Institute for Research on Poverty
Discussion Paper no. 1232-01

Welfare Reform in Wisconsin: The Local Role

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July 2001

Abstract

I suggest a new model for the implementation of social programs based on welfare reform in Wisconsin. Existing models tend to be top-down or bottom-up, but in Wisconsin the leading counties and the state government worked interactively to transform welfare. Existing accounts of the Wisconsin reform stress state-level leadership, but key features such as high participation in work programs and an emphasis on "work first" rather than training were developed first in Kenosha and several other counties, then adopted statewide. The story also dramatizes the critical role of strong program management and organization.

Welfare Reform in Wisconsin: The Local Role

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Wisconsin has achieved the most thoroughgoing reform of welfare in the nation. “Welfare” here means the controversial family aid program once called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and, since 1996, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In a series of changes beginning in the mid-1980s and culminating in 1997, Wisconsin replaced AFDC with Wisconsin Works, or W-2. The old system gave aid to single-parent families mostly on the basis of need alone. The new system conditions all aid on work effort at some level. Employable adults are expected to obtain regular jobs; they receive only support services such as child care, not cash. A few have their jobs subsidized. Those who cannot immediately get their own jobs must perform community service work in return for a cash grant. Those unable to do even this are assigned to remediation programs, which are also mandatory, in return for a lesser grant. Those not in regular work are expected to move up to it as they become able. Most states currently are strengthening their work requirements in welfare, but Wisconsin appears to be the only state that has rebuilt welfare entirely around employment (Holcomb et al., 1998, p. 77).

In response to the new demands, most recipients simply left welfare. Wisconsin’s welfare rolls, which topped 300,000 in 1986, fell almost continuously from that point. The fall in the caseload to date is around 90 percent, by far the sharpest decline of any urban state.[1] The causes include not only welfare reform but highly favorable economic conditions and new benefits, such as wage subsidies that help to “make work pay” (Ellwood, 1999). Social consequences appear favorable. Over 60 percent of former recipients are working, as in other states. Although most leavers remain poor, hardship is unusual, and most report that they are better off than they were on welfare (State of Wisconsin, 1999). In 1997, in a national survey, Wisconsin had the highest work levels among low-income parents of 13 states surveyed (Urban Institute, 1999).

This paper demonstrates that the Wisconsin reform depended heavily on innovation at the local level. Existing accounts attribute the reform largely to Governor Tommy Thompson and other state-level leaders (Corbett, 1995; Mead, 2000; Wiseman, 1996). But state officials themselves credit several counties with developing welfare work programs that became models for the state, and also for piloting several Thompson experiments in reform. Kenosha County pioneered the idea of enforcing high levels of participation in work programs, Kenosha and Sheboygan Counties developed programs focused on "work first" rather than education and training, and Grant County developed the policy of diversion, or finding alternative aid for needy families as a means of avoiding welfare. All these policies became features of W-2.[2]

The experience suggests a new model for social program implementation. The existing literature tends to take either a top-down or bottom-up approach. Either central authorities are seen as imposing policies on localities, or local administrators are seen as reshaping programs that come from above to suit their own priorities (Sabatier, 1986). This implies that when the center and localities agree, localities must be conforming to the center (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983). Conversely, if localities behave independently, they do so to frustrate the will of the center (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984). These patterns do appear in Wisconsin. The reform was strongly led from the center, and toward the end of the reform period, the state government in Madison did impose its will on the counties, converting them all to a W-2 model of welfare (Mead, 2000). And as I note below, some counties resisted the state insistence on enforced participation and "work first."

The leading counties, however, were out in front of the state. They gave the lead that the state and other counties followed. And for much of the reform period, the lead counties and state government pursued similar goals. Each competed with the others to find the best way to transform welfare. Rather than one coercing the other, the thinking and experience of Madison and the lead counties converged on the model that became W-2. This suggests not top-down or bottom-up but what I will call an interactive model of implementation—confronted by a similar challenge, problem-solving governments at all levels work on it in parallel and arrive at a similar solution. This presumes that they essentially agree about the nature and importance of the problem. In Wisconsin, Madison and the leading counties did agree on viewing the main welfare problem as low work levels by the adult recipients. They also agreed that it was urgent.

We often think that the dispersion of power to many centers in American politics leads to "gridlock," or the frustration of initiative. But recent authors have argued that if the many centers face a common problem, the rivalry between them can drive innovation faster than if initiative is concentrated. Partisan division between the federal branches of government may not impede the production of major legislation but actually abet it (Landy and Levin, 1995; Mayhew, 1991). The interactive model proposes that the same thing can occur during implementation. Both the state, and the counties sought to conceive and implement welfare reform, and as they did so, their interplay produced faster change than either could have produced alone.

This research is based mainly on field interviewing of Wisconsin welfare officials at the state level and in ten counties in the mid-1990s.[3]. The counties I visited were chosen, first, to include most of the largest in the state (Dane, Kenosha, Milwaukee, Racine) and also those that state officials viewed as reform pioneers (Grant, Kenosha, Sheboygan). I also asked to visit counties that were *not* high performers in the state's eyes. These counties—including some already mentioned—had either resisted work-first (Douglas, Marathon, Milwaukee, Racine) or only recently changed in that direction (Dane, Fond du Lac, Winnebago).[4]

In each county I (and in some cases a research assistant) spoke to a roughly representative selection of line staff and managers in the welfare department and in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS). JOBS was the principal work program attached to AFDC in this period and the predecessor of W-2. My questions focused on these main subjects: How did the counties serve welfare recipients in JOBS, what approaches worked best, and how would they explain the rapid decline in the Wisconsin caseload? The interviews allowed me to show in some depth *how* the counties changed welfare, or why they did not.

I first describe the counties based on the interviews, then compare these impressions to how the counties actually assigned their clients and how much they reduced caseloads, according to program data. Results confirm that the leading counties generally did have higher levels of enrollment and placement in job search and work than the other counties, and that they tended to drive caseloads down by more. Thus, the state's preference for these counties as exemplars was rational, given how it wished to change welfare. The program data also show a sharp reorientation of all the counties toward tighter administration and "work first" between 1993 and 1995 as the state applied pressure to change in that direction. In addition, I draw on government documents collected in the counties and in Madison.

KENOSHA

The most important of the pioneer counties was Kenosha, a mixed urban and rural county in the southeast corner of the state. During the reform period, it faced unemployment problems due to a declining industrial base. It also confronted a migration of low-income people from Chicago seeking a better environment. Some of them went on welfare. Local concern about this helped to make welfare migration an issue in the county and then the state. That helped to trigger the Wisconsin reform in the mid-1980s (Corbett, 1995, pp. 34, 36).

Leadership

One of the keys to the statewide reform was that politicians and administrators performed complementary roles. The governor and legislators set the agenda by defining the welfare problem and calling for change. But then they left administrators the leeway to craft actual programs, and they trusted them to do so. The same thing happened in microcosm in Kenosha. Welfare was given a local mandate for reform by the Public Welfare Board, most of whose members were also county supervisors. It called for a reform promoting employment. Although most of the members were Democrats, the board operated in a nonpartisan manner, a hallmark of Wisconsin's Progressive political style. Welfare managers delighted that they could "go to them with ideas" and get support, and yet not be told what to do. The principal figure who fronted for the welfare department with the state was County Executive John Collins, by all accounts a forceful and effective leader. Collins, said one official, was "as liberal Democrat as they come," but he also treasured a "strong work ethic." The Kenosha reform would, above all, vindicate that value.

The county also developed an enterprising group of welfare managers. Clark Earl became director of the welfare department in 1981. Finding Kenosha's existing welfare work program to be ineffective, he was willing, he told me, to "knock heads" and "make everybody change," and he did so. That style eventually made enemies. Earl came into conflict with Collins and, by 1993, had left the county, but not before he had broken the mold of welfare in Kenosha. A key lieutenant was George Leutermann, who headed income maintenance under Earl. He kept that role after leaving county employment to work for Goodwill Industries, after Goodwill became chief contractor for the new Kenosha work program. Later still, he headed up Maximus, one of the private agencies chosen to run W-2 in Milwaukee. A third figure was Larry Jankowski, who joined Goodwill in 1989 to head up the Job Center, which was to run JOBS and other work programs in Kenosha. This ambitious group, seconded by other managers and staff, transformed welfare in the county. Their efforts would eventually have statewide, national, and even international repercussions.

<u>Work Experience and Job Training Program</u>

The view that established work programs achieved little was shared by the state. In response, the legislature in 1986 created the Work Experience and Job Training program (WEJT), which was supposed to serve more recipients more intensively than earlier programs, using added state funding. Welfare mothers might be obligated to participate when their youngest child turned 2, as against 6 in earlier programs. WEJT was to be piloted in five counties in 1987. It predated by 2 years the national JOBS program, which it much resembled, and was folded into JOBS after that program began in1989.

The Kenosha managers applied to run one of the WEJT pilots to get extra financing for their ideas. They were selected.[5] Working through a "management group" of local agency directors, they crafted a model designed mainly to achieve early client involvement and maintain it. Recipients required to participate in WEJT were to go directly from eligibility determination into motivational training, then into skill assessment, and then into a series of training or work assignments with scarcely a break. Continuous case monitoring by staff was to produce continuous "engagement," thus countering the tendency of clients to drop out. Participation was not time-limited, as in some earlier programs; there was to be "no exit," Leutermann said, short of going to work or leaving welfare. Participation was also demanding. To get them used to the demands of employment, recipients were to achieve a "simulated work week" of as much as 32 hours of activity. The idea, Earl said, paralleled the thinking behind the Saturation Work Initiative Model (SWIM) in San Diego, an important federally funded experiment of the same era that aimed to maximize participation (Hamilton and Friedlander, 1989).

The initial implementation of the program in 1987 was troubled. WEJT was initially contracted to the local Private Industry Council (PIC), the agency that ran training programs under the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). The PIC, however, chose to serve only the 250 participants specified in its contract. This it did by "creaming," or concentrating on the most employable cases, as JTPA traditionally did. The county had expected, rather, that it would serve the entire welfare caseload found mandatory for WEJT, or over 1,000 cases, as only this would change the nature of welfare. A team of academic consultants recommended that the county reassert authority over the program (Corbett et al., 1987).

It did so forcefully. Control of the program was shifted back to the management group, and later in 1987 WEJT was recontracted to Goodwill and other nonprofit agencies. For several months, in Leutermann's words, the Kenosha managers "went on a rampage." Implementation of the program was slowed while staff audited every case to find out what their clients were really doing, or not doing. Out of this caldron, Kenosha developed the staff capacity and routines to monitor its cases and follow up on dropouts as closely, perhaps, as any welfare department had ever done. This administrative mastery was to be the foundation of everything the county achieved.

Work First

The model had still to be fine-tuned. Initially, WEJT everywhere in the state stressed putting recipients in education and training rather than right into jobs. The goal was to raise skills so that clients could find well-paid positions and thus get entirely off welfare and stay off. Later evaluations were to show that this approach generated smaller gains in earnings and reductions in dependency, especially in the short term, than putting people to work immediately in the jobs they could already obtain (Riccio, Friedlander, and Freedman, 1994; Freedman and Friedlander, 1995). Already in 1988–89, the Kenosha managers realized that many clients were failing to complete training assignments and go on to jobs. So they shifted away from "education for education's sake," Jankowski said, and toward education aimed more directly at jobs.

Then in late 1989, Governor Thompson approached them and asked them to pilot a "work first" model for the state, offering them extra money to do so.[6] A working group of personnel from all levels sketched out a model that was similar to WEJT but emphasized immediate work more strongly. Applicants for aid referred to the program were to undergo "immediate immersion right away" and participate for 8 weeks before they even "came up for air," Jankowski recalled. This involved an initial week of orientation and assessment followed by 7 weeks of job search, after which cases not getting jobs were put in community service positions. The philosophy now was, "You do not need an education to get a job," one supervisor told me. Rather, "To get a job, you need to work." The county continued to refer many clients to education and training—but now they normally had to be working at least part-time first. That step away from the remediation strategy would eventually be followed statewide, then nationwide.

Kenosha became one model for the Work First program, oriented to both job search and diversion, that the state implemented starting in 1994.

Resources

The Kenosha managers were adept at getting extra money from the state and Washington to implement their ideas. Whatever experimental program came along, they applied to run it. “If it sneezed we piloted it,” Leutermann joked. “I still have calluses on my knees.” He had obtained a $350,000 federal grant to pursue interstate welfare fraud (clients drawing welfare in Wisconsin while living out of state) even before joining the Kenosha welfare department. For the five WEJT pilots, the state allocated $1.8 million of its own money, over and above usual welfare work funding. To run the “work first” model, Thompson offered the county $100,000—it bargained for and got $350,000. Later on, after JOBS replaced WEJT, Kenosha County, and also Jackson County (not a research county), received funding sufficient to serve 70 percent of their caseloads, because they had achieved high participation, whereas other counties were funded at only 47 percent (Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 1991a, pp. 22–3; Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 1995, p. 21). Still more funds came for county experiments in Job Centers, case management, and client tracking.

Kenosha used this money to build up the bureaucracy so that clients could be served and monitored with unprecedented intensity. WEJT hired new staff, especially case managers who could go one-on-one with clients, helping to sort out the problems that barred them from working. The program used teams of staff to serve clients, a structure that called for more personnel than single case managers (see below). Most of this buildup occurred in the late 1980s, according to respondents. From 1990 on, WEJT and JOBS had 50 to 57 staff annually, or about one for every 50 cases[7]—an unusually high ratio for welfare work programs nationally. Since caseloads fell virtually throughout the reform period, this alone permitted smaller caseloads without any additional hiring.

Effects of WEJT

WEJT's primary goal was to raise "engagement" in the program, and this it achieved. According to Kenosha data, by early 1989 almost two-thirds of the recipients eligible for WEJT were either participating in the program or employed at least part-time—rates exceeding even those achieved in SWIM ("Welfare Reform," 1990). Participation here meant any activities at all. Under JOBS, the standards were tougher. To be counted as participants, clients had to undertake at least 20 hours of activities a week, and complete three-quarters of them. On that basis, Kenosha WEJT in 1990 achieved participation rates as high as 55 percent (Wiseman, 1991). This was vastly above federal norms for JOBS, which in 1990 required only 7 percent of eligibles to participate, rising to 20 percent in 1995.

Evaluations elsewhere suggest that one feature of high-performing welfare work programs is that they enforce participation stringently, as Kenosha did (Mead, 1997b). This indicates that Kenosha WEJT might have had substantial effects on its clients. A county follow-up succeeded in interviewing 39 percent of the clients who had left the rolls between late 1989 and early 1991. Over 60 percent were employed, that rate was sustained even a year after leaving welfare, and the rate was slightly higher for clients who had been in WEJT than for those who had not ("Evaluation Report," 1991). A state report found that Kenosha JOBS placed 30 percent of its clients in jobs in 1993, the highest of ten large county programs (State of Wisconsin, 1994, p. 6). Such figures are consistent with a sizable employment impact, although they do not prove it.

Kenosha's programs were not rigorously evaluated. One statistical comparison of Kenosha WEJT to non-WEJT programs in similar counties suggested that it merely reduced the caseload by somewhat more in 1988–89 than would have occurred otherwise. WEJT was given an experimental trial in Rock County, and there it actually *reduced* earnings and departures from welfare compared with the control group (Pawasarat and Quinn, 1993, chaps. 11–12). If WEJT in fact had little impact, the reason might be that the earlier work programs, which defined the baseline, were more effective than the Kenosha managers believed. Another reason might be that, as mentioned above, the program initially overemphasized education and training at the expense of employment.

So Kenosha's impact remains probable, not proven. Close observers of the program, however, certainly believed it was achieving something. For the state, the county was an exemplar, and in 1992, the National Alliance of Business honored Kenosha as the best JOBS program in the country.

Tensions with the State

Despite their achievement, however, the Kenosha managers "weren't easy to deal with," remarked Gerald Whitburn, who headed the state welfare department from 1991 to 1995. He recalled that Collins used to call him up and bend his ear to get extra funding. He respected the Kenosha managers because they "walked the talk," and showed conspicuous "professionalism," but he also found them "tenacious" about their own ideas. The program, said another state manager, finally became a "wayward child."

The issue, curiously enough, was "work first." Although Kenosha helped lead the way toward a focus on actual employment, the county resisted the extreme of "work first" represented by later state policy. The county's model really put participation rather than work up front. It demanded the immediate immersion of clients in the program, but they also received some preparation before they were expected to go out and get a job. One could not expect recipients to go out "cold turkey" and land positions, Jankowski remarked. They needed first to be oriented and motivated. W-2's policy of demanding employment even as a condition of aid, Earl said, was simply a way of "blowing people off welfare." Kenosha also opposed the 2-year time limit that W-2 placed on any one assignment. Even under "work first," the county still placed many clients in training alongside work. The idea of combining work with training, Leutermann said, got "lost" in W-2.

GRANT

Grant is a rural county in the southwestern corner of the state. Here the local welfare director, Jon Angeli, had created a work program in his own image over about 10 years. His approach was "family-centered." Angeli believed that it was usually problems within a poor family, for instance spousal or child abuse, that threw it on welfare and prevented it from getting off. The solution was intensive intervention in the family by caseworkers. Angeli recruited welfare and JOBS personnel who embraced his approach, then sent them to the University of Iowa to be trained as "family development" specialists at the National Resource Center on Family-Based Services.

Grant's approach was closer to traditional social work than Kenosha's. It focused initially on the family rather than employment. The idea was that past failures caused a family to feel powerless, then to react in dysfunctional ways, then to abandon self-sufficiency and go on welfare, in a descending spiral. The role of caregivers was to reverse that spiral with attention and services that would restore confidence, improve functioning, and eventually get a family off aid. Work was the end of the process rather than the beginning. Only thus could one reach what Angeli called the "sociologically unemployed." His sizable staff of social workers and other aides allowed him to achieve caseloads of 30 to 50, permitting close attention to each case. In 1993, Grant placed 22 percent of its clients in jobs, a figure well below Kenosha and Sheboygan and only 1 percentage point above the state as a whole (State of Wisconsin, 1994, p. 6). One reason probably was that the county focused less narrowly on employment

At the same time, the approach was demanding. Welfare might lavish services on families, but it also opposed "enabling." It asserted "empowerment," or the idea that the poor must ultimately be responsible for solving their own problems. Families were to be seen as "capable and functional," not as "incompetent" (Siss, n.d.). From this premise, tough work expectations logically followed. JOBS in Grant County was severe about expecting clients to seek and accept jobs as soon as possible. In this it was seconded by the conservative ethos of the surrounding farming community. In rural areas, welfare is less distinct from the rest of society than it is in the big city, so families face greater social pressures to leave assistance (Rank and Hirschl, 1988). If the county was only average in job entries, that was partly because, as I note below, it had already driven the most employable cases off the rolls.

Another implication was diversion. To the extent possible, Angeli believed, families in trouble were to look to their "natural support systems," including the "extended family," before they asked for public support. Grant, like Kenosha, was a pilot for "work first," but its main innovation was not immediate job search. Rather, the county demonstrated that one could keep most applicants for aid from going on the rolls if one confronted them about their own resources at the outset. The "family resource specialist" who did this was a talented young woman who had herself been on welfare. She found ways to get applicants into JOBS or work or to make other arrangements for them without their having to go on welfare. "A lot of people come in here expecting us to solve their problems," she remarked, but they were taught that the solutions lay "within" them.

Not everyone agreed with diversion. Grant, like Kenosha, came into tension with the state, but for being too tough rather than not tough enough. Some other counties regarded Angeli's strategy as virtually illegal. Grant was talking people out of assistance that they had a legal right to. That feeling reflected the traditional, entitlement view of welfare that the state reform would finally reject. Angeli and his team responded that they were merely serving the needy more effectively. Although the state funded the county to develop diversion, managers in Madison were cool about adopting that strategy statewide, until it became a facet of Work First in 1994. Jean Rogers, head of income maintenance at the state level, recalled that Angeli "was pushing the envelope as far as he could push it . . . ."

SHEBOYGAN

Sheboygan is a small city with a mixed economy on the Lake Michigan shore north of Milwaukee. Much of its caseload consisted of Hmong refugees who had migrated to the state from Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War. Most of these families were two-parent, but they had serious difficulties adjusting and learning English, and thus many subsisted on welfare. Here, as in Kenosha, the county welfare department had become dissatisfied with the existing welfare work operation. JOBS and earlier programs had been run by the local branch of the Job Service, a federally funded voluntary job placement agency. They had served only a small part of the caseload.

Sheboygan's solution was not a home-grown program. Rather, the department contracted JOBS to Curtis and Associates, a private firm that had run employment programs in several states. Curtis created a harder-nosed version of Kenosha. There was a similar stress on up-front job search, but the goal was more often full-time employment. Kenosha tended to leave families still on the rolls, receiving a partial grant to supplement part-time wages. Sheboygan aimed to get families entirely off welfare, which full-time work usually would do. If a client had not found work after 4 to 6 weeks of job search, he or she would enter a community service job but continue to look for work. If clients were assigned to remediation, it was usually English language training rather than more advanced education.

The program kept clients active through the same close follow-up seen in Kenosha. By 1992, Sheboygan claimed to have achieved a participation rate by JOBS standards of 56 percent, which, like Kenosha's, was vastly above national norms. The county became known as a forceful placement operation. In the last half of 1992, 28 percent of the county's cases recorded earned income, versus a state average of 18 percent ("Sheboygan County," n.d., pp. 3, 9). In 1994, according to a state report, Sheboygan placed 40 percent of its more disadvantaged clients in jobs, a rate second in the state among 27 midsize programs (State of Wisconsin, 1994, p. 9).

Sheboygan also excelled at diversion, or helping applicants for aid without putting them on the welfare rolls, for instance through temporary assistance or by referring them to local charities. This was one of the first counties to implement Work First when it began in 1994. The result was a sharp fall in the county caseload. The state assessed Sheboygan's Work First operation so favorably that it later contracted with the county and Curtis to consult with other county welfare departments about how to reduce their own caseloads, as this was a requirement for the departments being chosen by the state to run W-2.

CHANGING COUNTIES

Besides these pioneers, other counties supported welfare reform by showing that they could change toward higher participation and “work first,” once pressures to do this appeared. In some cases, change occurred because a county became a pilot for one of the Thompson experiments in welfare reform. Those programs, strongly shaped by the leading counties, helped spread their ideas around the state. The following were cases among my research counties; no doubt there were others.

Dane

Dane County, which contains Madison, Wisconsin’s capital and second-largest city, was one of the most liberal jurisdictions in the state. Here JOBS had strongly stressed the education and training of recipients, rather than putting them to work or reducing the caseload. But by the 1990s, a failure to raise participation and generate job entries led to disquiet at the state level and, finally, in Dane itself.

Administrators candidly admitted shortcomings. Then JOBS went through changes similar to, although less far-reaching than, those Kenosha had undergone years before. At the suggestion of the same consultants that advised Kenosha, in 1992 JOBS was taken away from the PIC, which had run it poorly. It was recontracted to other nonprofit agencies, whom the county monitored more closely. In 1993, the county doubled the number of JOBS case managers, reduced caseloads, enforced participation, and reassessed all cases for employability. “We can now say,” it reported, “that our case managers know their caseloads . . . .” The length of time recipients could study before going to work was cut back. By all these changes, the program began to close the gap with state averages in terms of participation and job placements (“Dane County,” n.d.). In 1994, Mary Ann Cook came from the state level to take over as JOBS manager, promising further changes in the same direction.

The impetus for the changes was in part political. “The county board went to Kenosha and fell in love,” Cook told me. Pressure also came from business. In a tight labor market, employers objected to the heavy emphasis of JOBS on education and training when jobs were going begging. But the greatest pressure came from within. JOBS staff themselves realized that their approach to the program, oriented to human capital, was outdated. They simply wanted to perform better.

Winnebago

Winnebago County contains Oshkosh, a small city in east-central Wisconsin. As in Dane, the JOBS program here had originally favored an education and training approach. There had been no overt pressure from political leaders or business to move toward employment, yet welfare and JOBS managers concluded that they had to change. They could see how state policy was shifting, and they feared that state funding for education and training might dry up.

So they had joined Work First, effective February 1995. The philosophy was now to be "work first, career second," one manager told me. A resource specialist had been installed, as in Grant County, to divert applicants from welfare when they first applied for aid. Should they persevere, welfare intake workers were supposed to read them a statement about how JOBS in Winnebago had changed. The goal now was to make them "self-sufficient." They were supposed to "benefit from the good economy and abundant well paying jobs" in the area.

Should they apply for and receive aid, they would immediately confront a newly toughened JOBS program that demanded near-immediate job search. The JOBS redesign had been done by a staff member imported from San Diego, the inventor of high-intensity welfare work programs and the home of SWIM. Whereas some officials had misgivings about the shift, others were enthusiastic that they could reverse a longtime growth in dependency.

Fond du Lac

Fond du Lac County contains another small city with an economy of light manufacturing. Here, as in Dane County, the traditional approach to JOBS emphasized education and training. When I first interviewed in Fond du Lac in 1994, staff described remediation for the low-skilled as their "highest priority," and they believed long-term education was "very successful." They hesitated to sanction clients (i.e., reduce grants) for noncompliance with requirements. They deprecated the rising pressure to enforce participation in the program, or to reduce the caseload. All that just meant "money, money" for the agency, one case manager said—not helping people. The program seemed slackly run compared to Kenosha or Sheboygan, with many clients allowed to remain uninvolved for long periods.

But as in Kenosha and Dane, pressure to change had come from the county executive, other politicians, and business. Fond du Lac applied for and was accepted (along with Pierce County) to be a pilot for Work Not Welfare (WNW), the most radical of the Thompson experiments. WNW entailed not only front-end diversion and a demand that recipients go to work within 30 days but also a demand that they "earn" their grants with specified hours of work or training effort under tight supervision. Most radical of all, a family could draw cash aid continuously for only 2 years. All these features would be carried over into W-2. To implement this program, one manager admitted, would mean "a shift in our paradigm."

WNW began in Fond du Lac in January 1995. By the time I returned in June, diversion was in full swing, the JOBS program had been toughened, educational assignments had been shortened, and the county was enforcing work as never before. Notably, the welfare department ran JOBS both before and after the change solely with its own personnel, without contractors. The shift had been wrenching, causing some loss of morale and the departure of some staff. They were replaced by others more committed to the work mission.

LAGGING COUNTIES

A final group of counties performed worse than the leaders in the terms Madison cared most about—job entries and reductions in caseload. In most cases, the reason was not that JOBS was poorly run. Indeed, by the standards of other states, JOBS and earlier welfare work programs were run well almost everywhere in Wisconsin (Mead, 2000; Norris and Thompson, 1995). Rather, it was because these counties dissented from the drift toward enforced participation and "work first."

Racine

Racine, a large county situated just north of Kenosha and feeling some of the same concern over welfare migration, was a willing pilot of several of the Thompson experiments in welfare reform. It was also a leader in child support enforcement, another frontier of antipoverty social policy. In welfare work, however, Racine took a more moderate line than its neighbor to the south. It was less insistent that welfare adults participate in JOBS. When they did, it demanded fewer hours from them, and it often allowed them to go into education and training rather than immediate employment. Overall, it was less demanding than the three vanguard counties, although more so than Dane.

The key difference from the pioneers, and also from Dane, was that there was less internal pressure to change. Welfare officials, and the elected officials standing behind them, were more content with JOBS as it stood. They understood their program as a set of services through which recipients progressed, guided mostly by their own choices ("Racine County," n.d.).

Marathon

Marathon, a moderate-size county in north-central Wisconsin, contains the city of Wausau. Here the dispute with state policy was sharper than in Racine. When I interviewed in 1995, the JOBS manager told me candidly that she disagreed with "work first" and remained committed to an education-and-training approach. JOBS here sent many clients to the local technical college. The county refused to participate in any of the Thompson experiments. Some staff did feel that the emphasis on education had been overdone, but at most they favored shorter training assignments more focused on jobs. The county adjusted to state directives no more than necessary, rather than taking them as cues for change, as Dane or Winnebago had done. For example, JOBS placed some clients in work, but in part to reap the bonuses that the state was then paying for job entries, the better to spend the money on training.

By state standards, JOBS was loosely run, allowing frequent nonparticipation. Far from rebuilding itself around the work mission, as in Kenosha, the welfare department in Wausau continued to give aid on the basis of need alone. It was largely detached from JOBS.

Douglas

Douglas County in the north of the state includes the city of Superior. Here again was a relatively passive JOBS program that felt little urgency about moving recipients into jobs. One reason might be that this locality was less exposed to welfare migration than the southern counties. Its economy was also less prosperous, with fewer jobs available.

The difference from the leading counties here was less that JOBS was wedded to remediation than that the agencies running the program had never fully internalized the work mission. The welfare department saw its role as giving clients all the benefits they were entitled to, without attempts to divert. The Job Service, which ran work activities, emphasized assigning clients to public jobs as much as placing them with private employers. Services to help families, which Grant County had made its centerpiece, were delegated to a group of nonprofit agencies, funded by foundations.

Douglas had joined Work First, but the program had not reflected or produced the changes seen in Sheboygan or Winnebago. The resource specialist stationed at welfare intake was unable to stop eligibility clerks from processing applicants for benefits before alternatives could be considered. Welfare officials told me that it was "not part of our job" to put recipients to work.

Milwaukee

Milwaukee County, with the state's largest city, had—by far—the largest welfare caseload. Here differences of philosophy with the state were compounded by serious operational difficulties. Local JOBS agencies were reluctant to enforce participation in the program. They also emphasized education and training heavily, at the expense of job placements.

More important, JOBS in Milwaukee was poorly run compared to elsewhere in the state, although probably well run by the standards of other big cities. The county welfare department had declined responsibility for the program, for fear that it would prove costly. JOBS was run instead by the state welfare department and contracted to several local agencies, public and private. The program was also loosely run, with many clients sitting unassigned, without participation, for years. If staff tracked cases, it was usually on their computers. They had much less face-to-face contact with clients than in the leading counties, in part because they had higher caseloads. George Leutermann summed up the situation in 1995, when he was working in the city: "Milwaukee hasn't reduced the caseload because they haven't had in place a system that could engage enough people to make an impact."

The state had attempted to tighten things up. In 1994, it organized the Milwaukee JOBS providers into two teams and made them compete for job placements, with results to affect their funding in the next year. In 1995, it instituted incentive payments to motivate them to make job placements, as it also did in the rest of the state. The unresponsiveness of the local public agencies would ultimately lead to the contracting of W-2 to a set of entirely private organizations.

STRUCTURAL INNOVATIONS

Besides policy changes that led toward "work first" and diversion, the leading counties and some others pioneered innovations in the organization of welfare work programs.

Case Management

One of these innovations was in how staff in welfare work programs served the clients. Traditionally, particularly in large programs, there are separate personnel to determine initial eligibility for welfare and then to run the JOBS program, to which the employable recipients are referred. Some clients get lost in the referral, which was one reason for a high rate of no-shows for JOBS. One solution is to "colocate" welfare and JOBS staff in the same offices, to facilitate referral. Another is to have a single case manager preside over both benefits and JOBS activities. Research suggests that this “integrated” approach does achieve higher participation and employment (Brock and Harknett, 1998).

Kenosha developed a third alternative—assigning clients to “integrated service teams.” Income maintenance, JOBS, and child care personnel would meet with the client together. The face-to-face communication with the client and each other allowed them to address quickly any problems that might be blocking the client’s nonparticipation. JOBS staff could also quickly tell welfare of any nonparticipation that might warrant a sanction. Under WNW, Fond du Lac adopted the same approach. It helps to account for the unusual ability of these programs to monitor their caseloads closely. On the other hand, it was costly, because more staff members were needed to serve a given caseload. Largely to minimize cost, Sheboygan preferred to use single staff interacting with groups of clients in orientation and motivation sessions.

Contracting

Another innovation was the frequent contracting out of work programs to private agencies. Contracting was not new, but it became more common as counties sought to change welfare. They often saw outside agencies as a way to do this without having to alter existing public bureaucracies. In Kenosha, WEJT and JOBS were contracted out because the county board viewed hiring under civil service as too costly. Also, Earl preferred a “corporate culture” where operators would be more accountable for results and also more “customer responsive.” The reasoning was similar to the ideas behind the “reinvention of government” (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). One of Kenosha’s achievements was to maintain cohesion among its key managers, even after some became contractors themselves; Leutermann left county employment to join Goodwill while Jankowski became a consultant.

Racine had a structure much like Kenosha’s, while Sheboygan contracted its entire program to Curtis and Associates. Grant contracted with several agencies, not only for itself but for a consortium of five local counties that ran JOBS together. In Milwaukee, the structure used both public and nonprofit bodies, then evolved under W-2 to one run entirely by private agencies.

Job Centers

A third innovation was the idea of merging welfare work with other programs, such as the Job Service, JTPA (the PIC), or vocational rehabilitation. It seemed inefficient to run these programs separately, since they all involved determining eligibility, appraising clients for employability, and then referring them to training programs or to job search in the private sector. Why not create a "one-stop shop," using common staffs, funded by all the programs, that could serve all the clienteles together?

This idea had been recommended by a state-level task force in 1985 and promoted by the state department of labor, but Grant was apparently the first county to create a Job Center, in 1985. In 1987, the state provided funds to develop Job Centers, with money for 1989–90 going to Kenosha and three other counties (Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 1991b, p. 13). With support from County Executive Collins, Kenosha used those and other monies to acquire a failed shopping center and move all the participating agencies into it. The center opened in 1990 with half a dozen agencies, but grew to nearly 20. Its rooms and offices are plush and modern, poles apart from the stereotypical run-down welfare office.

When people in Kenosha seek aid, they now go to this impressive facility, not to a separate welfare department. A large sign for the "Kenosha County Job Center" stands outside. The center symbolizes Kenosha's commitment to welfare, but also to making the system more work-connected and mainstream. In the county's words, the center "forges in the welfare recipient's mind the connection between receiving economic assistance and preparing for work supported self-sufficiency" ("Welcome," 1994). Similar, though less extensive, Job Centers were created in Dane and Racine Counties. Similar centers were organized in Milwaukee, although they were overtaken by W-2.

Management Information

A final innovation, found only in Kenosha, was improved management information systems. Although Wisconsin had stronger computerized reporting systems for welfare than did other states, the data were not timely or detailed enough to satisfy the Kenosha managers. So they developed their own system with the assistance of Michael Wiseman, an expert on welfare management from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The Job Center Information System (JCIS) ran on personal computers alongside the state system. It allowed WEJT to track individual clients closely as they progressed through the program. Staff could record assignment of clients to activities, generate lists of expected attendees at functions, and spot nonattendance quickly. JCIS was eventually displaced by an improved statewide computer system implemented in 1994.

PROGRAM DATA

The description above is based largely on my interviews at the state and county levels, plus some program documents. I also checked these impressions against how the counties actually assigned their clients, according to JOBS reporting data, and how their caseloads changed.

JOBS in October 1993

The data for October 1993, a typical month of that year, are shown in Table 1.[8] They mostly confirm the picture respondents gave of the counties. The base for the percentages shown is all recipients defined by AFDC as employable and referred to JOBS. Relative to the state overall, the leading counties excelled in the proportion of the referred whom they actually enrolled. Enrollment is a good measure of a program's authority, its ability to get recipients to take the work test seriously. The lead counties also minimized people who were in unproductive holding statuses, or who were sanctioned for noncooperation. Past research suggests that demanding work programs actually reduce sanctions because they leave participants in less doubt, compared to more passive programs, about what is expected of them (Mead, 1985, p. 237).[9]

Above all, the lead counties had high proportions of clients in job search and actual work; 40 percent in both Kenosha and Sheboygan were working, either in regular or community service jobs. One

TABLE 1
Clients in Administrative Statuses in Research Counties, October 1993 (percent)

	Enrolled	Holding Status	Sanctioned	Job Search	Regular Jobs	Unpaid Jobs	Remedial Education	Postsec Education
				Leading Counties				
Kenosha	**88**	24	1	**8**	**37**	**3**	**11**	**12**
Grant	**87**	24	2	**6**	**26**	**7**	5	**17**
Sheboygan	**90**	11	1	**8**	**35**	**5**	**32**	**11**
				Changing Counties				
Dane	76	**34**	4	2	16	1	6	8
Winnebago	84	26	3	4	**26**	**3**	**15**	**10**
Fond du Lac	84	**33**	1	1	**24**	**3**	**13**	9
				Lagging Counties				
Racine	78	16	**8**	3	18	0	**8**	**15**
Marathon	**91**	29	4	3	19	0	**23**	9
Douglas	**95**	**52**	3	3	**23**	**3**	3	**12**
Milwaukee	86	**32**	**8**	4	19	1	4	5
State	86	30	5	4	22	1	7	9

Notes: Calculated from county caseload data from the Department of Health and Social Services. The base for all percentages is all recipients referred to the program. **County figures above the state's are in bold**. Clients in holding status include those on hold, scheduled to participate, unassigned, and those whom the program does not intend to serve or has asked to be exempted from JOBS. Sanctioned means JOBS has asked welfare to reduce a grant for noncooperation. Regular jobs include full- and part-time. Unpaid jobs include community work experience and work experience.

surprise is that the leaders also had fairly highly proportions in education. That was partly because their high enrollments gave them more clients to assign to all activities. Also, Kenosha assigned many to training and Sheboygan to English language instruction alongside work.

The other counties were less tautly run and less demanding. Enrollment usually ran lower than in the leading counties, and holding statuses and sanctioning ran higher. Whereas Marathon and Douglas had unexpectedly high enrollment, they also had more clients inactive than the leaders, especially Douglas. Job search and work activity were mostly lower than among the leaders, but, except in Marathon, education assignments were not conspicuously high. Where the lagging counties fell behind the leaders, above all, was in making their clients active. As one might expect, the counties that were changing by the time I interviewed them in 1994–95 fell between the leading and lagging groups in many of these respects.

JOBS in October 1995

Table 2 shows similar data for October 1995, 2 years later. The gaps between the groups of counties have manifestly narrowed. Now almost all the counties are enrolling above the state average—although, as I discuss below, that figure has fallen. All except Kenosha and Grant show reduced assignment to holding statuses. Sanctioning in the changing and lagging counties has fallen—except for a sharp rise in Fond du Lac due to the unusual demands of Work Not Welfare. Almost all the counties show rises in job search and employment, with the increases generally greatest for the lagging group. The work rise extended to unpaid work assignments, or “workfare,” notably in Fond du Lac again due to WNW. Less clearly, there is a fall in education assignments, particularly in the leading counties. Changes this sharp in only 2 years show a remarkable capacity for bureaucratic change, particularly in programs like these with entrenched routines.

The shifts largely track changes in the statewide totals, where we also see a fall in holding assignments and sanctioning, a rise in job search and work, and a fall in education. Yet the counties still differ in characteristic ways. Sheboygan still stands out for exceptionally tight administration. Kenosha

TABLE 2
Clients in Administrative Statuses in Research Counties, October 1995 (percent)

	Enrolled	Holding Status	Sanctioned	Job Search	Regular Jobs	Unpaid Jobs	Remedial Education	Postsec Education
				Leading Counties				
Kenosha	**79**	**38**	**4**	**9**	**39**	3	4	7
Grant	**91**	**24**	2	**9**	**33**	5	1	0
Sheboygan	**81**	10	1	**12**	**44**	**9**	**14**	6
				Changing Counties				
Dane	**81**	**26**	2	5	**24**	**6**	5	**8**
Winnebago	68	14	2	3	**38**	5	6	**9**
Fond du Lac	**81**	**29**	**10**	2	**34**	**11**	**10**	**10**
				Lagging Counties				
Racine	**82**	15	2	**11**	**29**	2	6	**14**
Marathon	**88**	20	1	3	**28**	5	**19**	**15**
Douglas	**80**	**22**	3	**12**	**27**	**6**	5	**11**
Milwaukee	**76**	**23**	**5**	**12**	**24**	**6**	2	5
State	69	20	3	8	23	5	6	7

Notes: Calculated from county caseload data from the Department of Health and Social Services. The base for all percentages is all recipients referred to the program. **County figures above the state's are in bold**. Clients in holding status include those on hold, scheduled to participate, unassigned, and those whom the program does not intend to serve or has asked to be exempted from JOBS. Sanctioned means JOBS has asked welfare to reduce a grant for noncooperation. Regular jobs include full- and part-time. Unpaid jobs include community work experience and work experience.

and Sheboygan are still relatively tough on regular employment, and Grant less so, while Dane and Milwaukee—the two most liberal jurisdictions—remain relatively soft. Marathon has raised work levels but not job search and continues to emphasize remediation.

The chief anomaly is that enrollment for the state as a whole has dropped sharply. In October 1993, 86 percent of JOBS clients were enrolled in the program; 2 years later only 69 percent were. The change is partly artificial—due to a new computer system.[10] It also reflects rising diversion. As the state's tougher work policies became clear, many people who went on welfare also left it quickly because they could see the work test coming. This prevented their signing up for JOBS, thus depressing enrollment, although the effect was still to reduce the rolls. The change might reflect the incentives the state was now paying to counties, which rewarded job placements rather than enrollment.[11]

Between 1983 and 1993, Wisconsin's AFDC mothers became more often black, unmarried, younger, and less educated, and with younger children (Cancian and Meyer, 1995, pp. 10–30). This is what one would expect; the rolls were falling, taking the more employable cases off welfare first. Consistent with this, the clients referred to JOBS between 1991 and 1995 became somewhat younger and had less education and work experience. They are also became more short-term, suggesting that the older, longer-term cases were likely to leave the rolls first (Mead, 1996, pp. 12–14).

Caseload Fall

How did the differing county policies affect outcomes? The main goals of welfare reform, at both the state and county levels, were to raise work levels among recipients and the poor generally and also to drive caseloads down. The work goal was the more important because the Wisconsin reform never questioned welfare as such; the state continued generous benefits and services in AFDC even as it implemented tougher work tests. Nevertheless, caseload changes are the best indicators of county effectiveness in reform. We have data by county on caseloads but not on work levels among present and former recipients, nor among the poor generally. And since the reform did apparently raise work levels for the state as a whole, as noted above, caseload fall is one indicator of success, although far from a sufficient one.

Table 3 shows the extent of caseload decline between October 1994 and December 1995, when Work First was first implemented, and also between January 1987, when Tommy Thompson became governor, and December 1995. The end of 1995 is a good stopping point, because in 1996 the state implemented more drastic changes, preludes to W-2, about which my interviews have less to say. Over the longer period, the results show that the extent of change is in proportion to the extent of reform. Grant, Sheboygan, and Fond du Lac have the greatest falls, in the latter case due to the special severity of Work Not Welfare. Conversely, the least decline is in Dane and Milwaukee, which were both the most liberal and the most loosely run. Kenosha had only an average decline because it refused to focus on caseload fall as much as on high participation.

In the Work First period, Sheboygan and Fond du Lac reduced caseloads the most. Grant, like Kenosha, fell back to close to the state-level change, in part because it had already driven the cream of its caseload off the rolls earlier. In other research, I have shown that the policies exemplified by the leading counties—high participation and job search—also promoted success in terms of the performance measures used in JOBS, such as job entries made and cases closed (Mead, 1997a).

DISCUSSION

The Wisconsin developments fit the interactive model of implementation suggested at the outset. Madison was not fully in harmony with the counties, even the leaders, who also differed among themselves. And yet by a complex interplay, the two levels found their way toward policies of higher participation and “work first.” The lead counties set the pace, the state followed, and changes in state policy then drove all the counties in the same direction. Yet the individuality of the counties was far from extinguished. Like ships in a convoy, they all turned in the direction the state wanted, but within those bounds each continued to chart its own course. This room for maneuver would continue under W-2.

TABLE 3
Change in Caseload in Research Counties (percent)

County	Oct. 1994–Dec. 1995	Jan. 1987–Dec. 1995
	Leading Counties	
Kenosha*	-12	-35
Grant*	-15	-69
Sheboygan*	-35	-62
	Changing Counties	
Dane	-12	-16
Winnebago*	-28	-57
Fond du Lac*	-48	-71
	Lagging Counties	
Racine	-15	-39
Marathon	-13	-39
Douglas*	-8	-45
Milwaukee	-7	-11
State	-12	-33

Notes: Starred counties participated in Work First or Work Not Welfare prior to December 1995. Calculated from county caseload data from Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

Although the new structure makes stiff demands for client involvement and work everywhere in the state, it also allows counties wide discretion about many details. It was this combination of state and local initiative that led to the near extinction of traditional welfare in Wisconsin.

The interactive model can only be proposed on the basis of this one state. To confirm it would take research on other localities. The key to the model is that all levels of government involved in implementation share the same goals and view them as important. Harmony at the level of ends and priority is what prevents the conflict or inaction that prevents implementation in other models. Only then can the levels problem-solve in parallel.

To use Matland's ambiguity-conflict model, top-down implementation tends to occur where policies are clear and the levels disagree about them. Bottom-up implementation occurs when there is less clarity or less conflict. Wisconsin is a case of "administrative implementation" where policies are clear yet disagreement is muted (Matland, 1995). Disputes are then reduced to how best to achieve agreed goals. That situation is more likely in recent welfare reform, which has been a prominent issue, than in less visible areas of social policy. In the wake of the 1996 welfare reform, localities appear to be implementing work requirements vigorously but downplaying more contentious goals such as reducing unwed parenthood (Nathan and Gais, 1999). Thus, work reforms in welfare in many states may well display the interactive pattern. Wisconsin is unusual mostly in being precocious and thoroughgoing.

The Wisconsin case also casts a sobering light on the process of social policy development. Academic policy experts tend to think that successful programs rest mainly on good policy analysis and money. One figures out the best policy to solve a problem and then implements it with ample resources. But in the Wisconsin counties, planning was limited. The innovators drew their basic ideas from prior experience, not structured inquiry; deliberate analysis was confined mostly to planning the operational details.

And mistakes were made. With the apparent exception of Grant, every one of these counties had to redesign its welfare work program at some point, either because it failed to perform as expected or because of outside pressures. Or contractors had to be changed when they failed to produce. If there was policy analysis, it came mostly in the form of “groping along” (Behn, 1988). Given how little was known about how to change welfare when reform began in the mid-1980s, better planning probably could not have achieved much more.

As for money, its importance was clear but easy to exaggerate. Wisconsin social programs are generally well-funded, and welfare reform is no exception. Today, W-2 draws on a plethora of resources from many agencies, both public and private (“Resource Guide,” 1999). In Kenosha extra resources clearly helped the county to implement its innovations. But much of what all the counties achieved came by restructuring their existing operations, rather than by expanding or hiring new staff. Much of the staff buildup needed to enforce work was “funded,” not directly, but because the state caseload fell almost throughout the reform period. This shrank the caseloads of the existing staff, which allowed them to serve the remaining cases more intensively, which in turn drove the caseload down further—even without hiring any new personnel.

More conspicuous in the Wisconsin story is institutional excellence. At the state level, governmental quality was pivotal to the state’s ability to transform welfare. The two key attributes of the state regime were that elected leaders were able to agree about the direction of reform, and that administrators were able to implement the complex changes that resulted, a process stretching over more than a decade (Mead, 2000). We see the same potent combination at the local level. Among the research counties, in every case but Milwaukee, elected leaders were able to agree on a basic policy, without serious divisions. And in every case but Milwaukee, serious operational problems did not impede programs from achieving that policy, or changing as leaders decided was necessary.

Localities also showed civic idealism. When Tommy Thompson experimented with welfare, he depended on counties coming forward voluntarily to pilot his programs. To do this brought political credit to a county, but it also entailed making difficult changes in local expectations about aid and in welfare routines. Because of its special requirements, WNW was the most demanding of the experiments. Yet no fewer than 15 counties volunteered to pilot it (Thompson, 1996, p. 70).

Most important, the leading counties were exemplars of strong organization. Researchers have described what the effective implementation of welfare work programs requires. Managers must articulate a vision of a new policy and then recruit and organize staff who believe in it. That vision will be some version of the idea of social contract—serving clients in new ways, but also holding them to "high expectations." They will be helped, but they must also help themselves, above all by participating steadily. Each of the leading counties gave that message in a different way. Managers awarded staff considerable discretion about how to achieve program goals, but also held them accountable for key outcomes such as job placements. The staff in turn held clients accountable for staying involved and looking for work. Reliable information systems reported back on both staff and client compliance (Bardach, 1993; Behn, 1991; Mead, 1986, chap. 7; Mitchell, Chadwin, and Nightingale, 1980).

The leading Wisconsin counties achieved exactly this. The Kenosha managers and Jon Angeli in Grant created essentially new organizations to realize their ideas. Sheboygan purchased such an organization from Curtis and Associates. All these programs were suffused with the upbeat but demanding values of successful work programs. Kenosha's watchwords—blazoned on its walls—included "Expect Success" and "Unconditional Positive Regard." The program aimed to be positive toward all its clients—and just for that reason to expect more from them. From a distance, such slogans can seem corny or empty. But by believing in them, the staff motivates both clients and themselves. The tough side of all these programs was that managers held everyone involved, from the clients on up, strictly accountable for results.

The biggest difference among the counties was not in policy but in how fully they claimed ownership of their programs. The low-performing counties were above all passive and detached. They went through the motions of a JOBS program imposed from above, without caring strongly whether it succeeded. That effectively left it up to the recipients to decide whether to work, and little change resulted. In the leading counties, in contrast, managers were proactive. They strained to *use* welfare to produce positive social change. That energy, as much as money, drove their programs forward. Even a program with quite a different policy—perhaps even one *opposed* to "work first"—might have done as well, had it been implemented with the same conviction. The faith that effort was meaningful, that success lay within their grasp, was finally what motivated both staff and clients to achieve their goals.

The commitment to success overrode even failures and redirections along the way. The changing counties dramatized this. They put their past behind them and turned, without looking back, to something better.[12] When I asked Jean Rogers, the longtime manager of welfare reform at the state level, what distinguished the pathbreaking counties from the rest, she cited not only willingness to experiment but "tenacity" and "singleness of purpose."

Notes

[1]This calculation, which compares current W-2 rolls to AFDC, somewhat overstates the overall fall. Some AFDC cases were transferred to income programs outside W-2, and the fall in noncash welfare (Food Stamps and Medicaid) has been less dramatic.

[2]Interviews with Jason Turner on November 14, 1996, and October 10, 2000, and with Jean Rogers on October 10, 2000. Within the state welfare department, Turner was the chief manager of welfare reform from 1993 to 1997, and Jean Rogers headed the income maintenance division from 1991 to 2000. I also heard similar opinions from many other officials during my interviews.

[3]I interviewed in Dane, Fond du Lac, Kenosha, Milwaukee, Racine, and Sheboygan in July 1994, and in Grant, Douglas, Marathon, Winnebago, and again in Fond du Lac in June 1995. I made later visits to Kenosha in 1997 and to Milwaukee in 1995 and 1999. I also interviewed state officials in 1994 and 1995 and on several later occasions.

[4]I depended initially on state officials to characterize which counties were high and low performers, and their judgments proved accurate. It is better to select cases for a study like this on the basis of variation in the independent term (here program features) rather than the dependent term (here program performance). But it makes little difference provided a wide range of variation in both terms is explored, as I achieved. See King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, pp. 128–140).

[5]The other WEJT pilots were in Douglas, Jackson, Racine, and Rock Counties. The program was later expanded to much of the state.

[6]"Work first" was also piloted in Jackson County, where the emphasis was also on employment before training, and in Grant County, where the stress was on diversion.

[7]This calculation is based on staff data from annual Kenosha JOBS reports and county caseload data from the state Department of Health and Social Services.

[8]Data for Table 1 come from the Wisconsin Integrated Data System-Work Programs Reporting System (WIDS-WPRS) for the end of October 1993, and for Table 2 from the end of October 1995.

[9]Kenosha, however, threatened many clients with sanctioning and then brought them into compliance with “reconciliation” consultations, avoiding an actual sanction. This was one expression of the county’s intensive oversight of its clients. In October 1993, Kenosha was above the state norm in assignments to reconciliation, and in October 1995 both Kenosha and Sheboygan were.

[10]In making the changeover, according to state officials, welfare caseworkers at first referred some JOBS eligibles to JOBS multiple times, inflating the denominator of the enrollment calculation relative to the numerator. Some JOBS staff also postponed enrolling referrals due to overwork surrounding the changeover.

[11]Counties were supposed to serve 80 percent of referrals in ways beyond enrollment, except Kenosha and Jackson, which—due to their extra funding—were supposed to serve 100 percent. But no fiscal sanctions attached to achieving these targets or not doing so.

[12]When I first visited Fond du Lac in 1994, I had with me Bardach (1993). I expected to mention it to the managers, who had just agreed to join Work Not Welfare and expected wrenching changes. But when I first met with them, there was the pamphlet on the table. They had already read and discussed it.

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