



## COLORADO TANF UNIFYING THEORY OF CHANGE CURRENT (2025)

**Background:** This document presents a unifying Theory of Change (TOC) that describes how the various Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programmatic efforts implemented through calendar year 2025 are expected to contribute to long-term outcomes for families. A TOC is a model—a simplified representation of a real-world system—that helps stakeholders understand complex processes. A high-quality TOC captures the essence of a system without being overly complex or omitting critical aspects of the work. It makes explicit the pathways through which program activities lead to change by linking them to short- and medium-term outcomes and, ultimately, to long-term outcomes for the target population.

By clearly articulating the pathways to change under the current system via this TOC, Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) is better positioned to design and implement a new version of TANF in response to ever-changing state and federal demands. Visually describing the current system, with all its disparate parts, helps decision-makers readily see how resources are being invested and the strength (or weakness) of the logic underlying assumptions around how change happens. The TOC graphic helps facilitate conversations about policy tradeoffs and, coupled with information about current measurement and evaluation practices, identify where additional evidence building is needed.

In collaboration with counties and other stakeholders, CDHS has developed a TANF Collective Vision with the long-term objective of building a new program architecture that supports sustainable, responsive, and evidence-based service delivery. Achieving this vision requires a clear and shared understanding of who the program serves, what services it provides, and how those services are expected to make a difference.

**Key points:** This TOC supports a shared understanding of the current state of the program and helps elevate critical questions in a tight financial and regulatory environment. These questions include:

- Which populations and/or programming should we prioritize for services, given limited resources, capacity, and larger policy priorities?
- Are our assumptions about how our current delivery system works correct? For example:
  - Is our current case management approach uniform enough across the state and sufficient to support clients in overcoming often substantial barriers to workforce participation?
  - Does requiring clients to engage in work or training activities prior to addressing barriers to work effectively support workforce participation and earnings?
  - Do the broad federally-defined purposes of TANF provide enough strategic direction (and guardrails) to focus resources for Colorado's specific needs and priorities?
- To what extent are education, employment and job readiness training programs—including funding choices and participant placements—aligned with local labor market demands to increase the likelihood of placement in a high-quality job that supports retention, increased earnings over time, and contributes to Colorado's overall economic development?





### **Contextual Factors:**

Because the TOC is a model, it does not explicitly capture all contextual factors that shape how TANF is implemented. These include, but are not limited to, the modernization of the Colorado Benefits Management System (CBMS), decisions related to regionalization, the role of community-based contracts and non-government service providers, and shifts in payment approaches (e.g., standardizing cost per case). While these factors significantly influence program operations and implementation, they are treated as contextual conditions rather than core components of the TOC. The TOC is intentionally focused on clarifying what services are provided, to whom, and why those services are expected to lead to desired outcomes.

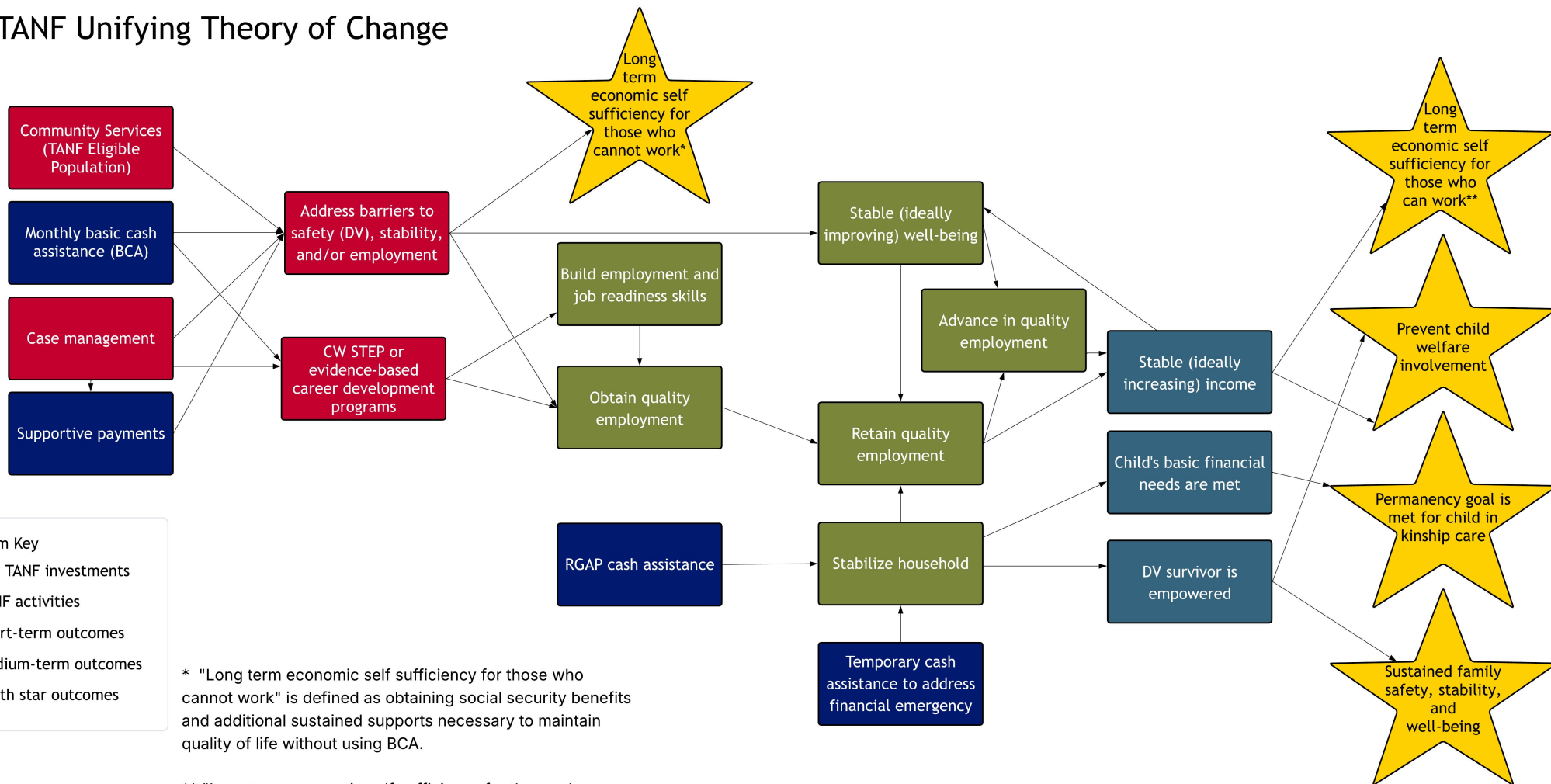
### **Terminology:**

This TOC has five core components:

- **North Star (Long-term) Outcomes:** These are the aspirational, long-term outcomes that the current TANF program seeks to influence.
- **Medium-term Outcomes:** These are measurable changes expected to occur after clients engage meaningfully with services and supports. Medium-term outcomes represent progress toward the North Star Outcomes and are more directly attributable to TANF program design and implementation, though they are still influenced by external factors.
- **Short-term Outcomes:** These are the immediate changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, or circumstances that are expected to occur as a direct result of program participation.
- **TANF Activities:** Tasks or programs designed to help clients prevent or overcome barriers to workforce participation and income stability, often in conjunction with financial assistance.
- **TANF Investments:** Financial investments in clients that complement TANF activities to support desired outcomes.



# TANF Unifying Theory of Change



\* "Long term economic self sufficiency for those who cannot work" is defined as obtaining social security benefits and additional sustained supports necessary to maintain quality of life without using BCA.

\*\* "Long term economic self sufficiency for those who can work" is defined as not using BCA and decreasing reliance on SNAP and Medicaid.