

TRACKING COUNTY RESPONSES TO WELFARE REFORM

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The Policy Context

Location and History

Transylvania County is located in the southwestern part of North Carolina and is bounded by the State of South Carolina on the south, the counties of Jackson on the west, Haywood and Henderson on the north. The county seat is Brevard. The area was first occupied by white settlers in the early 1700's. The county was formed in 1861 from Henderson and Jackson Counties. Railroads opened Transylvania County in the late 1800's to tourists. Tourism continues to be an important economic activity for the county. The name, "Transylvania" is from the Latin and means "over the trees" or "across the woods". (WNC County Guide). The county is in the Appalachian Mountains, 30 miles southwest of Asheville, NC and 60 miles north of Greenville-Spartanburg, South Carolina. It is called "land of waterfalls" because of its more than 250 waterfalls. Nearly 40% of the county is in the Pisgah National Forest. The Forest consists of 157,000 acres, providing many opportunities for outdoor recreation. The area is known for its natural beauty (WNC County Guide).

Demographic Information

Since much of the county is mountainous terrain and/or part of a national forest (elevations range from a low of 1,265 feet to a high of 6,045 feet), there is not much useable (flat) land. Also, the area was not easily accessible until around the turn of the century. These circumstances resulted in a predominantly rural environment where population growth over the years has been slow. The 1999 population of Transylvania County was projected to be 28,500, an increase of 11.7% since 1990. This places Transylvania County 70th in population in North Carolina. The population density was 75.3 persons

per square mile for a rank of 62 in North Carolina (County Development Information).

Transylvania County has very little racial and ethnic diversity. In 1997 population estimates were 93.7% white, 5.4% African American, .3% American Indian, and .5% Asian & Pacific Islander. 1.1% were of Hispanic Origin. A 1995 estimate indicated that the number of persons living in poverty in Transylvania county was 3,436, or 12.6% of the county population, of which 1,334, or 21.2% were children under 18. In 1997 the number of people underemployed (earning less than \$8.00 per hour) was estimated at 2,236, or 22.2% of the county population. This is a relatively large group that could be considered the “working poor.” (County Development Information).

Brevard is the largest municipality in the county with an estimated population of 6,079 in 1997. The other municipality in the county, Rosman, had an estimated population of 449 in 1997. There are also several townships in the county outside Brevard. These townships have small populations, from 1,000-3,000 persons each (County Development Information).

Economic Conditions

Major sectors of the Transylvania County economy include retail trade, tourism, manufacturing, services and agriculture. The county’s largest source of income comes from retail sales (\$225 million in 1996-97). There are several small manufacturing plants in the county and tourism provides an increasing proportion of the county’s income (County Development Information)..

Culture and Values

Transylvania County has a strong tradition of conservative family values. The people value church and community. There is a tradition of people looking after others in need. As is typical of a small community environment, many people know each other and have lived in the same area for years. Members of the community obviously feel very strongly that there is an obligation to assist those less fortunate. For example, on the first page of the Transylvania county Work First Plan, the vision of the

county's planning committee states: "Transylvania County will use Work First to help people raise themselves out of poverty and improve their quality of life--not just to get off welfare." (p. 4). Churches provide a central location for both religious and social activities. There is a preference for self-reliance and a reluctance to look to outsiders, including the government for solutions to family problems. This means that there is strong support for a two-parent family with religious ties and working fathers who provide economic support for their wives and children.

The beauty of the rural environment has attracted a number of retired persons and others who have built summer homes in the area. There are several county clubs and golf courses which cater to upscale tastes. There are also exclusive condominium developments in the county. These residents, both permanent and during summers only, bring a higher educational level and standard of living to the area. The county is home to more cultural variety than would otherwise be expected in a small, homogenous area of the state.

Brevard College, located in Brevard, has become known as the "summer cultural center of the South". The Brevard Music Center hosts numerous concerts throughout the summer and attracts music lovers from around the country. Brevard College is the oldest institution of higher learning in Western North Carolina. Transylvania County is also the home of Blue Ridge Community College (WNC County Guide).

Political Setting

The political environment of Transylvania county is predominantly conservative. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity means that issues common to larger, more diverse communities such as conflicts over school integration, for example, have been minimal. Also, since there isn't a large, continuing influx of permanent residents, there is a lack of strong impetus for change in many areas. However, the county has seen some small growth in the Hispanic population.

The following information obtained from the internet site, Project Vote Smart, gives a political perspective of representatives of Transylvania County from the federal and state levels. Examples of their voting records according to preferred positions of several major interest groups are provided below:

District 11, which includes Transylvania County, is represented in the United States Congress by Charles H. Taylor, a businessman whose home is Brevard, who was first elected in 1990. Mr. Taylor is a Republican whose values closely mirror those of his home county. For example, in 1999, Mr. Taylor voted for the preferred positions of the National Right to Life Committee (antiabortion) 100% of the time. He voted 92% of the time with the Business-Industry Political Action Committee, 100% of the time with the Christian Coalition, and 100% of the time with Handgun Control. (Project Vote Smart internet).

In the North Carolina State Senate, part of Transylvania County is represented by Dan Robinson, a democrat elected for the first time in 1999. Mr. Robinson was formerly a member of the Jackson County Commission. Mr. Robinson is somewhat more liberal than Mr. Taylor, having voted for preferred positions of the Christian Coalition of NC 27% of the time, the ACLU of NC 75% and the Alliance for Good Government, a liberal organization, 93% of the time.

The other North Carolina State Senator who represents part of Transylvania County is Robert Carpenter, a retired bank executive who lives in Franklin, in Macon County. Mr. Carpenter was first elected in 1988. Mr. Carpenter has voted for preferred positions of the Christian Coalition 91% of the time, the ACLU 100%, the Alliance for Good Government, 71%, and the NC National Federation of Business, 100% of the time.

A large part of Transylvania County is represented in the North Carolina House of Representatives by Trudi Walend, a Republican elected for the first time in 1999. She was formerly a Transylvania County Commissioner from 1996-1998. Ms. Walend voted for preferred positions of the Christian Coalition 66% of the time, the ACLU 40% and the Alliance for Good Government 60% of the

time.

According to April, 2000 figures from the U.S. Census, there were 9,329 Democrats, 8,901 Republicans, 19 Libertarians, and 4,564 Unaffiliated registered voters in the county. Of the total of 23,397, 21,164 were White, 296 were Black, 1,065 were American Indian, and 118 were Other. In regard to gender, the number of females was 12,662 and males, 10,735 (North Carolina Counties). Even though party affiliation is almost evenly split between democrats and republicans, it may not necessarily matter in the county since Charles Taylor, the conservative republican, has easily won reelection (receiving 56% of the vote in the 1998 election) on a regular basis. Also, Lauch Faircloth, the conservative U.S. Senator, received a majority of the Transylvania County vote in 1998. He ultimately lost to John Edwards in the general election (Election Results - November, 1998). The percent of voter turnout in the November, 1998 general election was 56.8%.

Transylvania county commissioners who held office during planning for welfare reform were Bob Masengill, Chairman, Mike Hawkins, Horace Jarrett, Trudi Walend and Bill Wallace, Vice Chair. Only one individual, Mr. Hawkins, presently a member of the commission, was also a member in the Fall of 1997 when decisions about welfare reform were being made. The current commissioners, in addition to Mr. Hawkins are Horace Jarrett, Ray Miller, Jeff Duvall and Marla Cilley.

Transylvania County commissioners are elected on staggered terms. According to the *1997-98 North Carolina Manual*, county commissioners are elected at the same time as elections for the general assembly. However, some counties (Transylvania is one of them) have staggered four year or two year terms, meaning that half of the commissioners are elected at each general election (p. 1099). Mr. Hawkins, Mr. Duvall and Ms. Cilley are up for reelection in November, 2000. Mr. Jarrett gave up his seat on the commission to run for the North Carolina House of Representatives but lost in the recent primary election.

Transylvania County employs a full-time county manager, Arthur C. Wilson, Jr. (Interview, June 29, 2000). Mr. Wilson is the administrator for all county offices. He reports to the five-member Board of Commissioners. Mr. Wilson believes staggered terms are beneficial for the county in that there are always several commissioners who know what is going on. It is helpful for new commissioners to have some experienced commissioners on the board

The Transylvania County Board of Social Services

Members of the County Board of Social Services during the planning period for welfare reform (1997-98) were Ernest Gilstrap, Chair, Lucy Deaver, Arlene Hoover and Gus Siniard. A review of Board Minutes from that period shows that the board was continually informed and updated of the progress of the county plan and fully supported the decision for Transylvania County to become an electing county.

Dates that welfare reform was considered by the board were:

August 26, 1997 - Ms. Griffin discussed welfare reform issues

September 23, 1997 - Trudi Walend, county commissioner, presented justification and rationale for Transylvania County to choose “electing” county status.

October 7, 1997 - The board had a special meeting to discuss and make a decision on “electing” or “standard” county status. The board voted unanimously for “electing” status.

October 23, 1997 - Ms. Griffin discussed the Local Planning Committee with the board. Arlene Hoover was chosen to be the board representative on the committee.

November 18, 1997 - Ms. Griffin informed the board regarding the Planning Committee and its progress.

December 16, 1997 - Ms. Griffin updated the board regarding the Planning Committee. She indicated that the Work First Plan should be completed by the next board meeting.

Welfare Reform as a County Political Issue

Welfare reform did not make much of a ripple on the political waters of Transylvania County when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P.L. 104-193) was passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton in August, 1996. This law eliminated AFDC and established TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and made other very historical and far reaching changes to public assistance. Not every provision of the new welfare reform law was “new”. Several federal measures preceded it, including the Family Support Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-485). This Act created the JOBS program and was the last major reform of AFDC (Hombs, 55). The Act included some of the same goals as P. L. 104-193, including an emphasis on the provision of education and training opportunities that would assist recipients in moving off welfare rolls to employment. Every state was required to have a JOBS program operating in every county by October 1, 1992 (Hombs, 55).

The federal law did not bring about many changes at the county level since there was already flexibility in North Carolina because of waivers which have been used by the state since the late 1980's. During the 1990's the federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHR) had made it easier for states to obtain waivers of certain federal regulations which gave the states and counties more flexibility in the operation of their welfare programs. In 1995 DHHR announced that it would “...approve waiver requests within 30 days for projects that address work requirements involving subsidized or unsubsidized jobs, community service, and rigorous job search or preparation.” (Hombs, 37). Also, Governor James Hunt had established Work First in North Carolina in 1995, one year before the federal legislation was enacted. Therefore, counties were gradually moving toward more programming flexibility and placing more of an emphasis on employment before the federal law was passed in 1996.

According to Mr. Wilson, County Manager, historically, welfare reform has not been a political issue in Transylvania County. County commissioners, whether democrat or republican, have not considered welfare as a matter of partisan politics. However, welfare reform in the county was a major

interest of Trudi Walend, a county commissioner in 1997. She had considerable responsibility for the county's decision to become an electing county, according to Carson Griffin, Director, Department of Social Services (Interview, June 29, 2000). Ms. Walend was the driving force for this decision. A review of Minutes of the commissioner's meetings during that time showed that Ms. Walend presented arguments and justification for electing county status at the September 22, 1997 meeting. She believed that an "electing" county would be able to provide much better care for the county's citizens in need at the local level. She strongly recommended taking action to become an electing county.

In an interview on July 20, 2000, Ms. Walend explained that she believed that being an electing county would be a very good opportunity for Transylvania. She had complete confidence in Carson Griffin, the DSS director and Louise Koontz, the Work First Supervisor. She believed that they would be able to carry out the necessary planning process and would be able to put the plan in place. Ms. Walend has lived in Transylvania County for many years and has a background in dietetics. She worked in public health and shared many clients with the Department of Social Services. She has had a continuing and deep interest in social services in the county.

Decision Dynamics - 1997-98

Electing or Standard County Status

The Transylvania County commissioners voted officially to become an electing county on October 13, 1997. However, the vote was divided, three for and two against. According to Minutes of the Board of Commissioners, the reasons two commissioners voted against it were that it would be very difficult to implement a new county plan for welfare recipients and it might create problems with the state. The staff of the Department of Social Services did not have major influence over this decision. The idea of an "electing" county was appealing because of the general belief that local people could best decide what was good for the county rather than having these decisions made at the state level. It was believed that

an “electing” county would be able to have more flexibility in provision of services and would result in more success in moving people from welfare to work.

According to Ms. Walend, the decision was controversial. Evidently, “politics” in Raleigh may have had some impact on the democratic county commissioners in office at the time because the democrats in Raleigh were against the idea of having electing counties. Ms. Walend did not know until the vote was taken that she would be successful in having Transylvania designated an “electing” county. (Transylvania almost missed out later when names were drawn from a hat in the North Carolina House of Representatives; the county was not chosen initially but was able to be an “electing” county when another county previously chosen was eliminated). Later, one of the commissioners who had voted against the plan told Ms. Walend she had done the right thing. Since that time there has not been any other example of any kind of partisanship in commissioner decisions regarding the Department of Social Services.

County Planning for Work First

According to Ms. Griffin and Ms. Louise Koontz, Work First Supervisor (Interview, June 29, 2000), the planning process was very labor intensive and time consuming. The Local Planning Committee consisted of ten people appointed by the county commissioners and 35 additional participating “stakeholders”, a total of 45 people. Trudi Walend, the county commissioner, was the Chairman of the committee and Carson Griffin was the Vice-Chairman. Ms. Walend also believed that the planning process was difficult. The meetings sometimes lasted all day. The stakeholders included representatives from a very broad section of the community, including, for example, mental health, the school system, the county health department, Head Start, vocational services, and a Work First recipient. The county commissioners voted to approve membership of the committee on October 27, 1997.

According to the Work First Plan, the group developed ground rules at its first meeting, and decided to make decisions by consensus. The Committee was divided into task groups which considered a particular

area of the Plan as follows:

- C Eligibility, Benefits & Transitional Services
- C Community Service, Internships, Jobs, Training and GED
- C County Statistics
- C Child Care
- C Transportation
- C Legal Issues
- C County Goals

Each group worked on its part of the plan and reported it to the entire group for discussion, refinement and adoption. Additional interested persons were identified through the process and assisted with plan development. For decision making purposes, only the ten members appointed by the commissioners were “official” decision makers. The “official” decision makers would use their authority only under two conditions: 1. If the entire group could not reach consensus on an issue, and 2. When it was necessary for formal approval of the plan before it was considered by the Board of Commissioners in January, 1998. The other committee members made recommendations only. According to Ms. Griffin, the committee members worked well together. There were disagreements, but these were worked out. Ms. Walend said that numerous controversial issues were taken up and everyone on the committee had a chance to participate. The committee was facilitated by Jim Stokoe, a staff member of its Council of Governments. Mr. Stokoe played a large part in the actual writing of the plan, along with Ms. Walend.

The establishment of the Local Planning Committee provided an opportunity for inclusion of a wide range of individuals in the DSS planning process and enabled them to become more educated about poverty in the county and the overall function of DSS in reducing and eliminating the need for financial assistance for this group.

Chronology - Local Planning Committee

The DHHS established a time frame for all counties to follow which mandated that counties intending to “elect” to design and operate their own welfare program must declare this intention by October 31, 1997. All counties in the state had to submit county plans to DHHS by February 1, 1998. The Local Planning Committee was given a deadline of January 2, 1998 to submit a draft plan to the county commissioners. The Committee had approximately two months to come up with its own plan for the operation of Work First in the county, an extremely short time frame. The Local Planning Committee met weekly from November 3 through December 31, 1997 to develop the plan.

Chronology - Board of Commissioners

A review of Minutes of Board of Commissioners meetings showed that various elements of welfare reform were addressed during the planning process on the following dates:

- September 22, 1997 - Commissioners were presented information on welfare reform.
- October 13, 1997 - Commissioners voted to become an electing county. Vote was 3 to 2.
- October 27, 1997 - Commissioners approved membership of planning committee.
- November 10, 1997 - Commissioners were given a progress report.
- November 24, 1997 - Commissioners were given a progress report.
- December 8, 1997 - Commissioners were given a progress report.
- January 6, 1998 - Commissioners had a special meeting to receive the Work First Plan
- January 12, 1998 - Commissioners held a hearing to receive comments on the plan
- January 26, 1998 - Commissioners voted to accept the plan and submit it to the State by 2/1/98.
- March 9, 1998 - Commissioners approved changes to the plan as recommended by the State.

Goals, Objectives, or Program Priorities

Welfare Reform Priorities

The Work First County Plan listed eight goals as established by the State. A decision was made not to develop any additional goals. The state goals and the county goals as described on pages 17, 18 and 19 of the Plan are:

- C Reducing the Work First Caseload
County Goal: Reduce caseload from 174 at 6/30/98 to 126 by 6/30/2000, a 15% reduction per year.
- C Putting Adults to Work
County Goal: Put 72 adults to work by 6/30/2000
- C Staying Off Welfare After Going to Work
County Goal: 61 or 85% of the 72 adults hired will remain at work
- C Meeting "All Parent" Participation Rate
County Goal: 35% of parents will meet this requirement by 6/30/99 and this figure will remain at 35% through 6/30/2000.
- C Meeting "Two Parent" Participation Rate
County Goal: 90% of the two-parent caseload will meet the 35 -hour per week level by 6/30/99 and this figure will remain at 90% through 6/30/2000.
- C Avoiding Welfare through Diversion Assistance
County Goal: There will be two diversions per year for 1999 and 2000.
- C Increasing Child Support Orders and Collections for Work First Families
County Goal: Number of child support orders and collections will increase by 10% per year from 7/1/98 through 6/30/2000.
- C Child Well-Being
County Goal: Every Work First child who has a substantiated case of abuse and neglect

must have a protection plan.

The plan noted that at the time of the development, county staff were already working with all clients whose youngest child is age one or older. The “easier to place” clients were already working. Welfare reform goals were not prioritized; all eight state goals were accepted unchanged. All county participants agreed. There was no controversy or disagreement on the overall goals.

Program Implementation: 1998-2000

According to Ms. Carson and Ms. Louise Koontz, Work First Supervisor, the major effect of the federal welfare reform legislation with regard to program operations in Transylvania County has been the elimination of the “entitlement” to welfare. No longer does a client have a “right” to welfare assistance. Previously, the department could only “encourage” a person to obtain training and seek employment. Now, everyone who applies for welfare (formerly AFDC), also, in effect, applies for a job. The elimination of a federal entitlement and the mandatory five year time frame for benefits at the federal level (two years in North Carolina) has made it clear that welfare benefits are indeed “temporary”. However, there is doubt that all clients recognize this; some apparently still believe that something or someone will still be available to help them out, even when the clock runs out.

There is now much more flexibility in use of funds. As long as the county meets its “maintenance of effort” requirement, it is allowed, as an electing county, to develop programs and use additional funds for other needs clients may have to support their employment. “Maintenance of effort” mandates that counties must use a certain amount of county funds for welfare; counties cannot cut back DSS budgets beyond that certain amount. The maintenance of effort requirement was put in place to make sure that counties did not use welfare reform changes as an opportunity to reduce county contributions to DSS.

Mr. Wilson noted that less control of the DSS budget at the state level has been a major change in the operation of the department since 1997. In previous years, money was budgeted in rigid categories

and there was much control over all funds. The increased flexibility at the county level has made it much easier to meet the needs of clients and help them in ways that enable them to be more successful finding and keeping jobs.

County DSS Organizational Change

According to Ms. Griffin and Ms. Koontz, there was a big change in “mind set” among DSS employees as a result of welfare reform. Employees in income maintenance and social services formerly had specific tasks to perform for clients and these tasks were relatively separate. Now both units have to work much more closely together and communicate with each other. This has meant that everyone focuses on the same thing: getting a client a job and enabling the client to keep the job. Everyone has to work together. The clients cannot go to one employee with one story and go tell a different story to another employee. This has meant better services for the clients.

County-State Relations

The major change in county-state relations has been that the state now allows greater budget flexibility. Funds for Work First are sent directly to the county on a quarterly basis according to the budget developed in the Work First Plan rather than being disbursed monthly by the state. However, there are still many regulations that come from the federal government that the state does not control. Another change is that as an electing county, Transylvania has been able to develop programs which differ from what the state previously required. However, there are still many constraints on counties. They are a very long way from functioning in a completely autonomous fashion.

Community Participation

Ms. Griffin and Ms. Koontz believe that community agencies are working more closely with DSS, although they have always had good relationships. One change as a result of the plan has been the specific involvement of faith based organizations. In regard to the county’s use of public and private

resources, one strategy described in the Work First Plan is a “Family Partners for Independence program in which churches ‘adopt’ a Work First family for mentoring by church members” (p. 43). The plan noted that all church based activities are voluntary. According to Ms. Griffin, this strategy was approved by the ACLU.

Ms. Koontz indicated that DSS had always worked well with community agencies. Since the county is small, relationships have always been strong. However, now, helping welfare clients get jobs is now a community effort. It is not just the responsibility of DSS any longer. Now, DSS contracts out some supportive services that weren’t available in the past. Everyone works together.

Successes, Achievements, Positive Results

There has been a dramatic drop in the number of clients receiving welfare assistance in Transylvania county, although Mr. Wilson and Ms. Koontz do not believe that the drop can be solely attributed to the 1996 welfare reform law. As previously mentioned, some of the changes affecting emphasis on employment and training were already in place by 1996. The very strong United States economy has filtered down to the lowest level service job, creating a scarcity of minimum wage workers. This has meant that employers have been willing to hire people who would be considered very marginal workers in a weaker economy.

For example, according to the Work First Plan, the Work First caseload was 174 as of 6/30/98. The June, 2000 Statewide Work First Progress Report indicated that the caseload had dropped to 85. DSS has already reached its caseload goal of reducing the work first caseload by 126 cases by 6/30/00. Additional goals and their statuses are as follows:

- C Putting Adults to Work - 6/30/98 goal, 72, June, 2000, 53.
- C Staying Off Welfare After Going to Work - 6/30/98 goal 61 or 85%, June, 2000, 97%.
- C Meeting the “All Parent” Participation Rate - 6/30/98 goal of 35%, June, 2000, 47%.

- C Meeting the “Two Parent” Participation Rate - 6/30/98 goal of 90%, June, 2000, 73%.
- C Avoiding Welfare through Diversion Assistance - 6/30/98 goal, two diversions, as of June, 2000, a total of ten diversions.

Two goals are not tracked by the state, “Increasing Child Support Orders and Collections for Work First Families”, and “Child Well-being”. No comparison figures are available for these goals. The county DSS has met or exceeded the majority of its previously determined goals.

According to Governor Hunt’s “1999 Work First Report Card: County Grades”, Transylvania County scored highly. The four categories evaluated by DHHS and Transylvania County’s grades were as follows:

- C Reducing the Number of Families on Welfare: **A**
- C Putting Adults to Work: **B**
- C Staying Off Welfare: **A**
- C** Increasing Child Support Collections: **B**

Ms. Koontz believes that overall, being an “electing” county has been a good thing for the clients.

Shortcomings

A major limitation in Transylvania County’s efforts to tailor its program specifically to its needs is the problem of coordinating county data collection with the state’s data collection system. According to Ms. Griffin and Ms. Koontz, the state’s computer system is very poor and out of date. They weren’t able to make some changes in eligibility requirements because that would have meant that the county would have to do considerable work to collect its own data and track it themselves. Since the state requires a great deal of information on client eligibility, it was more simple just to stay with the state system.

There are many clients in Transylvania county who are now working and are off welfare but are struggling hard to get along on minimum wages now. Even with child care and medical insurance, it is

very difficult for these people to make ends meet. The next major effort for welfare reform should be on moving people out of poverty not just getting them off welfare. Now, a “success” is a person who is no longer on the welfare rolls no matter how difficult it is for this person to provide adequately for a family. One program that would be of great assistance to the poor in North Carolina would be a state earned income tax credit. This would be modeled on the federal program that has been very successful in providing cash supplements to low income employed persons.

A big “unknown” is what will happen when the time limit runs out for welfare clients. What if some people need additional help at some future date? This “great social experiment” has some big unanswered questions. Another question is what will happen to people currently working at low level jobs if the economy starts to slow down. If they are laid off, who will hire them? Where will they find work? Ms. Koontz wishes that the state would put aside some money so that resources would be available for welfare clients in case of an economic downturn. Evidently, the money that the state is saving on welfare is not being put aside to “shore up” the system (even though more is being spent for child care, transportation and other support services). The saved money is being diverted and spent on all kinds of other items in the state budget.

Both Ms. Griffin and Ms. Koontz believe that all the people that can go out and get a job without great difficulty have done so; the remaining cases are “hard core”. Some of these individuals have multiple barriers to obtaining work such as drug, alcohol or emotional problems. Others have dependents such as sick relatives who need care. This group will need a very large amount of effort and support on an ongoing basis in order to be minimally successful in the work place. Those, in spite of all efforts, who are too disabled to locate and find employment, will need to apply for Supplemental Social Insurance, SSI, a federal program for the disabled. Ms. Koontz said that in the past it has been very difficult for people to qualify for SSI but she thought with more support, some people who really need to be receiving SSI will

be able to obtain it.

Even though the state is spending more money for child care and transportation, these areas are continuing problems. There is a need for child care for weekends and after regular working hours. Often, clients do not have cars or have old cars that frequently break down. There is no inexpensive public transportation in the county. DSS has a van to transport clients to jobs but it operates only during regular working hours. Many welfare recipients who might not have held a job in the past did not have a major need for regular, reliable transportation in order to get to a job every day at a certain time. People who don't have good working cars are at risk of missing work because they can't get there. There does not seem to be a long-term transportation solution in sight for the working poor in Transylvania County. Ms. Griffin and Ms. Koontz would like a local agency to develop transportation resources.

Another disadvantage of the current state system is that there are state goals that have to be reached to satisfy the federal government. Currently, there are no special rewards for a county that exceeds its goal by working hard because all the different county statistics are counted together. As long as the state goals are met, whether individual counties exceed their goals or not does not make much difference. There should be a reward system in place to offer incentives for counties to excel. Now, there are only penalties for counties that do not meet state determined goals for Work First.

Involvement of Players in Administration of Welfare

There is no indication that there is greater involvement of a wider range of players in the actual day-to-day administration of welfare in Transylvania County. No changes in this area were identified. The major players in administration of welfare are the people with expertise in this area, the Board of Social Services, Ms. Griffin and her staff at DSS. This has been true in Transylvania County for many years. Basically, "welfare" remains an extremely complex program that requires considerable experience and expertise on the part of those who administer it. It is certainly beyond the competence and interest of

most individuals not directly involved to master all its arcane rules. Also, coordination and communication among a variety of county agencies on behalf of clients is an extremely time consuming activity, requiring meetings and other activities on an ongoing basis; something for which most social service and other professionals lack time.

Assessment

After interviewing the major county “players”, and reviewing a number of documents related to welfare reform, my assessment is that one of the main goals of the 1996 federal welfare reform, devolution, or the moving of decision making from the federal level to the state and local level, has given the Transylvania DSS the capability of exercising creativity and innovation in the development of programs to assist people in moving from welfare to work. They have much more flexibility in budget decisions. They are able to create services now that they could not previously offer. However, the state retains a significant amount of control, in my opinion. As was previously stated, the state set goals and set expectations for how these goals were to be achieved. Transylvania County did have some decision making power. However, eligibility, a major component of any welfare program, had to remain unchanged because of the state’s inadequate computer system.

Also, some aspects of welfare reform were already in place in North Carolina by 1996. Since the 1996 federal welfare reform law was not the beginning of major program and budget changes in county welfare programs, it is hard to apportion out just which changes with respect to devolution can be directly attributed to the federal law.

As an electing county, Transylvania County established a Local Planning Committee which included a large number of persons in the community in the planning process and provided them with an opportunity to create their own “county specific” program. Participation in the planning process also created the opportunity for them to gain a greater understanding of the challenges of bringing about

change to a part of the Transylvania County population (the poor) who don't ordinarily receive much attention from the more affluent members of the county. However, there is little evidence that community agencies are any more involved with DSS than they were previously. The partnerships going on now were previously in place and were working well.

The Work First County Plan provided an opportunity for DSS to establish programs, goals, and objectives which could be measured with specific parameters and time frames. Measures for success were specified. A Statewide Work First Progress Report is issued monthly to the county offices that lists statistics for the eight statewide goals for standard counties and six statewide goals for electing counties, providing a further measure of each county's standing with respect to all other counties in the state. There is definitely the expectation that statewide, the departments, regardless of county status, are all moving in the same direction, putting welfare recipients to work.

From a political point of view, the county commissioners don't have welfare reform on their agendas. Welfare is not a political issue. The commissioners regularly receive reports from Ms. Griffin and there is rarely any discussion about these reports in the commission meetings. There are no indications that the Board of Social Services operates from a political perspective at all. They are supportive of Ms. Griffin and, according to the Minutes, have not raised questions or concerns about any activities of DSS.

It is possible that without the determination of Ms. Walend, the county commissioner who had a particular interest in social services, the county may have not have become an electing county. As an elected official, she is the one exception in the county who "took up the cause" and put considerable effort into making sure that the appropriate political decisions were made.

From my experience working in state government, unless a politician has a special interest or expertise in welfare, other priorities take precedence. After all, most people who are on welfare rolls

don't vote. They are primarily young single mothers with children, a constituency that doesn't have much clout. They don't own property, usually, and this, don't pay property taxes. I believe debates over contentious issues such as giving money to people who don't "earn" it, creating dependency, and welfare benefits contributing to "moral decline" are most likely to be played out at the state and national level, where ideological extremes on the left and on the right political spectrums are found. The political extremes also tend to receive more media attention than the "political middle" at all levels of government.

A small, rural county such as Transylvania would not be expected to experience a political revolution as a result of a passage of a federal law. A large layer of insulation at the state level protects counties, particularly the small rural ones, from the rough waters of social and political change. I believe change in all aspects of political and social life comes in very small increments in Transylvania County.

It appears that passage of P.L. 104-193 has had an overall positive effect on Transylvania County DSS and its clients in the short term, although the specific impact of this law cannot be separated from Governor Hunt's 1995 Work First efforts. However, there are some negatives and some "unknowns" at this point in time. It remains to be seen if Work First recipients can maintain their overall level of functioning over time, particularly due to the lifetime benefit limit.

An important issue that deserves consideration is the policy of mandating that all mothers of children age six months (in some counties, one year) and older must work full time. This policy framed the 1996 federal law. Since most are young single mothers without much education or training, they will be working in low level, low paying jobs probably for their entire lives unless they can find husbands who can support them and their children. The state will have to provide supportive services, probably indefinitely, to keep these mothers on the job (any job). At this point in time, two years into the Work First Plan, everyone in the county who can work is working. New applicants, if able bodied, are placed in employment relatively quickly. The remaining clients require ever increasing time, energy and effort on

the part of all who work with them. There may be a point where some consideration should be given to accepting that a certain number of people will never be able to hold regular employment, no matter what time and effort is expended on them. At this time, Governor Hunt's mandate to the counties is that everyone will be put to work.

With respect to Transylvania County, I have been impressed with the singularity of purpose of all the players I interviewed and their focus on doing their best to help every person and family in Transylvania County to achieve their highest potential. Ms. Trudi Walend, the county's representative in the North Carolina House, is a knowledgeable and effective advocate of welfare reform and social services. There is a great deal of experience and expertise in the county DSS office and the DSS staff and all the county officials are working well together.

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