

# Perspectives on Welfare Reform

## Part One: Social Work – Welfare And Work: Some Suggestions On How The Two Can Mesh, From A Public Policy Administrator

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This is a personal statement from an administrator of a large array of public programs that require and help welfare recipients to move into work and, ultimately, to self-sufficiency. The programs need to comply with a growing number of state and federal laws. Most important in Pennsylvania are the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 and Pennsylvania's Act 35. PRWORA eliminated the prior Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with the significantly titled Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Block grants to states replaced entitlements and a five-year limit was imposed. Increasingly, high participation rates were imposed on states while the activities that counted toward participation were narrowed. Act 35 strengthened Pennsylvania's emphasis on welfare recipients' obligation to seek, obtain, and maintain employment and introduced a range of new requirements including a 20-hour work requirement after receipt of cash assistance for two years. It is from the perspective of a program administrator who is trying to forge allegiances with all the professions and interest groups touching clients' lives that I offer some ideas for improving the positive connections between social work and public welfare employment and training programs.

American attitudes toward welfare and the people who use it have undergone a dramatic shift. We have come from a point where the mainstream view was that most poor people were in that condition because of influences external to themselves: poverty, the consequences of economic change, racism, urban decay, and so on. Today, the welfare system--at least that part of it responsible for income maintenance--is regarded by the public as a necessary, but rightfully limited social response to problems largely caused by personal decisions

made by the individual: becoming pregnant, choosing not to work, and failing to internalize the value system of the mainstream culture. I will not argue the merits of either point of view. I point out the dichotomy because the ideal of personal responsibility again pervades the current approach to public welfare.

The welfare system is operating under the presumption that the most significant problem affecting most cash assistance recipients is the lack of gainful employment. This condition is held to be created and maintained by a range of barriers to successful entry into the job market. They include insufficient commitment to the work ethic, poor educational attainment, limited job skills, and a range of behavioral, health, and situational problems. The argument that a lack of jobs represents a formidable barrier to employment is weakened by the plentiful entry-level jobs in many micro-economic arenas.

It was once widely thought--and still is in some circles--that barriers to employment must be removed before actual entry into the workforce. A primary value in the current welfare system supports entry into the workforce as a first step toward addressing other problems. This is partially in response to the widely expressed public view that irresponsible behavior (e.g., getting pregnant should not be rewarded with educational and training opportunities not readily available to responsible taxpayers. In addition, research and experience show that education and training do not necessarily produce better returns than job search and entry into the workforce. (Dan Bloom, "After AFDC: Welfare to Work: Choices and Challenges for States," New York, MDRC, 1997, is an even-handed summary of research on the effectiveness of welfare employment program.) Lastly, current laws just do not afford the time for training that

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AFDC did. In Pennsylvania, a client has one year during the first two years of assistance during which education or training alone can meet the work activity requirement. The five-year lifetime limit on TANF generates its own urgency.

Social workers and public assistance policy administrators have never been totally at ease with one another. Social workers in private practice and those in agencies operate according to the values and principles of the profession of social work. Public officials develop and operate programs that express the will of the electorate, as expressed by elected executives and representatives. The public will, as we know, is shaped by numerous influences, many of which have little relationship to the content of professional disciplines. The people we serve would benefit, I think, if this distinction were respected by both sides.

Following are some areas the social work profession and welfare administrators should address to ensure that both systems provide cooperative support to the people they jointly serve, without, I think, denying the basic precepts of social work and while remaining true to the ideals that called people to do social work in the first place:

More attention needs to be paid to which arenas are most appropriate to debate and challenge current welfare laws and programs. In public meetings and in the professional and popular media, we hear objections to the programs that are in place to implement the recent welfare reform legislation. The time limits are unreasonable. There is not enough emphasis on education. People with limited personal and financial resources are being required to juggle too many demands for work and conformance to behavioral standards. This is not to say that all the objections come from social workers or that the criticism is without merit. It is to say that care must be taken not to give our mutual clients the mistaken impression that the current welfare laws are under debate in ways that are at all likely to result in a reversal of current policies.

Indeed, most observers agree that if welfare reform legislation were to be modified today, it would result in more, not less, restrictive policies.

The public and representative government made the decision several years ago that the old system was counterproductive and that the new one should be characterized by transition, personal responsibility, and work. Not all social work professionals agree with the attitudes reflected and the measures contained in the new welfare system. However, professional training should address the issue of the effect some public advocacy may have on client behavior. More specifically, if clients get the impression from what they hear from the social work community that work requirements are loose and time limits will not be enforced, they may engage in behavior that results in loss of benefits or in not being prepared for the national five-year limit.

Federal--and most state--legislation requires a cooperative plan for self-sufficiency to be developed between the welfare recipient and the welfare department. In Pennsylvania, it is called the Agreement of Mutual Responsibility. The AMR and its functional equivalents elsewhere require clients to show how they are meeting the work requirement, list the steps they will take to become self-sufficient, and describe the arrangements they and the state will use and support to facilitate the process. Signing one is a condition of eligibility. Most social work involves some sort of plan developed with the client that is not unlike the AMR. Social work research, education, and practice can be of enormous assistance in shaping and communicating effective techniques in development of these narrow examples of service plans.

Entrenchment into the workforce while times are good will help ensure that clients and ex-clients move up far enough on a career path to avoid trouble in an economic downturn. Retention, advancement, and re-entry programs are being offered in order to provide support as new employees look for the return on the work-first promise, seeking edu-

cational opportunities and ways to polish their attraction to employers. Employment and training program officials and contractors will look to social work for intervention strategies that assist new workers to stay on the job despite family and other difficulties.

The work with the AMRs mentioned earlier requires more of the skills associated with social work and less of those of the eligibility/benefit technician. Continuing education opportunities that meet the needs of public welfare caseworkers are critical. It is important to note that the continuing—in some cases beginning—education provided is of little value if it is not presented in the context of the caseworker's job. That means that faculty must learn the program models in enough detail to demonstrate application of principle.

More agencies with social work missions are writing proposals and getting contracts to provide employment and training services to welfare clients. It is not uncommon for funders to find contract winners behaving as if the promises made in the proposal were made just to get the money. Much of what is in our statements of work is there because of statutory or regulatory requirements. Almost all of the program models are structured in the light of successful research and experience (see Bloom, above). In Pennsylvania, at least, contractors who do not meet program standards are forced into compliance or their contract is terminated. The profession of social work must think hard about the degree to which it is willing to become service vendors as opposed to purveyors of professional services.

Increasing numbers of profit-making organizations are entering or expanding their roles in the

field of provision of employment and training services to welfare clients. Few of them have an ideological mission. Public administrators are reviewing the degree to which tax status matters to the quality of service provision, particularly in a performance-based contract environment. Whether and how well a provider can deliver on promised service is the central consideration.

Where can social workers and public administrators find common ground? I suggest this: The current popular view of the poor is overly monolithic. Some truly vulnerable, blamelessly disadvantaged people are being swept into the same class as the obviously employable person who should get a job. If we, a collectivity that includes government assistance program implementers and social workers, ensure that the people who should be working are doing so and advancing themselves toward a point where they can support themselves and their families, the public mind will begin to discriminate between the person who takes the welfare ride because it is there and the persons and families who cannot navigate post-modern society on their own. If social work as a profession opts into the demand for self-sufficiency for those who can achieve it, public welfare can direct the savings generated by diminished caseloads to those who most need help. Public welfare administrators can realign their attitudes toward case management so that the holistic approach as practiced by the profession of social work becomes the ideal instead of the benefit-generating caseload management that came to characterize the welfare system that TANF replaced.