



IRENE LURIE

## Changing Welfare Offices

### Executive Summary

The 1996 welfare reform law that established the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program gave states increased discretion in providing benefits and setting program rules. In response, states have dramatically changed their policies and practices for handling welfare applications. Many welfare offices have adopted “work first” policies that require recipients to engage in job search or other work-related activities while they apply for cash assistance, and some offices have initiated policies that try to divert applicants from monthly cash assistance. However, fewer offices have created effective mechanisms for informing diverted applicants and recipients leaving welfare about the availability of food stamps, Medicaid, and other benefits. Welfare offices in many states have been haphazard in linking clients to pregnancy prevention and other family formation services, particularly where state policy gives them little or no support. In addition, they have only recently made job retention and advancement a high priority. Improving the performance of welfare offices would be facilitated by removing conflicting requirements across programs as well as by improving the training of workers and coordination across human services agencies.

The implementation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program occurs at local welfare offices where staff talk with people who are applying for assistance or already receiving it. At this point of service delivery, the TANF legislation, state laws and regulations, agreements between agencies that serve TANF clients, and the many other arrangements and procedures needed to run the program are brought to life.

To understand how TANF has unfolded, and how welfare caseloads have been cut so sharply, we must look at what happens inside welfare offices. How are the new rules in the TANF legislation conveyed to welfare applicants and recipients? How are the rules enforced? How are people referred to the services arranged for them or selected by them? Studies of program implementation show that changes in policy do not automatically translate into changes in treatment of

recipients. Formal rules promulgated by legislatures or administrative agencies may be unknown or misunderstood by frontline workers. These workers may not have the skills, resources, or motivation to explain and apply the rules correctly. In addition, when rules cannot be written in sufficient detail to specify all the aspects of the services that program designers envision, workers must exercise discretion in serving their clients.

TANF programs exhibit great diversity both among and within states. Because TANF increased the states' authority to design their own welfare programs, state programs now differ much more than they did under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Under TANF, states devolve many functions and decisions to counties and specialized local agencies. But despite this diversity, there are similarities in the direction of change. One of the most striking changes has occurred in the

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welfare application process: families entering the front door of the welfare agency now encounter a more rigorous application process than they did under AFDC.

## **Changes at the Front Door of the Welfare Agency**

Under AFDC, states were required to give anyone the opportunity to apply for aid, to act on the application with reasonable promptness, and to give aid to all eligible individuals. With the end of welfare entitlement and these procedural rules, each state now designs its own application process to certify or deny eligibility for assistance. This process is a primary vehicle for conveying the new rules of the TANF program. Almost all welfare offices use the application process to send a strong signal to TANF applicants that employment is now expected. Frontline workers generally believe welfare recipients should work and they support this change in orientation.

Many states use a variant of “work first,” which requires that individuals cooperate with work requirements while applying for welfare. Frontline workers generally have little or no discretion to exempt applicants from work first activities, and must make referrals to work first agencies before assistance can be authorized. Before becoming eligible for welfare, recipients may be required to engage in a job search for a period of time, attend a workshop on how to search for work, or attend a work agency orientation on employment services and supportive services such as child care and transportation.

State and local administrators report that the work first model serves several functions beyond the obvious one of promoting immediate employment. Sending people to job search can help the agency assess applicants’ skills and their need for education and training. Work first requirements can send a clear message to welfare applicants that they will need to take a job or do unpaid work as a condition of receiving welfare, a prospect that

discourages some people from continuing their application. Finally, requiring people to search for work or attend a workshop can identify people who cannot fulfill these requirements because they are already working, but not reporting their earnings to the welfare agency.

Because welfare agencies no longer need to give everyone the opportunity to apply for assistance, agencies can now use strategies designed explicitly to divert applicants from joining the welfare rolls. One diversionary approach used by agencies is to give applicants a one-time payment instead of providing continuing assistance. For example, if someone comes to a welfare agency after losing her job because her car broke down, she can be given a lump-sum payment for car repairs. The agency pays her enough to resolve her immediate emergency but does not formally accept her as a welfare recipient. Nearly half the states give short-term assistance if, in exchange, the applicant foregoes assistance for some specified period of time. A second diversion strategy is to refer applicants immediately to resources in the community, like housing programs, food pantries, and charities.

Short-term diversion payments are advantageous for people who prefer to avoid going on welfare, but they can also have negative consequences. In New York City, for example, a new eligibility process led frontline workers to discourage people from applying for benefits on their first visit to the welfare office, and instead encourage them to look elsewhere for support, such as among family members or within the community. Because eligibility for TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid are determined jointly using the same application, these diverted families did not have the opportunity to apply for food stamps and Medicaid, although both programs remain legal entitlements and must be offered on the first visit to a welfare office. These practices were challenged in court, and the city was placed under

a court injunction to redesign its eligibility process.

Greater use of computerized information systems has also made the welfare application process more rigorous. Computerized systems give offices information about applicants that was not available before the revolution in information technology. Finger-imaging systems used in New York and Texas enable offices to reduce welfare fraud by comparing an applicant's fingerprints with the fingerprints of people already receiving benefits. Other desktop computer systems enable workers to verify the information that applicants provide as well as discover unreported information.

In addition to these high-tech systems, some welfare agencies are returning to the old practice of sending workers to visit the homes of applicants and recipients. Home visits yield information about the family's lifestyle that may uncover unreported household members, income, or assets, and may also reveal problems such as disability and domestic violence that call for additional services.

Because applications for welfare have not declined as dramatically as welfare caseloads, the workload at the frontlines of welfare agencies remains heavy. New and improved computer systems do not necessarily reduce the time needed to process a case. The volumes of information to be gathered and conveyed leave little time to problem-solve with clients and give them information that might promote self-sufficiency.

### **Pursuing TANF's Goals Inside the Front Door**

One of the specific goals of the TANF legislation is to promote greater personal responsibility among welfare recipients regarding work, marriage, and childbearing. However, differences in political culture, personal values, economic and fiscal conditions, welfare benefit levels, and the unique characteristics of the adults and children in TANF families often result in varied state and local

policies and practices to promote personal responsibility.

A common characteristic among state programs is an increase in the percentage of welfare recipients who work in regular jobs, as opposed to participating in post-secondary education and vocational training. In the late 1980s, federal law encouraged states to enroll recipients in educational activities. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 39 percent of participants engaged in work-related activities in 1995 were actually in school (almost half in higher education), and not working in regular jobs. Emphasizing education, however, was a long-term investment strategy that did not immediately move people into the labor force and may even have led them to stay on welfare longer. So in 1996, the TANF legislation encouraged recipients to find regular work by limiting the amount of education and training that counted toward meeting states' work requirements.

States have clearly responded to these changes in federal law: by 1999, according to HHS, 27.7 percent of TANF adults worked either full-time or part-time in unsubsidized employment, while only 6.1 percent of TANF adults were engaged in education or training. More recently, some states have altered this trend by allowing TANF recipients greater access to post-secondary education.

The treatment of TANF adults who are not engaged in regular employment varies widely among the states, but the treatment still signals the importance of work. Job search, the next most common work activity after regular employment, was an activity for 5.9 percent of adults in 1999. Work experience, in which recipients work in exchange for their welfare benefits, was an activity for only 3.7 percent of adults. But where work experience is used heavily, as in New York City, Ohio, and Wisconsin, it conveys a strong message about the expectation of work and reduces the attractiveness of welfare.

Welfare offices tend to convey information about the financial rewards from work in a haphazard manner. The Rockefeller Institute's Frontline Management and Practice Study, for example, found that frontline workers rarely mentioned the fact that states will ignore part of earnings when computing the welfare benefit, a widespread practice that increases the incentive to work. Workers also rarely mentioned the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, a program that pays up to \$4,000 per year to low-income working families with children. Even when workers did explain these important policies, they did not always describe them fully and accurately. Similarly, a recent study by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) found that workers frequently did not mention the continued availability of food stamp and Medicaid benefits after leaving welfare. In recognition of these problems, several advocacy groups and welfare agencies have designed attractive and colorful brochures with specific examples of the full range of benefits available to working families.

To meet TANF's goals regarding parental behavior, all states have adopted a policy of requiring people to sign a personal responsibility agreement (PRA) as a condition of receiving assistance. PRAs require workers to be more paternalistic toward welfare recipients. Depending on the state, workers can ask recipients to attend classes on parenting, money management, life skills, family planning and counseling, or substance abuse counseling and treatment. Workers can also require parents to take their children for regular medical checkups and immunizations, make their children attend school regularly, and refrain from alcohol abuse. States may also test recipients for the use of controlled substances. Requiring recipients to cooperate with authorities to establish paternity and obtain child support was federal law under AFDC and continues to be under TANF. To the extent that workers monitor compliance

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with a PRA and make it clear that noncompliance will be costly to the recipient, PRAs can reduce the attractiveness of welfare and discourage welfare dependency.

TANF substantially strengthens the ability of states to enforce their rules on work and personal responsibility. Federal law now requires states to sanction welfare recipients by reducing the benefits of those who do not meet work requirements and child support obligations. TANF goes further than the former AFDC program by permitting states to increase the severity of sanctions and even end benefits completely, usually after repeated noncompliance with the rules. Changes in food stamp rules have also increased the severity of TANF sanctions because food stamp benefits no longer rise automatically when welfare benefits are cut. While states decide the amount of the sanctions, the decision to impose or lift a sanction is inevitably at the discretion of the frontline worker, perhaps with oversight by a supervisor. How hard the worker tries to understand the client's position, encourage different behavior, make referrals to additional services, or realize the client is truly unable to comply, is ultimately up to the individual worker. For these reasons, the actual frequency with which sanctions are imposed for a given rule violation varies among states, offices, and individual workers. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, 5.1 percent of

TANF families were under a sanction during an average month in 1998. By far the most common reason for the sanction was non-compliance with work requirements.

However, less than 1 percent of TANF families experienced a termination of all cash benefits.

Sanctions for failure to comply with other components of the PRA are less frequent, in part because monitoring compliance is costly in terms of workers' time and requires methods of tracking the client's behavior. The extent to which workers actually monitor compliance with all the items in the PRA varies among offices, which makes the PRA more meaningful in some places than others. Clients must sign numerous forms in order to establish and maintain their eligibility for assistance, but observations during the Rockefeller Institute's Frontline Management and Practice Study suggest that they often sign after hearing little or no explanation of the form and without reading it.

Efforts to change behavior regarding out-of-wedlock childbearing and marriage have been implemented more slowly and with less force than policies to encourage work, perhaps a reflection of divided public opinion on these issues and less clarity about which policies are likely to be effective. To discourage childbearing by women already on welfare, some states have introduced a "family cap," which means that welfare benefits do not increase with the birth of another child. A family cap is easy to administer because it requires no action or discretion by the welfare office.

Linking welfare recipients to family planning and pregnancy prevention programs has been far more problematic, however. Public health workers or family planning nurses are on site in only a small minority of welfare offices. In some offices, welfare workers say they are prohibited from mentioning family planning to their clients. Even where workers are instructed to refer clients to family

planning services, they may fail to do so because of personal beliefs, embarrassment, lack of time, or oversight during a crowded application process. While some workers may discuss marriage with their unmarried clients or try to repair relationships between married couples, few have had training in marital counseling.

### **Frontline Workers: Combining New and Old Roles**

Many welfare agencies are trying to broaden the duties of frontline workers. Once limited to impersonal clerical functions related to determining eligibility and benefits, frontline workers are now being asked to engage in more personalized conversations about their clients' lives, behaviors, and financial problems. Most agencies have changed the titles of their frontline workers from names like "eligibility specialist" to the more professional "case manager," which implies a broader set of duties. Many states have also trained their workers to involve clients in finding solutions to the problems that keep them on welfare. But frontline workers typically do not have an educational background in social work, and they often feel unprepared and reluctant to get involved with their clients' personal problems.

Although states are adding additional responsibilities to the welfare office worker's role, they have done little to reduce the time that workers must devote to determining eligibility and benefits. A continuing focus on welfare payment accuracy requires workers to spend a great deal of time collecting and verifying documents. Financial accountability is still important to welfare agencies, in part because workers collect information for both the TANF and food stamp programs, and the food stamp program continues to penalize states that make errors.

Frontline workers must still collect documents to verify family relationships and residence, income and assets, expenses, and

other personal matters such as immunizations for children or school registration. Thus, the continuing focus on welfare payment accuracy requires workers to spend a great deal of time collecting and verifying documents.

### **Changes at the Back Door: Helping Recipients Leave and Stay Off Welfare**

Families that succeed in working their way off welfare often continue to be eligible for child care assistance, Medicaid, and food stamps—all of which are important supplements to the earnings of low-income families. But many recipients do not inform workers that they are leaving welfare and simply fail to appear at a recertification appointment. When recipients exit the system in this way, welfare agencies do not have the opportunity to inform them of their continued eligibility for these supplements. In addition, some agencies require recipients who leave welfare to reapply for child care assistance, a step that is not always taken. As a result, people leaving assistance often do not take full advantage of the important supplements that may be available to them. Of families leaving welfare, but with incomes below the eligibility cut-off for food stamps, only about 40 percent continued to receive food stamps, according to a recent national survey by Sheila Zedlewski of the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.. Unfortunately, most agencies have not yet developed processes and practices at the back door that match the rigor of the eligibility determination process.

After moving many applicants and recipients into jobs, the next step for some welfare agencies is to help people retain and upgrade their jobs. People with low skills, little job experience, and child care responsibilities frequently do not retain their jobs and even if they do, they may earn too little to leave welfare. They may cycle on and off welfare as they take jobs and then hit snags that throw them back on the rolls. Although job retention services are

less developed than work first services, states are beginning to turn their attention to the task of supporting stable employment, re-employing people who have lost jobs, and advancing the careers of people beyond low-wage, entry-level jobs. With the TANF time limit affecting families in all states as of summer 2002, some states are also using their own funds to supplement the earnings of welfare families that are working but approaching the time limit for TANF-funded assistance.

### **Issues and Challenges for Welfare Agencies**

Welfare offices are recognizing that their primary strategy for reducing caseloads—diverting applicants and requiring and supporting work—may be insufficient for recipients who still are not working or who work but earn too little to leave welfare. Families that exhibit physical or mental health problems and disabilities, dysfunctional behavior, or the inability to speak English and perform other basic job functions, need a wide and flexible array of services. Welfare offices cannot be expected to provide all these services themselves, particularly specialized services for narrow populations such as drug addicts. Nor can welfare offices be expected to bear the sole responsibility for reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing and encouraging marriage, both of which require a broader response from society.

Welfare agencies have always drawn on the expertise and capacity of many public and private organizations. Departments of labor, workforce agencies, non-profit community-based agencies, and for-profit firms deliver employment and training services for welfare recipients; schools and colleges offer education programs; and public and private agencies coordinate child care, provide mental health and substance abuse treatment, and offer family planning services. The “charitable choice” provision of the 1996 welfare reform law permitted states to purchase services for

TANF clients from faith-based organizations. This controversial provision has yet to be used on a widespread basis, but it offers yet another group of potential partners for welfare agencies.

In order to serve the families that remain on the rolls, welfare agencies must have the capacity to draw further on the expertise and resources of community partners, and all partners must operate together as an integrated system that can serve families with multiple problems. Too often, families go from one agency to another for specific services without a coordinated plan. One way for welfare offices to coordinate services is to locate them in the same physical space with other agencies so staff can communicate directly with each other. Another approach is a case manager system that allows one person to assess the family comprehensively, develop a single plan, and coordinate the efforts of all agencies involved in the case.

Frontline workers need training to develop the skills necessary to recognize and understand client problems, make the appropriate referrals to specialized agencies when necessary, and establish a continuing personal connection with the clients they serve. Many states have not invested sufficiently in the training needed to prepare frontline workers for these additional tasks, nor have they hired

more highly skilled people. The reluctance to increase the size of the welfare bureaucracy—expressed in the cap on administrative costs in the TANF legislation and caps in state legislation—limits funds for both training and hiring. In recognition of the service-intensive nature of the current TANF program, Congress and the states may want to consider relaxing or removing these caps.

Welfare agencies also need sufficient resources to obtain a supply of services for their clients, particularly families with multiple problems. Sufficient funds to finance child care for parents who are expected to work, including low-income parents who are not on welfare, will be a continuing need.

At the federal level, TANF and other programs should be designed to facilitate service integration. Barriers to effective service integration include program-to-program differences in goals, outcome measures, performance standards, eligibility rules, income and asset limits, target groups, and geographic boundaries. The state and local administrators who manage these programs, and the frontline workers who implement them, see many of these differences as impediments to serving their clients. The upcoming reauthorization debate provides an opportunity to refine these program features so they operate as a more coordinated system.

### Additional Reading

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