions have stabilized.
- **Severe mental health issues such as active psychosis.** These clients are not well-suited for the program and are unable to participate unless their condition is stabilized.

Participants come to Next Steps from a variety of referral sources, mostly from TANF caseworker referrals and word of mouth throughout the community. Sometimes, family court mandates participation in Next Steps as a step in avoiding the removal of a child from the home. Staff have noted that court-referred mothers often have some of the most complex issues, including mental health diagnoses and a family history of multigenerational involvement in the child welfare system. In other cases, though the family court does not mandate Next Steps, caseworkers in Rockland County's Intensive Family Preservation Program² may strongly encourage their clients to participate before further court involvement occurs.

Other participant demographics include the following:

- On July 12, 2010, Next Steps was serving 35 clients and their children.
- A majority (57 percent) of clients were under the age of 25; an additional 20 percent were between the ages of 25 and 34.

¹ Percentages based on Next Steps' database of 26 alumnae and 9 active participants enrolled in the program on July 12, 2010.

² Rockland County's Intensive Family Preservation Program offers intensive, short-term, home-based services to families who require a greater degree of support than is offered in the county's regular Prevention Program, to keep children safely in their homes and avoid the placement of children in foster care.

- Program participants are racially and ethnically diverse: 26 percent are White/non-Hispanic; 20 percent are Black/African American; 29 percent are Hispanic/Latino, and 25 percent are biracial.
- The overwhelming majority of clients have never been married (89 percent), though a small number (9 percent) were married at the time of their participation in the program.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit took place July 12, 2010, at the Next Steps facility located at the Rockland County Social Services complex. The visit included:

- A participant-led tour of the facility, including the child care center, classroom, kitchen and break area, and playground, during which the two program participants shared their experiences with the program
- An hour in the classroom and playground area, interacting with children and parents and talking with classroom teachers about the parent education component
- Observation of a Dialectical Behavioral Therapy session with program participants
- An opportunity to observe staff and program participants sharing a nutritious lunch and discussing “real life” issues in an informal and nonjudgmental way
- A discussion in which the Male Coordinator and several participants shared stories of their work to build more positive relationships with the children’s fathers
- Observation of computer skills training and academic support
- A viewing of Next Steps’ outreach video, which was developed by program participants and is designed to be used to educate stakeholder groups about program benefits
- A discussion with child welfare and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) supervisors about how Next Steps fosters collaborations between these two departments
- An evening Parent Partner meeting

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)

Next Steps clients struggle with daily challenges and stressors. DBT teaches participants to examine their feelings and behavior, from their roots to current issues in their lives, and helps them approach problem-solving and stress management in more effective ways. The model has been adapted for a group setting and emphasizes four main areas relevant to Next Steps participants:

1. **Mindfulness** refers to the practice of keeping one’s focus in the present moment. Research indicates that practicing mindfulness can help reduce anxiety, stress, and depression.
2. **Distress tolerance** provides a framework to help participants recognize emotional pain and address it constructively. Participants are taught a variety of concrete strategies for managing distress.
3. **Interpersonal effectiveness** emphasizes building and maintaining healthy relationships and helping participants maintain self-esteem in relationships.
4. **Emotional regulation** helps participants learn to identify emotions, understand how they influence behavior, and regulate emotions that are connected with self-destructive behaviors.

Each participant receives a [workbook](#) to complete during the program. Participants use Diary Cards each week to describe situations and identify the underlying emotion and resulting behavior. DBT group discussions occur once per week and incorporate a structured lesson with open discussion among staff and participants.

Benefits of DBT include:

- **Improved relationships.** Many participants noted that DBT has helped them navigate their often emotionally charged relationships with their children's fathers. Several say they are now more attuned to their emotions when they are talking with their children's fathers, and that this awareness helps them to temper their reactions with knowledge of what is best for their children.
- **Conflict resolution skills.** DBT provides an important framework for conflict resolution, both among participants and between participants and staff. Next Steps staff encourage and model immediate conflict resolution. During the site visit, several participants noted that learning how to disagree constructively had helped them to improve their relationships with family members or their children's fathers.

EPIC Parenting Education

Next Steps uses the Families in Transition model for parent education, developed by Every Person Influences Children (EPIC) at the Wilson National Center for Parenting Education. EPIC includes both formal education on child care and child development topics, and observation and coaching while mothers care for their children in Next Steps' classrooms.

Weekly training sessions consist of lecture and discussion. Participants are encouraged to use examples from their own experience to illustrate the day's topic. Topics covered include:

- Tuning in to your child
- Fostering self-esteem
- Helping children cope
- Setting limits
- Building independence
- Learning through play

Each week, mothers videotape their child for 5 minutes, take a photo of their child, and write a paragraph describing their child's development. Photos and paragraphs are pasted into scrapbook pages, which the mothers can keep and continue using after graduating from the program.

For 2 hours each day, mothers also complete a "Mommy and Me" activity with their children in the classroom. Child care providers suggest activities, talk with mothers who have issues or concerns, and model positive adult-child interactions. Next Steps staff noted that mothers often come into the program with very little understanding of child development, which often leads to them having unrealistic expectations for children's behavior. By building time into the day for parent-child interaction, child care providers and Next Steps staff can help mothers build their confidence and knowledge so that they are better able to understand their child's needs. At times, staff also have been able to identify potential issues and connect parents and children with special services to address developmental delays, emotional or behavioral concerns, or attachment issues.

Father Involvement

Next Steps employs a Male Coordinator, whose responsibilities include working with mothers to:

- Help them understand the benefits of father involvement in the lives of their children.
- Engage them in designing a father involvement component that was comfortable for them.
- Contact incarcerated fathers, with the mother's consent, and provide monthly updates about their children (avoiding any discussion of the mother's circumstances or relationships).

Next Steps staff have worked diligently to help fathers feel safe and welcomed in the Next Steps building, which has led to increased positive interactions between fathers and their children. Project leadership hopes that these activities will set the stage for active and positive father involvement, particularly when incarcerated fathers return to the community and are in a position to become more active in their children's lives.

Mentoring

The Children's Bureau Discretionary Grant award provided resources for a committee of Next Steps participants and staff to design and implement a mentoring component based on the [Parent Partners model](#). Many of the volunteer mentors are Rockland County Department of Social Services (DSS) workers.

At the time of this site visit, the mentoring component of Next Steps was still evolving. The few matches that had occurred were formed somewhat organically, as Next Steps participants and volunteer mentors participated in activities together and gravitated toward one another in an informal setting. While staff initially attempted to match participants with volunteer mentors, these matches were unsuccessful.

Matches are expected to meet at least once per week for an hour. While face-to-face contact is preferred, child care and scheduling issues often result in matches talking by phone. Next Steps participants have seemed particularly comfortable when mentors take on the role of an "information resource" rather than a friend, as they view this as beneficial but nonthreatening. Mentors continue to remain committed to the program, whether they are involved in 1:1 matches or not. Many attend training and regular mentor meetings on their own time and continue to develop relationships with program participants through group activities.

Challenges

Some of the challenges the program has encountered include:

- **Enrollment barriers.** At the time of the site visit, approximately 30 percent of the clients referred to Next Steps had chosen not to enroll in the program. While there is little formal data about why they opt not to enroll, staff feel some are simply not ready to do the difficult academic and emotional work required. Some clients return later and complete the program successfully, indicating that both a commitment to the program and the emotional readiness to identify and address complex, often painful issues, are key.
- **Lack of a common data system.** Some leadership turnover has made data sharing between Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare more difficult. Program leadership noted that having an integrated data system would improve the ability of Next Steps staff to identify potential participants and access necessary data quickly and easily for evaluation purposes.
- **Resistance to DBT.** Initially, program participants were reluctant to participate in DBT. Staff felt that part of this resistance was due to participants' negative thoughts about mental health treatment or any program component they felt was intended to "diagnose" or "fix" them. Further education about DBT, as well as staff's active participation in the group sessions, helped reframe the program component as less an "intervention" and more as a different way to think about daily challenges and problems.

- **Lack of father involvement.** Many of the Next Steps mothers have poor or nonexistent relationships with their children's fathers. Many grew up themselves without strong positive paternal role models and have few models for successful male involvement in the lives of children. Staff note that even when Next Steps mothers have cordial relationships with the fathers of their children, a father's new romantic partner can be a source of conflict and stress.
- **Resistance to father involvement.** Many Next Steps mothers resisted the Male Coordinator's efforts at the start, suspecting an underlying message that "single mothers alone aren't good enough." An effective way of overcoming this resistance was for the Male Coordinator to join participants for lunch on a regular basis and listen to their conversations, gently beginning to explore participants' feelings about the lack of contact with their own fathers. These conversations helped many Next Steps mothers realize it was possible for their children to have a positive relationship with their fathers that would help them thrive throughout their lives. Staff also noted that as the economy has struggled, Next Steps mothers are increasingly dependent on financial support from fathers. This has offered an added incentive for mothers to reengage with fathers and encourage them to provide both financial and emotional support to their children.
- **Immigration concerns.** Several fathers approached by program staff were fearful of becoming involved with their children, particularly through any sort of formalized program, due to unresolved immigration issues. The Male Coordinator reported that many of the fathers would only agree to meet with him in the evening. After further discussion, staff learned that many fathers feared visits during regular business hours, believing that law enforcement officials would be involved. They viewed evening visits as "informal" or "unofficial" and were more open to being engaged when this fear was alleviated.
- **Mentoring challenges.** Some Next Steps participants felt that they already had enough demands on their time, and they were reluctant to allow another "stranger" to become involved in the personal details of their lives. Several mothers reported fearing that volunteer mentors would "call CPS" on them. Volunteers also expressed the need for clear boundaries in the relationship and specific guidance on how the mentoring role differed from their regular job responsibilities. Participants are more open to this component as they recognize that mentors can be helpful to them in specific situations, such as job referrals and interview help, or as additional supports in advocating with the schools for their children.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

Next Steps staff and leadership have learned a great deal about implementing and operating a collaborative program that best meets the needs of their clients. These lessons include:

- **Engage participants in planning and implementation.** Staff found that listening to participants' needs was only the first step in the collaborative process. Engaging participants meaningfully in program planning helps avoid or alleviate participant resistance to program components such as father engagement and mentoring. (Staff note, "no new program component that was designed without participant input has ever been successful.") Five committees jointly run by staff and current participants focus on these aspects of the program: Facilities Maintenance, Management, Special Occasion, Transportation, and Welcoming. Active client engagement helps Next Steps' participants build self-esteem and gives them valuable experience expressing their needs and developing or accessing resources to meet those needs.
- **Build trust and clearly communicate confidentiality policies.** Staff anticipated that collaboration between child welfare and TANF caseworkers would result in efficiencies for clients involved in both systems. Despite the convenience of coordinated timelines and case plans, clients were not always eager to see caseworkers communicating more frequently, particularly when issues and challenges arose. Clients who came to Next Steps through the TANF program were often suspicious and guarded, fearing a greater likelihood that they would be investigated by child protective services or that their children

- would be removed from them. Finally, clients required role clarification when DSS staff moved into other roles, such as serving as volunteer mentors, to ensure that information was shared appropriately. During the site visit, Next Steps participants described their high degree of trust in Next Steps staff—and in each other—as being instrumental to the program’s success.
- **Co-locate with health services.** Next Steps’ location in the county DSS complex allows for additional services that participants otherwise might struggle to access. An onsite nurse provides mothers with resources on family planning and sexually transmitted infections. Many Next Step participants have relatively little good information on sexual health issues and, in many cases, the Next Steps program is their only source of accurate information and nonjudgmental support. Next Steps staff also emphasize the development of a strong sense of self, apart from the ability to bear and raise children, to help participants avoid unplanned pregnancies in the future.
 - **Foster interdepartmental support.** Next Steps began as a TANF program that developed a strong child welfare component. Directors in both departments were highly visible in their support for Next Steps, which filtered to the supervisor and caseworker levels. This support motivated and enabled caseworkers to collaborate closely and develop integrated case plans for participants that were neither contradictory nor duplicative—a clear benefit for program participants.
 - **Balance structure and flexibility to meet client needs.** Next Steps follows a set schedule and curriculum. A rolling admissions structure allows all clients to experience the full range of program activities while permitting them freedom to develop and work toward individual goals. This helps ensure that services build on client strengths and meet their needs. Also, while most participants complete the Next Steps program in 6 months, exceptions are made for clients who need a longer intervention to develop skills and stability to enter the job market, or whose caseworkers feel the family needs additional support and supervision.
 - **Provide onsite child care.** Interviews with participants support the staff’s belief that onsite child care is a critical factor for many of these mothers. It was clear that free, safe child care allows mothers to participate fully in the program. Co-locating child care with program services also supports a nonthreatening approach to ongoing parenting education and helps address issues of separation anxiety, as mothers are free to visit with their children throughout the day.
 - **Limit staff turnover through collaboration.** Very few Next Steps decisions are made unilaterally, from those involving individual cases to discussions about program and curriculum modifications. Program leadership has been careful to ensure that all staff members have an opportunity to speak and be heard in staff meetings, so program decisions are informed from multiple perspectives. Staff note that there is low staff turnover and a high degree of staff cohesion and morale as a result. Low turnover allows staff to form strong, trusting relationships with program participants that often last well beyond graduation. Staff believe these relationships are at the heart of the Next Steps program and enable participants to make the life changes necessary to strengthen and maintain their families, even after their formal program participation has ended.
 - **Model positive recreational activities.** While Next Steps participants work through difficult and complex issues, the program staff also believe in the importance of celebrating holidays and milestones. The group emphasizes activities that are free or low cost, to help Next Step mothers identify ways to enjoy free time with their children after they have completed the program. Each year, Next Steps hosts holiday celebrations that are centered on recognition of different cultural traditions. Alumnae dinners are held every other month. They are funded through a separate grant and are very well attended, offering opportunities for participants to talk informally and for children to play together. An annual Alumnae Meeting allows past participants and their children to reconnect and celebrate their successes. Outings such as trips to a local park encourage families to engage in healthy physical activities while also bringing the entire group together in an informal setting.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

Next Steps is participating in the Children's Bureau's evaluation of this grantee cluster, being conducted by James Bell Associates. Next Steps has contracted with ResearchWorks, Inc. for local evaluation.

The local evaluation design compares the outcomes of Next Steps participants with outcomes from a matched sample of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients who do not participate in Next Steps. Subjects are matched on the following factors:

- Age
- Educational level
- Number/age of children
- Race/ethnicity
- Involvement with the child welfare system

Outcomes to be examined include:

- Educational attainment
- Employment status and salary
- Child welfare involvement

At the time of the site visit, staff had experienced difficulty identifying matches from the county's TANF participants. Staff attributed this difficulty to leadership turnover within the department, which delayed access to records. As of November 2010, the evaluators had received a list of records for potential matches and were culling this list to identify good matches for approximately 15 Next Steps participants who had enrolled in the program since August 2009.

While the formal evaluation has not been completed, staff feel that the number and nature of calls they receive from former participants are positive indicators. On average, they receive three or four such calls each week. Generally, callers are seeking advice, guidance, or support, indicating that relationships between Next Steps staff and participants are strong and continue even after participants leave the program. This is particularly important because many Next Steps participants have few, if any, positive supports outside the program. Staff also feel that participants who seek further guidance are demonstrating an ongoing commitment to the lessons they have learned in the program and a desire to continue to strengthen their families using what they have learned.

During the site visit, current and former Next Steps participants discussed the benefits they had received from the program. These included:

- **Increased support and confidence.** Many participants spoke of developing new confidence in their ability to provide well for their children and to find meaningful work that would eventually enable them to be financially self-sufficient.
- **Knowledge of child development and parenting.** Gains ranged from appropriate ways to discipline and redirect their children, to how to advocate for their children's needs in various settings, including the educational and mental health systems.
- **Collaborative culture.** Several current and former participants stated that they valued "being heard"—some for the first time in their lives—and they felt that this was what differentiated Next Steps from other programs in which they had participated.

ATTACHMENTS

The [attachments](#) for this site visit report are available via the Child Welfare Information Gateway library:

- Additional Resources: Child Welfare and TANF
- Monthly Goals Worksheets
- DBT Workbook
- Additional Resources: Mentoring
- Parent Partners Application Packet
- Parent Partners Participant Packet