

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Caldwell County**

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Caldwell County has responded to the welfare reform implementation challenge in a manner that reflects its commitment to County-based governance, citizen concern, and a shared social welfare ideology. In 1997, the County actively engaged its leadership and citizenry in a decision-making and planning process aimed at reinventing its social services. The decision made by County leaders was to become an Electing County to increase its own discretion and responsibility for implementing welfare reform.

According to its leadership, Caldwell County was denied the opportunity to implement the full array of welfare reform measures. Nevertheless, the County has used welfare reform as an opportunity for expanding and redirecting services to the underemployed and citizens living in poverty. Evidence for this perception include the following:

1. Enhanced inter-governmental communication regarding the existing social service delivery system and the impact of welfare reform on this system.
2. Expanded opportunities to educate influential Caldwell County citizenry regarding the mission of the Department of Social Services (DSS) in general and welfare reform in particular.
3. Further establishment of the DSS Director as a key community leader with direct ties to leading State DSS policy makers.
4. Reoriented and reengineered DSS to accommodate the mandated policy changes in welfare legislation (i.e. shift from eligibility to employment paradigm)
5. Increased staff morale as the result of reorienting and reengineering the DSS.
6. Anticipation and creation of a community forum (i.e. Caldwell County Welfare Reform Planning Committee) for addressing the implications of both federal and state welfare reform legislation prior to their enactment.
7. Formation of coalitions and network linkages with existing resources (i.e. Success for Families Program).
8. Creation of new service resources for preparing welfare recipients for labor market participation (i.e. Job Developer & Job Coach positions).
9. Establishment of a local policy of emphasizing welfare reform goals such as “ensuring the well-being of children”, “reducing poverty”, and “workforce participation” in place of reducing expenditures and welfare rolls
10. Proactive pursuit of new and reallocated monies to address the barriers to individual and family self-sufficiency (i.e. The Fatherhood Initiative Coordinator).

Leading indicators of welfare reform successes in Caldwell County include: fewer people on welfare, more people employed, increased DSS staff morale, and an enhanced public awareness of families in poverty.

Along with the perceived successes, Caldwell County leadership shares a concern about the sustainability of welfare reform and its impact. Welfare reform is considered to be practical during economic favorable conditions but has not been tested in an economic downturn.