What Does the Future Hold?

Describing the changes taking place in our programs and agencies is difficult enough—we often do not fully appreciate change until it has already happened. Recognizing this limitation, we would nevertheless like to speculate on the future.

There are some clues in what has already occurred. The table below lays out a set of transformations that, at this simple level, are relatively easy to describe. In practice, they are highly complex changes with significant implications for program design and agency operations.

### Primary Program Purposes

- **Income Support**
  - Job Placement
    - Work Support
      - Family & Community Support

Under TANF, most programs clearly moved from income transfer systems to job placement systems—the dominant purpose of PRWORA. But the process did not end there, because getting a person into a job was not enough. The early studies of those leaving welfare suggested that, although most of them were working at jobs above the minimum wage, their labor market attachment seemed tenuous and fragile. For some, the real work was just beginning. And as active cash assistance caseloads collapsed, the families that remained in the system were very challenging indeed, requiring wholly new service approaches and resource investments.

### Income Support

From the early 1970s until sometime in the early 1990s, what we knew as cash welfare was clearly an income support system. The purpose was to get a check out the door efficiently and accurately. Though work obligations had been attached to welfare since the 1960s, they were not seriously applied until the Family Support Act of 1988, or later in many cases. The transition from an income support to a work orientation took many years, and much debate, to complete.

### Job Placement

Once the transition to a work orientation was complete, agencies focused on job placement goals. Their success has been extraordinary, with caseloads falling from over 5 million in early 1994 to less than 2.4 million by the end of 1999. Yet this success has almost immediately raised a new set of issues. How does one sustain and nurture new entrants into the labor market? How does one encourage career progression and earnings growth?

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The very fact that we’re doing all the welfare delivery system inside of a one-stop job center conveys the message to the applicant or the recipient that’s why they come here. They don’t come here for welfare; they’re coming here to get a job. Whenever anything goes out from this facility in terms of letters, in terms of notices, the idea of getting a job, being successful in job search, is the primary message we send to participants. Throughout the job center the ‘expect success’ motto is very prominent.

Larry Jankowski, Kenosha County, Wisconsin
The New Face of Welfare

same time, needs that never could be dealt with in the era of income transfers and high caseloads now become manageable. Just as suddenly, therefore, some of those who are thinking along the lines of work support agencies are already engaged in planning to redefine themselves as family and community support entities.

Walk into what used to be welfare agencies today and you are likely to find managers and staff struggling with child welfare issues, education issues, health and mental health, crime and delinquency, and a host of other personal or family or community matters. You find activities geared to children doing their homework, to youth making the difficult transition to adulthood, to practical matters such as transportation. As they undertake these roles, many local agencies are becoming a nexus and source of funding for new networks that tie together service providers in ways that make sense for troubled families with children.

Culture change is now embedded in the organizational culture, a process, not an event. It is unlikely to come from the top down, but rather will emerge in agencies all across the country.

Work Support

Suddenly, agencies are grappling with work-based and work-focused strategies, shifting from a focus on the nonworking poor to the working poor—one of the most profound shifts in public policy in recent times.

In effect, job placement agencies are moving from a job placement perspective to a work support and career enhancement perspective. This shift contains significant challenges for agencies and workers. How do you engage participants who are working and may no longer see what was welfare as useful? Do you need to develop new types of relationships with the private sector? Must you develop nontraditional office hours, including evenings and weekends? Should you outstation office sites, perhaps some located where the employees can be found?

Most important, this transition encompasses a shift from the nonworking poor to a growing concern for the working poor.

Family and Community Support

While agency workers confront these challenging tasks, yet another set almost immediately crowds in on already stressed policy designers, implementers, and front-line personnel. Drastically falling caseloads suggest that those remaining on welfare are very hard to serve, facing multiple barriers. At the same time, needs that never could be dealt with in the era of income transfers and high caseloads now become manageable. Just as suddenly, therefore, some of those who are thinking along the lines of work support agencies are already engaged in planning to redefine themselves as family and community support entities.

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Thinking Ahead

The explosion of innovation and entrepreneurship in welfare offices has been remark-
able. The list below seeks to capture some common characteristics of the changes and evolution we are witnessing. They are not necessarily listed in order of importance, and there is some overlap.

1. Get the question right

We see the organizing principles of social assistance moving from strategies of income support to employment and to self-sufficiency. In the future, we expect to see further shifts toward a more ultimate purpose, nurturing and raising competent and healthy children within functioning families. All the other objectives—economic well-being, work, and family stability—are interim measures of success or benchmarks with respect to this ultimate goal.

2. “Solutions at the front lines” are replacing “solutions at the center”

Washington can collect and distribute money efficiently, but it cannot run social service interventions very well. Devolution will not stop at the state level. Authority and real decision making will continue to drift downward, first to the county or local agency, next perhaps to neighborhoods. In some respects, real authority will ultimately rest with the professionalism of the worker or case management team.

3. Approach is more universal, less targeted

Targeting benefits inevitably generated perverse incentives, since there was always the temptation for recipients to alter behavior or circumstances to gain access to benefits. If social services are generally available to the broader community, there is less need to bend one’s situation to fit program requirements—to have a child, or leave the child’s mother, or lose a job, or hide the fact that one is working. Comprehensive job centers merge the disadvantaged into programs and agencies designed to serve the entire community.

The expansion of TANF efforts to a broader community can take two forms. First, we can include more of the near-poor by relaxing income and asset rules. Second, we can include more families by eliminating arbitrary categorical restrictions (“we only help single parents”). Both expansions keep people from making bad choices merely to get welfare.

4. Replicate the real world

The nonworking poor are being treated as one would treat everyone else. If you treat them differently, troublesome signals are sent to the larger community, signals that may generate antagonism to poverty programs. Expect more from people and you will get more in return.
5. **Decouple transitional supports (including child support) from welfare**

Welfare used to be the *passport* to an array of services and other transfers, from child care subsidies to free help with child support to education and training help. These programs are now being decoupled from welfare status, in the name of fairness and to reduce the incentive to become “dependent” merely to access these other goods.

The old AFDC system officially had a monthly accounting period, or at best 6-month certification periods, even though families might be in the system for a decade or two. Now we have time limits, but ironically, a longer perspective, at least in some respects. We seem to be moving back to a 1960s concept of actual, former, and potential welfare clients. We are providing more postplacement services to improve the well-being of families through work, and more with those in danger of dependency such as teens and young mothers. The beginning and ending of a case are no longer clear.

Once they get the job, they’re still in the loop here. We never ever would tell someone they could not come back and get any classes that we have here. They’re more than welcome to come back in at any time they want and we can update their resume, get them a different resume geared for a different career move that they want to make. I like to keep myself involved as much as they’ll let me without being too intimidating at the same time.

Janice, TANF retention specialist in Oregon

6. **Emphasize community responsibility**

Increasingly, reform is seen as a community responsibility, with employers, service vendors, volunteer groups, and the faith-based communities all playing a vital part. Governments used to have a monopoly on the provision of social assistance. They are likely to remain the responsible authority, but much more is expected from nonprofits and even for-profits, in an environment that fosters both cooperation and competition.

**Steps Toward the Future**

Many observers will perceive TANF to be welfare by another name, clearly more work-oriented but welfare nonetheless. They will continue to focus on the income transfer functions that have dominated the vocabulary of the welfare debate for the past three decades. But those on the front lines sense the profound changes taking place in communities across the states.

At a meeting in 1998, a WELPAN member paused during the discussion and mused, “You know, we are not talking about welfare anymore, are we?”

When a mother with small children needs help in Wisconsin, she does not go to a welfare agency; she generally goes to a job center, or a workforce development center. Depending on where she lives, she will walk into a government agency, or a nonprofit or for-profit agency. In many areas, the agency is best thought of as a network of vendors that weaves together an ensemble of services to help all members of the community to enter the mainstream of society. Increasingly, we see these agencies focusing on issues of personal, family, and community dysfunction—domestic violence, teen fertility and education, parenting, and entry and progression in the labor market.

If you walk into the job center in Dayton, Ohio, you will find the TANF agency. But you will also find some 50 other public, nonprofit, and for-profit agencies that serve the employment and service needs of that community. They compete with and, at the same time, complement one another. The underlying concept is to break down the narrow, categorical service delivery systems that bring limited technologies to very specific populations—
goals—all families in the target group were employed. As they were approaching the goal the director organized what he called Z-teams, multidisciplinary teams to work comprehensively with those hard-to-serve families that remained.

In the south side of Chicago, in the community once dominated by the notorious Robert Taylor Homes housing project, young mothers meet and discuss their lives within the structure provided by the Pathways Program. These TANF recipients discuss welfare and work issues, but they spend even more time discussing children and parenting and relationships and basic family functioning. They are building lives. And if these young mothers do find work, they could be helped with their tax returns to ensure that they access the Earned Income and other credits to which they are entitled.

In Indiana, they are working hard to stress community involvement and responsibility. Welfare is not just about what government does. In 1995, the legislature issued a mandate that established a grassroots community planning process to inform and shape future welfare plans.

Innovation and change know no geographic boundaries, and the WELPAN network has reached out for insights and synergy. In El Paso County, Colorado, local officials are blending together the child welfare and the TANF systems and trying to create a wrap-around set of services to really attack community poverty. TANF will be their preventive program for child welfare, and child welfare will be their antipoverty program. They have reorganized all their resources and developed an entirely new set of relationships with the community.

In Oregon, the TANF caseload has fallen from 44,000 cases to fewer than 16,000 cases. Entry-level wages are above $7.00 per hour.
But for the state and its local agencies, falling caseloads and work are only intermediate goals. The real work is to stabilize families and ensure that children are being raised in the best environment possible. Toward that end, agencies are making huge investments to deal with problems associated with domestic violence, mental health concerns, and substance abuse challenges faced by the hard-to-serve population. When you talk with managers and workers and ask about their model, you repeatedly get the following response—“whatever it takes.” There is no model to be exported, simply commitment.

A new worker in a local Oregon TANF office, an ex-marine who did things “by the book,” was frustrated. He went to his supervisor and asked for a policy manual, since he could not find one anywhere. The supervisor thought for a few moments, reached in his desk, and handed over a motivational book for managers. Policy and protocols, it seems, are less important than purpose and professionalism.

We used to have autonomous welfare agencies. Now we are moving toward job centers, and family support centers, and multipurpose human resource centers that serve the broader community. We are also bringing the broader community to the table in many ways. Helping those in need is more often done through systems that address the entire community, not just the poor. TANF funds can go a long way to develop and nurture new local delivery partnerships.

The future is uncertain, and much depends on continued support as PRWORA is reauthorized. Currently, states are enjoying TANF surpluses, on average about 25 percent over what they would have received in federal funding under AFDC. But this will be a tempting target as the reauthorization debate takes place. And flexibility without resources is no flexibility at all.

Maureen Casterlein, Astoria, Oregon