

Showcase NC: Share Yourself -- Work-First Mentor Education Program

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Abstract

This article discusses the Work-First mentor education program in North Carolina and the steps for implementing it .

As welfare reform continues to evolve in North Carolina, many North Carolina families with limited resources continue to struggle with problems such as inadequate housing, money management, parenting, poor health, and access to community resources. The challenge of balancing work and family while working through a myriad of employment hurdles is monumental, inducing stress and frustration. Businesses want their employees who have been on welfare to keep their jobs and add value to the company. A strategy which strengthens job retention is mentoring. Businesses have learned that consistent use of mentors coupled with life-skill education is a key factor for job retention in these cases.

Mentoring is a structured, one-to-one relationship or partnership that focuses on the needs of the mentored participants. Mentoring fosters caring and supportive relationships and encourages individuals to develop to their fullest potential, while developing active community partnerships. Individuals who are mentored develop life skills and competencies which help them personally and professionally. Their families also benefit, because participants improve their skills and relationships with family members. It is important to note that, despite popular belief, the welfare population is far from homogeneous. People who receive welfare benefits are no different from many others who have required short-term assistance at some point in time.

Share Yourself is designed to train volunteers recruited from community groups such as civic clubs, religious organizations, the business sector, or citizens who are interested in becoming involved. Once trained in the mentoring process, volunteers are matched with a learning partner (Work-First Participant) who together embark on a relationship journey. Projected outcomes

include (1) mentors gaining skills, understanding, and knowledge of the mentor process; and (2) learning partners showing increased job retention and advancement.

Presented as a user friendly train-the-trainer manual, **Share Yourself** guides Extension professionals through the process of organization and implementation of the project at the local level. Teaching Units include the following: Welfare Reform, Mentoring Concept, Building a Helping Relationship, Understanding Oneself and Values, Understanding the Audience, Coaching and Assistance, Poverty Simulation (ROWEL),¹ Community Resource, Referral, Safety, and Liability. The currently used curriculum will be replaced by Share Yourself Mentor Education curriculum in development by North Carolina A & T State University.

The following shows the progression of steps or phases involved in implementing **Share Yourself** on the county level. Rather than sequential, these are concurrent and iterative.

Phase 1: Advisory Board and Collaboration

A strong advisory board is a vital component to the success of the **Share Yourself** program. The advisory board helps to identify key resources in the community and leads the collaborative efforts necessary for planning and implementing the program. It is critical that the Board be representative of the community and include trained Mentors and Work First Participants.

Phase 2: Recruiting Volunteer Mentors

Quality marketing materials help to market the program and recruit prospective volunteers. These materials customized to the specific county can be distributed to various community organizations, churches, and county officials. News articles, public service announcements, and local television outlets are also helpful to program marketing and volunteer recruitment. All volunteers complete a standard application prior to acceptance in the program. Liability issues may require a legal background check. This process should be directed by the Advisory Board.

Phase 3: Volunteer Training

Volunteers are trained on schedules which meet their time restrictions and may include weekend and evening sessions. Training units include: Welfare Reform, Mentoring Concepts, Building a Helping Relationship, Understanding Oneself and Values, Understanding the Audience, Coaching and Assistance, Poverty Simulation (ROWEL), Community Resource, Referral, Safety, and Liability.

Phase 5: Recruiting Work-First Participants

Participation in **Share Yourself** by Work-First participants is completely voluntary. Successful recruitment is highly dependant a strong Advisory Board which should include representation and buy-in from the local Department of Social Services. It is imperative that the Department of Social Service Work-First Coordinator view **Share Yourself** as a viable and vital contribution to the Work-First efforts. Active recruitment takes place in all programs that serve Work-First participants.

Phase 6: Matching Volunteer Mentors and Work-First Participants

The successful match between Volunteer Mentor and Learning Partner (Work-First Participant) is a primary objective and begins with the volunteer application. Flexibility in the program allows for matching which includes "personality style" inventories or informal subjective matches. Again, this process should be directed by the Advisory Board who may themselves contribute to the matching process.

Optional components may include classes for the Work-First participants themselves. Topics could include the following: self-esteem building, time and money management, adjusting to the work force, balancing work and family, stress management, and job readiness.

Extension educational programs have for years played an important role in helping families achieve and maintain self-sufficiency. For more than 84 years, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, with the assistance of volunteers, has provided a wide variety of educational programs to limited resource families so they could improve their quality of life, maintain stable housing, provide healthy and nutritious meals, manage their resources, and contribute to communities. Cooperative Extension, as a community-based educational institution, is the logical organization to help bridge the challenges of Work-First participants with the world of work because of Cooperative Extension's experience in working with limited resource individuals and families; working with volunteers and partnering with agencies; organizations, and the business community.

Share Yourself is supported by a contract awarded to North Carolina State University, Cooperative Extension Service, from the North Carolina Department of Social Services. Four counties ---- Forsyth, Halifax, Moore, and Northampton ---- are serving as pilots to test the Work-First mentor education program.

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Endnote

1. Developed by ROWEL (Reform Organization of Welfare), this is a realistic simulation of living a month in poverty. Participants are randomly assigned a role to adopt during the simulation. Roles vary and include the following: single mothers with children, couples, children, youth, and elderly. Each family group is assigned a home, assets, and bills. It is the task of the family to take care of their day-to-day responsibilities with the assistance of various community agencies, organizations, and businesses. For example, school-age children must attend school; rent or mortgage and utilities must be paid, food must be obtained. This component has been identified by trained volunteers as critical to providing an understanding of the lives of those who live in poverty. [Return to text.](#)

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