

NEWA asked for information in five key areas:

- 1. Family relationships**
 - a. Parenting skills
 - b. Domestic Violence
 - c. KCSP
- 2. Child Support**
 - a. Touch on referrals to SES
- 3. Child Care Assistance**
 - a. CCAP –STEP & LI
- 4. Employment Services**
 - a. Supportive Services
 - b. Disabled – Mental/Physical
 - c. Earned Income Disregard
 - d. Post FITAP
 - e. Voc Ed
 - f. GED
 - g. Job Search/Readiness
 - h. WEP
- 5. Children's Education**

State of Louisiana
Department of Social Services (DSS)
Office of Family Support (OFS)
Family Assistance Division
TANF Best Practices
March 2008

The Family Independence Temporary Assistance Program (FITAP) is a program administered by the Office of Family Support, Family Assistance Division that provides cash assistance grants to families with dependent children. The Strategies To Empower People (STEP) Program is a program administered by the Office of Family Support which provides education, employment, training, and related services for families receiving or applying for FITAP assistance who are work-eligible.

Through both the FITAP and STEP programs, OFS recipients have multiple opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency.

Using the five key areas provided by the National Eligibility Workers Association (NEWA), the focus of these best practices will be related to:

- Family Relationships
- Child Support
- Child Care Assistance
- Employment Services
- Children's Education

Family Relationship

Parenting Skills Training is available to STEP recipients who are pregnant or have a child under the age of one. Supportive Services are offered which include child care and transportation to those participating in the training. The training consists of techniques for caring for infants, family meal planning, and financial planning. The recipients are in a class among their peers, and they are required to work with others in a group setting. This teaches them the importance of working with others and as a team. Certificates are issued upon completion of each of the six modules.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- The Case Worker will attend the participant's first class
- The worker attends the presentation of the certificates and takes the participant's picture with their certificate.

Domestic violence occurs in many forms. It may be as subtle as verbal or emotional abuse or as visible as physical injuries.

OFS has policies and procedures established to:

- Screen individuals applying for and receiving FITAP assistance to identify victims of domestic violence while maintaining the confidentiality of such individuals;
- Refer such individuals for counseling and supportive services; and
- Temporarily waive certain program requirements which would make it more difficult for such individuals to escape domestic violence or unfairly penalize such individuals who are or have been victimized by such violence, or individuals who are at risk of further domestic violence.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Have one worker handle all cases where the recipient is a known victim of domestic violence.
- Display Domestic Violence posters/literature in all parish offices with the domestic abuse hotline number prominently displayed. Paper and pens are made available to recipients so that they can discreetly write the number for future reference.
- Informational posters with the hotline phone number on tear-tabs are displayed in the parish office.
- Worker makes the appropriate referrals for self-identified victims and helps the recipient develop a plan that specifies the necessary actions, goals, and services that may enable the victim to escape the domestic violence situation.
- Some workers serve as a representative for OFS at the Family Justice Center (a one-stop agency for victims of domestic violence).
- Make referrals to Legal Aid or providing the name & telephone number of the Legal Aid office in their area
- Some workers provide their personal cell phone number to the recipient giving them access to their worker 24 hours a day in the event of an emergency.
- Workers create a relationship with their local domestic violence shelter so that immediate contact can be made if the need arises.

Kinship Care Subsidy Program (KCSP) is administered by OFS and it provides cash assistance for children that reside with Qualified Relatives (QRs), other than their parents. KCSP allows QRs who provide for the health, welfare, and education of a related child to receive financial assistance, thereby insuring family stability for the child. Studies have shown that children placed with relatives instead of in foster care homes, tend to thrive and do better in school and social settings. Placement with relatives provides a better chance of the family unit staying intact.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Offering recipients the option of applying for KCSP when they have a relative child in their care and are applying for another program.
- Offer assistance to the recipient in obtaining required documents needed to determine program eligibility.
- Make referrals to Legal Aid or providing the name & telephone number of the Legal Aid office in their area
- Collaborating with DSS/Office of Community Services (OCS) – the state agency responsible for child protection.
- Louisiana (LA) Kinship Integrated Service System is a partnership between OCS and OFS. LA KISS is designed to improve safety, stability, permanency, and well being outcomes for KCSP families in four (4) parishes in the Greater New Orleans Region.

Child Support

The Support Enforcement Services (SES) Program is within OFS that works closely with Family Assistance to help families in need obtain support from non-custodial parents. SES puts children first by helping parents assume responsibility for the economic and social well-being, health and stability of their children.

The following is explained to the cash benefit applicant:

- The automatic assignment of support
- The requirement to cooperate with Support Enforcement Services (SES)
- Good cause may be claimed for not cooperating with SES.
- The penalties for not cooperating with program requirements.
- Upon case certification, a referral is automatically sent from Family Assistance to SES.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Informing the applicant of the methods of receiving monetary support through either direct deposit or via a debit card.
- Sharing success stories about applicants who have benefited from SES services.

Child Care Assistance

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) - A program administered by the Office of Family Support that determines household eligibility for Child Care Assistance, and makes payments for child care services to eligible providers.

Strategies To Empower People Child Care (STEP-CC) - Child Care Assistance paid on behalf of FITAP families participating in approved STEP activities and employed families transitioning off of FITAP.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Provides recipients with a current list of local child care providers, including addresses and contact information.
- Offers to assist recipients and child care providers with completing paperwork.
- Offer child care assistance to all recipients, even those with free child care.
- Assisting the recipient to arrange “back-up” child care for those who use Family Daycare homes.

Supportive Services

Participants are provided supportive services to enable them to participate in STEP. STEP supportive service payments are disbursed electronically. The electronic disbursements include Direct Deposits to the client's bank account (checking or savings) or payments to a Stored Value Card account; the commercial term for a card-accessed account system where payments are electronically deposited in an account accessible for cash withdrawal or for credit purchases, similar to a debit card.

The types of Supportive Services available are:

- Transportation,
- Child Care, and
- Other Supportive Services, including but not limited to:
 - Car repairs
 - Driver's license fees
 - Union dues
 - Tools
 - Clothes
 - Uniforms
 - Medical tests
 - Eye glasses or hearing aids
 - Safety equipment

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Thoroughly explain all of the supportive services available to the participant.
- Use the supportive services to pay for driver's education courses, down payments on car insurance, or driver's license fees.
- Explain all options for transportation, including: bus fares/tokens, contracted transportation, taxi cabs, reimbursement for mileage if their personal vehicle is used, and paying a relative/friend for transportation.
- Provide the participant with a list of child care providers that provide pick-up services for the children.
- Use supportive services to pay for an "interviewing outfit".

Employment/Training Services

The primary goal of the STEP Program is to ensure that all work-eligible families are actively and universally engaged in meaningful activities designed to enable their transition from receipt of FITAP cash assistance to self-sufficiency. A work-eligible recipient is an adult under age 60 or a teen head of household who is included in a work-eligible family and who is not disabled or incapacitated, or who is not caring for a family member who is disabled or incapacitated, as documented by a medical expert.

STEP has a variety of options for individuals ensuring that the placement is suitable to their particular situation.

- STEP Employment
- STEP Education
 - Vocational Education
 - General Equivalence Diploma (GED)
- STEP Job Search/Readiness
- STEP Work Experience Program (WEP)

Mental & Physically Disabled Individuals – OFS also works with families or recipients who are not work-eligible. These families are also engaged in activities designed to enable their transition to self-sufficiency. The activities include but are not limited to:

- Keeping scheduled appointments with medical professionals,
- Applying for SSI,
- Participating in rehabilitation programs and any other activities that will enhance the transition to self-sufficiency.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Interact with all recipients in a warm, caring, respectful, empathetic manner and frequently reassure recipients that all information is held in strict confidentiality
- Encourage recipients to share problems that, if not addressed, can be very significant obstacles to self-sufficiency.
- Once a recipient is approved for SSI/RSDI, offer to assist the recipient in the future with benefit redeterminations, requests for verification, paperwork, etc.
- Conduct frequent home visits or make frequent “how are you” phone calls, to the disabled recipients; these visits and calls are a great opportunity to reinforce the fact that you are a worker who truly cares.
- Conduct all agency business in the home of the recipient for their convenience.
- Visit recipients who are hospitalized; bringing a small gift will really brighten their day.
- Offer to accompany recipients when they visit other agencies to apply for additional services, or go to the recipient’s home to assist them with completing forms; paperwork can be complicated and intimidating, so most recipients will welcome the opportunity.

- Through a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of New Orleans (UNO), the agency sends referrals to UNO who in turn assesses the recipient for the most common developmental disorders, including but not limited to: learning disabilities, expressive language disorder, stuttering, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. If the recipient is determined to have a developmental disorder, UNO makes the appropriate referral (Louisiana Rehabilitative Services, SSI, etc.).

STEP Employment – Employment is the ultimate goal of STEP. Once the recipient is gainfully employed, OFS has several earned income deductions that are applied to the case. In addition to the \$120 standard deduction and the dependent care deduction, there is a \$900 time-limited disregard that is applied for 6 months when a recipient's earnings exceed the standard deduction plus the amount of the dependent care deduction. This means that a recipient can earn up to \$1,020 (gross earned income) and still be eligible for a full FITAP grant for up to six (6) months.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Explain the advantages of earned income disregard to all recipients so they understand their case will probably not close immediately once they become employed.
- In the recipient's third month of receiving the earned income disregard, the worker completes a Family Transition Assessment (FTA). It is completed collaboratively with the recipient. The purpose of the FTA is:
 - To determine the family's strengths and challenges so they can retain employment and become self-sufficient,
 - to develop an action plan to address the identified challenges,
 - ensure the recipient is knowledgeable about all available supportive services,
 - to help the family think about what they will do when they are no longer receiving cash assistance, and
 - provide a basis for Post-FITAP case management.

Post FITAP is provided to FITAP recipients who become ineligible to receive FITAP cash benefits as a result of excess earnings from employment or the loss of the Earned Income Disregard and may be eligible for transitional employment related supportive services. Post FITAP consists of twelve (12) \$120 monthly payments to assist employed recipients with transportation expenses. In addition to the \$120 Post FITAP transitional transportation payments, the recipient may also be eligible to receive Post FITAP transitional *other supportive services* (as outlined earlier).

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Pay for tools or supplies required to maintain their employment
- Pay for minor car repairs
- Buy work-related clothing to maintain employment

STEP Education – a variety of educational activities are allowed in STEP. Work-eligible recipients, who lack basic workplace literacy skills, as determined by assessments, participate in a combination of employment and educational activities designed to improve their workplace literacy skills.

Vocational Education (Voc Ed) – OFS has partnered with the Louisiana Community & Technical College System (LCTCS) to prepare individuals for employment in occupations requiring training. These activities give participants the knowledge and skills to perform a specific occupation.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Attending graduation ceremonies and taking pictures of the participant with their diploma/certificate.
- Sending cards of encouragement while in the Voc Ed course.
- Sending cards of congratulations upon completion/graduation of the course.
- Driving participants to special events, i.e. final exams, graduation practice, graduation, etc.
- Giving 'pep' talks when they are feeling overwhelmed by their studies.
- Giving the participant a small gift upon completion/graduation of their courses.
- Visit the Voc Ed school.
- Refer the participant to the computers available at the local library.

General Equivalence Diploma (GED) is defined as regular attendance at a secondary school or in a course of study leading to a certificate of general equivalence, in the case of a recipient who has not completed secondary school or received such a certificate.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Sending cards of encouragement while in the GED classes.
- Driving participants to final exams
- Giving 'pep' talks when they are feeling overwhelmed by their studies.
- Giving the participant a small gift upon completion of their GED.
- As participants hit certain milestones, such as achieving a new grade level, or passing a typing tutor, the worker designs a certificate of completion (using a Word document & graphics) and sends it to the recipient on color paper so they can share their accomplishment with family and friends.
- Attend graduation ceremony.
- Meet the participant's extended family.

Job Search/Readiness is defined as:

- the act of seeking or obtaining employment,
- the preparation to seek or obtain employment, including life skills training, and
- substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, or rehabilitation activities

As part of Job Search/Readiness, participants are given the test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) Locator during the first week of Job Readiness. The TABE Reading test will be given to participants whose TABE Locator results are below 6.0 grade level and they are defined as an emerging reader. Once it is determined that the participants has been assessed as an emerging reader, a group staffing will be held to recommend the appropriate placement (other than Job Search/Readiness) options for the participant.

If the TABE Locator results are at 6.0 or above, the participant is then given the WorkKeys Assessment Test. Upon completion of the WorkKeys, the participants are given a certificate based on the results to present to prospective employers. The certificate has varying levels based on individual testing and results. These participants continue in the Job Search/Readiness program.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Creating a local office “clothes closet” for participants to choose appropriate outfits for job interviews.
- Workers visit the Job Readiness class each week to check on participant’s progress and to see if they can help them in any way.
- Take the participants on job interviews.
- Sit in on “mock” interviews that are part of the Job Readiness class.
- Give participants a free/inexpensive calendar (such as promotional ones from the bank) so they can keep track of appointments, such as job interviews.
- Give the participant a binder to help them stay organized.
- Keeping the participants abreast of what is going on in their case.
- Keeping a working list of employers that hire on a regular basis and providing the list to participants.

Work Experience Program (WEP) is defined as a work activity, performed in return for TANF benefits, that provides an individual with an opportunity to acquire the general skills, training, knowledge, and work habits necessary to obtain employment.

WEP participants have the opportunity to:

- Develop basic work habits
- Learn new skills
- Practice skills already learned
- Acquire on-the-job experience
- Demonstrate skills and work habits to prospective employers

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Workers maintain a close working relationship with the WEP providers and visit the sites often
- Continuously look out for new WEP sites/providers
- Be flexible with the days/times of WEP participation, for example, allowing the participant to work a 4-day work week as opposed to a 5-day work week
- Tell participants of success stories where WEP participants were eventually hired as a result of the WEP placement

Children's Education

If a Minor Unmarried Parent (MUP) is under age 18, has a child at least 12 weeks of age, and does not have a high school diploma or its equivalent, they must participate in a Secondary/GED activity or in an alternative educational or training program approved by the worker.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Send cards of encouragement while in the GED classes.
- Drive participants to final exams.
- Give 'pep' talks when they are feeling overwhelmed by their studies.
- Give the recipient a small gift upon completion of their GED.
- Make sure that the MUP does not set unrealistic/unachievable goals.

The Family Success Agreement (FSA) is a mutually- developed contract between a work-eligible FITAP recipient, on behalf of their family, and OFS. The FSA sets forth mutual and time-bound responsibilities, expectations, activities, and goals designed to transition the family from receipt of FITAP to self-sufficiency. As part of the FSA, a plan to ensure appropriate child development, educational attainment, and school attendance for each minor child is included in the agreement.

Parish office/Worker best practices include:

- Assist the participant in registering their child in the Head Start or Pre-Kindergarten program.
- Offer assistance to the participant in obtaining necessary documentation for enrolling their children in the school system.
- Refer the children to the local health unit for immunizations.
- Refer the participant to local agencies for help with school uniforms and school supplies for their children.
- Help find a child care that offers before/after school care.
- Make arrangements to attend school meetings (parent/teacher conferences) with the parent if requested by the participant.
- Refer the participant to the local school board or non-profit agency for assistance with tutoring or literacy programs the child may need.
- Attend the child's graduation (Kindergarten, Middle-school, or High school) and take pictures of the child with their parent (your participant).