Changing the culture means changing how we do business. Changing how we do business means changing how we organize within Human Service agencies and how we interact with the community and how we interact with our clients. It means partnerships, it means collaborations, it means relationships that didn’t exist before.

—Ohio

The old program was error-driven, now we are employment-driven. The old program focused on paper, now we’re focused on people. The old program was a barrier-based program looking at what they (recipients) couldn’t do. Now we’re looking at strengths that they have and what they (customers) can do to become self-sufficient.

—Minnesota

One of the guiding forces behind our mission is to bring families together. The issues that are brought up . . . have a lot to do with parenting, educating your child, doing what’s best for the whole family.

—Illinois
The New Face of Welfare

Perspectives of the WELPAN Network

A mind, once stretched by an idea, never regains its original shape.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

It has been several years since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996. Clearly, PRWORA has transformed welfare policy. But in our opinion, it has accomplished something more fundamental. PRWORA affirmed and accelerated trends that already were transforming the purposes and character of public assistance in the United States. Many of these changes are intended to fundamentally alter what “welfare” agencies do, how they are organized, what they look like and feel like, and how they inform the experiences of program participants.

When applicants or participants interact with a welfare-type agency, they encounter a set of expectations, procedures, attitudes, and environmental cues. In total, these interactions constitute what is generally called the “culture” of an agency. The agency’s culture helps define the character of its programs, although the culture does not dictate the policy orientation of individual agencies. We use the term “culture” to capture the broad set of changes undertaken by our member states.

Transforming the character of a program and therefore the culture of a system typically starts with a restatement of its mission. But that is just the beginning. Often, it involves the alteration of agency structure, operations, and ambiance in ways that fundamentally reshape the experiences of all stakeholders.

The Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance Network, or WELPAN, is a group of senior welfare administrators from the seven upper Midwest states who have been meeting to discuss issues and ideas since federal welfare reform became a reality in 1996.

At the heart of many WELPAN discussions is curiosity about what lies down the road, where we are headed. We as state officials believe that a real appreciation of the changing culture of the social welfare community will emerge from agencies struggling with the realities of reform, and we have felt an obligation to share some of our experiences and insights with our peers elsewhere.

We hope, with this document, to

- help define what is really meant by culture change from the perspective of those who design and manage programs;
- suggest some ideas, tools, and resources to help plan and implement organizational and system change;
- help others understand that transforming front-line agencies is essential to welfare reform, and educate them about what is involved—how long it takes, and the barriers and obstacles likely to arise;
- initiate a dialogue among our peers about the direction of social assistance in the United States.
What Does Culture Change Mean?

For members of the community, culture change may require that they rethink stereotypical views of welfare and welfare recipients and become more actively involved in addressing the issues affecting low-income and otherwise disadvantaged families.

The task of changing what welfare is all about is in its fourth year. We feel that now it is appropriate to pause and reflect on the challenge of culture change in welfare operations from a broader perspective. Some lessons and insights are beginning to emerge.

For participants, culture change means that behaviors once peripheral to a conventional welfare program are now seen as critical. They are expected to assume personal responsibility, commit to job preparation, identify resources such as child care and child support payments, take advantage of work opportunities, engage the agency and society in new ways, and work assertively to become part of mainstream society.

For front-line workers, culture change is a change in attitudes, values, philosophies, and staff roles. These changes make existing organizational structures, attitudes, and skills obsolete and place new and different demands on agency workers—demands that require them continually to exercise professional judgment and to upgrade knowledge and skills.

For welfare officials, culture change means thinking more strategically about the scope of welfare activities and more imaginatively about how to get things done. They must think about networking with community programs and resources to address more ambitious goals. And they must be ready to devolve control to those working most closely with families, permitting workers at the front line to be creative and to take risks. Finally, they must seek ways to measure and reward the right outcomes, focusing on performance and not process.

What We Have Learned So Far

A while back, when many WELPAN members were asked to estimate how far their states had progressed through an imagined ten-chapter book of welfare reform, most claimed that they were only on chapter two or three. Virtually all noted that changing the way business is done is hard work. Inertia, fear of the unknown, proprietary knowledge and expertise, precariously positioned power relationships, categorical funding streams, byzantine federal and state regulations, and a host of other factors make change complex and difficult. Here we offer some observations—and caveats—from our joint experience.

Culture change is not so easy as it looks

Extraordinary conflicts have arisen among related systems as the culture of TANF changes. In particular, the conflict between

Changing the culture means changing how we do business. Changing how we do business means changing how we organize within Human Service agencies and how we interact with the community and how we interact with our clients. It means partnerships, it means collaborations, it means relationships that didn’t exist before.

Joel Rabb, Ohio

The old program was error-driven, now we are employment-driven. The old program focused on paper, now we’re focused on people. The old program was a barrier-based program looking at what they (recipients) couldn’t do. Now we’re looking at strengths that they have and what they (customers) can do to become self-sufficient.

Pat Jernell, Anoka County, Minnesota
the TANF and Food Stamp programs has been a topic of continuing discussion among our states. Similar though less troublesome tensions exist between TANF and the child welfare system, the social service and labor sides of state agencies, and so forth. One WELPAN member employs a geological metaphor to describe this intersystems conflict. It’s like “large tectonic plates grinding against one another.” These tectonic plates, the large blocks of land that move with glacial slowness, create tension as they move past each other. Eventually, the pressure builds to the breaking point and earthquakes erupt.

We must focus on fundamentals, and we must keep our eyes on the prize

Defining success is ultimately the most important and difficult job that state and federal officials have, as we came to understand in our early WELPAN discussions. Sustaining momentum means continual vigilance to “get the question right”—to come to consensus on ends, and eschew futile arguments about strategy as if they were ends. We must measure performance, not process.

We must maintain our investment in TANF

The reauthorization debate is imminent. Some will look at the diminished welfare caseloads and conclude that welfare is reformed and that the bulk of the resources now directed toward such programs can be diverted. But if caseloads were the only, or even the most important, measure of success or failure, welfare reform would have been easy: end the program. No caseload, no welfare problem.

We are only now beginning to sort out how to reinvest TANF resources effectively. We list some possibilities in the documents in this folder.

We cannot backslide

The difficulties and disruption associated with change are not reasons to alter direction. As the debate over the reauthorization of PRWORA picks up steam, we suspect that arguments will be made about unevenness of performance, or about the ability of national officials to know what is happening and control “abuses.” True, not all jurisdictions will engage in reform with equal compassion and commitment. But leveling all to the least common denominator is not an appropriate response. Rather, we should use those at the cutting edge as exemplars for others.

One of the biggest hurdles in moving the system from entitlement to empowerment is sending a consistent message to applicants or recipients across all the agencies and all the staff people involved. We came here with our historical ways of dealing with public assistance recipients, and they weren’t always the same. Educational institutions had one way of treating them, job placement people looked at them differently. The challenge was to bring together those various approaches so as to provide a consistent message to the participant. This took a long time to put everyone on the same page—we have a tendency to revert to the way we’ve always been doing things.

Larry Jankowski, Kenosha County, Wisconsin

We must get the “ground rules” straight

One vexing problem with culture change is that the various systems do not move together. Nationally, there are 75 or more low-income programs, some based on the newer service models, others on the old entitlement notion. There are conflicts over funding streams, jurisdictional issues, and technology issues. And then the program or fiscal auditors come in and second-guess decisions that were made in good faith. We need to get the ground rules consistent for all involved agencies, rules that reward rather than punish innovation and risk taking.
We get what we measure

All culture change discussions start with deciding what we want to achieve. That, in itself, is not always obvious, as the WELPAN network discovered when it tackled the question of goals early in its existence. The obvious suspects, lower caseloads and more people employed, often turn out to be instrumental objectives rather than ultimate goals. Work, for example, may be less relevant as a goal than as a tool for achieving more stable families, better parenting, and healthier kids. But whatever we decide is important, that is what we should measure and reward. If we don’t, the culture change crusade is futile.

We must keep communicating

We recommend that others engage in the kind of dialogue that WELPAN has created in the upper Midwest. The premise of WELPAN is horizontal communications, a dialogue among peers, rather than vertical communications, insight from the top down. Really good ideas may well come from the state next door, or the local agency a thousand miles away. We must find ways to nurture a productive dialogue among ourselves.

We can only get what we reach for

Vision and purpose drive real change. Discussions of technique and of methods and models are likely to go no further than “whatever it takes.” If stakeholders share a vision of where they want to go, they will do “whatever it takes” to get there.

You know people might say that she’s crazy to say we’re going to eliminate poverty in our community, what a thing to say instead of being concerned about reducing welfare caseloads. And I probably would be crazy to say that if I was just thinking it was only our Department’s role to do that in the community. But I have this whole community backing me, providing services, working with families, providing all kinds of things that have always been out there. And this flexibility has really allowed us to sort of bring all that together, bring that to bear. And so I believe in a community like ours, the elimination of poverty is not an unrealistic goal.

Barbara Drake, El Paso County, Colorado
Copies of this publication may be obtained from the Publications Department, Institute for Research on Poverty, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison WI 53706 (e-mail: irppubs@ssc.wisc.edu; phone: (608) 262-6358; fax: (608) 265-3119).

On occasion, the WELPAN network has produced consensus reports and public statements, some of them bearing on difficulties arising from the far-reaching culture changes demanded by the new structure of welfare. In January 1998, members of the WELPAN network published their first report, Welfare Reform: How Will We Know If It Works? <www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp/welpan/>. In September 1999, the network issued a joint statement on the conflicting, and sometimes clashing, institutional and program cultures embodied in the TANF and Food Stamp programs as they evolve along different paths; see <www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp/welpan>.
This report reflects the thoughts and perspectives of the following members of the Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance Network, or WELPAN. This network embodies a simple principle, that the most important communication patterns in a devolved policy world are horizontal, among peers, rather than vertical, from the top down. The “culture of welfare” issue has been part of the WELPAN dialogue since the inception of the network in the fall of 1996. The content of this statement is drawn from the experiences that members have shared with one another as they embraced devolution and reform. Though all members may not fully agree with everything contained in the report, each believes that the report, on the whole, captures important insights that they wish to share with their peers and colleagues. Most of the quotes and examples are drawn from within the network, but some do come from programs and welfare officials who graciously shared their experiences with the WELPAN members. In particular we want to thank TANF officials in Colorado and Oregon, particularly Shirley Iverson. The report is a consen-sus project of the members and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the member states.

The WELPAN Network in the year 2000:

**Illinois**
Karen Maxson, Associate Director  
Office of Employment and Training  
Illinois Department of Human Services

Mary Ann Langston, Associate Director  
Office of Financial Support Services  
Illinois Department of Human Services

**Indiana**
Thurl Snell, Deputy Director  
Division of Families and Children  
Indiana Family and Social Services Administration

Charlene Burkett-Sims, Manager  
Family Independence Section  
Division of Families and Children  
Indiana Family and Social Services Administration

**Minnesota**
Ann Sessoms, Co-Director  
Families with Children  
Minnesota Human Services Department

Kate Wulf, Director  
MAXIS  
Minnesota Human Services Department

**Ohio**
Joel Rabb, Chief  
Bureau of County Support  
Ohio Department of Human Services

Stan Sells, Chief  
Bureau of Partnership Development  
Ohio Department of Human Services

**Wisconsin**
Jennifer L. Noyes, Administrator  
Division of Economic Support  
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

Philip Klein, Chief  
Research and Statistics Section  
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

We wish to thank the Joyce Foundation for its continued support. WELPAN meetings have been moderated by Thomas Corbett, Associate Director of the Institute for Research on Poverty; this report was produced by IRP staff. Other WELPAN members or former members who participated in the production of the report include Sally Titus-Cunningham, Iowa; Carla Sheppard, Peggie Powers, and David Gruenfelder, Illinois; Douglas Howard, Michigan; and J. Jean Rogers and Jan Van Vleck, Wisconsin.