

Executive Summary
New Hanover County
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New Hanover County chose to apply for electing status at the urging of the County Commissioners who saw an opportunity to become more involved in the development of a program that would be more focused on promoting self-sufficiency. DSS staff were the other major players in the development of the new plan. Although initially concerned about the tight timeframe for formulating a proposal and the potential for inconsistent eligibility criteria from county to county under the electing option, DSS staff also believed they could do a better job of providing work incentives for welfare recipients and eliminating unnecessary duplication in the welfare system.

Assessments of the Work First program are mixed. Successes include the 70 percent reduction in the welfare rolls in the county, the culture change among DSS staff whose jobs have changed from a focus on determining eligibility to job placement, increased collaboration with other agencies such as employment security and mental health, and a better understanding and focus on the importance of child care, transportation, and other barriers to obtaining and keeping jobs. Shortcomings focus on the type of jobs being obtained and the dim long-term prospects for self-sufficiency of former recipients in service-level employment, the lack of involvement of community groups outside of the professional human services community, and the obstacles provided by an inadequate public transportation system.

A number of questions face continued Work First reform in New Hanover County, most of which are relevant to the state and nation as well. How will the program be affected by a downturn in the economy where employment opportunities are scarcer? How will success be measured as the county deals with a remaining pool of welfare recipients with very difficult obstacles to employment? How can long-term self-sufficiency be realized when people are trapped in low paying jobs in a region that lacks affordable transportation and housing options? Is the focus on immediate job placement at the expense of education and training programs for welfare recipients a wise policy in the long run?