

Trauma support for welfare recipients helps them earn more, study shows

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Participants in the Building Health and Wealth Network during one of their final classes last year. Credit: Drexel University

People on welfare can earn more money in their jobs—and potentially leave the program—if the trauma they've faced since childhood is

addressed, Drexel University research shows.

Think of it this way: If you were constantly being given job training but couldn't stay employed or make enough money to get by, you'd probably feel pretty badly about yourself.

But what if you became of a member of a group who could help you feel connected to a support network of like-minded people? Suddenly, you might not feel so alone, and you could start to feel that your troubles are not just your own to bear. Now, you can pay attention to issues affecting you, work on them with your new peers, and focus clearly on your health, building wealth, and reaching goals.

That's what a new study led by Drexel's Center for Hunger-Free Communities shows—[trauma](#) support could be the key to success in the population who receives welfare.

"Financial education without the trauma-informed peer support had virtually no impact on improving income and in promoting health," said Mariana Chilton, PhD, director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities and professor in the Dornsife School of Public Health. "Once the trauma-informed peer support was mixed in, income started to improve and mental health for the parent really improved."

Officially titled Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the state program is almost purely focused on getting recipients into the workforce, with little thought given to other conditions that might affect recipients' advancement opportunities or ability to secure competitive pay.

But the study, which tested the effectiveness of a financial empowerment program with this trauma support built in, found that those who received added peer support for past or current trauma were

significantly more likely to earn more money in their jobs.

More than 100 TANF recipients who are caregivers to [young children](#) took part in the study. And those who received the trauma-informed peer support experienced improvement in their feelings of self-confidence (termed self-efficacy) and in dealing with depression, according to the study, published in the Journal of Child and Families Studies.

"It turns out that the trauma work that the groups did helped to create a sense of connectedness and purpose that helped caregivers build the muscle to earn more and to promote a sense of well-being," Chilton said.

Eligibility criteria for a caregiver of a young child on TANF is very strict—a person must make less than half of the federal poverty line (less than \$700 per month for a caregiver and two young children). Some experts think that simply teaching a little bit of extra financial savvy on top of helping people get into the workforce can help bolster income.

And, as it stands now, the standard programming for state TANF recipients only focuses on finding employment and building job skills, as the recipients are required to work at least 20 hours a week, or spend that time training or looking for a job. However, research has shown that the current programming doesn't help recipients stay in a job—or provide a sustainable way out of Welfare.

A reason for that may be that TANF recipients are very likely to have experienced trauma as a child or have ongoing experiences with it. This trauma might include being exposed to neglect, abuse or severe poverty. A third of participants may have a work-limiting health condition (like depression) and exposure to violence and adversity is extremely common.

So Chilton and her research team conducted a study in which 103

caregivers on TANF taking part in the Center's Building Wealth and Health Network were split into three groups:

- A group in which the TANF recipients received normal TANF programming, focusing on employment (referred to as the "control" group)
- Another group in which the recipients took 28 weeks of financial education programming
- And a third that combined the financial education with peer support that took trauma into account (the "full intervention")

The research team found that participants who received the full intervention—financial education and trauma-focused peer support—were significantly more likely to make more money. Participants who only got financial education programming or the regular TANF programming had no significant changes in their earnings.

And while the group that got the full intervention experienced a significant improvement in self-efficacy, those who only got regular TANF programming—with no trauma support—actually were more likely to have a decline in self-efficacy. Additionally, the full treatment group was five times as likely to have reduced symptoms of depression compared to those who got no trauma support.

This study shows just how valuable—and effective—such peer trauma support could be. So how practical would it be to add it to current TANF programming?

"It's very feasible and we did it with encouragement from the state," Chilton said. "Throughout the country, there is great interest in promoting a culture of health in all domains of everyday life, especially those that involve our tax dollars."

The significant benefits of trauma-informed support were not just limited to the caregivers, however.

"It's good for the long-term success for the caregiver, and they can pass it on to their children," Chilton concluded. "You can see it in our results: Those who got the trauma-informed peer [support](#) and [financial education](#) were able to protect their kids from signs of developmental risk. That's profound for two generations."

More information: Layla G. Booshehri et al. Trauma-informed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): A Randomized Controlled Trial with a Two-Generation Impact, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-017-0987-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0987-y)

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