

## Executive Summary

Extensive community involvement in helping families move toward self-sufficiency has been a hallmark of welfare reform in Durham County. After a full discussion of the issues by elected officials, the Social Services Board, and top county administrators, the Board of Commissioners voted to maintain the standard county-state relationship. A broad-based citizen committee examined the needs of Work First clients and oversaw the development of the Work First plan.

In general, the County leadership did not view the changes in welfare policy as “reform.” Requiring welfare clients to take jobs that pay less than a living wage was not consistent with the county’s goal of assisting residents to develop skills that would allow them to benefit from new jobs created by prosperous high technology firms moving to the area. Despite fundamental disagreement with aspects of Work First, county leaders were committed to complying with state mandates to reduce welfare rolls. At the same time, they marshalled all available community resources to put in place a program that would minimize harm to families facing termination.

The Durham County DSS embarked on a concerted effort, first, to restructure the organization and its management systems, and, secondly, to build partnerships with community agencies and non-profit organizations. Two newly hired administrators created a “Family Self-Sufficiency Unit” and designed service delivery processes that encouraged coordination between eligibility and employment services functions. They also established clear numeric goals and gave employees frequent feedback on progress.

Among many partnership arrangements, four are particularly noteworthy. First, the DSS collaborated with the Durham Public schools to station social workers in schools where they could focus on helping at risk children to improve school performance. Secondly, a partnership of Duke University, the schools, and DSS targeted first-time parents aged 17 and younger for assistance aimed at enhancing their success as students and as parents. Third, the Department contracted with the Durham Chamber of Commerce for job development and placement services for Work First Clients. Fourth, DSS contracted with the faith-based Durham Congregations in Action to match Work First families with church groups who would help with transportation, child care, and mentoring.

After implementation of the Work First plan, the county was pleased that it has met caseload reduction goals imposed by the state. Also identified as achievements by some were a dramatic change in the culture of welfare and strengthened capacity of community organizations to address child and family poverty. Despite some positive outcomes, perceptions remain that state and federal rules are not consistent with long term goals of the community. Local leaders are actively engaged in advancing local concerns in the state policy arena.