

Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform

Buncombe: Innovation in a Standard County

*1997 Outstanding County Award
North Carolina Association of County Commissioners
for
Reengineering Work First Community Collaboration*

A Certificate hanging on the wall of
Buncombe County's Work First Office

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Buncombe is the largest county west of Mecklenburg and the seventh largest in the state. While it ranks eleventh in the number of manufacturing jobs, its economy is increasingly dominated by service and retail trade industries and a substantial number of jobs are linked to the highly volatile and seasonal tourist industry. It is relatively wealthy, ranking twelfth in the state in per capita income, although it had the fifth highest rate of increase in AFDC payments from 1988 to 1994. Economic development and diversification remain priorities in Buncombe but problems with water sources, housing and pollution make it increasingly difficult to accomplish that goal.

Even though its annual unemployment rate dropped below 3 percent for 1998, the job mix prevented marked improvement in living standards for many county residents. Noting the disparity in wage scales, especially for retail work, the opening section of the county's *Work First Plan* concludes that, in addition to child care, job training, and transportation, "the most pressing realities are: livable wage [and] medical insurance for working families" (p. 3). In Buncombe, welfare reform has gone beyond simply getting people off the welfare rolls. The county's effort seeks to build a broad-based community network that integrates job training, government benefits, and private contributions to help people become, in the words of the county's Department of Social Services (DSS) Director, "self-sufficient to the greatest extent possible."

Buncombe's Work First strategy is shaped by an understanding that moving off welfare is not the same as escaping poverty. Its program emphasizes "transitional assistance" and seeks to continue a variety of benefits as long as customers (DSS prefers to use the term "customer" rather than "client" for welfare recipients) make an effort to establish their autonomy. Its approach also seeks to develop community ownership of the issue and engage a diverse array of interests in addressing it. County officials readily adopted Standard status, but emphasized that

did not mean supporting the status quo. Its *Work First Plan* stated, “Buncombe County wishes to become a ‘pilot’ Standard county to test innovative ways of doing business that will increase the productivity, streamline service delivery while providing efficient and effective, yet compassionate pathways to independence for families” (p. 16).

This report reviews Buncombe’s efforts to move, as one official put it, “onto the edge and think of new ways” to help people. The opening section reviews the county’s stable political context which invests considerable authority in agencies that have a record of success and examines the process which produced the decision to adopt the Standard option. Part two summarizes the themes and practices incorporated in the county’s plan and the third section surveys the three strategies the county adopted to implement its program. The fourth part analyzes the views expressed by Buncombe County officials regarding welfare reform and the final section briefly reviews how the Department of Social Services has established its preeminent position in welfare policy making in the county.

The Policy Context and Process

Politically moderate, Buncombe has a history of supporting both Democratic and Republican candidates for state and local offices. The county is governed by a five-member Board of Commissioners elected at-large in presidential election years and is represented in the legislature by two senators and three house members. When welfare reform moved onto the agenda in 1997, the Commission was solidly Democratic. Democrats had won all five seats in 1992, and, with the exception of the two-term chair who retired, all were reelected in 1996. Another Democrat, who had previously served on the Commission, was elected to fill the open seat. Four of the five legislators, however, were Republican.

Stable Democratic control of county government enhanced the Commissioners' customary deference to advisory boards and agency directors. Said one Commissioner, "we have a tradition of trusting our boards and administrators. We take care in our hiring and expect them to have studied issues in detail." This tradition and the long tenure and political skill of the DSS Director who assumed the position in 1983 led to what one Commissioner called "excellent" relations between the Board and DSS. There is, he continued, a "natural tension over funding" but our relationship is "characterized by mutual respect." The DSS Director agreed, saying the Commissioners appreciate professionalism and expect that agencies will solve problems in house. One official attributed the smooth relationship to the Director's willingness to share information. The Commissioners, she said, "are assertive and ask hard questions," but DSS has the "ability to marshal information and provide it to key parties." She described the Director as typical of those in larger urban counties, "politically astute with good public relations skills." The result, said another official, is that "few other counties enjoy the kind of communication between DSS and the Commissioners as exists in Buncombe."

The county's experience with Work First actually began in 1995. When Governor Hunt received a waiver from the Federal government, said one official, "we saw an opportunity to start changing values, beliefs, and behavior. Under AFDC we were legally gagged from suggesting that clients ought to do something to earn the help they were receiving. We couldn't say what needed to be said. The Governor and Work First liberated us from that constraint." Anticipating forthcoming changes, the county formed a Legislative Reform Task Force which included members from the county's Health Department, Job Training and Assistance, DSS, Mission Hospital, Asheville Buncombe County Christian Ministries (ABCCM), the Affordable Housing Coalition, Blue Ridge Mental Health Center, the Chamber of Commerce, and several churches.

Its purpose was to articulate the values which should define welfare programs and identify the services deemed essential to effectively implement the ideas.

According to one county official, the Committee was one of the first efforts in the state to inspire serious discussion and long term planning. Its effect, she argued, was felt in two ways. First, their deliberations influenced local legislators who attended the meetings and listened to the discussions. Their participation “meant the county was in a better position than almost any other to shape the debate on welfare.” Second, the Committee engaged the county in rethinking welfare long before the legislature formally ratified the Work First Program.

Thus, when Commissioners began discussing welfare reform in November and December 1997 they were confronted by a strong network of public and private agencies that had already developed an agenda. The Board conducted, what one official described, as “serious and prolonged discussions” on the issue and originally two commissioners showed an interest in the Electing option. Another official characterized the Board as concerned and interested and somewhat conservative in their thinking. “They wanted to do something about welfare, take a new direction,” he said, “but weren’t clear as to what.” The Task Force’s discussions provided a ready-made set of alternatives.

DSS was clearly the dominant influence on the decision to adopt the Standard option. Said one Commissioner, there was “no question” where DSS stood. DSS professionals presented a united front, and in the absence of any countervailing pressure, the Board had no compelling reason to ignore the agency’s recommendation. One Commissioner remembers being provided with extensive information, all of which pointed in the same direction-- experimentation was good but Electing status was a high risk proposition with potentially significant problems. The final decision to adopt the Standard option was unanimous, but the Commission did charge the County

Manager with reporting on the experiences of Electing counties so it could rethink its decision after the first budget cycle was completed.

The case for choosing the Standard option centered on one argument-- the practical costs were too high and, since the Standard designation did not preclude innovation, the risk of adopting Electing status was therefore too great. One official described the requirements for Electing status as a “nightmare” that would demand more management and tracking expenditures than the county could afford. Buncombe is a large county with a heavy welfare load, said one Commissioner, and to totally revamp the system would be expensive. Said another participant, “taxpayers have invested millions over fifty years to develop a base of talent and skill and systems to deliver social services. Why scrap it after all this time when there is no clearly better option?”

The start-up and administrative costs were deemed unnecessary because Buncombe’s current system was perceived as successful. In the words of one Commissioner, “There is general agreement that the current system is working well and there seemed no reason to junk the process.” He added that “this doesn’t mean the system is perfect,” but emphasized that even Standard counties have the opportunity to try new things. Another official agreed, arguing that under the Standard designation the county would still have maximum flexibility over non-cash programs. “Except for cash assistance there is no distinction between Electing and Standard counties. Being Standard does not exclude innovation.” Defending “reasonable” experimentation as the prudent course, he argued the best decision was to wait until there was a comprehensive review of the pilot projects in 2001 and then make adjustments as they are warranted. Claiming that Buncombe’s DSS is innovative anyway, another Commissioner agreed, saying it was best to let others take the big risks. “We will try our own changes,” he said, “and carefully monitor what happens in other counties.”

One Commissioner summed up the decision simply: “The whole thing was too risky. There were simply too many unknowns. It wasn’t clear what gains could be achieved and what the advantages would be.” “Right now,” he said, “the Standard state system allows the maximum amount of flexibility with the minimum amount of risk. The Board has a commitment to helping citizens and this could be best achieved by choosing the Standard option.”

Decision makers were also suspicious of the motives behind the Electing option. One Commissioner explained that his sense from talking to people at the state level and in other counties was that those favoring the Electing option wanted to “crush poor people.” Electing counties will be “harsh” and people will suffer, he said. While he agrees that there are problems with the welfare system, and that good can come from trying new things, he doesn’t think experimentation to improve welfare services is the object in most places choosing to go Elect. While “punishing the poor” may be smart politics, he continued, “we are all Democrats and understand that it is not good policy.” Another official said Electing counties were doing it only to save money and were not concerned about the consequences. “They don’t understand the risk they are taking. They are being too short sighted.” Pilot programs are good, she continued, “but they have to spring from the right motives to be successful.”

The decision to adopt the Standard option was made without much input from sources other than DSS. The commission’s traditional deference to professionals gave the agency’s arguments considerable weight. Noting that his counterparts were snubbed in some places, Buncombe’s DSS Director said the Commissioners allowed his agency “good input.” One Commissioner said DSS’ views were carefully considered because the department has earned the Board’s respect. “They were passionate but fair in their presentation,” said one Commissioner. He noted too that the state Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

was not a direct force in the decision. They provided information but “did not pressure the county to go one way or the other.”

The county’s Republican dominated state legislative delegation was not a factor either. One of the representatives did invite State Representative and welfare reform activist, Cherie Killian Berry, to speak in Asheville in the Fall of 1997, but her appearance did little to influence the values of decision makers. Relations with the delegation were strained anyway because some of its members had sponsored legislation directly affecting the county without consulting the Board. One Commissioner said the state delegation didn’t “pressure us, probably because they figured it wouldn’t make any difference.”

While there was no effort to discourage public input, one Commissioner said he didn’t receive any phone calls or visits on the issue. The general sense of voters, said another, is that welfare is wasteful but because the issues and programs are so complex, people don’t understand the nuances nor care about it enough to get involved. He added that there might have been little public debate because most people concerned with the issue understood the commission’s orientation and preferences. Another Commissioner disagreed claiming there was considerable public interest, but it wasn’t noticed because “everyone was pulling in the same direction.” According to him, policy is not made in Buncombe by an inner core of elites. Even if Republicans controlled the Board, he said, they could not have resisted the pressure from relevant interests. “A punitive policy would not have been acceptable here.”

The Planning Committee appointed to design the County’s Work First plan was chaired by the DSS Director and convened on November 5, 1997. It formed five work groups-- Goals/Outcomes/Policy, Family Support, Employment, Child Care, and Transportation-- each of which met twice. The final plan was approved by the Committee less than three weeks later on

November 24. What is remarkable about the speed with which the committee operated was its extraordinary size. The Commissioners appointed thirty people including two of their own members, five representatives from DSS two of whom were consumers, one member of the DSS Advisory Board, nine representatives of community-based organizations and agencies, seven people from the business community, and six people from government agencies including the county's two school systems. In addition, another 25 people were brought into the discussions. Of these, seven were from DSS including one consumer, nine from community-based organizations three of whom were from the Blue Ridge Mental Health Center's substance abuse program, a DHHS field representative, a business person, and representatives from seven churches. (*Buncombe County Work First Plan*, pp. 28-32).

One participant gave two reasons why this large group was able to operate so quickly and efficiently. First, there was a marked consensus on the ends. There were differences of opinion she said, but no dramatically divergent views. Second, the DSS staff was well prepared and provided the necessary information clearly and succinctly.

The Plan

Buncombe County's *Work First Plan* contained 44 "statements" outlining specific actions DSS would take to implement the program. The proposals ranged from the location of job announcements and listings and media publicity strategies to transportation, training and outreach programs. Each activity "statement" was rated as to whether it would help meet each of the eight state-mandated goals. Table I lists the eight goals and the percentage of the 44 "statements" that the *Plan* said would contribute to achieving that purpose. This crude measure suggests that Child Well-Being was the highest priority for the Committee as 42 of the 44

“statements” (95 percent) were said to help accomplish it. According to this analysis though, the *Plan* appears to respond most to the short term objective of removing people from the welfare rolls as the second, third, fourth, and fifth ranked goals all have that as their primary purpose. Moreover, many of the “statements” were at best indirectly tied to Child Well-Being. Helping an adult get a job might benefit the child in the long run, but that is not likely to be the immediate purpose of the provision.

In keeping with the national and state emphasis on immediate employment, the *Plan* recommended “a job preparation training that models the Strive program in New York” (p. 21). The proposed course would be run by Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College which already was offering a Job Club at the JobLink Career Center located in DSS headquarters. The result was a program called ASPIRE which is two weeks of intensive “real life nuts and bolts” job training.

Table I: Relative Priorities of Buncombe’s *Work First Plan*

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Percentage of “Statements” Relating to the Goal</u>
Child Well-Being	95%
Reducing the Work First case Load	86%
Meeting the “All Parent” Participation Rate	86%
Meeting the “Two Parent” Participation Rate	86%
Putting Adults to Work	84%
Avoiding Welfare through Diversion Assistance	55%
Staying off Welfare After Going to Work	52%
Increasing Child Support Orders and Collections	36%

“This is not a hand holding enterprise,” said one DSS worker. “Its purpose is to prepare people for the harsh realities of the working world.” The classes are tailored to meet the specific needs of the people enrolled and cover a range of basic principles including social skills and personal presentation. ASPIRE joined several other programs already in operation including Survival Skills for Women, an Industrial Work Skills program, and a Certified Nursing Assistant training program all run in conjunction with the school.

The work emphasis is noticeable as soon as one enters DSS offices. Both cash assistance and employment staffs are located in close proximity and the area is dominated by lists of available jobs and directions to the JobLink Center on the ground floor. Pamphlets with titles like “Developing Workplace Skills” and “Balancing Work and Family” are prominently displayed and applicants are told in their first interview that they are expected to work, and if they can not be hired for enough hours to meet their time share commitment, they will be placed in a nonprofit agency to develop work experience.

The work emphasis’ purpose is to urge participants to assume greater personal responsibility for their family’s welfare. To encourage people to take charge of their lives, the *Plan* promises to develop incentives and bonuses for new participants (p. 23) but these are less pronounced and specific than the sanctions it outlines for non-cooperation. The *Plan* requests four waivers from the state, one of which asks that the county be permitted to impose financial penalties in the form of reduced payments to people who do not comply with their Personal Responsibility Contract. This provision is popular with DSS staff, one of whom said “sometimes a

club is needed to motivate people.” It is unfortunate, said another, “but sometimes that is the only way we can get people to be accountable. Cash assistance has to be tied to performance. Work First is not an enabling group. The people here are hard nosed.” “We want to avoid being punitive,” said a third, “but we have to be firm.” An early issue of a Work First newsletter carried a warning for recipients. In answer to a rhetorical question as to whether welfare reform was temporary, the publication noted, “here’s the truth as we know it: *It is not going to go away!* All of our signs are that welfare reform will *only get tougher*” (Stakeholder’s Quarterly 1998, p. 2; emphasis in original).

While the tough rhetoric and work emphasis is a central component of the county’s plan, the superficial analysis of the action “statements” summarized in Table I obscures three fundamental themes which dominate Buncombe’s Work First implementation strategy-- extensive collaboration with community organizations and private actors, an emphasis on collateral problems that confront Work First customers, and an extensive focus on benefits designed to smooth a person’s transition from welfare.

The first theme, is the degree to which the *Plan* specified collaboration with county organizations and businesses. A primary goal from the very beginning, said one official, was to “construct a broad-based support system.” (This helps explain the large size of the planning committee.) Cooperation has long been emphasized in Buncombe’s welfare effort. The *Plan* lists 27 collaborative efforts in which the county was engaged before Work First and states “We can only see that these collaborations will strengthen and continue to grow” (pp. 5-6). Several of these partnerships are singled out for expansion and the *Plan* says the county “will form new collaborations whenever possible” (p. 6). Two sectors are given special emphasis. First, the *Plan* appeals to churches to expand their relationships with Work First families. Through

ABCCM, churches were already involved in the Wheels to Independence Program which solicited the donation of automobiles for the poor and the Adopt-a-Family Project (p. 24), but the *Plan* calls on them to expand their assistance “to include employment related issues” such as supporting participation in job-training programs (p. 22).

The second group explicitly cultivated is business. The *Plan*’s “Innovative Strategies” section describes five activities designed to elicit employer cooperation. Each is to be conducted in cooperation with other agencies notably United Way and the Chamber of Commerce. Under the *Plan* the county would host its own Job Fair to help employers find suitable workers, engage in “one-on-one” conferences to educate employers, expand its job listing service, and hold an annual Community Forum where Work First employers report on their experiences and “innovative ways that they have found to bridge communication and educational problems” (p. 23). Perhaps the most significant incentive though, is working with Employment Security to provide employers information on the tax advantages of participating in Work First. DSS even promises to help with the paperwork necessary for an employer to take advantage of the incentives. According to one official, Buncombe made an explicit effort to “pursue the problem from the employer’s perspective.” “We need,” said the DSS Director, “the full cooperation of employers to hire folks and give them a chance to work to support their families” (*Asheville Citizen Times* 1998a).

To enhance the notion of community participation, the *Plan* also outlines a promotional media campaign. The effort was designed by a local advertising agency who took the project pro bono at the urging of United Way and it was implemented in January 1998. The *Plan* also commits Buncombe to sharing the materials with other counties. Appendix 1 contains some samples of the ads and Appendix 2 is a list, published by DSS, of employers who have hired Work

First participants. Such registers are circulated to pressure other employers to participate.

Asheville's newspaper has also helped by publishing stories of successful Work First customers which carry a sidebar giving the phone number of the Work First office for "Businesses wanting to learn more about hiring Work First applicants and possible tax benefits" (*Asheville Citizen Times* 1998b; 1999).

DSS officials insist these cooperative efforts are essential to Work First's success. Said one, "we have a community-oriented philosophy and pull in everyone we can. That is the norm in this community. Any effort that did not share in that value would not long survive." Another DSS worker agreed, claiming that people in the county are unusually public spirited, and "care about the community and the people who live here." She also noted that cooperation is the hallmark of agencies and community groups and that, while there are no central coordinating mechanisms, there is also little turf protection. It is "contacts and informal communication" which make the system work, she said. She also attributed the cooperative climate to community leaders adding, "if you are positive, it is infectious and rubs off on others."

County officials concur. One Commissioner described the community as "well-integrated" and populated by citizens "sensitive to a variety of issues." "The community infrastructure is solid," said another and "each effort and contribution gives impetus to others." So important are the various organizations, he added, that the county could neither ignore their resources nor even "consider absorbing what the not-for-profits, the partnerships, and private groups do." Another official agreed, claiming that people in Buncombe are willing to "pull together when necessary because they share a pervading commitment to the community and its success."

The second theme that pervades the *Plan* is the degree to which it recognizes how practical problems can undermine a family's efforts to escape welfare. More than 60 percent of the six pages that describes the administration of the program are devoted to four practical problems which could derail a customer's transition-- child care, transportation, substance abuse, and adult health. With the exception of adult health, each section details the problem and summarizes the actions necessary to address them. The transportation portion, for instance, lists twenty specific steps the county would take to ease the burden of getting customers to jobs and classes. The "Innovation Section" also describes a proposed Mediation/Parenting Center to improve relationships between estranged parents and their children.

The report also suggests that without such auxiliary programs, the county will be unable to meet its participation rate. In the section which proposes hiring two additional Substance Abuse Counselors for Blue Ridge Mental Health Center the report notes that employers "cite substance abuse as a key concern. Maintaining employment with this disease will be difficult and will impact upon our ability to move these folks toward financial independence." The concern was that state regulations allow a county to "set aside" 20 percent of its welfare population for such disorders, but the *Plan* estimates that 35 percent of the county's welfare population has an abuse problem (p. 20).

An emphasis on transitional assistance is the *Plan's* third theme. As one DSS official put it, "getting people off welfare is not the same as getting them out of poverty." The DSS Director refers to this as the "Seven/Eleven gap" pointing out that seven dollars is about what a low wage employee can expect to make per hour whereas it takes a wage of about eleven dollars per hour to begin to be self-sufficient. "Low-wage, no-benefit jobs are not the answer," he says. The real goal, he claims, is to make people self-sufficient to the "greatest extent possible." To build

independence people must know there are supplements available to them. A DSS worker agrees, arguing that most entry level jobs do not pay enough. “That is why,” she says, “we have to work hard to find other benefits. They are essential to take up the slack.”

The DSS Director has long been a proponent of expanded transitional benefits. Even before the reform debate was beginning in Raleigh he claimed such benefits were essential to keeping people off the rolls (*Asheville Citizen Times* 1995). He uses nearly every media opportunity to reiterate the point. “There’s increasingly a trend toward low-wage and no-benefit employment in our community that people are having to take to provide for their families... We just need to understand that sometimes a job isn’t enough, and folks need a little help” (*Asheville Citizen Times* 1998a). This, the Director claims, is the real goal of reform. “Work First is not just about trimming welfare rolls. It’s about helping families become economically stable and get their needs met. If we are to be successful, we’ve got to have a commitment to support working families” (*Asheville Citizen Times* 1998b).

Three of the four waiver requests contained in the *Plan* are specifically designed to ease a participant’s transition from welfare. First, the *Plan* seeks to more closely align eligibility requirements for Food Stamps, Medicaid, and cash assistance, the effect of which is to make it easier for applicants to qualify for Work First. It includes, for example, provisions which disregard one automobile and the first three months of income from employment when considering eligibility. A second waiver request asks that the county be permitted to use TANF funds “to provide follow-up and case management service to Work First recipients [for up to six months] after they are placed into employment” (p. 16). Third, the county asked permission to use TANF money to provide “Transitional Benefits” such as transportation and child care to employed participants.

The task of finding transition benefits is assigned to case workers. To assist them, the *Plan* implements a streamlined intake procedure. When applicants are first interviewed, their eligibility for a range of programs is verified in order to insure they are considered for all benefits for which they qualify. Appendix III contains a handout prepared for DSS employees which illustrates the concept of transitional benefits and summarizes the role of the case worker.

Implementation

Since many of the *Plan's* provisions were already in force in one form or another, the implementation process had no formal beginning. While the time line is confused, however, three strategies characterized the overall process-- extensive exploitation of community resources through contracting, an aggressive grant writing effort to increase resources, and fundamental changes within the Department of Social Services.

Contracting with local agencies is a mainstay of Buncombe's Work First effort. Said one official, "we probably do as much contracting as any other county." The strategy developed out of necessity. DSS recognized early that it lacked the expertise to run short term job preparation programs and, fearing that directing clients into existing ones might not meet their needs, proceeded to "purchase specific training" from A-B Tech. Later, when the agency faced a shortage of caseload managers and the county refused to increase the number of positions, they contracted for the positions. We discovered, a DSS official said, that local public and private agencies "succeeded quite well. We got the job done without having to add new positions."

By summer 2000, DSS had 15 contracts worth about half a million dollars with local organizations such as ABCCM, A-B Tech, the Employment Services Commission, Mountain Area Training Services, and Goodwill Industries (formerly Handiskills). According to one DSS

worker, “our original object was to bring in as many partners as possible and the contracting process served to tie groups together.” With time, however, the process evolved to the point where “we have sufficient experience to carefully negotiate agreements with an increasing emphasis on the best performance at the lowest costs.” All in all, he concluded, the county was simply exploiting its ample “community resources and expertise.”

The extensive contracting network has been partly financed by an aggressive grant writing strategy. Said one DSS official, “we go for every dollar we can. We exploit every opportunity. It is a basic value here.” Another added “we grab for resources wherever we can find them.” Some of the grants are geared to developing more intensive services for, what one worker called, the “hard core cases.” For example, one grant-funded program provides job coaches whose duties include shadowing new workers and helping them with workplace adjustment issues. They also do follow up interviews with employers. The largest grants, however, seek to expand transitional benefits and services. TANF money, for example, has been obtained to extend some funding to people at 200 percent of the poverty level and additional funds were procured to emulate a pilot program being tried in other parts of the country where Work First and Children’s Services coordinate their efforts on a case by case basis. Other major achievements include a housing grant worth more than \$400,000 to help former Work First customers and a Reverse the Cycle Grant from the Jordan Institute for Families which provides resources for more intensive assistance to new applicants. The grants allow the county to more fully exploit the flexibility permitted under Work First guidelines. “They allow us to try new things,” said one DSS official, and “make our program more complete and comprehensive.” Since the grants are written in conjunction with other organizations, they also complement the community collaboration emphasis.

The third implementation strategy involved fundamental transformations within DSS. Despite its adoption of the apparent status quo Standard status, Work First implementation induced dramatic changes in the agency and its operations. The changes actually began before the state legislature enacted Work First when the DSS Director administered an attitude survey to his agency. He discovered that an “entitlement” and “nursing the client” mind set pervaded the social work staff. Anticipating the changes promised by the Governor’s early initiative, the Director then instituted a series of workshops designed to change the organizational culture. Their purpose was to get DSS workers to “change values,” and place greater responsibility on the customer. Getting his staff to internalize these values was, the Director said, “the most significant result of reform.” The process resulted in a 50 percent turnover in case work staff. Said one worker, “those who couldn’t adapt to the changed mind set retired or moved on. The shift was too dramatic for some.”

To enhance the impression that Work First was a bold new departure, the top of the Work First administrative unit was built with people from outside DSS. The original Work First director was a DSS employee, but when she transferred to the state field office, she was replaced by a retired regional office worker who was specifically recruited by the Director to head the program. The second major appointment was a job developer also recruited personally by the Director. Her task is to locate available positions and help the caseworkers place their clients in those jobs. According to several officials these two hires were critical because they cemented a relationship with the business community. The new administrators were described as “hard nosed realists who were adamant that people should work,” an image that reduced business’ suspicion of DSS.

Each also brought extensive community contacts. The job developer, for example, was described as “knowing everyone.” A former human resource officer, she brought carefully cultivated business and organizational contacts which she uses, said one official, “to beg, plead, and cajole employers to give Work First people a chance. Since people trust her, she can get them to gamble on high risk employees.” Even when placements don’t succeed employers seem to be willing to try again.

The difference from traditional welfare programs was heightened by moving Work First offices out of the DSS building and onto the A-B Tech campus. “This marked us as a sort of stepchild, as outcasts. But that is good because we are different from the traditional programs,” said a Work First employee. According to another employee, the new location “emphasizes the program’s work component.”

These changes have produced a more aggressive approach on the part of Work First employees. “We work with every single person individually,” said one official, “and if they don’t show up or begin to backslide, we go find them.” The agency has even established an office in one of Asheville’s subsidized housing projects. “Our unofficial motto,” said one worker, “is *just do it!* We do whatever it takes.” The tough rhetoric and image projected by Work First officials appear to be somewhat of a smoke screen, however. One official, for instance, tells of case workers paying for customers’ work clothes out of their own pockets and allowing two and even three violations before imposing sanctions is common. “We really want our people to succeed,” she said. While the workers are not afraid to confront Work First participants, they appear to be increasingly flexible as customers do their part.

Work First’s implementation has been difficult at times. According to one worker, when the program was first implemented the caseload was overwhelming. Early successes, however,

dropped each case worker's load by about half which was a mixed blessing. While workers enjoy fewer customers, their lists are dominated by more difficult cases who need intensive attention and "stragglers" many of whom are "resentful and angry." As it gets more difficult to achieve their participation rates, workers feel increased pressure. Their success in reducing rolls had another ramification, the transfer of four case workers into Child Protective Services. Still, morale among the Work First staff is good. One worker attributes it to the support they receive from DSS' top echelon, especially when it comes to providing leverage to move recalcitrant customers.

The attitude that has developed within the Work First division has emerged partly because of the independence enjoyed by the agency from excessive state regulation. "Work First has created a whole different atmosphere in dealing with the state," said one DSS official. The flexibility in the new program makes things more community driven and inspires local creativity. One caseworker appreciates the looser reigns claiming it "allows us to adapt to the participant's needs and gives us important leverage in getting people to cooperate." Another official noted that staff who are more comfortable relying on state regulations have transferred from support services into cash assistance where the program is still centrally controlled.

While they appreciate the state's growing recognition of the importance of county administration and local options, DSS officials retain fundamental support for a state centered system. Said one official, "If you believe all citizens should have equitable access to cash assistance, you have to grant the state's responsibility for rule making and providing cash assistance. The state has an obligation and the system needs to be state centered." According to the DSS Director, one of the best aspects of Work First is that it creates "a healthy tension between the state and the counties which nurtures creativity. Tension between systems is a

catalyst to change.” What keeps this tension under control, he claims, is “the trust, based on mutual professional respect and ethics, that emerges at the different levels.”

The Balance Sheet

Buncombe county officials generally seem satisfied with Work First. Commissioners are pleased with the declining rolls and DSS case workers appreciate the program’s flexibility. Workers have also developed a greater sense of involvement with clients and take increased satisfaction when their customers succeed. Work First officials particularly, cite the program’s attitude change as one its major benefits. According to one, “Work First one of the best things we have ever done because it eliminates the emphasis on entitlement.”

Despite their overall happiness with the program, Buncombe officials had a surprisingly long list of suggested changes and complaints. Almost all of these, however, focus on the broader issues surrounding welfare and indicate a dissatisfaction with the state’s lack of commitment to dealing with fundamental poverty issues. Their comments reveal a sense that Work First is only one component of a much larger agenda. One DSS worker, for example, claims Work First’s focus is too narrow. “It still doesn’t get at the heart of the problem. A person with a ninth grade education may get a job, but they cannot become self-sufficient. The same is true for people with psychological problems. They need treatment and support. But the money just isn’t there.” Another official said Work First will succeed in the short run because there are jobs. The problem, she says, is “there are not enough good jobs to lift the working poor out of poverty.” To be fully successful in eliminating the problem, said a third worker, more resources are essential to deal with related issues including substance abuse, child care, health care, transportation,

improved training, and more comprehensive follow up. Even with the grants, she notes, “the money is very tight.”

One of the workers attributes the problem to politicians “who are more concerned with the taxpayers than the clients and, therefore, have a limited vision.” A DSS official agrees, claiming the state is “overly optimistic about the need disappearing.” He is particularly concerned about an economic decline because he doesn’t think the state government will provide sufficient extra resources in a recession thereby putting intense pressure on local communities. “The state is constantly trying to weasel out of its responsibilities,” he said. “A major economic downturn would hit us very hard,” says another official. “We are at rock bottom and tightly staffed.” One of the Commissioners shares this concern. Fearing the state will not properly fund its mandates, he says counties will have to make up the difference. “Welfare reform is not a big issue in this county,” he said, “but that will change if we have to raise taxes to satisfy state demands.” There is a fear in Buncombe that a recession would overload the system in another way.

Commissioners particularly, are concerned that an economic downturn would induce people to migrate from nearby Electing counties that have adopted more punitive policies. “We offer so much more especially in the way of funding for children and the elderly,” said one Commissioner, “that we become an attractive alternative.”

Another county official agrees that solutions to most remaining problems, particularly administrative ones, have to be addressed at the state level. He is concerned, for instance, about the inefficiency of supporting two different cash assistance programs and believes a greater consolidation of training and job placement efforts is essential. He thinks, too, that it is the state’s responsibility to eliminate the controversies over time-limits, eligibility, and residency which have emerged under the dual system. Another official agrees, claiming the state must reconstruct its

data system. “As we serve more people in more complex ways with fewer case workers, we need a coordinated and standardized application system,” he said. “By reducing record keeping and eligibility determination costs, we can move ahead and continue follow up projects. That will mark the complete change of direction from entitlement thinking.”

On a broader level, the DSS Director thinks the state must make an effort to help the working poor by implementing programs such as a state earned income tax credit and other low-wage supplements. He proposes, for instance, that the state help people with incomes up to 300 percent of the poverty level purchase health insurance, provide significantly more assistance with child support enforcement, and initiate a statewide housing trust fund. He notes, for example, that the Smart Start program has helped alleviate child care problems and hopes the state will undertake similar initiatives to help people become self-sufficient. County level innovation and activity are essential, he says, “but the larger issues have to be addressed in the context of the state, national, and global economy.” He would also like to see increased cooperation among individual counties similar to the state managed pilot Data Warehouse Program in which Buncombe participates with five other counties.

As the emphasis on greater statewide coordination indicates, there is little interest in Buncombe changing course and requesting Electing status. One DSS official claimed that Electing counties have not made significant changes, “certainly no more than we have done here. We innovate as much, if not more, than they do. We have demonstrated that major changes can occur in Standard counties.” Another official adds that the only thing that seems to happen in Electing counties is “punitive policy.” While the Board of Commissioners has not discussed the future direction of welfare reform in the county, the apparent broad-based community support for the effort makes it unlikely they will embark on a radical new direction.

Agency Adaptability and Support in a Stable Culture

In short, the course of welfare reform in Buncombe was determined by a dynamic agency which carefully cultivated a public base within a stable political environment. Such an underpinning was essential because the political culture grants considerable leeway to established issue networks with a record of successful innovation. One Commissioner, for example, thinks Work First will succeed because “DSS has recruited the heavy hitters in the county to support it.” He attributed this to the Director’s ability to trade on his statewide reputation and his agency’s award winning record. Describing him as “a great salesman who is good at getting the word out,” he noted that the Director understood the political and social dynamics of the county well.

The key to successful policy making and implementation in Buncombe County, said an official, is “engaging the community in owning problems and then soliciting their help in solving them. This community is willing to help. All you have to do is ask.” The DSS Director claims this situation resulted from the work of three people who made a concerted effort in the mid 1980s to develop a greater sense of cooperation and community responsibility. The base was always there, he said, “but it took strong leaders to bring it forth and cultivate and nurture it.” To his way of thinking, a successful community is created by the interaction of leaders and the general public. He claims, for example, that even good ideas will not work unless community values and public thinking are suitable. But he also thinks that the people who influence opinion and behaviors must take the lead. “The more you practice and teach the values, the more they become a part of the culture,” he says.

This doesn’t mean the county is free of tension and conflict. Buncombe is a fragmented community undergoing substantial changes which increases the diversity of outspoken interests. An agency that becomes too isolated or entrenched can lose its credibility and effectiveness.

DSS' success in building a support network, says one county official, is due to its ability to avoid being perceived as a "welfare fortress" and making "community engagement an organizational cultural value." DSS' Director claims his agency has successfully institutionalized the "values, beliefs, and behaviors" of social service without the "rigidity" that often comes with it. Noting that DSS' operations may occasionally seem chaotic, he claims that things work because "our values are right and there is continual communication. Our basic organizational value is to expect change and adapt. We understand we cannot be complacent." It is this attitude which explains why being a Standard county need not be synonymous with the status quo.

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