

**North Carolina County Reports:
Policy Choices and Welfare Reform**

1997-2000

Guilford County

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A. The Policy Context

Guilford County is located in central North Carolina, part of the Piedmont Triad Region. It is a large urban county, consisting of 650 square miles. The population in 1999 was 393,419, with an average annual growth of 1.3% between 1990-1999. The racial makeup of the county is around 70% White and 26% Black. Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans consist of about 4% of the total population. The county is approximately 78% urban. The municipalities within the county are: Archdale, Gibsonville (part), Greensboro, High Point (part), Jamestown, Kernersville (part), Oak Ridge, Pleasant Garden, Sedalia, Stokesdale, Summerfield, and Whitsett. Greensboro, the county seat, is the largest municipality with a population of 205,260.

Per capita income in the county was \$29,229 in 1998, well above the state average. Between 1990 and 1998 the average per capita income growth was 4.1%. Currently, the unemployment rate is 2.5%. The county has a rich history rooted in textiles, furniture, and transportation. However, in the past few decades, service industries have located within Guilford County's borders. The service, manufacturing, retail, and government sectors lead the county in total employment. The major employers (by number of employees) are Guilford County Schools, Moses Cone Group (a nonprofit hospital), American Express, Guilford County Government, AMP Inc., City of Greensboro, and Lorillard Tobacco.

The county itself is divided into three distinct “cultures.” The City of Greensboro is the most urban location, where most of the county’s population resides. As the third largest city in North Carolina, it shares many characteristics of nearby Winston-Salem and Raleigh. The city of High Point, known as the “furniture capital of the world,” is smaller than Greensboro with a population of 73,581. The city has the unique situation of spanning across three counties, although most of its population lives in Guilford County. Many county government offices are located in both Greensboro and High Point, creating a challenging situation when it comes to service delivery. The rural sections of the county share a more conservative culture that is distinct from the urban areas. Many communities in the rural areas have resisted development and urbanization, some of which have sought municipal incorporation to withstand annexation pressures from High Point, Greensboro, and Kernersville.

Political Scene

Politics plays a major role in Guilford County. The County Board of Commissioners, the chief decision-making body for the county, consists of eleven members, a size that has been debated about off and on since it was increased several years ago. The board is responsible for setting policy for the county, which includes decisions on land use, public schools, taxes, and the hiring and firing of the county manager. The partisan board members are elected in the districts they represent, with the exception of two countywide at-large seats. The majority party shifts on the board almost every election cycle, which leads to a high turnover rate among the elected officials and

some administrators as well. However, a few board members have relatively safe seats due to the political, racial and economic make-up of their districts.

The chairmanship of the board has also changed regularly over the past decade, with each swing in party control. While some chairs are fairly effective in controlling the sound and fury of the conflict among board members, others have failed. The chair of the Republican majority board during the 1997-99 period described below was Joe Bostic, a former professional football player and local businessman. With little background in human services, over his term in office, he became more capable of mediating the conflicts and learning about county programs. Two extremes in policy preferences, style and rhetoric are represented by two other long-time controversial and outspoken members of the board: Democrat Melvin "Skip" Alston, a Greensboro businessman, and president of the North Carolina NAACP; and Republican Steve Arnold, a High Point businessman who is a former NC state representative and a candidate for NC Lieutenant Governor in 1996. Alston acts as a spokesman for the African-American community, while Arnold identifies with conservative Republicans.

The major conflicts in the last three years have been over public school funding and social services. Some of these have become nasty, heated, and personal battles pitting the board of county commissioners against the school and social services boards, with legal proceedings threatened and acted upon. County board meetings at times have become a source of exciting entertainment for its audience when the board members rise to the occasion to attack their opponents with words or threaten them with bodily harm.

The county manager is the chief administrator for the county. The current manager, Roger Cotten, was selected in 1997 after a long career as the director of the Tax

Department in Guilford County. He is influential in budget discussions and hires most of department heads. Since the commissioners hire him, they can replace the manager as well. In the past ten years, Guilford County has had four managers and an acting interim county manager (John Shore) twice. This fact illustrates the political instability present within the county. As one party is uprooted from office, the other replaces key government officials and/or eliminates administrative positions. Currently, the Democrats control the board with a 6-5 majority. Mr. Cotten has survived the most recent party change on the board in the fall of 1998, even though he was accused by some of complicity in a Republican takeover of the Social Services Board in the summer of 1998. His contract ensures that in the event that he is fired as manager, he would return to his former position as tax director. During the 1997-98 time frame, Mr. Cotten delegated almost all human service issues to his Deputy County Manager, John Shore, who was appointed director of DSS in 1998.

The director of the Department of Social Services is responsible for administering all county DSS services. He or she is appointed by the DSS Board, not by the manager or the Board of Commissioners. The director's job has become somewhat more difficult in that he or she must satisfy both state and county directives about programs and administration. In recent years, DSS-Guilford County has gone from an agency almost taken over by the state, primarily due to staff shortages in child protective services, to an agency better able to provide effective services. Much of this has been attributed to the new director, John Shore, who came into the agency after the forced resignation of Joyce Lewis in 1998. Lewis, a long-time DSS official, was held responsible for much of the

agency's problems with child protection, and Shore, the former Deputy County Manager, stepped in to set things right.

The Board of Social Services oversees the department. It currently consists of five members, three appointed by the Board of Commissioners, one appointed by the state Social Services Commission, and one selected by the board itself. Members are appointed for staggered three-year terms; the members elect the chair in July each year. Their purpose is to select and evaluate the department director, advise county officials in developing plans to improve social conditions in the community, and consult with the Director of Social Services regarding the agency's budget.

The Board itself is not insulated from politics and has been a battleground for Democrats and Republicans on the Board of Commissioners. The Social Services Board during 1997-98 had a majority of Democrats on it, and was chaired by Rev. Michael King, an African-American community leader and executive director of Project Homestead, a growing affordable housing agency in Greensboro. When county commissioners publicly criticized Director Joyce Lewis after the deaths of two children earlier reported to child protective services, Rev. King defended her and refused to call for her resignation. After several months of public wrangling about the poor performance of DSS and its director, in the summer of 1998, Republican commissioners (then in the majority) attempted to take control of the previously Democratic Social Services Board. In a so-called "plot" hatched over the previous several months, they eliminated two positions held by Democrats leaving office in late June to create a three-member board with a Republican majority. However, with Democratic gains in the next fall's elections, the board went back to a five-member body.

B. The Process of Welfare Reform in Guilford County

Key Events 1997-1999

The issues related to welfare reform and Work First are inextricably bound up in the politics and leadership of the county, as well as some specific tragedies in child protection. For several months in late 1997 and early 1998, many of the county commissioners did not want Joyce Lewis to remain as DSS director, but could not fire her themselves, and the Social Services Board refused to do so. The wrangling between the Board of County Commissioners and the Social Services Board about changing directors not only reflected a broader, public dissatisfaction with the Guilford County DSS, but it also affected the welfare reform planning process. Members of the planning committee represented different constituencies and partisan affiliations, and were generally distrustful of DSS. The key trigger event producing a more public outcry about DSS failures occurred in March of 1998 with the death of a child who was a protective services client. This followed two earlier child deaths perpetrated by family members within the previous year.

The state Division of Social Services also put pressure on the county to make major improvements in Guilford County DSS. It began a well-publicized investigation of the Guilford County DSS's division of child protective services shortly after the child's death. The county commissioners publicly called for the Social Services Board to fire Director Joyce Lewis, but Social Services Board Chair, Rev. Michael King, refused, stating that they should wait for the findings of the state investigation. In July the state DSS investigation concluded that the DSS be placed on probation, finding that staffing levels, caseloads, and training were seriously inadequate for the number of cases referred

to DSS. By then, Lewis had resigned under pressure, though she continued to draw a salary and benefits for several more months.

With the forced resignation of Joyce Lewis in May 1998, the department began to change. Under John Shore's leadership, the department was restructured and refocused. He was credited with being able to get along with a highly partisan DSS Board and the Board of County Commissioners, unlike active Democrat Joyce Lewis. Shore began his appointment by outlining a plan to add new workers and remove those who were not performing, in addition to improving morale within the agency. The county commissioners agreed to fund the additional employees. While DSS under Lewis had had a difficult relationship with other county and community agencies, Shore's philosophy and actions built bridges within the human services that benefited the process of implementing welfare reform.

Accolades for Shore's leadership come from employees, board members, and the media. According to an editorial in the *News and Record*:

The low-key director of the Guilford County Department of Social Services is usually the first one to say it: John Shore hasn't repaired and restructured the once-troubled department by himself...[But] it takes a unique individual to pull it together. It takes just the kind of quiet dedication and level-headed leadership Shore has provided since taking the unenviable position of director.... Shore didn't have to step into this minefield. During his 19 successful years as deputy county manager, his ability to separate the work at hand from politics, emotion and ego had earned him a reputation as an effective administrator. He could easily have leaned on his laurels and cruised on into retirement. Instead, he chose to make a difference....Since then, caseloads have decreased, morale has increased and relations with other agencies have gotten better. (Feb. 5, 2000, p. A10)

By early 1999, the state had taken Guilford DSS off probation and a Democratic majority was established on the Board of Commissioners. The Commissioners reestablished a DSS Board of five members, with Republican Trudy Wade as chair. The

proposed DSS budget in March asked for and received a 9.75% increase in order to hire new workers and expand services. The department and welfare reform issues retreated from the limelight as school funding and leadership issues took center stage in Guilford County politics. Since then, media coverage of welfare reform and DSS has been very light, and generally positive about its results.

Welfare Reform Timeline in Guilford County: 1998 – 2000

(based on *News and Record* accounts)

August 1996:

- President Clinton signs the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA)

January 1997:

- Federal welfare reform takes effect in North Carolina, placing almost all welfare recipients on a five-year lifetime limit for cash assistance

August 1997:

- The NC General Assembly votes on the state welfare reform package, which includes the provision to allow counties a choice of whether to be an electing or standard county in implementing welfare reform

September 1997:

- The Guilford County Board of Commissioners votes 6-5 to be an electing county; however, this slim majority is insufficient for the required supramajority

October 1997:

- The commissioners appoint 11 of the 18 members of the Work First Planning Committee

November 1997:

- The Work First Planning Committee meets to get organized. The members select two co-chairs: Chuck Winfree, a Republican commissioner, and Trudy Wade, a Jamestown veterinarian

- In its second meeting, a new vote for the committee's leadership is taken; Trudy Wade and Linda Jones, a black community activist, are elected co-chairs.
- The planning subcommittees hold public forums and meetings with various groups to allow wide input into their deliberations on the Work First plan.

December 1997:

- The three subcommittees present their reports to the full Work First planning committee, some with minority opinions expressed; the committee works to develop a consensus; it requests the DSS staff to write the plan in time to submit it to the state.

January 1998:

- The county Board of Commissioners reviews and approves the Work First Plan, and submits it to the state DSS.

March 1998:

- The state DSS asks for several clarifications, but not a major overhaul, of the Guilford County welfare reform plan

Spring 1998:

- The county Board of Commissioners calls for the resignation of DSS Director Joyce Lewis, after a third child who was a DSS client dies in Guilford County; Michael King, chair of the Social Services Board, defends Ms. Lewis and attacks the board as being too quick to pin the blame on the director before an investigation occurs;
- The state DSS begins an investigation of the Guilford County DSS, division of child protective services

May 1998:

- Joyce Lewis, DSS Director, is forced to resign by the DSS Board of Social Services after several months of public pressure by the Board of County Commissioners; Associate Director Phyllis Latta is appointed to serve as Interim Director

July 1998:

- The state DSS investigation concludes that the DSS be placed on probation, following their investigation that found that staffing levels, caseloads, and training were seriously inadequate for the number of cases referred to DSS

- Deputy County Manager John Shore agrees to serve as the Interim Director of DSS while the Social Services Board conducts a national search for Joyce Lewis's replacement

November 1998:

- Jeff Thigpen (Dem.), a young, recent MPA graduate of UNC-Greensboro, wins a seat formerly held by a Republican on the Board of County Commissioners, thus changing the balance of power on the Board from a Republican majority to a Democratic majority
- John Shore requests the DSS Board allow the agency to hire 10 more staffers, to bring the caseloads within state mandates for child protective services
- John Shore indicates that he wants to become the new DSS Director

December 1998:

- John Shore is appointed as Director of Social Services by the DSS Board, beating out more than two dozen applicants
- Shore outlines a plan to add new workers and remove those who were not performing, in addition to improving morale with the agency
- County Commissioners agree to allow DSS 10 more employees in Child Welfare Services

January 1999:

- The State DSS takes Guilford County DSS off probation
- The Democratic majority in Board of Commissioners expands the DSS Board from three to five members

March 1999:

- The proposed DSS budget for 1999-2000 includes a 9.75% increase in funding; included is the hiring of new workers and an additional \$3.3 million in day care costs

May 1999:

- Guilford County Faith Summit is held at Mount Zion Baptist Church, sponsored by the Welfare Reform Liaison Project, a non-profit organization

C. Decision Dynamics

Electing vs. Standard Status

Once DSS investigated the electing vs. standard option during the early fall of 1997, staff members decided to recommend the standard status after discussions with the Deputy County Manager John Shore. In September, they presented this recommendation to the Social Services Board, and a majority of the Board agreed and passed on the recommendation to the Board of Commissioners. On October 6, 1997, the Guilford County Board of Commissioners met to consider this choice. The discussion became quite heated, with a policy discussion about welfare reform and the capacity of DSS degenerating into a partisan debate. The board voted 6-5 along party lines to be an electing county; however, this slim majority was not sufficient for the state's requirement that a supramajority be required to choose the electing status.

John Shore said that after reviewing both options, he would have preferred the electing status for Guilford County, since it appeared to offer the prospect for greater experimentation. However, he recommended the standard approach for two reasons: 1) a "managerially challenged DSS" in terms of its leadership and its lagging technological capacity; and 2) the obvious splits in the community, both on the county Board of Commissioners, and between the Social Services Board and the commissioners (Interview, February 1998). Trudy Wade agreed with this assessment—"Everything at DSS was in disarray," though she pointed out that all the tensions did not come from welfare reform alone (Interview, August 2000). Certainly public confidence in DSS had also eroded with the controversies and deaths in the child protective services arena.

Welfare Reform Planning Committee

The planning committee's involvement in welfare reform decisions was well publicized in the media, and was seen by many as a "political process." (Shore Interview, July 2000). Social Services Board Chair Trudy Wade called it as "a political hot potato" (Interview, August 2000). In October 1997 the commissioners appointed 11 of the 18 members of the Work First Planning Committee after making a public appeal for nominations. Seven of the appointments were filled according to the terms set forth in the Welfare Reform Legislation of the North Carolina General Assembly. This legislation mandated that the committee represent members of the Board of County Commissioners, DSS Board, Public Health Board, Mental Health Board, school system, a community-based organization, and the business community. After some personal "lobbying" for positions on the committee by various applicants, the county commissioners each appointed one additional person to the committee, bringing the total to 18. Three commissioners served on the committee: Republicans Chuck Winfree and Mary Rakestraw, and Democrat Warren Dorsett. The other members of the committee were:

- Don Cameron, President, Guilford Tech Community College
- Nettie Coad, Community Activist, Old Asheboro Neighborhood Assoc.
- Ben Collins, High Point resident
- Kris Cooke, Guilford County Board of Education
- Curtis Douglas, Guilford County Dept. of Mental Health
- Rick Gorham, Goodwill Industries
- Linda Jones, Community Activist, Greensboro Housing Residents Council

- Rev. Ted Napper, minister
- Ruth Rideout, Bennett College (later executive director, Faith Matters)
- Joanne Sharp, realtor, former member, NC House of Representatives (Rep.)
- Deborah Shaw, public housing resident
- Lynn Snotherly, housing developer
- Kathy Spicer, Residents' Council, Greensboro Housing Authority
- Trudy Wade, Jamestown Veterinarian
- Jimmy Wiggins, businessman, North State Monument Co.

Of the 18 members, seven are African-Americans. Most did not represent community service agencies. Only one person was from High Point, and two were from the county area.

In early November, the Work First Planning Committee met for the first time to get organized. The members selected two co-chairs: Chuck Winfree, a Republican county commissioner, who was also a member of the Board of Health, and Trudy Wade, a registered Democrat at that time. In its second meeting, some committee members objected to the previous decision about co-chairs, saying that community members had not had enough input. A new vote was taken, in the absence of Chuck Winfree. Trudy Wade was reelected, and public housing resident and community activist, Linda Jones, was elected co-chair. Jones and Wade each chaired a subcommittee, and Winfree was selected to chair a third. This conflict over leadership is indicative of the community conflict and political posturing that occurred occasionally during the subsequent meetings of the committee and subcommittees. The members also expressed a lack of trust in DSS and the Board of Commissioners in particular.

DSS staffed the committee and provided the committee with data and estimates. Even before the chairs were determined, Work First coordinator Jim McAbee had pulled together the data and the outline of the plan, but did not develop or present any options for the committee to choose among. Unfortunately staff had not received sufficient information from the state DSS about the new regulations and the budget when the plan was being designed. The committee members seemed to appreciate DSS's help, according to Shore, and overcame its suspicion of their input (Interview, February 1998). According to co-chair Wade, in the beginning DSS staff had a greater role because they brought the ideas to the table. As time went on, the plan became the committee's, and the staff wrote it up (Interview, August 2000).

Once the committee was organized into subcommittees, the process of getting all the ideas on the table for discussion took a while. The initial problems, as Wade saw them, were learning to work together and "being respectful of each others' views." Some members feared any change, others expressed concerns about poor people falling outside the safety net (Interview, August 2000). As the plan deadline approached, the committee agreed on the overall goal of self-sufficiency, and almost reached consensus on strategies to overcome barriers in daycare, transportation, and employment training. The co-chairs were very good at focusing the discussion and gaining a consensus, according to John Shore (Interview, February 1998). Both DSS staff and committee members agreed that representatives of client groups had a great deal of input on the subcommittees. Wade did not believe that the three county commissioners had any more influence than anyone else did. Despite the intense scrutiny and regular TV and newspaper reports, the media

did not affect their deliberations very much—the community leaders on the committee were very good, she stated (August 2000).

In the end, the final plan was quickly put together by the staff, without a detailed budget. John Shore said he was “frustrated by the time frame. There was a lot potential for a systematic look at the problems, but we didn’t get into it in enough depth for anyone’s satisfaction. We didn’t get to reflect as much as we should have” (Interview, February 1998). DSS Work First Coordinator Jim McAbee was frustrated by the lack of data and information about what flexibility would be allowed under the standard county designation (Interview, September 1998).

At the end of December, the committee made the draft plan widely available for public review and comment prior to first, the Social Services Board meeting in early January, and then shortly thereafter, the Board of County Commissioners’ meeting. When the plan was forwarded to the county Board of Commissioners, the issue of welfare reform became politicized again, according to John Shore (Interview, February 1998). The national-level debate seemed to affect the discussion, in his opinion. The Republican members emphasized the importance of turning most services over to non-governmental agencies, which DSS staff had not recommended. Democrats raised fears about the time limits and the community fallout from having recipients lose their cash assistance.

Plan Filing with State DSS

The Work First plan was submitted to the state without a complete budget in mid-January 1998. Budget figures for the next fiscal year were not supplied by the state to the

county until February. In March the plan was returned to Guilford County with requests for the budget information and additional details on several items. The budget and the following information was subsequently provided to the state: the methods of cooperation between the mental health and social services departments; how the county planned to assist clients in transitioning to work; and how the county would pay for some transportation costs.

D. Goals, Objectives, and Program Priorities of the Work First Plan

Reducing the family assistance caseload and increasing family self-sufficiency were the major goals for the planning committee. It recommended an increased coordination of existing services, while enhancing DSS partnerships in the community. The committee suggested developing a countywide “One Client database” system, which would link the agency to all other county agencies. The committee also planned to increase job mentoring, training, and education, as well as assuring that parents were given support and adequate childcare. Transportation would also be provided in accordance with state regulations and guidelines. A One Stop/Job Link Center had already been opened in High Point in May 1997, providing a central location for people to receive job-related training and services. The committee also suggested that DSS expand the team-based approach in Child Welfare Services to the agency as a whole.

The committee developed a vision statement and a set of specific performance measures to articulate its primary goals for welfare reform:

Work First Vision Statement:

To engage in a joint effort between the Work First participant and the Department of Social Services in the process of achieving self-sufficiency for the family. To

partner with community based programs, business and faith communities to adequately educate, train and support the family while they move themselves toward economic independence. (Guilford County Work First Plan for 1998-2000, p.3)

The committee also agreed on eight goals for Guilford County, with specific objectives for each supplied by the state DSS, based on several factors, including the county's caseload and employment figures:

1. Reduce the Work First Family Assistance Caseload by 15% *
2. Put 1,649 adults to work*
3. 85% of adults stay off welfare after going to work*
4. 35% of all parents meet the "all parent" participation rate
5. 90% of all two-parent families meet the "two parent" participation rate
6. Utilize Diversion Assistance for 55 families
7. Increase child support orders and collections by 10%*
8. Case plan for 100% of the children receiving both Work First and intensive CPS services. (Guilford County Work First Plan, 1998)

* Included in the state report card performance measures

E. Program Implementation: 1998-2000

When the planning committee spelled out its goals and specific objectives, some members expressed fears that they would not be reached. However, with a strong economy and changes in the management and mindset of DSS, these objectives have largely been realized. The Work First goals and objectives set in early 1998 were measured by the state each quarter, and culminated in the state report card issued in 1999 for the previous two-year period (1997-99). Each county was graded on four

performance goals: caseload reduction, work placements, employment retention, and child support collections. Guilford County received the following grades for each:

- reducing the Work First caseload: C (a decline of 24.8%)
- putting adults to work: B (1,224 employed)
- staying off welfare after going to work: B (84% of goal)
- increasing child support collections: A (110.8% of goal)

Strengths and Innovations in Guilford County DSS

The Guilford County Work First program has seen a fairly smooth process of implementation over the last two years. DSS interviewees gave five areas of major accomplishments: the creation of strong community partnerships, a decline in welfare rolls, the development of a performance-based system, a change in the staff mindset, and an increase in community support. Both DSS staff members and Social Services Board chair Trudy Wade agreed that welfare reform has worked out well. Wade stated that not only was Shore able to make the desired changes, but the board's philosophy of working with the community on welfare reform set a new direction for DSS to follow.

Community partners played a critical role in implementing welfare reform in Guilford County. The major partners in the welfare to work initiative were Goodwill Industries, Vocational Rehabilitation, Bennett College, Welfare Liaison Project, Greensboro Housing Authority and High Point Housing Authority. Of these, some partners were more effective than others were in both planning and implementation of the particular service or program they participated in, according to DSS staff. They praised Goodwill Industries, the Welfare Liaison Project at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and the local Vocational Rehabilitation office in particular. The reasons given for their success

were regular meetings with DSS from the start, a clear purpose, and good communication as the programs unfolded. Both Goodwill and Vocational Rehabilitation had long histories of working on public programs with disadvantaged populations. Even though Vocational Rehabilitation had a lot of direction from the state and had extensive experience, they had to adjust their standard operating procedures to work with the welfare recipients. They were able to do so by meeting regularly with DSS to work out all the day-to-day operational details and problems. While the Welfare Liaison Project at Mt. Zion Baptist Church did not have much experience, it also worked closely with DSS during the entire planning and implementation process.

A large local foundation, the Joseph M. Bryan Foundation, also became a partner in the Work First program by initiating an early DSS contract with Goodwill Industries. The foundation was anxious to fund a job readiness training and employment placement program for welfare recipients if the county would contract with Goodwill and pay for \$50,000 of the \$300,000 program. DSS officials agreed, and the contract was quickly negotiated, signed, and implemented (Interview, Cook-Harris, August 2000).

Faith-based organizations became involved in Work First during the welfare reform planning process. Faith Matters and the Welfare Reform Liaison Project at Mt. Zion Baptist are two organizations that are integrally involved in welfare-related services, but both were only officially organized as nonprofit agencies in 1998 after the plan was submitted to the state. The executive director of Faith Matters, Ruth Rideout, who served on the planning committee, began her agency under the auspices of St. Matthew's United Methodist Church in the summer of 1997. She had been inspired to create a new agency

after reading a report on the role of religious organizations in serving the poor commissioned by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (Britt, 1997).

According to interviewees, faith-based organizations were at first hesitant to get involved in welfare-related services. Some expressed reluctance to take on new roles because their own congregations required their attention. Some feared that they might step across the dividing line between church and state. In late 1998, in accordance with new court decisions and state DSS directives about the involvement of faith-based agencies, DSS wrote up a statement that both Faith Matters and Mt. Zion representatives signed to outline the limitations on exclusion of non-members and proselytizing to program enrollees. Once the expectations were clarified, the agencies felt more comfortable going forward with their work. Later, in May 1999, the Welfare Liaison Project also hosted a training and information workshop at Mt. Zion Baptist Church for other congregations and agencies to increase their participation. The intended purpose was to encourage them to help recipients find jobs, training, childcare, etc. before their welfare funds were discontinued, but little more resulted from this workshop. The existing programs currently do not involve the broader community of faith or any interdenominational group. Although it is the most visible interdenominational group in the city in political and justice issues, Greensboro's Pulpit Forum has not directly participated in these discussions or welfare-related services.

The business community had also pledged to play a large role in employing welfare recipients in their companies during the planning process. In the first phase of the new program, American Express led the way and "jumpstarted the process" of getting corporations to buy into this effort by committing to a target, according to DSS staff

(Interview, July 2000). It soon snowballed, so that over two dozen businesses signed agreements with DSS and set targets for hiring certain numbers of TANF clients. By June 2000, all had met their targets, and a few had exceeded them. The total number of employers who hired welfare recipients was over fifty, with most of these hiring at least 10 during the 1998-2000 period. Retail businesses, such as McDonald's, Wendy's, Wal Mart, and Food Lion, hired the majority of employees. The average hourly wage for the 1998-99 period was \$6.53, and it increased to an average of \$6.80 for 1999-2000 (Year-End Summary, July 2000). DSS staff members gave credit for their success to the strong economy, the Chamber of Commerce and an in-house job developer. Employers now come to job fairs and to DSS onsite to recruit new employees.

As a result of these partnerships and the favorable economy, the welfare rolls in Guilford County have declined significantly—approximately 30% over the last three years, and about 25% during the 1997-99 period that the state based its report card on. However, DSS costs for serving current and former welfare recipients have actually increased, as a result of the higher labor-intensive services provided to support the self-sufficiency efforts in transportation, daycare, and job training.

DSS personnel credited the clear state performance standards for the positive results, suggesting that the targets drove the process. The state gave the counties the flexibility and funding to design their own programs and procedures to reach their targets. This proved to be a more effective approach than the former method of prescribing all the details of the process.

Another major accomplishment that the DSS interviewees cited was the change in the DSS structure and the staff's mindset, from the old entitlement approach to the client

services approach. While in the past, employees were told to encourage clients to obtain cash assistance and other benefits, in the current system the agency-wide effort is to find recipients jobs to move them toward self-sufficiency. Another shift has been to focus on the needs of the entire family unit, not just the individual client. This holistic approach now encourages employees to be social workers, instead of merely eligibility determination caseworkers. The structure of DSS has also had to be reorganized and redirected to create, in Shore's words, "a single vision for blending practices across TANF, child welfare and services." The three main units that were created to serve welfare recipients are now Eligibility (cash assistance, Medicaid), Employment, and Daycare. Due to the higher service demands, new positions have been added to the employment and daycare units.

Major Problems in Implementing Work First

In addition to the normal difficulties in starting up a new program, Guilford County DSS experienced two major problems in the first year of Work First: understanding the money flow and the degree of budget flexibility, and altering the mindset of DSS staff. The state did not supply the county with enough information to make appropriate decisions prior to the implementation of Work First in July 1998. The promised budget flexibility was very unclear to both the state and the county, and they had difficulty with coding activities and expenditures correctly.

Altering the mindset of DSS staff was an even longer process, and some had doubts about its prospects for success. The problem of retraining personnel in the new values and procedures was made more difficult by the fact that there was no time to stop the old and start the new with training, since clients continued to need services. In fact,

no formal training program was used to reeducate employees, but they tried to “turn the ship while moving ahead,” as John Shore phrased it (Interview, July 2000). Guilford DSS is a very large department, and the new efforts were quite difficult to explain and implement. Staff turnover occurred as a result, and it actually helped the adaptation process. Some employees who were not comfortable with the new approach retired early or left for other employment. New positions were created in the employment and daycare units. New hires had no old baggage, so they proved to be more flexible, and more quickly trained in the new mindset and system. Those who remained from the earlier period had to adapt, and most did so gradually as their efforts saw success.

Relationship with the State DSS

The expectation of devolution advocates that county governments would have greater discretion over TANF funds and over programs for the poor has occurred in Guilford County. DSS has become more innovative and creative in their priorities, budgets, and programs. According to John Shore, the department has “reclaimed its reputation to be a creative leader in poverty issues.” However, elected officials have not been more involved in welfare programs, as some might have expected, at least not since the commissioners approved the Work First plan in January 1998 (Interview, July 2000).

The state DSS has given even the standard counties much more flexibility in implementing welfare reform, though it took a while for Guilford County to figure out what could and could not be done. Deborah Cook Harris, the Work First program manager, described the process as being confined in a box under the old system, and then having the top removed, but not knowing how high one could stand up and move (July 2000). Once DSS gained a better understanding of the new rules and relationships with

the state, she found the freedom exhilarating. For example, the community partnerships and the Wheels to Work program were not possible under the previous AFDC and JOBS program, and now they are considered major factors in helping recipients become self-sufficient. Though the state's role has not changed significantly in the areas of food stamps and Medicaid, in Work First, the state has shifted from a regulatory role to a proactive communication role, sharing information statewide about what works in other counties.

F. Assessment

Overall Guilford County's Work First program has been a success, despite the political turmoil and confusion that marked the planning period in late 1997. The controversies about DSS and its previous director threatened to derail the planning process, and seemed destined to doom the new efforts. However, with a new social services board and director, the department was able to change its culture and create new opportunities for clients. Under new leadership, the organization has moved to work much more closely with the community partners and clients in promoting a shared sense of responsibility for their futures.

The decisions about the welfare reform plan involved elected officials, the business community, clients, and human service agencies in the county. This was a significant departure from past decisions and marked a shift in responsibility for welfare recipients from Guilford County DSS alone to the entire community. It also was an opportunity to think more broadly and creatively about how to break the cycle of dependency and failure that many families on welfare experience. Welfare recipients and their advocates were

included on the planning committee, and together the members were able to create a common understanding of the challenges of self-sufficiency.

The implementation of Work First in the county has faced challenges as well. Some of the partnerships have not worked as well as others. Some agencies, such as Goodwill, have cooperated and performed well. Others have had some internal difficulties as well as inexperience in working with DSS. Nonetheless, the Guilford County interviewees agreed that one of the best outcomes of welfare reform has been the community partnerships DSS has forged to assist low-income people in finding employment and ultimately achieving self-sufficiency. The other primary positive outcome is that many individuals and families are moving off the welfare rolls into jobs, education, and self-sufficiency. Overall, the new flexible procedures and clear performance standards set by the state were seen as critical in achieving the results through a more creative process. Even though it was designated as a standard county, Guilford County DSS has taken advantage of the increased discretion to design programs and services that meet its welfare recipients' needs.

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Welfare Reform Planning Committee Member – Ruth Rideout – August 13, 2000