

Trends And Emerging Issues Related to Welfare Reform: a Perspective For Extension

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Condra Jones knows firsthand what is necessary to make the transition from welfare to work. She spent several months last year on public assistance before the local Employment Security Commission matched her with a position at the Speech and Hearing Clinic. "I think anybody can do it if they've got a support group behind them, if they have some skills, and they comply by the rules," says Ms. Jones. "Sometimes you need somebody just to pat you on the back and tell you it's going to be all right." Ms. Jones knows what it is like living in the transition from welfare to work.

Since the passage of the new federal welfare legislation in August 1996, states are actively transforming systems that provide services and benefits to welfare recipients. A major paradigm shift is occurring, especially as workers focus on the importance of work, job placement, and retention rather than on receiving financial assistance without work.

A number of significant trends are evident as organizations and agencies work together to change and manage the transition of the welfare culture to a renewed emphasis on personal responsibility:

- Interagency and public-private sector partnerships have developed at both the state and county levels resulting in intense dialogue to sort out respective roles and responsibilities. Discussions often start around issues of common interest and then grow as the organizations share experiences and build trust with each other.
- Multiple changes in federal and state laws, state and county governance, clientele expectations, and services point to the fact that one type of program does not fit all counties. In North Carolina, some counties will be allowed to design their own Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Qualifying counties will be determined by the legislature. North Carolina is broadly viewed as having created a national "laboratory" for experimentation in social welfare policy and devolution with its

Work First program. Devolution refers to the passing of responsibility and authority from the federal government to the state government, and from the state to the local government.

- Many employers are becoming contributing partners in welfare reform. With labor shortages, many employers are looking to the welfare system as a source of new workers. More companies are providing child care, transportation, meals, and other employment supports in order to hire and retain employees. Businesses are interested in partnering with the public sector on post-employment services such as facilitating payroll direct deposit or providing child care directly on site to help individuals balance work and family responsibilities.
- Welfare reform magnifies the fact that necessary and appropriate services do not always exist in the state. Overcoming barriers to employment such as transportation, child care, and job training will help all workers. Providing needed services requires collaboration and closer relationships among public and private agencies that may have not worked together before.
- State welfare and workforce development officials are fast recognizing that by enhancing the skills of current employees, jobs for individuals leaving welfare will become available. Some companies are upgrading the skills of already employed workers so they can advance on the career ladder and entry level positions can be made available for others.
- As caseloads decrease, the harder-to-serve welfare recipients are left needing jobs. These individuals need innovative strategies to address their unique needs and circumstances. Challenges such as physical and learning disabilities, substance abuse, and mental health problems among recipients and their family members, poor communication, academic and employability skills, little or no work experience, attitudinal problems, access to child care, and lack of transportation combine to create new challenges. Now every Work First applicant receives a substance abuse screening at the time of application. This substance abuse initiative will help ensure that participants do not enter employment without addressing circumstances that may negatively impact their employment retention and advancement opportunities.
- The role of fathers in helping families become self-sufficient is receiving increased attention. A number of strategies are being used to improve the responsibility of fathers to their families. These strategies often involve the establishment of legal paternity, court referral of parents to employment and training services, and the threat of sanctions to encourage noncustodial parents to participate emotionally and financially in their

children's lives. Peer counseling sessions also stress that both parents must contribute to a child's well-being. As one father stated, "I am moving to a job that will pay better and so I can be close to my son."

- As caseloads are reduced, counties will invest existing resources and reinvest welfare savings in post-employment services. Reinvestment strategies include the following: skill development training that enables people to move up the career ladder, early childhood development programs that reduce the likelihood of the next generation resorting to welfare, mentor education programs, and innovative transportation options.
- It is important to determine if welfare reform makes a difference. Many organizations, county and state government, and others are including evaluation and accountability requirements to measure success and best practices. Policy makers need reliable information about pilot programs to guide the implementation of new laws.
- Welfare reform is a significant cultural change that will take time to understand and address. Individuals are expected to take charge of their own lives and improve their attitudes and behaviors towards work. All citizens have a right and an accompanying responsibility to financially provide for their needs and those of their families. Strong messages are being conveyed about the importance of behaving responsibly, when starting and expanding families, and in meeting parental responsibilities related to child support, keeping children in school, and keeping children immunized and healthy. Welfare is not "business as usual."

Implications for Extension Education

By building on the strengths of the Cooperative Extension Service, extension agents are well prepared and uniquely positioned to facilitate community involvement and work directly and indirectly to address the needs of families in poverty. Each of the following potential audiences has different educational and informational needs.

- Social service agency personnel -- Extension's involvement can include service on advisory committees and county task forces that are addressing child care availability, food assistance, and resource and referral. Serving on committees helps create awareness about Extension and promotes educational programming opportunities. Extension can also train volunteers or beneficiaries in groups organized by other agencies. Programming with other agencies who already have the welfare recipient as part of their audience as an established group works well.

- Welfare recipients -- Extension agents can directly teach lifeskills. There is a great need for providing education and information on family budgeting, food and nutrition, consumer education, housing decisions, parenting, child care, goal setting and decision-making. Educational needs and skill building may be ongoing, once welfare recipients join the workforce, when access to a mentor educator could be invaluable to both employees and employers.
- Local citizens -- Extension can communicate with community groups and individuals about poverty, and provide educational assistance on strategies for volunteer mentoring, and volunteering to homeless shelters, food banks, church projects, clothes closets, and literacy programs.
- Volunteer organizations -- Extension can assist community organizations whose members want to adopt or mentor a family, work in community coalitions, establish child care centers, work with local coalitions, and set up immunization clinics.
- Business community -- Extension is equipped to assist the business community with strategies related to work and family balance, family friendly policies, organizing lunch and learn classes on specific topics such as time management, money management issues, and parent/child communication.

Extension educators are actively and appropriately engaged in communities to eliminate barriers to independence and self-sufficiency.

Single mothers on welfare remarked during a recent Work First hearing in Raleigh that the logistical difficulties they face as they try to do better for themselves and their children are extremely challenging. One mother said, "the lack of reliable transportation keeps me from holding down a job." Two others want to move up in life by earning degrees, but the state's requirement that they work full-time to receive public assistance makes their dreams impossible. The scarcity of affordable, trustworthy child care also seriously hinders these and other mothers' ability to work.

It is important to note that even though people will be exiting the welfare system, some people will be working but remain poor. Extension will continue to have a role to play as people strive to become more self-sufficient. Extension can not only teach directly to limited resource families, but also play a valuable role in facilitating community involvement, training volunteers, and encouraging citizens to continue the process of lifelong learning.

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