

TRACKING COUNTY RESPONSES TO WELFARE REFORM

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The Policy Context

Location and History

Jackson County is located in the southwestern part of North Carolina. It is adjacent to the counties of Haywood on the north, Swain on the northwest, Macon on the southwest and Transylvania on the southeast. The county seat, Sylva, is about 45 miles southwest of Asheville and about 150 miles north of Atlanta, Georgia. Although the area was settled in the late 1700's by predominantly Scotch-Irish people, Jackson county was not officially established until the mid 1800's from parts of Haywood and Macon counties. The county is located in a valley bounded by the Balsam mountains, Cowee mountains, Blue Ridge mountains and Great Smoky mountains.

In the late 1880's after a railroad was built, lumber became the region's major industry. From then until the 1930's, a very large amount of the region's forests were cleared to meet the great demand for hardwood. The establishment of the railroad opened the area for tourism, bringing people from Georgia and South Carolina to summer resort hotels such as the Balsam Mountain Inn. Tourism continues to be an important part of the economy of Jackson County, as the county's cool climate attracts people from warmer parts of the south in the summer. The colorful fall "leaf" season also brings thousands of tourists to the area.

Demographic Information

The mountainous terrain of the county (elevations range from Sylva's 2,039 feet to Richland Balsam's 6,450 feet) and lack of useable (flat) land has resulted in a predominantly rural environment where population growth over the years has been slow. The population of Jackson County was projected to be 29,621 in 1999, a 10.3% increase since 1990. This increase is less than the projected growth of North Carolina's population of 15.4% for 1999. (County Development Information) This places Jackson County 67th in population in North Carolina. The population

density is 60.4 persons per square mile for a rank of 70 in North Carolina. Jackson County has very little racial and ethnic diversity. Population estimates for 1997 were 87% White, 1.5% African American, and 10.9% American Indian. The remaining groups were Hispanic, 1% and Asian And Pacific Islander, .06% (County Development Information).

According to a 1995 Census Bureau estimate, the number of persons living in poverty in Jackson County was 4,660, or 17.3% of the county population, of which 23% were children under 18. However, in 1997 there were a number of people who were underemployed (earning less than \$8.00 per hour), 4,298 people or 37.9% of the county population. This is a large group that could be considered the “working poor” (County Development Information).

Jackson County has four incorporated towns: Sylva, Dillsboro, Webster and Cashiers. There are several unincorporated communities, including Cullowhee, the location of Western Carolina University. Jackson County’s population consists of a mixture of long time residents whose families have owned land for several generations, retirees from the north and from Florida, and a transient population of over 6,000 students who attend Western Carolina University or Southwestern Community College. Sylva is the county seat. It was incorporated in 1899. It is governed by a mayor and five-member board of commissioners. The 1997 population of Sylva was 2,303 (*1999 Guide to Jackson County*).

Economic Conditions

Major sectors of the Jackson County economy include retail trade, tourism, manufacturing, services and agriculture. The county’s largest sources of income come from retail sales (\$248 million in 1996-97) and travel and tourism (\$47 million in 1997). (*1999 Guide to Jackson County*, 8). Harrah’s Casino opened on the Cherokee Indian Reservation in November, 1997 and created 1,000 new jobs in the county. The average wage in Western North Carolina in 1997 was \$24,412, less

than the average wage for North Carolina, which was \$26,665 (County Development Information)

Culture and Values

The people of Jackson County hold strong fundamental Christian beliefs. They value family and community. There is a tradition of people looking after others in need. People who have an illness or death in the family can expect support from neighbors such as food, financial assistance or other help. Regular benefits such as dinners, yard sales, and musical events are advertised in the weekly newspaper, *The Sylva Herald*, to assist families who are victims of house fires or major medical expenses. Churches, primarily Baptist, provide a central location for both religious and social activities. There is a preference for self-reliance and a reluctance to look to outsiders, including the government, for solutions to family problems. Jackson County natives sometimes appear somewhat insular and isolated from mainstream culture. Newcomers are those who have moved to the county from somewhere else even though they may have lived in the county for years.

Political Setting

The political environment of Jackson County is predominantly conservative. The political party label, either democrat or republican, does not significantly differentiate the voters since the majority of voters represent varying degrees of conservatism. There is strong support in the community for traditional family values such as a two-parent family with strong religious ties. The ideal family has a hard working father who provides economic support for his wife and children. Several generations of families may live in close proximity on land that has been in the family for years. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity means that issues common to larger, more diverse communities such as conflicts over school integration, for example, have been minimal. Also, since

there isn't a large, continuing influx of permanent residents, there is a lack of strong impetus for change in many areas. However, an issue in the county that is receiving more and more attention is land use, specifically zoning. Many local residents resist any kind of controls on land use; some newcomers want to be able to protect their property with zoning requirements. Others, including developers, want to be free to expand land use to include mobile home developments and other businesses.

The following information obtained from the internet site, Project Vote Smart, gives a political perspective of representatives of Jackson County from the federal and state levels. Examples of their voting records according to preferred positions of several major interest groups are provided below:

District 11, which includes Jackson County, is represented in the United States Congress by Charles H. Taylor, a businessman from Brevard, NC who was first elected in 1990. Mr. Taylor is a Republican whose values closely mirror those of Jackson County citizens. For example, in 1999, Mr. Taylor voted for the preferred positions of the National Right to Life Committee (antiabortion) 100% of the time. He voted 92% of the time with the Business-Industry Political Action Committee, 100% of the time with the Christian Coalition, and 100% of the time with the American Conservative Union. Conversely, he voted 0% of the time with Handgun Control.

In the North Carolina State Senate, Jackson County is represented by Dan Robinson, a democrat elected for the first time in 1999. Mr. Robinson was formerly a member of the Jackson County Commission. Mr. Robinson is somewhat more liberal than Mr. Taylor, having voted for preferred positions of the Christian Coalition of NC 27% of the time, the ACLU of NC 75% and the Alliance for Good Government, a liberal organization, 93% of the time.

Jackson County has two representatives in the North Carolina State House. Liston

Ramsey, a democrat, has been in the House since 1966. In 1999 Mr. Ramsey has voted for preferred positions of the Christian Coalition of NC 50% of the time, the NC National Federation of Independent Business, 80%, the ACLU of NC, 80%, and the Alliance for Good Government, 100%. Mr. Ramsey has announced his retirement and his replacement will be elected in November, 2000. The other representative is Phil Haire, a democrat from Sylva who was elected in 1998. Mr. Haire voted in 1999 for preferred positions of the Christian Coalition of NC 46% of the time, the ACLU of NC 75%, and the Alliance for Good Government, 77% (Project Vote Smart Internet).

According to the U.S. Census web site, in April, 2000, Jackson County had 23,397 registered voters, of whom the majority, 11,686, are white democrats. There are 6,625 republicans and a relatively large number, 5,066, of "unaffiliated" people. There are very few minorities represented on the voter rolls, Black, 296, American Indians, 1,069, and Other, 118. Genders are nearly evenly represented, 10,735 males and 12,662 females (North Carolina Counties).

All five Jackson County commissioners are democrats and all were elected to first terms in November, 1998. All received at least 55% or more of the popular vote. Voter participation in this election was 46.3% (Jackson County Board of Elections). Mr. Jay Denton is the chairman of the commissioners and he also serves as County Manager. Jackson County is the lone county in North Carolina that does not have a separate, non-political position for a county manager.

According to the *North Carolina Manual, 1997-98*, "North Carolina's county commissions display a sometimes bewildering diversity in size, term of office, method of election, method of selecting the chairman and administrative structure." (P. 1098). In addition to having the only combination county manager and commissioner, Jackson County also has the unique distinction of having the chairman of the county commissioners elected by the voters. In addition to Mr. Denton,

other commissioners are Roberta Crawford, Conrad Burrell, K. Stacy Buchanan and Franz Whitmire.

There is no indication that the current composition of the county commissioners is strongly partisan. According to Lisa Duff-Majors, a reporter for *The Sylva Herald* who regularly covers county commissioner meetings, the current commissioners are “moderate” democrats and do not appear to take partisan political positions on issues.

The Jackson County Board of Social Services

Katie Allman is the chair of the Jackson County Board of Social Services. She was interviewed on July 6, 2000. Board members are appointed to staggered terms; she has been appointed by the governor twice and is in her 13th year on the board. She has served two consecutive terms, was off the board for an interval, and then was reappointed. She believes the board provides very good representation for the county. Currently, board members come from five separate communities in Jackson County. Ms. Allman believes that board members share a common set of values which tend to make disagreements and conflicts about welfare issues very rare, regardless of who is on the board at any point in time. Ms. Allman has taken considerable interest in DSS over the years and she indicated that she felt very privileged to be able to make a contribution. Ms. Allman is complimentary of the present group of commissioners who were first elected to public office two years ago. She believes that the commissioners are easy to work with as a group and are always open to discussion.

A review of the Board of Social Services Minutes indicated that the Board was very much involved in the planning process for welfare reform. A representative of the Board, Ms. Juanita Burrell, served on the planning committee. The Board was continually informed of progress of the

plan by Mr. Bob Cochran, DSS Director, and there was no apparent controversy or disagreement about the direction that was taken by DSS.

For example, the following excerpts from the Minutes show how the Board was regularly informed of welfare reform issues:

July 14, 1997 - Mr. Cochran shared information on the status of House and Senate bills on welfare reform. He planned to share this information with commissioners.

August 11, 1997 - Board received a copy of a Resolution passed by the commissioners in response to welfare reform initiatives in the legislature

September 15, 1997 - Mr. Cochran gave an explanation of new laws affecting Work First.

October 13, 1997 - Mr. Cochran reported on his appearance before the commissioners and their approval of the Planning Committee membership.

November 10, 1997 - Mr. Cochran reported on progress of the Planning Committee.

December 8, 1997 - Copies of the county plan were presented to the Board

March 16, 1998 - Proposed minor amendments to the county plan were presented.

June 8, 1998 - Work First Team reported success in reaching goal of helping 84 Work First participants obtain subsidized employment. The minutes noted that “Jackson County is ahead of many others in this area”.

January 10, 2000 - Two board members attended a social services board training conducted by the North Carolina Institute of Government. They reported that “several problems that were addressed at the training were ones we are fortunate to have avoided in Jackson County, e.g., political interference on agency decisions, significance discordance with the board, etc.”

Welfare Reform as a County Political Issue

Welfare reform did not make even a small ripple on the political waters of Jackson County when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P. L. 104-193) was passed by Congress and was signed by President Clinton in August, 1996. This law eliminated AFDC and established TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and made other very historical and far reaching changes to public assistance.

Historically, Jackson County commissioners have taken a “hands-off” position with respect to the operation of the Department of Social Services. The previous director and the present director, Mr. Cochran, have enjoyed the full confidence of the previous and current commissioners.

In a telephone conversation on July 12, Mr. Jay Denton, Commissioner and County Manager, said that welfare was not a political issue in Jackson County. His primary source of knowledge about welfare comes from the DSS annual budget. He obtains knowledge about the operations of DSS from reviewing the budget. In the two years he has been commissioner and county manager, the DSS budget is reasonable and there aren't any large unsubstantiated requests for budget increases. He believed that there were people “out there” who may need services but are not getting them but some do not want any help and there isn't a practical way to go out and find them. He mentioned traveling to another nearby county recently where there was a very poor neighborhood with dilapidated houses. There is not any place in Jackson County where you would see very obvious poverty, as far as he knew.

Mr. Denton said that the commission was concerned with “hot political issues” most of the time. These are issues that have loud, vocal constituents who show up regularly at commission meetings. Poor people never come to meetings and aren't there to speak their opinions.

Mr. Cochran was interviewed on June 27, 2000. According to Mr. Cochran, one of the reasons that the commissioners aren't overly concerned with what happens in the department is

because of the existence of the county Board of Social Services which has responsibility for overseeing the department and provides direct supervision of Mr. Cochran. The department must operate within guidelines set by the State Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) which also provides oversight to the department.

Katie Allman concurred with Mr. Cochran's assessment of the political implications of welfare reform. She said that the commissioners "have their hands full" of other issues to deal with and throughout her tenure on the board, the commissioners have been very supportive of DSS. This has been true regardless of the political affiliation of the commissioners. She has never seen any partisanship over the years regardless of whether the commissioners were democrats or republicans. Historically, the commissioners and the board have always worked well together.

Decision Dynamics - 1997-98

"Electing" or "Standard" County Status

The Jackson County DSS opted for standard county status. Mr. Cochran had primary responsibility for recommending this decision. His rationale for this recommendation was that a standard county designation was best for the people of Jackson County. He thought there was the possibility of liability for the county if the department made some wrong program decisions and he did not like the idea of experimenting with unknowns. He believed it would be best for other counties to try out new things first. If the new ideas were successful, Mr. Cochran believed the State would adopt them and make them available to everybody. Ms. Allman and the board concurred with Mr. Cochran's assessment and judgment of the county's position.

Not every provision of the new welfare reform law was "new". Several federal measures preceded it, including the Family Support Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-485). This Act created the JOBS program and was the last major reform of AFDC (Hombs, 55). The Act included some of the

same goals as P.L. 104-193, including an emphasis on the provision of education and training opportunities that would assist recipients in moving off welfare rolls to employment. Every state was required to have a JOBS program operating in every county by October 1, 1992. (Hombs, 55).

Mr. Cochran did not think that the federal law brought about many changes at the county level since there was already flexibility in North Carolina because of waivers which had been used by the State since the late 1980's. During the 1990's the federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHR) had made it easier for states to obtain waivers of certain federal regulations which gave the states and counties more flexibility in the operation of their welfare programs. In 1995 DHHR announced that it would "...approve waiver requests within 30 days for projects that address work requirements involving subsidize or unsubsidized jobs, community service, and rigorous job search or preparation." (Hombs, 37). Also, Governor Hunt had established Work First in North Carolina in 1995, one year before the federal legislation was enacted. Therefore, counties were gradually moving toward more programming flexibility and placing more of an emphasis on employment before the federal law was passed in 1996.

County Planning for Work First

Mr. Cochran had major responsibility for identifying and contacting members of the county Welfare Reform Committee. He tried to obtain a cross-section of people in Jackson County who had an interest in welfare reform. The committee included a total of 35 representatives from practically every agency and organization in the county that might make a contribution to reform, including public health, public schools, mental health, employment security, child development, Chamber of Commerce and various commissions. Several client recipients of Work First also served on the committee. Jay Coward represented the Jackson County Commissioners. Mr. Coward, a republican, did not run for election in November, 1998.

Short Chronology

The DHHS established a time frame for all counties to follow which mandated that counties intending to “elect” to design and operate their own welfare program must declare this intention by October 31, 1997 . All counties in the state had to submit county plans to DHHS by February 1, 1998. This three months’ time period was very short, especially for counties that wished to create an individualized program. However, in Jackson County, less work was involved because of its standard county status decision.

In spite of the large number of committee members, Mr. Cochran and Ms. Jennifer Abshire (Work First Supervisor who was also interviewed on June 27, 2000) indicated that everyone worked well together and there was not a lot of controversy or discord. A major effort involved educating everyone because of the differing amounts of knowledge about welfare among the participants. The task of the committee was made easier because they started from the recommended position of being a standard county which meant that they did not have to create entirely new procedures, goals or objectives.

The establishment of the Welfare Reform Committee provided an opportunity for inclusion of a wide range of individuals in the DSS planning process and enabled them to become more educated about poverty in the county and the overall function of DSS in reducing and eliminating the need for financial assistance for this group.

The activities of the Welfare Reform Committee and time frames of its operation are summarized in Jackson County’s Work First County Plan. The committee process was facilitated by staff of Western Carolina University’s Mountain Resource Center. The following is a short chronology of its work:

October 29, 1997 - Overview of the Work First Program was provided to committee

November 5, 1997 - Committee discussed strategies to achieve state and county goals

November 19, 1997 - Committee divided into small groups to discuss specific topics.

December 3, 1997 - Committee reviewed and approved county plan

In regard to the county commissioners' involvement in the plan, Mr. Cochran appeared before them on the following dates:

October 16, 1997 - Presentation of issues regarding "standard" and "electing" county.

-Approval of Work First Committee membership

January 15, 1998 - Presentation of Work First County Plan

The Work First County Plan was approved unanimously by the county commissioners. Minutes of that meeting indicate that there were no questions from the commissioners about the plan. The commissioners commended the Welfare Reform Committee for its work.

It should be noted that between October, 1997 and January, 1998 there was a Jackson County commissioners' election in November, 1997 and all incumbent members of the commission (republicans) were voted out. An all new group of commissioners (democrats) took their places in December. Therefore, the commissioners who approved the standard county status and the Work First Committee members in October were not the same individuals who reviewed and approved the county plan in January. A question may be legitimately raised regarding how much knowledge the new commissioners had about the county's plan when they voted to approve it.

After approval, the county's plan was submitted to DHHS by the required deadline. At the April 9, 1998 meeting of the commission, Mr. Cochran presented some minor changes to the county plan that were recommended by DHHS. The commissioners voted unanimously to approve the amendments.

In regard to participation of other community agencies, the opinion of Mr. Cochran and

Ms. Abshire is that there is more communication, especially with REACH, the county's domestic violence prevention agency. In a press release issued by Mr. Cochran on September 20, 1999, he stated that "...Jackson County has benefitted from strong partnerships and collaboration from among several organizations involved in employment and training." Organizations mentioned were the Employment Security Commission, Southwestern Community College, WIN Program, Webster Enterprises, Mountain Projects, and Vocational Rehabilitation. The Employment Security Commission is particularly important in efforts to better coordinate efforts to locate employment for clients.

Mr. Cochran indicated that in order to have a larger amount of interagency collaboration at the local level, there would have to be more money and more leadership provided to counties from the state level. Mrs. Allman did not believe that there was any more interest now in welfare reform among the Jackson County public that there had been prior to 1997.

Goals, Objectives, or Program Priorities

Welfare Reform Priorities

The Work First County Plan listed eight statewide goals as identified by the state DHHS for "standard" counties:

- C Reducing the Work First Caseload
- C Putting Adults to Work
- C Staying Off Welfare After Going to Work
- C Meeting the "All Parent" Participation Rate
- C Meeting the "Two Parent" Participation Rate

- C Avoiding Welfare Through Diversion Assistance
- C Increasing Child Support Orders and Collections for Work First Families
- C Child Well-Being

As a standard county, the plan followed state guidelines and adopted goals established by DHHS. For each goal, specific outcomes, strategies, and who would carry out the strategies were listed. Specific procedures for measuring outcomes were identified, including statistical information and dates outcomes were to be achieved.

Jackson County also identified two of the statewide goals for particular county specific goals and strategies:

- C Reducing the Work First Caseload
- C Staying Off Welfare After Going to Work

For “Reducing the Work First Caseload”, the statewide goal was that the Jackson County Work First Family Assistance caseload would be reduced to 142 by the end of FY 1998-99 and 121 by FY 1999-2000. The county goal was 134 by the end of FY 1998-99 and 107 by FY 1999-2000.

For “Staying Off Welfare After Going to Work”, the statewide goal was that 85% of participants would remain on their jobs after they were off welfare for at least 12 months. The county goal was 90%.

Program Implementation: 1998-2000

Distinctive Aspects of First One-Two Years

According to Mr. Cochran and Ms. Abshire, the major effect of the federal welfare reform legislation with regard to program operations in Jackson County has been the elimination of the “entitlement” to welfare. No longer does a client have a “right” to welfare assistance. Previously, the department could only “encourage” a person to obtain training and seek employment. Now,

everyone who applies for welfare (formerly AFDC), also, in effect, applies for a job. The elimination of a federal entitlement and the mandatory five year time frame for benefits at the federal level (two years in NC) has made it clear that welfare benefits are indeed “temporary”. However, there is doubt that all clients recognize this; some apparently still believe that something or someone will still be available to help them out, even when the five years are complete.

There is more flexibility in use of funds. As long as the county meets its “maintenance of effort” requirement, it is allowed to use additional funds for other needs clients may have to support their employment. “Maintenance of effort” (MOE) mandates that counties must use a certain amount of county funds for welfare; counties cannot cut back DSS budgets beyond that certain amount. The maintenance of effort requirement was put in place to make sure that counties did not use welfare reform changes as an opportunity to reduce county contributions to DSS.

Ironically, in the November 16, 1998 Board of Social Services Minutes, there was a discussion regarding Jackson County’s underspending of county TANF funds, in other words, the county’s maintenance of responsibility effort was not being met. This was due to the very large drop in Work First caseloads and also, the state was providing additional funds to the department. DHHS requested that counties make more effort to expand services so county MOE funds could be expended.

An example of a program developed by DSS to give more and better support to working families is called, “Assistance for Working Families of Jackson County.” The program provides a wide variety of assistance, including transportation, car repairs, day care expenses, and “quality of life” expenses such as rent, dental, eye exams/glasses, etc., if these directly impact the parents’ gainful employment.

Ms. Allman noted that less control of the DSS budget at the state level has been a major

change in the operation of the department since 1997. In previous years, money was budgeted in rigid categories and there was much control over all funds. The increased flexibility at the county level to develop a range of supportive services has made it much easier to meet the needs of the clients and help them in ways that enable them to be more successful finding and keeping jobs.

Overall, the commissioners have supported DSS's requests for additional funds for innovative programs. For example, Mr. Cochran noted that he recently received approval to pay child welfare staff extra money when they have to be "on call". This decision will help a great deal in recruitment and retention of child welfare workers.

County DSS Organizational Change

Welfare reform has resulted in both organizational and cultural changes at DSS. In regard to organizational changes, for the first time, DSS has a person assigned to the Employment Security Office in Sylva full-time. This person is physically located in that office and is able to work closely with employment security personnel. She can coordinate efforts to place clients in jobs more effectively. DSS also contracts with REACH for a Job Coach who assists clients with a variety of needs related to finding and keeping employment, such as transportation and child care.

In regard to cultural changes, employees in income maintenance units and social services units formerly had specific tasks to perform for clients and these tasks were relatively separate. Now, both units have to work much more closely together and communicate with each other. This has meant that everyone focuses on the same thing: getting a client a job and enabling the client to keep the job. Ms. Allman concurred, noting that employees are no longer able to do one particular job without regard to what other employees are doing. Everyone has to work together. The clients cannot go to one employee with one story and go tell a different story to another employee. This has

meant better services for the clients.

County-State Relations

The major change in county-state relations has been more flexibility in decision making at the county level which means less control at the state level, particularly in budget matters. However, Mr. Cochran said that the State will always have rules and guidelines for counties to follow and that is the case now, even with welfare reform. A standard county is essentially continuing to operate its welfare program essentially as it was before 1996. In spite of a relaxation of rules and regulations regarding how money is spent, the state DHHS still demands a considerable amount of paperwork, forms and numerous statistics.

Successes, Achievements, Positive Results

There has been a dramatic drop in the number of clients receiving welfare assistance in Jackson County, although Mr. Cochran does not believe that the drop can be solely attributed to the 1996 welfare reform law. As previously mentioned, some of the changes affecting emphasis on employment and training were already in place by 1996. The very strong United States economy has filtered down to the lowest level service job, creating a scarcity of minimum wage workers. This has meant that employers have been willing to hire people who would be considered very marginal workers in a weaker economy. Ms. Allman also attributes some of the decline in number of clients to the strong economy. For example, according to the Jackson County Department of Social Services Annual Report, 1996-97, the average number of monthly cases was 287; the March, 2000 Statewide Work First Progress Report indicated that the caseload was 113.

Mr. Cochran's September 20, 1999 Press Release reported that the results of Governor Hunt's "report card" showed that Jackson County scored highly. The four categories evaluated by DHHS and Jackson County's grades were as follows:

- C Reducing the Number of Families on Welfare: **A**
- C Putting Adults to Work: **B**
- C Staying Off Welfare: **A**
- C Increasing Child Support Collections: **B**

Shortcomings

A concern of Mr. Cochran and Ms. Abshire is the large number of clients who are now working and are off welfare but are struggling hard to get along on minimum wages now. Even with child care and medical insurance, it is very difficult for these people to make ends meet. It has been estimated that a wage of \$9.00 per hour is required for self sufficiency according to Ms. Abshire. The next major effort for welfare reform should be on moving people out of poverty not just getting them off welfare. Now, a “success” is a person who is no longer on the welfare rolls no matter how difficult it is for this person to provide adequately for a family. One program that would be of great assistance to the poor in North Carolina would be a state earned income tax credit. This would be modeled on the federal program that has been very successful in providing cash supplements to low income employed persons.

A big “unknown” is what will happen when the five year lifetime limit runs out for some clients. What if some people need additional help at some future date? This “great social experiment”, according to Mr. Cochran, has some big unanswered questions. Another question is what will happen to people currently working at low level jobs if the economy starts to slow down. If they are laid off, who will hire them? Where will they find work?

Both Mr. Cochran and Ms. Abshire believe that all the people that can go out and get a job without great difficulty have done so; the remaining cases are “hard core”. Some of these individuals have multiple barriers to obtaining work such as drug, alcohol or emotional problems.

Others have dependents such as sick relatives who need care. This group will need a very large amount of effort and support on an ongoing basis in order to be minimally successful in the work place. Those, in spite of all efforts, who are too disabled to locate and find employment, will need to apply for Supplemental Social Insurance, SSI, a federal program for the disabled.

Another problem has occurred with Medicaid. According to a report by Families USA, there has been a large drop in numbers of people receiving Medicaid. The problem is that the states were supposed to end the link between welfare enrollment and Medicaid eligibility. Now, people may be inadvertently dropped from Medicaid when they obtain employment because the two programs are tied together. A challenge for Jackson County DSS is to make sure people who are eligible apply for Medicaid and keep it. More outreach needs to be done. North Carolina also has a new health care program for low income people, Health Choice. This program is for the working poor and it needs to be publicized.

Even though the state is spending more money for child care and transportation, transportation in the county continues to be a major problem. Often, clients do not have cars or have old cars that frequently break down. There is no inexpensive public transportation in Jackson County. Many welfare recipients who might not have held a job in the past did not have a major need for regular, reliable transportation in order to get to a job every day at a certain time. People who don't have good working cars are at risk of missing work because they can't get there. There does not seem to be a long-term transportation solution in sight for the working poor in Jackson County.

Involvement of Players in Administration of Welfare

There is no indication that there is greater involvement of a wider range of players in the

administration of welfare in Jackson County. No changes in this area were identified. The major players in administration of welfare are the people with expertise in this area, the Board of Social Services, Mr. Cochran and his staff. This has been true in Jackson County for many years. Basically, “welfare” remains an extremely complex program and requires considerable experience and expertise on the part of those who administer it. It is certainly beyond the competence and interest of most individuals not directly involved to master all its arcane rules. Also, coordination and communication among a variety of county agencies is an extremely time consuming activity, requiring meetings and other activities on an ongoing basis; something that is very time consuming for most service professionals.

In regard to participation, Ms. Allman said that most people don’t know much about welfare and they are not concerned about it. She has seen no increase in involvement of a wider group of community people. After the county plan was submitted, the Welfare Reform Committee has had no formal participation in the operation of DSS.

The employees of DSS, particularly Mr. Cochran, the director, manage the department very well, according to Ms. Allman. She was particularly complimentary of Mr. Cochran and the way he operates DSS. She believes that the county is very lucky to have someone of Mr. Cochran’s experience and ability in charge of the department. Mr. Cochran is carrying on a county tradition in which DSS operates in an autonomous fashion regardless of the political affiliation of the county commissioners. Jackson County citizens are comfortable with this arrangement.

Assessment

After interviewing the major county “players”, and reviewing a number of documents relating to welfare reform, my assessment is that one of the main goals of the 1996 federal welfare reform law, devolution, or the moving of decision making from the federal level to the state and local

level, has primarily given the Jackson County DSS more flexibility in how money is spent and has allowed them more creativity in program implementation and design.. However, as was previously stated, Mr. Cochran believed that some aspects of welfare reform were already in place in North Carolina by 1996. Since the 1996 welfare reform law was not the beginning of major changes in county welfare programs, it is hard to apportion out just which changes can be directly attributed to the federal law.

The county response in the form of a county Work First Plan, was beneficial in that it involved a number of persons in the community in the planning process, and provided them with a greater understanding of the challenges of bringing about change to a part of the Jackson County population (the poor) that don't receive much attention from the more affluent members of the county. However, the planning process evidently did not result in much change in the participation levels of other agencies and organizations in the community.

The Plan also provided a focus and clear guidelines for all DSS employees to operate within specific parameters and time frames. Measures for success were specified. DHHS has a "Work First Report Card" posted on its web site so that results are available for everyone to see. Monthly reports are also issued to the county offices that list statistics for the eight state goals for every county, providing a further measure of each county's standing with respect to all other counties in the state. There is definitely the expectation that statewide, the departments are all moving in the same direction, putting welfare recipients to work.

From a political point of view, Jackson County commissioners don't have welfare reform on their agendas. From my experience working in state government, unless a politician has a particular interest or expertise in welfare, other priorities take precedence. After all, most people who are on welfare rolls don't vote. They are primarily single mothers with children, a constituency that doesn't

have much clout. They don't own property, usually, and thus, don't pay property taxes. I believe debates over contentious issues such as giving money to people who don't "earn" it, creating dependency, and welfare benefits contributing to "moral decline" are most likely to be played out at the state and national level, where extremes on the left and on the right political spectrums are found. The political extremes also tend to receive more media attention than the "political middle" at all levels of government.

I believe the greatest impact of welfare reform in Jackson County has been the flexibility in use of funds. The rigid guidelines and prohibitions in the way money could be used to help people have been removed. Jackson County DSS is much more able to provide funds that may make a critical difference in whether someone can keep a job or not, such as money for car repairs. It is easier for the department to be creative and innovative in addressing client problems.

A small, rural county such as Jackson would not be expected to experience a political revolution as a result of passage of a federal law. A large layer of insulation at the state level protects counties, particularly the small rural ones, from the rough waters of social and political change. I believe change in all aspects of political and social life comes in very small increments in Jackson County. The explanation lies in the culture and history of this area and the fact that a majority of county citizens are satisfied with the political status quo. Welfare recipients represent a very small part of life in Jackson County. They are essentially invisible to the ordinary person (and the ordinary politician).

It appears that the passage of P.L. 104-193 has had an overall positive effect on Jackson County DSS and its clients in the short term. However, there are some negatives and some "unknowns" at this point in time. It remains to be seen if Work First recipients can maintain their overall level of functioning over time, particularly due to the lifetime benefit limit.

An important issue that deserves consideration is the policy which framed the 1996 federal legislation which mandated that all mothers of children age six months (in some counties, one year) and older must work full time. Since most are young single mothers without much education or training, they will be working in low level, low paying jobs probably for their entire lives unless they can find husbands who can support them and their children.. The state will have to provide supportive services, probably indefinitely, to keep these mothers on the job (any job). At this point in time, two years into the Work First Plan, everyone in Jackson County who can work is working. New applicants, if able bodied, are placed in employment relatively quickly. The remaining clients require ever increasing time, energy and effort on the part of all who work with them. There may be a point where some consideration should be given to accepting that a certain number of people will never be able to hold regular employment, no matter what time and effort is expended on them. At this time, Governor Hunt's mandate to the counties is that everyone will be put to work.

With respect to Jackson County, I have been impressed with the singularity of purpose of all the people I interviewed and their focus on doing their best to help every person and family in Jackson County to achieve their highest potential. I have not found any indication at all that welfare reform is (or ever has been) a political issue in this county.

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