

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Mecklenburg County
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Mecklenburg County is the largest county in North Carolina and one of only two counties in the state whose Boards of County Commissioners replaces the Boards of Health, Social Services and Mental Health. Mecklenburg County's approach to welfare reform has been innovative and dynamic. Although a rich county it faces some unique employment problems for low skilled workers because of its industrial and commercial base. The county's Work First plan identifies the need for more manufacturing jobs.

The Department of Social Services began efforts to change the welfare system significantly in 1994 with the arrival of a new Director. Having had experience with a work fare program in California, he set to work changing procedures and goals at DSS. Welfare recipients were informed in summer of 1996 that they would have to be off the rolls by August of 1998. DSS signed contracts with many organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce, who committed to hiring welfare recipients. The DSS Director developed a long range plan with the announced goal of eliminating poverty in the county within five years. His plan included the involvement and cooperation of ten sectors of the community. Among these were the faith community, businesses, education, and other governments. Work First families and Medicaid recipients are enrolled in an HMO.

The decision by the County Commissioners in 1997 for the county to be electing or standard was marked by philosophical and ideological differences. Several politically conservative members argued for electing status. However, the DSS Director and the County Manager provided information that convinced the majority that the county was better off under standard status. Many felt that great progress had already been made in changing the welfare system.

The number of recipients on the welfare rolls in Mecklenburg County has dropped substantially although not steadily. The number of public, business, and nonprofit organizations working together with DSS to help reform welfare has increased greatly. They work to accomplish things far beyond the scope of traditional welfare services such as removing barriers and providing support such as transportation, mentoring, spiritual support, child care, and health care issues. DSS employees have changed procedures and work in teams to help recipients solve their problems and obtain employment.

A reported success of welfare reform is the way that the recipients feel about themselves and the process – they have higher self-esteem since they have the ability to support themselves. The majority of county officials interviewed said that they were not seriously worried about the economy turning down and with clients losing their jobs. With the new approach and activities clients now are better at finding jobs and have more skills desired by employers. The public is more aware of the welfare system and the changes that have taken place. DSS has worked to publicize their activities and successes.

Relationships with state agencies, however, may not have improved. They may have become worse. With more variation among procedures in the counties, state DSS officials are less able to provide guidance.

Some County DSS officials expressed concern with those going off the clock because their time had expired. Others said they weren't concerned with shortcomings of welfare or Work First, per

se, but with transportation, the school system, and availability of economic opportunities to reduce the chance of poverty and placement on the welfare rolls.

County officials are reluctant to identify many of the changes that have taken place as welfare reform. Although they agree that much has changed and that there have been many successes, much of the welfare system remains the same. Many other changes have taken place concurrently with Work First.