

# **Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform**

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### **The Policy Context**

**General Information** Pitt County is located in eastern North Carolina, some 90 miles east of Raleigh. The county is almost evenly bisected by the Tar River which flows through Rocky Mount in Nash and Edgecombe Counties to Washington<sup>0</sup> in Beaufort County. The Tar River in most of Pitt County is almost a tidal river—the current generally flows downstream except in dry seasons—mostly summer—when the river can actually flow from east to west as the result of tides. The river’s name changes from the Tar to the Pamlico at Washington, NC where the water becomes salty and Pamlico Sound begins.

Pitt county gently slopes from south to north—the southern side of the county is generally higher than the northern half. The south bank of the Tar River typically has a 20 foot bluff while the north bank is a long, low-lying flood plain. For this reason, cities and towns in Pitt County are generally built along the south side of the Tar River. The southern boundary of Pitt County—its boundary with Craven County—is the Neuse River which flows down to New Bern in Craven County where the Neuse becomes a tidal river.

**Demographics** The Pitt County population is some 126,263 as of a special 1998 census that the county and city of Greenville jointly undertook. That special census found that the county population broke down into 63.9% white, 32.5% African-American, 2.8% Latino, with the

remaining less than 1% all other ethnicities. The percentage of county population of Hispanic origin has increased dramatically—of the 20 US Census tracts in Pitt County, only four showed negative changes in Hispanic population from the 1990 US Census to the special census undertaken in 1998, and even the negative changes in these four Census tracts were very small.

Pitt County grew rapidly in population throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The county population increased in excess of 20% from 1980 to 1990, and increased again by some 16% between 1990 and 1998. Much of this population growth is attributable to the growth of East Carolina University and the medical-hospital complex in Greenville. In recent years, several large firms associated with health care and other light industry have located in the industrial park on the northern edge of Greenville. In the 1980s, Burroughs-Wellcome developed a pharmaceutical production facility in this industrial park which became the major producer for the anti-AIDS drug AZT. In the mid-1990s, Burroughs-Wellcome merged with Glaxo to form a larger pharmaceutical company. Glaxo-Wellcome closed their Greenville plant which was later sold to Catalytica, a manufacturer of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals. In the early 1990s, ASMO, a Japanese manufacturer of small electrical motors, located a production facility in the same industrial park. ASMO has been bringing a number of Japanese corporate executives to Greenville for extended stays at their production facility.

Pitt County is also one of the thirteen Global TransPark counties in eastern North Carolina. These counties were designated as a planning region involved with the development of a just-in-time manufacturing facility located at the Kinston Regional Airport. The Global TransPark is projected to create some 25,000 jobs in the region when it is finally completed, but development of the facility is proceeding at a much slower rate than most thought it would. Pitt County may well be a major beneficiary of Global TransPark development since, as many local

residents believe, individuals from outside the eastern North Carolina region, who move to this area for jobs in the Global TransPark will most likely choose Greenville, with a major university, a good county school system, and other attractions, as a place to live over Kinston.

The Pitt County Development Commission web site (<http://www.locateincarolina.com>) states the following about the county economy: “The Pitt County/Greenville area is one of the fastest growing urban centers in the State of North Carolina, consistently ranking among the top ten centers in dollar volume of construction activity. It is also a leading retail center in eastern North Carolina and ranks as one of only a dozen billion dollar retail markets in NC. The local economy is well diversified with government, wholesale/retail trade and manufacturing each accounting for approximately 25% of total employment. Agriculture is also a strong contributor to the economy (over \$100 million annually); tobacco, corn, soybeans, wheat, peanuts, eggs, livestock, poultry and vegetables are the primary agricultural products. Major employers include: East Carolina University (education), Pitt Memorial Hospital (health care), Catalytica Pharmaceuticals, Collins and Aikman (knitted fabrics), NACCO (lift trucks), Grady-White (boats), ASMO (electric motors), Rubbermaid Cleaning & Maintenance Products (brushes), Vermont American (drill bits & routers), Fullarton Computer Industries (computer hardware), Greenville Yarns - A Division of Mohawk (carpet yarn), and TRW (automobile components).”

Pitt County ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 13 Global TransPark counties in terms of median family income (\$43,288 in 1999) and 5<sup>th</sup> in per capita income (\$21,117 in 1997), making it one of the wealthiest counties in eastern North Carolina. However, the median family income and per capita income are both only just above the state average of \$42,200 and \$20,217 respectively. Unemployment in the county between 1990 and 1999 ranged from a low of 4.1% (1990) to a high

of 6.3% (1992) and averaged 5.4%. This is about one percentage point higher than the average for the state of North Carolina over the same time period which was 4.4%. In fact, unemployment in Pitt County ran higher than the state average for every year in the 1990s except 1990. By the end of the 1990s, as unemployment in the state of North Carolina fell below the 4% “full employment” indicator (3.6% in 1997; 3.5% in 1998; 3.2% in 1999), Pitt County unemployment rates for the same time period ran around 4.5%.

These wealth indicators in Pitt County are somewhat misleading—the county has virtually a bimodal economic distribution. Some people—professors and senior staff at East Carolina University, doctors, administrators, technical staff, and others at Pitt County Memorial Hospital, skilled workers at Catalytica, and some others in the county—enjoy high income and a good standard of living, while others exist on minimum, or slightly above minimum, wage. Many doctors at the ECU Medical School and Pitt County Memorial Hospital, whose income is fairly high, are at the beginning of their medical careers and are thus still paying off medical school loans, buying into partnerships, etc. Thus, disposable income in Pitt County may be much lower than what one might expect. There is also a fairly high number of people who exist in poverty, particularly in rural areas outside the city of Greenville. Pitt County’s rate of food stamp usage (9.7%) ranks the 29<sup>th</sup> highest in the state of North Carolina and its 1,408 Work First families put it in the company of counties with much larger populations. Of the ten North Carolina counties that had over 1,000 Work First families in 1999, only two—Halifax and Richmond—had smaller populations than Pitt County. Thus the pattern in the county is one of a strong economy with many middle and upper-middle class individuals but also containing a significant number of those in poverty or at just above the poverty level. Many of these latter individuals or families are “the working poor,” people whose relatively large family size and low income put them below

the federal poverty line.

**Political Background** The Pitt County Board of Commissioners is composed of nine elected commissioners. Six are elected from the six electoral districts in the county and the other three are elected from three combined districts (a pair of electoral districts is combined to form a “super” electoral district). Commissioners are elected to two year terms of office. Until the mid-1980s, the Pitt County Board of Commissioners was a wholly white male bastion. At that time, the US Justice Department began to put pressure on the county (under the provisions of the Voting Rights Act) to change its electoral system from wholly at-large—which tends dramatically to under-represent minorities—to some form of district-based system, under which minorities can be elected more readily. The current commission is composed of nine Democrats, two of whom are African-American, and three of whom are female (one female member is African-American). The Pitt County Commission has been 100% Democratic since Reconstruction days. The major political battles on the Commission have thus not been partisan and have been within the confines of the Democratic Party. Ideological issues often arise—as the County Manager put it, there is not a whole lot of ideological difference between a western NC Republican and an eastern NC Democrat—but other battles have generally been personal (between two commissioners who have different loyalty bases), geographical (Greenville vs. rural areas; northern Pitt County vs. the Greenville area; etc.) or, more recently, racial. For example, in early 2000, an African-American commissioner announced his resignation from the commission. The local Democratic Party met and nominated Ann Huggins—an African-American woman—to fill the vacant seat. The full Commission, debated Ms Huggins’ credentials for the position and sought to appoint a non-African-American to the seat. It was not until the issue was heavily covered in the local newspaper that the Commission backed down and appointed Ms Huggins.

**The Floods of Fall, 1999** One additional background item that must be considered in setting the policy context for the evolution of welfare reform in Pitt County is the role of the floods in fall, 1999. In September, 1999 Tropical Storm Dennis and Hurricanes Floyd and Irene hit eastern North Carolina, dumping in excess of 30 inches of rain over several weeks. The Tar and Neuse Rivers could not accommodate the runoff from these storms. In addition, several creeks—Contenea Creek and Chicod Creek, in particular—overflowed their banks. The flooding that hit Pitt County was the worst the county had ever experienced; it was estimated that this was at least a five hundred year flood. Flooding in the Greenville, Grifton, and rural areas of the county was extensive; Pitt County had more homes abandoned and the highest amount of property damage as a result of flooding than any other county in eastern North Carolina.

The flooding in eastern North Carolina was not an equal opportunity disaster. Lower income, minority families were much more heavily impacted than were middle class white families. Lower income and minority families tended to live on the north side of the Tar and Neuse Rivers—the low lying side—where property values were lower and the predominant architectural style was the mobile or modular home. These homes were heavily damaged by the floods—in Greenville, for example, one square mile south of the Tar River was flooded while *ten* square miles north of the Tar River were flooded. People reporting into shelters were virtually exclusively poor, African-American, or Hispanic. Many of these people had pre-existing welfare files or were working in minimum wage jobs which put them one step from the poverty line.

Not only was the typical victim of the flooding somebody who was only a few steps from poverty, flood recovery put a tremendous strain on county financial and administrative resources. While federal aid is often touted as forthcoming to disaster-impacted counties, it is now almost one year after the 1999 floods and the first federal buyouts of flood impacted homes has just

taken place. Some individuals have been living in Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA)-supplied temporary housing for eleven months and may be living in such housing (two bedroom mobile homes) for another six months. The loss in sales tax revenue to the county as a result of business closures from the flood, lowered purchasing as a result of electrical and water outages over a two-week time span, and general lowered business activity for the entire fall of 1999 was severe. The ability of the county to pay for additional programs was lowered dramatically and unemployment peaked up in the last quarter of 1999.

One issue concerning displaced flood victims that is coming on the agenda in the county is the eventual movement of people in temporary FEMA housing out of these units. The county Work First supervisor identified this as a major upcoming problem since residents since the residents of the temporary housing do not recognize that this housing is temporary and that they will eventually have to move out. Many of these people lived in rental housing and any cash payment through the federal buy-out program will go to the owner of the property rather than the renter. These dislocated people will present a major challenge to the county when FEMA closes these temporary housing units. The Greenville area, in particular, has little low-income affordable housing for such people and their relocation to outlying areas—Farmville, Grimesland, Ayden, etc.—will simply increase transportation costs while decreasing housing costs.

## Time Frame–Highlights

Pitt County decided not to pursue the electing county status in 1997 when the General Assembly offered the possibility. According to the interviews we conducted, there really was no single point where the decision to remain a standard county was made; the decision seemed to evolve over time into a generalized consensus that this was something the county simply was not interested in. There was no meeting or hearing on the issue.

The standard plan has worked well in Pitt County since 1998, according to our interviewees. Data prepared by the Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform staff show a 33.6% drop in Work First families from 1997 to 1999. According to the county Work First supervisor, the drop is even more dramatic—she mentioned that at the current time, the county only has one Work First family in which both parents are able-bodied. And even this one family is a special needs family in which the mother is a full-time student and the father is jobless but does volunteer work. All other cash assistance recipients are either single parent families or two parent families where one of the parents is disabled.

## Decision Dynamics–1997-98

The decision of whether to become an electing county or not was never seriously entertained in Pitt County. In our interview with the County Manager, he said that uniform benefits across the state were preferred in Pitt County since the county was concerned that individualized benefits would lead to people moving in response to a better benefit package which he said, “happens all the time.” In his view, the issue was not discussed very widely around the county. He had several conversations with the county DSS Director, Assistant County Manager, and a couple of county commissioners but there really “was not a lot of conversation

around the subject.” And also, in his view, there was quite a lot of work to do to elect and the county was simply not prepared to take this work on.

The former chair of the County Commission reiterated this point, stating that there really was no interest at all in pursuing electing status. The major goal, in his view, was to get as many people as possible off welfare and if this meant funding education or training or counseling, the commission was willing to do that. But electing county status was simply something they were not interested in. In his opinion, however, the decision was less political than it was support of the County DSS Director who had strong opinions about staying on the state plan.

The former chair of the county commission also said that one concern that the Board of Commissioners had about electing county status was the unique role of the ECU School of Medicine and Pitt County Memorial Hospital (PCMH). The commissioners did not want the county to become any more of a magnet for people with special conditions than it already was—according to this interview, Pitt County has the highest percentage of AIDS patients of any county in North Carolina, the reason being the presence of the medical school and an advanced hospital facility means that AIDS patients know that by living in Pitt County they will get good care. He also cited the example of the county-operated Walter Jones Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Treatment Center which enjoys a good reputation throughout North Carolina and so draws its treatment clientele from throughout the eastern North Carolina region. This commissioner thought that the same rationale might apply to welfare—that welfare recipients might look at Pitt County as a place where medical benefits would be more easily attainable than in other counties if the county developed its own plan. He also thought other commissioners agreed with him on this.

The County DSS Director took the decision to the Board of Social Services first. The

DSS Board strongly recommended to the Board of County Commissioners that the county stay a standard county. According to the DSS Director, only one county commissioner expressly asked any questions at all about potential electing status and his questions went to the issue of economics and the maintenance of effort that the state was expecting from counties if they stayed on the standard plan. The DSS Director thought the whole electing vs standard county issue was a political one and that the basic choice for county DSS Directors was whether to support the governor (who he thought was opposed to counties' electing) or to support the governor's opposition in the General Assembly (who he thought favored counties' electing). According to the DSS Director, the Commissioners also felt that the issue was political and that they did not want to become a guinea pig by getting involved in a trial project on something that was working fairly well in the county.

The DSS Director also said that he thought that several counties that initially moved toward electing county status went that way since they thought they could drug test all those who applied for financial assistance, which he said was blatantly unconstitutional. He thought that some in those counties wanted to be as punitive as possible to the poor. And his conclusion was that Pitt County was simply not interested in this kind of approach.

The County Work First supervisor was not involved in the decision to stay as a standard county but she responded to a direct question with an answer that, knowing what she did about Pitt County, the decision to stay standard was political. The Work First supervisor was also unfamiliar with the concept of electing status and expressed surprise that Craven County would want to pursue electing county status.

### **Goals, Objectives, or Program Priorities**

Various interviewees differed on what the goals of the Pitt County Work First program,

as it was developed in 1997, were. The Work First supervisor said that she thought the sole goal was to make the welfare population of the county self-sufficient, but she was not in her present position in 1997. The County DSS Director said that the goals, as enunciated by the Work First Planning Committee, were twofold. The first goal was full employment for all who were employable. And the second goal was to find jobs *with full fringe benefits* for as many as could be accommodated. The DSS Director then said that if the county had stuck with the second goal, they would have placed only a half-dozen people in jobs in three years! A member of the county commission stated that in his view, the major goal was to reduce the welfare case load to as small a number as possible while also reducing inter-generational welfare dependence. He stated that there were many cases in which a mother, daughter, and grand-daughter were all on welfare and that, in his opinion, as long as none of them had a model of somebody in the family being gainfully employed, there would always be a strong tendency for this extended family to stay on cash assistance programs. Requiring one of these individuals to work—no matter what kind of work it is—would set a positive example to the remainder and so deter them from seeking welfare benefits. It is unusual, however, that it was only this individual—the most conservative of all we interviewed— who mentioned the welfare of children and the elderly as a goal of the program.

The chair of the DSS Board (who is also a county commissioner) could not disagree with this position more vehemently. Her position was that the real goal of welfare reform was to be punitive to those receiving cash assistance and to get them into whatever kind of job the county could. She said that people who had been moved from welfare to work were now the working poor who were working in dead-end jobs with no benefits. She asked how long can these people remain this way. Her belief was that the entire program should have been tied to education—the county would test welfare recipients, find out what potential skills and talents each individual

might possess, and then train or educate these people in the areas in which they expressed interests and were talented. In such manner, this individual stated, welfare would be truly unnecessary and each individual's potential would be maximized.

There is thus a great deal of disagreement amongst the most important actors in the Pitt County Work First program as to what the goals of the program actually are.

### Program Implementation: 1998-2000

Although those we interviewed indicated a lack of consensus about the goals of the program, only one interviewee—the chair of the county DSS board—thought that the program was not working well. All others had some reservations about the program but concluded that it generally was at least partially successful.

**Changes in the Population of Those Receiving Case Benefits** Each of the interviewees noted the major change in the welfare population of the county from 1997 to the present. Each, in a different manner, told us that the easiest cases had already been dealt with and what remained were the more difficult cases. The Work First supervisor put it best when she commented that since the first people leaving cash assistance for work tended to be able-bodied, the emphasis in the program in 1997 and early 1998 was on educational training and career counseling. People who could work needed to know what kinds of work were available to them and possibly what kinds of work they were skilled enough to do. More recently, since the able-bodied population has already moved out of the system, those who have tended to remain are either physically or mentally handicapped or those with other dramatic problems. There is now little emphasis on career counseling but a great deal more emphasis on basic living skills—budgeting, dressing well for interviews, etc. The most able of the current group of those on cash assistance are encouraged to pursue their GED but this is only a small percentage of those receiving cash assistance at the

current time.

The Work First supervisor also discussed the problems of categorizing individuals as disabled. Her position was that many current welfare recipients in the county were actually mentally disabled but that it was far more difficult to these people to be so classified than it was for people with physical disabilities to be classified as disabled. Thus, those with mental disabilities were being required to take jobs that case workers knew they could not hold for any length of time as a result of their mental disabilities. Some of these same people were simply not employable since, as she put it, they could not work at the level that industry requires of its workers.

**Project Strive** Several of the interviewees mentioned the county's successful experience with Project STRIVE. This three-week, intensive, boot camp-like, program teaches basic living skills to those receiving cash assistance. The program is administered by Life of North Carolina, a non-profit and is partially staffed with Americorps volunteers. The county DSS director told a story about a barely literate Work First enrollee who had never been able to hold a job. After a three week session in Project STRIVE, he saw the same person walking down the hallway at the DSS office, wearing a black skirt, white shirt, with a positive attitude, getting ready for a job interview. There was no data on the success of Project STRIVE but four of the five individuals we interviewed in Pitt County spontaneously mentioned the project and related anecdotes of its success. Project STRIVE also conducts follow-up sessions with those who go through its initial three-week training session.

**Involvement of Other Non-Profits, etc.** Beyond Project STRIVE, several other non-profits, and other organizations were seen as becoming more important in Work First recently. The Work First supervisor talked about increased interaction and cooperation from Vocational

Rehabilitation, Pitt County Mental Health, the county Health Department, and the East Carolina University School of Medicine, in particular the School of Medicine's Psychiatric Unit which is often used as a last resort by DSS for those who are having severe mental problems.

**Transportation and Child Care** Each of the interviewees discussed problems associated with transportation and child care for those moving from welfare to work. Their positions on each of these varied greatly.

The county Work First supervisor was the most detailed in discussing transportation problems. She described the lack of public transit in Pitt County and the lack of coordination between the GREAT (Greenville Area Transit) system—the public bus system in Greenville—and area businesses. For example, the industrial park at the northern edge of Greenville typically has three shifts per day. The GREAT bus schedule, however, does not line up with the industrial park's shifts. So, workers on the first shift at the industrial park cannot take the bus to work but can take it home while workers on the second shift can take the bus to work but cannot take it home. The county Work First supervisor spoke in great detail about the transportation needs of those returning to work and said that what was really needed in the county were three vans (and she actually laid out the possible routes for those vans!) to pick up and drop off workers around the county. In her view, Work First was very serious about transportation for those returning to work but were having problems coming up with solutions. For example, a woman living in Farmville but working in Greenville is heavily dependent on her own car for transportation. When her car's transmission went out, she did not have the money to repair it. Work First could not pay to fix her car but they could pay for her public transportation to and from work (at a cost of \$60-\$70 per day), but the cost of fixing the car was far less than the monthly cost of alternative forms of transportation.<sup>0</sup>Mary Ellen Bragaw, Pitt County Work First Employment Program

Supervisor, June 28, 2000

The former chair of the county commission, on the other hand, was suspicious of the transportation issue. His observation was that transportation was not a problem but an excuse for people who did not want to work. He observed that virtually everybody had a car in a rural area and so rides could be arranged when necessary if the person individually did not own a car. He cited his own living situation—in a rural area—as an example of this; all of his neighbors had their own transportation.

The Work First supervisor also examined the inter-relationship between transportation and child care. For example, this woman cited the model child care program at Pitt Community College (PCC) and how well it met the needs of former welfare recipients returning to work. She then talked about the PCC bus system which transports people to and from the college. But this transportation system only operates when the college is in session; when it is not in session, the only alternative individuals using the child care system have is to use the GREAT bus which only goes as far as Carolina East Mall—some 3/4 mile from PCC. She remarked how difficult this walk might be for a woman carrying a baby.

Child care itself was described as a major barrier to those returning to work. Each of the five individuals we interviewed cited problems with child care, whether those problems were more theoretical (how can these people who work minimum wage afford to pay for quality child care?) to more practical (specific examples of individuals who have had problems with child care; calculations of what percentage of income child care takes for a single parent earning minimum wage). Even the former chair of the county commission, who discounted the impact of transportation problems on people's ability to work, mentioned child care as a real problem.

**Lack of “Life Skills”** On a more general note, those more familiar with the individual cases of

welfare recipients cited the differences between the current welfare recipient and those receiving benefits in 1997. Many of the current recipients, we were told several times, were simply not able to operate in the modern world. Many did not know how to handle money, to budget, to plan for future expenditures, etc. The Work First supervisor went so far as to say that these people were so limited that they typically never had a back-up plan if their initial plan failed. So, if the old car they used did not start, they simply would not go to work since there was no provision for a contingency plan if the car would not start. If a child was sick and could not go to child care, they simply would not go to work since, again, there was no provision for a contingency plan. It would only take a few cases of these types of absences for an employer to terminate the individual.

**Organizational Change** None of the interviewees cited much organizational change at the county DSS. They did, however, discuss changing roles amongst workers at DSS. The Work First supervisor, as mentioned above, spoke about the change from career counseling and training in 1997 to basic life skills now. The DSS Director went farther on this and said that he even thought that, at times, the professional social workers—those with MSW degrees, for example—were not as good in dealing with the current generation of welfare recipients as less-educated individuals were. Often, he said, those with fewer years of education might have similar experiences to the clients while those with Master’s degrees could not empathize with the clientele. The Work First supervisor said that she thought that the jobs of people in the DSS had not changed as much as the clientele had changed.

**County-State Relations** Contrary to what we initially thought, several of our interviewees thought that the state was actually becoming more rigid in its dealing with counties over the welfare program. The Work First supervisor, for example, said, when she first started working at

DSS, she could “wangle” more benefits than she could now. If she had a reason and she really felt it was right for a family, she could obtain some kind of benefit for the family. Now, she said there are dozens of guidelines to adhere to and she felt her hands were tied in comparison to the way things had been.

The DSS Director had a different take on this. He said he thought that a more stable environment had been evolving since 1997 but then the floods of Fall, 1999 hit. In response to these floods, the state House of Representatives was reprogramming TANF Block Grant money for flood relief. While he noted the necessity of getting people back into their homes, etc., he also noted that the County Commissioners had already told him they would not pick up the shortage in the budget. If they actually did not, his only option would be to cut staff. He thought that the program had been cruising along fairly well but that the floods had caused a tremendous hardship to the county as a whole, and that this problem would have most likely existed even if Work First had never been adopted. For example, he indicated that just after the floods, the county DSS office received 7300 applications for food stamps and actually approved some 6600 of these for a three-month allocation of food stamps.

**Major Successes of Work First** Each of the interviewees had a fairly similar list of Work First accomplishments through its first three years of existence in Pitt County. The DSS Director started his discussion of these successes by noting that in his entire career, this was the first time that he had been involved in a noble re-engineering experiment. He then went on to note the various types of successes, especially early in the program’s existence—the movement of the able-bodied out of the welfare system and into the labor market. In his view, there were three separate populations of welfare recipients in Pitt County in 1997-98 who reacted quite differently to the Work First changes. First, there were those getting very small amounts of public assistance who

voluntarily went off welfare when they saw the requirements the new program would place on them. Second, there were those who had something to take to the labor market. He viewed this second group as relatively easy to work with; many if not all of them were placed in jobs fairly easily. The third group he identified as those in generational poverty. He said that this was the group that for whom it was very difficult to find job placements. Quite reasonably, he saw the first two groups as successes for the Work First program and the latter group as one of its real problems.

All of our interviewees identified Project STRIVE as a major success for the county, as noted above. This project has been viewed as one of the only bright spots in dealing with the partially disabled, difficult to place, last group of welfare recipients described by the DSS Director above. All of the interviewees also discussed increased inter-agency cooperation amongst the agencies dealing with social services in the county—there appeared to be some notion in the interviewees that these agencies thought that they were all in this together and needed to increase their cooperation to deal with an increasingly difficult problem.

**Major Shortcomings of Work First** Each of the interviewees identified a different set of shortcomings and each appeared to give more thought and more detail to the shortcomings they identified than to the successes described above.

The Chair of the DSS Board was probably the most negative about Work First. She started here interview by stating simply that the whole business is not working. She was particularly concerned about people moving off of welfare into jobs with no benefits; they thus were no longer “the poor” but were now “the working poor.” She said that the percentage of those in poverty in Pitt County had remained fairly constant over the three years (in her view at 22.3%) and thus Work First was not moving people out of poverty but simply off the welfare

rolls. She believed that the program got off to a wrong start by not having a strong tie to education. As stated above, she thought that each welfare recipient should be tested to determine their skills, needs, strengths, etc. and then education programs could be set up to help this person accomplish these goals. She was particularly concerned about transportation and child care needs and said that the county did not have any provisions to solve these problems for former recipients returning to work.

The county DSS Director also identified a number of shortcomings, particularly revolving around the group in “generational poverty” described above. His major concern, however, was the raiding of the state social service budget to pay for flood relief efforts and short term flood-related services. He noted the huge number of food stamp applications after the floods but also noted that the number of Medicaid applications had also gone up even before the floods. In making this last observation, he also noted that these recent applications tended to come from middle-class individuals who were seeking Medicaid eligibility to help pay for their parents’ nursing home bills. His generalized point was that the budget for the generational poor, which he thought was somewhat adequate for a few years, was now being threatened by applications from, first, temporarily displaced people as a result of the floods and, second, middle class people who needed help in caring for aging parents. Although he did not directly say it, his implication was that in any such direct competition for resources, the generational poor would lose out.

The Work First supervisor, rather than directly addressing shortcomings in the program, mentioned a series of unfilled needs. These were the need to make a decision to classify somebody as disabled faster and simpler, the need for low income affordable housing, and the need for an agency or county operated bus system.

The difference between physical and mental disabilities had been discussed earlier in this

case study but the basic point is that it is much easier to get physical disability status than it is to get mental disability status. And many of the current population of welfare recipients in the county might be eligible for mental disability status. The delay in getting these people so classified becomes more problematic as they advance toward the two year cap on welfare eligibility. Many of them cannot work at all or cannot work at the level that private industry requires but they do not show the physical disabilities that make it apparent that somebody cannot work.

The lack of affordable low income housing in Pitt County is also problematic since it interacts with the transportation issue below. The major job market in the county is Greenville but housing costs in Greenville are rather high (and higher than the rural areas of the county)—the second quarter, 1998 American Chamber of Commerce Researchers Association (ACCRA) survey rated Greenville housing at 96.4 while Charlotte—with a much higher income base—was rated at 99.1. Thus, many minimum wage people work in Greenville but live in outlying communities. These people pay a relatively high percentage of their income for transportation, something which could be reduced if Greenville had more affordable low income housing.

The lack of transportation and the lack of coordination in transportation have been discussed above and it should be apparent that this is a major problem in Pitt County, especially since many low income people are heavily dependent on automobiles or the poor public transportation system to go back and forth to work.

## Assessment

It is readily apparent that there is a great deal of concern about the future of the Work First program in particular and in the welfare population in general among those we interviewed in Pitt County. All of the interviewees mentioned the problems of child care and transportation.

Some went farther and discussed the nature of the work experience that former welfare recipients were moving into and whether undertaking this work was a net plus or a net minus for the individuals themselves. Two individuals—the chair of the DSS Board and the DSS Director—questioned the value of requiring single women with children to work at all. They both expressed a concern that this requirement could result in a generation of children who did not have much parental supervision and this could lead to increases in such social maladies as crime rates, school drop out rates, etc.

The concern by the DSS Board Chair that each welfare recipient be individually tested and individual education programs designed to meet their needs is certainly progressive and laudable. I wonder, however, how practical it is and how much political support there would be in an essentially conservative county to undertake such an effort.

The Work First supervisor's ideas on transportation seem to be very sophisticated. She had already mapped out van routes through various parts of the county and could visualize the schedules for these vans. All that was necessary was the actual purchase of the vans and the hiring of drivers. But the money to accomplish this has not been forthcoming and she was the only person to mention it. Given that, I wonder whether this is really on the county political agenda at all or whether this is just some idealistic vision which she personally indulges.

Last, the DSS Director's concerns about long-term welfare recipients vs. short-term assistance for flooding victims or middle class individuals with elderly parents seem to be particularly advanced. He was thoughtful and developed his arguments carefully but his sense of frustration came through very clearly. His notion that the program was cruising along nicely until the demands of those displaced by the flood conflicted with the need for funds for the "truly needy" is something that had dominated goodly portions of the welfare literature in the past. But

I had not seen this argument put so practically and in such a pure form as the director put it. Pitt County truly has a problem if the Board of Commissioners will not augment a lowered DSS budget with county funds; the state of North Carolina truly has a problem if it take funding from the “lowest of the low” to fund temporary programs to assist middle class individuals, simply to avoid a tax hike in an election year.

The interviews in Pitt County were very interesting. The people we interviewed abstracted from their individual perspective and spoke about system-wide problems. They seemed to be very concerned about the nature of the problem and the population of welfare recipients. They were not particularly positive about the future of the program but thought of it as an experiment—and not a particularly positive experiment at that.

## ENDNOTES

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0.1. Washington, NC was the first town in the US named after George Washington. Long-time residents of eastern North Carolina call Washington, “little Washington” to differentiate it from Washington, DC.

0.2. It is interesting to compare this situation with that in the Craven County case study. In Craven County, officials were able to *buy* a car for a person who needed transportation. In Pitt County they were not able to *repair* a car for a person who needed it.

## INTERVIEWS

Tom Robinson, Pitt County Manager, June 6, 2000

Edward L. Garrison, Director of Social Services, June 14, 2000

Eugene James, Member and former Chair, Pitt County Board of Commissioners, June 19, 2000

Terry Shanks, Member, Pitt County Board of Commissioners and Chair, County DSS Board, July 13, 2000