

Executive Summary
Wake County
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Welfare reform in Wake County coincided with three other social service reforms. First, the county merged the departments of mental health, public health, and social services into Wake County Human Services. The merger included job training and housing services. Second, county government began promoting partnerships with other agencies, nonprofits, and businesses. Third, Wake County Human Services adopted results-based management. The objectives of Work First were consistent with these reforms, which encouraged flexibility, innovation, and results.

The creation of Human Services was promoted to improve welfare services and save taxpayers' money. Furthermore, the interaction of welfare reform, the creation of Wake County Human Services, the emphasis on partnerships, and results-management was evident in the Work First planning:

1. Vocational Services Unit was created from the merged units; its highest priority was Work First.
2. Partnerships were created to meet the goals of reducing the welfare rolls, securing and retaining workforce participation, and ensuring the well-being of children. The partnerships included the Employment Security Commission, Johnston County, Wake Technical Community College, and the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau.

These interactions remained evident as Work First was implemented:

1. Responsibility for Work First involved senior mental health and social services staff. The mental health culture facilitated flexibility, and the social services culture facilitated accountability.

2. The number of partnerships increased, and the county contracted with nonprofits to offer services to Work First participants.
3. The Work First Steering Committee, which included county agencies, nonprofits, and businesses, had adopted a strategy of brainstorming and creating projects to improve client outcomes.

During the period of welfare reform the county's welfare caseload (other than child-only cases) has been reduced by over 50 percent, and roughly 90 percent of Work First participants have not returned to the welfare rolls. The prosperity of the county has attracted an in-migration from poorer areas of the state, so that number of new applicants each month remains high.

In reflecting on the achievements of Work First county staff point out that it hard to separate its effects from the county's robust economy and the innovation facilitated by the consolidation of social services.