



Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council

Public Benefits Accessibility Project Phase 1 Qualitative Report

Purpose - This report follows the Phase 1 Survey Report released on August 7, 2024, which focused on statistical summaries of *quantitative* (multiple choice question) *data*. The information presented below is derived from a content analysis of two sources of *qualitative* (open-ended question) *data*; 1. Phase 1 of the *Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council's* (CPRAC) **Public Benefits survey**, and 2. the CPRAC **Public Hearing testimony** (written and verbal) held on Monday, April 29, 2024. An additional report will be forthcoming using Phase 2 survey data after Phase 2 of the survey ends on December 31, 2024. The goal of this project is to better understand administrative burdens (barriers to access) associated with the OTDA SNAP, Public Assistance and SSI benefit programs.

1. Online survey respondents were asked the following questions:

“In your own words: was there anything else about applying for _____ that was a problem, or slowed you down, in getting it done? What changes would make it easier for you? If you learned a close friend was applying for _____, what advice would you give them? Any additional comments about the application? Please explain as best as you can.”

“In your own words: What is the hardest part of maintaining your _____ benefits? If you learned a close friend was having difficulty managing their _____ benefits, what advice would you give them? What changes would make it easier for you? Any additional comments about maintaining _____ benefits?”

2. Public hearing testimony respondents were asked to provide input as follows:

“The public hearing will provide an opportunity for CPRAC to hear directly from New Yorkers about their experiences. ...[and] will focus on “administrative burdens” [clients] face when applying for and receiving Public Assistance (also known as Cash Assistance or Temporary Assistance), food assistance (SNAP), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), including but not limited to:

- *Challenges completing application forms,*
- *Understanding requirements related to each program,*
- *Managing benefits once receiving them,*
- *Getting help with these processes.”*

To that end, during the public hearing, the audience responded to the following prompts:

- *Describe the challenges you faced applying for benefits.*
- *What is the hardest part of maintaining your benefits?*
- *Are there certain experiences/processes that you found helpful?*
- *What changes would make it easier for you to access benefits?*
- *What would make the experience simpler and more respectful?*

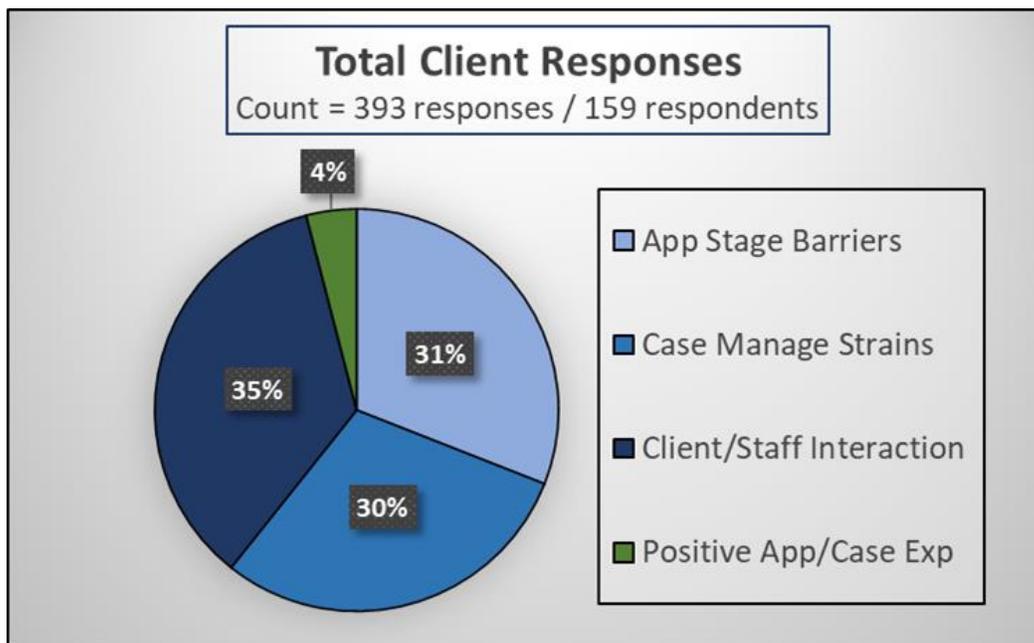
Interpretation Caveats – The following independently analyzed observations used data collected during the Phase 1 period, which ended on May 31, 2024. These data help provide important insights into some of the experiences had by **people who sought public benefits through OTDA**. However, the responses are likely NOT representative of *all people in need*, nor do they represent *all* public benefit applicants and/or recipients in NYS. The number of client respondents in Phase 1 was small (159 qualitative respondents) relative to the total number of SNAP households (over 1.7 million). Additional data collection is necessary to increase our sample size and to reach the broadest mix of individuals who seek support and qualify for our programs. Thus, these results are *useful* but must be *interpreted with caution*.

Part 1 - Summary Statistics

Sample Size:

- As seen in the client “counts” underneath the chart titles below, of the **159** respondents recorded thus far, a total of **393** responses were categorized. The open-ended question format allowed respondents to include as many types of experiences as they wished to describe, in the time and space made available to them, as follows:
 - **34** via public hearing or written statements (including emailed and handwritten)
 - **125** via public benefits survey
- Among the 393 qualitative responses, **4%** reported **positive experiences** in seeking support from OTDA programs; of these, **2%** regarded the application process, and **2%** regarded their case management experience.
- The **blue** segments in the chart below show that the majority, or **96%** or 378 of the 393 qualitative responses fell into 3 main categories:
 1. **31%** (122) regarding the **application stage**,
 2. **30%** (117) regarding the **case management stage**, and
 3. **35%** (138) regarding **direct client/staff interactions** that may have occurred at any point in the applicant/recipient experience.

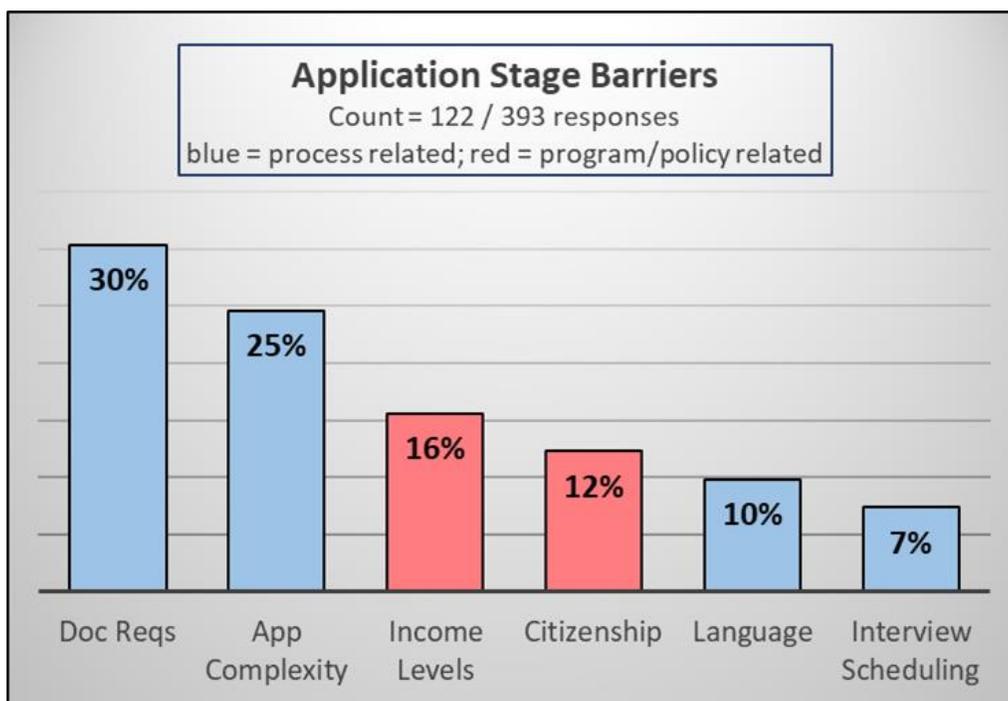
- Part 2 of this report will provide a selection of actual client statements that illustrate the type of responses that were included in each of these 3 main response areas.



Application Stage Barriers:

- Of the **393** responses received from **159** respondents who described their experiences during the application process, 122 responses or **31%** of these addressed barriers faced at the application stage.
- Within those 122 responses that focused on application stage barriers,
 - 28%** identified **applicant eligibility criteria** (as seen in red) that caused them to not submit an application;
 - of which, **16%** had **income levels** that exceeded the amount allowable to receive benefits, and **12%** were prevented from doing so due to their **citizenship** status.
 - The remainder of the 122 responses that focused on application stage barriers addressed administrative burdens and fell into 4 main categories (as seen in blue):
 - 30%** regarding **documentation requirements**;
 - 25%** in the overall **complexity** and **length** of the **application** itself;
 - 10%** on **language difficulties**, including unclear English language jargon and/or directions on the application form(s); and

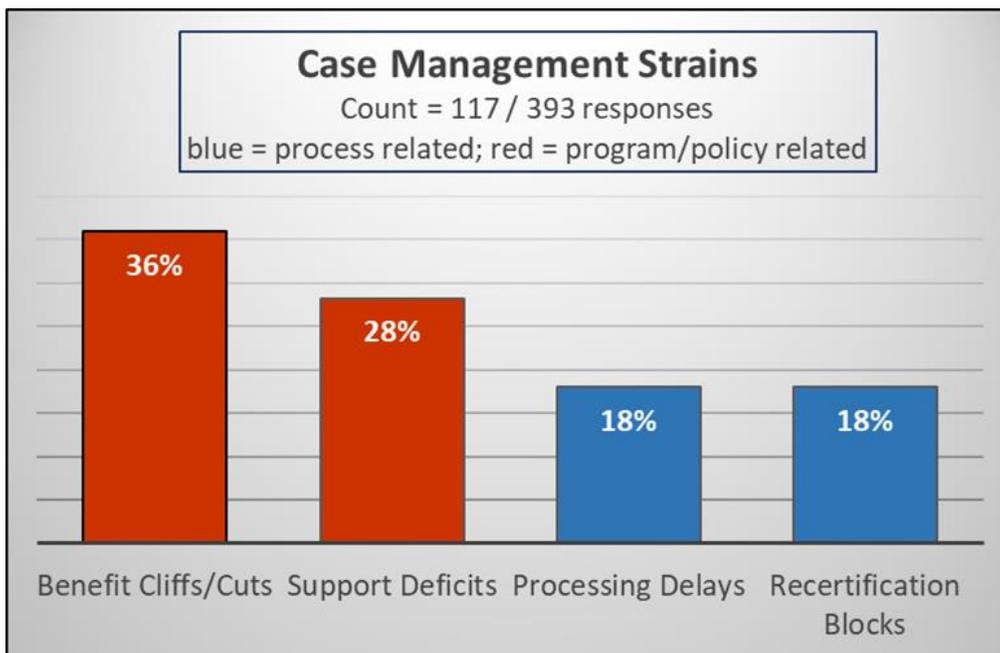
- **7%** regarding difficulty and/or confusion in **scheduling interviews**, and/or not being contacted for an interview when the applicant expected it.



Case Management Strains:

- Of the **393** responses received from **159** respondents, 117 responses or **30%** of all responses addressed challenges related to their experiences managing their public benefits cases, which often involved situational stress.
 - Among the 117 responses that focused on case management challenges, more than 60% (**64%**) discussed challenges related to program or policy features, such as the value of benefits or program eligibility criteria (as seen in yellow):
 - **28%** described **stressful benefit deficiency** situations in which the amount of support received were not enough to cover their family's living costs; and
 - **36%** involved **benefit cliff factors**, with confusion and/or pressures imposed by how changes in circumstances affect reciprocity status.
 - The remainder of the 117 responses (**36%**) focused on administrative burdens and fell into 2 main categories (as seen in blue):
 - **18%** involved **processing delays** and/or disruptions in receiving benefits once the application was successfully submitted; and

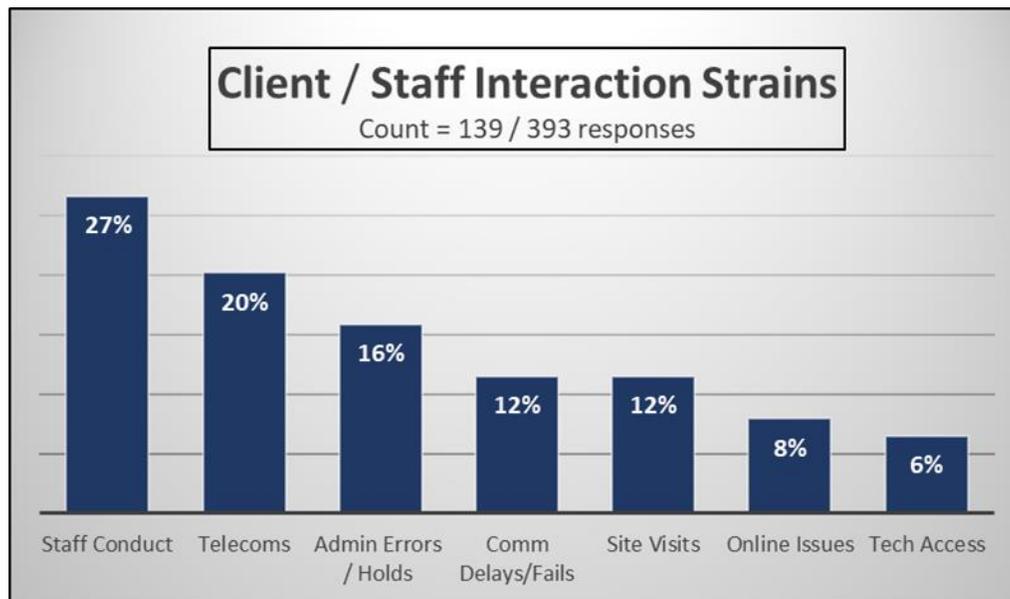
- **18%** involved confusion, delays, misinformation, disruptions, lack of follow-up and/or recourse opportunities in the recipient **recertification** process.



Client / Staff Interaction Strains:

- Finally, the largest portion, 139 responses or **35%** of the **393** responses received from **159** respondents expressed frustrations related to their **direct interaction** with **government staff**, which were often described as strained. These interactions generally fell into the below categories, and may have occurred at *any point* in the application/recipient experience, as follows:
 - **27%** involved **staff conduct**; such as an overall insensitivity, or disrespectful behaviors, exhibited by staff members toward the applicants and/or recipients,
 - **20%** involved **poor** treatment of clients during **telecommunication exchanges**,
 - **16%** involved perceived **administrative errors**, such as caseworkers unable to access documentation clients had submitted online, or errors made by staff,
 - **12%** of respondents reported additional **communication failures**,
 - **12%** of respondents reported unpleasant experiences during **in-person visits** at local social services district offices, such as excessive wait times and limited hours of operation,
 - **8%** of respondents experienced difficulty using online services,

- **6%** of respondents identified barriers that involved not having access to the web, a smart phone, or other commonly used digital technology.



- The **structural strains** described by respondents, involving barriers/burdens in the application and/or case management process, **would likely also be experienced by caseworkers and telecommunication staff who interact with these respondents.**
- Qualitative statements made regarding negative customer service experiences appeared in *both* the CPRAC *Public Benefits* surveys and *Public Hearing* testimonies and were closely aligned in substance.
- These statements reflect problems that are typical of understaffing, and “worker burnout,” and which have been well documented elsewhere in public sector studies.^{1 2}
- In other words, negative experiences in the application and case management stages may be the result of staff stressors that manifest in *client/staff relations* in the form of communication failures, perceived disrespect, frustrating treatment patterns, cultural competency issues, and other factors.

Part 2 – Selected Client Statements

A small number of responses (15 responses or 4% of responses) highlighted the neutral or positive experiences that clients had navigating processes to apply for and receive SNAP, PA

¹ Ratcliff, M. (2024). Social Workers, Burnout, and Self-Care: A Public Health Issue. *Delaware Journal of Public Health*, 10(1), 26–29. <https://doi.org/10.32481/djph.2024.03.05>

² Soskis, B., & Tomasko, L. (2023, March 3). *Addressing Burnout Is Critical to the Social Sector’s Success*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/addressing-burnout-critical-social-sectors-success>

and/or SSI benefits. In this context, an experience was considered “neutral” or “positive” if there were no explicit challenges reported.

Positive or Neutral:

ID 33. “[Translated from Spanish] I had **no problem with my application** and if I find out of a friend who wants to apply for the benefits, I will **send them directly to the office** where I received the assistance [to] complete the form.”

ID 38. “It’s easy to manage my case **because I always respond right away** to any notices I receive and submit documents when requested.”

ID 177. “**applying online is the best its so convenient.**”

However, the overwhelming majority of responses (96%) highlighted the challenges or “administrative burdens” that clients faced when navigating SNAP, PA and/or SSI processes. These responses are categorized by their focus on challenges related to three main government interaction stages, 1. application processing, 2. case management, and 3. direct governmental interaction, which may occur at any time, related to either application, case management, and/or other processes. These accounts illustrate the types of accessibility issues and administrative burdens reported by clients, as expressed *in their own words*:

Application Processing:

Application Complexity:

ID #52. “The process requires **way too much time**, assumes literacy, and you might not even get approved. **The constraints are too specific and too much jargon for the layperson to understand.**”

ID #159. “**The application itself is complicated and there is no guidance offered to successfully do it on my own.** The Dept of Social Services should make it easier to aid applicants. Trying to reach them by phone takes **HOURS** on hold. It is very discouraging.”

Documentation:

ID #38. “Having to submit all the documents. I don’t live near transportation and **had to travel to town to apply** for the benefits.”

ID #40. “I had to **send them more documents again** if they never received them on time.”

ID #139. “**Submitting documents were not clearly defined.** Some of the requested documents do not make sense from anyone other than the head of household. Applying in person was a disaster with customer service being non-existent, but online was much easier and simpler.”

Other Application Processing:

ID #87. *"You can apply online, and they have a mandatory phone interview. If you do not make the one they schedule for you, it is impossible to get ahold of anyone at the office for scheduling. They also do not enter the information correctly and then you get mail saying that you never had an interview, and no one will help you via phone look into it."*

ID #111. *"I wasn't sure if I was eligible because I have roommates and didn't understand what household meant. When applying I first got denied because I was working a gig job at restaurant and wasn't paid on a bi-weekly basis, and they were confused by that. I had to call and wait on hold for 4+ hours during my workday to talk to somebody. I would tell my friend to apply with a caseworker or someone friendly that you already know who might help you understand what they are asking for."*

ID #137. *I could not work and do schooling full time so for the benefit of my family I had to quit school. When I started working part time, I reached back out to my SNAP caseworker who then informed me now that I was working, I still wouldn't be eligible for benefits because we were just barely over the income threshold to be eligible."*

Case Management:

Process Delays:

ID #119. *"The places never calling back... You send the same paperwork to snap and heap but they make you send it separately. Seems like the whole program is to deter us from trying to get help."*

ID #110. *"The emergency option takes too long. I was given a list of food pantries but some of these places are not even open. It took around 30 to 40 days to receive the benefits."*

ID #7. *"I would tell a close friend be prepared to be frustrated and wait."*

Support Deficit:

ID #169. *"The worst thing managing is my Snap benefits and with 3 person family CAN NOT survive a month with the money we get. Towards the end of the month, I go without eating so I know my wife and daughter will eat"*

ID #102. *"Benefit income quantities and benefit amounts do not reflect current day prices"*

ID #136. *"Outdated income standards, unrealistic amounts on which to live"*

Benefit Cliffs/Cuts:

ID #8. *"Honestly, the hardest part about it is when you get a job that's remotely a dollar above, you're taken off in a spur of the moment with children when"*

you already couldn't afford anything while you was on the public assistance. ... Help shouldn't be this hard this scary and degrading."

ID #21. *"The problem with the system is that it does not allow you to get on your feet before they cut it off."*

ID #136. *"Making slightly 'too much' income where I was no longer eligible for benefits but not yet making enough to have food-security and housing security, **perpetually stuck in too much and not enough.**"*

Other Case Management:

ID #23. *"If I have a question about my case, I have to go to the city office because **it's pointless calling them. They have not enough agents answer the phones.** If I go to the city office for maintaining cases, I'm sure that it's going to be a min 3-4 hour event. **It's a lot of people in the waiting line but just a few people who service them.**"*

ID #25. *"Please answer the phone when people are trying to call about their cases because **sometimes you can't make it in person especially when the kids have a break from school, and you have nobody to watch them.**"*

Direct Governmental Interaction:

Staff Conduct:

ID #11. *"**It would feel so unwelcoming and burdening that I would rather close my case.**"*

ID #143. *"The issue is only accessing help through the center in person. **They're rude and judgmental and will have people wait more than 4 hours just to answer a question. They don't answer the phone when you call.**"*

ID #136. *"**Long wait, no answer on phone, lack of accessibility...disrespect and dehumanizing treatment.**"*

Administrative Error:

ID #24. *"**...workers on several occasions lost my paperwork or failed to pass it along to the right person which resulted in me being denied several times.** I would always encourage others to get proof that they turned things in."*

ID #43. *"When you recertify and submit all your documents and the worker puts the year 2020 not 2024 and did not correct their mistake and now **you have to keep going to the office to correct their mistake** "*

ID #68. *"I was able to apply for SNAP because a Medicaid facilitated enroller showed me that our family qualified using a line on our taxes ""gross income after farm loss"". I applied online for SNAP and our family qualified. When it was time to recert, **the local DSS worker called me and said I did not qualify by a lot.** I knew that my income had not changed that much and was worried that*

*they would consider my case as fraud. Fortunately, the local caseworker was willing to listen as I explained how we had initially qualified. She said she was at her job 13 years and had never heard of using the gross income after farm loss line on a tax filing. Neither had her supervisor, but they followed up with the state office and **found that I did indeed qualify.** Because I live in a rural county, I think this qualification could apply to others and I am concerned that the local DSS did not know about it.”*

Other Governmental Interaction:

ID #129. ***“It is hard when you work during the same hours offices are open so unable to make it in person, yet the phones are never answered.”***

In addition to the feedback that fit into one of these three stages of government interaction (application, case management, direct), there were other responses that reported experiencing a confluence of issues across multiple stages. For example, one response pointed to what they believed was the misalignment between government websites, call centers, local offices, and the advice provided by staff, which compounded the burdens faced by the client when applying for or maintaining benefits, as they felt they were being bounced between resources but unable to get the help they needed. This also included reports of submitting documents online that call center or office employees could not see or access, and/or receiving incorrect information from these sources about their application, documents, case, or general next steps:

ID #18. ***“The amount of paperwork that has to be submitted that for some reason that never gets to the caseworker”***

ID #21. ***“When I first started getting benefits you had to only go in person, over time they have moved a lot of it over the internet. The problem they are still have is they are **not getting all the people documents when you send it in.** They need to work on the system.”***

ID #80. ***“Online application allows you to submit documents, but they never make it to your case worker.”***

ID #158. ***“Submitting Documents, when submitting the application, I upload documentation and it says received but they never receive them electronically.”***

Due to the number and variety of burdens reported by clients related to their application, case management, or direct interactions with government generally, several respondents emphasized that they found the processes were much easier when receiving assistance from nonprofit organizations – and recommended doing so instead of seeking help from government:

ID #113. “I was originally rejected and had to seek assistance through a CBO in order to receive benefits. There was no one for me to speak with as I found out by checking online. I knew I had no money and needed to eat so I sought help. I

would tell my friend to **let an organization help them do not try to submit the paperwork on your own** it will just prolong the process.”

ID #159. “If i had to give advice to a friend, it would be to **not attempt it on their own**. Seek help from an organization like I did.”

Summary

- The observations presented in this report allow us to gain important insights into the experiences of people who have sought and/or currently receive SNAP, PA and/or SSI benefits.
- Additional data collection is necessary to increase our sample size and to reach the broadest mix of individuals who seek assistance and qualify for public benefit programs. Thus, these results are useful, but must be interpreted with caution.
- In addition to several main areas of *structural strain* (ie., application process barriers and case management burdens) a significant number of respondents reported additional stress factors in their direct interaction with government staff. These problematic exchanges include communication failures, perceived disrespect, frustrating treatment patterns, cultural competency issues, submission delays, etc.
- Improvements in application processing and case management procedures will likely begin to alleviate the challenging interactions our clients have described having with case workers and other staff members.
- Overall, continued attention to *client statements* and experiences will allow us to *target specific improvements* needed in three key interactive areas, including,
 1. streamlined and increased efficiency in application processing,
 2. reduce deficiencies in case management/ customer service, and
 3. increased support for district staffing levels and human resource development.
- Most documentation and eligibility requirements for SNAP are established by the federal government. Efforts should be made to streamline documentation where in the control of the State and for New York to seek ways to reduce documentation and eligibility restrictions required by federal rules.
- If enhancement initiatives in these areas are collectively addressed, using measureable outcomes, we will very likely see a greater, positive, and long term impact on the delivery of critical family support programs to our clients.

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