

Executive Summary
Wilkes County
By Dr. Dennis Grady

Wilkes County became ground zero in the contest between state level Republican and Democratic Party leaders over the eventual shape of welfare reform in North Carolina. As legislative leaders in both parties battled over the summer and fall of 1997 in what would become the longest legislative session in the State's history, social service professionals and conservative local politicians fought on the floor of the county commission chambers over whether to remain a standard county or risk the odds of going elect.

Ultimately four main goals were articulated among the major actors in Wilkes County as this battle ensued locally:

1. Providing political support to state Republican legislative leaders by agreeing to be part of their experimental, devolutionary effort.
2. Reducing the welfare caseload and moving TANF recipients into gainful (minimum wage) employment.
3. Reducing the cost of running the County welfare system and directing the savings to other purposes.

4. Reducing the risk associated with going elect.

The manifestation of the first goal was an historic special meeting of the County Commission following a decision to remain standard wherein the Republican Speaker of the NC House of Representatives and the Republican leader of the House's welfare reform effort appeared before the Wilkes Commissioners to plead for Wilkes participation. Even with this special pleading, it took the face-saving device of a "study" committee that allowed Wilkes to be considered going elect in Raleigh while appearing to keep the option open at home.

The second goal was achieved by moving approximately 600 individuals into minimum wage, no-skill, dead-end jobs in a full employment economy.

The third goal was accomplished by a combination of achieving the second goal and the federal maintenance of effort (MOE) requirements resulting in Wilkes DSS having more flexible funding than ever in its history. This allowed the DSS agency to restructure a portion of its operation and devote more resources to child support enforcement and child protective services.

The final goal of risk avoidance was held most dearly by the DSS policy subsystem. Doomsday scenarios were conjured up concerning the consequences of going elect which chilled the otherwise willing Republican leadership on the commission. After the decision was made, the TANF advisory group became an independent actor in the DSS system which included numerous outside actors like the county manager who heretofore had little involvement in the details of DSS affairs. The administrative leadership of the agency developed a hands-off posture to the program which remains to this day.

Fundamentally, the issue was fought among conservatives over what was the more conservative thing to do. Was it more conservative to experiment with welfare like their partisan brothers and sisters wished them to do, but perhaps run the risk of law suits and increases in welfare rolls. Or was it more conservative to do what they had always done in the past which was to follow the lead of Raleigh very closely? Partisanship trumped tradition in this case.