

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Buncombe County
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Since Buncombe County has long considered itself an innovator in the delivery of welfare services, Work First was viewed as an opportunity to liberate the county's programs from the restraints imposed by AFDC. The county sought to establish itself as a *Pilot@Standard* county that would use every available resource to help welfare customers escape the cycle of poverty.

Following Governor Hunt's lead, the DSS Director started planning for major changes in the welfare program as early as 1995. Thus when the issue moved onto the County Commission's agenda in December 1997, considerable groundwork had already been done. The Department of Social Services had cultivated an extensive community support base and developed a Work First Plan with 44 action statements. Fearing that the Electing option was fraught with risk and persuaded that the Standard option did not preclude innovation, the Commissioners unanimously accepted the DSS recommendation that Buncombe choose the Standard option.

The Work First plan's primary emphases were on removing people from the welfare roles and protecting child well being. It had two major features. First, building on the county's long history of church, business, and government agency cooperation to address social problems it adopted a collaborative community oriented approach. Second, the Work First plan sought to address a series of collateral problems facing people making the transition to self-sufficiency.

Three strategies characterized the new plan's implementation. First DSS contracted extensively with community agencies to provide services such as job training. Second, DSS embarked on an ambitious grant-writing campaign to raise additional funds to address collateral problems. Finally, the agency recruited Work First managers with ties to the business community who imposed a no nonsense tone on the program.

Buncombe officials do not see Work First as a solution, only a step toward a more comprehensive attack on poverty. They applaud the greater administrative latitude given local communities and are confident in their ability to make the most of the opportunity. They warn, however, that not all local governments are as committed as Buncombe to addressing poverty issues. Officials are also concerned that the state might begin to shirk its funding responsibilities undermining the progress that has been made.