



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

U.S. House of Representatives
Ways and Means Committee - Subcommittee on Work and Welfare
Testimony of Director Roxane Somerlot
Marion County (Ohio) Department of Job and Family Services
April 8, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Work and Welfare, my name is Roxane Somerlot. Thank you for allowing me to testify today on the topic of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) non-assistance services. I am the Director of the Marion County Department of Job and Family Services, a position I have held for 25 years. Marion is a county of 65,000 residents located in northwest Ohio. I have also served as the President of the Ohio Job and Family Services Directors Association and currently serve as the Chair of the OJFSDA Workforce Committee, a statewide group of practitioners focused on employment, training, and workforce development across all the programs we administer.

Regardless of population size, geography and available resources, counties are deeply invested in ensuring healthy, safe and vibrant communities. Among our numerous responsibilities, serving as the front-line of the social safety net is a primary function of county governments. County governments administer TANF in California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Virginia, and in my home state of Ohio. In Ohio, the human services delivery system uses a state-supervised, county administered structure. The Ohio county departments of job and family services (CDJFS) are staffed by county employees, and the director reports to the board of county commissioners. CDJFS agencies blend the administration of multiple health, human services, and workforce programs under the direction of state agencies, most notably the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, the Ohio Department of Medicaid, and the Ohio Department of Children and Youth.

Given the role that county governments play in administering TANF and other public assistance programs—as well as in employing 3.6 million Americans—our employees, administrators and elected officials have unique insight into challenges and opportunities for leveraging this critical program to achieve its statutory mission. In Ohio, county job and family services departments are responsible for determining eligibility for means-tested programs including TANF, SNAP, publicly-funded childcare, and Medicaid (including long-



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

term care, children's health insurance and aged, blind and disabled). Counties also operate employment and training programs for individuals receiving TANF, SNAP, WIOA and other workforce programs. Additional social service responsibilities include adult protective services, child protective services, foster care, adoption, childcare licensing inspections, and child support programs.

In every interaction, we work to identify individuals who are ready and able to take the next step in moving up the economic mobility ladder. And once someone has taken that next step, we work with partners to help ensure they are stable and able to keep that job or succeed in that training program.

In Marion County, the CDJFS is the umbrella for public assistance programs, workforce development, and child support enforcement. While the Marion County children services agency operates separately and reports to a children services board rather than the board of county commissioners, we collaborate closely to ensure we are serving families holistically. Statewide, sixty-eight (68) of the public children services agencies are under the county JFS umbrella.

Our county-led structure and holistic management across programs enables us to serve the whole family. It gives us the flexibility to work with our local partners in an efficient and productive way that allows each organization to focus on the work they do best in order to most effectively serve our county residents. And, it gives us the opportunity to be nimble and proactive in meeting community needs as they emerge.

PROGRAMS FUNDED BY TANF IN OHIO

Since the passage of welfare reform in the 1990s, Ohio has received an annual TANF block grant of approximately \$725 million. This amount has not changed since 1997, and since that time its purchasing power has eroded 50% due to inflation. Despite this, TANF is still the glue in serving low-income families in Ohio. In recent years, the state of Ohio has used its TANF block grant for three primary purposes:

- County Allocations: There are two main allocations provided to county JFS departments – one for program activities and services, and one for the successful administration of these programs. The county TANF Regular allocation provides funding to Ohio's county JFS departments to support activities and services for the



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

Ohio Works First and Prevention, Retention and Contingency (PRC) programs. The goal of the PRC program is to help families retain employment in order to divert them from needing long-term cash assistance, and stabilizing children in the home – be it their family of origin or a kinship setting – so they don’t need to enter the custody of a children services agency in order to have their needs met. Allowable activities include case management, work activities and supports, screening and assessments, family stabilization services, and post-placement services.

Additionally, the county TANF Administration allocation is distributed to counties to fund the determination, monitoring, and timely action of eligibility for TANF funded services. It also funds program development, compliance, integrity, performance management, reports, and other critical functions for successful program outcomes.

- Publicly-funded Child Care – A vital work support for low-income families that allows them to stay in the workforce. Eligibility is determined at the county level and providers are paid by the state. Eligible families must have an initial income below 145 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). In order to avoid a benefit cliff, families can stay in the program until their income reaches 300 percent of the FPL. Currently, the state also uses the Child Care Development Block Grant to support a voucher program for families with incomes at initial eligibility between 145% and 200% FPL.
- Ohio Works First program – Ongoing TANF cash assistance benefits for families with minor children in the home. Eligibility is determined at the county level and benefits are paid by the state. The caseload of this program has fallen dramatically over time, and approximately 85% of the cases are “child only” situations in which a child is living with grandparents or other kinship caregivers because the parents can no longer care for them.
- Social Services Block Grant - In addition, the state transfers ten percent of the TANF block grant to the Title XX Social Services Block Grant. These funds are passed down to counties as more flexible Title XX funds that are used to fill other gaps in



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

state or federal funding. The most common uses for the funds in Ohio are child and adult protective services. SSBG funds, and TANF Title XX Transfer, are a lifeblood for the provision of services to children and adults who are victims of abuse, neglect and exploitation.

I will also discuss two other programs that combine TANF resources with other funding streams: (1) the Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program (CCMEP), a program to help low-income youth between the ages of 14 and 24 build career paths and find employment; and, (2) the Benefit Bridge Pilot Program, a state pilot program that provides services, supports, and coaching to families that have an opportunity to move up the career ladder but are facing the loss of public benefits as their income rises (the “benefit cliff” issue).

PRC AND OTHER TANF SUPPORTS

We leverage the county TANF allocation in variety of ways in Marion County to stabilize people in the workforce.

PRC: The foundation of our TANF programs is the county Prevention, Retention and Contingency (PRC) program. Every county in Ohio has its own PRC plan, which can be adapted to local needs. Each county’s plan is periodically reviewed and approved by the county commissioners. In Marion County, we continuously scan our local environment to make sure our PRC plan is reflective of community needs with the goal of fostering self-sufficiency and supporting county economic development. Our plan prioritizes supports that allow people to obtain and keep employment. The goal of PRC is to stabilize families facing difficult circumstances so that they do not have to apply for ongoing cash assistance (prevention), can overcome barriers to finding or keeping employment (retention), and mitigate emergent needs which could threaten the health, well-being or stability of the family (contingency).

Services range from car repair, fuel assistance, emergency utility or rent payments, short term training, essential work supplies for a new job (like work boots), to contracts with local non-profits to enhance their stabilization programs. In the past two years we have developed a PRC program to specifically assist kinship caregivers (many of whom are working) to stabilize their financial condition while



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

supporting an unplanned, expanded family and associated costs like childcare, car seats, cribs, and other basic necessities.

In 2024, our agency provided PRC services to 853 families in the county. Their direct benefits totaled \$532,000 dollars. Our most utilized services were housing, kinship assistance, and utility assistance. Several examples show the vital role that PRC can play in supporting employment. “Michael,” a father of 3 school-age children, recently received assistance through the PRC program to repair a wheel bearing on his family’s only running vehicle. Both he and his wife work and their shifts are often unpredictable and overlapping making sharing one vehicle difficult at best. With assistance from the PRC program, he was able to continue working more than 50 hours per week with his employer all while making sure his wife is able to get to work and continue to care for their 3 children.

“Ashley” applied for PRC help for gas cards in July of 2024 as she had started new employment at a local manufacturer and needed some help with gas until she got her first paycheck. PRC was able to assist her with \$150 in gas cards to get her to and from her new job. In January 2025 she needed tire replacements and was able to receive help toward those replacements in order to continue getting to her job safely. She is still employed today and doing well, thanks to these meaningful supports through the PRC program.

Our agency contracts with a local nonprofit to fund programming in financial literacy and guided decision making using the Bridges Out of Poverty model and the “Getting Ahead in a Just Getting by World.”

Title XX

As noted above, Ohio transfers 10% of its TANF Block Grant to the Social Services Block Grant, or Title XX. In providing Adult Protective Services through Title XX funding, we partner with our district area agency on aging to provide a more comprehensive approach with the shared goal of assisting seniors in maintaining their independence while increasing their well-being and safety within the community. During this past year, over 300 referrals were investigated.

We also partner with a local nonprofit (Marion Matters) through Title XX to fund financial literacy and guided decision making using the Bridges Out of Poverty model and the “Getting Ahead in a Just Getting by World” process with over 200 participating thus far.



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

Title XX funds also play a critical role in Ohio counties in funding children services, particularly in today's environment with eroding IV-E reimbursements and a significant number of youth having complex needs.

WORKFORCE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

We know that for those who are able to work, a career pathway and help finding and keeping a job is the best way to stabilize needy families. TANF is a critical program in counties' efforts to assist our low-income residents while also meeting the workforce needs of our local businesses.

Career pathways for the emerging workforce:

Students enrolled in high school and post-secondary education – also our future and sometimes current workforce – can be served or connected to us in a variety of ways.

CCMEP: The Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program, CCMEP, can provide person-centered plans and services, and a partner for the enrollee in their case manager who is there as a service coordinator, cheerleader, guide and support, for youth between the ages of 16-24. This program aims to blend TANF and WIOA in doing so. It can provide services to both in-school and out-of-school youth.

We partner with our local Goodwill Industries to provide enhanced direct services to youth ages 14 to 24 who are disconnected, both out-of-school and in-school. The ultimate goal is a successful transition to employment. There were 122 youth involved in the CCMEP program during FFY 2025; 54 of them were engaged in a paid employment experience.

One of our many success stories is “Katlin,” who was receiving TANF cash assistance when she referred to CCMEP. She is a single mother and wanted to do better for herself and her child. A plan was established based on Katlin's goals, the first step being money management. She had expressed interest in working in manufacturing and was enrolled in a subsidized employment program working at a local manufacturer. She enjoyed the work and learning new skills required for the position. The manufacturer was very impressed with Katlin and her drive to be successful. They offered Katlin full-time employment. She is



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

now earning a self-sufficient wage of \$20.00/hour and no longer receives public assistance benefits.

TANF Summer Youth program: The state provides a separate allocation to county JFS departments to support career development for youth and a summer work experience program for youth who may not be in need of the more robust case management program created in CCMEP. This program is focused on youth enrolled in high school and provides not only supported job experience but also development of “soft skills”, financial literacy, working in teams, seeking/taking direction, and much more.

In 2024, we placed 30 youth, ages 14 – 17, with 14 employers. Over the summer, these young people earned a combined \$73,000 in wages and gained valuable experience to help them in the labor market in the future. One of these participants, “Blake,” participated in the program because he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do when he graduated high school. After completing the bootcamp/orientation week, he was assigned to work at a local high-performance parts manufacturer, in the warehouse. He was enjoying his work and doing a great job. Blake completed the summer program and received the incentives for attendance and completed mock interviewing. The company stated, “Blake did a fabulous job over the summer and is now an employee of ours.” Blake is still working there and enjoys his job.

Promoting Workforce Retention and Self-Sufficiency

Benefit Bridge

Benefit Bridge is a pilot program currently offered in a dozen counties in Ohio. Marion recently joined and is enrolling its first cohort of six participants. The purpose of the program is to address the “benefit cliff” in which parents that move up career ladders may be faced with the loss of vital assistance programs. The Benefit Bridge provides financial counseling and incentives to support these families with the goal of sustaining their economic momentum and preventing them from needing to come back onto public assistance. TANF-funded services, including supports through the PRC program, are available to families up to 200% FPL. Other funding sources are used for families in the 200% – 400% range. We are very encouraged by the ability to have this program in our workforce retention and economic mobility toolkit.

Employer Resource Network



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

In partnership with the Marion Chamber of Commerce, Marion Community Foundation, and Ohio Health we invest TANF and Title XX funds alongside our community partners to provide an employee retention service, available for employers to buy into. When employees who are recently elevated off assistance, or maybe still in receipt of public assistance, face a hurdle, it too often can lead to loss of a job. The ERN works to provide a confidential resource for eligible employees who face a set-back, and identify ways for the employee to first, communicate with their employer, and second, troubleshoot ways to address the problem. A Success Coach assigned to the employer is available on-site and via phone to navigate and arrange resources for eligibility families to address situational problems involving childcare, transportation, housing, family violence, etc.

Connecting our Clients to Employers

Ohio Means Jobs Centers are located in all counties. Their purpose is to provide access to information, referrals, and resources from a variety of local partners to help Ohioans obtain employment. The Marion OMJ Center is significantly connected to our employer community, and we invest local WIOA funds and, for job seekers who are eligible, TANF funds to support the priorities of our businesses. These funds support services like recruitment, applicant screening, business-led customized training, HR benchmarking, retention initiatives and economic development resources.

To ensure our workforce-related TANF services are meeting the needs of our county, Marion County leadership and our county's OMJ staff are consistently engaged with our local employers, economic development, and schools. A brief description of these partnerships follows:

Business Retention & Expansion (BRE) Sessions

Marion County's staff is included in all Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) meetings with area businesses. These sessions are coordinated by our economic development organization (Marion CANDO!) in conjunction with OneColumbus. BRE meetings with company leadership enable us to learn about both challenges and opportunities being experienced by the business. Our focus is to identify ways in which we can resolve and/or support employers through our combined array of services and connections with local and state resources. We are on track to meet with 40 businesses this calendar year.

Economic Development Activities



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

As economies grow, income tends to rise for everyone including the poor. Additionally, sourcing and developing talent is a key component of economic development. Therefore, our OMJ Center works in tandem with local development and planning professionals to prepare our community to attract growth opportunities. This takes the form of labor market analysis and helping to sponsor and staff community projects such as our 2024 Summit on Housing, JobsOhio Site Authentication Conference, and “Why Marion?” (a high school logistics presentation to the Marion Area Chamber and Rotary).

Partnerships with Schools:

Marion JFS is a charter member of the Marion Area Workforce Acceleration Collaborative (MAWAC). This group includes educational leadership from all K-12 schools, Tri-Rivers Career Center, Marion Technical College, and the Ohio State University-Marion. Core members also include our Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development organization and most importantly, local businesses. We meet monthly at a different company location to design and activate collaborative approaches to integrate business priorities with the educational experience for the purpose of creating pipelines postgraduation. Our OMJ staff also help educate K-12 teachers through a “Teacher’s Boot Camp” each summer. The camp connects teachers with local businesses and supports them in creating curricula based upon their experiences with demand occupations.

Childcare

Childcare is one of the most critical supports to ensure parents can find a job and keep a job. These parents are working, but not at high enough wages to enable them to pay for the high cost of child care on their own. The TANF block grant is a major source of support for the program in Ohio. Policymakers in Ohio are currently searching for ways to expand eligibility through the regular program and through voucher programs that will enable parents to not have to worry about childcare as they look for and accept higher-paying jobs. Ensuring they can access publicly funded childcare is a critical way to support work.

Locally, Marion JFS is part of a community-wide task force working to strengthen childcare accessibility. Our collective work has resulted in expanded school-age childcare options, and we are expecting two new centers to open in 2025. In 2024, 431 children from over 300 families received publicly-funded child care in our county.

TANF Pilot



Department of Job & County Services

MARION COUNTY, OHIO

Roxane G. Somerlot, Director

In terms of TANF cash assistance – I am eager to see what the re-released TANF Pilot looks like from the US Department of Health and Human Services. Ohio was one of five pilot states selected by the department to administer the pilot program. There is some question if the bureaucracy around core and non-core work activities has a positive impact on long-term employment outcomes. The pilot is a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate the potential ROI of other types of interventions with families on TANF assistance, while preserving the intent of the program to focus on work. Ohio's initial pilot proposal was designed around providing services to both the adult individual – concrete supports like educational programs, job readiness, and connections to SSI/D for those who are unable to work – and the whole family for long-term stabilization, such as parenting skills and financial literacy. Given the correlation we know exists between economic insecurity and involvement with children services agencies, one of the outcomes we hoped to see was a reduction in children services involvement. Ohio was also planning to collect and aggregate individualized data to gauge the impact of addressing physical health, mental health, peer supports, housing stability, transportation, financial literacy and financial management, and education and training, on employment and earnings.

In summary, through multiple programs such as PRC, CCMEP, Benefit Bridge, and Child Care, TANF-funded services are essential in ensuring individuals who wish to stay in school, enter the workforce, or undertake a new career path have access to stabilizing services and investments in their future.

We have seen that these investments truly do pay off, especially when looking in the long term at the value of keeping parents in the workforce and students engaged and successful in school. These efforts are improving the economic development of the county and strengthening our families.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.