

Department of Social Services: Work First program shows success

By Scott Nicholson

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After a decade, the Work First program is showing successful results, according to Department of Social Services (DSS) administrators.

DSS director Jim Atkinson said Work First replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a welfare program that applied to a broad number of people. "It was an entitlement program," Atkinson said. "We would automatically take the application if the person was eligible."

A jobs program served as an interim step, before federal welfare law changed and each state crafted its own program. Work First shifted emphasis from benefit payments to employment and training, with parameters established to prevent most people from becoming chronic welfare recipients.

"Work First is North Carolina's name for this program," Atkinson said, adding that a neighboring state called it "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families." "Each state can call it what it wants to."

Federal rules determine the eligibility based on family size and income. Maximum countable income for eligible families is \$312 for one person, \$422 for two people, and \$544 for a family of four. "if they are eligible by income and family size, the requirement is that the person either works or is in training leading to work," Atkinson said. Benefits last for three months if the person doesn't find a job or enter school or a training program. If the recipient successfully enters one of those programs or works, then he or she earns a "job bonus" which provides benefits for an additional three months. The goal there is to get the recipients "back on their feet," so they can save money and get ahead, according to Pansy Moody, the DSS income maintenance supervisor. They also remain eligible for Medicaid health coverage for a year to help them become self-sufficient.

Moody said usually there is very little income for eligible families, if any. In North Carolina, a recipient can receive benefits for a lifetime total of 60 months. Each state can determine the formula for benefits. In North Carolina, a recipient can get welfare payments for a maximum of 24 months, then must be off the program for at least three years before becoming eligible for another 24 months. After an additional three years, a recipient can receive the final 12 months of benefits.



Social services supervisor Pansy Moody and director Jim Atkinson say the Work First program has helped people move from welfare into the job market.

Photo by Scott Nicholson

In practice, very few recipients have gone back on the rolls after finishing their first round of eligibility. "Our goal is to keep 90 percent of former recipients off the rolls," Moody said. "Right now, we're at 88 percent."

Atkinson said when people come in to apply for the program, they undergo an assessment, which is another major change from the AFDC days. Now each client's needs are studied to determine what course of action will work best. Depending on circumstances, a person may be given a one-time benefit worth three months of payment, designed for an emergency situation. Atkinson stressed that those payments are reserved for cases where the one payment will bridge a gap to employment.

Moody, who has served with DSS for 21 years, said she's seen some positive changes under the Work First program. "Under AFDC, I would have three generations (receiving benefits) at the same time, and there were no requirements," she said.

Under AFDC, there were 214 welfare recipients in the county when Work First took effect in July 1995. This month, there were 38 recipients, which is about average. "It dropped to below 50 within the first year," Atkinson said "And it leveled off and is maintained at between 30 and 50 people."

He attributed the decline to a variety of reasons. Some don't want to work, and they weren't willing to apply," he said. "Once they apply and are found eligible for work, they must apply with the Employment Security Commission."

Of the 38 currently on the rolls, 26 are children under the age of 18. Atkinson said in most cases those youths were being cared for by their grandparents or other family members, while parents might be pursued for child support. Those under 18 are exempt from the work requirement and the 60-month limit on benefits.

While Work First payments are made by the state government, the county budget supports a "maintenance of effort" fund. The fund is \$163,000, a figure that hasn't changed much over the past decade. The money administers the program and also provides for job retention and job training. It can also be used for transportation, car repairs, uniforms, books, anything that helps someone keep or train for a job.

The DSS also maintains an emergency assistance fund of about \$25,000. The money can be used for rent, water bills, electricity bills, or deposits on an apartment or house. The limit is \$300 per person per year.

Moody said most of the recipients are between 30 and 34 years of age, and about a fourth of them choose training or education over work while receiving benefits. Atkinson said the shift from automatic benefits to case assessment has created more paperwork but better results. "A lot of work is put into a very few cases," he said. "The other side is, we've reduced the caseload to a very small amount. The state in general has reduced the Work First caseload drastically."

The county must renew its plan every two years and submit it to the state. Any area in which the county isn't meeting its goals requires an action plan. Counties originally could choose to be "standard" or "electing" counties when the proposal was first floated by the state. Atkinson said Watauga "wisely" chose to be a standard county, meaning the state continued to be responsible

for handling benefit checks. Atkinson said while many counties wanted to run their own programs at first, now he's not sure if the state-imposed maximum of 15 electing counties is being met.

“One of the things criticized about AFDC is that it discouraged people from getting jobs,” Atkinson said. “There was a misperception about the problem. It's mostly young, single females with children. The bad reputation and stereotype was a lazy person who just wanted to sit around and watch TV all day and get a government check.”

Atkinson further dispelled that myth by saying that no one could survive off welfare benefits for long. He said young mothers had child care burdens, few job skills, and often faced transportation problems. “It's almost an impossible situation,” he said. “Even with a monthly check, they still couldn't make it.”

A family of two receives a welfare payment of \$236 a month. They are often eligible for other programs such as Medicaid or food stamps, but the money doesn't go far. A family of two gets \$274 in food stamp benefits. “It's not going to be enough to exist,” Moody said.

Atkinson said there was also criticism of the Work First program at its inception. “Work First not only required people to get jobs, it gave them a way to do that,” he said. “It taught them how to look for jobs, how to dress, how to interview, and provided daycare and transportation, and taught them how to conduct themselves professionally so they could keep a job.”

Atkinson said in emergency hardship cases, the person must demonstrate that the payment will allow the person not to need more money in the future. “There was a worry early on that in five years there would be large numbers of people dropping off with no safety net,” he said. “That really hasn't happened. Maybe in larger counties, but not here.”

Moody said in dealing with clients, she'd noticed how much self-esteem they had once they'd successfully entered the work force. About 10 to 15 cases at any time are considered unemployable, through substance abuse, disabilities or other problems.

Atkinson expects the Work First program to last, though new administrations might bring new ideas and federal law may change.

“I was a little skeptical in the beginning that Work First would be as successful as it was made out to be, but I've been pleasantly surprised,” Atkinson said. “It's worked remarkably well. It keeps people in jobs. People may be underemployed but they're still employed.”

“Even underemployed, they're making more than they would with their (welfare) benefits,” Moody said.

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