

**Executive Summary**  
**Craven County**  
**By Dr. Carmine Scavo**

Craven County responded to the challenge of welfare reform by seeking to become an electing county. In 1997, the County Board of Commissioners voted to seek electing status and created a Work First Planning Committee which developed a comprehensive plan to implement welfare reform. The committee developed a plan which was passed by the County Commission in late 1997 and forwarded to the state of North Carolina. In response to various state concerns, the plan was incrementally changed and was accepted by the state in early 1998. In Fall, 1998, the Craven County plan was not selected in the lottery mandated by the General Assembly to choose the final electing counties.

Craven County, however, did not allow its designation as a standard county stand in the way of substantial reform of the county's welfare system. Much of this reform revolves around increased flexibility in addressing the needs of welfare recipients. Reducing case loads has allowed the county to increase the amount of flexibility in the welfare system. County officials expected a 25-30% case load reduction in the first year of the Work First program. However, case loads declined 18% in the first three months and 38% in the first year. By the third year of operation, case loads had dropped 75% from what they were before 1997.

Craven County DSS has not undergone substantial organizational changes as a result of the changed welfare environment. Feelings of increased flexibility and autonomy were cited by several respondents even in the absence of organizational change. Part of the feelings of increased flexibility were mirrored in observations of incremental change in the institutional culture at DSS—*some* employees had been shifted out of income maintenance into training and protective services but this was largely the result of reduced case loads for those working in income maintenance.

Craven County officials deemed Work First a huge success in their county—they cited the shift from helping those who were not truly needy to those for whom the lack of cash assistance would be a disaster as one of their major successes. They also cited the shift in the program from a focus on working adults to children and the elderly as a success. None of the interviewers expressed any shortcomings in the program; the nearest one came to a mention of a shortcoming was one respondent who spoke about the lack of research on what happens to the children of former welfare recipients—in terms of such things as high school graduation rates, etc.—when those recipients returned to work.

As a final note, Craven County officials said, to a person, that they planned on attempting to re-elect if they were given the opportunity to do so. There was some bitterness in their tone when they discussed the amount of work they did and how they lost out on electing status as a result of the lottery conducted by the General Assembly.