

# Profiles in Success

## TANF Choices

*Temporary Assistance to Needy Family through Choices  
in Killeen and Austin*

Fifteen years ago, a major nation-wide welfare reform initiative took place at the federal level. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, replaced well-known welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program, and the Emergency Assistance program. TANF replaced these federal entitlements with block grant funding distributed to states, territories and tribes on an annual basis. TANF is a comprehensive program that provides benefits, administrative expenses, and services for needy families. TANF took effect in 1997 and was reauthorized in 2006 under the Federal Deficit Reduction Act of 2005.

TANF aims to assist those in need to transition to self-sufficiency. The program is administered through the TANF Bureau within the Office of Family Assistance, and is authorized by the Social Security Act through Titles IV-A and XVI. TANF's block grant structure allows states maximum flexibility as they design and operate their own programs to achieve the program's goals.

In Texas, the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) determines eligibility for TANF applicants. Once eligibility is determined and cash assistance is processed at HHSC, individuals are referred to the Texas Workforce

Commission (TWC) for the employment and training portion of the TANF mandate. TWC administers this employment and training program under the name of Choices.

Three overarching objectives of Texas government are ensuring local control, supporting smaller and more efficient government, and emphasizing work and individual responsibility. These are the same values advocated by the Choices program. Choices participants know that government assistance is



temporary, that Texans are responsible for supporting themselves and their families, and that finding employment is the first, essential step toward this goal. The "Work First" service model is at the core of Choices and services are delivered through TWC's network of Local Workforce Boards and 228 one-stop centers.

Choices programming is designed to enable individuals to transition to work that is tailored to meet the needs of local employers. Choices operates under a Work First philosophy aimed at immediate engagement in job search with attachment to the workforce as quickly as possible. Those unable to find employment within four weeks must be enrolled in volunteer work positions. Prior to TANF certification, individuals are required to attend Workforce Orientation for Applicants, which gives them an overview

of the services that are available. Following the orientation and after receipt of TANF, they participate in an Employment Planning Session where they meet Choices staff, undergo an assessment and receive guidance in creating an employment plan. Program participants begin testing the labor market by conducting job search activities.

Choices staff make an effort to place program participants in volunteer work positions that match their educational level. Participants may only receive training if they are working, or are co-enrolled in a work activity, such as community service, on-the-job training, or subsidized employment. The program encourages teenagers who have the responsibility of heading a household to finish high school or its equivalent before entering employment. Choices job readiness and job search activities include a variety of supports, such as self-esteem building, job search skills, labor market information, goal-setting in the context of the job search, resume writing, interviewing techniques, and job retention skills.

Choices seeks to connect participants with their volunteer work as soon as possible in order to fully leverage their exposure and work experience for potential employment opportunities. Participants are expected to make a number of employer contacts each week, many of which are the result of Choices staff referrals. While Choices participants are job hunting, the program offers support services that include child care, assistance with transportation, and assistance with some work-related expenses.

The overriding goal of the program is to bolster an individual's ability to retain employment, earn wages, and progress to a state of self-sufficiency.

To this end, Workforce Solutions offices provide a continuum of services to Choices and TANF recipients who are employed, but still need additional assistance to retain their employment and achieve self-sufficiency. Some of the post-employment services offered include:

- ongoing case management
- child care, transportation and work-related expenses
- additional career planning and counseling
- assistance regarding an employees' assistance program
- mentoring

In addition, Workforce Solutions offices can also provide referrals for TANF/Choices participants post-employment for education and training resources, as well as other community support services. TWC and Workforce Solutions offices have been recognized nationally as a model for successfully integrating public assistance benefits with workforce development. Successful outcomes include:

- A drop in TANF caseloads of 80 percent from 1996 to 2010.
- A decrease in the population of mandatory Choices individuals of 76 percent (down from 71,000 to 16,000) between August 2003 and August 2010.
- A decrease in the monthly number of individuals sanctioned for non-cooperation with Choices work requirements of 92 percent from September 2003 to August 2010.

The profiles below illustrate how two individuals entered Choices and successfully transitioned out of the program to a path of self-sufficiency.



**TANF/Choices - Profiles in Success**

**M**elinda McCammon came to Texas with her two daughters in June 2010. Originally from Hoopeston, Illinois, Melinda had accepted a job as a private caregiver for an elderly woman in Copperas Cove. With her children, she drove 27 hours straight from Illinois to Texas, only to learn upon arrival that her ward had suddenly died. Saddened by this news and with no friends or family in the state, Melinda entered a shelter with her daughters, ages 13 and three.

By September, Melinda had still been unable to find work. She went to Workforce Solutions Central Texas in Killeen and applied for assistance. At Workforce Solutions she was advised of the Choices program and of the assistance she could receive with her living expenses and her job search, including one-on-one help with her resume and job applications. Melinda attended employment seminars and diligently continued her search for a job. As the summer wound down, she enrolled her 13-year-old in school, and spent even more time job hunting. With assistance from a workforce development specialist, she applied for a position with Subway Restaurants.

In October, Melinda began working for Subway approximately 30 hours a week. Knowing very little about this type of work, but with enthusiasm and determination, she quickly learned the ins and outs of being a sandwich artist. At this particular Subway in Killeen, Melinda and her co-workers produce one to two hundred sandwiches an hour during the lunch rush. She knows many of her

customers well now, and for those regulars who order the same thing daily, she is always prepared. With the support and encouragement of Workforce Solutions, Melinda moved into an apartment within walking distance from the restaurant and was finally able to establish a routine for her young family.

Since her restaurant job was part-time, Melinda continued looking for opportunities to pick up additional work. The Choices program provided Melinda with appropriate clothes for a professional interview and in December 2010, she landed a second part-time job with an education services company. Presidium, Inc., headquartered in Virginia, opened a new operations center in July 2010 to accommodate Killeen's continued growth and demand for a variety of IT services.

In addition to her restaurant job, Melinda now works 12 to 18 hours a week as a Technical Support Specialist providing Blackboard Student Services at Presidium in Killeen. She answers client telephone calls and interprets and solves problems ranging from password troubleshooting to resolving information requests with connections to other links and services. On any given shift, she answers between 30 and 40 telephone calls and has consistently achieved the company's goal of 85 percent quality resolution of client needs.

Melinda's schedule is demanding, but with two part-time jobs, there are two afternoons during the week when she is available for her children. On the other three days, she leaves Subway after the lunch rush and arrives at Presidium at 2:00 p.m., where she works until 11:00 p.m. Up each morning at six to get her daughters ready for the day, her weeks



pass quickly as she hurries from job to job, while coordinating babysitters for her youngest child and monitoring the whereabouts of her middle-schooler.

Reflecting upon the last nine months, Melinda says she likes the balance these two very different jobs have brought to her life. Her job in food service satisfies her need to be with people and to be doing something active with immediate gratification. Her job with Presidium appeals to her more thoughtful side, requiring her to methodically work through problems and use her computer skills. Melinda is self-taught and the work she does for Presidium has allowed her to both expand and strengthen her IT skills. Her IT job also requires people skills, but of a different nature. Instead of accurately processing dozens of noisy requests for food, she must focus on just one request at a time, but from someone whom she cannot see. Her IT job is also time-pressured, because she must quickly assess the caller's level of computer acumen in order to achieve speedy resolution of his or her problem. Melinda observes that the two different jobs draw from a set of skills, that with help from Workforce Solutions, she was able to successfully present to employers.

Melinda's short-term goal is to continue working at her two jobs until a managerial opportunity presents itself. She has transitioned entirely off the support she received through Choices and TANF, and is happy with her self-sufficient routine and the ability she now has to support and nurture her family. She relishes the idea of her children growing up in Killeen and has already seen her youngest daughter's asthma greatly improved with the change in climate. Both amused and delighted that last winter's snowfall in central Texas was considered highly exceptional, Melinda sees a promising future in Texas for herself and her two daughters on many fronts.



Hard work and determination have brought Maria Henry a long way in the last nine months. She is currently a front-end store supervisor at a local retail store and very close to transitioning out of the TANF/Choices programs to self-sufficiency.

Maria is a 25-year-old single parent of two young children, ages six and seven. She left a domestically unstable situation in 2008 and lived at a shelter with her children for a time. After an extended period of unemployment that lasted about 18 months, she sought and received TANF assistance in July 2010.

That same month, Maria went to Workforce Solutions Capital Area to begin her Choices orientation and to develop her Individual Employment Plan with a program specialist. Maria identified limited access to a car and lack of child care as two barriers to self-sufficiency. By this time, Maria had established secure living arrangements for her young family and one of her employment goals was to find work in close proximity to where she lived. Her children would be in kindergarten and first grade in the same area, making work location an even more important consideration to her. With an outgoing personality and prior experience in retail, she knew that customer service or retail were strong areas in which to focus her job search.

Workforce Solutions Capital Area proved to be invaluable. Maria was impressed with the many resources that were made available to her, including job referral services and internet access. Her case manager was both attentive

and supportive, providing Maria with a clear understanding of various job-seeking options. Workforce Solutions certified her for child care and transportation assistance, and after receiving her initial job-search packet, Maria lost no time putting in the 25 to 30 hours per week job hunting required of Choices participants. She could conduct her search online or in person, but she chose to do a combination approach of applying online, and following up in person.

Within three weeks, Maria received an offer from Party City, a retail store not far from her home. Maria explains that first she applied for the position online, and then contacted the employer to see when she could interview in person. She went to Party City on August 1, 2010, and on August 2nd, she received a job offer. Maria began in a part-time position, but steadily worked her way up to 35 hours a week. She is paid bi-weekly, and every other Monday she checks in with her program specialist at Workforce Solutions Capital Area. Her children are in onsite after-school child care, and as Maria transitions from TANF to self-sufficiency, she will continue to receive assistance with child care.

At Party City, Maria is happy to have a workplace environment where she can thrive. At the end of January 2011, she was promoted to a supervisory position, and her hours were increased to between 36 and 39 hours a week. As a front-end store supervisor, she is responsible for the sales floor covering the front portion of the store and for customer service, including customer returns. Management recognized her as a reliable employee, and gave her the responsibility for certifying large currency denominations, closing out the cashier associates' tills as shifts end, and key and safe handling. She usually works the late shift and assists in closing the store. Her management team gradually realized she was at the store most evenings and, therefore, not seeing much of her children. Recently, they have

assigned Maria some morning shifts so that she can be home in the evenings with her children, and given her some Saturdays off.

Maria is resourceful, and her ideas for improvements to Party City's sales strategies have been well received. One of the store's major spring events is "Dr. Seuss Week," an event commemorating the famous children's books in local schools. Unfortunately, this year the store sold out of many items before the commemoration, including the popular blue "Thing 1" and "Thing 2" wigs. As disappointed customers came and left, Maria reviewed inventory and noted that Party City did stock blue hairspray. She tested it on herself to see how easily it washed out, and anticipating customer inquiries, to check how much of it came off on hands and clothing. At her suggestion, the store featured it for Dr. Seuss Week, much to the satisfaction of many happy customers!

Maria feels she is in an environment where her ideas for inventory, display, and planning are valued. She has taken the initiative to ask for constructive criticism in order to improve her job performance. As she nears the ninety-day probation period for her promotion received in late January 2011, she feels optimistic about the possibility of another promotion and increased benefits.

In the short-term, Maria is striving to maximize her performance in her current job at Party City. She plans to take advantage of the computer skills training available at Workforce Solutions Capital Area, because her long-term goals are to eventually move into office work. She will still be in touch with her program specialist for continued childcare assistance. Maria feels welcome at Workforce Solutions, and says the support and guidance she has received from Choices has made it possible for her to get back on her feet, and make plans for a more secure future.

**The Texas Workforce Investment Council promotes the development of a well-educated, highly skilled workforce for Texas and advocates a workforce system that provides quality workforce education and training opportunities.**

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