

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Transylvania County
By Dr. Terry Gibson

Transylvania County chose to be an “electing” county with respect to welfare reform. The county is located in a rural area in Western North Carolina and has a tradition of upholding conservative family values, independent thinking and self reliance. The impetus for “electing” county status came primarily from one individual, Trudi Walend, a county commissioner in 1997 with a strong interest in social services. As a result of her leadership, DSS undertook a very intensive planning process designed to enable every client to reach his/her potential by moving off welfare into employment.

A summary of positive changes that occurred in Transylvania County as noted by county officials is as follows:

1. The involvement of a large number of persons in the Local Planning Committee that held a number of planning meetings to design a more effective program for moving people off welfare and into work.
2. Responsibility for obtaining work for clients is more of a community effort and is not seen as only the job of DSS.
3. There is more flexibility in use of funds.
4. DSS can contract out some supportive services for clients that were not available in the past.
5. There has been a dramatic drop in the number of clients receiving welfare assistance.
6. Faith based organizations have been involved in assisting clients to find and keep employment, something that was not possible prior to welfare reform.
7. Funds for Work First are sent directly to the county on a quarterly basis.

Although a number of positive changes have occurred, DSS officials expressed concern about what would happen to clients in minimum wage jobs if the economy went into a decline. These people would be put out of work. Also, many clients remain at or under the poverty level without much hope of improving their income levels. A “hard core” group of clients will always need much support and assistance to maintain employment. Mothers with children do not earn enough from wages to pay for day care and transportation. A big question is what will happen when the five year lifetime benefit limit runs out.

Overall, DSS officials believe that being an “electing” county has been a good thing for the clients although it has meant considerable work for the DSS staff. Ms. Walend, now a state representative, also believes that the county has benefited because of an increased amount of local autonomy. DSS officials have a long history of positive relationships with county commissioners and there is no indication that welfare reform has been a major political issue in Transylvania County.