

Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform*

Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

By

Dr. Gary Rassel, Research Associate
Ms. Beth Etringer, Research Assistant

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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The Policy Context

Economic and Social Characteristics

Mecklenburg County is the most populous county in North Carolina. In 1998, the county had 624,464 residents. The county's population is projected to increase by 20.4 percent by the year 2008. In 1997, Mecklenburg County per capita personal income was \$32,295, higher than any other county in North Carolina. Per capita income for the state as a whole was \$20,217. The median family income in the county was \$61,397. In 1990, 81.6 percent of county residents had a high school degree and 28.3 percent had a college degree.

In 1998, 347,740 residents, nearly 56 percent of the county's population, were in the labor force. According to the EDIS County Profile, during the first quarter of 1999, the service industry employed the largest number of workers --130,209 workers, or 27.1 percent of the labor market. Retail trade employed 78,557 people or 16.4 percent of the county's labor force. Finance, Insurance and Real Estate make up the third largest segment of the workforce with 11.5 percent or 55,276 people. Charlotte is one of the top banking cities in the United States. The fourth largest employment area is government sector jobs with 50,677 or 10.6 percent of the labor force in this occupation. "Mecklenburg County is primarily a banking and technology community which requires a more highly skilled workforce than what might be found in a rural area. The special challenge for the Work First program will be supporting the development of skills to meet a specialized workforce. Additionally, the lack of lower skilled positions limits job placements. There is a need for more manufacturing jobs" (Work First Plan, 20). Even if a low skilled worker does find a job, the pay is very low. The Work First Plan notes that many low skill jobs in Charlotte and the surrounding Metropolitan Statistical Area pay less than a living wage (4). The Work First Plan cites the lack of manufacturing jobs and the fact that other nearby counties have offered incentives and lower taxes to new companies moving there. "Mecklenburg is competing with Cabarrus, Gaston, and Union counties where land and taxes are cheaper, and York County

which is located in South Carolina and offers companies large [financial] incentives to locate in the state. Currently both Monroe and Union County have ambitious tax incentive plans to entice new business” (Work First Plan, 6). The Plan did, however, point out that the county and City of Charlotte are offering tax incentives for companies willing to operate or expand along some of Charlotte’s threatened corridors.

Since 1992, Mecklenburg County has seen a steady decrease in the county’s unemployment rate. The unemployment rate was 5.1 percent in 1992, 4.3 percent in 1993, 3.5 percent in 1995 and 1996, 2.6 percent in 1997, 2.3 percent in 1998 and 2 percent in 1999.

In 1995 the Concord Tribune cited a publication of the Conference on Poverty as saying that Mecklenburg County had the lowest percent of working poor in the state with 21.8 percent (Plemmons, May 8, 1995, A1). In 1990, 9.6 percent of the population was below the poverty rate. Just over five percent of the residents of the county receive Food Stamps. The number of active Food Stamp cases fell and then rose again since Work First was started. In July of 1996, caseloads were at 14,393. They dropped in 1997 and 1998 to 13,619 and 12,371 respectively and rose in 1999 to 13,162 and in 2000 to 13,314 (www.co.mecklenburg.nc.us). According to this website, 81.2 percent of Work First Families were African American, 11.6 percent were white, and 7.2 percent were of another race. The North Carolina Department of Commerce rated Mecklenburg County as one of the least economically distressed counties in the state (Work First Report Card).

According to the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, 70.4 percent of county residents were Caucasian, 26.6 percent African-American, 2.6 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2.4 percent Hispanic (www.charlottechamber.org; August 14, 2000). A common perception in the county, however, is that the Hispanic and Asian populations have increased substantially recently.

The Political Setting

The Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners has nine members. Six are elected from districts and three are elected at large. All seats are filled every two years. In 1994,

the size of the Commission was changed from seven to nine members. Two new seats and the fact that two incumbents were not seeking reelection that year meant that the Commission was sure to have four new commissioners (Editorial, November 1, 1994). Republicans took control of the Commission that year winning two of the three at large seats and evenly dividing the district seats with Democrats (Leonnig, November 9, 1994, 1A). Leonnig reported that "Republican candidates promised to apply a big knife to the \$808 million budget and said they'd consider reducing the county's responsibilities when making decisions about social services, school funding, parks, libraries and jails" (Leonnig, 1994,1C). Republicans talked about refusing federal money for programs that help the poor and needy if local money was also required. A newly elected Republican, Linda McCall, was quoted as saying that the government can't be all things to all people - it will go bankrupt if we continue to try. Some people felt uneasy about the new Republican control. "It tells me poor are in for a hard time", Bob Davis of the Black Political Caucus was quoted as saying (Leonnig, 1994, 1C).

In the 1996 elections Democrats seized control of the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners for only the second time since 1984 (Batton, November 6, 1996, 12). A Charlotte Observer editorial called for the five open seats (four were unopposed) to be "weighted in favor of experience, modernization, and thoughtful pragmatism. Otherwise the next board could be immobilized by philosophical disagreements or tilted so far to the right it would abandon the long partisan tradition of socially progressive but fiscally conservative local government that has served this community so well" (Editorial, October 23, 1996).

The fears suggested in the editorial seemed to mirror what would soon come. Although the Democrats held a five to four majority on the Board, a moderate Republican incumbent member had been replaced by a very ideologically conservative, and some would say strident, Republican. In addition, one of the Democratic members was very conservative on many social issues and occasionally voted with the Republican majority. The county and its residents were soon divided by issues, none more so than an issue concerning arts funding. After lengthy and

bitter debate, the Board voted 5 to 4 in favor of a resolution to cut funding for the Arts and Science Council (ASC). The five voting for the cut became known as the “Gang of Five”. Some members of the commission opposed county funding for the ASC because the organization gave money to performances and exhibits that showed homosexual themes. The conservative Democrat voted with the Republicans as he was strongly opposed to any tolerance of homosexuality. Shortly after the vote, the Charlotte Observer published an article describing emails between the commissioners' three most conservative Republican members and a liberal Democratic Commissioner. The article described the emails as "emblematic of the genuine dislike among current commissioners, and of the canyon-sized gap between them on public policy matters" (Batton, April 20, 1997, B1). The article also pointed out that the disagreements had become so harsh and "distracting" that the Chair of the Commission, Parks Helms, sent a memo to other commissioners. Helms wrote, "When our emotions and feelings overwhelm our ability to be civil and courteous, it is a disservice to those on all sides of an issue" (Batton, April 20, 1997, B1).

Shortly after this vote, the four Republican members persuaded the conservative Democrat to join them in replacing the Chair of the Commission with one of their own. This action further soured relations among board members and created additional tension.

In 1998, the arts funding debate of the previous year was an important issue in the election of members of the County Commission. An October 31, 1998 article in the Charlotte Observer cited huge differences in the amount of money that Republicans and Democrats received in their campaigns. "The money that poured into the Democrats' campaign is a result of the controversy surrounding the current board" (DeAngelis, C1). Parks Helms was quoted in the article as saying, "It indicates to me there is a sense of urgency about changing the dynamic of the current board. There are many people out there who have been energized by the last two years of divisiveness and bitterness and littleness".

The November 4, 1998 editorial in the Charlotte Observer heralded the elections as a "Great Day for the County" as Democrats took seven of the commissioners' nine seats and swept the at-large seats. Bill James and Tom Bush were the only members of the "Gang of Five" - those who opposed funding the ASC - to win reelection.

According to the North Carolina State Board of Elections, in 1998, of 412,108 people registered to vote in Mecklenburg County, 45 percent were registered as Democrats, 37 percent were registered as Republicans, 18 percent as Unaffiliated, and 0.11 percent as Libertarian.

Time Frame - Highlights

In 1984, the Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners elected to "abolish the County Boards of Social Services, Area Mental Health Authority and Public Health and assumed the powers, duties and responsibilities of those Boards" (Work First Plan). In 1994, Jake Jacobsen became the head of the Department of Social Services (DSS) in Mecklenburg County, replacing a Director who retired. Jacobsen came to Charlotte from San Diego, California where he had been Director of Social Services. Shortly after his arrival, a county employee reported, employees at DSS wondered: "Does this man ever sleep?". This employee went on to say that Jake Jacobsen was the major force behind welfare reform in Mecklenburg County. She said that he came at the right time and was responsible not only for "shaking Department of Social Services workers out of their boxes", but also for "kicking the business community" into action to help welfare recipients. Although Jacobsen had instituted and managed a workfare program in San Diego, Mecklenburg County officials had not specifically recruited for someone with that background.

The county implemented a version of Work First in July of 1995. In July of 1996, they informed the recipients that they would have to be off the rolls by August of 1998. In July of 1996, the Department of Social Services in Charlotte signed a contract with the Chamber of Commerce in which each member of the Chamber would hire one welfare recipient. Prior to the

signing of the contract the DSS Director went to the President of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce and explained that the Department of Social Services was a bigger business than most of the ones belonging to the Chamber and that it was a big labor market. At first, the President of the Chamber was reluctant for the Chamber to get involved, so the DSS Director took a Chamber Vice-President to Riverside California to view the GAIN program and to a conference on welfare issues in Las Vegas. The chamber member was the only Chamber of Commerce member at the conference. The contract with the Chamber was signed the following July. In response, 2,100 businesses hired a Work First recipient (Jacobsen, 2000). The contract marked the first such partnership between a Chamber of Commerce and Department of Social Services in the country. The Chair of the County Commission noted that Mecklenburg County has the good fortune of having a healthy public/private partnership. Having that partnership has facilitated the ability of the county to deal with reform and created an environment for reform. He went on to say that reform would not have worked in the county without the support of the business community and its leaders.

In addition to acquiring the help of the business community, Jake Jacobsen also enlisted churches in his efforts, "He's put a preacher to work who is going from door to door to many of the county's 600 houses of worship for suggestions on how to put the jobless to work" (Businesses, Churches Help Mecklenburg Reduce Welfare Rolls, October 21, 1996, A5).

A June 17, 1997 article titled 'Experiment Targets Benefit Applicants Already on Welfare', announced that Mecklenburg County had joined in to be a part of the nation's "first ever interstate effort to catch welfare fraud" (Stephanie Gibbs, June 17, 2000, 1A). The other counties included in the experiment were Union County in North Carolina, York, Aiken, and Lancaster Counties in South Carolina, and Richmond County in Georgia. The counties will use fingerprinting to "cross check each others public assistance rolls to make sure that when people apply for benefits, they are not double dipping in another state or county" (Stephanie Gibbs, June 17, 2000, 1A)

In 1997, the DSS Director announced his goal to "Wipe Out Poverty in Mecklenburg County in Five Years". Part of his plan to reach this lofty goal is "The Customer Fusion Decagon". Jacobsen identified ten agencies, organizations, and networks that were imperative for reaching the goal: the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the City of Charlotte, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Non-profit Agencies, the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, Central Piedmont Community College, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Faith Community, Mecklenburg County Government, Health Maintenance Organizations, the Charlotte Housing Authority, and the State of North Carolina. The idea behind the decagon is that the 10 systems work together to reach common goals. If one of the systems is not doing its job, the entire system breaks down and the goal is not attained.

Mecklenburg County has used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to map and track cases over the past few years. GIS has made it possible to see where, geographically, there is a heavy reliance on social services. The Department of Social Services is then able to target their services to certain areas of the county and to engage members of the decagon in those areas to participate.

Mecklenburg County is the only county in the state to have Mandatory Managed Care for Work First Families. In essence, Work First families and Medicaid recipients are enrolled in an HMO. The county has been able to provide medical services for a total of 70,000 to 80,000 people through this mechanism.

Decision Dynamics

On October 21, 1997, Mecklenburg County Commissioners voted for Mecklenburg to be a standard county. The county's Work First Supervisor said that the county did not want to be an electing county. According to her and the DSS Director, the "dollars and cents" just weren't there. An article in the Charlotte Observer entitled "North Carolina Welfare Bill Gives Counties Control" discusses the fears of some that "allowing counties to set their own benefit levels could

lead to a race to the bottom in which counties compete to keep the rolls down”(Gibbs, June 12, 1997, A1). The article cites Jake Jacobsen, as saying that could cause families to move to counties that were offering higher benefits”(Gibbs, June 12, 1997, A1). "Jacobsen said he would like to see more flexibility at the local level, but fears Mecklenburg's workforce caseload would balloon if other counties reduced benefits”(Gibbs, June 12, 1997, A1). The article went on to say that "Jacobson's other big worry was that the NC Employment Security Commission might not meet federal goals for putting welfare recipients to work”(Gibbs, June 12, 1997, A1). Diana Tini mentioned in her interview that the experiment was for no more than 15 percent of the welfare population of the state, so most of the counties that are electing are small. “If Mecklenburg county and a county like Cumberland were electing, no other counties could do it” (Tini, 2000).

The decision for Mecklenburg to request standard rather than electing status was not without conflict or controversy. Work First County status was debated while all members of the “Gang of Five” were on the board. The debate concerning whether to become an electing county was based on a “philosophical dichotomy”, according to Parks Helms, Chair of the County Commission. He went on to say that one side viewed the issue as a fiscal issue while the other viewed it as a creative opportunity. Others would view the differences as those between pragmatism, including fiscal pragmatism, and ideology. Three conservative commissioners felt that electing status would give the county more control. In the end, commissioners voted 6-3 “not to become a ‘test’ county in the program, which the majority said did not seem like a bargain and could create more problems and bureaucracy” (DeAngelis, 1C). Diana Tini said that Jake Jacobson provided information to convince others, including members of the Board of Commissioners, that electing county status was not good for the county and that the county would be better off as a standard county. Part of Jacobsen’s argument was that the county had made great strides with its own version of welfare reform and would be hampered under electing status. Parks Helms said that he and the others agreeing to stay a standard county took their cue from Jacobsen. All of the Democrats on the board and Tom Bush, a Republican, voted to be a standard

county. “The three Republicans in support of the state plan said it could save money and give local leaders more of the control that they have been seeking” (DeAngelis, 1C). A quote by Joel Carter, one of the conservative Republicans voting to be an electing county was: “We won’t have home rule. We’ll continue to have it dictated by the states and the feds” (DeAngelis, 1C).

"On October 21, 1997, the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners authorized representatives from the following to serve on the Planning Committee for Work First: the Human Services Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Workforce Development Board, Charlotte Housing Authority, United Way of Central Carolinas, Child Care Resources, Inc., representatives of the banking community, Goodwill, Employment Security Commission, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC), and Mecklenburg Ministries" (Work First Plan). The public was allowed to review the draft plan and to comment on it before the Board of Commissioners voted on it. The draft plan was available at “all public libraries in the county, the County Department of Social Services offices, the County Commissioners’ and Manager's office and could also be accessed via the Internet (Announcement for Public Comment Period for Mecklenburg County’s Work First Plan).

In deciding how to reach the goals that the state set for the county, the Work First Planning committee also identified four major categories of needs for Mecklenburg County low-income families: child care and transportation, barriers to employment, support services and employer relations. Some of the innovative means by which the county plans to help solve issues concerning lack of child care are to “utilize a letter campaign to child care providers to recruit for non-traditional child care hours, to promote community use of schools during non-school activities for child and family related activities and to divert TANF savings for childcare” (Work First Plan, 14).

Transportation needs in the county are for adequate public transit including both in the city and to outlying areas and extended hours for public transportation (Work First Plan, 2). The Department of Social Services will assist recipients in the form of bus tickets, Trac Cards or

mileage reimbursement for 60 days after the recipient begins working (Work First Plan, 15). In addition there was a Kiosk installed at the DSS building to “expand the customer’s knowledge of bus routes” (Work First Plan, 15). Crisis Assistance Ministry and Goodwill Industries developed a program called Cars for Work to “provide opportunities for low-income individuals to own cars donated through these agencies” (Work First Plan, 15). The program targets “individuals with stable employment histories who are currently employed and need transportation to stay employed” (Work First Plan, 15). The Work First planning committee also recommended that the participants be given transportation packets and that a hotline be developed for contacting Charlotte Department of Transportation (CDOT) for access to transportation and car pools”(Work First Plan, 15).

The planning committee identified a need to help adults in welfare families overcome barriers to their employment. That can be done by providing life skills training, additional time to complete training, and counseling and support to help a family to overcome substance abuse problems, language barriers and domestic violence (Work First Plan, 3). In addition to these are the need for adequate and affordable housing, the coordination of services and communication among different agencies and flexible service hours at the Department of Social Services. In terms of employer relations, the Planning Committee cited a need for “more forty hour per week, low skilled, stable, ongoing employment opportunities” (Work First Plan, 3). They also called for job shadowing and an increase in the understanding of the client population by employers (Work First Plan, 4).

Goals, Objectives and Program Priorities

The State of North Carolina gave Mecklenburg County the following outcomes and performance goals for 1998-1999:

1. Reducing the Work First Caseload - 15 percent
2. Putting Adults to Work - 2,380

3. Staying off of Welfare After Going to Work - 85 percent
4. Meeting the "All-parent" Participation Rate - 35 percent
5. Meeting the "Two-parent" Participation Rate - 90 percent
6. Avoiding Welfare through Diversion Assistance - 79 families
7. Increasing Child Support Orders and Collections for Work First Families - 10 percent
8. Child Well-being - Have a case plan that includes safety issues for 100 percent of the children receiving both Work First and intensive CPS. (Work First Plan 8-9)

To meet the goal of reducing the Work First caseload, the plan calls for "using multidisciplinary case management teams to enhance service delivery" (Work First Plan, 11).

This makes it possible for better coordination between services and better service for the family. The Plan calls for the involvement of the business and employer community and "job readiness, job placement, and job development" to help to get recipients off of the welfare rolls by providing them with training and job shadowing activities that will enable them to learn job skills (Work First Plan (11)).

The goal of securing and retaining work participation is to be met in several ways. Potential Work First applicants must register with the ESC prior to applying for Work First (Work First Plan, 9). Two ESC workers are on site at the DSS office to complete the registration process as quickly as possible so that the person may find work as soon as possible. A "thorough assessment of strengths and barriers to employment" is conducted (Work First Plan, 9). Workers determine what is holding the recipient back from working – from lack of work ethic to lack of childcare. The Work First participant must go through an orientation session so that they may learn the rules and consequences of breaking the rules. "Job readiness, job placement and job development activities are provided to individuals as well as to groups and by other public/private vendors" (Work First Plan, 9). These services help to increase the employability of the client. In addition to utilizing the ESC, the county also has a job developer located on site and DSS services are coordinated with agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Goodwill Industries, and

JobLink (Work First Plan, 9). In addition, an Employment Resource Center (ERC) is located on site. In the ERC, participants may use computers to type up resumes, telephones to call potential employers to set up meetings and to gain other skills necessary to obtain a job.

The Work First plan also calls for aid in helping those who are not ready for real work experience. "Work Experience is an unpaid employment/training opportunity in a public or private agency". The program is aimed at "participants who are unable to find paid employment, who need to develop stronger job references or who lack job entry skills" (Work First Plan, 9). Three hundred twenty-two positions in 70 agencies have been a part of this program. "Training is also available through Central Piedmont Community College, private vendors and employers" (Work First Plan, 9). A gift of computers to Central Piedmont Community College provided an innovative means of training and education to "facilitate acquisition of reading and computation skills" (Work First Plan, 10). Work First participants use these computers to improve their employability.

The plan calls for the utilization of several support sources to help those who have moved off of the rolls stay off. One of the most innovative and unique is the Vestibule, a "faith-based job retention support network" (Work First Plan, 10). It is located in the waiting room of the DSS building. The plan also mentions \$44 million in public and private funds to aid families in emergency situations such as maintaining housing (Work First Plan, 10). The Planning committee called for formalized follow-up services for terminated recipients, the tracking of successful participants to determine what made them successful, and for training for workers so that they may be better able to notice if someone relapses to substance abuse (Work First Plan, 12). State and local expenditures can be reduced by using diversion assistance and pursuing child support early in the process.

To ensure the well being of children, the Work First Planning committee called for DSS to "utilize resources to determine the impact of the termination of benefits on the program". The agencies to aid in this are the Homeless Service Network, Crisis Assistance Ministry, Family Self

Sufficiency, Child Protective Services, Community police, Battered Women's Shelter, Family Center, the school system, Communities in Schools and health care systems" (Work First Plan, 13). They also called for the improved coordination with Youth and Family services (Work First Plan, 10).

Eliminating child and family poverty has been very important to DSS workers in Mecklenburg County. As noted earlier, DSS Director Jake Jacobsen introduced a plan to "Wipe Out Poverty in Five Years". The Customer Fusion Decagon was a major part of his plan to accomplish this. The concept behind the idea was that in addition to barriers such as poor work ethic or substance abuse that were causing many to need welfare services, there were also "systematic and institutional barriers" as well (The Customer Fusion Decagon: A Systems Approach to Wiping Out Poverty in Mecklenburg County).

"The Customer Fusion Decagon is a model designed to integrate a system of community resources to create a 'synergistic effect'" (Decagon Information Packet). The model calls for the utilization and cooperation of all ten resources in order to produce the desired results – to eliminate poverty. According to the theory, all parts of the system must work together and must do their part. A failure of one part of the decagon to do its job results in the breakdown of the system. The concept behind the plan is that "people in systems generate fusion by supporting each other to reach common goals". A goal of the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners is that county residents will live in a safe, healthy, livable, prosperous, unified and well-governed community. To attain this goal, fusion must occur among the ten systems of the decagon on behalf of DSS customers (Decagon Information Packet).

The school system is critical in helping to provide "the foundation for learning so students can develop job-readiness skills and learn the value of work" (Decagon Information Packet 3). The schools and the Department of Social Services have worked together to provide summer day camps, after-school programs and the Voyager Program (Jake Jacobsen). In addition, the school system started a pre-school program. DSS is a "strong advocate" of the

program “as early education is the critical component to helping children develop the fundamental skills that prepare them for future learning” (Decagon Information Packet 3). DSS and the school system also have automatic certification for free and reduced lunch for children whose families receive AFDC, now TANF, payments.

The City of Charlotte is a link in the decagon. Cross-training and co-location have occurred between Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police officers and child welfare workers to improve the process of protecting children. In addition, the City is working on ways to better improve the public transportation system for residents (Decagon Information Packet 2). This is important to Work First families as transportation is often listed as a barrier to employment.

According to the decagon information, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community includes many non-profit organizations that work with human services agencies to provide cultural enrichment opportunities, prevention, education and social support groups. Commission Chair Parks Helms cited the importance of non-profits to the decagon. He said that the United Way was an important resource in that they provide volunteers to help with programs such as Communities in Schools and the Uptown Shelters. Diana Tini also mentioned the importance of Goodwill and the Urban League and the training that they provide to Work First participants. Members of several non-profit agencies served on the Planning Committee for Work First and their support of Work First families is critical to the success of those families.

The Charlotte Chamber of Commerce and the business community are also important to the success of reform and eliminating poverty. Not only was the Chamber and DSS contract to market Work First Families to the business community an innovative and unique agreement, but the Chamber has helped in other ways as well. For example it helped to identify and provide solutions to barriers for employment. Another important service that the Chamber provides for Mecklenburg county is “developing businesses in fragile and threatened parts of the inner city of Charlotte, called City-Within-a-City. Within this area, a 40 acre business park will bring employment to inner-city residents” (Decagon Information Packet 3). Parks Helms (2000) said

that it is “an absolute requirement” for the healthy public/private partnership that Mecklenburg County has with the business community to continue.

Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) “provides community-based educational opportunities, and is an important component in the system of developing work-force-ready students and enhancing the skills of those already in the work force” (Decagon Information Packet 4). Jake Jacobsen mentioned a one-year limitation on skills training for Work First participants. To help to solve the problem created by this rule, CPCC shortened some of its courses so that Work First participants had the opportunity to benefit from the skills and education that those classes provided.

Charlotte Mecklenburg’s Faith Community is a part of the decagon as well. They provide a “network of social supports for people who are moving from welfare to work” and provide “mentoring, day care, and job opportunities” to welfare recipients (Decagon Information Packet 3). Jacobsen seemed impressed with the services that this segment of the community provides to participants. He said that religion gives people social support, a work ethic and social support but if they also give transportation, childcare and mentoring services, then that is “icing on the cake”.

Mecklenburg County Government plays a key roll in Work First in that they give money to and oversee the work of DSS. They also are responsible for funding the Health Department and other services that Work First Families need. Jacobsen said that DSS has a relationship with Mental Health and that Mecklenburg County was the first in the state to deal with substance abuse and domestic violence in relation to welfare reform. He also mentioned that if domestic problems exist in the home, that situation is dealt with before the family is put on the two-year clock.

Health Maintenance Organizations make up part of the decagon. Health care is being provided for Mecklenburg DSS customers who receive Medicaid through HMOs (Decagon Information Packet 3). Mecklenburg County is the only county to have mandatory managed care

for welfare recipients, according to Jake Jacobsen. The Charlotte Housing Authority and the Department of Social Services “share data for eligibility purposes, jointly investigate residents suspected of welfare fraud, and jointly provide better case management services to residents participating in Work First” (Decagon Information Packet 2). The last section of the Decagon is the state of North Carolina. They play a “vital role in how Mecklenburg DSS relates to Work First participants through the Child Support Enforcement program, employment services and issuance of benefits” (Decagon Information Packet 4).

Reducing the Welfare Rolls

Parks Helms mentioned the contract with the Chamber of Commerce as part of the county's effort to securing work participation of its welfare participants. He mentioned having a Work First Sign-up Day at the airport. The Department of Social Services invited all of the employees and those looking for work and brought them together in one location so that they could meet each other. DSS staff put together a video to emphasize the importance of Work First. The video was shown to a group of business leaders at the center City Merriott. The video pointed out that the concept of "Just Take One" was good not only for the welfare recipient but also for the companies and businesses that employed them.

Ensuring the Well-being of Children

Mecklenburg County put a major focus on the children of families going through the welfare system. DSS brokered a partnership between the Board of Education and other county agencies. Today there is an on-line certification for free and reduced lunches for AFDC recipients' children. More kids are able to take advantage of this program because there are no extra forms to be filled out. The Department of Social Services partially funds an after school program. It also funds an educational summer program called the Voyager Program for the children of welfare recipients.

Reducing Child and Family Poverty

The County Work First Supervisor pointed out that Work First Clients are on a twenty-four month clock. At the eighteenth month, DSS workers "staff the case". This means that all workers involved with the case get together to see if they have done everything possible in order to help the family, that the path they are on is the right one and what they may have missed that could make a difference in the family's ability to get off welfare.

This employee also mentioned how the "team approach" provides a more holistic view of the situation and better serves the needs of the family. In providing such services, DSS professionals are able to better see the factors causing poverty in the family and are better able to find the means by which the family can overcome obstacles.

Program Implementation

Program Operations

The employees of the Department of Social Services in Mecklenburg County have a sense of greater discretion, choice and autonomy in program operations in recent years. The county has more discretion and autonomy in its actions and, according to one employee, the state is less involved in the activities of DSS than they once were. "There are 100 different counties doing it in 100 different ways," she said. The state is not able to oversee every decision that workers in Mecklenburg County make. This employee noted that the state did not provide as much guidance as in the past, possibly because of the greater variety of county activities. She also attributed this to changes in top personnel at the state Division of Social Services. This autonomy and discretion have made it possible for the Department of Social Services to be more innovative and creative in the ways that employees perform their jobs.

Use of Funds

The Work First Supervisor has found that DSS has greater discretion in how it operates and in how it spends money. Today, money is spent for day care, transportation, training and

improving the eligibility of participants. There is an Emergency Assistance Fund available to help divert a family from needing Work First Services or to aid those on Work First. The money can be used for family needs such as money for clothing, blankets, and food if the primary breadwinner loses a job, becomes ill, or dies, or if they need prescriptions or eyeglasses (Work First Plan, 15).

DSS has an automated revenue service enabling the social worker to enter a code and the system finds the best way to bill the service provided. This helps the Department get the maximum out of the money it is given. An employee has been assigned to investigate and monitor state and federal government revenue sources for which the Department is eligible. This has increased the revenues available to the Department.

Participation of Non-Profit Organizations, Firms, and Other Agencies.

Mecklenburg DSS has used substantial autonomy and discretion in its choice of forming relationships with non-profits, firms, and other government agencies and has been very creative in how it involves them. Mecklenburg County, for example, has “deals” with unlikely sectors of the community – the business community and the faith community. The Department of Social Services and the Chamber of Commerce were the first in the country to sign a contract in which Chamber of Commerce members agree to hire Work First participants. Second, with the separation of church and state being such a fundamental value in this country, many would have thought that a relationship between DSS and the faith community was taboo. However, the faith community has played an important role in serving Work First Participants. There is a Vestibule in the waiting area of the DSS building. Work First participants can enter a faith based retention support network through the Vestibule. “The Vestibule will be the managing instrument for bridging of client movement from the Work First Program into the services of the faith community”. The Plan also calls on DSS staff to “serve as liaisons for the new employees, the faith community and the business community” (Work First Plan, 10).

Organizational Change

Mecklenburg County DSS changed the focus of its work objective and its culture as well as many procedures. For example, the application process was changed. Initially the department had an Intake Area and a Case Management Area. During fiscal year 1998, the intake unit began a transition from a specialized to a generic approach to service delivery. The application process is now combined for all programs and the intake worker is responsible for helping recipients apply for all programs they are eligible for not just simply one program. As the DSS Director noted, if someone doesn't qualify for Work First, the intake worker can still take a food Stamp application.

Three years ago, DSS started a "Families to Teams" approach to serving families on welfare. The recipients are served in a team environment. According to the Work First Plan, fifteen multi-disciplinary teams are responsible for case management of Work First Family Assistance, Medicaid, Food Stamps, Refugee Assistance and Employment Services. The new approach takes a more "holistic" view of families' needs. An employee said that it enabled the family to be seen as "more than just records". The DSS Director said that all work together to provide services. County leaders and DSS workers set a high priority in meeting all of the welfare reform goals set down by the state.

The organizational and procedural changes in the Department of Social Services seem to have gone smoothly with little disruption for employees and clients. One gets the impression that upon Jacobsen's arrival, employees were somewhat overwhelmed with his ideas and energy but were themselves energized by these. He even initiated some physical changes in the DSS building to improve working conditions and work flow, and make the environment a more pleasant place for work and to visit.

County-State Relations

The Work First Supervisor said that she felt the relationship with state agencies had deteriorated: "There are 100 counties doing it 100 different ways." Some of the cohesiveness

between the state and the county are gone. She noted that the state provided less guidance than in the past. The Director expressed frustration with the state and with Governor Hunt. He said that although he likes him as a person, he would give Governor Hunt a “D” grade because he has let some of the core functions of the state decline. According to the DSS Director, the state has not provided enough funding for Mental Health, child welfare, senior citizens, the criminal justice system, and transportation and that the schools had to play catch-up. He went on to say that money for some programs was actually going to help pay for other programs that weren’t funded as they should have been; for example, Smart Start money is used for health care. He was also concerned that the state continues to change the rules concerning Work First and that those changes cause the county DSS to have to play accounting games to get their work done.

Successes, Achievements and Positive Results

The Work First Supervisor reported that in her opinion the number of people who had been put to work and the number of those who have gotten off of welfare were the best achievements of reform. She also felt that the programs to serve Work First Families made it a “community approach”. Programs were aimed at not only the adults but also at the children in the form of summer camps and after school programs. She said that cooperation among different agencies and organizations had increased. To emphasize this point she mentioned that workers at other agencies such as the Battered Women’s Shelter and the Salvation Army would be able to discuss with Work First participants the rules of Work First and what happens if those rules are broken and how many months the family has left on the program.

The Mecklenburg County web site provides information about the Work First Family Assistance Program (www.co.mecklenburg.nc.us/codss/ecoserv/wffa.htm; July 25, 2000). This site shows that between July 1, 1993 and July 1, 2000, the number of adult cases on the county welfare rolls declined from 8,632 to 2,289. The number of cases on the rolls as of July 1, 1998 totaled 3,874. This indicator shows that the goal of reducing the welfare rolls has been accomplished.

The Work First Supervisor also noted that businesses had learned a lot about how to retain workers who had come off the welfare rolls. She said that in doing so that businesses had learned a lot about how better to retain the average worker, that is, the non-welfare worker.

Jake Jacobsen discussed in further detail the increase in the number of agencies working with DSS. He said that one of the biggest successes was the ability of these agencies to work together to solve the issues and remove barriers of Work First Families such as transportation, mentoring, spiritual support, child care, and health care issues – things far beyond the scope of traditional welfare services. He said there was more communication between different agencies – such as the on-line database that allows for direct certification for free and reduced lunches for AFDC families – thus allowing more children to benefit from the program. Also, he pointed out the success of the relationship with the business community, in terms of the Chamber contract and the fact that business leaders are so involved in and receptive to DSS's vision.

The Chair of the County Commission noted that one of the major successes of welfare reform has been in the way that the recipients themselves feel about the process. He said that recipients have higher self-esteem in that they believe in their ability to support themselves. Several of those interviewed said that they were not concerned about the economy taking a downturn and with clients losing their jobs. These officials said that clients now know how to find jobs, have skills to help them on the job and have a work ethic instilled in them. The skills that the former welfare clients are receiving will help them to find a new job more easily, according to these interviewees.

The change in the Work First participants' minds has occurred in the community as well. The DSS Director was credited with the positive view that many members of the public now have of DSS in Mecklenburg County. An employee said that often he would present even small accomplishments to the Board of County Commissioners – for instance when DSS put together a small chorus and went to sing in front of the commissioners. Jacobsen has also been very active in presenting his proposals to the public and has discussed changes in welfare in a variety of

forums in the county. In his interview he said that one of the successes was the positive view of DSS and Work First recipients by the general population. The Chair of the County Commission said that there was a cultural shift in the general population, which no longer sees welfare as a handout.

Shortcomings, Barriers, Problems and Failures

Diana Tini said she was really concerned with those who were going off the clock because their two-year time had expired. She said that it was frustrating when time runs out and the recipient isn't working. Sometimes, according to Tini, it is difficult to make people believe that there is an end to the poverty and there is light at the end of the tunnel. Those unable to see the light are the ones who lose their jobs because of excessive absences or for failing to work at all. Diana also mentioned that more emphasis needed to be placed on retention. She was also concerned about those who hadn't been reached.

Jake Jacobsen said he was worried not about Work First, but about transportation, the school system and economic development activities. He said that there needs to be a change in these environments to lessen the chance of poverty and placement on the welfare rolls. He discussed his perception that institutional racism still persists and is a cause of poverty in the county. For instance, he asked how certain inner city schools and parks got to be in such bad shape and how the county allowed the "big boxes" (major stores) to move out of the inner city.

Parks Helms said that the poor will always be with us and that the problem will never be completely solved. He said that though Work First may not be totally successful, they have seen good results.

Range of Players

The range of players in the administration of welfare in Mecklenburg County is much wider than before. It is important to point out that Jake Jacobsen was named many times as being very influential in the welfare reform process. Jacobsen was and is willing to take risks, to innovate and to be creative. That has enabled his staff to do the same. With Jacobsen's

persuasion, the business community and the Chamber of Commerce joined in the process. They have helped to identify ways to reduce the barriers that welfare recipients have, they have hired them and marketed them to other employers, and they have helped to change some of the old clichés of what being a welfare recipient was all about.

In addition to the business leaders, religious leaders and their congregations have helped in the cause to get welfare recipients jobs. The Department of Social Services also has partnerships and agreements with the schools, various non-profit agencies, the housing authority, and health maintenance organizations to help Work First Families.

The broad range of players involved in helping to make Work First work has created a much more positive program in the eyes of the citizens of the community. No longer is welfare reform seen as a handout. People realize that there are institutional barriers, barriers due to lack of training, and barriers of transportation and childcare. It has also helped to change the perception that welfare recipients have of themselves. They have more confidence in their abilities and more self-esteem.

Assessment By Research Associate

By almost all measures, what has become known as welfare reform has been a success in Mecklenburg County. The number of families and individuals on the welfare rolls has decreased substantially. It will be difficult to separate the very robust economy the county has enjoyed in recent years from the impacts of changes in the welfare system. However, as one interviewee said: “If we can’t get [them] off of welfare and into a job now, we will never be able to do so. This has been the best time to change the system”.

A number of factors have been involved in the success of welfare reform in this county. The most important factor, however, has been the Director of the Department of Social Services, Jake Jacobsen, who was hired in 1994. He set to work almost immediately to address the

problems of the current welfare system and to bring about changes. He has also been a good publicist for the changes that have been made.

The impact of Work First is not clear. Obviously, Mecklenburg County made changes in the welfare system locally well before the state adopted Work First. The state Work First program seems to have made it easier for the county to undertake some initiatives and has given them more flexibility in how money can be spent. It may have resulted in more state and federal dollars as well. But many of the successes seen in the county are the result of county innovations that preceded Work First.

Both the DSS Director and the Chair of the County Commission took issue with the term “welfare reform”. The Commission Chair said that the term was misleading in that welfare reform was broader than just getting people off of welfare rolls. He said it had implications for self-esteem, transportation, education, housing and so on. All of these elements, he said, were feeling the results of reform. He also noted that the term “welfare reform” was not descriptive of what was happening and hence was misleading.

The DSS Director was concerned about the term for different reasons. He felt that welfare reform was not really reform for two reasons. First, “welfare to work” had already been done. He mentioned that San Diego, where he was from, started a welfare to work program in 1979 and in 1980 they had a referendum to have a work component added to all of their welfare-type services. He mentioned that the GAIN program, as it was called, had been a benchmark for federal legislation for welfare reform. The Director said that he almost immediately started parts of the welfare to work program when he came to Mecklenburg County in 1994. He also did not feel comfortable calling it reform in that it only dealt with cash assistance. He mentioned that there was not a work requirement for Food Stamps. He went so far as to say that the new Electronic Benefit Card was a “blunder and an embarrassment” because it did not teach the value of a dollar. The recipient simply had to swipe a card and take the food home. The Director

concluded by saying that reform tinkered with time limits and child support payments but that it did not overhaul the system.

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