Evolving Purposes,
Emerging Institutional Cultures

We see emerging welfare strategies as means for solving serious societal and family failures, ranging from poverty to unwise fertility decisions to family instability to poor parenting. These policies seek to connect those isolated from mainstream society to the systems and institutions that can help them achieve their full potential. They stress, not what is wrong with people, but what families can achieve with a little help.

Retreating from the income-oriented solutions to poverty that prevailed after the 1960s, we are bringing social assistance back into the people-changing business. Morality, behavior, and a concern with the quality of parenting and family have been reconnected to welfare, as in the earliest welfare systems. Today’s welfare programs, however, address a more complex and ambitious set of goals, and with new technologies. Work, for example, is increasingly seen as a tool for stabilizing families and improving the discipline and focus of the adult caretakers, rather than an end in itself. Agency workers may find themselves cajoling, counseling, and using a variety of casework techniques to ensure the proper stewardship of the family, but within a much different organizational environment.

The most important new institutional challenge is the return of welfare policy, not merely administration, to the control of local agencies which, in turn, increasingly are engaging their own communities in the policy process. This contains, on the one hand, enormous potential for innovation and entrepreneurship and, on the other, the disquieting prospect that variation across agencies, and even workers, will lead to profoundly inequitable consequences.

At many WELPAN meetings, we have wrestled with the implications of these changes. In some ways, we as state officials are much less able to know what is going on at the front line of our most innovative agencies. At the same time, it is increasingly important that we have a reasonably accurate sense about what is happening, so that we don’t impede emerging local innovations. There is, we believe, a new role for state governments. It is to set parameters, not prescribe policies. It is to improve our knowledge about what works and what doesn’t.

I think probably the biggest change is the emphasis on personal responsibility that we have brought to the mix and the way that has been supported by the W-2 agencies themselves by building on people’s strengths rather than identifying their weaknesses. . . . First and foremost is the signal that you are valuable, you are valuable to your family, you are valuable to your community, and we are going to help you identify how you can build upon that value.

J. Jean Rogers, Wisconsin

In years past there was much more of a belief that you needed to fix everyone before they were able to go to work. The new research, as well as the new program, has these two running concurrently, that employment is a critical piece of that fix. It’s very stabilizing, it’s very good for self-esteem. Going to work every day provides that structure on which you can build a treatment plan.

Shirley Iverson, Oregon
Perhaps it is to facilitate the cross-fertilization of ideas.

The Emerging Attributes of the New Institutional Cultures

We begin this discussion with an example.

There is a popular type of reform termed “diversion.” Designed to divert applicants from coming on to public assistance, these policies are often characterized as up-front, lump-sum payments which an applicant can accept in lieu of proceeding with the application.

Although a state, or agency, may say that it has adopted a certain policy or intervention, that tells us little until we know how the policy is put into practice. What actually takes place may differ greatly from agency to agency. In agency A, “gatekeeping” staff who first meet with potential participants may fully and unambiguously stress the diversion message. In agency B (in the same state), the existence of a diversion payment may be mentioned only in passing amid a clutter of other information. On paper, the state TANF plan shows that there is a diversion component; in reality, the experiences of participants at the gate are utterly different.

Although it is disconcerting, the ambiguity associated with local control is inevitable, for at least two reasons.

First, there have always been compelling arguments that local government is the best government, that local preferences and tastes should be taken into account in both the design and implementation of programs. Local jurisdictions, it is said, simply differ from one another in important ways, and imposing uniformity actually diminishes equity.

The second argument flows directly out of the renewed focus on a broad set of behaviors. There are some public functions that are best performed at a central level and others best performed at a local level. Tax and transfer programs can be run at a central level of government in reasonably efficient and equitable ways; few argue that Social Security should be devolved. But, as behavioral change becomes the dominant theme of welfare programs, it is increasingly difficult to manage operations from a central level. When we focus on behavior, morality, and family functioning, we choose to focus on issues and challenges that cannot be addressed through rule-driven policies and protocols. As professional judgment and discretion increase, control mechanisms must be decentralized.

In the figure below, we lay out attributes that we believe characterize the new forms of social provision, and compare them with prior ways of organizing and operating welfare programs. These are our best guesses at the important transitions taking place in our states. Clearly, these attributes are not found everywhere, nor is there universal agreement that they always represent reality even in the

In the new culture, I think the most important role that the state can play is define expectations and outcomes. Focus on outcomes and leave much of the process to the individual counties. The state role is to assist counties in terms of using the machinery that is available to them. . . A second kind of role the state can play is distributing information about what is working in one part of the state to other parts of the state.

Joel Rabb, Ohio

I think in our case, in El Paso County’s case, local flexibility has been absolutely critical. We were fortunate that the welfare law in Colorado gave us the maximum amount of flexibility—basically, just passed down the basic cash assistance eligibility and everything else was really left up to the local communities.

Barbara Drake, El Paso County, Colorado
cutting-edge reform sites. Still, they are a useful way to introduce a discussion about the direction of reform.

The way things were

The benefits-oriented era of cash welfare that persisted from the 1960s through the 1980s was in many respects simpler. The underlying world view was uncomplicated—the compelling misfortune of disadvantaged families was a shortfall of resources and the public obligation was to make good that deficit. Program purposes were fairly limited—get checks out to eligible families accurately and, in some jurisdictions, efficiently. The time horizon for managing cases was short. Each month was a new accounting period where the assets and income were, in theory at least, recalculated to determine if a resource shortfall existed.

The target groups of interest were similarly limited—mainly the adult recipients, only on occasion the children. The worker-client interaction tended to be uniform, episodic, and routine. Typically, no one asked applicant families what their problems were, or where their strengths lay, or how best to move them into society’s mainstream. The gatekeeping function was to separate the eligible from the ineligible. Even if applicants were asked about problems, they were provided with a laundry list of programmatic responses.

In such a system, horizontal equity was to be assured by treating apparently similar families in the same way. Conformity to

The New Face of Welfare
bureaucratic norms emerged as an institutional virtue which, in turn, encouraged vertical, or top-down, communication patterns. At the extreme, local agency and worker discretion was severely constrained by the introduction of automated welfare case management systems after the late 1970s. Important program rules were built into the system and the manuals were rewritten to translate all discretion into clear-cut choices: if the situation is \( A \), you must do \( X \); if it is \( B \), you must do \( Y \).

This paradigm had the virtue of clarity. Everyone knew what a case was and where the welfare agency was located. Organizational and program boundaries were clear; professional roles were fixed. Most workers worked rather autonomously to carry out a narrow range of responsibilities for their own caseloads.

### The way things are becoming

In the emerging paradigm, the program challenge is to encourage behaviors that are positive and if possible discourage those that are counterproductive. The new programs have varied and multiple goals (work, marriage, parenting, raising children well) encompassing multiple targets (parent, child, non-resident parent, and community).

Complex, behavior-focused programs tend to be dynamic and longitudinal, based on change over time, not static systems in which each month is an independent accounting period. They tend to be so multidimensional and individualized that workers must adopt professional norms that eschew bureaucratic rules.

In turn, the organizational forms in which the workers function are transformed, becoming flatter and less hierarchical. Horizontal communications replace vertical patterns. Agency boundaries become porous as inter-agency agreements and one-stop agency models emerge. Entrepreneurship and outcome-oriented institutional philosophies begin to supplant risk-aversive public monopolies.

Discretion at the operational level is replacing traditional command-and-control organizational strategies. Malleable and plastic organizational forms that can respond quickly to new challenges are supplanting traditional welfare organizational forms.

The new culture may well require a different kind of “welfare” worker. In the past, welfare managers wanted “left-brain” dominant workers, those who excelled at routinized, detail work and operated well at linear, unvarying tasks. Suddenly, the need is for “right-brain” dominant workers who can see the big picture and are creative at problem solving. The new management challenge is to...
continually motivate staff to forget the rules and work on finding solutions to complex family problems.

Fundamentally and quickly, the welfare world has been turned upside down. Individual workers, teams of workers, and institutional partnerships will be tackling the most difficult of society’s problems. They will no longer be functionaries executing policies but professionals creating policies. They will no longer dwell on symptoms but address fundamental cures. And rather than ignoring the most difficult cases, the most troubled families, they will be trying to engage them in creative ways.

A Few Key Management Themes

I think Wisconsin did one thing up front. We designed a game plan for how our new welfare reform process would operate that was not terribly prescriptive in terms of how the local entity would put it together, and so we have 80 different agencies and 80 different models for how the job center might be envisioned.

J. Jean Rogers, Wisconsin

In reality, of course, few agencies encompass all of these changes. The most ambitious typically are involved in iterative, uneven transitions from the old organizational culture to the newer version. But if we were to select a set of changes that are particularly useful in summarizing the transitions we see in some of our agencies, the list might include:

A move from income support to personal and interpersonal functioning

The AFDC focus was on money, income deficits, and income transfers. Now, we are increasingly concerned with how people function as individuals, as family members, and as part of broader community and labor market networks. This is close to the European concept of social inclusion.

Collocation and integration (job and family centering)

The broader set of goals attached to reform demands a broader set of services and technologies. When these are scattered, crippling client “leakage” (losing touch) and communication problems arise. Job centering and family centering, where all critical supports are in the same physical location (or in environments where they easily can communicate), are emerging as a favored organizational form. The next step is to integrate essential services so that delivery is seamless and transparent to the customer.

Social contracting and mutuality continuum

The relationship between target group member and institutional agents is no longer unidirectional—the bureaucracy speaks and the beneficiary responds. Relationships are more complex, but increasingly based on mutuality of purpose and driven by explicit social contracts. Customer input is taken more seriously.
Comprehensive and front-end services

Collocation and integration permit the delivery of wrap-around services within a preventive strategy. Old welfare tactics often waited until a person was clearly a long-term recipient. Particularly as caseloads fall, agencies do not have to make as many difficult allocation choices and can intervene up front to develop comprehensive plans for families with multiple challenges. They can address short-term issues before they become debilitating barriers.

Integration of the human capital, labor market attachment, postattachment models

Older reform efforts often chose between targets of intervention. Should we prepare people for the labor market (human capital), or push/pull them into the labor market where opportunities for training and experience are available (labor market attachment), or focus on keeping them in the labor market and helping them advance (postemployment interventions)? Emerging strategies tend to be more eclectic, recognizing that all are important.

The return of social work and other case management issues

Program designers and managers increasingly talk about the return of social work practice. They are developing team approaches to case management. They are coordinating an array of services focused on troubled individuals and families. They are doing home visits and full-family assessments.

Outreach

As traditional caseloads fall, and as the services and help provided to those that remain are more accepted by the community, we see more outreach. Sometimes it takes the form of outreach for Food Stamps and medical care for children. But sometimes agencies want to showcase their new mission and services, reaching out to deal with domestic violence, parenting, and issues of community well-being.