

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Cabarrus County**

**By Dr. Gary Russell**

Politically conservative Cabarrus County began innovating in the provision of welfare services prior to Work First which marked the state's current welfare reform movement. The county began a program, Work Over Welfare or WOW, in 1995 to move individuals off the welfare rolls. It also implemented several structural and procedural changes in the Department of Social Services.

For the last decade, all of Cabarrus County's Commissioners have been Republican. Issues of growth management and opposition to tax increases have dominated recent elections. In 1995 the Director of the County Department of Social Services, known as a problem-solver and innovator, proposed a workfare program which would use a grant diversion of AFDC and Food Stamps money to pay hourly wages. The goal was to turn the welfare program into a work opportunity program. County commissioners supported the effort and sought legislative approval to implement the program. In 1995 Cabarrus became the only county in the state to have approval for welfare reform. It then established Work Over Welfare (WOW).

Cabarrus County developed its Work First Plan in 1997 and initially planned on becoming an electing county. A component of this plan was a "pay for performance" requirement. Under it a client must work a required number of hours for cash assistance. Although the county's plan was approved for electing status, the county decided to remain a standard county.

Welfare reform appears to have been successful in Cabarrus County. Welfare rolls have been reduced and many former recipient have steady jobs. County staff and leaders believe that the goal of enabling former welfare recipients to be self sufficient has been met. However, numerous other changes took place before and during welfare reform. The WOW program and welfare reform changed the way the county DSS worked with recipients. A team approach is used to help solve applicants' problems rather than merely qualifying applicants for benefits. County DSS works more closely with the Employment Security Commission and other organizations now than before.

Several county officials noted that welfare reform has not saved money. However, in this very conservative county commissioners seemed willing to spend money for clients as long as it was not for long term cash assistance. Several county officials said that money was being spent differently and more effectively. Money was going to collect child support payments and pay for child day care and transportation.

The County relocated three departments – Social Services, Health, and Mental Health – into the same newly renovated building in 1998. This relocation made county services more accessible. The county was also the first in the state to use a single application process whereby clients could apply for many services on one application and in one trip to the DSS office.

DSS appears to have more flexibility now than before. Welfare reform helped to open the arena for innovation. An official noted that welfare had not been reformed but that many important changes had taken place. Many interviewees said that the biggest success of Work First was the change in outlook of the recipients and the impact of this on their lives.

Officials expressed concern about the inability of recipients to take advantage of certain educational programs because of Work First limits. Others expressed concern about what would happen if the very robust economy took a downturn – some stated explicitly that much of the

success of welfare reform was due to the economy. Another concern was with the state of education in the county – some officials noted the relatively high percent of residents who had not completed high school and expressed concern that welfare reform would not do anything to address this problem.

Changes in the state mental health system will impact county expenditures. Whether this also impacts welfare reform or not, it is another financial stress for the county. Recent elections will replace two moderate Republican Commissioners with two very conservative ones. This also may bring unwelcome changes.