



# NEW WORK EXPERIENCE POLICY IN MARYLAND'S TEMPORARY CASH ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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The U.S. Congress has largely avoided major policy changes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program since its inception in 1996 (Falk, 2024). Notable exceptions include the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act, which tightened work participation rules and revised how caseload reductions are determined for performance metrics. Similarly, the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) of 2023 again adjusted the formula for caseload reductions and introduced additional work outcome measures.

Despite limited federal changes, states have broad discretion in operating their TANF programs and can update program policies to restrict access or enhance the program. Maryland's TANF program, known as Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA), has seen a flurry of policy changes in recent years, mostly driven by strong advocacy to enrich participant outcomes. For example, in July 2019, Maryland began passing through a portion of child support payments to TCA families (Family Investment Administration [FIA], 2019a); additionally, the state introduced Transitional Support Services to address the benefit cliff (FIA, 2019b). In July 2020, adults were permitted to participate in vocational education activities for 2 years, an increase from the federal maximum of 1 year (FIA, 2020a). TCA families also began receiving an additional monthly benefit of \$45 per recipient in September 2022 (FIA, 2022c).

This is one of three briefs on four new TCA policies implemented in calendar years 2021 or 2022. These briefs detail the percentage of the caseload impacted by the following policies:

- (1) the shift from full-family work and child support sanctions to partial sanctions;
- (2) a work exemption for adult recipients during their first 6 months of TCA benefits;
- (3) an expanded work exemption for single parents with a child under age 1; and
- (4) limitations on the use of work experience and community service to meet work requirements.

This brief examines TCA families who **participated in a work experience or community service activity** under the new limitations and aims to highlight the impact of this recent TCA policy change on Maryland families.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Only 2% of SFY 2023 cases had an adult participate in a work experience or community service activity. This is a decrease from 25% in previous years.
- Typically, adults participated for 3 months, aligning with the new policy limiting participation to 3 months in a 3-year period.

## During the 6 months after the participation in work experience or community service activity ended:

- One in 10 received a work sanction, and few (1%) had a child support sanction.
- Three in five (61%) participated in another work activity in which half (50%) of participants became employed.
- Two in five (39%) cases closed.
- Among closed cases, half (50%) closed for income above the limit and 21% did not reapply.

## Data and Study Population

### *Data Sources*

TCA program participation data were extracted from the Eligibility and Enrollment (E&E) system and its predecessor, the Client Automated Resources and Eligibility System (CARES). E&E and CARES are the administrative data systems for safety net programs managed by the Maryland Department of Human Services (MDHS). CARES was operational between March 1998 and November 2021; the migration to E&E was fully completed in November 2021.<sup>1</sup> Both systems provide individual- and case-level participation data for the TCA program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and other services as well as demographic data on participants.

Information on the types of work activities assigned to and completed by participants is provided by the Work Opportunities Record Keeping System (WORKS), which was developed in December 2006 by MDHS to collect and report data related to federal work participation reporting requirements, provide MDHS with information that can be used to monitor the results of local work programs, and provide local staff with information to manage and improve program operations.

### *Study Population*

The study population includes every family who received TCA for at least one month in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2023 (July 2022 to June 2023). There were 27,973 families who received at least 1 month of TCA in SFY 2023 including 23,251 work-eligible cases in which the adult recipients were required to participate in a work-related activity. From this caseload, the cases in which an adult recipient participated in a work experience or community service activity during SFY 2023 were identified (n=380). Follow-up data for these families is extended through June 2024.

### *Data Analysis*

This report utilizes descriptive statistics to describe cases and adult recipients who participated in TCA, including percentages, medians, and averages. The average represents the total (e.g., all earnings) divided by the number of individuals included in the analysis. Median is sometimes a preferred representation of the data. The median is derived by arranging all values from lowest to highest and selecting the midpoint value. Extreme values do not affect the median, which can sometimes skew averages. This report examines population statistics and therefore does not include inferential statistics which are used to generalize sample findings to the population.

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<sup>1</sup> The transition to E&E resulted in some data inaccuracies. When we were able to identify data inaccuracies, we excluded analyses. Given the

transition to a new data system, there may be additional unknown data issues.

## Background on Work Experience and Community Service Activities

### WORK ACTIVITY LIMITATIONS

Effective October 2022, adult recipients were limited to 90 days in a work experience or community service work activity over a 3-year period. These activities can be used to meet federal work requirements.

(FIA, 2022a)

Participation in federally defined work activities is a central tenet of the TANF program, which aims to “end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage” (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, 1997). Most adult recipients in Maryland’s TCA program are required to engage in these activities and failure to do so can result in a work sanction, leading to reduced monthly benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Recipients have several options for meeting this participation requirement, including nine core and three non-core work activities.<sup>3</sup> To be fully compliant, recipients must complete 20 to 30 hours per week with the majority of hours in core activities (Ensuring that Recipients Work, 1999; FIA, 2022b). Work experience and community service activities are two of the nine core activities. Both activities are unpaid and intended to improve adults’ labor market prospects by providing practical job skills and experience

to adults who may struggle with obtaining employment (FIA, 2022d).

The effectiveness of these two work activities, specifically work experience, in leading to employment and higher earnings is mixed. Some research finds negative or no impact on earnings (Davis et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2005), but one study suggests that work experience may have positive long-term effects (Dyke et al., 2006). Previous research in Maryland found that adults who participated in work experience were more disadvantaged (Nicoli, 2016). Compared to adults who participated in other core work activities, those who were in a work experience activity were the least likely to have a high school education and had the highest average months of TCA benefits. Additionally, these adults had the lowest employment and earnings before receiving TCA and after exiting TCA. However, the work experience participants did experience an increase from their pre-TCA employment and earnings.

Despite the limited evidence for the effectiveness of work experience activities, Maryland relied heavily upon this activity to meet federal work participation requirements. Among Maryland recipients meeting the required number of hours in work activities between federal fiscal years (FFYs) 2016 and 2019, 40% to 50% participated in a work experience activity compared to 2% to 3% nationally (Office of Family Assistance, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). Several advocates and previous TCA recipients were concerned with the reliance

<sup>2</sup> See [Partial Sanctions in Maryland’s Temporary Cash Assistance Program](#) for more information on work sanctions.

<sup>3</sup> See [Participation in Federally Defined Work Activities Across Maryland](#) for a list of all activities.

upon work experience. For one, TCA recipients who participate in unpaid work experience activities may not be eligible for benefits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (Testimony of LaDonna Pavetti, 2022) which has been shown to boost the incomes of low-income families (Shrider, 2024). Previous TCA recipients indicated frustration at the lack of pay for completing the same tasks as paid employees while subsequent job offers were rare (Testimony in Support of HB1043, 2022).

The passage of House Bill 1043 (2022) was designed to address these concerns. The bill limits participation in a work experience or community service activity to 90 days within a 3-year period. This limitation requires case workers and vendors to consider other work activities that can lead to unsubsidized employment. Advocates' hope is that TCA customers' own goals will be considered when determining work activity assignment, and when work experience is identified as beneficial, that the focus will be on quickly gaining marketable skills by employers who will offer positions to those who meet the job requirements (Testimony of LaDonna Pavetti, 2022; Support – HB1043, 2022; Testimony in Support of HB1043, 2022).

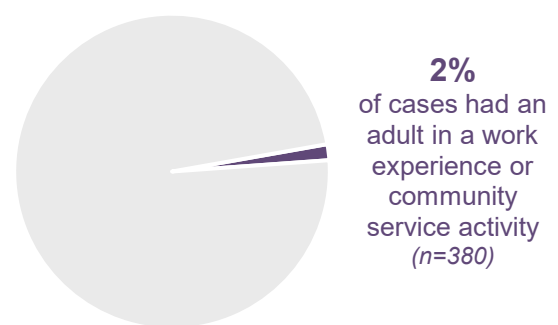
On the other hand, the Family Investment Administration as well as local case workers see value in work experience activities. Importantly, participation in work experience was key to meeting federal work participation goals, and participation limitations could jeopardize federal funding (Letter of Concern, 2022). Case managers suggest that employers often need longer than 90 days to identify a skill match for open positions or for customers to meet the minimum qualifications (Schuyler et al., 2024).

## Participation among the SFY 2023 Caseload

Maryland TCA recipients regularly participated in work experience and community service activities prior to the passage of the policy limiting participation to 90 days. Previous research found that about one quarter of work-eligible adults—those who are required to participate in a work activity—participated in a work experience activity for at least one hour (Nicoli, 2016; Gross & Passarella, 2019). This finding was consistent among TCA recipients in FFY 2014 as well as in SFY 2018.

In October 2022, during SFY 2023, the 90-day limit on work experience and community service activities became effective (FIA, 2022a). Participation in these two activities subsequently plummeted. Among cases with a work-eligible adult, only 2% participated in these activities. Aligned with the policy, those who participated in one of these two activities only did so for a median of 3 consecutive months.

**Figure 1. Participation in a Work Experience or Community Service Activity in SFY 2023**



### Consecutive Months of Participation

Cases with adults participating in a work experience or community service activity did so for a median of **3 consecutive months**.

## Short-term Outcomes after Participation

The next set of analyses explore three major outcomes during the 6 months after adults' participation in a work experience or community service activity ended. These outcomes include: (1) families received a work or child support sanction; (2) adults participated in another work-related activity or were identified as having a barrier to participation; or (3) the families' cases closed. It is possible, but rare (1%), for families to experience all three of these outcomes during the 6 months after adults' participation in one of the two activities ends. Hence, these analyses explore each outcome independently.

### *Conciliations or Sanctions*

Unless families have an exemption or good cause reason, non-compliance with requirements to participate in work-related activities or cooperate with the child support program results in a financial penalty commonly known as a sanction. When sanctioned, families' TCA benefits are partially reduced until they comply with requirements or a good cause exemption is identified. For a work sanction, the adult portion of the TCA benefit is reduced by 30%. For child support sanctions, the entire grant amount is reduced by 25%, the minimum required by federal law (Other Accountability Provisions, 1999). These partial sanctions went into effect in December 2021 for child support sanctions and January 2022 for work sanctions (FIA, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Each time customers are not

<sup>4</sup> Previously, full-family sanctions were implemented for non-compliance; this meant that cases closed and all TCA benefits ended until families complied with requirements. Prior to the implementation of partial sanctions, full-family sanctions were largely phased out beginning in March 2020 when Maryland

### OUTCOMES AFTER PARTICIPATION

The next set of analyses examine outcomes in the 6 months after participation in a work experience or community service activity ended. **Only cases that have at least 6 months between the participation end date and June 2024 are included in these analyses.** Nearly all (99%) SFY 2023 cases with an adult participating in a work experience or community service activity (379 of 380 cases) had at least 6 months of follow-up data at the time of data retrieval.

compliant with work or child support requirements, case managers must provide customers with a 30-day conciliation period before the financial penalty is imposed. This allows the customer to either come into compliance before they are sanctioned or to provide a good cause reason for non-compliance.

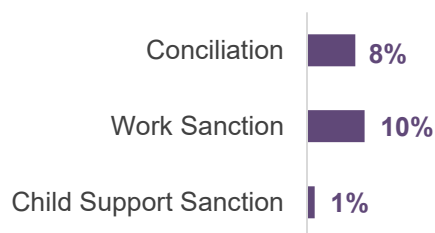
In the 6 months after adults' participation in a work experience or community service activity ended, few received a work or child support sanction. As shown in Figure 2, only 8% received a 30-day conciliation period, meaning they were non-compliant with either work or child support requirements. At this point, families do not receive a financial penalty; however, to avoid a penalty, they must comply with requirements or provide information for a good cause. One in 10 (10%) families received a work sanction during the 6 months after their participation end date, and only 1% received a child support sanction. Based on prior research, the median financial penalty for a work sanction is just under \$50 per month and about \$180 per month for a child support sanction (Passarella, 2025).

suspended work requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic; when sanctions were reinstated, many families still qualified for a good cause exemption due to continued pandemic-related closures and illness (Zimmerman, 2021).



## Figures 2. Sanction Status

*During the 6 months after activity end date*



It should be noted that the percentage with a work sanction exceeds the percentage with a conciliation period (10% vs. 8%). Based on policy, a conciliation period should always precede a sanction. The lack of a conciliation period may be based on data errors; however, it is possible that some families did not receive a conciliation period before issuing a sanction. This disconnect may be a result of case managers transitioning to this new policy; hence, it is important to ensure that case managers are aware of the 30-day conciliation period before issuing each sanction. Certainly, this may indicate an area in which additional training is necessary.

### ***Participation in Work-related Activities or Assignment to Barrier Codes***

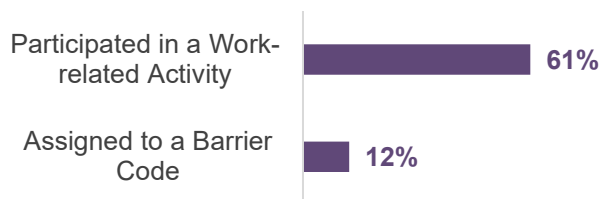
As previously stated, most adult recipients are required to participate in a work-related activity. Hence, another outcome during the 6 months after adults were no longer participating in a work experience or community service activity is participation in another work-related activity. Alternatively, adults may identify a barrier that prohibits their participation in an activity. As shown in Figure 3, participation in another work-related activity was common while few had a barrier to participation.

Just over one in 10 (12%) adults who participated in a work experience or

community service activity had a barrier code listed at some point in the following 6 months. Barrier codes represent reasons that adults are unable to fully participate in work activities. Barriers can range from childcare and transportation challenges to domestic violence or disabilities. Additionally, these barriers may impact adults' participation for a limited period of time or be more long-term issues such as a disability that requires adults to apply for Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance.

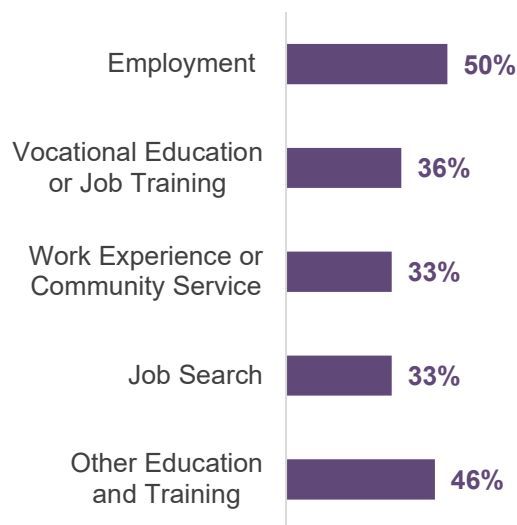
## Figures 3. Participation in Activities or Assignment to Barriers

*During the 6 months after activity end date*



In the 6 months after adults' participation in a work experience or community service activity ended, three in five (61%) began participating in at least one other activity although participation in multiple activities is possible. According to Figure 4, half (50%) of adults *who participated in another activity* became employed. Another one third (33%) of those participating in additional work-related activities attended job search activities, potentially indicating a readiness for employment. This analysis did not explore whether the sites in which the TCA recipients participated in work experience subsequently hired the participants. MDHS (2023, 2024) reported that very few work experience participants were hired by their previous work experience sites. Nonetheless, this may suggest that the work experience obtained by TCA recipients spurred other employment opportunities.

**Figure 4. Participation in Activities**  
During the 6 months after activity end date



**Note:** Includes adults who participated in a work-related activity (see Figure 3). Adults may participate in multiple activities throughout the 6-month follow-up period so percentages may not sum to 100%.

Participation in education and training activities was also common among TCA recipients who participated in another activity. Nearly two in five (36%) participated in a vocational education or job training activity. Possibly, the work experience activity sparked interest in a new field, and participants were seeking skills to meet the job qualifications. In the recent past, Maryland extended participation limits in vocational education from the 1-year federal limit to 2 years, allowing adults more time to achieve necessary credentials (FIA, 2020).

Additionally, nearly half (46%) of adults who participated in additional work-related activities participated in other education and training activities. These activities include enrollment in secondary education or a GED program, adult basic education, English as a second language, or job skills training. The high level of participation in these activities may signify lower educational attainment in which basic job skills are necessary; indeed, this is aligned

#### ACTIVITY DESCRIPTIONS

**Employment:** unsubsidized or subsidized jobs

**Vocational education or job training:** education program, on-the-job training, self-employment training

**Job search:** resume development, job applications, and interviews

**Work experience or community service:** unpaid placements designed to prepare participants for employment

**Other education and training:** secondary education/GED, adult basic education, English as a second language, job skills training

with prior research indicating that TCA recipients who participate in work experience activities have low levels of educational attainment (Nicoli, 2016).

Interestingly, after adult recipients participated in a work experience or community service activity, they subsequently participated in one of these experiences *again*. In fact, one third (33%) had another spell of participation in a work experience or community service activity during the 6 months after their initial participation ended. At first glance, this is concerning, given that participants are now limited to 3 months in these activities over a 3-year period, and the typical participant had 3 months of participation. However, the vast majority of adults on cases with another spell in a work experience or community service activity had additional months remaining of their 3-month limit.

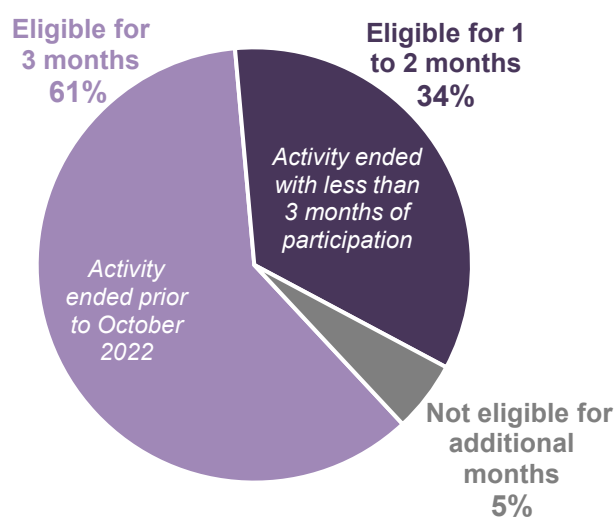
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Most (95%) cases with additional participation in a work experience or community service activity had additional months remaining of their 3-month limit (see Figure 5).

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Specifically, 95% of the adults who subsequently participated in a work experience or community service activity in the 6 months after their initial participation ended had additional months remaining in their 3-month limit. There are two reasons adults had these additional months. First, this policy became effective within SFY 2023 in October 2022. Three in five (61%) work experience or community service participants ended their participation prior to October 2022 before there was a 3-month limit. These individuals, then, were still eligible for 3 months of participation in these two activities. Second, another one third (34%) of participants did not participate for the full 3 months available, leaving another 1 or 2 months of eligibility for work experience or community service. Only 5% of participants who had a subsequent spell in a work experience or community service activity had exhausted their 3-month limit. Most likely, this discrepancy is due to the transition to a new policy.

**Figure 5. Additional Eligibility in Work Experience & Community Service**  
During the 6 months after activity end date



## Case Closure

Case closure is the final outcome examined in this brief, and two in five (39%) families had their cases closed during the subsequent 6 months. Aligned with the high participation in an employment activity, the most common reason for case closure was income above the eligibility threshold. Half (50%) of cases that closed had either earned or unearned income that exceeded the income threshold (Figure 6). Based on other research, employment is certainly common among TCA leavers, but few earn self-sufficient wages (Smith et al., 2024). Median earnings among leavers remain stubbornly below the poverty threshold.

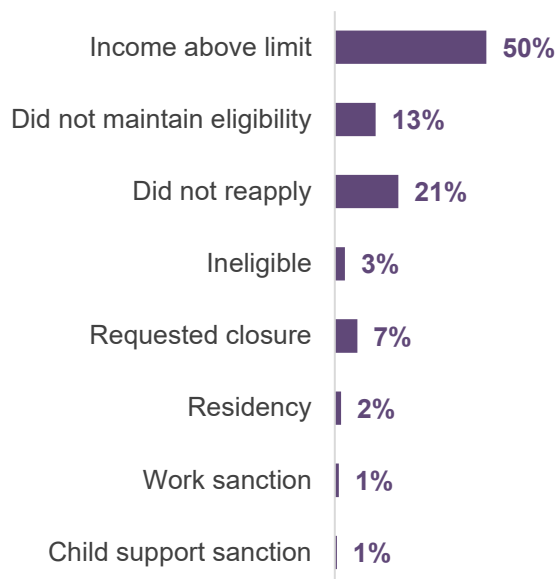
### Case Closure among Adults Participating in a Work Experience or Community Service Activity

During the 6 months after the activity end date, **two in five (39%) cases closed.**

While income above the eligibility threshold was the most common reason for closure, other administrative factors also played a role in closures. Maintaining eligibility is a part of the process for receiving benefits. To do this, adults need to provide evidence they are meeting the requirements of their independence plans, and they must complete periodic redeterminations for benefit eligibility. The inability to maintain eligibility at these points may result in a case closure. One third of families had their cases closed for either not maintaining eligibility (13%) or for not reapplying during the redetermination period (21%). All other closures among this small group of TCA families each accounted for less than 10% of the closures.



**Figures 6. Case Closure Reasons**  
During the 6 months after activity end date



#### CASE CLOSURE DESCRIPTIONS

**Income above limit:** Family's earned income and/or unearned income exceeded eligibility threshold

**Did not maintain eligibility:** Family did not submit required information regarding eligibility or did not comply with the eligibility process such as compliance with their Family Independence Plan

**Did not reapply:** Family did not recertify their eligibility for TCA when required, did not provide all documentation to recertify benefits, or missed the redetermination appointment

**Ineligible:** Family no longer met technical eligibility, such as a deceased head of household or no dependent children

**Requested closure:** Family requested to discontinue TCA benefits

**Residency:** Family no longer resides in Maryland, or their residency is unknown

**Work sanction\*:** Adult recipient did not comply with work requirements

**Child support sanction\*:** Adult did not comply with child support requirements


*\* Based on a limited case record review, there was a potential administrative data system error that suppressed the actual case closure code in the system. Case record reviews for all cases could not be conducted; therefore, cases are still listed as sanction closures although these are likely system errors, and families' cases closed for other reasons.*

## Conclusions

Maryland's TCA program has undergone many policy changes over the last handful of years. Most of these changes are aimed at ensuring TCA customers are provided with services to encourage well-being and stability. The focus of this brief was on a new policy limiting the amount of time customers could participate in two federally defined work activities: work experience and community service. These are unpaid work activities designed to provide skills to customers who may have difficulty obtaining employment.

The evidence on the effectiveness of these two activities—particularly work experience—in leading to employment and higher earnings is not clear. Nonetheless, Maryland relied heavily on its use to meet federal work participation goals, differing from national trends. Advocates' concerns about over-reliance led to a 3-month limit over a 3-year, as outlined in House Bill 1043 (2022). This new limit appears to have drastically reduced participation in work experience and community service activities. Previous research found that about 25% of customers participated in work experience activities annually. However, only 2% of customers participated in these activities during SFY 2023, the year in which the new policy was implemented. On par with the new policy, the typical adult recipient participated for 3 months.

There were some positive outcomes among the customers who participated in these two activities during the 6 months after their participation ended. More than half (61%) of participants went on to participate in other activities, thereby limiting work sanctions among these families. Half of those with additional participation became employed,



potentially indicating that the work experience activity provided some skills or opportunities for employment. Others went on to search for employment or participate in education and training activities to further develop their skills. Lastly, about 40% of these cases closed, and half were for income above the eligibility threshold, again indicating some level of employment success.

These outcomes, however, have a few limitations. First, it is unclear whether participation in the work experience or community service activity led to employment, and more specifically, whether the activity site offered employment to the participants. MDHS (2023, 2024) reported that very few work experience participants were hired by those sites. Additionally, this brief did not explore employment outcomes after initial participation in other types of work activities. Although half of adults who paired work experience or community services with a subsequent work activity

were able to secure employment, it is possible adults participating in other types of work activities would similar or better employment outcomes. Second, this brief did not explore employment outcomes to determine how many quarters in which adults were employed, the sectors in which they were employed, and their earnings. Maryland's *Life after Welfare* annual reports highlight that many adults work after leaving the TCA program, but earnings remain low and often continue to qualify families for other safety net programs.

Nonetheless, these outcomes do provide some optimism. Additional research may be warranted to determine the employment outcomes of work experience and community service participants. It is possible that a more refined approach to determining who would best benefit from these activities could have a positive impact on their subsequent employment and earnings.

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