

Executive Summary
Forsyth County
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Forsyth County, a large urban county in the Piedmont Triad region, has a stable political environment, a thriving economy, and strong leadership in its Department of Social Services. The Board of County Commissioners chose to be an electing county in late 1997, after a concerted “lobbying” effort by state officials, though the benefits of this choice were somewhat murky at that time. This decision was not entirely endorsed by the Social Services Board, but was reaffirmed by commissioners after some second thoughts in January of 1998. Overall, most of the participants have been fairly satisfied with this choice and the implementation of Work First in Forsyth County. The major disappointment about the electing status occurred early in the process when the expected flexibility was not forthcoming from the state.

The welfare reform decisionmaking and planning process involved elected officials, the business community and human service agencies in the county, which was a significant departure from past decisions. Public housing residents and welfare recipients, however, were not included initially. The welfare reform planning committee decided to focus on the goal of promoting and supporting recipients’ self-sufficiency rather than a more punitive approach. It included a two-year time limit on cash assistance, while setting in place the necessary supports to encourage success. However, the plan was largely based on the state standard blueprint when the state Division of Social Services did not allow the county the flexibility to create more innovative programs. In addition, the state did not provide sufficient data and clear direction to DSS to use in its planning process.

Nonetheless, the county implementation of the plan has moved into some innovative directions. First, the DSS has devoted resources to finding and obtaining additional grant funding to support the self-sufficiency programs. Second, the department has included a strong component of economic literacy, or Feminomics, in its programs that are primarily targeted toward training women to be more knowledgeable about financial matters. Third, the number and scope of its community partnerships has been a primary method to provide supportive services to recipients. Collaborations with nonprofits, city government, the housing authority, and faith-based organizations have allowed DSS to use their expertise and client contacts to improve service delivery. In general, the business community has not been as involved as was hoped in the planning process.

Internally, the department has restructured itself and the culture of its employees has shifted from being an income maintenance operation to a job preparedness enterprise. Employees have been given goals each month for job placements, and these have largely been met, though many of the jobs are at lower wage levels at one or two large employers. Nonetheless, welfare rolls have significantly declined, and former TANF recipients have been moving into employment with only a few cases of termination of cash benefits. In sum, the local officials involved in welfare reform in Forsyth County have evaluated their efforts as a successful change to a more innovative approach to public welfare.