

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jackson County

By Terry Gibson

Jackson County, located in a rural area in Western North Carolina, exemplifies tradition and conservative family values. There is a history of independent thinking and self reliance. With respect to welfare reform, county officials chose to be a "standard" county. The rationale for this decision was that it would be best for the people of the county and it would be better for others to try out new ideas rather than experimenting with "unknowns". The director of DSS, Mr. Bob Cochran, believed that positive changes were already underway in North Carolina at the time of passage of the federal welfare reform law in 1996 because of the establishment of Work First Program by Governor James Hunt in 1995. Also, the federal government was more willing to grant "waivers" that enabled DSS offices to implement various changes in eligibility rules since the early 1990's.

A summary of positive changes that occurred in Jackson County as noted by county officials is as follows:

1. Establishment of a County Welfare Reform Committee composed of a cross-section of people who represented practically every agency and organization in the county with an interest in welfare reform. Members of the committee gained knowledge about the needs of the poor.
2. Development of improved lines of communication between DSS and other agencies in the community.
3. Increased flexibility in use of funds and a reduction in number of "rigid" budget categories.
4. Increased ability to meet the needs of clients.
5. The assignment of a DSS worker to the Employment Security Office which enables better coordination and communication with regard to employment of DSS clients.
6. The elimination of the "division" between employees in income maintenance units and Social service units which has resulted in better client services.
7. A sharp drop in numbers of families on welfare and an increase in numbers of adults put to work.

Although a number of positive changes have occurred, DSS officials expressed concern about the lifetime benefit requirement and what will happen to some families when the lifetime benefit is exhausted (in a total of five years on welfare assistance). Another issue is the fact that welfare reform requirements for work do not enable people to move out of poverty. Many people who are working are making minimum wages with little opportunity for advancement. There are also people who will require an extremely large amount of support, such as social services, day care, transportation, etc., in order to maintain employment.

There is a long history of autonomy of the Jackson County DSS. Local government is predominantly non-partisan with respect to DSS activities. The county commissioners were fully supportive of DSS and its decision to be a "standard" county. There was little evidence of a major impact of welfare reform in this county as DSS had previously undertaken a number of initiatives supported by federal waivers and by Governor Hunt's Work First Program in 1995. No evidence was found that welfare reform has ever been a political issue in this county.