August 2010
Olympia, Washington

Adults on TANF in Washington State

DRAFT

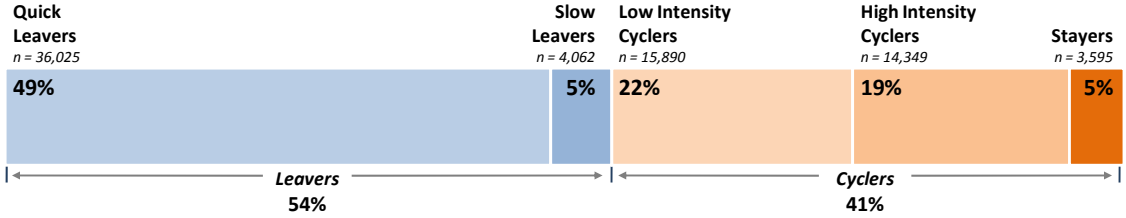
Risks and Outcomes for Leavers, Cyclers, and Stayers

Prepared for the WorkFirst Subcabinet

THE TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES (TANF) program provides cash assistance to families and aids parents in gaining employment and achieving economic self-sufficiency. To assist with the re-examination of the TANF program, the DSHS Research and Data Analysis (RDA) Division conducted an analysis of adults on TANF in state fiscal year (SFY) 2007 to identify risk factors related to persistent dependence on cash assistance and other client outcomes.

Overall, we found that clients who were able to transition off TANF relatively quickly and remain off were less likely to have barriers to work and more likely to experience steady wage growth. Those who spent more time on TANF were more likely to have chronic illness, substance abuse, and mental illness. They were also more likely to be caring for family members with special health care needs and to experience homelessness and family violence. Behavioral health problems—especially substance abuse—were found to be the key drivers of homelessness, child welfare involvement, and criminal justice involvement. Behavioral health needs were also found to impede employment and wage progression.

Key Findings

1. **Employment and wage progression facilitate successful transitions off TANF.** About half of clients on TANF in SFY 2007 left quickly and remained off TANF through the end of SFY 2010 – even though this period included the sharpest economic downturn since the Great Depression. Another 41 percent of the caseload cycled off and back on TANF at least once during the 3-year follow-up period. "Cyclers" show significant labor force attachment but do not show the degree of wage progression that "quick leavers" were able to achieve.
2. **Stayers, slow leavers, and high intensity cyclers have a greater prevalence of barriers.** About a third (29 percent) of the SFY 2007 adult TANF caseload consists of clients who remained persistently on cash assistance ("stayers" and "slow leavers") or who cycled off and on the caseload with relatively intensive use of TANF over the 36-month follow-up period (high-intensity cyclers). These clients were more likely to have chronic illness, substance abuse, and mental illness. They were also more likely to face barriers related to caring for family members with special health care needs, homelessness, and family violence.
3. **Behavioral health problems are key risk factors for homelessness, child welfare involvement, and criminal justice involvement.** We found that grouping clients according to behavioral health risk factors provided a useful lens for understanding why some clients experience more adverse outcomes than others. In particular, substance abuse problems were major drivers of homelessness, child welfare involvement, and criminal justice involvement. In addition, individuals who had co-occurring substance abuse and mental health problems were more likely to be involved with the child welfare system and to experience poorer employment outcomes.

Distribution of leavers, cyclers, stayers, TOTAL POPULATION = 73,921, SFY 2007