

“Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform”

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The Policy Context

Moore County is located in the south-central part of North Carolina, in the center of the well-known Sandhills region. (Pate 1999, 36) Once known mainly for the production of naval stores, and more recent agriculture—especially peaches—Moore County is now the center of world-class golf courses, resorts, and the associated service sectors.

Economic and Social Characteristics

The county is comprised of some 705.2 square miles, and has a temperate climate. The Town of Carthage, near the geographic center, is the county seat. (Kelleher 2000) A number of other jurisdictions, located mainly in the southern part of the county, are the hubs of both population and the dominant economic activities described earlier. These jurisdictions include Aberdeen, Pinehurst, and Southern Pines. The county has experienced some significant growth to the west, along North Carolina 211 and Highway 5, linking Aberdeen and Pinehurst. Other parts of the county are also growing primarily through residential development, in corridors that leave many parts of the county rural, and even isolated. Moore County is not within a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. (Kelleher 2000)

The 1998 population of the county is 70,839, which represents a 20% increase over the eight years from 1990-1998. A long-term projection suggests significant population increase, from 70,839 to 81,719. (Kelleher 2000)

Increasing population, economic, and political diversity may be likely in the future of the county. In some of these ways, the county could be viewed as two counties. One part of Moore County is driven by the golfing, resort, and tourism businesses, and sustained by the wealth of the increasing number of retirees and the professional classes established to give them and the rest of the population health care, financial services, and other services. (Pate 2000, 36; and Moore Plan 1998, 2-3) The other part of Moore County consists of substantially less affluent persons,

including minorities, who are likely to spend most of their work lives in service, distribution, light manufacturing, or agricultural employment. (Pate 2000, 36)

For example, some 22% of the population (ranked 69th in the state) is age 65 or older. Many of these older persons are retirees, and are relatively affluent and well educated. By comparison, more than 11% of the county's residents are in poverty, and some 20% are classified as working poor. More than 28% of the families are single parent and there is an average teen pregnancy rate of approximately 10%. The non-white population stands at 18%. (Kelleher 2000)

The county is rated high economically, and has a per capita income of \$26, 986. The 1999 median family income is \$45,100. Both of these figures are greater than the North Carolina figures of \$20,217 and \$42,200, respectively. (Kelleher 2000)

Moore County has maintained some 40% of the population in the workforce, compared with the state average of 48%, and has a relatively low tax rate of \$0.49/100 value (one of the lowest in the state). The county's unemployment rate has dropped from 7.0% in 1992 to 4.8% in 1996 to 4.1% in 1998. Nearly three-fourths of the population has a high school degree (74.3%) and 19.8% have a college education. (Kelleher 2000)

Overall, the county's economic future is positive, due to the strengths of the tourism industry, manufacturing, some agriculture, and health care industry (which is actually regional rather than local). However, it is the low wage service economy that could be prevalent. Many of the new businesses and expansions observed in the most recent national economic upturn are associated in this county with the service sector and its attendant job structure, which tends to be low paying and sometimes seasonal. The combination of low unemployment rate, and a small but substantial low skill population, could produce difficulties in enabling people to make the transition from welfare to productive, sustained employment. In some ways, the availability of paid employment could belie the otherwise bright picture of the county's future economic condition. Additionally, the county has over the past eight years experienced an 18%

immigration rate, possibly putting additional pressure on both the public and private sectors to produce jobs and services. (Pate 1999; Moore Plan 1998, 3)

The Political Setting

The political setting of Moore County also reflects some degree of diversity, but within a clearly stable partisan power-base and dominant culture. At the local level, the Board of Commissioners has been solidly Republican for a number of elections since 1992, and presently is continuing this pattern. Some 65% of the population is registered voters, including 38% Democrats and 46% Republicans. About 15% of the population is unaffiliated or associated with various third parties. Typically, the direction of Moore County in state and national elections tends to reflect the present partisan proportions favoring Republican candidates. (Kelleher 2000)

Another political factor characterizing Moore County is a high level of community and civic involvement and participation. Given an abundance of relatively affluent, active retirees, community participation in Moore County tends to be very visible and effective. Additionally, retail firms, financial institutions, industrial firms, health care organizations, and major resort and tourism organizations, and civic organizations, schools, and the faith community, traditionally commit to a myriad of challenging sustaining activities on a consistent basis. Community and civic participation in the county tends to run counter to recent reports concerning the demise of civic engagement, at least among a substantial part of the population.

This combination of control by moderate Republican elected officials and a generally civic-minded population has tended to produce a sometimes difficult and contentious, but frequently effective public process. Overall, this combination of demographic, economic, and political factors establishes a strong set of conditions favoring effective changes in community-based welfare reform. (Reporter, 2000)

Time Frame—Highlights

Among the key highlights of the early stages of welfare reform consideration in Moore County were the early discussions dealing with the electing or standard status. No interviewee specifically stated that significant political controversy or difference characterized the early deliberations. Work started at some time prior to the formulation of the Planning Committee dealt with the composition of the committee, and the specific timeframes during which the work of drafting a plan would have to be completed.

November 5, 12, and 19, 1997, were dates during which informative briefings were held for the members of the newly selected planning committee. In three December 1997 meetings and between them, the subcommittees and full committee worked to develop the plan. During January 1998, the plan was finalized and offered for public review and comment, prior to its submittal. Another important date is April 20, 1998, which marks the submittal of the revised plan. Subsequent dates or timeframes include the recent (June 2000) formal hiring of a new faith community coordinator. June 2000 also marks the time during which the WFFA cases reached their lowest number since welfare reform was begun: 203 (WFFA Active Cases: Fiscal Year 1999-2000) Finally, in May, 2000, further partial reorganization at DSS in recognition of the shift in emphasis and the decline of some services due to reduced cases was formalized. (DSS Director 2000; DSS Organizational Chart May 2000) These events characterize the highlights chronologically, although it must be said that contractual developments and commitments and other similar occurrences continue to take place regularly between DSS and community collaborators.

Decision Dynamics

Earlier waivers that permitted state welfare reforms preceded the national welfare reform legislation (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) and the eventual devolution of administration to the states and subsequently to counties, focused on

major policy changes in the general area of welfare. The key focus, now for a number of years, has been on an effort to transform and in some ways eliminate the various entitlements and dependency aspects of welfare. (Hercik 1998, 1-2) In place of these entitlements and the old dependent philosophy stands a commitment to work and personal responsibility.

This significant policy and philosophical change has opened the way for important changes in how welfare is administered. In turn, these changes have been colored by the options offered to counties and by the options selected and in some cases carried out at both the state and county levels. In one sense, the timeframes described earlier make it clear that the changes in administrative procedures, in structure, and organizational cultures, have had to come about in what has been a very short period of time.

Hence, time, partisan politics, funding issues, concerns with authority, accountability and the notion of public value, have all converged to create significant challenges for the organizations responsible for planning and carrying out welfare reform. In North Carolina, services vary substantially locally, but remain supervised by the state agency. In the aggregate, local costs far exceed the equivalent measures at the state level. As a result, the decisions made at the county level, concerning whether to become electing or standard were acknowledged as decisions that could have had major consequences and long-term effects for welfare administration and policy and for other human services as well. (Commissioner 2000)

The choice, at the county level of becoming electing or remaining standard reflected a variety of philosophies of federalism devolution, and administrative capacity. Initially Moore County officials chose by a vote of the Board of Commissioners, to become an electing county. The decision reflected a perceived need, and an apparent commitment to “provide local flexibility in the administration of the Work First Block Grant.” (Moore Plan 1999; Commissioner 2000) Key actors—the Chair of the Board of Commissioners, the County Manager, the Finance Director, and the DSS Director—made several trips to Raleigh for the purpose of obtaining clarification and additional information about the options and what they entailed for counties.

The county delegation just described met with both state agency administrators and key elected officials from the local delegation and those responsible for much of the welfare reform policy developments, including the electing and standard options. The interviewees who attended these meetings explained that the decision to choose electing was not an easy one. The decision of whether to submit a plan to become electing with all that status entailed in terms of discretion, responsibility, enforcement capability and administrative capacity, involved serious concerns and reservations expressed by some actors. (Moore Interviews 2000; Pate 1999) Much of the concern focused on local finances, and on the administrative changes that were believed to be necessary or required under the electing status. (Pate 1999) Because of these concerns, there was some genuine uncertainty regarding the electing option. It does not appear that the concern was about devolution or county autonomy in carrying out welfare reform. Instead, the apparently short-lived concern mainly revolved around financial and administrative matters. Eventually it became the view of the Commissioners in Moore County—after significant discussion with key administrators as mentioned above—that electing was the preferred option for Moore County. (DSS Director 1998 and 2000)

The Chair of the Moore Commissioners explained that the option was a way to tailor what was being done in Moore County (in administration of welfare) to coordinate and respond to a set of larger Moore County issues—jobs, child welfare and child care, and transportation, among others—and that the electing option could be beneficial in this effort. In short, more local discretion could be a way to create additional public value in Moore County. (Commissioner 2000)

Later, the electing option decision was reflected in the local media. The perspective was that Moore County could do a better job with more local control, particularly in several emerging critical areas such as transportation, day care, and community involvement. (DSS Director 2000) in addition, within the local group guiding the effort, these views were accepted, along with the notion that the electing status provided the same level of funding and that administratively the

county government could be more efficient and flexible (as to uses within the block grant areas of discretion and its exercise) than would be the case if the county were standard status. (Social Services Board Chair 2000 and DSS Director 2000)

Moore County Planning Effort

Primarily, it was the County Commissioners who pushed forward the effort for the county to become electing. The Department of Social Services, under the guidance of its Director, provided significant decision support in the way of data and information, and the County Manager was heavily involved in several important areas as well. (County Manager 2000; DSS Director 2000) When the decision was made, it became apparent that the time frame for developing and submitting plans was a very short one. (County Manager 2000) Interviews conducted with the key actors suggest that a kind of dual planning process was used. It turns out that this process-within-a-process expedited and refined the quality of the Moore County Plan such that only a few key issues such as drug testing effectively lowered the initial standing of the plan when it was reviewed. Both related streams of planning activity reflected a full commitment to the effort by Commissioners, County Manager, DSS Director and Staff, and the Social Service Board. One also gains the impression that other community actors, including public and non-profit organizational leaders and certain others were supportive of the decision as well. The subsequent pace and volume of planning activity by those appointed bear out this impression. (Pate 2000; DSS Director 2000)

The first “planning process” addressed the technical, administrative, and programmatic aspects of the welfare reform option on which the county Plan was to be based. In shaping these components of the proposal (plan) to be submitted for consideration, the DSS Director held a series of staff meetings in which various staff members discussed and developed the changes they felt necessary, and how these changes could be made. They worked with other officials to address some of the staffing and financial issues. Importantly, this was a fully involved process and it resulted in the creation of a strong and accurate advocacy of these changes at the

subsequent larger planning committee, subcommittee, and public meetings. (Pate 2000; Moore Plan; DSS Director 2000) Much of this initiative therefore was more centered on administrative and technical concerns and appears to have been very limited in terms of major political or partisan issues or controversies. (Commissioner 2000)

At a second level, or from a more public and representative perspective, the planning effort that produced Moore County's plan became effective community collaboration. (Social Services Board Chair 2000) Again, the County Manager, who chaired the Planning Committee, worked with the Board of Commissioners to create a sound planning committee that would reflect and represent key interests and diversity. While it could be argued that some citizen or business interests may not have been directly represented, it appears inescapable to conclude that the collaboration that produced the plan, and the direct involvement and commitment of the Commissioners were features that resulted in a very positive effort, particularly in comparison with others earlier made in Moore County. (DSS Director 2000)

Following recommendations made by the North Carolina Department of Human Resources, the Commissioners appointed an eighteen-member committee to prepare the plan for submittal in an effort to be assigned electing status. As indicated, very little "politics" is believed to have occurred during the planning process, but the process did reflect genuine differences of opinion and expressed interests. (Social Services Board Chair 2000) The committee was comprised of some six businesses or other private sector interests, and the remainder consisted of county public sector organizations and citizen volunteers. (Moore Plan 2000) To a large extent, the planning committee included many of the interests that would eventually become critical to effective implementation. Also, the planning process essentially produced a large-scale investment on the part of many interests who were needed for effective implementation, or which could have in some way resisted effective implementation. A critical gain was made for the plan that was eventually produced, under the concept of collaboration. (DSS Director 2000) With leadership from the County Manager, the committee met ten times between November 5th and

January 26th, 1998 to develop the Moore County Work First Plan. (Moore Plan 1998-2000) The sequence and task allocation for this effort are informative.

Early committee meetings were primarily educational and informational briefings, conducted by DSS staff. These meetings focused on specific aspects of welfare and Work First, including related areas such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, and funding. The next phase of the process, based on the results of the administration of an internal questionnaire, was to organize the larger planning committee into a group of more specialized subcommittees. These subcommittees focused on transportation, day care, mentoring, community service, substance abuse and treatment, funding, and county conditions and related data. (Moore Plan; DSS Director 2000) By organizing in this manner, the larger planning committee heard subcommittee reports, and was able to conduct a more in-depth analysis in an efficient manner. Many of the issues that would or could have consumed much of the committee's time were addressed in the context of the subcommittee meetings, thereby leaving larger concerns to the full committee. Also, the resolution of what could have emerged as more difficult issues and potential conflicts was made more likely given this emphasis on working in small groups centered on common interests and concerns. (DSS Director 2000)

The Moore County DSS Director and the five subcommittees proposed the overall goals and objectives, and the primary content for each one of the five content sections corresponding to their work. Most of the effort to tie plan sections together in written form also was done by the DSS Director with the participation of others on the committee. (Pate 1999) The County Manager and one of the citizen volunteers prepared the data for the plan. The product of this effort was a comprehensive plan of some 30 pages and the supporting documentation. Public review was initiated on January 7, and public comments were heard on January 20, 1998. (Moore Plan 1998-2000)

Filing Plans with the State

In Moore County, the goals, measurable objectives, and specific action steps to meet them were made explicit in the plan. Importantly, the Moore County Plan reflected a fundamental philosophy of personal worth, the acceptance of individual responsibility, and a belief that sustainable welfare reform was a community commitment. The underlying strategy to create this level of public value in welfare was both straightforward and multifaceted and seems to have been designed to address the matter of helping individuals and families throughout a sustained period of accomplishment and from a number of assistance perspectives. (Work First Supervisor 2000; DSS Director 2000)

How Moore County had initially intended to meet its goals was laid out in the plan that was submitted on January 26, 1998. In this initial plan a series of eight outcomes and goals for the county were identified—these were Work First goals developed by the North Carolina Department of Human Resources for Moore County. Each goal included a measurable outcome component. According to the Moore County Work First Plan, and several of those interviewed for this study, a significant part of the efforts of the Moore County Work First Planning Committee's efforts was devoted to the development of the means, approaches, and processes needed to meet these goals. (Moore Plan 1998-2000)

It was not expected that reaching the goals at the level of the specified outcomes would be routine or easy either managerially or operationally. Many new actors and participants were expected to become engaged in the assistance process, and in a variety of forms. (DSS Director; Social Services Board Chair 2000) The persons interviewed who participated in the planning process nevertheless clearly felt that these were among the most significant features of the plan. These components were the expressions of how the public and private sector resources and expertise could be used in an effective manner. (Social Services Board Chair 2000) By deciding to adopt the goals developed by the state agency, the Moore County Planning Committee provided itself an opportunity to focus on the critically important issue of designing and

developing the means for carrying out the plan and meeting the goals. (DSS Director 2000; County Manager 2000)

Among the most prominent features and emphases in the plan are those related to working with a multitude of community organizations to accomplish various plan objectives. Indeed, the plan identified at least a dozen private resources or types of resources ranging from the faith community to Moore Friend to Friend and Pinehurst Resorts. The public sector resources identified numbered at least twenty-five ranging from the Sandhills Community College to the Moore County Schools and the Employment Security Commission. (Moore Plan 1998-2000)

It is plainly accurate to suggest, as did the interviewees, that this effort was among the strengths of the overall Moore County design. In some sense, this was an effort to create public value through adaptive planning and the early development of a joint government-community institutional capacity to carry out an effective program that would serve the public interest. Hence, for each goal the plan described in some detail the specific means of performance. The structure of goals-measurable objectives-and institutional designs and procedures are linked together very coherently in the Moore County Work First Plan. (DSS Director 1998-2000)

It was the view of most of those interviewed that by working diligently to be selected as an electing county, expressing high quality technical reasoning, and demonstrating a probable high level of sustainable community commitment and operational involvement, Moore County would gain more leverage to create value—through discretion, some degree of flexibility, enforcement capacity, generally local operational authority, some funding discretion, and flexibility for the program. Included in the initial version of Moore County's plan were several features that were deleted prior to submittal of the revised version on April 20, 1998. Arguably the most important and controversial of these features was the initial provision to conduct drug tests for applicants. This issue had been researched and discussed in the plan formulation process. The specific provision was deleted and replaced with another drug testing provision for the

revised plan, submitted in April 1998. This initial provision, along with several others, helped to produce less favorable ratings in the state reviews. Overall the initial Moore County effort was not well received when initially reviewed. Disappointed with the ranking and points awarded, the Planning Committee made a successful and quick turnaround to revise or delete the problematical portions of the plan while building on the strengths in other parts. Drug-screening and mental health screening were, added, to give two examples. Several features of the earlier plan were revised, and the result was that the standing of Moore County's plan was substantially improved. The second round found Moore County's plan 6th out of 29 county plans submitted. (DSS Director 2000; Commissioner 2000)

The Moore County interviewees were very disappointed with the unusual process used to select electing counties. They felt that all the work that had been done was devalued as a result of this selection process. Their response was triggered by this apparent minimization of the efforts they and others had invested, and their convictions that the welfare reform initiative would actually be better if the county were chosen as an electing county. They had expected changes in administration ranging from modest to major, and they were prepared to deal with the changes in a responsive manner to better the overall administration of the program in the county. (Interviews)

Moore County Goals, Objectives, and Program Priorities

As explained earlier, the Moore County Work First Plan included a series of eight goals and measurable objectives adopted by the state agency for the county. A substantial effort was made to develop clear descriptions of the means that would be used to accomplish these goals. The Moore County Work First Goals, along with the associated measurable outcomes, can be summarized as follows:

1. Reducing the Work First Caseload: 15% initially, then greater
2. Putting Adults to Work: 224 clients to work

3. Staying off Welfare after Going to Work: target retention level of 85%
4. Meeting the “All Parent” Participation Rate: 35% of parents at 35hrs/weekly
5. Meeting the “Two Parent” Participation Rate: 90% of eligible two-parent families
6. Avoiding Welfare through Diversion Assistance: utilize for 7 eligible families
7. Increasing Child Support Orders and Collections for Work First Families: increase child support and related by 10%
8. Child Well-Being: Include safety plans for all covered children who receive Work First and Child Welfare Services. (Moore Plan pages 14-15)

It seems clear that these goals and outcomes are relatively comprehensive and that when considered together form a logical and workable structure for long-term welfare reform that extends beyond a focus on the typical adult client, to include children and families as basic social units. As indicated by several of the persons interviewed, a substantial effort was made by the Planning Committee to identify and coordinate the means through which goals would be accomplished. (County Manager; DSS Director) The committee actually spent additional effort and energy to strengthen the community resource base and commitments in the revision phase following the initial state review of the plan. (County Manager 2000)

Child-Care, Transportation, and Substance Abuse were areas specifically identified for special administrative attention given their status as significant “challenges.” As described in both the initial and revised plans, major emphasis was placed on the coordination of child-care and transportation in recognition of their significant interrelatedness.

Additionally, in these three areas, a concerted effort was made in the planning process to identify and develop working agreements and memoranda of understanding, focus outside (non-DSS) funding, and reprioritize DSS resources so as to accelerate and sustain capacity and operational effectiveness. Many innovations, including the mentoring program, the ASTEP program, combating domestic violence (using Friend to Friend), and others were described in the plan.

Program Goals, Objectives, Priorities

To achieve additional perspective on goals and priorities, Moore County interviewees were asked to address the emphasis or priority placed on five welfare reform goals or objectives:

1. Reducing welfare rolls
2. Securing and retaining workforce participation
3. Reducing state and local expenditures
4. Ensuring the well-being of children
5. Reducing child and family poverty (clear up margins from here to so far down)

Both the individual and summary responses to this item proved to be interesting and informative. In one sense, they suggest the range and variety of perspectives and interpretations of welfare reform itself. From another perspective, the responses of those interviewed make one aware of the enormity of the undertaking that is known as ‘welfare reform.’ A third consideration simply is that one’s assessment of the goals of welfare reform depends on one’s role, stake, or interest in the entire matter.

In general, the perspectives offered by the Social Services Board Chair and the Chair of the Moore County Board of Commissioners provided both the broadest views and the ones that seemed to be most associated with general county or citizen-related concerns. Given their roles and representative obligations, which is to be expected.

The Commissioner interviewed for this study explained his perspective on the overall Moore County goals, as an effort to support welfare reform and tailor Moore County needs to Moore County means. (Commissioner 2000) he felt that welfare reform has several purposes, significant ones of which are to reduce the welfare rolls, and secure and retain workforce participation. He felt that the other goals of expenditure reduction and especially ensuring the well-being of children and reducing family poverty were meritorious, but that they would prove to be very difficult to accomplish. (Commissioner 2000) He also felt that the complexity of involvement, along with some irreducible problems such as substance abuse, legitimately stand in

the way of reaching the final two goals. This may demonstrate the limits of effective welfare reform in its present (albeit improved) form. (Commissioner 2000)

The present Chair of the Moore County Social Services Board saw ensuring the well being of children and the reduction of child and family poverty as the primary goals of welfare reform. Welfare roll reduction and sustained workforce participation were viewed as instrumental to these broader, longer-term goals. In general welfare reform could be supported on this basis. The goal of expenditure reduction was considered infeasible given the scope and complexity of the public policy concern and real need. Cost is a legitimate issue, but at this point the Board Chair suggested, it is not realistic to reduce financial outlays in this area. Her focus seemed clearly to be clearly on the human qualities involved in the entire reform effort, suggesting the focus on the child welfare and poverty goals. She has a strong background in several human service areas, and consequently was plainly cognizant of the long-term concerns raised by welfare reform. She was prepared to make commitments, particularly in the area of community participation and collaboration. (Social Services Board Chair)

For Moore County, the assessment offered by the Manager provided a balance—a kind of midpoint between the other actors interviewed. Specifically, the County Manager felt that welfare roll reduction is the highest priority goal. However, he also persuasively stated the importance of children's well being and family poverty reduction. He felt that some progress could be made in the area of expenditure reduction, or at least in achieving some efficiencies in the program. His assessment of welfare reform goals also was based on concerns that are broader public policy and economic issues than would be easily apparent. This breadth of concern undergirded the complexity of welfare reform raised by most of the other actors in the county. One useful example is the Manager's concern with the difficulty in raising manufacturing job wages (statewide). His comment is that these issues directly affect welfare reform when such reform is based on jobs that are expected to at some point generate a living wage for families who are

willing to assume the responsibility of maintaining employment instead of staying (if given the option) on welfare. (County Manager 2000)

The two social services administrators in Moore County interviewed for the case report—the Director of the Department of Social Services and the Work First Program Supervisor—had somewhat similar views on goals and perhaps the most technically refined reasoning in support of their specific statements. They are the most directly involved of all those interviewed in the daily implementation of welfare reform.

The Work First supervisor felt that welfare roll reduction and workforce participation are essentially mandatory. They are therefore of immediate and continuing concern and priority. The well being of children and the reduction of poverty are the highest eventual goals, because the challenges associated with them are at the root of long-term progress in this entire issue area. The Work First Supervisor perspective was both practical and hopeful, growing from some sixteen years of experience in this area and from working in a variety of social service settings. (Moore Work First Supervisor 2000)

The Moore County DSS Director, also very experienced, felt that concentrated emphasis on workforce participation is perhaps the key to the other goals—which, in her view, have great merit as public policy and community goals. She explained that ensuring the well being of children could be the outlier among all five reform goals, which could be addressed best by focusing on work first families. She worked to help identify causal linkages, and to logically array the goals and objectives. Agreeing somewhat with the Chair of the Board of Commissioners, she felt that ensuring the well being of children is a special case, and perhaps one that could require the use of different approaches and resources than those that could work toward accomplishing the other goals. However, it must be said that the DSS Director may have had a more optimistic view of the feasibility of accomplishing these longer-term community and public policy objectives. Additionally, perhaps more than the other actors interviewed, this official seemed to fully articulate what is known about the relationships—linkages—among all the factors

involved in welfare policy and administration generally and welfare reform specifically, although in fairness both the Commissioner and Social Services Board Chair used very similar language and logic in arriving at similar points. (DSS Director 2000; Commissioner 2000; Social Services Board Chair 2000)

Agreement among Moore County Actors

On balance, considering the perspectives that tend to be created by the interests associated with their offices and positions, as well as interpretations of their own roles in welfare reform the Moore County officials appear to be in general agreement. They do support most of the same goals. However, they did not place the same values of emphasis on the same goals, nor did they fully agree on the underlying linkages or connectedness among the goals despite the fact that nearly all of them felt that such connectedness exists. In general they did not (with at least one exception being the Social Services Board Chair's view on gender equality) seem to expand goals offered for their consideration, nor did they seem willing to add substantially to the possible goal structure of the welfare reform effort. When one considers their views, it is easy to believe that a cohesive, sustained effort to reach these goals can be kept alive and functional. (Social Services Board Chair 2000)

Program Implementation: 1998-2000

The interviewees were asked to address a series of items relating to the implementation of Work First. All of those interviewed responded openly and again reflected in their comments a number of articulate views on the issues.

County Discretion and Choice

The initial concern had to do with the distinctive aspects of the first two years and the extent to which there was a sense of greater choice in program operations, fund use, and participation by non-profits or others. All of the Moore County interviewees agreed that these were some distinctive aspects in the first two years. They agreed that the most important special

characteristic was in the overall approach to welfare, with its emphasis on providing the kinds of assistance that could lead to a productive life rather than simply to receiving a monthly check. The Work First Supervisor described a sequence of steps as follows: “When they ask for a check now...from the day they walk in the door they are being told...helped...educated that they will be in some type of work or school activity and they do have to do one of those activities before we will approve them.” (Work First Supervisor 2000)

As described earlier, the perception of a fundamental change in the values served by welfare was prevalent. Also, several of those interviewed felt that there was something special and significant about the emphasis of focusing on both individuals (workforce participation) and families—by bringing many community resources to bear on their needs. (Social Services Board Chair 2000; DSS Director 2000) In short, the interviewee’s view was that the program would help the whole person and family rather than just one aspect. (DSS Director 2000) operationally, the Moore County administrators, particularly the DSS Director, characterized this as a shift from an emphasis on eligibility determinations to an emphasis on social work assistance, and closely working with clients in their efforts to make major life transitions. (DSS Director 2000)

The interviewees all felt that there was a greater degree of county choice than was previously the case. Nearly all of them emphasized greater choice in the area of program operations. The County Commissioner’s view was that the requirements still were much too restrictive (even under standard program status) and limiting in terms of what counties could do to address the issues. (Commissioner 2000) The Work First Supervisor identified greater flexibility in assessments of clients and their needs, and in the determination of the need for and provision of expanded, immediate services. In fact, this is a very prominent feature of the Moore County Work First Plan and a strength of the program. (Work First Supervisor 2000)

The DSS Director related her belief that there is more flexibility in both program operations and in the use of funds. She felt that there is more discretion and autonomy in the involvement of non-profit organizations and firms as well. This area was in fact singled out as

being of particular importance in the Moore County efforts. The Social Services Board Chair and Commissioner echoed similar views on this point. (Social Services Board Chair 2000; Commissioner 2000)

The others interviewed felt that most of the flexibility was in the operations area, although the County Manager's most salient observation on the issue of local choice and flexibility related to the shift in operations and the use of funds moved from income maintenance to social services. In this regard, he reflected views of both DSS administrators. The Manager also had a broader view of the funding flexibility and financial issues in welfare reform generally as they are associated with county government operations. (County Manager 2000)

The Moore County Chair Commissioner felt that, as indicated, greater discretion was exercised in operational areas, but he also saw overall discretion as limited at best (again, reflecting his concern with county autonomy over program implementation). (County Commissioner 2000) On balance, all of the Moore County actors did feel that there had been somewhat greater latitude for local administration of the program. They differed, however, in their specific views of the areas of greatest choice and their views appear to relate to their overall concerns with welfare reform implementation.

County DSS Organizational Change

The interviewees also agreed that over the past several years there has been a significant degree of organizational change in the DSS. Again, assessment of the extent of change, both needed and in progress, and explanations of this change varied considerably depending on whether the person interviewed was inside or outside DSS, or the administrative area of Moore County government.

The Commissioner felt that although there has been some positive change, the rate of change could be faster. He also felt that there has been some resistance to needed changes. On this point he did not elaborate, although he feels that some productive changes are now underway.

It should be said that these comments were not made in a manner, which could be construed as critical of any individual officials. (County Commissioner 2000)

The Social Services Board Chair felt that there could and should be less duplication of services—she felt that more efficiencies could be built into the “system” which could require more DSS organizational change, although her point of view related to the whole institutional structure for administering and providing welfare services and not simply to DSS. (Social Services Board Chair 2000)

Moore County’s Manager said that DSS must make a concerted effort to assist people and help them joining the workforce. He felt that there was an attitudinal and value change at DSS and among others directly involved in administering welfare services, and reflected that much of the challenge was up to DSS. (County Manager 2000) Similarly, the Work First Supervisor explained that a substantial amount of organizational change already has occurred and that it has involved both unit mergers and some downsizing. (Confirmed by charts supplied by the DSS Director) Her view is that the culture change at DSS has been challenging. It has occurred and continues to occur in parts rather than all at once. Some of the changes, particularly in relocating personnel, have been very stressful, but there has been a resurgence of confidence among employees who now see the value of their newfound flexibility, and capabilities, and overall approach to their work. Hence, the supervisor’s view is that the long-term impacts, if addressed effectively, should be constructive and beneficial in an organizational sense. (Moore Work First Supervisor 2000)

The DSS Director similarly felt that over the past several years various necessary changes have created a more effective organization and program, but also a more concerned group of employees. Some needed changes were resisted at the state level. Yet, there has been something of a culture change particularly centered on the commitment to the client and employees’ flexibility and versatility. The Director has sought to guide this change in the agency in a variety of ways, ranging from briefings, to training, to less formal means. (DSS Director 2000)

Some of the various changes—mostly structural/reorganizational and human resources-related, as well as value-based (the approach to the clients) have been to lower DSS employee morale in the short-term. In turn, this has caused some people to question DSS’ capacity to address welfare reform effectively with enormously expanded range of new responsibilities. The load on the agency has been significant, and the organization has struggled to differentiate and adapt, so as to more adequately address clients, other agencies, and organizations. (DSS Director 2000; Work First Supervisor 2000)

At this time, the agency and its supportive organizations seem to have weathered the storm and may be considered more effective, and perhaps stronger than before. It also seems clear that there is a new philosophy at DSS. Whether this can be construed as a culture change completed, or underway is arguable. It does seem likely, according to the Director, Work First Supervisor and County Manager, that the end result is going to be a more effective agency at the center of a significant array of partnerships and joint efforts designed to create public value in Moore County. If there is any disagreement on this is it as to the location of the “center” of the collaborative welfare reform effort. It seems clear that the interests and political factors are present in Moore County, and many other counties as well, to shift welfare reform in that direction should the perceived need and/or opportunity occur.

State-County Relations

In this area, the general perception of several of those interviewed was that the selection process had harmed the quality of state/local relations in welfare reform. (Interviews) yet, several interviewees felt that the routine operation of the program had been made more effective because of a more supportive outlook in the relevant state agencies, in terms of flexibility and local autonomy. (DSS Director 2000) Even so, state/local relations are considered an issue, particularly (again) moving from inside DSS to policy generalists—Commissioner, the County Manager, and the DSS Board Member. In her view, the DSS Director suggested that there seems

to be a new, changed attitude at the state level—more supportive of local efforts to do what is required to make the program work. (DSS Director 2000)

Successes and Continuing Challenges

Nearly all of the Moore County actors are of like mind of this concern. They feel that the sense of collaboration and community involvement combined with a growing sense of self-worth on the part of clients and families are the clearest successes of welfare reform to date (roll reduction and workforce participation are products of these collaborations and attitudinal shifts). Both DSS administrator felt that the approach taken and the sustained effort, including community collaboration (leading to zero requests for extensions of assistance) helped lead to the increased sense of self-worth among clients. This linkage, it is believed, has shaped the effectiveness of welfare reform in Moore County to date. (DSS Director 2000; Work First Supervisor 2000)

Limitations and Continuing Challenges

As for limitations and continuing challenges, it was the view of the Social Services Board Chair that the overall effort is still too limited. The reform effort has not addressed some related and continuing problems, including the residual mentality apparently held by some clients. (Social Services Board Chair 2000) In addition, the Commissioner, the Work First Supervisor, and the DSS Director all felt that a major challenge would be some group of clients who may be simply unemployable and unable to lead economically productive lives. This is particularly a concern when considering the clients faced with substance abuse, mental impairments, and other long-term difficulties. (DSS Graphics)

Finally, the County Manager felt that the fact that the Planning committee is not meeting formally and maintaining a critical mass of interest in the broader community collaboration is a major concern. In fairness, it must be said that an effective, albeit informal network exists primarily among members of the original planning committee. (Moore County Manager 2000)

In summary, the assessments of the Moore County interviewees represent more agreement and a small area of differing opinions (divergent) on both successes and limitations or continuing challenges. The strength of the community effort and the associated collaborations, the increase in client perceptions of self worth (and the resulting outcomes to date) and the sustained commitment are agreed to by several of those interviewed.

There is some divergence in terms of expressed feelings about limitations— limited scope of effort, the residual of very challenging client cases, and the continuing need to address some key areas such as transportation and day care more effectively. These are virtually all independent assessments raised by one or two actors in nearly all instances. They feel that the program and approach works, but that much more action is needed and for a long time. The concern of the County Manager regarding the fact that the working meetings are no longer formally conducted is also an important symbolic challenge for Moore County. It is this working forum that created the design for the present successes. (County Manager 2000)

Involvement of Wider Range of Participants in Welfare Reform

One result of the approach taken by Moore County to Work First has been the identification and enlistment of a significant array of public, non-profit, and business collaborators in the overall effort. Clearly there has been a wider involvement of participants in welfare administration since 1998. Complexity has increased to somewhat fit the scale of the design for addressing the issue (clearly much broader and substantive than before reform). Some of the participants have persisted since the beginning, and others are joining in the effort currently. Also, some commitments have tended to diminish as economic conditions change and as the challenge of the commitments has become burdensome for some collaborators and partners. More recently, according to those interviewed, the role of the faith community has begun to increase. The Social Services Board Chair made this point, and also stated that businesses have expanded their involvement and yet some important linkages still are missing.

The Work First Supervisor said that some worksites have concerns and problems with some clients. All the other county actors interviewed agreed that among others the roles of churches and the faith community generally have recently become more significant in the welfare effort.

Research Associate Summary Assessment

The Moore County experience in welfare reform has been shaped by the contextual factors in the county, the approaches to governing and creating public value adopted by the key actors, and the sensitivity of the primary political and administrative participants to the need to include a variety of willing community partners in the long-term effort. It is my view that a core of similar perspectives concerning how to deal with Work First existed (and still exists) among the key participants in the effort. This set of core perspectives, or even values, enhanced the quality of both the initial planning decisions and the subsequent implementation activities. Several interviewees now feel that the actions of Moore County as a standard county are similar to the actions that would have been taken if the county had been selected as an electing county. These actions include taking care to design an effective planning process, being largely inclusive in the collaborative planning and subsequent implementation process, taking care to differentiate within DSS through relatively small reorganizations and culture shifts, taking care to expand the network of formal linkages with other public organizations so as to improve capacity, taking care to expand the base of community partners (beyond those engaged in the planning process) as the effects of welfare reform became known, and most importantly, designing and maintaining an approach to welfare administration that centers on the life needs of client individuals and families.

The “size” of welfare, and Work First as a public concern is relatively modest in Moore County. The caseload is just above 200 at this point, which is significantly lower than at the beginning of this implementation process. I now see that the political and administrative

challenges relate more to dealing with the expanded concept driving welfare administration than to simply caseload reduction. Dealing with this larger array of client needs is difficult. In this regard, the design developed in Moore County, with its emphasis on community partnering, linking with other public agencies, and undertaking measures to maximize internal capacity without increasing costs may be an excellent baseline design for responding to the continuing challenges. It does seem clear that as one moves away from the center of this network—the Department of Social Services—there continues to be a firm commitment to sustainability and quality.

The administrators in this county have found relations with the state agencies to be more workable for county objectives than before the reform process. The representative officials would prefer more county autonomy and even less direction from the state. I believe that based on the work done for the past several years, the key actors in Moore County are clearly capable of finding additional ways to improve the lives of their clients and create public value in the welfare area. I also believe that the key actors are realists. They know the locations of some of the areas where present capabilities do not bring about significant constructive change (clients with severe difficulties and situations that are extraordinarily complex). They are continuing to seek ways to change their capabilities so as to become more responsive to the continuing needs of their clients.

Finally, it is my observation that all the key actors interviewed are seeking ways to expand the linkages between welfare reform and other public and private issues that are logically associated with the broader social and economic goals of county government. Recall the County Manager's concern with the low manufacturing wages paid statewide. With the emphasis on community collaboration and working toward desirable futures for the clients, Moore County may have positioned itself to continue its positive work in the area of welfare and human services. The system is creating public value. (Moore 1995)

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Interviews

1. Board of County Commissioners, Chair
2. County Manager
3. Director, Department of Social Services (1998 and 2000)
4. Social Services Board, Chair
5. Supervisor, Work First, Department of Social Services
6. Reporter, The Pilot (Newspaper)

Interviews were conducted during July 2000, following preliminary contacts and some discussions. The DSS Director was formally interviewed in 1998 and 2000.