

Issue BRIEF

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Learn, Innovate, Improve: **Lessons from Adams County's Efforts to Increase Engagement in the Colorado Works Program**

LI² is a three-phase, evidence-informed analytic process designed to guide innovation and improvement of human services programs.

The objective of the LEARN phase is to clarify the underlying reasons for a program change and to build a common understanding of the problem to be solved.

The objectives of the INNOVATE phase are to generate and prioritize ideas for program change and document a clear road map for change.

The primary objective of the IMPROVE phase is to conduct a series of small pilots, or "road tests," to gather feedback and refine the program innovation. A second objective is to help build program staff's capacity to collect, analyze, and use data for everyday program decisions and continuous improvement.

Engaging people in required program activities is a persistent problem in human services agencies across the country. The Colorado Works program—Colorado's version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF—is not unique in its struggle to engage beneficiaries of cash assistance (parents with little to no income) in employment services. Counties throughout the state, which all run their own version of Colorado Works, have tried a variety of strategies to engage parents, including financial incentives. Yet initial engagement rates—the share of parents who follow through on required upfront activities such as orientation, initial meetings, and plan creation—generally remain around 50 percent.

This problem threatens to further destabilize vulnerable families, who may have their cash assistance revoked for failing to comply with program requirements. It also puts an administrative burden on the program staff who spend time trying to re-engage parents, issuing sanctions, and closing cases.

A growing body of research in the behavioral sciences reveals some important facets of human behavior that are relevant to solving this problem: (1) people rely more on intuitive, reflexive thinking than on deliberate, effortful thinking; (2) the mind's attention is finite and highly selective; and (3) self-control is an exhaustible cognitive resource.^{3,4} Moreover, research shows that living under the stress of insufficient physical resources complicates a person's ability to navigate everyday tasks, which in turn can inhibit follow-through on intended or expected behaviors.⁵

Drawing on this body of research, a team from Mathematica Policy Research, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and three county agencies, used a behavioral science lens to diagnose the factors that lead to low engagement. The team then co-created evidence-informed solutions and tested them to see whether they improved upfront program engagement. This brief summarizes the innovation experience of Adams County's Adams Works program. We describe the county's efforts, which were guided by the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) model, to design, test, and learn from a research-informed solution to this common engagement challenge (see sidebar).

LEARN



Our work began with understanding and documenting the factors that lead to low initial engagement. The CDHS Employment and Benefits Division defines and measures initial engagement in the Colorado Works program as the parent (1) agreeing to a road map that outlines his or her goals and work-related activities and (2) reporting at least one hour in a work-related activity.

Through a series of interviews with staff in 10 counties across the state, our team found a considerable amount of variation in how counties communicate and track engagement within their agencies. In addition, counties use a variety of approaches to engage parents in employment services, some of which are more onerous than others. Despite these differences, counties of varying sizes and with various Colorado Works models reported similar challenges communicating with families and completing referrals from eligibility to employment providers.

The Adams County team decided to focus on parents' transition between receiving an eligibility approval for cash assistance from the department of human services and attending an orientation with Adams Works. Once a parent is approved for benefits, the eligibility specialist refers him or her to attend a mandatory orientation session with Adams Works, called a Welcoming Session. Fairly minimal instruction is provided by the eligibility specialist about Adams Works or the Welcoming Session. Adams Works holds two Welcoming Sessions every Friday—one in the morning, one in the afternoon—facilitated by a program supervisor and lasting for about 45 minutes. Parents are required

to attend a Welcoming Session in person; if they do not show up to their scheduled session or pre-emptively reschedule, their case is immediately closed.

Historically, about half of the parents who received referrals to an Adams Works orientation attended their scheduled session. The Adams Works team had previously tried to address these low show rates by introducing a series of monetary incentives and text-message reminders. However, although no experimental test took place, the team saw no meaningful increase in attendance after rolling out the incentives and reminders to the entire caseload. The team also restructured the orientations into a group format; they were previously conducted by a case manager in one-on-one settings with parents.

Based on their experiences working with parents, Adams Works staff hypothesized that a more personal connection before the Welcoming Session might help to address parents' ambivalence, lack of understanding, or forgetfulness with respect to the required session. Staff noted that parents often say they received little to no information about the content of the session from their eligibility specialist. Staff also said that parents are commonly confused about the purpose of Adams Works in relation to their benefits.

INNOVATE



To address some of these bottlenecks to upfront engagement, the Adams Works team and Mathematica co-created a proactive outreach strategy. Specifically, the team wanted to try a personalized approach to connecting with parents newly assigned to the program. Using a "road map" for change, the county defined its strategy, its targets for change, the anticipated outcomes, and potential moderators of the strategy's success (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Adams Works' proactive outreach road map

Strategies <i>What we will do</i>	Targets <i>What we will change</i>	Outcomes <i>What success will look like</i>
<p>Lead workers contact parents by phone one or two days before their scheduled Welcoming Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone conversation is brief and focuses on clarifying the purpose of the Welcoming Session and what the parent can expect, and confirming that the scheduled time works <p>If an email is on file, lead worker sends a follow-up email confirming the phone conversation OR, if the parent did not answer, summarizing the same points that would have been discussed</p>	<p>Parent's feeling of connection to the program. Parent feels more valued as a person rather than "a number" to the program</p> <p>Parent's buy-in to the Welcoming Session. Parent sees the value and benefits of attending</p> <p>Parent's behavior. Parent shows up to the scheduled Welcoming Session on time</p> <p>Information delivery. Lead workers provide more consistent, relevant information to parents about the Welcoming Session</p>	<p>Increased attendance rate at the Welcoming Session, from a historical average of 50% to 75%</p> <p>Increased attendance rate at one-on-one case manager meetings, which take place within four business days of the Welcoming Session</p> <p>Faster engagement of parents into program activities</p> <p>Lower staff stress and workloads driven by rescheduling and noncompliance processes</p>
<p>Moderators <i>Factors that may affect our strategies, targets, and/or outcomes</i></p>		
<p>Parents' phone numbers and email addresses are inaccurate or missing</p> <p>Eligibility team are delayed in sending referral to the Adams Works team (potentially missing the timeline for staff to reach out in advance)</p>		

WHY RANDOM ASSIGNMENT?

A random assignment approach assigns study participants to either receive an intervention or not. Because the assignment is done at random, we can reliably conclude that any resulting difference in outcomes between the group who received the intervention and the group that did not was the effect of the intervention. In other words, the outcomes of the two groups would have been the same if not for the intervention. Randomly assigning parents to either receive the intervention or receive “business as usual” is the best way to test and know—with a high degree of certainty—that any resulting difference in outcomes is due to the intervention.

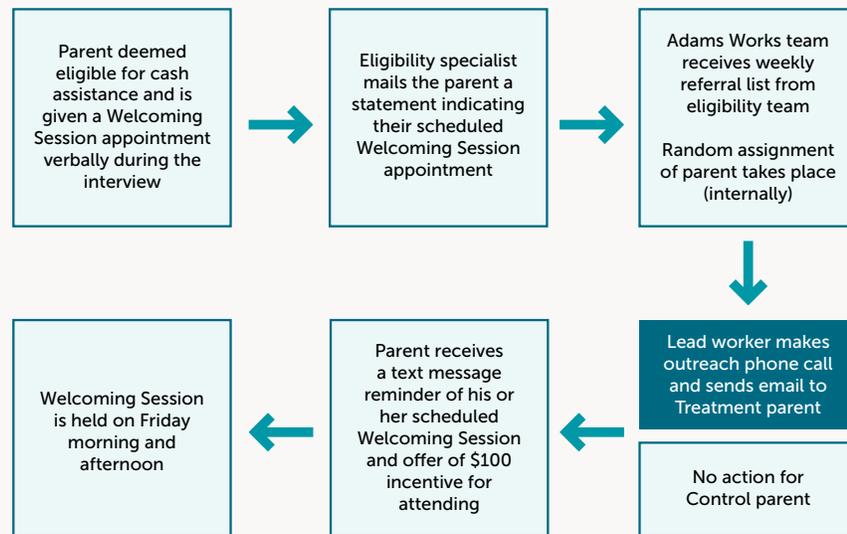
The team’s approach was fairly straightforward to implement. For anyone approved for cash assistance, the eligibility specialist told the parent the time and date of his or her scheduled Welcoming Session during the eligibility interview. The parent also received the standard mailing, indicating the scheduled time. Each week, the eligibility specialists gave the Adams Works team a list of all parents scheduled for Welcoming Sessions. Two designated lead workers made phone calls to parents on Wednesday or Thursday, immediately preceding the morning and afternoon Welcoming Sessions scheduled for that Friday. Adams Works continued its offer of a monetary incentive to all parents for attending their scheduled Welcoming Session (\$100 issued to parents’ Electronic Benefit Transfer cards), which was mentioned in a text message sent to parents’ cell phones one day before their scheduled Welcoming Session.

IMPROVE



In trying out the new approach, the Adams Works team was committed to generating reliable evidence about whether this strategy could truly achieve the desired impact on the primary outcome of interest: attendance rates. So, in partnership with Mathematica, Adams Works launched an experiment of its new approach on January 3, 2018, by randomly assigning each new parent referred to the program to either receive proactive outreach or to receive the “business as usual” approach. Figure 2 shows the two approaches, highlighting that the only difference between these two experiences is the phone and email outreach by Adams Works.

Figure 2. Proactive outreach versus “business as usual” in Adams Works

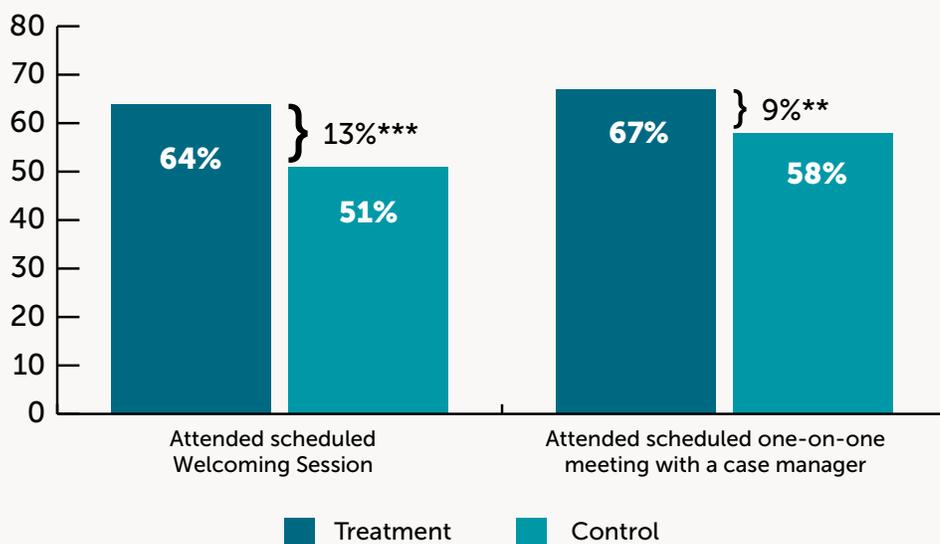


Between January 3 and May 18, 2018, Adams Works conducted 38 Welcoming Sessions on 19 Fridays, with 833 parents randomly assigned into the experiment. Of those 833 parents, 403 (or 48.4 percent) were assigned to the treatment group and received a phone call and email from the Adams Works team; 430 (or 51.6 percent) were assigned to the control group and did not receive this additional outreach from the Adams Works team.

Results from this experiment show that the team’s outreach strategy led to an impact on the

two key outcomes of interest (Figure 3). Our analysis confirmed that the differences between the treatment and control groups are statistically significant for both the rate of attending scheduled Welcoming Sessions and the rate of attending scheduled one-on-one meetings with the case manager. We are therefore able to conclude, with a high degree of confidence, that the Adams Works proactive outreach strategy caused these increases in attendance rates among parents in the treatment group.⁶

Figure 3. Impacts on key outcomes



*** p-value < 0.001

** p-value < 0.01

Qualitative feedback from Adams Works staff supports these findings. Supervisors said that they got fewer complaints regarding scheduling and missed appointments. Lead workers who conducted the outreach to parents in the treatment group said that their interactions were generally positive and that parents expressed appreciation for the personal phone call. But lead workers said that emailing was often difficult because clients' email addresses were occasionally not included on the referral or were not up-to-date. Anecdotally, Adams Works staff observed noticeable improvements in key timeliness measures for their program during the experiment phase—specifically, measures of the share of clients who complete an assessment within a 15-day window and a 30-day window from eligibility determination. (One of the forms completed by parents at the Welcoming Session satisfies this requirement for an assessment.) We also examined whether this outreach strategy had any impact on the rate of rescheduled orientations; we found there to be no meaningful difference in the rate of rescheduling orientations between the treatment (17.6%) and the control (17.0%) groups.⁷

Based on the evidence generated through this short experiment, the Adams Works team scaled up its outreach strategy to the entire caseload of new referrals for the program, effective June 1, 2018, with the hope of increasing attendance across the board. The team has also made several content and process improvements to the design of the Welcoming Sessions, further streamlining them and creating a more efficient experience for parents.

In sum, the Adams Works team was able to apply the LI² process and key insights from behavioral science to address a persistent problem for the program. Using a simple random assignment evaluation, the team produced reliable, actionable evidence within five months. This evidence helped the team make an informed decision about scaling up the strategy for the entire caseload, based on its demonstrated success.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC

² Adams Works Family Transition Services, Adams County, Colorado

³ Kahneman, D. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011.

⁴ Mullainathan, Sendhil, and Richard H. Thaler. "Behavioral Economics." October 2000. Available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=245733. Accessed June 22, 2018.

⁵ Mullainathan, S., and E. Shafir. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013.

⁶ Statistical significance measured using t-tests of differences in mean, where $p < 0.001$ for the 13 percentage point difference in attendance rates at the Welcoming Session, and where $p < 0.01$ for the 9 percentage point difference in attendance rates at the one-on-one meeting with the case manager.

⁷ This difference is not statistically significant.

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