

Executive Summary
Forsyth County
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Guilford County's Board of County Commissioners failed to obtain a supra-majority to support an electing decision about its status in implementing Work First under the new state welfare reform law of 1997. The board's division on this issue reflects an ongoing conflict within the county about many policy issues. While welfare reform and the Department of Social Services' (DSS) management were critical concerns during 1998, they no longer are front-page news. The period of political conflict and administrative confusion have been replaced by positive results and more unified leadership of the department.

The welfare reform planning process was a critical start in the process of change in Guilford DSS. The planning committee was broadly representative of elected officials, local nonprofit agencies, the business community, and DSS clients. Despite a slow start, conflicts about its leadership, and lack of state information, the committee agreed about the desirability of community partnerships and support services for TANF recipients. The business community bought into the process and agreed on goals for hiring welfare clients.

During the first several months of 1998, Guilford County's welfare reform efforts were somewhat stalled over disagreements between the commissioners, the Board of Social Services, and the DSS department head. The state DSS placed the department on probation following the deaths of children who were clients of Guilford's protective services unit. When John Shore was appointed as director, the department began to regain its credibility and its role of making welfare reform a reality. The county has been successful in reducing its welfare rolls, placing recipients in jobs, and in arranging several partnerships with nonprofit organizations. The department has transformed its culture and structure to be more effective in coordinating services and in retraining employees to serve and support their customers. Overall, elected and appointed officials have been pleased with the results. The major complaint about the process of welfare reform has been the lack of clarity about the state's flexibility in its regulations, especially early on in the 1998-99 period. Nonetheless, Guilford DSS asserted that it has found far greater freedom to transform its priorities and programs in welfare reform than in the previous AFDC.