

Executive Summary
Ashe County
By Dr. Dennis Grady

Ashe County is located in the extreme northwestern corner of North Carolina in the remote forested Appalachian highlands. For generations the people of this rural, poverty stricken county have taken great pride in their independence and self-sufficiency. One of Ashe County's claims to fame is its secession from the state of North Carolina during a brief period in the 18th century when it aligned itself with a few counties of eastern Tennessee to form the State of Franklin. This perception of independence from the affairs of Raleigh and a feeling of remoteness from the worries of the state capital remain ever strong to this day.

The story of welfare reform in Ashe County is the story of a strong willed, experienced, and well respected DSS Director taking a leadership role in virtually every aspect of the decision making process. With almost continual turnover on the Board of Commissioners, a hands-off county manager who would be replaced during the welfare reform implementation process, and a relatively small AFDC caseload, the DSS Director took it upon herself to maneuver the DSS Board and then the County Commissioners to remain a standard county. Citing unclear guidance from the state DSS office and uncertain consequences of going "elect", she persuaded the Republican dominated board that the safest approach would be continuing with essentially the status quo.

The greatest concern within the DSS policy system about Work First was that it was an incomplete response to the needs of the poor. In this small, remote, and economically challenged county, the TANF eligibles and the DSS professionals are not strangers. The needs of the poor are well known by DSS staff and the barriers to self sufficiency are not unidimensional. One of the unintended consequences of the transition to TANF was the unexpected slack resources that resulted from the decline in caseload coupled with the maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement. Essentially, the Ashe DSS has never had so many resources available to bring to bear on the multi-faceted problems of the neediest of the county.

The story of welfare reform in this county is the story of policy expertise and compassion trumping political expediency and simple-minded conservatism. While welfare reform should have been a major issue given the political and economic backdrop of Ashe County, it never gained saliency. The social services policy community raised the drawbridge and the uniformed and less compassionate were not invited to participate in the planning or implementation of the transition from AFDC to TANF.