

## Executive Summary

Welfare reform planning and implementation in Person County has been characterized by a strong sense of accountability in the administration of social services, collaboration among local human services agencies, and resource limitations arising from the county's small population size. In the fall of 1997, the County Commission decided to remain under "standard" state supervision. They reasoned that the county would be able to reap the benefits of substantial reform while avoiding the rigors of setting up an application and payment system at a time when state oversight procedures were also in a state of transition. The planning process generated program ideas and a supply of good will that helped DSS staff arrange services for clients later.

A high degree of trust and consensus on goals among social services professionals in the county helped Person to respond quickly to the welfare reform legislation. County leaders reported several changes resulting from implementation of welfare reform. The biggest accomplishment, in the view of DSS administrators, has been a change in "mindset" of social service workers and clients. Cash assistance is now understood as temporary and tied to employment. A dramatic decrease in the number of families on welfare was also seen as an important achievement. Between the end of 1995 and July, 1997, the rate of caseload decline in Person was nearly twice as fast as the average decrease for the state as a whole. Three years later, the caseload had stabilized and county leaders viewed further reduction as unlikely.

Organizational and programmatic changes have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The DSS streamlined its organizational structure to coordinate services and payments functions more effectively. The agency also expanded internal staff meetings focused on addressing specific case situations to include payments workers and employed a similar interagency process to mobilize support for clients approaching eligibility limits.

Programmatic changes included new arrangements with Job Service/Employment Security for job referral, with the local sheltered workshop for services to disabled clients, with the Mental Health Department for substance abuse screening, and with Person Community College to eliminate or redesign of training programs for welfare clients. The county often must join with neighboring communities to provide specialized services.

From county leaders' perspective, welfare reform has not resulted in greater autonomy at the county level. Changes have been instigated by directives from state and federal governments, not by local decisions. Maintenance of effort requirements have prevented the county from shifting funds from welfare to other functions. Most of the programmatic innovations have been required by the state. The county has worked hard to carry out state mandates thoroughly and expeditiously and to adapt state programs to fit the needs and resources of a small, rural county.

There is consensus among the leadership that Work First implementation has been successful. However, DSS administrators raised concerns that the state does not systematically examine progress toward county priorities of ensuring child welfare and reducing family poverty and that the impact of the program's strict time limits will intensify economic distress when the economy slows.