

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

McDowell County

By Dr. William Sabo

While McDowell county ranks below state averages in income and nearly a third of its full-time workforce lives in poverty, it ranks in the bottom quintile of North Carolina counties in the percentage of residents receiving AFDC. The county's top priority is economic development and its culture is dominated by an ingrained animosity toward welfare programs. Political entrepreneurs successfully exploited this mistrust and steered the county into Electing Status in a process marked by charges and countercharges of political manipulation.

The Work First plan adopted by the County Commission in January 1998 contained four central components-- an employment emphasis, new qualifying criteria, an in-house appeal process, and a series of county commitments to clients-- two of which proved to be particularly controversial and contributed, along with problems with the state DHHS, to a 19-month delay in implementing the program. A controversy surrounding the hiring of a private firm to collect child support payments and legal challenges to including Supplemental Security Income in determining eligibility and requiring mandatory drug tests added to the climate of mistrust and controversy and could have derailed the county's efforts at welfare reform.

The county's DSS, however, adjusted to mandated changes and moved to exploit the administrative and policy flexibility Electing status permitted. Officials have been pleased by the results. In addition to declining case loads, the county has realized substantial financial benefits. DSS has come to agree too, that the plan is more moderate and less punitive than it first feared. Still, substantial divisions and concerns remain. For example, county and DSS officials remain divided over the need for a new transportation policy, but political changes on the commission have altered the atmosphere to where the differences are more pragmatic than ideological.

Despite their current satisfaction with the program, however, officials remain wary of the future. The county's employment base remains susceptible to minor economic adjustments and officials agree that economic development is the only long-term welfare reform. In addition, despite efforts by several community agencies to take advantage of Work First opportunities, a county-wide support network to aid the poor does not exist in McDowell. The weaknesses of the county's infrastructure combined with its political culture make welfare reform a perennially controversial issue.