

Why GAO Did This Study

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) gives American Indian tribes the option to administer their own Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant programs. GAO first reported on the use of this flexibility by tribes in 2002 ([GAO-02-768](#)), and given the upcoming expected reauthorization of TANF, GAO was asked to examine (1) how tribal TANF programs have changed since 2002, especially in light of changing economic conditions; (2) the challenges tribes face in administering their own TANF programs and what tribes have done to address them; and (3) the extent to which the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has provided guidance and oversight to promote the integrity and effectiveness of tribal TANF programs. GAO analyzed federal TANF data; interviewed federal officials; surveyed all tribal TANF administrators; and conducted site visits at 11 tribal TANF programs in four states.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HHS review its process for tracking related single audit reports, improve processes for maintaining tribal TANF data that can be shared in a timely manner, and provide timely, accessible and consistent guidance that is clearly communicated to its tribal TANF programs. HHS commented it will be mindful of these recommendations as it examines ways to improve its efforts.

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES

HHS Needs to Improve Guidance and Monitoring of Tribal Programs

What GAO Found

Since GAO first reported on tribal TANF programs in 2002, the number of programs has increased—from 36 in 2002 to 64 in 2010. In addition, more tribes use program flexibilities to both tailor services to meet the needs of their TANF families and cope with changing economic conditions. GAO also found that some tribes have increased their work participation rate goals over time. For example, more than half of the 36 tribes that have been administering a TANF program since 2002 have raised these goals over time. Many tribes also allow a wide range of activities families can use to meet work participation rates, such as cultural activities or commuting time. Tribes also reported in GAO's survey that changing economic conditions have adversely affected their caseloads, funding, and services provided. For example, some tribes reported that since the beginning of the economic recession in 2007, they have larger average monthly caseloads, use other federal funding to fill budget gaps, and cut back supportive services to provide more cash grants.

According to GAO's survey results, tribal TANF programs face challenges with initial program implementation, staff development and retention, and the development of adequate data systems. Moreover, all 11 tribes GAO visited talked about the various barriers to self-sufficiency facing their TANF participants, such as a lack of transportation and limited employment opportunities. To address these challenges, many tribes reach out to HHS regional office staff, other tribal and federal programs, and private consultants. For example, to address challenges related to developing adequate data systems, GAO learned that the majority of tribes use consultants to develop their systems and provide training. In addition, to enhance employment opportunities, some tribes have placed participants at their Head Start offices, while another tribe has partnered with its modular housing plant.

HHS provides oversight and guidance for tribal TANF programs, but does not always do so in a timely or consistent manner. HHS officials told GAO that they use tribal TANF single audit report findings to target training and technical assistance to tribes. However, the systems that HHS uses to track these reports are fragmented, and as a result, tribal TANF officials may not consistently be aware of all the single audit findings related to tribal TANF programs, or be in a position to promptly identify and address recurring problems and mitigate risk. Other oversight tools, such as quarterly data reports used to calculate work participation rates, are not consistently updated by HHS in a timely manner, which, according to GAO's survey, is a challenge to tribes' administration of their TANF programs. HHS headquarters and regional offices provide guidance such as basic policy manuals, training at yearly conferences, and one-on-one assistance over the phone. However, some tribes expressed difficulty in finding and receiving clear, consistent, and timely guidance from HHS, which hinders their ability to successfully manage tribal TANF programs and finances.