

# **Perspectives on Welfare Reform**

## **Part Three: Occupational Social Work And Welfare Reform: Directions For Continuing Social Work Education**

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Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) (P.L. 104-193), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant programs are mandated to move increasing numbers of individuals into the workplace. TANF requires that adults in families receiving assistance under the block grant participate in work activities after 24 months. Further, TANF mandates now limit total lifetime welfare receipt to a maximum of 60 months.

In response, welfare-to-work programs in most states have adopted a "rapid labor-force attachment" or "work first" philosophy, which assumes that the transition from welfare to work is linear, and further assumes that the initial job placement is final. However, research evaluations of rapid labor-force attachment programs over the past several decades reported that participants experience frequent and rapid initial job loss, cycle on and off welfare, and rarely receive above-poverty wages (Burtless, 1997; Gueron & Pauly, 1991; Herr & Halpern, 1991). Other studies reported the additional burden and cost for new workers of skeletal or non-existent on-the-job benefits, lack of adequate transportation, and unavailability of quality child care (Riemer, 1997). Finally, since passage of the PRWORA, recent state and local findings suggest that the majority of former welfare recipients who have obtained jobs are consistently worse off financially than those who remain on welfare (Sherman et al., 1998). Increased rates of poverty among children and difficulty accessing food, shelter and needed medical care are among the additional hardships accompanying recipients' moves from welfare to very-low-wage jobs (Sherman et al., 1998).

We suggest that schools of social work can and should respond at individual, program, and policy levels to the dire economic and employment needs

of TANF participants. As a profession with a long history and commitment to serving the needs of marginalized and oppressed persons and groups, social work is uniquely positioned to take a leading role in developing welfare-to-work programs and employment policy that address the educational, vocational training and social/economic needs of participants. Missing from current workforce attachment and retention initiatives, these elements are necessary components if the goal of our efforts is to prepare participants for work experience that provides income and benefits sufficient to lift families out of poverty. Otherwise, social workers seeking to effect positive occupational outcomes for TANF program participants will face the ethical challenges of practice in the context of programs and policies which, as currently configured may succeed only in moving welfare recipients into jobs which provide participants little to no protection from hardship, and may result in increased levels of poverty for participants and their children.

In this study, we suggest how social work educators can design and develop curricula to help welfare-to-work program personnel and workplace professionals maximize the work efforts of TANF participants. Curricular content would address the nature of the broad social, economic and educational needs of program participants, as well as the barriers that such continued need, left unaddressed in most current program designs, may place on participants' ability to move successfully toward economic security. Further, curricula for these contexts would emphasize skills in legislative and system-focused advocacy and in coalition-building, toward the goal of involving program participants in joint efforts (O'Donnell, 1993), in order to effect needed changes in policies which have guided the implementation of current welfare reform efforts. We use knowledge about job retention and occupational

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social work as a framework for the development of our model.

### **Job Retention Supports: Background**

Recent welfare-to-work demonstration programs found that job retention supports extended job stability, sped labor market return after job loss, and potentially resulted in self-sufficient wages (Herr, Halpern, & Wagner, 1995; Rangarajan, Schochet, & Chu, 1998). Retention supports were characterized as individualized, job-focused case management, crisis intervention, transitional financial assistance, transportation assistance, childcare vouchers, job development, job training and search activities, post-employment follow-up, and reemployment services.

At the program level, staff roles and characteristics were particularly important to job retention among program participants (Berg, Olson, & Conrad, 1991; Rangarajan, Meckstroth, & Novak, 1998). Influential elements included trusted relationships, workplace knowledge, linkage with ancillary work-related supports, and sensitivity to individual rates of progress. However, while some income maintenance workers have had social work training (Green & Edwards, 1998), social work practice in welfare-to-work and job training programs appeared to be minimal (Besharov, Germanis, & Rossi, 1997; Herr, Halpern, & Wagner, 1995; Quint, Musick, & Ladner, 1994; Rosenthal, 1998). Many work-program staff members were found unable or unwilling to manage both the training and personal concerns of the participants, particularly the interaction between complex personal problems and workplace needs (DeParle, 1998; Valbrun, 1997). In fact, the largest post-employment services demonstration project reported that case managers received little guidance about how to serve clients with different types and levels of need (Rangarajan, Meckstroth, & Novak, 1998, p. xii).

Similarly, supports in the workplace led to improved rates of job retention among former TANF program participants compared to rates in worksites without supports (Dodson, Joshi, &

McDonald, 1998). Select private sector companies and firms participating in the Clinton Administration's Welfare to Work Partnership also reported improved retention rates among former welfare recipients, some over 70 percent (Education, 1997). Most attributed their success to the combination of job-specific training and employee support services. However, most employers were too small, unwilling, or lacked knowledge about how to provide these kinds of supports.

In ideal form, retention supports began at work-program onset and persisted in various forms for at least five years (Herr, Halpern, & Wagner, 1995). At present, few TANF programs offer retention services lasting more than 12 months and such services in businesses and corporations are nascent. As a consequence, we forward a continuing education model that addresses the procedural and programmatic needs reported by program workers and employers, directing attention also to structural and policy issues.

### **A Continuing Education Training Model**

In recent professional literature, Iversen (1998) proposed the systematic application of specialized occupational social work knowledge and skills to the work-specific, multilevel roles of employment support personnel in work-enhancement programs and the workplace. Here reformulation forms the base for a continuing education certificate program for job support personnel to learn how to best provide retention supports in welfare-to-work programs and organizations hiring former welfare recipients. All modules in the program present the selected material in relation to job readiness, job attainment, and job retention. Modules can be offered at both post-bachelor's and post-Master's degree levels, as well as to recipients with and without social work degrees. Recipients of this training are likely to include job placement staff, employment advisors, job coaches, work skills training providers, workplace supervisors, workplace mentors, and peer support providers. Ultimately, schools of social work can provide training for retention-focused personnel

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in welfare-to-work and school to career programs, one-stop community employment centers, job training centers associated with major businesses, and workplace supervisors and administrators. Such educational programs would build on existing social work curricula, incorporating both general social work knowledge (Green & Edwards, 1998) and specialized occupational social work approaches (Iversen, 1998). We propose that such training be organized into the following four modules: interpersonal relations; environmental and social support systems; organizational structure and behavior; and community resources and the labor market.

#### **Interpersonal Relations Module**

As the literature indicated, a strong client-program worker relationship was essential to all retention-focused supports (Herr, Halpern, & Wagner, 1995). Resting also on program worker knowledge about the workplace, such relationships were directed at getting, keeping, and advancing in jobs. In this module, assessment skills would be refined to permit deeper understanding of the range of individual and structural barriers to job retention. Such knowledge directs the development of both individually-tailored supports and strategies to address these barriers on community and policy levels.

This module would also include training in the use of focus group methods, encouraging the use of this methodology in planning, implementing and evaluating program design. Further, education in the use of group skills would help support personnel design specific group content in areas such as self-esteem building, problem-solving and contingency planning, empowerment techniques to combat fears engendered by previous experiences of discrimination and harassment, and advocacy techniques for changing situations of perceived and real stigmatization due to gender, race, ethnicity, or assistance status.

#### **Environment/Social Support System Module**

The Environment/Social Support System module expands general social work assessment, brief coun-

seling, and referral competencies to include systemic assessment and intervention strategies aimed at strengthening the participant's family and community support system. This module includes assessment and referral to appropriate resources for substance abuse, mental health needs, family violence and family conflicts; ways to prepare families for the participant's entry into the workforce; ways to access transitional benefits; and how to facilitate access to further education, vocational skill training, and individualized reemployment resources. The following components would be based on occupationally-focused social work expertise:

How to assess the need for, and access continued cash, transportation, food, medical and child care benefits, to help support and maintain individual and family well-being during the period of transition to the workforce, and continuing beyond employment, to augment low-level wage and on-the-job benefits, as needed.

How program personnel can use knowledge about the stresses that exist for individuals and families experiencing poverty and unemployment to inform program design and resource provision. Such stresses might include behavioral, physical and mental health conditions; needs of children or extended family members; and issues of family violence.

How to examine the meaning of education and work in the lives of participants, as transmitted in the family-of-origin (Farber & Iversen, 1998; Iversen & Farber, 1996). Such examination can guide the development and use of both instrumental and expressive supports within families toward members' work efforts.

How program personnel can best evaluate work experiences in adolescence (Rich, 1996) and young adulthood. Such evaluation would include how to assess consistency in the content of high school goals, post-secondary education, and job characteristics, since such continuity increases the potential for economic self-sufficiency among poor inner-city women (Iversen, 1995).

How program workers can use knowledge about inflation, wages, pension vestiture, profit sharing (Root, 1993), and insurance coverage, to help participants assess and expand networks and information sources about work, learn about the range of non-wage benefits available in different organizations, understand job specifications among potential employers, and assess these elements according to individual needs.

### **Organizational Structure and Behavior Module**

Examples of practices and services that support retention among new workers in the workplace include: organizational flexibility; preparation for the particular institutional culture; on-site or subsidized childcare; employee assistance programs (EAPs); mentoring programs; transportation aids and subsidies; help accessing the Earned Income Tax Credit and emergency utility assistance; and attention to occupational health and safety concerns (Lewis, 1990). Consequently, instruction would address the following occupationally-focused material:

How program workers and EAP personnel can use knowledge about career and interest assessment, search strategies, and skills evaluation to improve the "fit" between work-program participants and eventual employment sites.

How program staff can educate work-program participants about workplace climate, structure, organizational history, management philosophy, and format, in order to help participants recognize the structural sources of workplace stress and develop strategies for organizational change. Such strategies may include involvement in the union or workplace organizing efforts.

How to use organizational diversity models (Mor-Barak, 1998) to identify previous or current conflictual or discriminatory experiences in the workplace, assess individual responses to these experiences, and work collaboratively to redress harmful policies and practices. This module will also teach supervisors how to implement training on identifying and managing issues of difference (for

example, gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability) that may exist between program workers or employers and their supervisees.

How to use knowledge about legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-336) (Estes, 1987) and the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-596), to educate new workers about their workplace rights and protections and guide them in the use of such measures on their own behalf.

How to assess and remove barriers to retention resulting from elements of organizational structure and behavior, including supervisor-worker relations, co-worker relations, and hiring procedures. This module also uses occupational social work expertise to teach employers how to develop employee support programs to eliminate such barriers and facilitate individuals' transition and attachment to work.

How supervisors can help new workers understand lines of authority and responsibility, how to negotiate flextime, how to resolve conflicts, and how to advocate for oneself in the administrative hierarchy.

### **Community Resource and Labor Market Module**

As previously noted, a number of structural barriers exist that interfere with the ability of clients to find and keep jobs. The most obvious of these are availability of accessible employment opportunities that provide at least a living wage, adequate job benefits, and policies and practices which limit the amount of education and vocational training for which TANF participants are eligible. Social work's macro orientation promotes community organizing strategies directed at social change efforts. The last module we propose involves training on community organizing, community education, community outreach, and advocacy:

How job developers and program workers can use outplacement knowledge and skills to develop and nurture relationships with local businesses to maximize job creation in employment settings where there is potential for job permanence and career-ladder movement.

How program workers can use negotiation skills to develop strategies to educate and advocate with select employers to increase hiring of unemployed and working-poor clients and take advantage of tax breaks for doing so.

How new employees together can advocate for wage increases, improved nonwage benefits, on-the-job training, and advancement opportunities.

How program workers and employers can use alliance-building skills to initiate collaborative career enrichment and mentoring activities with community high schools, skills development centers, and service organizations.

How to advocate for the inclusion of education and skills training in the definition of work efforts, following the guide of welfare-to-work initiatives successful in such advocacy. In addition, how to conceptualize and structure access to further education for underemployed workers and those seeking advancement opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

Provisions of the recent welfare reform legislation (PRWORA), such as "work first" policies and time-limits for lifetime assistance, suggest new and expanded support and advocacy roles for social workers in both welfare-to-work programs and workplaces hiring former welfare recipients. As job retention was a central problem in earlier welfare-to-work programs (Burtless, 1997), a logical role for social work is the design and provision of retention support services which require structures for access to and completion of higher education programs. Occupational social work skills and knowledge developed in work organizations can be applied to work-program and workplace support services in order to increase rates of retention in economically-sufficient jobs for welfare-to-work program participants (Iversen, 1998).

Recent research on the effectiveness of labor force attachment programs suggests that adequate training of support workers is a key to the success of such programs. Helping unemployed individuals find and keep jobs that will move them out of

poverty requires sophisticated assessment and intervention skills that attend to the complex interplay among interpersonal, structural and organizational barriers to job readiness, attainment, and retention. It is also essential to understand structural barriers to attaining living-wage employment and develop methods necessary to bring about policy changes. Using principles derived from occupational social work, we have proposed a series of training modules aimed at preparing work-program and workplace personnel to successfully support job efforts among individuals with wide-ranging types and levels of need. Modules about interpersonal relations and the workplace, environmental and social supports, organizational structure and climate, and community resources and the labor market form the foundation of a retention-focused continuing education certificate program. The exact content of the modules can be constructed in collaboration with welfare-to-work program participants, program service providers, and employers according to the needs of the particular geographic location and clientele.

We further suggest that schools of social work are ideally suited to respond to the challenge of providing such professional development and training through their continuing education programs. Such programs have historically demonstrated the ability to adapt and respond to the changing professional development needs of the community. The modules we propose provide only a blueprint for such training programs. Continuing education programs in schools of social work across the country can build on this model, tailoring theirs to the particular needs of the communities they serve.

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