

Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform
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Ashe County

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The Policy Context

A Brief History of Ashe County

Ashe County is located in the mountainous far northwestern corner of North Carolina bordering Tennessee and Virginia to the west and north respectively, Wilkes and Alleghany Counties to the east and Watauga County to the south. It was created by the North Carolina Legislature in 1799 out of Wilkes County territory and named after Samuel Ashe, a Revolutionary War patriot who had served as Governor of North Carolina from 1795-97. The Town of Jefferson, chartered in 1803 and named after the sitting President, serves as the County's seat of government. A variety of settlers - German, Scotch, English, and others - traversed the "Great Wagon Road" of Virginia's Shenendoah Valley to reach this remote "lost province" of untamed, western North Carolina (Fletcher 1963, 10). Ashe County has the distinction of seceding from the State of North Carolina during the Eighteenth Century. From 1784 to 1789, residents of then-Wilkes County considered themselves to be citizens of the State of Franklin, an ill-fated attempt to create an independent state out of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina (Fletcher 1963, 22). This early spirit of independence and remoteness from the affairs of Raleigh has not waned in any significant sense over the past two centuries.

Ashe's Socio-Economic Profile

Due in large part to the remoteness of the area, the early Ashe County economy was generally self-sufficient and enclosed. Though some lead mining occurred, residents generally relied on networks of trade and barter to meet their needs (Beaver 1986, 12). There was very little economic development in Ashe County until the early twentieth century. The county's

primary (or most practiced) economic engine was farming, and though Ashe County farms numbered 4,500 in 1930, most were described as producing for subsistence only (Fletcher 1963, 55). Today, approximately half of Ashe citizens derive some income from farming though only 7% of the population are considered farmers (Beaver, 1986, 32).

In the late 1800s a burgeoning timber industry played a significant part in ending Ashe County's relative isolation. Even today over 60% of the County is timber covered. (Ashe Chamber of Commerce, 2000) Railway networks were created to transport timber outside of the county. By 1914, rail lines connected Ashe with the rest of the nation, and sawmill and timbering businesses flourished (Fletcher 1963, 323). With the development of the timber industry came an increase in county population. Where there were just over 3,600 inhabitants in 1810, over 19,500 reported residence by 1900 (Fletcher 1963, 55).

The timber industry lost relevance at the start of the Great Depression. A nationwide decrease in demand for lumber led to mill and timber business closings across the country. The WPA carried the Ashe County economy throughout the Depression. Extensive road building projects were begun to improve the county's access to outside markets. Public health and educational institutions were established (Fletcher 1963, 323).

Like mining and timbering, the WPA proved to be a fleeting economic base. But the County realized it had another resource that was relatively untapped: outdoor recreation and tourism. Ashe County had been a natural playground for the affluent as far back as the late 1800s, but the advent of roads and the average American's improved capacity to travel after the second World War paved the way for the full blown development of a recreation industry (Beaver 1986, 26-28). But tourism industries in the Appalachian South typically create seasonal jobs that do not usually offer worker benefits or attractive wages.

Only three employment sectors could each account for over 1,000 persons employed in 1997: manufacturing (2,222 persons), service industries (1,095), and retail trade (1,211). Although less important than in its heyday of the early twentieth century, sawmill and timber work remain a major component of Ashe County's manufacturing industry, accounting for 17.2% of those jobs. Over half of the service sector is involved in health care. Tourism contributes to the prevalence of restaurant industry workers in Ashe County who make up 35.5% of persons involved in retail trade (*United States Census* 1998). Economic development has thus been the compelling issue in Ashe County during the 1990s.

In comparative terms, Ashe's population is overwhelmingly white, rural, lack formal education, are low income, and are underemployed. In 1997, Ashe County's population was 23,954 ranking it the seventy-fourth most populous county in the State. Its population density was 52 persons a square mile in comparison to the State's average of 155 persons per square mile. Ninety-nine per cent of all residents were white compared to the State percentage of 72.2. In terms of education, 55.6% of persons over 25 years old have completed high school compared to 70% for the State; 8.1% of persons over 25 possess college degrees which is not quite half the State's average of 17.1%. In 1996, the civilian labor force numbered 12,011 persons, up from 11,361 in 1990 (*United States Census* 1998). However, the county only counted 5,566 persons as employed in 1997 (most of the others presumably working outside of the county). The County's 1998 unemployment rate was 7.3% compared to the State average of 3.5%. Persons living in poverty accounted for 18.4% of the county population in 1990 compared to 12.5% of the State's population. Even though Ashe's median family income improved from \$18,951 in 1989 to \$25,609 in 1995 (*United States Census* 1998), its 1999 median of \$29,500 lagged far behind the State's median family income average of \$42,200.

What emerges in reviewing these data is a county that represents the stereotypical Appalachian community - racially homogenous, rural mountain farmers, wedded to the land, independent, proud, somewhat suspicious of outsiders, and self-reliant. As will be discussed later, the idea of being “on the dole”, despite the economic realities pushing people in that direction, is anathema to the culture of the region. It is not surprising, therefore, that welfare reform did not capture the imagination of community activists or the political spotlight it might have in other regions of the state. Welfare, like religion and politics, is just something one does not discuss in polite company.

Ashe’s Political Context: County Commission Elections of the 1990s

Despite an even balance in voter registration between Democrats (45%) and Republicans (45%), the Republican candidates for office won consistently throughout the 1990s. In 1992, Lauch Faircloth outpolled incumbent Democratic Senator Terry Sanford 57% to 43% and Jim Hunt barely took the County by 13 votes out of almost 11,000 cast in his otherwise easy statewide victory over Jim Gardner. In 1996, Republican candidates for national and state offices cleanly swept the County. Bob Dole received 62% of the vote while Jesse Helms and Richard Burr won by similar landslide margins. Ashe even went for Robin Hayes in the gubernatorial election against Jim Hunt who again won easily across the rest of the state. The County again voted for both Republican State Senate candidates (Foxx and East) and for all three Republican State House candidates (Hiatt, Wilson, and Baker). Not surprisingly, given the success of national and State Republican candidates, Republicans have also ruled the County Commission throughout the 1990s. However, Democrats and non-traditional candidates, i.e. women, made some progress in Ashe County during these elections. In 1990, two Democrats and one Republican were elected

to the county commission. Two Republicans, including one woman, won the available seats in 1992. Three new commissioners took office in 1994, including two Republicans and one Democrat. In 1996, two new Republicans took office. Finally, in 1998, two Republicans and a Democrat won seats. The Democratic win marked one of the few times any local incumbent won reelection during the previous two decades. Table I below portrays the Commission line-up during the period that welfare reform was being discussed..

Table 1

1994	1996	1998
Beth Saylor (R)	Dwight Shepherd (R)	Dwight Shepherd (R)
Harold Stanley (R)	Lee McMillan (R)	Lee McMillan (R)
John Noblet (D)	John Marsh (D)	John Marsh (D)
Kenneth Young (R)	Doyal Denny (R)	Richard Calhoun (R)
Jerry Powers (R)	George Yates (R)	Larry Rhodes (R)

It is clear from Table I that incumbency is no particular advantage in commissioner elections. There is a continual turn over in commission seats during the decade. This trend continued during the 2000 primary election cycle when two incumbent Republicans were defeated by an organized group of three ultra-conservatives led by a former commissioner, and a third resigned from the Commission following a strident debate over landuse planning during the fall of 1999. As a consequence of this continual turnover among Commissioners, little institutional memory or policy expertise exits among Commission members. The lack of policy expertise helps explain the decision dynamics that came into play as the Commission decided on how to handle welfare reform in 1997.

Time-Frame Highlights

Based on the socio-economic conditions outlined earlier, it is not surprising that economic development has been the major political issue in Ashe County during the past decade. It came up as a topic in every candidate forum covered by the Ashe County press during the 1990s. However, a variety of other political issues have accompanied the ‘pro-development’ rhetoric at different times. Water quality issues were prevalent in 1992 (White Oct. 23, 1992, 1B). Education reform and road improvements were discussed around 1994 (White Apr. 7, 1994, A1). Taxation became an issue in 1998 (White Apr. 30, 1998, A1). Waste management issues and land use planning were generally consistent political issues throughout the 1990s. And land use planning, in fact, consistently garnered bi-partisan political support during the period (“Commissioner candidates...” Oct. 27, 1994, 1A).

Welfare reform generated some sporadic interest during the 1990s. In October of 1992 all candidates in the commissioner field were asked their opinions on a host of issues, including welfare reform, during a press-sponsored bipartisan candidate forum. Three of the six participants specifically addressed the welfare issue, and two of them called for the state to assume greater control (and funding) of welfare and other social service programs (White Oct. 23, 1992, 1B). One of them also added ‘job creation’ as a component of reform. Beth Saylor (R), the final welfare discussant and a future commissioner, argued for cutting back social services in general in an effort to get people to “earn their keep” (White Oct. 23, 1992, 1B).

According to one of the region's most astute observers, these attitudes of self-reliance and working for one's keep are deeply embedded in the Ashe (and general Appalachian) culture.

Demonstrations of worth depend primarily on work. Claude Phillips, who resides with his family at the bottom of the creek, spends much of his waking hours reclining on a couch on the porch. Claude is "only renting"; he is "no kin" to any of the Phillipses in the community and is "on welfare 'cause he's too lazy to work." Claude is worthless and ignored.... The distinction between worthless and worthwhile seems to depend on whether the individual in question makes some effort at coping with subsistence. (Beaver, 1986, 157-8)

It is thus not surprising that one sees very little defense of those on welfare. Based upon this ethos, if a person is on welfare, it is his/her own fault.

Decision Dynamics - 1997-98

The recommendation to be a "standard" county was made by the DSS Board and pushed aggressively by DSS Director Donna Weaver. Weaver, a career DSS social worker, had worked in the agency 19 years, 13 as its Director, prior to the welfare reform initiative. She had been quite satisfied with the predecessor to Work First, the JOBS program. She feared that the new Work First program, if turned completely over to the County's discretion as "going elect" might mean, could turn TANF into a punitive approach to hurt the truly needy. Her concerns were based upon the rhetoric coming from Raleigh and statements made by local political figures (e.g., Beth Saylor) who she felt were less than fully informed about the dynamics of rural poverty. Under the JOBS program, according to Weaver and Dana Colvard (also a social work supervisor at DSS), the staff was able to bring many different community resources to bear on the

underlying causes of poverty. They both perceived the Work First program as unidimensional and thus a less sophisticated approach to ending the cycle of poverty their clients were experiencing.

(Donna Weaver and Dana Colvard interview, July 23, 2000)

In a spring 1997 newspaper interview, Weaver took stock of the Work First program and its potential affect on the County. Overall, her public assessment was cautious. For example, she noted that the county's welfare roles had already dropped from 243 in 1995 to 223 in 1996 prior to implementing TANF (McMeans April. 29, 1997, 1A). It was unclear how this new approach would improve upon the current JOBS program in ameliorating the causes of poverty. The timing of this observation is significant given the events being reported from Raleigh. In March 1997, Governor Hunt had unveiled his welfare block grant proposal (Senate Bill 352) which "grants to counties the flexible and discretionary use of funds previously earmarked for day care, transportation, and job training.... Eligibility requirements and benefit levels would remain State-determined and uniform across the State." (Wright and Carton, 1997, 5) In May, two months after Hunt's proposal, the House Republicans offered their own version of welfare reform that not only included a block grant to the counties but also allowed for county autonomy in eligibility and benefit determination. Weaver's public comments were in line with her sister DSS Directors who virtually to a person opposed the House Republican proposal.

The early success of Work First apparently contributed in part to a perception of welfare reform as being a non-issue in the 1998 commission elections. In a candidate forum held October 1998, five candidates were given the opportunity to respond to a question that made mention of the county DSS within the broader context of improving the efficiency of all county spending. Four out of the five respondents avoided comment on DSS. The fifth candidate listed DSS among a non-

prioritized list of areas he was interested in learning more about, then developing appropriate policy decisions in response (“ Meet the commission...” Oct. 22, 1998, 1A).

On top of the general cultural attitude toward work and welfare, another contributing factor in the decision environment was the relationship between DSS and the County Manager’s Office. The manager of Ashe during 1997 was Jeff Miller who had a strained relationship with the DSS Director according to both the DSS Director and the current manager. When asked about Miller’s role in the decision process for going standard, the consensus among County informants was that he played no role in the process whatsoever.

The administrative transition from the JOBS program to the Work First program was a very smooth process in Ashe County. The JOBS Advisory Committee was largely retained as the Work First planning committee, the planning process utilized for JOBS was employed with some modifications for Work First; and, essentially, all the actors within the DSS policy domain remained intact during the transition. For example, four of the five members on the DSS Board remained from 1995 to 1997. One of the members from 1995, Lee McMillan (no relation to Dan McMillan the County Manager), was elected to the Commission in 1996 and remained on the DSS Board after his election. Lee McMillan was credited by both the DSS Director and the current Manager as very instrumental in the smooth transition from one program to the other.

A third element in the decision environment that prompted Ashe county to remain standard were signals coming from Raleigh, according to Commissioner McMillan. From his perspective, the NCDSS officials were deliberately vague on what would be required in a county’s plan if it decided to go “elect” and, furthermore, were hinting that counties would be “on their own” if they chose that option. Given concerns about the administrative capacity of the Ashe DSS to develop a plan without State assistance, McMillan was convinced that remaining

“standard” was the safest option to take. When asked if there was any discussion among the other commissioners about welfare reform options, he observed that the other commissioners did not really understand the consequences of the choices and really did not care too much to know about the issue. They deferred to his expertise since he had been on the DSS Board for a number of years. (Interview, Lee McMillan, August 1, 2000)

On September 29, 1995, Ashe County submitted its Work First amendments to its 1995-96 JOBS Plan. The amendments consisted primarily of one to two sentence descriptive statements in response to State DSS plan questions. Eight months later, June 26, 1996, Ashe submitted a one page amendment to its plan that describes “How Mandatory Families Will Be Prioritized for Active Participation.” On February 11, 1997, a letter from Ashe DSS to Ms. Pheon Beal at NCDSS provides a one sentence clarification of whom will be eligible for Work First services. One month later, March 24, 1997, Ashe DSS provided a one paragraph explanation of how “mandatory” families would be prioritized for Work First Employment Services. Finally, on October 28, 1997, twenty five months after its original Work First amendments, the County submitted its two page “Plan Update.” According to DSS Director Weaver, the relations with NCDSS were smooth during the planning and submittal procedures. She perceived that, since Ashe had decided to remain as a standard county, the routines developed over many years between the County and State social services agencies remained cooperative and congenial as TANF was implemented.

Ashe County leaders who were knowledgeable about the issue did not perceive that welfare reform began in 1997. To most members of the welfare policy community, welfare reform began in 1995 when the Work First amendments to the JOBS program went into effect.

The changes in 1997, as best as could be deciphered from the distance of Ashe County, were perceived to be primarily in eligibility procedures and criteria, not the program's thrust.

Goals, Objectives, or Program Priorities

Based upon the interviews with key informants and a review of the newspaper record, it is clear that the professional social services community had a different set of goals than the political community as welfare reform was implemented. Recalling the statement from then candidate and future commissioner, Beth Saylor, that folks on welfare needed to learn how to “earn their keep”, a sentiment echoed eight years later by the current County Manager who saw welfare reform as “a way to get people to work,” it is evident that the political and administrative leadership of the county viewed the shift to TANF as a way to reduce welfare roles and to increase workforce participation. In a recent interview the county manager observed that the biggest barrier to welfare reform implementation was the educational process of teaching people that “you just can't stay home all the time.” (Interview with Dan McMillan, June 13, 2000) It is equally clear that the professional leadership at DSS feared that TANF would lead to increased child poverty and other family dysfunctions like alcohol abuse and domestic battering. The social work professionals perceived the problems of the clients as multifaceted and that the TANF program (as originally perceived by the DSS professionals) was deliberately structured not to

address these numerous causes and effects of poverty. Given the fear that TANF would lead to greater social breakdown in the County, the DSS goal was to minimize the deleterious effects its implementation.

In the newspaper interview of 1997 noted earlier, Weaver had observed that the families who had initially gotten off welfare were the most easily employable. The remaining recipients would, therefore, have the most difficult time finding jobs. Weaver went on to suggest that this “unemployable” group would be more likely to turn to criminal and/or abusive domestic activities when public assistance ran out (McMeans Apr. 29, 1997, 1A). In the end, Weaver cast doubt on the social philosophy that encouraged the development of programs like Work First. She explained that “[t]hose who are impoverished and disadvantaged in terms of opportunities, education or parental upbringing, have to struggle and it’s easy for society to sit back and criticize those folks. Society in general, and the middle class in part, is frightened because the American dream is slipping away.” They see their taxes supporting the disadvantaged and they are angry, frightened and upset, she said, “but we’re angry at the wrong source. There’s not a one of us who doesn’t depend on someone else for something” (McMeans Apr. 29, 1997, 7A).

Program Implementation 1998-2000

Once it was clear precisely what officials in Raleigh were requiring from county DSS agencies, implementation proceeded in a smooth manner. For those hoping that the TANF program would reduce public assistance caseloads, their most hopeful expectations were realized. Caseloads dropped by 58.6% from 1997 to 1999. This drop far exceeds the statewide average of 38.8% during the same time frame. If one looks back farther to 1995, caseloads dropped from

approximately 250 individuals to slightly over 70 for a percentage reduction of over 350%. Of those 70 current cases, 50 are children, which means that only 20 adults in Ashe County receive TANF benefits. This reduction was in spite of the fact that Ashe's unemployment rate was almost double the State average during this period.

When asked about this apparent anomaly, the DSS Director credited the new eligibility criteria and assessment procedures as the major reasons. In Weaver's estimation to remain eligible for TANF payments, clients were expected to subject themselves to such demeaning and invasive questions about their personal lives that they preferred to remain off public assistance. For example, if an applicant is suspected of having a problem with alcohol, s/he must receive treatment from the County Mental Health Substance Abuse program to remain eligible for TANF benefits. In the absence of public assistance many former AFDC recipients took minimum wage, dead-end, service jobs that provided partial subsistence. And, since Food Stamps and Medicaid benefits still applied to these former clients, they could survive.

A somewhat different perspective is found from the Commissioner's perspective. According to Lee McMillan, the reason for the decline was the deadline imposed for receipt of TANF benefits. "People will survive if they have to. They just need to learn how to work and how to take care of their children." He further credited the availability of more flexible resources in the DSS agency as instrumental in causing the decline.

This flexibility in using TANF resources was one of the unanticipated consequences of the shift to TANF which allowed DSS to acquire essential resources, reshuffle its staff and reorder its priorities. According to Weaver, during the first year of TANF, the county DSS agencies across the State were uncertain exactly how flexible NCDSS would be in allowing counties to experiment with different approaches to addressing the causes of poverty. Weaver

observed, “We weren’t very creative that first year.” However, during the second year of the program, counties began to discover that NCDSS would be more flexible in how resources were used. This flexibility became important as two realities of TANF intersected. One was the aforementioned decline in caseload. The other was the “maintenance of effort” (MOE) requirement that assured the agency a level of resources equal to what it received in 1996 when its caseload was more than triple its 2000 level.

Given greater flexibility and more abundant resources, the agency was able to provide a broader and more intense level of services to children of Work First participants and to devote greater attention to individuals who were no longer public assistance recipients but still living on the margins of poverty. The agency made a particular priority of middle-school children in the County. In partnership with 4-H and the school system, the agency devoted considerable resources to the Support Our Students (SOS) program which provides after-school tutoring and other enrichment activities to students in the sixth through eight grades. The agency was also able to devote greater attention to child support enforcement providing more resources to young mothers and their children. The agency was able to refocus its efforts in career counseling and assisting clients and former clients in creative ways to address the individualistic barriers preventing them from fully participating in the workforce. In anticipation that incidences of child abuse would increase due to the termination of public assistance, the agency devoted considerable time and energy to making home visits to families with young children and providing assistance to these families as needed. One gets the very clear impression that the County DSS staffers do not perceive the poor of Ashe as mere clients. In a small rural county, the families eligible for DSS assistance are likely to be known personally by the staff. The staff could have gone to school with them or their “kin”. Therefore, the problems that the poor families are experiencing as they

adjust to the expectations of Work First are not remote - they are immediate and well understood by the DSS staff.

From an organizational perspective, the shift to TANF was a catalyst for positive change according to the DSS Director. One of the first things the agency undertook was to provide additional training to all of its staff, not just its professional social work staff. This across the board training increased the morale of the agency and set the stage for the restructuring which was to occur in the eligibility section of the agency. Since income maintenance workers are not professional social workers, it was essential that training be provided if they were to function effectively in their new capacities. The restructuring allowed the agency to concentrate on what it perceived to be the greatest threat emanating from the Work First program - greater child abuse and other domestic dysfunctions. Given the reduction in demand for services from the income maintenance section, the Director was able to transfer two positions to the children's services section. Furthermore, the agency felt more creative in addressing individual problems given that the funding coming from Raleigh had fewer programmatic strings. Essentially, the agency felt more empowered to use its creativity to address problems that heretofore would have been outside the parameters of the old AFDC/Work First guidelines.

From the perspective of Commissioner McMillan, the flexible resources allowed the organization to acquire some essential resources that made it more effective and efficient in delivering services. "We were able to get them more phones, more computers, buy them new vehicles. It was just pitiful how little they (DSS) had. Their cars weren't reliable. They even had to double up on the phones. Beginning in early 1998 we could allow them to get the fundamental tools they needed to do their jobs." (McMillan interview, August 1, 2000)

From the County Manager's perspective, welfare reform has also been a success primarily because there are fewer individuals receiving public assistance and more people working in the service economy at minimum wage jobs. From a political perspective, by all accounts, the transition to TANF has been a non-issue. In the most recent primaries, where two sitting commissioners were ousted by their own party and one resigned prior to the primary over landuse issues, no mention of welfare was uttered. In Ashe, the issues are landuse planning and building a new courthouse. Welfare reform has had little salience, perhaps because it has met the expectations of those in favor of it while not creating the problems anticipated by those opposed.

Overall Assessment

In reviewing the implementation process of welfare reform in Ashe County one is reminded of the Sherlock Holmes story, "The Dog That Did Not Bark." Given the socio-economic conditions and the political atmosphere of the County, welfare reform should have been very controversial. The fact that it was not, by all accounts, suggests an interesting story. The underlying story is one of a DSS agency and its director who strove to make the best of what they feared would be a bad situation and succeeded.

Despite the fact that Ashe County's poverty rate was 50% above the state average, its unemployment rate more than twice the state average, and its median family income \$13,000 below the State's median, its welfare roles dropped over 300% from 1995 to 2000. Despite persistent political rhetoric castigating the poor in the early part of the decade and a cultural ethos antagonistic to public assistance, the topic has faded from public view. Clearly, the ability of the County to transition so smoothly from AFDC to TANF is a tribute to the administrative prowess, compassion, and political astuteness of the social services policy community.

It seems clear that the operative attitude among decision makers was deference to expertise. Given the continual turnover among the elected commissioners, it was fortunate that one commissioner, Lee McMillan, had knowledge of how the social services system worked due to his service on the DSS Board. It was also interesting, if not fortunate, that the County Manager in 1997 played no role in the decision process. He apparently was satisfied to let the Social Services Board and especially the Commissioner representative on the board, Lee McMillan, guide the decision processes. It is also significant that the current County Manager has remained aloof from the day to day operations of the Social Services Department. While relations are not strained under the current administration as they were with his predecessor, he clearly defers to his DSS Director in matters related to welfare reform.

Undoubtedly, the major player during the transition from AFDC to TANF in Ashe County was its strong and experienced DSS Director. She anticipated that problems would occur if Ashe went "elect" and convinced the DSS Board that remaining "standard" was the most feasible option for the County. She anticipated that the new eligibility rules would create other problems and restructured her staff and resources to contend with them. She waited to see how flexible

State DSS would be in restricting the expenditure of public assistance funds and, once she was comfortable that the State would allow flexibility, she used her resources innovatively.

The implementation of welfare reform in Ashe County is an example of a relatively insulated subsystem carrying out its policy responsibility with little to no political or local administrative oversight. The major actors were the DSS agency leadership, its Board, and the State DSS officials. Since the leader of the policy domain was both competent and compassionate, the implementation went smoothly.

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