



# Arkansas Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) Program: Barriers to Aid for Low-Income Families

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## Article Details

Article Type: Review Article

Received date: 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2023

Accepted date: 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2024

Published date: 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2024

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**Citation:** Bettadapura, S., and Danforth, L., (2024). Arkansas Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) Program: Barriers to Aid for Low-Income Families. *J Soci Work Welf Policy*, 2(1): 106. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jswwp1100106>.

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## Abstract

Literature reviews and secondary data analysis of the Arkansas Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) program show systemic issues in its mission to serve low-income families. This review analyzes the program's design, processes, and long-term trends which may contribute to barriers in accessibility and enrollment. Recommendations for improving program participation rates include increasing income eligibility standards, adopting nudge techniques, and simplifying the enrollment and benefits issuance process to overcome its structural barriers.

**Key Words:** TANF, Welfare, Welfare Reform, Low-income Families, Cash Benefits, Supportive Services

## Introduction

### Aid to Dependent Children

The origins of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program date back to the Great Depression wherein President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program. Founded in 1935, the ADC program aimed to alleviate widespread poverty and unemployment in the United States by providing financial assistance to single mother families. The federal government provided program funding to states where each state had the flexibility to define their own eligibility and benefit rules. However, this resulted in many states (particularly in the South) disproportionately excluding Black families with the overarching goal to continue a pecuniary system that "relied on low wage labor of Black workers" [1]. In 1962, the ADC program was renamed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. During this time, federal eligibility rules for the program made it more accessible to Black families. This increase in access, combined with the prevalent messaging of "welfare queen" symbolism, would define many of the biases and stereotypes embedded within the program's perception and design, and carry over to contemporary rules and policy-making [1].

### Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

In 1996, President Bill Clinton replaced the AFDC program with

the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which gave each state complete control over the design and eligibility requirements. Under the TANF program, states are able to enforce their own work participation requirements as well as requirements surrounding maximum time limits that participants can spend receiving TANF programming, incentivizing states to reduce the number of families receiving assistance. Specifically, TANF was designed to provide services to low-income and needy families to fulfill the following four purposes: (1) to provide assistance so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) to end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) to reduce the incidences of out of wedlock pregnancies; and (4) to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families [2]. To achieve each of these purposes, the TANF program offers a variety of programs and services, including the Career Pathways, Community Investment Initiative, the Work Pays program, and most notably, the Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) program, which is the focus of this analysis. A core component of the TANF program, the TEA program offers cash assistance and supportive services to help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency. However, in the state of Arkansas specifically, the TEA program has demonstrated static eligibility rules and a consistently decreasing caseload.

### Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) Program

States are individually required to administer cash assistance programs under the TANF block grant. Operated under the TANF Federal Block grant (and executed by the Arkansas Department of Human Services [ADHS]), the Arkansas TEA program is a time-limited twelve-month program which provides monthly cash assistance (depending on size of familial unit), job-readiness education, child care assistance, and transportation assistance [3]. Arkansas TEA program eligibility requirements include work participation, drug screening, and child support assignment, among several others [4]. Failure to comply with one or more of these requirements can result in a sanctioning process, leading to a reduction of client benefits or closure of their case [3].

In the following article, authors engage in the evaluative process of identifying how TEA is implemented, start to finish, and analyze fundamental problems with the structure and operational flow of the program which may result in many low-income families not receiving assistance for which they could be eligible. In order to better understand why TEA enrollment continues to fall while poverty rates in Arkansas continue to rise, authors not only examine state and federal TEA/TANF guidelines, but also analyzed de-identified public data sets from government research databases (e.g. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Census Bureau, etc.). Data cohorts with participant demographics (e.g., race, gender, family composition, etc.) and information related to program usage (e.g., application approval rates, caseload size, state spending patterns, etc.) were created using Microsoft Excel. Secondary data visualization and analysis was conducted using R software and open-source packages around the R ecosystem (e.g. ggplot2).

### **Overview of TEA Life Cycle: Application, Eligibility, Enrollment, and Closure**

Enrollment in the Arkansas TEA program begins at Arkansas Department of Human Services (ADHS), where the applicant fills out an application form used to determine eligibility for TEA, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid. The participant and their family are screened across the numerous categories, including assistance unit composition, Arkansas residency, immigration status, income eligibility, resource and asset value (e.g. savings accounts, cars, burial plots, etc.), work-activity participation, education-related work-activity requirements (for minor parents), child support assignment, and are also required to complete drug testing.

The screening process typically involves an in-person interview with an eligibility worker at an ADHS office in the applicant's servicing county. Upon approval for the TEA program, a work-eligible adult is expected to visit the Arkansas Division of Workforce Services (ADWS) office to complete a work-readiness assessment. The client's employment goals, needs, and barriers to work are identified, and an employment plan is created in consultation with the client (who is now referred to as a participant).

The participant is expected to engage in pre-defined work activities each week (e.g. job search, job-skills training, community service, etc.). If the participant does not complete their assigned work-activity hours per week (dependent on the specific participant, see pg. 8 for specifics), the family is sanctioned, and all TEA programming is reduced or halted. If this occurs, a compliance officer takes over the case and brings the family back into compliance with their employment plan. A participant can only receive supportive services such as transportation and childcare after they complete their work-readiness assessment and agree to their employment plan, which outlines the participant's future goals and challenges, and the steps they will take to achieve full-time employment [5].

### **Deep Dive: Application Process**

An electronic portal is available for Arkansans interested in applying for the TEA program. However, because 27% Arkansas residents lack adequate broadband infrastructure, a paper application form is also available [4, 6]. The application can be used to apply to multiple government assistance programs. This requires an individual interested in applying for TEA to review and be aware of the indicators as to which of those questions are relevant to TEA, specifically. The application form is eighteen pages in length with verbiage regarding responsibilities, rights, terms, and conditions interspersed throughout the questions. The application can be submitted in-person at a local ADHS office or faxed in. The application undergoes a two-step process that involves screening for completeness followed by an interview with the participant. There is a thirty-day timeframe for ADHS to approve or deny a submitted application.

### **Deep Dive: Eligibility Standards**

#### **Income and Resource Eligibility**

The income standard for eligibility determination in Arkansas as of December 2022 is on the lower end vis-à-vis other states in the country. A participant's family must earn below \$223 per month irrespective of household size and monthly expenses to be eligible for the Arkansas TEA program. This standard represents just 10.8% of the 2023 federal poverty level for a family of three of \$2,072 per month [7]. Moreover, a single adult working full time with minimum wage (\$11 per hour) would earn around \$1,760 per month. The income eligibility standard comprises 12.7% of this wage. In addition to the net income standard, participants' net resource value must be less than \$3,000 [3]. Assets include cars, savings accounts, burial plots, homesteads, and other legacy holdovers. Each TEA household is allowed to own one vehicle. All other assets and/or the value of a second vehicle cannot exceed \$3,000.

Both the earned income (wages, tips, contracts, and self-employment income) and unearned income (retirement, SSI, UI, etc.) of the client and their household are considered in determining TEA eligibility. Some earned income can be disregarded to help reduce the calculation of the net income standard against which the income eligibility threshold is compared to. There is a 40-60% reduction of earned income to arrive at the net income standard [3]. Such disregards, however, do not exist for unearned income sources. Expenses are also not factored in while calculating the net income standard. Together, unearned and earned income after deductions cannot exceed \$223 per month. This net income standard is the benchmark for households of any size – from 2 to 10+. The Arkansas TEA program's standards may be compared with those of the Mississippi, a state with similar socioeconomic conditions to Arkansas. While Mississippi's version of the program has a more stringent resource limit of \$2,000, its income eligibility is higher and varies with the size of the assistance unit. The monthly limit begins at \$403 for a one-person assistance unit and increases by \$138-139 per member up to \$1,652 for a unit of 10+ persons [8]. Even considering the disregards applied by Arkansas to arrive at their net income limit, the state of Mississippi offers more accessible standards in addition to conditional income disregards due to marriage or increased earnings. In 2021, Arkansas held the second lowest position in the nation for maximum monthly income for initial TANF eligibility (which applies a 20% reduction to work-related expenses and does not ensure qualification for cash benefits) for a family of three, with Alabama enforcing a maximum of \$268 per month and Minnesota applying a cap of \$2,413 per month. Moreover, the median income eligibility standard for initial TANF eligibility for a family of three in the United States as of 2021 was \$890 per month [9].

#### **Assistance Unit Composition Eligibility**

The assistance unit (also known as familial unit applying for TEA assistance) must have an adult or caretaker relative taking care of at least one dependent child. Families eligible to be served under TEA are grouped into four types of units: single-parent families (in which a single adult is taking care of their under-18 dependent child); two-parent families (in which two adults are taking care of their under-18 dependent child); minor parents (in which parents under the age of 18 are taking care of their child); and child-only (in which a child is being taken care of by a grandparent, a caretaker relative, or an adult receiving SSI). There is a family cap rule wherein a pregnant person cannot include a newly-born child in their TEA assistance unit. Inclusion of the child potentially increases the cash assistance amount by around \$40 per month. In the case of a single-parent family, the mother is expected to sign off on any child support they receive to the state's Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) department. During the eligibility determination process, one of the requirements is to collect and transmit the non-custodial parent's information to the OCSE department to pursue the collection from the out-of-household parent [3].

Household Size	Income Eligibility Standard (as of December 2022)	Cash Assistance
1	\$223 per month	\$81
2	\$223 per month	\$162
3	\$223 per month	\$204
4	\$223 per month	\$247
5	\$223 per month	\$286
6	\$223 per month	\$331
7	\$223 per month	\$373
8	\$223 per month	\$415
9 or more	\$223 per month	\$457

Table 1: Relationship between household size, income eligibility, and cash assistance as of December 2022 (Arkansas Department of Human Services, 2023b)

### Biographic and Demographics Eligibility

All active recipients of Arkansas TEA assistance must be United States citizens or allowable refugee/immigration status and be Arkansas residents. Each recipient's SSN must also be interfaced with the SSA for a process called "SSN enumeration." This is required to validate and crossmatch the client's name and date of birth with their records to ensure that the identity of the individual is accurate. Any discrepancy must be fixed, and a failure to address any SSN mismatches could result in denial of benefits [3].

### Drug Screening Eligibility

All active single- and two-parent participants are subject to a Drug Assessment Questionnaire (DAQ) during the initial application and subsequent re-evaluations of the case. If the participant refuses to answer the questions, they are unable to participate in the TEA program. If the participant admits to drug use, then they are referred to a double test to confirm the specifics of illegal drug usage. The ADWS family support unit develops a plan of action for the participant to follow through. If the participant does not agree to comply with the plan of action or perform the drug test, they are not allowed to participate in the TEA program [10].

### Time Limited Eligibility

The Arkansas TEA program enforces a limit on the number of months they can receive benefits under the TEA program. Arkansas, along with Arizona, has the shortest eligibility period in the nation [11]. There is a state time limit of twenty-four months, and a federal time limit of sixty months (notably, HB1401 filed in February 2023 halved the state time limit to twelve months) [5,10]. If participants move to Arkansas from another state, the number of months they received benefits in the other state(s) do not count toward the Arkansas state time limit. However, they do count towards the sixty-month federal time limit. As part of the initial and ongoing eligibility test, the participant must be below both state and federal time limits.

### Deep Dive: Enrollment

### Hand-Off to ADWS for Case Management and Work-Readiness Assessment

All applications including those that are pending, denied, opened, and closed are interfaced with ADWS. As the state's TANF program administrator, ADWS has a shared responsibility to ensure that all families comply with the work-participation requirements. Accordingly, they advise ADHS on issuing benefit payments.

ADWS has twenty days to complete a thorough assessment for each work-eligible TEA participant. The participant is evaluated on

several categories including presence of learning disability, education level, substance abuse, transportation and childcare need, and work experience. Based on the comprehensive assessment, the participant is placed in one or more of the following allowable core work-activities: Job Search, Work Experience, On-the-Job Training, Career and Technical Education, Subsidized or Unsubsidized Employment, and Community Services. They can also be assigned to participate in non-core work activities such as job-skills training or education directly related to employment or GED. However, given the configuration of the federal regulations, the non-core activities contribute less to the state's TEA program performance measures [12].

The completion of the work-readiness assessment and the employment plan by ADWS signifies the completion of the TEA onboarding process. From this point onward, the case manager provides the oversight, coaching, and counseling services needed to keep the client on track to comply with work-participation requirements and help provide services such as transportation and childcare.

### Case Management – Work Requirements

Federal performance measures mandate that all work-eligible adults are required to work a minimum number of hours per week to receive assistance. Work activities are categorized into core and non-core. A participant is required to work only in these predefined work activities for the minimum number of hours for the duration of receiving assistance. A single parent is required to work for a minimum of thirty hours per week. A two-parent family must together be engaged in at least fifty-five hours of work per week. There is a reduction in the number of required hours if the family has children under a certain age and whether they are receiving federally funded childcare. Work requirements are waived completely if there is no parent or active adult in the TEA assistance unit. Such cases typically involve a parent taking care of a grandchild. Similarly, for cases involving minor parents, full-time participation in high school is mandatory in lieu of traditional work requirements [12].

### Case Management – Non-Compliance

There are various penalties applied on the cash assistance amounts that families receive for non-compliance. Non-compliance sanctions are typically categorized as progressive or non- progressive. Progressive penalties are assessed on participants who fail to meet the work requirements without a valid cause. The percentage of reduction in benefits ranges from 25% to 100% and is spread over six months before closing the case completely if necessary. During the

sanctions period, supportive services are not provisioned to the participant's family. Non- progressive sanctions are given when participants do not comply with the immunizations schedule for children or with the assignment of child support rights to the state. The sanctions and reduction in benefit amounts in this situation is 25% and continues for the duration of the compliance [13].

## Results

The following data reflect an aggregate of Arkansas TEA applicants. Trends around TEA usage were examined using de-identified public datasets from the Administration for Children and Families, including total number of families receiving services over a twelve-year period, poverty levels in Arkansas vs. Arkansans receiving TEA services, Arkansas employment rates vs. TEA approvals, as well as TEA participant demographics (race and gender) and information regarding annual program expenditure. Further, numerous application trends and gaps in service delivery were identified after examining TEA program implementation, start to finish. Upon examination of long-term trends in these sectors and TEA service delivery, authors

found that components of the application and enrollment process potentially contribute to declining caseloads within the program. Demographic trends were analyzed to provide further context in understanding these trends and their effects on TEA recipients.

### TEA Application Trends

One of the major findings of this analysis is that since the inception of the Arkansas TEA program in 1996, the caseload has steadily decreased. In 1996, there were 23,000 families receiving TEA assistance [14] decreasing to 8,598 in 2007 [15] and continuing a steady decline from 2010 to 2021. Current caseloads now hover at 949 [16]. However, levels of poverty and unemployment in the state have not seen a corresponding decrease, with 65,537 families with children under 18 in poverty and a 3.1 unemployment rate as of October 2023 [17, 18]. Despite families with children in poverty being the population that TEA theoretically aims to serve, the caseload relative to this population appears to be very marginal and has continuously decreased over the past decade.

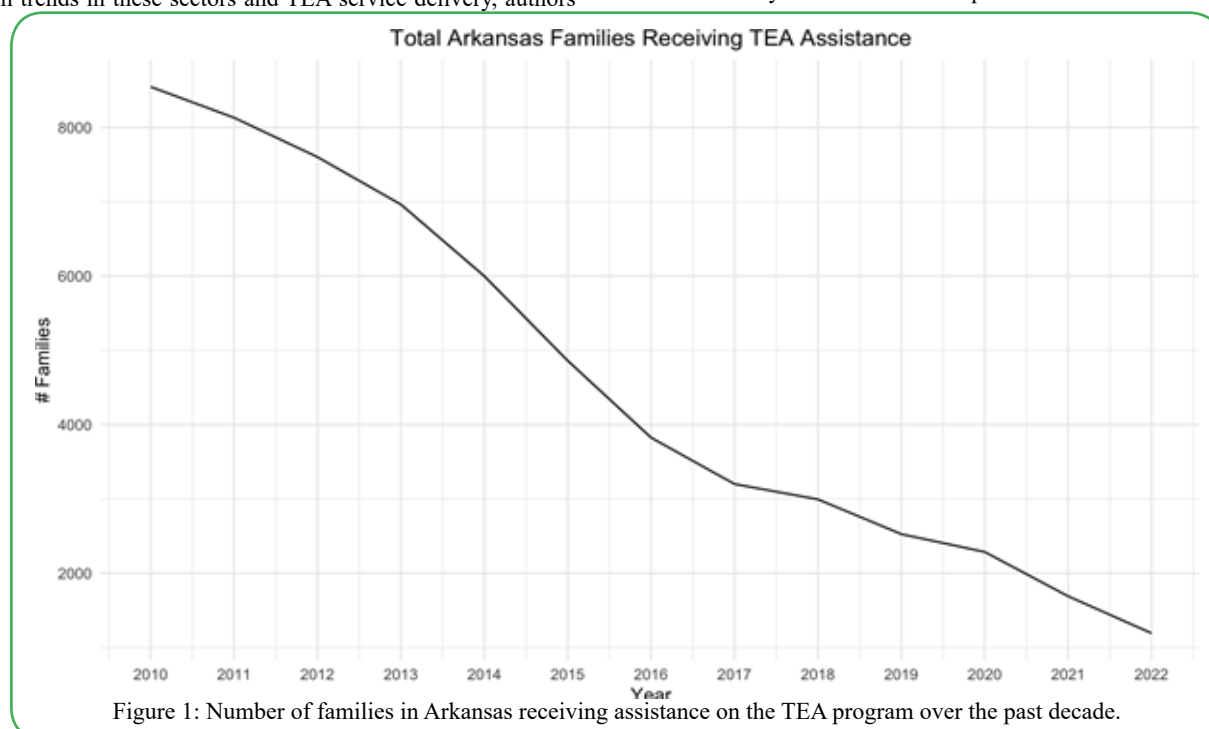


Figure 1: Number of families in Arkansas receiving assistance on the TEA program over the past decade.

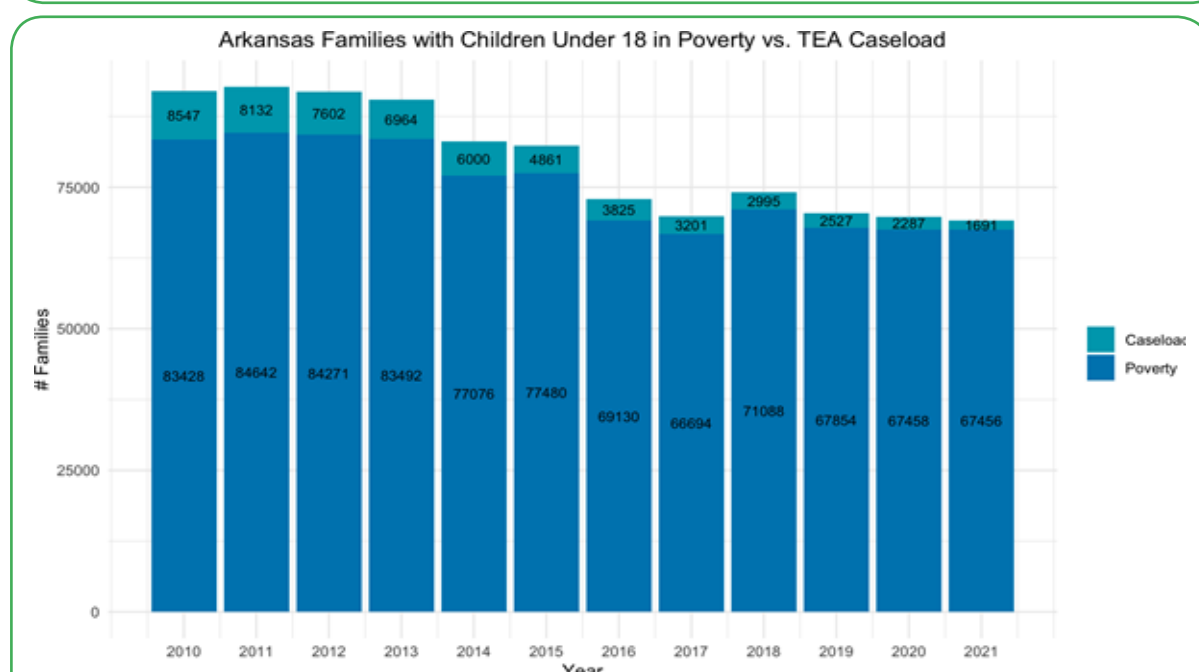
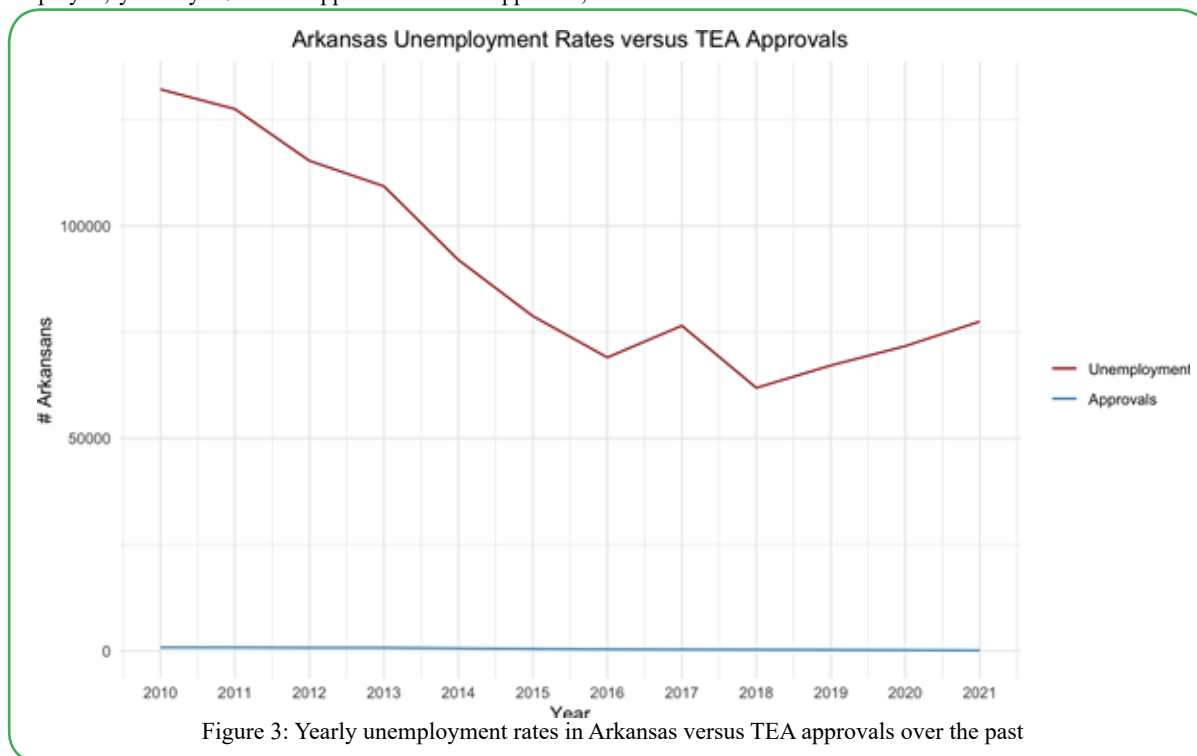


Figure 2: Disparity between families with children under 18 in poverty versus the total TEA caseload in Arkansas over the past decade.

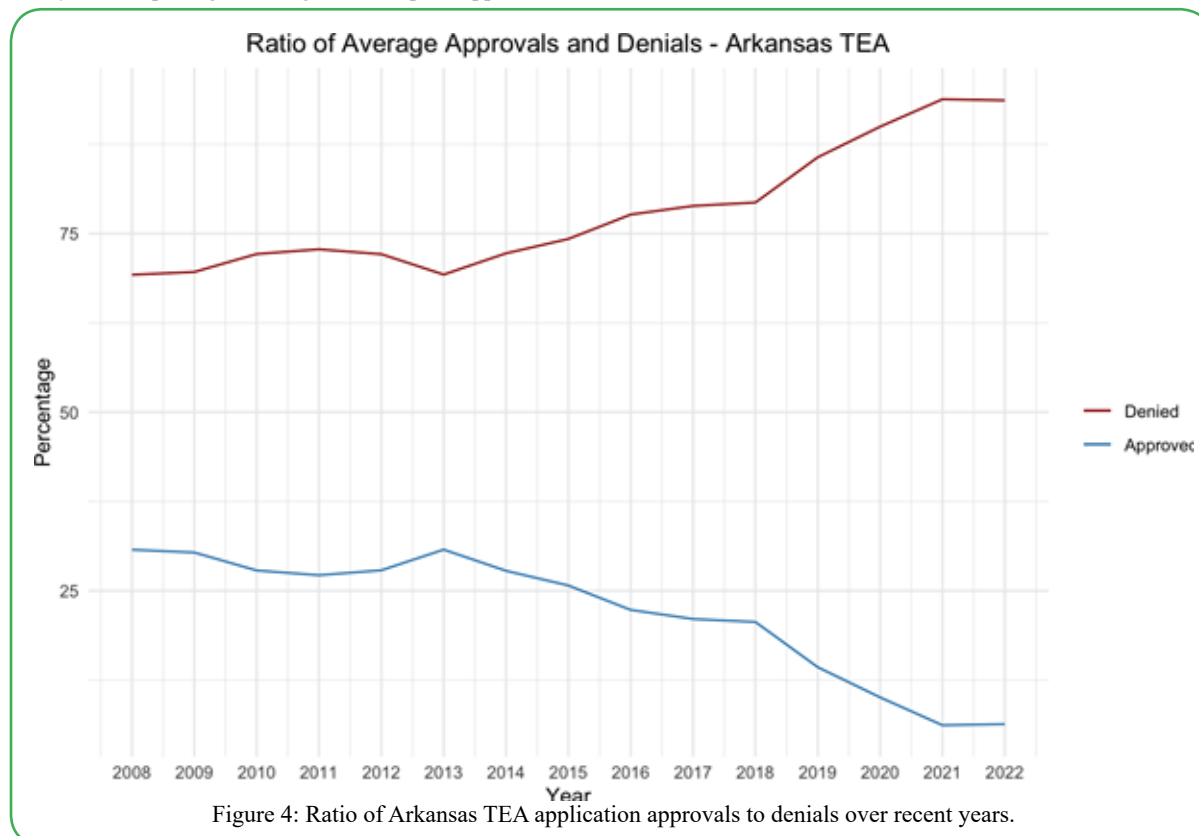
Further, one of the purposes of the TEA program is to promote job preparation and self-sufficiency. However, in Arkansas, the TEA program appears to have had a very low impact on employment rates. TEA application approvals have trended significantly lower than unemployment rates, even during the COVID-19 pandemic when unemployment rates began to rise. In 2021, 77,486 Arkansans were unemployed, yet only 102 TEA applications were approved,

leaving approximately 93.8% of those who applied for TEA services denied from receiving benefits [19]. Even considering that unemployment numbers include family units that do not have an adult caring for a dependent child and individuals with above median incomes and resources, there is still a significant number of families without secure employment who are unserved by the TEA program.



In addition, there has been a significant and steady increase in denial of TEA applications since 2008 [20]. Reasons for this phenomenon could be income and resource eligibility rules which do not reflect inflation or wider macroeconomic trends, potential clients' inability to comply with travel requirements as part of the application process, or the difficulty in completing the long and complex application

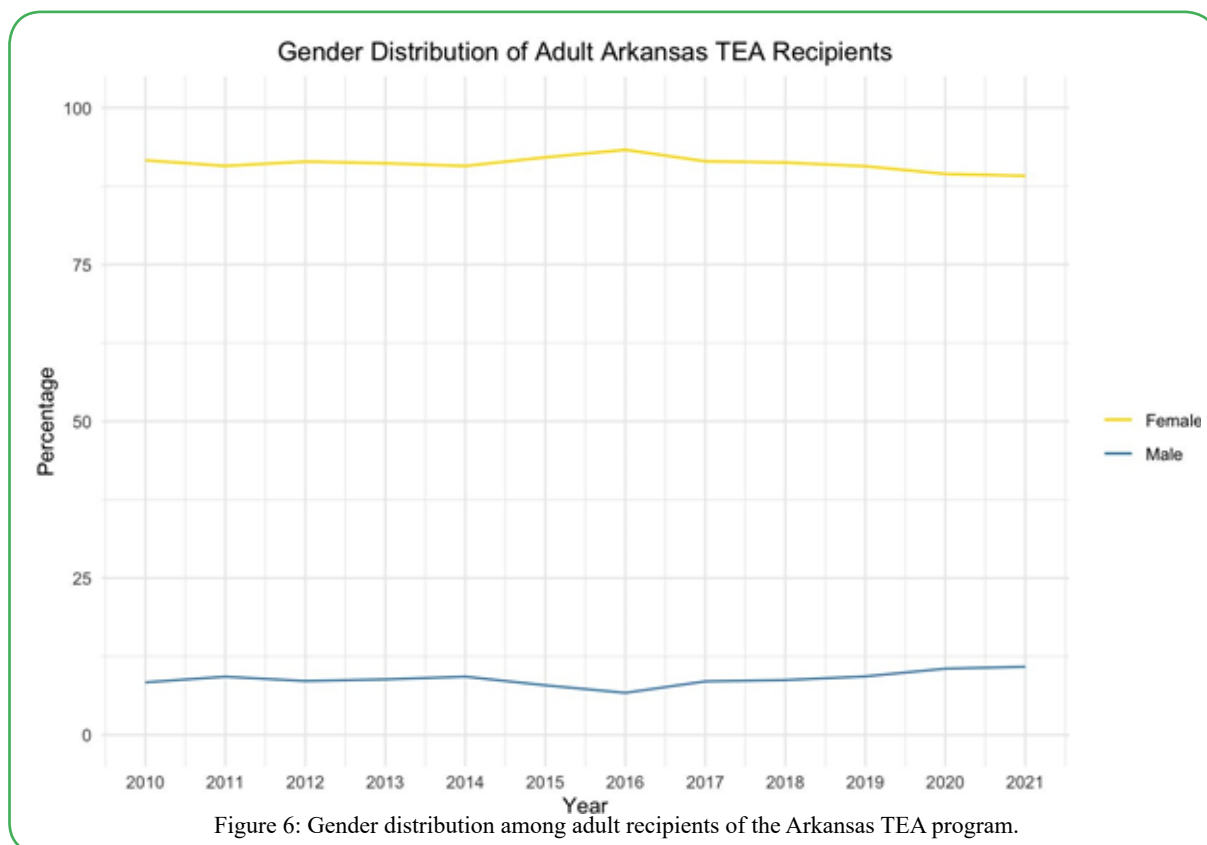
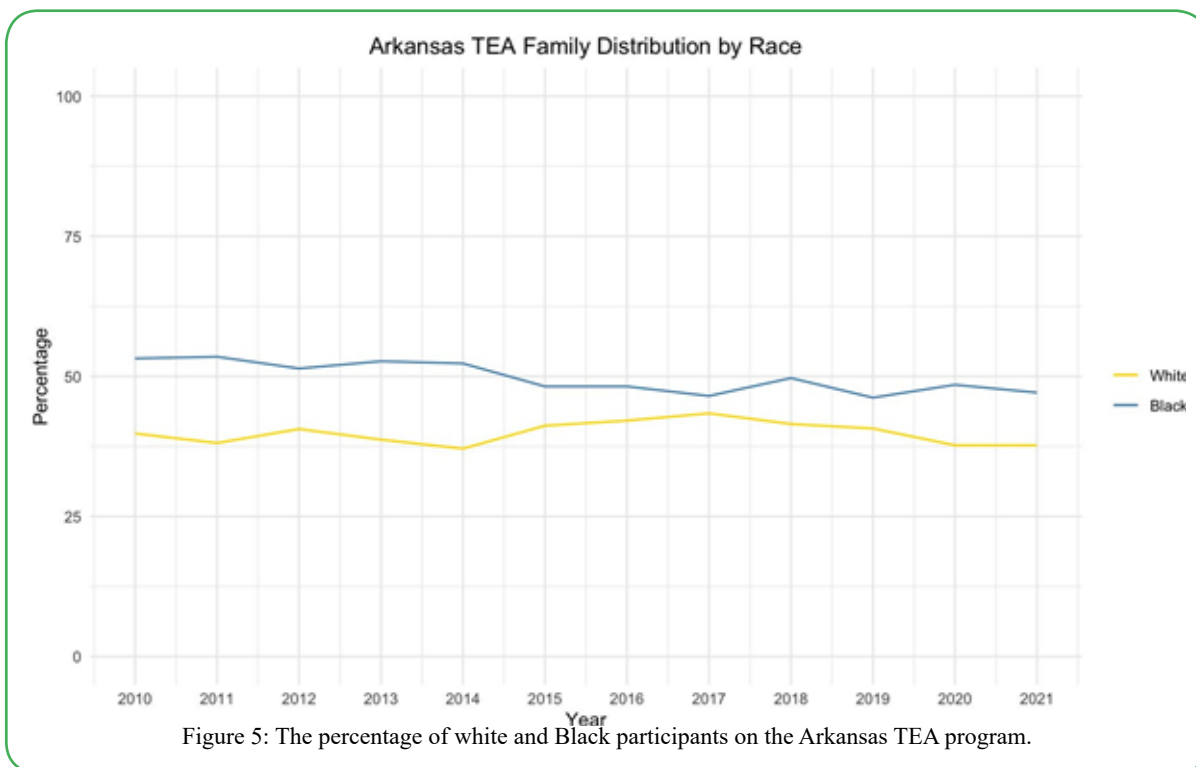
form. However, understanding why this may be happening prompt further research into the reasons which factored into this divergence. Areas to further explore when considering this gap include any policy or service delivery changes, or macro-economic conditions such as inflation and corresponding income levels.





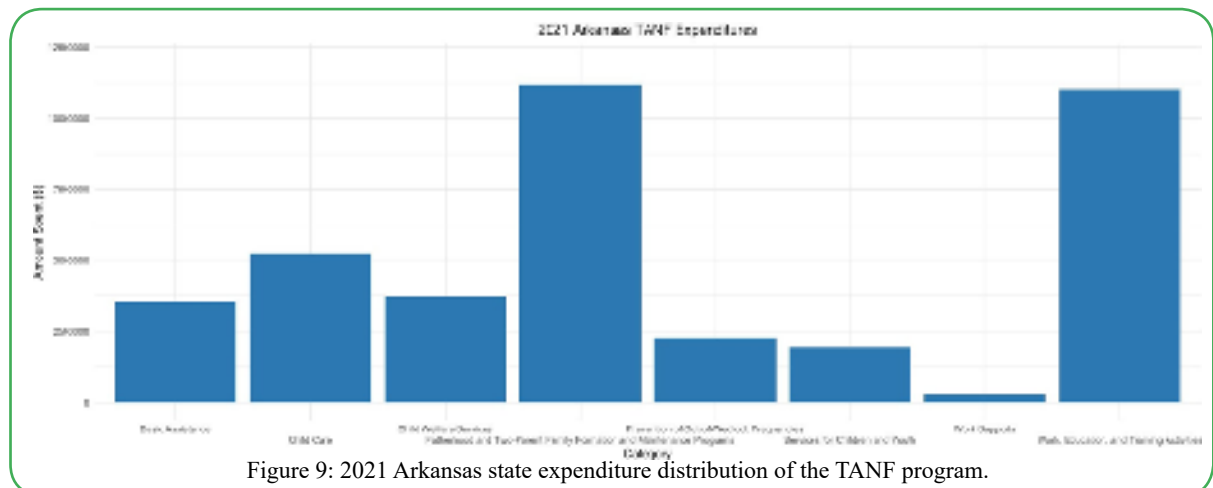
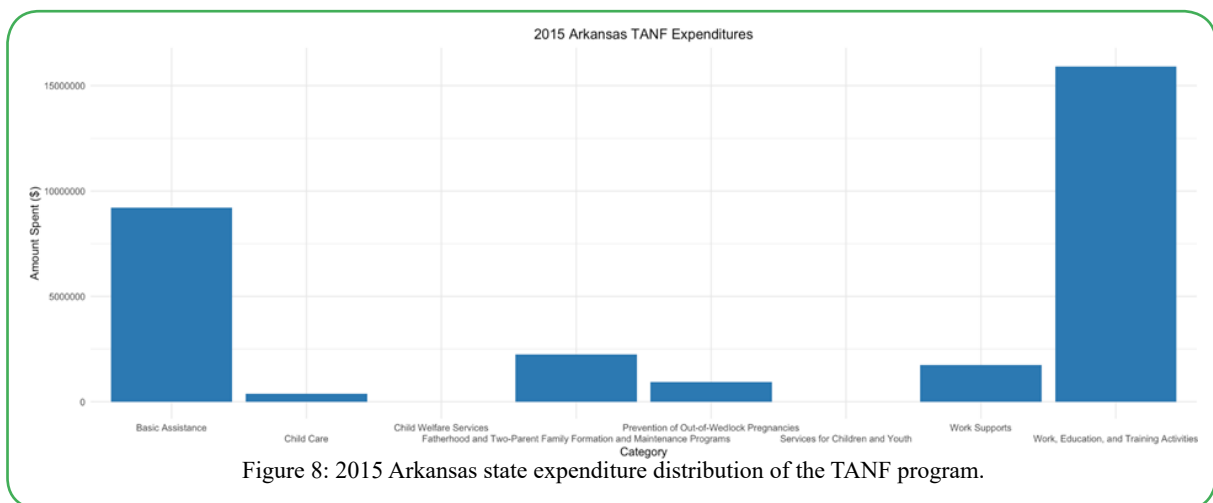
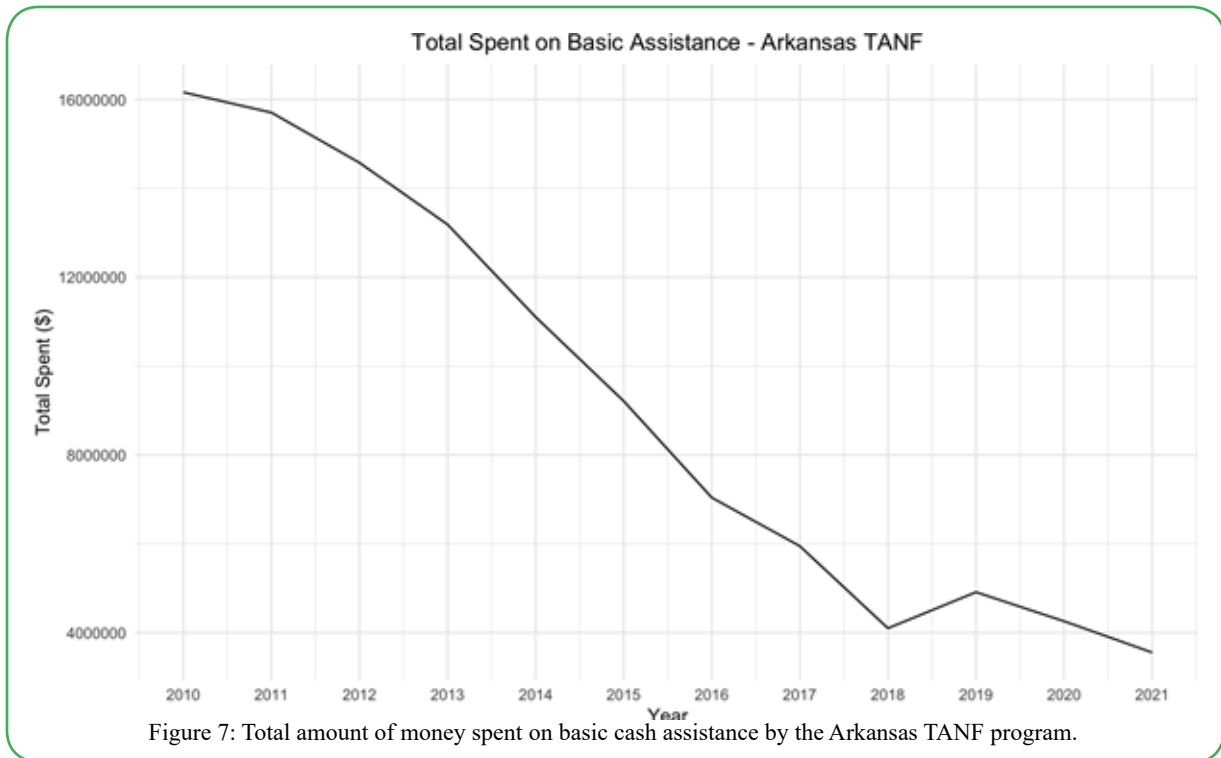
When examining specific demographic patterns of those who receive TEA services, authors found that the percentage of Black participants has been consistently higher than the percentage of white participants. However, the trend lines present an interesting convergence in recent years. The assumptions and racial rationales used to originally formulate TANF policies do not appear to be true or relevant as per the data. Although the program historically excluded Black families and had to undergo federalization to expand its reach, its usage has been similar across racial groups. This presents a research opportunity to study whether or not racial injustices of the past are now entering an area of wider class and social justice domains. As

it relates to gender distribution among work-eligible recipients of TEA, women have consistently constituted a higher proportion in the program than men. The origins of the AFDC, the predecessor of the modern welfare-reform cash assistance program, provided targeted assistance to low-income women. The trendlines shown in figure 5 demonstrate that this demographic continues to be the main consumer of the program. However, much like the discussion on racial motivations progressing into a class and social justice domain, there could be a case to be made that a policy which was made with women (particularly Black women) in mind could be leaving a segment of our society underserved, as only 10% of TEA recipients are men.



When authors examined the total amount of money spent on basic cash assistance (a rarely utilized component of TEA), we were surprised to discover that following a marginal increase in expenditures in 2019, basic assistance spending has decreased consistently and significantly over the past decade with an approximately 78% decrease from 2010 to 2021 [21,22]. In addition, expenditures on categories such as basic

assistance and work, education, and training activities have also experienced mild to significant declines. However, spending on child care, services for children and youth, and programs to promote fatherhood and two-parent family formation have seen an increase in proportional spending [23].



## **Critiques across TEA Service Delivery**

### ***Service Delivery Logistics and Coverage Map between ADWS and ADHS***

Until the 2023 legislative session that established the Arkansas Department of Human Services as the sole agency over administration of TEA, the Arkansas TEA program was operationally split between ADHS and ADWS. Before August of 2023, Arkansans interested in TEA had to travel to the Division of County Operations (DCO) (the operating arm of ADHS) to apply for and receive benefits. However, to report work-activity requirements, receive work support (e.g. transportation, childcare, etc.), demonstrate work or education participation, or receive the full TEA cash assistance, the participant was required to travel to ADWS sites. While ADHS field offices are present in all 75 counties across the state of Arkansas (with certain counties having multiple locations), there are only twenty-seven ADWS offices across the state. From a geographical coverage standpoint, this means that one ADWS office could cover anywhere from one to six counties across Arkansas. The distance that clients have previously had to travel between ADHS and ADWS to fulfill all application, onboarding, and enrollment requirements ranges from 0 to 64.4 miles, with the average distance traveled between offices at 22.4 miles. Transportation and childcare are the biggest barriers facing TEA participants, yet these services are not provided until the work-eligible adult physically travels from their county's ADHS office to their local ADWS office and completes a work-readiness assessment. This presents a significant problem for those attempting to apply for and secure TEA services, particularly involving childcare and transportation support.

### ***Convolutd and Obfuscating Application Process***

There are several areas of the application process, including the length and structure of the application itself, that are challenging and serve as potential bottlenecks to application and enrollment. The TEA application is eighteen pages long, uses extremely technical language (e.g. asking applicants to report extensive and complex financial information), and requires participants to distinguish and navigate to TEA-relevant sections of the application among SNAP and Medicaid sections. For example, it is actually possible to inadvertently not select the TEA service option due to the application serving as common intake between three programs. This may be attributed to confusion during the application completion or the applicant simply being unaware that they are eligible for TEA.

Further, the eligibility workers assigned to each applicant may not be explaining the TEA program to the prospective recipient, particularly those individuals who apply for SNAP but are unaware of TEA. In 2023, 118,207 Arkansas households were participating in the SNAP program. In 2022, over 71% of participants were families with children, and in 2020, 43% of participants' household incomes were at or below 50% of the poverty line [20, 24]. However, in 2023, just 949 families in Arkansas participated in the TEA program [16].

Additionally, households with one or more members participating in TEA are deemed categorically eligible for SNAP, yet households on SNAP are at risk of having their SNAP benefits reduced if they subsequently enroll in TEA, which is a conundrum [25]. This, combined with the disparity in participation for each program, suggests that many Arkansas families currently on SNAP may be eligible for TEA, but are not enrolled due to lack of information exchange between the two programs to promote strategic TEA enrollment.

### ***Rigid TEA Work Requirements***

Historically, TEA has been a welfare-to-work program. Work-eligible adults who receive TEA benefits must participate in weekly work requirements (see pg. 8 of manuscript for specifics), such as employment, community service, or secondary school to remain in the program. That was, however, not a requirement with SNAP and Medicaid until recent years in which federal and state policy changes have introduced work requirements in the SNAP program. In 2019,

8.1% of TEA-recipient families' case closures were attributed to work-related sanctions [26]. Additionally, it has been suggested that eligible families have been deterred from applying to TEA due to work requirements [27].

### ***Interview Requirement Potentially Representing Undue Burden***

Potential clients may take the first step in applying for TEA, but fail to show up for the required interview to complete the application process. Prior to ADHS assuming full agency over the program, clients had to first undergo an eligibility determination at an ADHS office or DCO, and if they were deemed eligible, undergo a second in-person assessment and employment planning at an ADWS office. As stated previously, although this process was amended effective July 2023, it is likely that numerous applicants were not able to travel across two agencies to attempt to secure TEA services. Further, there is a 20-day timeframe to complete this handoff, which can be difficult for families with children and/or families who are already trying to meet the mandatory work activity hours per week, even before they are approved for TEA.

### ***Income Eligibility Standards and Cash Assistance***

The income eligibility standard of the program as of December 2022 is \$223 per month, which is based on the 1996 minimum wage (\$4.25 per hour in Arkansas). Although the current minimum wage is \$11.00 in Arkansas [28], the current living wage for a single adult with one child is almost three times the minimum wage and six times the 1996 minimum wage. This disparity reflects stringent monetary limits which may affect program participation rates [29] as the low-income ceiling required to participate in TEA excludes a large proportion of the 7.1% of Arkansas families who earn less than \$15,000 per year, but who may be ineligible for TEA services based on this specific eligibility standard [30]. Moreover, the cash assistance component of the program provides just \$204 per month for a family of three and increases by about \$40 per month per member of the assistance unit. In contrast, the current living wage in Arkansas for two working adults with one child is \$17.75 per hour [29].

## **Discussion**

In order to address the major critiques of TEA service delivery, the following recommendations are approaches that may be considered. Implementation will require further research and impact analysis in multiple areas, including information technology, personnel, financial, contractual, and governance of ADHS.

### **Recommendations to Improve Service Delivery Logistics**

As stated previously, ADHS and ADWS operationally split the application to and administration of the program until July 1, 2023 when legislation appointed ADHS as the sole agency coordinating the TEA program. This was, of course, a major recommendation related to service delivery logistics for TEA that is no longer needed. However, there are other recommendations and approaches that may be considered to make applying for TEA services easier across Arkansas, especially for those who do not have transportation. For example, it might be prudent to employ a TEA workforce specialist who is dedicated to sharing information and assisting with the TEA portion of the application exclusively. This workforce specialist could be available at ADHS/DCO offices on scheduled days so that they can provide case management initiation services at the point of eligibility determination and approval.

It would also be prudent to have a mobile workforce of case managers to aid with completing job searches and applications via mobile buses, or have scheduled days at local community centers (e.g., libraries or faith-based organizations), particularly in larger, rural counties where obtaining transportation to an ADHS office might be difficult. This recommendation would potentially be an easy lift, as ADWS currently employs a fleet of mobile units which are equipped with resources such as internet, computers, printers, and job application software. Extending this program and employing regular outreach to low-income and TEA-eligible communities throughout the state could help facilitate greater access to families seeking to



participate. In addition, providing tele-case assessment services such as the call center model that has already been implemented by TANF's sister section (the Unemployment Insurance unit) would be helpful with service application and delivery logistics, as this would provide a convenient way for applicants without transportation to apply for TEA.

### **Recommendations to Improve Application Process**

One of the challenges observed with the application process is the amount of legalese and requests for financial information within the application, which is currently set at a reading level of college graduates based on the Flesch-Kincaid reading ease test [31]. This adds to the information overload presented to the client, and does not consider the applicant's reading level. Most obviously, simplifying the language within the TEA application itself to around grade six (6) level [32] would not only reduce the burden on the client, but also help policy-makers understand and communicate the benefits of the program rather than its policy and regulatory aspects.

It is also important to ensure that prospective TEA users not only complete the application, but select the TEA option. To do this, eligibility workers should be extremely well versed in TEA requirements (vs. just SNAP and Medicaid requirements), auto-screen for TEA eligibility, advise the client of the added benefits from the TEA program, and initiate the incremental checklist (beyond SNAP) needed to apply for TEA. If a client is not aware of what TEA offers, the most popular services under TEA (e.g., cash assistance, childcare, transportation, etc.) should be emphasized. If the client has explicitly refused to apply or is not interested but is eligible, they should receive follow ups, outreach, and reminders from their intake workers or case managers in case they reconsider and become interested down the road.

Additionally, there is currently a categorical eligibility between TEA and SNAP, meaning that individuals eligible for TEA are automatically deemed eligible for SNAP and are accordingly enrolled. However, individuals who only apply for SNAP are not auto-enrolled in TEA, nor are they automatically informed about the additional benefits they could possibly receive. Communicating this possible eligibility across both programs could increase client awareness of SNAP/TEA services, and may increase TEA enrollment. To assist with this, IT systems can be configured to automatically share documentation captured for SNAP with TEA. Systems can be designed to trigger alerts and/or to-do lists if documentation is not shared across programs. At time of publication, authors were not able to determine if any other states utilize IT systems that enable eligibility determination across enrollment into multiple assistance programs.

### **Recommendations Surrounding Work Requirements**

As stated previously, 8.1% of TEA case closures are attributed to work related sanctions [25]. If clients are at risk to receiving sanctions for not meeting work requirements, it would be prudent for TEA case managers to notify TEA clients about this before a sanction is issued and to make a plan for avoiding those sanctions. Further, if a client is formally sanctioned, TEA case managers should continue the provision of supportive services rather than removing this support during a sanction period. When services (childcare, transportation, cash assistance, etc.) are cut off during a client's sanction period, the client will likely face additional struggles in meeting their TEA employment requirements. By avoiding this likely counterproductive withdrawal of services, the client is more likely to maintain consistent employment and eventually move off TEA rolls.

Further, a monetary work participation bonus could be initiated for clients who meet or exceed their assigned work activity hours. Clients could receive additional cash benefits for adhering to work requirements or working additional hours. This positive reinforcement technique could be implemented monthly and could further motivate the client to fulfill their work activity requirements. A similar consideration could be made to link a client's case

manager's performance appraisal to their performance indicators (i.e., how many clients participated fully or exited with employment, how many supportive services were provided, participant feedback on the case management experience, etc.). These indicators could be measured and considered when evaluating a case manager's performance, providing further motivation to ensure that all participants are given the opportunity to avail of any supportive service they may require. Lastly, consideration may be taken to relax work participation requirements for single- and two-parent families. The respective requirements of thirty and fifty-five hours of mandatory work activities could be reduced to minimize the incidence of work-related sanctions and increase chances for families to exit the program with secure employment.

### **Recommendations Surrounding Income Eligibility and Cash Assistance**

As the income eligibility standard of the program does not reflect current cost of living or minimum wage, legislative rule changes should be considered to update the net income standard to the current state minimum wage or the annual federal poverty level by household size. This could expand the program's reach to enroll low-income families who, despite living below the federal poverty level, may not qualify for the TEA program. Moreover, the monthly cash assistance provided to program's participants may be updated to better reflect and accommodate the current state living wage. This could incentivize and encourage potential clients to join the program. These changes would not only increase accessibility to the program, but also encourage additional clients to apply, consequently broadening the reach of the program.

### **Conclusion**

The past decade has seen a considerable decline in enrollment of the Arkansas TEA program, though the state has not seen a correlative reduction in poverty or unemployment. Analysis of the program's structure reveals systemic issues in its operational split, complex application process, stringent work requirements, and outdated income eligibility standard which may contribute to its declining caseload. Non-legislative techniques may be implemented by case management staff to alleviate these barriers, while actual policy changes (e.g., adjusting the program's income limit and modifying the work requirements and sanctions process to become less punitive, etc.) could further increase enrollment and participation.

Limitations of this review include the inability to track former TEA participants following their exit from the program. Examining how clients fared could provide insight into which aspects of the program were helpful for participants and which need improvement. Similarly, we lacked the opportunity to interview and collect feedback from current participants and incorporate their perspectives into our analysis. This review instead analyzes the program primarily from an administrative perspective. Moreover, there is opportunity to account for the viewpoints of case managers who run the program in its day-to-day processes, as well as lawmakers who rationalize and enact the laws and policies which govern the program. Accounting for these perspectives could provide a broader and more comprehensive analysis of the program, its operations, and strategies to improve it.

Legislative action in recent months following the conclusion of this analysis resulted in major changes to the structure of the program. The time limit on which clients can participate in the program in the state of Arkansas was halved from twenty-four months to twelve months, the income eligibility standard of the program was increased from \$223 per month to \$513 per month, and the program's operations have shifted entirely from ADWS to ADHS-only. While the reduction of the time limit could negatively impact the TEA caseload, the increased income eligibility standard and simplification of the program's logistics may broaden its reach and accessibility. Future research could observe the long-term effect of these changes on participant outcomes and program enrollment.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author(s) declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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