

“Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform”

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The Policy Context

Robeson County is located in the southern coastal plains of North Carolina bordering South Carolina. The county has been a main supplier of naval stores, and today still is largely rural and agricultural mostly in tobacco and cotton. The county has more recently increased poultry, pork, and aquacultural operations. It contains a number of manufacturing and commercial operations, and service activities along I-95.

Economic and Social Characteristics

The county is among the largest, if not the largest, in North Carolina—some 944 square miles. Lumberton, which is the largest city in the county, is the county seat. A number of other local jurisdictions, mostly classified as towns, are located across the county, primarily at traditional travel, trade, or economic hubs. These localities include Fairmont, Maxton, Pembroke, Rowland, Red Springs, and St. Paul. (Kelleher 2000)

In recent years, the county has experienced some economic growth along the I-95 corridor, and surrounding the City of Lumberton. Again, the county is dotted with small towns and settlements essentially in an otherwise rural setting. Robeson County is near Hoke and other rural counties, and Cumberland County, which include Fayetteville and Fort Bragg.

The 1998 population of Robeson County is 113,682, which represents a gain of about 8.1% since 1990. The long-term projection to 2008 suggests a population increase to 120,965. The current rank in the state is 19th on population. (Kelleher 2000)

A modest increase in population, and economic challenges, as well as a high degree of demographic and political diversity are likely to be the future of this county. Robeson County is significantly diverse demographically, among African Americans, European Americans, and Native Americans, with a substantial influx of Hispanic persons in recent years. There is both affluence and poverty in the county, and both are spread throughout the county. Robeson is in the midst of a difficult transition, and its people are pressured to address many issues related to

growth, economic change, education, and social transformation. A substantial part of the population is relatively poor, generally less educated, and likely to work in various low skill jobs in light manufacturing, agriculture, and especially service type jobs. (Pate 1999)

The age distribution of the county population is informative—relatively youthful with a median age of 32.34 compared with the state median of 35.47. The proportions among the county's three main racial and ethnic groups are relatively even. (Pate 1999)

This is not a county with a large affluent class. The poverty rate of 24.1% is one of the highest in the state, and the unemployment rate is 7.7%, also high. Furthermore, Robeson County is economically low: two on a standard scale of five. (Kelleher 2000)

The per capita income for the county is \$16,620, among the five lowest in the state. The median family income is \$30,700, which is also among the lowest in the state. Both of these figures can be compared to the state figures of \$20,217, and \$42,200 (an enormous family income difference of \$11,500). (Kelleher 2000)

Robeson County has maintained some 46.1% of its population in the workforce compared with the state average of 48%, and has a tax rate of \$0.81/100 value (very high). Only 57% of adults in the county have a high school education, and 11.0% have a college education. Robeson County's projected growth rate to 2008 is a very modest 6.4%, and the net migration is a very small 0.9%. (Kelleher 2000) Despite recent gains in some locations, these figures do not suggest a strong economic future for the county. The county has lost some jobs in recent years. (Pate 2000) However, as indicated, growth is taking place along the interstate corridor and in some other locations. Furthermore, some new businesses are locating in Robeson County and its primary hospital is developing regionally. Also, some agribusiness and service operations are generating jobs and some wealth.

Low-paying jobs, low education and skills, a high rate of dropouts from schools, and a less competitive economic presentation may not bode well for the county generally and for the persons currently receiving various forms of public assistance. The challenges are clear, and

include finding new businesses and employers, more worker skills, and increased wages and economic stimulation. The low immigration rate could help prevent job saturation, but it also may mean that new skilled managers, professionals, and active new people are not increasing as a proportion of the workforce.

The Political Setting

The political setting of Robeson County reflects a degree of diversity, although the county does appear to have a stable partisan power base and multiracial elite power structure. Democrats dominate local elected bodies. From a population of 113, 682, there are 71,116 persons registered (63%). Interestingly, 85% of the population registered is Democrat, compared to only 9% Republicans. The comparable state proportion is 52% Democrat, 34% Republican. The remaining voters are independent or third party. (Kelleher 2000)

Robeson County has supported Democratic candidates in a long series of national and state elections. One member of the U.S. Congress is from Robeson County. The County Board of Commissioners has been Democratic for a long time, perhaps a record that is not likely to change.

The size, diversity, and lack of major large cities are factors that have been traditionally associated with the county's lack of growth and unity of purpose. There could be a lack of civic engagement across all of the county's major populations. Pockets of volunteers, and civic engagement can be found at various places in the county, but there appears not to be a strong, widespread, and consistent manner of civic engagement in the county. Hence, Democratic dominance, a relatively modest level of civic engagement and political participation and civic volunteerism appear to have combined to yield a degree of community collaboration that may not be adequate to sustain welfare reform or other long term commitments. Essentially there is a very limited culture of civic engagement, and the basic predictors of public participation: income education, and opportunity all are in short supply in the population generally.

Moreover, the generally agriculturally driven economy across the county lacks many of the elements of a supportive infrastructure for the types of actions that could sustain community collaboration in welfare reform (such as industrial and manufacturing firms, civic groups, and the like). Public participation in non-elected areas is not significant in many parts of the county.

These factors may have combined not only to help create the conditions generating the need for welfare assistance, but also may have restrained the development of an essential set of factors needed to support welfare reform. The overall combination of demographic, economic, and political factors establishes a set of conditions in which welfare reform may be somewhat challenging to sustain.

Time Frame Highlights

Consideration of whether to select electing of standard status was one of the key highlights of the early states of welfare reform in Robeson County. Even with the choice of standard rather than electing, the key actors had an obligation to develop the Work First Plan, and the time provided for the effort was short. The Board of Commissioners voted to administer the Work First Program in Robeson County as a standard county on November 3, 1997. (Pate 1999) One week later, November 10, the Board appointed the Welfare Reform Planning Board.

The Planning Board met on December 9, 18, and 31 and January 7, 1998 to perform analyses and prepare the Work First Plan. The plan produced by that effort was approved and submitted on January 7, 1998. (Robeson County Work First Plan 1998-2000)

Subsequent significant actions have included the reorganization of several units within DSS essential to welfare reform, and the signing of a series of contracts and memoranda of understanding with various providers and public or non-profit partners in 1998 and 1999. (Robeson County Work First Supervisor 2000) A few additional agreements have been signed in recent months, most of them related to service provision by community groups and organizations.

Exact dates were not provided, but these actions occurred throughout the implementation period to date. (Work First Supervisor 2000)

Decision Dynamics

Earlier waivers that permitted state welfare reforms preceded the national welfare reform legislation 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. Local aggregate costs far exceed the equivalent measures at the state level. However, local operations are conducted locally but are supervised by the state agency. 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)

In Robeson County, the choice of seeking electing status or being standard revolved around political, administrative, and community capacity considerations. (Interviews 2000) The

Robeson County Work First Plan for 1998-2000 reflected the decision of the Board of Commissioners for the county to be standard. Under this designation, the eligibility criteria and payment methodology for the Work First Family Assistance are set by the state agency. It is informative to review the perceptions of key actors in Robeson County who were involved in the selection of standard status.

Welfare reform generally, and the options related to achieving electing or standard status are viewed as political issues by several of the key actors interviewed in Robeson County. According to the Robeson County DSS Director, there was a useful but not extended discussion of seeking electing status when the options were announced. The Director's view was that much "politics" was involved at all levels (in the federal system) in the general welfare reform area. He considered the development of welfare reform, and its partisan and interinstitutional conflicts, and essentially concluded that the county would be "better off" administratively if it were standard and not electing. In general, it was also felt that with the Republican dominance of the General Assembly, and their heavy promotion of the "electing" and "standard" options, a largely Democratic county like Robeson would not be selected or even competitive in the end. This was the Director's perspective, and it seems to have been corroborated by others who were interviewed. (DSS Director 2000) If the national and state legislatures were behind reform it was the Chief Executives at both levels who adapted the ideas to fit at both levels. Hence, Robeson County's decision to remain standard was compatible with at least the national and state level actors driving welfare reform overall. One long-time county commissioner felt that administrative issues were critical and that under the difficult conditions in Robeson County, the decision to be a standard county perhaps improved long term and administrative prospects. (Commissioner 2000) In short, the electing versus standard choice was not the single important factor in welfare reform in this county.

Administrative considerations also led Robeson County to choose standard status—at the recommendation of the DSS Director. Apparently it was believed that the process under the

standard status could be similar to the way Robeson County functioned and it would be the most suitable choice. There was also some concern that the reforms that needed to be carried out and that would be of most value to the clients were administrative and should come from within counties rather than from state dictates. The issue of fairness to clients rather than punitiveness also was a concern both in terms of policy and administration. The view was that savings would not be likely without the punitive aspects of the program. (DSS Director, Commissioner, Social Services Board Chair 2000)

Finally, the choice in Robeson County was at least somewhat influenced by the concern that electing status would not be conducive (given its punitive aspects) to the creation of sound community partnerships, which would be especially needed in this status. Hence, it was the recommendation of the DSS Director that was the principle driver behind Robeson County's decision to be a standard county. (DSS Director) The apparent trade between county discretion and autonomy under electing and the predictability and fairness, and efficiency under standard status were acceptable to the Board of Commissioners when the final choice was voted unanimously.

Robeson County Planning Effort

It was generally acknowledged by those interviewed that a significant planning effort was necessary even under the standard status. Once the decision was made, all participants were aware of the relatively short period of time for plans to be submitted. The Robeson County Commissioner who was interviewed felt that the preparation of a plan under which the welfare program would be transformed in fundamental ways would be especially challenging given the short time permitted for the process. (Commissioner 2000) In any event, the subsequent effort did involve a large number of community and governmental organizations and participants.

Some thirty-nine members were appointed to the Work First Planning Committee on the recommendation of the DSS Director to the County Manager (for appointment by the Commissioners). These positions were the ones recommended by the state along with several

others who had requested assignment to the committee. (Pate 1999) The Robeson County committee was relatively large and included a substantial representation of key community and public interests. The composition of the committee generally followed the recommendations of the state. Seven business organizations, including three employment service organizations were represented on the committee. The University of North Carolina at Pembroke also was represented, as were more than a dozen other public agencies and organizations. Also included were most of the key non-profits, community, and faith-based organizations from across the county. Additionally, there were several citizen volunteers and some organizations that joined the effort at their own request. One example would be the inclusion of the county's Black Improvement Association. (Robeson Plan 1998) In all, the effort was felt to be successful from the perspectives of inclusion, openness, and visibility. And the committee clearly had captured the involvement of many who could be in a position to serve as community partners in one way or another.

According to those interviewed, the planning process that produced the Robeson County Plan, went smoothly and cooperatively, without undue conflict. Working with a large committee and short time frame, only four major meetings were conducted. All members worked in a cooperative manner under the guidance of the chair, who was a long time community leader and whose appointment seemed to resolve some earlier community issues. (Robeson Plan 1998, Interviews 2000)

As has been observed elsewhere, the Robeson County planning process included two streams—one focused on the technical aspects of welfare and its administration, and another focused on the shaping of an effective community organization to carry out the plan. In the initial portion of the planning process the DSS staff presented largely technical information of the Work First Program and relevant county-level information and data. The purpose of such briefings was to make certain that the members of the committee (Board) would be reasonably well informed and has the technical base they needed to engage in the planning process in an effective manner.

In the next portion of the effort, the more public and representative actions were put into place—specifically with the members of the committee identifying a variety of issues that they felt needed to be examined. Then, as a means of creating both efficiency and content quality, the larger committee was made into some eight smaller subcommittees. (Robeson Plan 1998) These groups, in the opinion of the DSS Director, developed a series of critical needs along with in-depth strategies to deal with the needs. (DSS Director 2000) Many of those involved in preparing sound strategies in which they and their organizations would eventually participate.

It seems clear that the participants in this effort made large investments of their own abilities and energies, all directed toward a common end. This was, in the views of several of the key actors, and important countywide collaboration effort. (Commissioner 2000, DSS Director 2000) The Robeson County committee centered on a common vision statement. Several emphases are worth summarizing here: First, the effort of welfare reform is to support families and help them make a transition (and hence break a cycle of dependency). They also envisioned a countywide system that employs both public and private organizations in the effort. Multiple, but related service areas are to be emphasized including education, child care, transportation, health care, support services, employment, housing, and engagement of the faith community. (Robeson Plan 1998)

The movement from unemployment to employment and from short-term employment to sustained employment is critically important, given the overall goal of family self-sufficiency. As the contributions from the eight groups came in and were completed, it was the task of the DSS staff to take the information and put it into a form suitable for the plan. Emphasis also was on the development of effective strategies to use in carrying out the efforts. (Robeson Plan 1998) Several interviewees explained this as a demanding part of the overall effort, particularly in consideration of the short timeframe and the focus not just on short-term but long-term efforts as part of the overall vision. As a result of this effort, the committee, working with the DSS, was

able to shape an excellent county plan for administering the reform program. (DSS Director 2000, DSS Board Chair 2000)

The DSS Director and several others interviewed explained that the long-term and community focus of the effort separated it from previous similar actions. The differences were the openness of this effort, and the emphasis on realism and effectiveness in administration. Collaboration and the multidisciplinary effort were also keys. The product of the Robeson County effort was a comprehensive plan of some thirty pages plus supporting material. The plan was completed and submitted in January 1998, following a vote of the Board of Commissioners. (DSS Director 2000, Commissioner 2000)

Filing Plans with the State

The goals, measurable objectives, and a series of action steps for each were placed in detail into the Robeson County Plan. As indicated, the plan's vision statement emphasized a series of important aims and values that under girded the remainder of the plan—family and individual worth, responsibility, sustainable employment, and others. The subsequent strategy was both straightforward and laid out in some detail—and plainly one intended to meet the welfare difficulties in the county head-on. The community is built in as a crucially important part of the effort.

The Robeson County plan designed to achieve the vision statement contained a series of eight goals and outcomes as provided by the North Carolina Department of Human Resources—statewide Work First goals set up for each county. Each goal included a measurable outcome component. By adopting these goals, the Robeson County Committee could in turn devote (as it did) the largest share of its effort to developing the means and approaches to meet the goals. (Robeson Plan 1998)

Although encouraged by the diligence of the planning committee, the DSS Director and others felt that reaching these goals at the level of specified outcomes would be a serious long-term challenge. Among other issues would be the involvement of new partners and participants

in the assistance process. Moreover, this involvement would take several new, innovative forms. This emphasis on community involvement was a significant feature of the plan, as they expressed in specific terms how the public and private sector resources and expertise could be used effectively. (DSS Director 2000) Being standard gave Robeson County the opportunity to employ its resources within what was known to be an acceptable framework.

Although specific details are offered in the plan, it is the broad emphasis on the involvement of many community organizations and non-DSS public organizations that demonstrates the strength and innovativeness of the Robeson County effort. The plan identifies a number of private organizations and resources from the faith community to specific other community organizations. Public agencies planned, as partners are multiple, and include Employment Security Commission, the public schools, and Robeson Community College. (Robeson Plan 1998)

This adaptive effort was, according to several of the key actors, among the overall strengths of the plan. Although essentially described in qualitative, concise, outline form, the plan creates an opportunity to increase public value over a long period of time. On balance, the linkages among goals, outcomes, and institutional designs and procedures are presented in an objective, coherent manner. (Robeson Plan 1998)

Robeson County interviewees seemed well aware of the challenges faced even in standard counties in their efforts to meet the objectives of welfare reform. As explained, the very high volume of clients and the difficult nature of the problems facing both individuals and families made successful implementation quite problematical. At the time of the plan development, the Robeson volume was approximately 9,000 cases, compared to the current volume of approximately 4,000. (Work First Supervisor 2000) By remaining standard, the feeling is that such chances could be increased. (DSS Director 2000, Work First Supervisor 2000)

To further increase likelihood of success, a series of innovations will be initiated in Robeson County. In summary form the innovations are:

1. To establish a countywide, community-based approach to welfare reform;
2. To establish a new collaborative system of service coordination and integration among the major public and private sector service providers; and
3. To establish local, interagency councils to unite the existing resources within communities. Also, to establish TANF support groups. (Robeson Plan 1998)

These innovations demonstrate further commitment to opening the process to useful and positive change.

Robeson County Goals, Objectives, and Program Priorities

As explained, Robeson County included a series of eight goals and measurable objectives provided by the state for the county. The planning committee worked diligently to demonstrate how Robeson County could accomplish these goals—means, procedures, and available resources. The Robeson County Work First Goals, along with the associated measurable outcomes, emphasize reducing the caseload, putting adults to work, staying off welfare, meeting parental participation rates, diversion assistance, child support orders and children’s well-being. (Robeson Plan 1998, 10)

The goals and outcomes appear relatively comprehensive, and when considered together, form a logical and workable structure for welfare reform that shifts the focus from dependent individuals to sustainable working families. Efforts to coordinate the means for achieving the goals were described in detail and it is clear that this was a major effort of the committee and DSS staff. As described, several administrative innovations in support of the specific goals were developed in the plan.

Program Goals, Objectives, Priorities

In order to gain further insights and perspective on the Robeson County effort, the interviewees were asked to address the emphasis or priority placed on five welfare reform goals and 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

The responses to this material are both informative and interesting. The variety of perspectives is made clear in the individual responses. That is the interesting aspect, particularly when welfare reform is designed to be a “coordinated” undertaking. In addition, the individual responses also make one aware of the multiple perspectives and scope of what is referred to as “welfare reform.” Moreover, one also becomes aware of the fact that an assessment of welfare goals often will reflect an individual’s office or position.

Essentially, the expectation might be that the perspectives of individuals in elected positions or otherwise in representative roles will be somewhat broader and even abstractly expressed. These presumed ties to general county or citizen-related concerns are important and help to balance other, more technically determined viewpoints.

The Chair of the Social Services Board emphasized securing and retaining workforce participation. He felt that it was necessary to move beyond the focus on welfare roll reduction. In his view, expressing this goal as a priority expanded, made more stable, and reflected community commitment more than roll reduction. It is a clear, and important first major step to the reforming of welfare. (DSS Board Chair 2000)

The Board Chair also expressed a concern in connection with his emphasis on retaining workforce participation. Specifically, he wondered if the twenty-four month limit is feasible,

especially in consideration of the very limited capabilities in some clients and client families. Indeed, he suggested this issue was a major future challenge to welfare reform generally in some places—like Robeson County.

The Chair also made it clear that he supported “putting people back to work,” but he was emphatic that short-term fixes, or fixes imposed from anywhere outside would not work. What could work, and indeed may be necessary, is to help people change their own attitudes. As he put it, change has to come “from the inside out.” (DSS Board Chair 2000)

With regard to other goals, he felt that they were more difficult to achieve. And, it was his view that other key actors did not always share his perceptions. For example, the goal of reducing expenditures is not a high priority for him. It is likely higher for other key actors. This one may be more relevant for elected officials. He also made the point that people should consider the multiplier effects of welfare expenditures in the community. He was very supportive of ensuring the well being of children and reducing poverty, but explained that both, although meritorious, were very long-term. The attributes of the present welfare system may not, in his opinion, be capable of achieving these goals. One primary reason for this contention is the deep-seated cultural difficulties, such as low aspiration levels, that seem to pervade the region. On balance, his concern is whether—even with reform—welfare is actually set up to work. (DSS Board Chair 2000)

The Chair of the Board of Commissioners explained that in his view, change takes time. It especially takes time to help people learn how to fit into the economic and social mainstream. As is the case with most of the others interviewed, the more immediate goals of reducing the welfare rolls and securing and retaining workforce participation are of the highest priority. This experienced local official felt that going to work must become a conscious desire on the part of all clients and citizens in Robeson County. He contends that the “philosophy has changed” and that most people would rather be working than not (and hence being on welfare). The mentality

of people has changed. As he put it: “ We must find something the clients can do (work) and reduce the rolls.” (Commissioner 2000)

In general, the Commissioner argued that to retain workforce participation, many community sources and mechanisms must be put into place to teach people responsibility, skills, and generally to educate them beyond specific job capabilities. Cost reduction, he felt, is at best a long-term goal, given the realities of what it will take first to achieve workforce participation, he suggested. He feels that just paying clients is short-run less expensive but long-term problematic (the original argument for welfare reform). It actually is likely to cost more because of the array of services needed to accomplish reform, but this is justifiable given the ends.

Both the protection of children and poverty reduction are extremely significant. They are worthy, but again, very long-term. In fact, the Commissioner gave several real-life examples to illustrate how some clients have made enormous progress in this area when they are assisted adequately. These goals are meritorious, but longer-term. (Commissioner 2000)

The Robeson County Manager’s perspective was heavily influenced by his experience as manager in Alamance County. He has been Manager in Robeson County for about one year. His view is that the primary purpose of the reform is to get people to work in gainful employment. While in many counties, including Robeson, welfare is a budget issue, he feels it is important to use all available means to help people build their confidence and go to work. (Robeson County Manager 2000)

The highest priority goals, in his view, are reducing the welfare rolls and workforce participation. He feels that taking care of children and poverty reduction are broader goals and much longer-term. Moreover, he felt that the first two goals are keys, or instrumental for the essential accomplishment of the last two goals. Cost reduction is rated last, because he feels it is difficult. Some programs simply cost more than others, yet it is important to become as efficient as possible. Challenging cases also make cost reduction difficult, according to the Manager. Plainly, the Manager, as senior administrator, is concerned with the financial aspects of welfare

reform, but also with moving toward a service configuration capable of moving clients and families toward the longer- term goals. (Manager 2000)

Both of the DSS administrators—Director and Work First Supervisor—agreed that getting to work and roll reduction are important, along with stable workforce participation. The DSS Director feels it is important to help clients eventually become productive citizens and taxpayers. To this end, his view is to work with the whole person—requiring a very different approach and model than traditionally used in the welfare administration field. The Work First Supervisor, along with three staff professionals, emphasized the need to help clients develop a greater degree of self-esteem. (DSS Director 2000, Work First Supervisor 2000)

Both the Director and the supervisor agreed with the other key actors in expressing the relevance of the roll reduction and participation goals to the eventual accomplishment of children’s well-being and poverty reduction. The humane approach now used at DSS suggests a minimum a concern with these longer-term issues.

Neither professional emphasized cost reduction. They feel it is of value, although in candor, simply explained that welfare done the reform way simply is a relatively costly undertaking compared to its former protocol (that is, payments based on eligibility criteria). Of all those interviewed, these professional administrators appeared to have a somewhat more refined, specific knowledge. This is something very logical given their detailed knowledge and expertise in this area. (DSS Director 2000, Work First Supervisor 2000)

The Robeson County key actors were very much in agreement on the two priority goals of welfare reform. It is interesting to consider the variations in their logic, and to relate (as did they) these variations to their roles in the county either as elected or appointed generalists or as social service professionals. Although these key actors supported most of the same priorities, they did not place the same values on them. Moreover, with the exception of the DSS Board Chair, they did not appear willing to expand the scope of the effort or its target. But the DSS Director did suggest, convincingly, the relevant and importance (and eventual effectiveness) of

treating the whole person rather than focusing on single areas of client needs. Robeson County is faced with a major policy and administrative challenge in welfare reform, and it bodes well both operationally and in policy that the unity of purpose is manifested in their views on priorities. (DSS Director 2000) Also, it is informative to recall the effort spent on the vision statement development that occurred in the planning process.

Program Implementation

Key actors in Robeson County next addressed a series of items related to the implementation of the program. Responses were open, and all were very articulate. Not all of those who were interviewed addressed each one of the items, and not all who were interviewed had the same knowledge of each item.

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-profit organizations and others.

Most of the officials felt that there had been greater choice and discretion in some of the areas considered if not in all of the areas. Approach to welfare was seen as of paramount importance—certainly more than local autonomy. Yet, they argued, more local choice and discretion generally needs to be built into the process and system of administration. It is clear that along with a strong sense of appreciation for the direction, or philosophy of welfare reform, the overall values of welfare are supported. The emphasis of working with individuals and families, and using community resources, is much supported. Yet, along with this expanded view of welfare, the actors generally agreed that local or county discretion and flexibility both are needed if the welfare goals and values are to be met. (Interviews 2000)

No one denied that the present program is more flexible than its predecessor; however, several felt that greater choice is needed now and in the future. For example, the DSS Board

Chair feels that the guidelines still are too restrictive, and limiting concerning counties—most likely in the areas of program operations and use of funds. (DSS Board Chair 2000) The County Manager was mostly concerned that not enough county discretion is found in all areas, especially in program operations. In this area, he feels, the state regulations and guidance are too restrictive. (Manager 2000)

The Commissioner felt that there was some additional degree of discretion in program operations. He did not address the other areas directly but had the opinion that more flexibility would improve program administration and outcomes. (Commissioner 2000)

The Robeson DSS Director agreed that there had been a greater autonomy and more choices, with the result of higher creativity, especially in the social work areas that have increased in visibility since the reform was initiated. However, his view also is that TANF is still too constraining, particularly in the areas of budgetary discretion (too little discretion). He also said that the program does permit much choice in the determination of how to participate with non-profit organizations. He agreed that flexibility in this area is very helpful to the program overall. (DSS Director 2000)

The Work First Supervisor felt that the operational autonomy at the program level had increased and that this put more challenging decisions before the individual managers and professionals. Several kinds of examples suggested that operations are less restrictive in part because the manuals are much less restrictive. In fact, one staff professional suggested that the state is less restrictive and that there is something of a policy vacuum which permits county discretion by default. Hence, program level administrators feel that there is much responsibility generated by the situation at the state level. While challenging, these areas of choice and autonomy are very favorably viewed. (Work First Supervisor 2000)

Overall, the Robeson County actors seem to accept that some choice exists primarily in the area of program operations. However, there is variation on the other aspects of welfare reform administration and the extent to which county officials have much choice in other

important areas. It appears to be the case that increased choice and autonomy in welfare administration is something of an incremental process. Greater latitude to use the kinds of imaginative projects and networks is viewed by all as the future of reform.

County DSS Organizational Change

Most of the interviewees felt that over the past several years there has been a significant degree of organizational change at the DSS and in the network surrounding welfare generally. As is the case with several other areas addressed herein, they agreed more that there is and has been change, although there is less agreement on the sorts of changes that are needed and in progress. In this regard, the distinction appeared to related to whether the interviewee was elected or generalists, or whether social services and administrators (typically with a more refined working knowledge of social services). (Interviews 2000)

The Commissioner felt that the most significant change has been in the area of morale. Morale, he said, has increased positively since the 1997 reorganization, which was carried out by the present Director independent of the later Work First Plan effort and subsequent reform implementation. He is quite concerned, however, with the workload on DSS employees and that they are “taxed to the limit.” He would support the idea that there has been a useful beginning to a culture change at DSS. (Commissioner 2000)

Similarly, the DSS Board Chair felt that there has been a substantial, and positive change at DSS. He felt there is good morale and that the DSS has made and is still making needed organizational and cultural changes. (DSS Board Chair 2000)

In a more specific vein, the County Manager felt that significant changes ere underway at DSS. He explained that there was more cross training, and more expansion of jobs and roles in the DSS. He sees the need for efforts to continue to strengthen the capacity of the DSS and the professionals who work there. (Manager 2000)

The DSS Director has several comments to make regarding the notion of change in DSS. Over the past several years, there has been a great deal of cultural transformation within the agency. He used the term “culture blending” to describe the sort of changes taking place at DSS. These sorts of changes are occurring in an incremental manner and many of them are small and informal enough not to be fully visible outside the agency or at least the closely linked network associated with welfare reform. The slogan, or common vision at DSS is the effort there to provide a “continuum of care” for welfare clients. Additionally, the Director feels that increased positive value is being achieved by training and what he refers to as a “spirit of discovery.” Hence, on balance, he sees an apparent series of initiatives he (largely) has put in motion in the agency. (DSS Director 2000)

At the most operational level, the Work First Supervisor described several initiatives that in her opinion are doing much to transform DSS, its culture, and that of the associated network. She pointed out three areas: one area is the changes that have been brought about through the use of unit mergers and reorganizations. In a communication subsequent to our meeting, she explained a series of such mergers, and some unit level downsizing that has occurred between 1996 and the present. It seems clear that the changes are done to make the agency more responsive to its operating environment. This form of differentiation has made DSS much more responsive than could otherwise have been the case. (Work First Supervisor 2000)

Furthermore, DSS is much more flexible now, and more open as well. This also has tended to encourage creativity, which is a factor that also tends to ease the culture transformation also occurring. All in all, the Supervisor’s comments and perceptions blend with those of the relatively new Director.

Not all of the changes at DSS have been viewed as positive—at least not in the short-term context within which some of them took place. Reassignments, reorganizations, changes in established procedures, and the forms of relationships with clients all have been difficult for some employees. It appears that on balance these concerns are being addressed, although staff

members clearly to see a need for additional training and support as their workplace culture is being incrementally transformed. The shift continues to be one with a dual focus—one centered on commitment to the client, the other one on the growth of employee capacity and versatility in operating a changing service delivery system. Also, a few of the changes made have led to concerns about DSS and its capacity to deliver the reform version of services—especially considering the shift away from a DSS-centered hierarchy toward a network of public and community partners. The net result has been a secondary burden—change—on the agency as the effort has been made to differentiate and find new forms and procedures compatible with the new mandates and expectations. (Interviews 2000)

The “continuum of care” philosophy and vision suggested by the Director appears to have been accepted by others who were interviewed. Small evidences of higher morale also are present as one observes the routines of DSS operations. As is the case with other participants in this large-scale reform effort, DSS is adjusting and adapting to the reality. From those who were interviewed it does seem likely that the agency, and network, is in a position to adapt and even to anticipate the sorts of environmental and contextual influences that may occur and refine their operations to enable a greater level of care, service, and productivity. (Interviews 2000)

State-County Relations

In the area of state-county relations, most of the actors interviewed sense (and some gave examples) a more collegial and flexible relationship with the “state” than has existed for some time (since before reform at least). It is useful to realize that each interviewee has, in effect, a very different vantage point from which to make his/her observations. Especially relevant seems to be the level, frequency, and formality of the contacts with state government personnel. More frequent and less formal the contact with someone at the same operational level suggests a more cordial and flexible relationship, for example. Also, the three generalists interviewed may have a variety of relationships at the state level for purposes other than the welfare area. They also hear comments from DSS employees and others who more routinely engage with stat employees—a

factor that may be reflected in their comments. (Commissioner 2000, Manager 2000, DSS Board Chair 2000)

In general, relations seem more positive. The DSS Board Chair's feeling is that in dealing with welfare issues there is now much more of a dialog than in the past. He emphasized that there is "less of a hierarchy now," which could suggest a new openness at the state level. (DSS Board Chair 2000) Similar views, albeit somewhat more tentative ones are shared by the Commissioner, who suspects better relations. (Commissioner 2000) He is in state-level contact on a variety of issues and concerns.

The County Manager's view is that there may be minimal change in this area. Again, it must be said that this official is in contact on a variety of issues at the state level, and that his perception reflects his position and general administrative responsibilities. (Manager 2000)

As one considers the DSS administrators—Director and Work First Supervisor—a somewhat different perspective emerges. The Director explained that relations with the state are "much better than in some time." In a similar way, the Supervisor suggested that relationships are improved and that decisions about rules and their applications are much less restrictive than before. These views seem to support the feeling that frequent and routine, and perhaps professional contacts increase the positive nature of the communications. Finally, it should be clear that the stakes of welfare reform effectiveness are as high for state level employees and organizations as they are for counties. (DSS Director 2000, Work First Supervisor 2000)

Successes and Continuing Challenges

Most of the actors in this county shared similar perspectives on the success part of this item. Several feel that the welfare roll reduction has been a huge success. The Commissioner and the DSS Board Chair are of like mind on this point. These actors and several others also see a deeper sort of success beyond simply welfare roll reduction. The DSS Board Chair sees the large-scale psychological effects of welfare reform in a very positive light—less violence, less racial polarization and acceptance of others. The Commissioner's feelings are that the overall

effort of welfare reform and the work toward creating many new opportunities and achieving a greater degree of stability are of much positive value. The continuing focus of welfare on the whole person is the County Manager's viewpoint on current successes. In this regard, his observation mirrors the overall philosophy of the DSS Director as identified earlier in this study. As for the Director, his view on success in welfare reform is what he characterizes as an attitudinal shift in the community. As he explains it, "No more Cadillac stories." (DSS Director 2000) It must be acknowledged that this particular Director is not only well respected in this county, but that he also has much leadership experience elsewhere. He has also been involved in speaking to civic and other community groups and consequently has an exceptional grasp of community sentiment and feeling on welfare concerns generally. (Interviews 2000)

The Work First Supervisor feels that there are several successes at this time. One success is the growing capacity of the welfare service network and its provision to the clients of a customized array of useful options for dealing with employment and other life issues. She also mentions those new collaborative efforts among community partners and public agencies, and the positive environment that currently surrounds the reform activities (a view shared with her Director as indicated earlier). (Work First Supervisor 2000)

Again, the current successes reflect role and position in the welfare service delivery setting, along with one's experience and formal role. Taken together, a picture of diligence, and a fundamental shift in both agency and community views of welfare emerges from the responses on this item. A concern with sustainability and further need to adapt are a part of the reality grounding framing these positive comments.

Limitations and Continuing Challenges

In general, the actors remained hopeful even as they were describing the shortcomings, limitations, and continuing challenges of welfare administration and reform. As indicated earlier, sustainability concerns seemed to be something of a common thread. For example, the DSS Board Chair expressed a real concern with what he called the "residual issue," specifically

meaning the clients with special needs and difficulties that appear to put them outside the range of welfare system capability to truly help—at least long term. In Robeson County, he explained further, the scope of the job given the characteristics of the county is so enormous that even with the successes to date the challenges still are enormous. The county statistics presented earlier—some of which were discussed in this interview—would seem to support the Chair’s perspective. He also expressed some concern with the level and stability of community group or partner involvement, especially related to the long-term sustainability issue described earlier. He is a minister and feels the need for more substantial involvement by churches, yet is aware of the fact that the resources they have available are themselves quite meager. These are real limitations in the local culture. (DSS Board Chair 2000)

The County Manager’s concerns with limitations reflected at least one view similar to the DSS Board Chair: how to address the needs of the very difficult to serve. The Manager also expressed his concern with the quality of the effort given possible economic changes such that few jobs would be available, and that funding to support the requisite community efforts might not be so readily forthcoming as they are now. The Commissioner’s view tied into both that of the Board Chair and the Manager. His concern is with the overall scope of the effort. It is his belief that the scope of the welfare reform effort is “overwhelming,” and hence may be insurmountable given the types of organizational efforts being used to address and implement it. (Manager 2000, Commissioner 2000)

In a related concern, the DSS Director feels that the successes and public relations of the efforts to date may be something of a double-edged sword—if they serve to heighten expectations about continuing performance given present available resources. Again, the notions of administrative and community efforts and their sustainability are an implicit but significant issue here. The Supervisor expressed a key concern with continuing to find ways and means to help people as their needs continue to change and evolve (as the region, technology, and the economy all change). As an illustration, she subsequently provided information that earlier this year an

agreement with Mt. Olive Methodist Church to provide computer courses to clients was reached. (DSS Director 2000, Work First Supervisor 2000)

Overall, the expressions of limitations, shortcomings and continuing challenges reflect more agreement than disagreement. Several of the specific views are closely related to each other and together suggest a broad perspective that could be addressed in an ongoing strategic effort in the county. As has been the case on other items, the actors' concerns reflected position, perspective, and function.

Involvement of Wider Range of participants in Welfare Reform

Beginning with the initial selection of participants to serve on the planning committee, a significant number and array of community interests have been engaged in the county welfare reform effort. Now, several years later, chronological details show an increasing involvement on the part of individuals and organizations either not involved or less heavily involved at some earlier point. This evolving, and more complex network has expanded somewhat to fit the scale of the design needed to address the extraordinary volume of clients whose needs are still being addressed in the system. As described, several of those interviewed registered concern with the diminished participation by some early participants, and the general lack of support by others (regardless of the legitimacy of their reasons). Overall, it seems clear that the design—community participation and partnering—depends on active, sustained contributions by many and that there is a real risk if a county cannot build and maintain an effective network. This appears to be the challenge facing Robeson County in this critically important area. (Interviews 2000)

Research Associate Summary Assessment

As is likely the case with others, Robeson County's experience in welfare reform and its implementation has been greatly influenced by local contextual factors, by the perspectives influencing key actors and the subsequent network and organizational designs put into place, and by the volume and level of commitment of public, private, and community partners.

In my opinion, based on observation and in-depth conversations and interviews, most of the key actors in Robeson County share similar views on the goals of welfare reform. This blend of political, community, and professional administrative perspectives and values has enabled the county to make significant reform progress in the face of enormous difficulties and challenges. Care has been taken at all levels to create and carry out as effectively and as efficiently a mandate as well as an opportunity. Specifically—the planning process, DSS reorganization and culture change, the strengthening of a community network of partners, and the development of a client-centered service approach—have contributed much to present successes.

Yet, there are persistent challenges and difficulties clearly present in welfare reform implementation here. For one thing, the volume and degree of difficulty found in the present and future client populations is enormous. Caseload reduction alone is just not enough, and there may not be enough resources available and sustainable to expand the operation to meet these needs. The vision and professionalism among key actors, especially within DSS, is excellent. They are creative, inventive, and dedicated. Moreover, they have put a system in place that could grow to meet future challenges if the other partners do their part and if some new ways are identified to help clients with very difficult problems. My observation is that further away from the network's center and DSS, there will be serious capacity and sustainability issues soon enough.

Improved relations with state government can be helpful. Robeson actors seem to have the capabilities to revise and improve their system, although they may need more assistance in doing this simply because they cannot do everyday work and system redesign simultaneously. And, as all my interviewees show, these professionals and their support staffs are all dedicated to client and family service.

In conclusion, it is my view that the actors in this county are working diligently to implement welfare reform. Their emphasis on good management, creative professionalism, and client-centeredness and community partnering is a solid base to use in building for the future.

Challenges lie ahead in welfare in Robeson County, as the actors there continue to find ways to create 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.