

TRACKING COUNTY RESPONSES TO WELFARE REFORM

CHATHAM COUNTY AND THE IMPLEMENTATION WELFARE REFORM

***(WORK FIRST): OPTIMISM VERSUS PESSIMISM AMID PARTIALLY
REALIZED EXPECTATIONS****

By

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August 2000

*This case study is one of several county reports of the project Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform in North Carolina. The research is funded in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and the UNC-CH.

A. Chatham County: The Policy Context

Several features are prominent in setting the stage on which Welfare Reform (Work First) has been acted since 1995 in Chatham County, North Carolina. The significance of “reform” in welfare and human service delivery surfaced pointedly in 1997. Like many issues, reformist or otherwise, it has taken on a life of its own in a broader socio-political and economic policy context. It is relevant to provide a sketch of that context at the outset.

Diversity: Geography and Demography

Size and diversity are two framing features for Chatham County. The size factor is one of geography. The County is one of the largest in the State, with 700 square miles of territory but with a population of fewer than 50,000 (growing rapidly at 1.9% annually over the past decade). This large area and relatively small population produces, quite naturally, a low-density feature presenting transportation obstacles for childcare and other support services in welfare-to-work efforts.

Diversity in population composition and in economic activities is spread across the rolling, forested, river-dissected terrain of the County. The northeast section of the County is strewn with modest and upscale subdivisions and settlements that have two distinct orientations. The first is affordable, mid-priced, large-lot, single-family homes that are “bedroom” type residences for hundreds of professional and high-tech workers at (a) the Research Triangle Park, and (b) the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

The second component of this portion of the County is represented by three large (in area and population) retirement-type developments. One, the Governor's Club (a gated community), surrounds a Jack Nicklaus-designed 27-hole golf course where the least-expensive building lots sell for \$100,000. A second development, Carolina Meadows, is less pricey but is still a select, semi-closed community. The third sizeable development is Fearington Village, a large set of single-family houses set around a cosmopolitan "country store" and five-star restaurant whose total ambience has been advertised in The New Yorker magazine.

Needless to say, welfare reform could not be farther from the concerns of these dominant cohorts of residents in this section of the County. Nevertheless, interspersed and nestled nearby many of these ultra-modern residential areas are remnants of "mobile" homes and old deteriorating structures that remain from the near-to-actual rural poverty that once pervaded much of Chatham County, at least into the 1970s. Michael Harrington, 1963, book on Appalachia poverty, The Other America, could still accurately describe these pockets of poverty sparsely sprinkled in northeast Chatham County.

Central Chatham County is "dominated" by the town of Pittsboro, if that term can be applied to community of about 2,000 persons. It is the County seat and the hub of governance for this sprawling 20-by-35 mile jurisdiction. County offices are situated in a Government Center complex located on the southern perimeter of the Town Square. The square is actually a traffic rotary bottleneck that encircles the old colonial County Courthouse dating from 1770. Central county administrative functions and a host of ancillary activities (e.g., USDA County Extension Offices) are located in several structures. Notably, however, the offices of the County Department of Social Services (DSS) are concentrated in a separate building a mile away on the west edge of

the Town of Pittsboro. The separate and remote site of the DSS building is not the only feature of the DSS distance from the Government Center.

Within 15 miles to the east, south, and west of Pittsboro the predominant economic activity is agriculture. Dairying, live stock, poultry and mixed-use ground crops are evident, as are an array of small farms with modest-sized tobacco allotments. Most of the County's 900 farms are in this region where the average farm covers about 100 acres. Also to the east and northeast of Pittsboro is another new "industry," namely, recreation.

Nearly twenty years ago the Haw River, a northwest-to-southeast tributary of the Cape Fear River, was dammed to create Jordan Lake. This twenty square mile reservoir, an Army Corps of Engineers flood control project, was named after the then-Senator that shepherded the authorization through Congress. Jordan Lake has seen an exponential growth in recreation activities and has been the focus of numerous water usage and related issues, issues that in many respects far overshadowed welfare reform matters on the public agenda.

Fifteen miles west of Pittsboro is Siler City, a third and sharply different socio-political component of the economic "engine" that drives Chatham County, whose current unemployment rate is under 2%. Siler City, with a population of 6,000, is not only the largest municipality in the County but also the center of its "old economy." Contemporary manufacturing and production-type activities dominate this city and surrounding area whose downtown faded redbrick buildings and railroads are reminders of an old textile mill town.

Two poultry processing plants and other industrial activities have created a substantial demand for low- and semi-skilled workers around Siler City. This demand has drawn hundreds of

Hispanic workers (and families) chiefly from Texas and/or directly from Mexico. The 1990 census recorded about 500 Hispanics in Chatham County; estimates place the current figure at around ten (10) times the earlier number, excluding an unknown number of undocumented persons. About 40% of the enrollment in three Siler City schools are Hispanic and more than 50% of kindergarten children speak Spanish as their first language. About two-thirds of the Health Department prenatal clients are Hispanic.

Political Culture

The three-economy, three-culture character of Chatham County is far from as simple, neat, and segmented as the above description might imply. There are nuances and complexities that cannot and need not be described here. What has held much of this diversity within governable bounds has been the continuity of political control in the hands of Democrats dominating the five-member Board of County Commissioners. A few comments on this topic will further set the stage for welfare reform.

In 1994, a year of nationwide shifts toward Republican electoral victories, one Republican was elected to the five-member Chatham County Board of Commissioners. This was the first Republican to serve on the County Board during the 20th Century. In 1998 the Board returned to complete Democratic control. As a historically poor, stable, rural, remote, Southern agricultural county, Chatham once fit Elazar's conservative "traditionalistic" political subculture.

There is no easy or simple way to describe the current political culture of the County. The single most summary observation is that the political culture is clearly in the process of change. This reflects in part the changing character of the population, demography, economy, and social composition of the County. Issues involving land use (zoning), subdivision regulations, water,

health, roads, recreation, taxes, etc. crowd the public agenda. The chief political manifestation of these issues is reflected in the turnover among members of the Board of Commissioners. Two new commissioners joined the Board in 1994, one in 1996 and three in 1998. There will be at least two new members after the 2000 November election. As a result, only one commissioner will have served on the Board continuously from 1994 through 2000. The single political constant through the 1990s seems to be political change despite partisan “stability.”

The County has for many years employed a professional county manager to oversee the administrative and financial operations of the County. This position has also experienced considerable turnover during the past two decades. The incumbent manager has held the post since 1996. Growth in the County has added considerably to oversight responsibilities in human resources, finance, budgeting, planning, and recreation. The number of county employees is slightly over 300 (not counting schools) with an annual operating budget of \$45 million (including \$12 million for county-funded school support). Rates of administrative growth and turnover echo the broader political, economic, and social changes in the County.

Economic and Social Patterns and Trends

The economic base and diversity of Chatham County can be described with more detail and precision by three sets of figures. One is a gross retail sale by major retail categories. A second is the composition of the work force. The third is commuting patterns, especially in relation to surrounding counties. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide the data on these three economic dimensions and constitute the basis for the following statements.

Retail Sales. Automotive sales approach \$100 million, a surprising annual figure of nearly \$3,000 per adult resident of the County. Two features help explain the magnitude of this figure. One is the absolute necessity of an automobile (and associated travel costs) to traverse the County to and from work, either inside or outside the County. Secondly, Chatham County automobile dealers, with lower land, taxes, and other costs, are highly competitive with out-of-county new and used car prices. Buyers from Orange, Durham, and Wake Counties are often enticed to purchase vehicles from Chatham dealers. Over 40,000 vehicles are registered to County residents, including nearly 12,000 trucks, demonstrating the dominance of personal transportation. Lumber and building materials (at about 10%) also reflects the growing residential and related construction boom in the County as well as the presence of three brick plants and eight small wood processing and fabrication companies.

Work Force. Table 2 shows the composition of the work force in Chatham County. Manufacturing, concentrated around Siler City, represents more than 40% of total employment. Another 40% are divided almost equally among services, retail, and governmental employment. No exact figure on employment for nonprofit agencies is available, but a more-than-modest segment of services (14%) reflects the role of NPOs in the County. Additionally, in 1992 the County, according to the North Carolina Day Care Licensing Division, had one of the highest percentages in the State (70%) of working mothers with children under six.

Commuting Patterns. Table 3 reports the commuting patterns for 13 counties in the central North Carolina region. With a 1999 labor force of about 26,000, over half of all Chatham County residents are commuters, about 9,600 out-commuters and 4,100 in-commuters. To work and/or live in Chatham County means travel to or from the County for a majority of the work force.

Major Industrial Employers. A few main points can be noted about industrial employment in the County. First, three poultry processing plants (in Siler City) employ about 2,100 workers. (Over 90% of these employees are reportedly Hispanic.) Second, nearly 1,700 workers are employed in textile, apparel, fabric, or upholstery jobs. Third, brick and wood products total another 700 jobs. In short, about 4,500 jobs are in three main types of industrial activity, constituting about two-thirds of the County's 6,800 manufacturing jobs. With a national and state economy growing robustly during in the past decade, the prospects for "old economy" jobs have remained strong in Chatham County.

Employment and Welfare. Both the National and the State statutes on welfare reform rested on the presumption of instilling a work ethic among a substantial segment of an otherwise dependent portion of the population. P.L. 104-193 sent a clear signal with its title, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Similarly welfare reform in North Carolina has been implemented under the title; "Work First," which began in 1995 and anticipated the national legislation.

The link between a strong economy and the decline in welfare rolls is a significant and contentious issue, one that cannot be resolved on a one-county or even a single-state basis. The trends in Chatham County employment/unemployment figures when juxtaposed to AFDC/TANF recipients reveals remarkably linked albeit lagged patterns. The relevant County figures are shown in Table 4.

The initial year (1991) is a somewhat arbitrary starting point but it shows the County unemployment rate at 5.3%. Across the following eight years four major trends occurred. First, the absolute number of persons employed increased by more than 4,000 (from 21,460 to 25,840).

Second, the number of unemployed persons dropped from nearly 1,200 to less than 500. Third, the unemployment rate was reduced by more than two-thirds (68%), from 5.3% to 1.7%. Fourth and finally, the number of families relying on AFDC/TANF for support declined from over 400 to about 175, a decline of well over 50%.

Clearly, a strong economy “lifts all boats”, although not necessarily equally. The more difficult question, however, is: How and how much has the implementation strategies of welfare reform(s) contributed to the apparent decline in dependency shown in the last column of Table 4? Neither a clear or certain answer can be provided in this single case study. Posing the question does turn our attention to the decisions and strategies Chatham County has pursued in the implementation of Welfare Reform.

B. Time Frame and Decision Dynamics: Chatham Becomes an Electing County (1997-98)

A combination of conditions, actors, and actions contributed to the County consciously considering “Electing” status. The 1997 General Assembly presented this option to a limited number of North Carolina Counties. Electing status meant that a county could (if it wished) depart from State eligibility requirements and benefit levels. These options, however, were not influential factors in prompting the County to pursue electing status. Rather, it was for purposes of streamlining human services that County decision-makers began to explore the discretion that might accompany electing status. “Streamlining” became the phrase symbolizing goals of human service integration, coordination, and comprehensive service delivery to clients with multiple service needs.

Streamlining

The streamlining idea had actually preceded the 1997 electing status option. After Work First began in North Carolina in 1995 members for the Board of Commissioners had expressed concern about more effective delivery of several services to clients with multiple needs. Additionally, the new manager (in 1996) was conscious of and concerned about redundancies, overlapping, and inadequately coordinated service delivery in the human services arena. Human services here covers, at a minimum, health, mental health, and welfare. Thus, the Board and the manager came to a meeting of the minds regarding on the need to address this issue. The electing county option presented precisely such an opportunity in the fall of 1997.

From the outset the staff and those associated with the County Department of Social Services (DSS) were unsympathetic to or actively opposed to the electing option. The three-member DSS Board, which appoints the DSS Director, went on record as opposing the electing-county option. Despite this dissent the Board of Commissioners proceeded, on 6 October 1997, to appoint a countywide ten-member Task Force to develop a plan for Work First as an electing county. It was optimistically expected that the task force would stake out a claim for greater autonomy in pursuit of welfare reform and human services delivery in Chatham County. The central actors in this process recall lively exchanges, clear expressions of concern, yet unanimous Board agreement in favor of exploring change and innovation. From the outset expectations were high. Task Force membership included two County commissioners, the chair of the DSS Board, persons from the Health, Mental Health, and DSS agencies, and four citizens.

The initial results were several and serve to summarize an intensive, extensive, complex, and energetic effort to develop an innovative plan to be implement welfare reform as an Electing County. The highlights were:

1. a unanimous decision of the Board to pursue electing status,
2. appointment of a broadly representative planning Task Force chaired by a member of the Health Department staff,
3. an ambitious planning document resulting from intensive meetings among an array of eight sub-groups of the Task Force in the span of three months (October – December 1997),
4. submission of the plan to the State DSS in January 1998,
5. recommended approval of the plan (and electing status) by the State DSS in March 1998,
6. Final concurrence by the General Assembly of electing status in July 1998.

In July 1998, Chatham County secured its status as an electing county for purposes of implementing welfare reform.

Expectations

Despite the unanimous action of the Board and the strength of the County plan, as judged locally and by the State, there remained varied expectations about its implications and probable consequences. On the optimistic side several key actors saw the plan (and electing status) as an avenue to greatly improved service delivery, especially to clients in the most difficult straits with multiple and complex service needs. This focus and sentiment was reinforced by the continuing overall decline in Work First (TANF) recipients because of employment opportunities. Increased state funding for child care and transportation assistance facilitated this. On the horizon in several participants' minds was the emergence of a "hard core" of clients whose several needs would be most difficult to meet.

The dominant theme of optimism was offset by two divergent sentiments. One, shared by the dominant “optimists,” was a cautionary concern about whether the County had taken too much of a risk, administratively and fiscally, in choosing electing status. What would happen, some thought, if the State DSS (or other powers that be) “cut us off at the knees”. Inadequate fiscal support or rigid and inflexible enforcement of State health, mental health, child, and social services regulations could frustrate the entire enterprise. This sentiment reflected the fragile and often testy character of many state-local relationships. It also revealed the dependent or subordinate posture county officials often expressed in their perceptions of authoritative State actors.

The most clear pessimistic and skeptical view of the County’s general policy direction existed among the actors closely aligned with the County DSS. This perspective was strongly held but it remained a minority sentiment one step (or more) removed from the stance of the Board of Commissioners and the County’s central administrative actors.

Several general points emerge from a review of this decision process in Chatham County. One was the readiness to engage in some policy risks based on a set of high expectations among top officials. A second was the substantial investment of time, resources, energy, and organizational skills in developing a county plan that came across to most actors as strategic and sophisticated in the direction of integrated human services.

Other Expectations

Expectations about streamlining and integrating human services were far from the only concerns in the minds of major participants. Other issues were present. Three of the most prominent were fiscal, administrative, and community support.

Fiscal. Chatham County officials anticipated that achieving electing status would first result in more money. The decline in welfare rolls and associated outlays were expected to produce a financial benefit (or windfall) for the County coffers. Second, county officials expected that the TANF funds would be more flexible. TANF funding from Washington to the state capitols was in the form of a block grant. Similarly in North Carolina, the State had indicated to counties that the funds would be in “block grant” form.

Administrative. Several administrative expectations were part of the package of premises on which county officials took action. Not all of these were unique to electing counties. In Chatham, however, they appeared to surface more sharply or clearly because of the special attention and visibility of the County’s decision to pursue the electing route. One was continued use of the State-standardized computer based EIS (Eligibility Information System). The County would not put in place its own stand-alone computerized information system but continued to rely on the State for both client tracking and financial record keeping. Also expected from the State was continued technical support and training/retraining assistance. The retraining aspect was of particular concern. In the 100 counties across the state there would be 100 organizational “culture shifts.” Case workers and front-line personnel could no longer focus simply on eligibility and benefit-level decisions. Their responsibility now involved helping clients find a job, encourage them to obtain enhanced skills, and, ideally, become self-sufficient. Such changes had already started soon after Work First was instituted in 1995 and were expected to be fully realized under the revamped system.

Community Involvement. A third but by no means final set of expectations centered on community involvement and expanded participation by individuals, groups, and nonprofit organizations, including faith-based communities. The concepts of “social capital” and of “civic infrastructure” were not terms of the discourse or “script” among the players on the Chatham County stage in 1997-98. But the idea(s) of greater community involvement, citizen participation, and group/association engagement were explicit as well as implicit parts of the on-stage dialogue. The welfare reform “play” quite clearly presumed that important individual and group members of the “audience” would become involved. In this respect, spectators were expected to come on the “stage.”

C. Goals, Objectives, Strategies

The Work First “Vision Statement” for Chatham County was articulated early in the 36-page (single-spaced) plan for “Chatham County Welfare Reform.” It read (p.8): “The Welfare reform vision of Chatham County is to lead to jobs providing family self-sufficiency and community prosperity.” The plan identified the needs of low-income families in five major categories, each of which was assessed by Task Force subcommittees that included consumers and service providers. The need categories were (1) childcare, (2) transportation, (3) support services, (4) employment, and (5) substance abuse. Each category contained an extensive list of 10-15 more specific needs that could or should be addressed, depending on individual circumstance(s). One challenge noted in connection with this array of needs was the high proportion of Work First clients who were substance abusers. The estimate was in excess of the statewide average of 30%.

For three of the needs noted above special sections of the county plan addressed the current conditions and estimated demands in connection with the Work First program. These were childcare, transportation, and substance abuse. Also discussed was the topic of “Public and Private Resource Utilization,” with a specific focus on funding a part-time coordinator to work with faith-based communities.

Strategies

Two essential elements in meeting the aforementioned needs were targeted in the plan. One was “Service Delivery Organization” and the other was funding. The former emphasized that (p. 22), “Coordinating services with linking agencies provides increased services with a minimum expenditure of funds.” The second recognized that while no funds were officially committed to these purposes, “Monies from the anticipated savings from reduced Work First caseloads and/or reduced maintenance of effort [funds] may be directed toward these program suggestions at the discretion of the Chatham County Commissioners” (p. 31).

Meeting the needs of Welfare Reform would be enhanced by two basic supporting strategies.

The first was structural, namely, reorganizing to improve the coordinated and collaborative meeting of a broad range of service needs to Work First clients. The second springboard was funding, especially the allocation of discretionary “savings” available to the County Commissioners.

Goals

What aims, purposes, or goals were these strategies intended to achieve? There are two ways of responding to this question. One is based on the “official” goals that the State DSS required as components of each county’s plan for implementing Welfare Reform. The second represents the actual or operational goals and priorities as interpreted and applied by Chatham County officials.

The statewide goals were straightforward. Eight were specified in the following order: (1) reducing the Work First caseload, (2) putting adults to work, (3) staying off welfare after going to work, (4) meeting “all parent” work participation rates (35%), (5) meeting “two-parent” participation rates (70%), (6) avoiding welfare through diversion assistance, (7) increasing child support orders and enforcement collections, and (8) enhancing child well-being. Every county in the State was required to incorporate these eight goals into its plan.

How did Chatham County interpret and respond to this set of goal specifications? This is a two-fold question involving (a) interpretation and (b) actual response. The former will be discussed here as initially viewed by the main participants in the 1997-98 policy formulation stage. The matter of actual response will be addressed in the following section on implementation during 1998-2000.

Based on several interviews with the main participants it is possible to draw inferences and interpretations about the aims and objectives that represented higher priority among the state-specified goals. The most often mentioned goal articulated among county actors was one of family self-sufficiency. This manner of expressing county objectives encompassed several of the more precise state goals, e.g., moving clients from welfare to work, reducing welfare rolls, and meeting participation rates.

There was and is, however, a subtle and significant difference in presenting the aim in family oriented terms, as well as in a self-sufficiency framework. It captured the broader or comprehensive approach that served as a springboard for the streamlining concerns that actuated county officials early in the decision process. That outlook also pervaded many of the deliberations of the Task Force. Distinctly absent was a view that welfare rolls should be reduced regardless of other factors. There was no imperative aimed at “pushing” clients off the rolls.

A second top priority among the concerns of county actors was child well being. About half of all Work First “cases” are child-only clients. These children receive financial support in a variety of settings, e.g., foster care, grandparent custody. Whatever the context, it was evident that care and service support for these children occupied a prominent status in the thinking of elected officials and administrators about how to promote child welfare, now and in the future for this high-need high-dependent population. There was broad agreement among the major actors on these two goals. Where differences surfaced they revolved around strategies. Here the Chatham County deliberations became singular and simple. Streamlining became the instrumental goal around which officials formulated their aims for Welfare Reform as an approach to human services delivery.

D. Program Implementation: 1998-2000

It is important to understand where and how Work First and Welfare Reform fit into the larger scheme of county-based welfare programs specifically and human services more generally. One way of presenting this context is to use financial and personnel data.

Chatham County Human and Social Welfare Services

Chatham County Human Services (HS) programs are second only to education in the county budget. For FY 2000, for example, total HS outlays were estimated at \$11.2 million, with a net cost to the County of \$6.3 million. (The difference between these two amounts is funded about 80% by state/federal aid and 20% miscellaneous revenues/fees.) Total outlays for education were \$18.4 million with a net cost to the County of \$15.9 million. On a “net cost” or locally funded basis HS is less than half the County’s outlays for education.

Within HS, however, social services (provided by the DSS) are the major component of expenditure and employment. DSS in FY2000 expended a total of \$7.2 million, nearly two thirds of total HS outlays \$11.2 million. The net cost of HS funded by the County was \$6.2 million and Social Service net funding at \$3.8 million constituted over 50% of all human services net spending. From a staff or personnel standpoint the number of DSS employees’ (64) is slightly over half of the 120 County workers (FTE) involved in delivering all human services.

Work First and Social Services

Where does Work First and Welfare Reform fit within social services and the DSS organizational framework? Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, Work First constitutes only a modest portion of DSS operations. Table 5 places Work First in the overall DSS fiscal and personnel context.

Several observations can be offered from figures shown in Table 5. First and foremost is the extent to which other major social service programs dwarf Work First, whether calculated on a total or net (county) expenditure basis. Child protection, day care, foster care, and Medicaid are

all substantially larger than Work First outlays, sometimes by several multiples. Medicaid, for example, is gargantuan on the fiscal landscape, particularly when county-financed costs are considered. Indeed, Medicaid net outlays (\$1.5 million) amount to nearly 40% of the \$3.8 million in County-financed social services.

From a formal budget standpoint then, Work First requires less than \$100,000 in County funds. More detailed and alternate state-generated accounts for DSS show, however, that Chatham County outlays for Work First are considerably higher, approaching \$250,000. This discrepancy occurs in part because some Work First funds (and state-local MOE) are credited toward Special Assistance, Foster Care, and Child Protective Services. There may also be other explanations.

The difficulty of identifying and explaining this financial discrepancy is one feature (among many) that has prompted county commissioners across the state to urge independent and neutral observers to “follow the money.” There seems to be substantial and skeptical sentiment that the commissioners (and perhaps others) are “in the dark” regarding the flow of funds to Work First and related programs.

Work First Program Implementation

Several features about implementing Welfare Reform in Chatham County since 1997 should be noted. These factors transcend the complexities and controversies over tracking the allocation of funds within county budgets or fiscal relations between the State DSS and the County.

There has been a major and fairly successful change in the organizational culture of Work First and related social service workers. The shift from a “benefits-eligibility” orientation to a job-

finding, counseling, client-advisor role for front-line workers has been a positive development. As one manager said, “it was like a breath of fresh air, freeing us to do what needs to be done to help persons become self-sufficient.” There seems to be broad agreement within DSS that the changes have been a boost to DSS worker morale and some of this positive outlook has spread to clients.

Changing the organizational culture was aided by the State DSS. Training, retraining, and leadership development efforts by the State were acknowledged as constructive in multiple ways. The State has also assigned field personnel (by regions) to provide technical assistance and advice on a continuing basis. These forms of assistance from the State have been applauded, but there is a general view from nearly all quarters in the County that no fundamental change or even a major shift has occurred toward greater autonomy for counties from State control.

Two types of specific reactions are directly relevant to the autonomy and authority issue. First, comments from operating level personnel indicated that State officials seemed to have adopted a more flexible approach with regard to many detailed rules and regulations governing TANF and Work First. This more flexible posture has been a welcome development. Second, there is a continuing tone of criticism of the State DSS. This was exemplified by the comment. “We just wish that when the State is going to do something they would let us have some input.”

The issue of streamlined delivery of human services remains a matter of continued discussion and debate. On the one hand there now exists in Chatham County a set of networks among multiple agencies that is case-focused, problem solving, and service-coordination oriented. One example of this is the State-promoted initiative on “Success for Work First Families Risk.” In Chatham

County representatives from 10-15 agencies meet (usually monthly) to consider specific cases (usually 3-5) of special-needs Work First families. The main agencies included are:

Family Violence/Rape Crisis Center	Central Carolina Community College
Vocational Rehabilitation	Orange-Chatham-Person Mental Health
Chatham Transit Network (CTN)	Joint Orange-Chatham Community Action (JOCCA)
Horizon/CASA	Family Resource Center
Child Care Network (CCN)	DSS Staff

The DSS staff usually includes not only Work First personnel but also representatives from Adult Services, Child Protective Services, Child Support, and others as needed.

In addition to this “at risk” focus, the DSS contracts with JOCCA, CTN, CCN, and related entities for employment counseling, transportation, childcare, and a variety of other client-needed services. These inter-agency connections have produced on one level some significant and positive coordination efforts. These efforts have fostered conclusions about Work First that several respondents shared with the author when they were asked: How would you evaluate welfare reform? Replies included such statements as: “Work First works,” “Welfare reform is working,” “Some of our worst fears have not happened,” “The County took a gamble and has been lucky” “Welfare reform has been a definite success.”

In contrast to these favorable views and judgments are opinions about limited or lost opportunities for greater reform. This involves a mixture of views about events and results covering the past 2-3 years. One strain of opinion, the most pessimistic, is that Welfare Reform offered the chance for a “bright future” but the window opportunity has closed with little

likelihood of it opening again. This viewpoint also finds expression in the comment that “most political leaders have either lost interest or couldn’t care less” about Welfare Reform. This sentiment acknowledges that public attention and interest in welfare reform peaked in 1997. Since then it has disappeared from the radar screen of public agenda issues and is unlikely to reappear.

Offsetting this pessimism about prospects for change is a distinctly optimistic outlook, especially as it involves streamlining human services. One commissioner noted that, “While the momentum has been lost, the vision is still there.” This viewpoint found action-oriented expression during January/February 2000. In a January work session the Board of Commissioners reviewed and discussed progress on Welfare Reform. The issue was back on the “official” agenda.

Subsequently, the Board met on 16 February with local representatives to the General Assembly (two senators and two house members). The Board had four items of local concern on which it requested action during the General Assembly session in 2001. One item was the request for a “local bill” authorizing Chatham County to reorganize and consolidate its human service agencies. Currently, only counties with populations over 400,000 are permitted to enact such consolidations. No firm commitment was obtained from the legislative delegation. Clearly, however, there is an effort to restore and sustain the momentum that was generated late in 1997 when Chatham County chose to become an “Electing County.” It remains to be seen whether the expectations of the optimists will be more fully realized in the near future than in the recent past.