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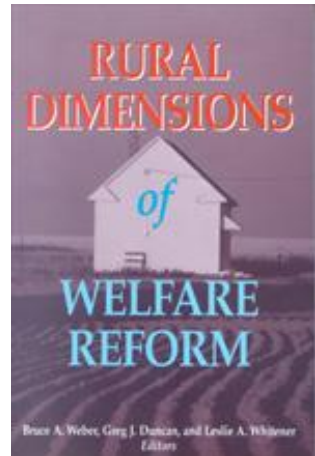
Where All the Counties Are Above Average: Human Service Agency Directors' Perspectives on Welfare Reform

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Where All the Counties Are Above Average

Human Service Agency Directors' Perspectives on Welfare Reform

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When asked to rate their counties in progress toward welfare reform, the directors of human service agencies in Appalachian Ohio almost uniformly describe their county as “above average.” This echo of the fabled Lake Wobegon is from agency administrators in counties in a remote rural region characterized by high poverty and unemployment rates and low levels of economic and infrastructure development, an area largely bypassed by the economic growth of the last decade of the 20th century. How can we explain the nearly universal optimism about the impact of welfare reform and its prospects expressed by these bureaucrats, who are most responsible for its design and implementation? This question appears especially puzzling for a region that has seen few real benefits from economic expansion and that, by all objective indicators, remains desperately poor and underdeveloped.

We examine the views of the 29 directors of human service agencies in the rural Appalachian counties of southeastern Ohio. The directors of these agencies are the principal agents of welfare reform, the officials who are charged with the design and implementation of the new policies, and the individuals who ultimately will be held responsible for its success or failure at the local level. We contrast their perspectives with that of the ideology and policy climate that drove the reorganization of the welfare system and with the perspectives of the clients who are the focus of the new policies. This research is part of a larger multi-

method, multiyear, multigroup study of the impact of welfare reform in poor rural communities. The results of this component show that despite realistic assessment of the numerous barriers to success in welfare-to-work programs, the reorganization of the way welfare is administered has resulted in a largely positive, often enthusiastic, endorsement.

BACKGROUND PERSPECTIVES

Elite Views of Welfare Reform

Current welfare policies are a legacy of the conservative attack on the liberal welfare state that gained momentum in the Reagan era and subsequently became entrenched in political discourse by the beginning of the 1990s. Although there had been a long history of elite dissensus (Teles 1998), by the time of the Clinton administration, welfare reform had become a bipartisan preoccupation, with only minor variation in the types of changes advocated across the political parties. The Clinton administration policy advisors found common ground with a new Republican congressional majority to drastically alter the parameters of the safety net. The result was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), the welfare reform bill whose purpose was “to end welfare as we know it.”

This legislation did, in fact, put an end to long-standing entitlement programs that guaranteed qualified recipients access to public assistance. Most notably, it marked the end of the primary program of cash assistance, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and substituted the more circumscribed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The latter’s purpose was seen as temporary, limited, and geared toward moving recipients toward self-sufficiency through formal employment. The legislation gave the states great flexibility in designing and implementing their own welfare programs, but a primary parameter was a 60-month lifetime maximum for receiving assistance. Many states, including Ohio, designed programs that placed far lower limits on eligibility, usually restricting it to two or three years.

The route to creating political consensus on the need for welfare re-

form can be traced in the debates about causes, consequences, and remedies for poverty that emerged from the perceived failure of War on Poverty programs in the decades following their expansion. Individual incapacity, cultural deviance, or structural barriers were each identified and hotly defended as the primary source of poverty and thus the most appropriate target for public policy (Epstein 1997; Katz 1989, 1996; Schram 1995; Teles 1998). Foremost among the issues that figured prominently in these debates was welfare dependency and its sources (Gordon 1990; Handler and Hasenfeld 1997). Increasingly, the welfare system was redefined as the cause of poverty and dependency rather than its remedy.

The most influential of these attacks came from the right in a “war on welfare” that reversed the logic of the War on Poverty by inverting the causal link between poverty and welfare. While liberal analysis saw welfare programs as a necessary response to complex social problems, conservative analysts argued that the existence of welfare itself created, sustained, and deepened poverty by providing disincentives to work and to traditional nuclear family formation. This, in turn, created a rational calculus for dependency and antisocial behaviors, such as nonmarital childbearing (Gilder 1981; Murray 1984). These arguments were incorporated into the *Contract with America* (Gingrich 1994, p. 67) to form a centerpiece in the drive to gain Republican control of Congress and a blueprint for the campaign and future legislation.

The charge of dependency was not limited to conservative analysis. Increasingly, researchers and policy analysts with liberal identification also adopted welfare dependency as the principal problem of the welfare system. For example, Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood (1994)—the primary architects of Clinton administration welfare policy—conflate poverty and dependency; they accept the conservative diagnosis of the problem but substitute government programs to make work pay for the free market and laissez-faire approaches advocated by the right (Epstein 1997). Even from the opposite end of the political spectrum, feminist theorists also found fault with the welfare system for cultivating dependency among its recipients, although their diagnosis differed markedly in the forms and sources of the problem. They were particularly vocal in arguing that the welfare system creates a system of public patriarchy that substitutes impersonal, public control of women by the state for the more direct private control of family and male kin

(Abramovitz 1988; Brown 1981; Fraser 1990; Tickamyer 1995–1996). In other words, welfare bureaucracies position clients in the role of dependent (Ferguson 1984, p. 45).

Models of Public Policy: Carrot and Stick

The common thread that unites the different approaches is a model of human behavior that assumes individual rationality as the basic premise. Programs are criticized for their failure to provide appropriate incentives for valued behavior (labor force participation, traditional family formation, avoidance of substance abuse) or sanctions for deviance from mainstream norms and values. Thus, a conservative analyst such as Charles Murray (1984) pointed to the “moral hazards” of welfare as the inducement for dependency. *The Contract with America* states that “incentives affect behavior . . . It’s time to change the incentives and make responsible parenthood the norm and not the exception” (Gingrich 1994, p. 75). The claim that behavior is a product of a simple benefit calculation undergirds liberal prescriptions as well. Bane and Ellwood (1994) adopted a rational choice model that makes welfare more desirable than work when work doesn’t pay. The individual in both approaches is a rational actor, calculating how to maximize opportunity, even in a system that supplies limited options. If the incentives are perverse, it is only reasonable that a rational actor will act accordingly.

This assumption of individual, economic rationality increasingly was reflected in the criticisms of existing welfare provision and in the specifics of reform proposals. Although by no means the only assumption and value embedded in these policies (others included the value of free market mechanisms and traditional patriarchal family forms, reliance on private rather than public sectors, and distrust of centralized government intervention), all politically viable welfare reform proposals called for changes that entailed a system of rewards for work and self-sufficiency and punishment for dependency and deviance. Whether emphasizing the carrot of making work pay and providing programs to enhance employability or the stick of time limits and sanctions for failure to adhere to social and program rules, norms, and values, reform policies purported to embody a commitment to a behavioral model that

focused on individual rationality and utility maximization (Tickamyer et al. 2000).

In the debates over welfare reform, discussion of structural impediments and barriers was minimal. Issues that had previously loomed large in liberal analysis, such as discrimination, lack of access to education, jobs, or opportunity, formed little part of the discussion and were generally seen as secondary to issues of motivation and dependency. In other words, in the development of an elite consensus over the shape of welfare reform, structural analysis was discarded in favor of an individualized approach that emphasized character issues and individual choice. The only structural barrier that was widely acknowledged was the institutionalized welfare system itself. Thus, it should not be surprising that, in this environment, consideration of spatial variation in sources and consequences of poverty, welfare provisions, and the impact of reform efforts was almost completely missing. Poverty and welfare dependency are typically viewed as urban problems and analyzed in a national context. Despite widespread rural poverty, and unique barriers to successful implementation of welfare reform, rural issues take back seat in research and policy analysis.

Devolution and Barriers to Rural Welfare Reform

Although regional differences were largely ignored in policy debates, devolution, the other key feature of reform, highlights such differences. Shifting responsibility for welfare reform programs from federal to state and local jurisdictions was promoted as a means to overcome the “one size fits all” federal policy. This policy, it was argued, failed to recognize variation in social, political, and economic circumstances and prevented creative experimentation and program innovation. At least in theory, devolution from the federal to the state level provides an opportunity to design policies and programs tailored to the needs and capacities of local areas and that emphasize democratic input and local control and responsibility. In practice, there is as yet little evidence that specifically rural problems and needs have received much sustained attention from either the federal or state governments. This is particularly important given that local jurisdictions vary in their capacity to implement welfare reform, and that devolution puts great

strain on local capacity, requiring poor rural areas with limited resources to design and implement programs to meet state and federal mandates that do not recognize unique rural problems.

Among these problems are severe deficits in resources, employment opportunities, infrastructure, social and human capital, leadership, and political influence at more central levels of government. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) points out that rural economies face many obstacles compared with urban economies in their potential for creating job opportunities for welfare recipients. Rural communities lack the advantages of metropolitan areas that can attract new investment; rural areas cannot achieve the same economies of scale in delivering social services for education and training, child care and transportation; and they generally lack access to capital and credit for job creation. Rural areas also have significant numbers of “working poor”—people who are employed, but are working part-time or in low-wage jobs that provide few, if any, benefits. The contrast between urban and rural is always stark in these respects, but particularly in light of the economy of the 1990s, in which many urban areas achieved historically low unemployment rates. It is therefore important to call attention to the problems of infrastructure and unemployment that still define much of the rural United States.

As a consequence of these structural features of the economy, rural residents often face an underdeveloped infrastructure of support for employment, even when there are jobs. Everything from the difficulty of travel in these areas to the absence of child care can be included as obstacles to employment. In light of this, we can expect that the impact of welfare reform, and specifically of welfare-to-work programs will be very different in rural and urban areas. Similarly, the needs of welfare-to-work participants will also differ, as will the capacities of human service agencies to manage welfare reform.

THE SETTING AND THE STUDY: WELFARE REFORM IN APPALACHIAN OHIO

Data for this study are drawn primarily from in-depth, semistructured interviews with the 29 directors of Departments of Human Ser-

vices (DHS) in Appalachian Ohio. Interviews were conducted in spring 1999, halfway into the 36-month eligibility window for Ohio recipients of cash assistance.¹ The research was designed to provide qualitative data from each of the participating groups at the beginning of reform and after initial eligibility expires in order to discover the subjective meaning of these changes from both a bottom-up and a top-down perspective, rather than imputing or imposing them from above (Reinharz 1992; Schram 1995). We also draw on results from an analysis of focus groups of program participants in four counties selected for more intensive study. Details of the design of this component of the study and its results are reported more extensively in Tickamyer et al. (2000). The contrast between the differing perspectives of actors with different levels of power and responsibility are a central focus of this chapter.

Ohio makes a particularly interesting arena for studying welfare reform because devolution was taken one step further, from the state to the local level. Under a plan called Ohio Works First (OWF), the state adopted a 36-month lifetime limit for assistance and stringent work requirements for program participants. Responsibility for specific program design and implementation was devolved to the counties. County DHS directors are charged with applying reform policies in their communities and have a significant amount of authority, latitude, and flexibility in how they accomplish this task. Their agencies are also subject to sanctions if their counties are unable to meet state-imposed goals when eligibility limits expire.

Counties vary in the types of measures they have adopted, but even more in their capacity to meet the requirements of reform measures. Although most counties in the region share high levels of poverty, unemployment, and remoteness from urban centers, there is a substantial amount of variation in these measures of economic activity, and even more in less tangible factors such as sources of local social and human capital, economic development initiatives, and access to training and educational resources. Table 8.1 shows the poverty, unemployment, and median household income for the 29-county area, using the most recently available statistics at the time of data collection.

The larger study from which this chapter is drawn focuses on four “showcase” counties selected to represent areas that reflect different levels of capacity to manage welfare reform, given both the economic

Table 8.1 Poverty, Unemployment, and Median Household Income in Appalachian Ohio, by County

County	% Below poverty 1995	Unemployment rate (%), Feb. 2000	1995 Median household income (\$)
Adams	20.3	12.8	22,529
Athens	20.1	6.5	26,020
Belmont	15.7	5.9	26,337
Brown	12.1	7.7	31,324
Carroll	10.9	6.2	32,245
Clermont	7.1	4.6	40,689
Columbiana	14.0	6.3	30,139
Coshocton	11.9	7.7	29,308
Gallia	18.9	10.3	27,426
Guernsey	15.9	10.0	26,077
Harrison	15.9	8.0	24,444
Highland	12.9	5.7	27,201
Hocking	13.0	11.1	28,865
Holmes	10.6	3.3	31,786
Jackson	17.5	8.3	25,050
Jefferson	15.5	6.4	27,538
Lawrence	19.9	7.1	24,818
Meigs	21.4	14.9	23,558
Monroe	17.4	11.8	25,926
Morgan	15.7	18.3	26,458
Muskingum	14.2	8.6	29,079
Noble	14.5	12.1	27,190
Perry	16.0	10.2	26,899
Pike	19.5	11.4	26,814
Ross	15.1	6.1	30,750
Scioto	21.4	10.5	24,219
Tuscarawas	10.6	6.6	30,564
Vinton	19.1	17.1	24,530
Washington	12.3	6.7	31,127
Total	15.5	9.0	27,893

conditions in the county and less tangible resources such as sources of human and social capital available for county officials and agency personnel. In this chapter, however, we analyze the interviews conducted with all 29 of the DHS directors. With the exception of the four counties selected for closer scrutiny in the case study, the interviews were conducted by telephone by members of the project team and student assistants. In the four showcase counties, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the principal investigator. Interviews were tape recorded with permission of the DHS directors. Early in the research, equipment failure resulted in several cases without usable tapes. In each instance, however, there were at least two persons present during the session, each of whom wrote extensive notes almost immediately following the interview.

As public officials, DHS directors are not subject to the same levels of protection of anonymity and confidentiality required and desired for other populations in this study, but in requesting cooperation, we indicated that we would make every effort to report results in a manner that would focus on larger aggregate trends rather than on identifiable individuals. In general, directors were eager to assist in the project and to discuss their views. In a number of cases, DHS directors invited other staff to be present. Interviews lasted for an hour, on average. Interviews were professionally transcribed and checked against the audio tapes. Analysis is conducted via the use of NUD*IST, a qualitative data analysis program and by standard inductive approaches.

FINDINGS: VARIATIONS ON A POSITIVE THEME

On first examination, the views of the DHS directors appear to vary widely; closer inspection reveals more similarity than difference, however. In particular, DHS directors express positive views about welfare reform in general and in their communities in particular. Typical views included a favorable overall attitude about the purpose and goals of welfare reform, but not necessarily its outcomes. There was also widespread acknowledgment of the real problems facing both program participants and their human service agencies. These views combine two

sets of explanations that are often characterized as contradictory in the literature, but in this case represent a complex and multilayered understanding of the realities of poverty and welfare in their communities: they attributed blame to individuals, which often reflected “culture of poverty”² explanations, and they also recognized the significant structural barriers particularly to poor rural counties and the region. Finally, they shared mixed views of the organizational mandates of welfare reform and the implications for their agencies, with general enthusiasm reserved for potential and actual flexibility in program design and implementation.

We examine each of these in detail and compare these views with those expressed by program participants. Not surprisingly, we find a very different orientation among the two groups. We conclude with an overview of how top and bottom perspectives provide different windows on the prospects for successful welfare reform policy.

Attitudes about Welfare Reform

The DHS directors generally expressed positive views about welfare reform. In the 29 counties, only one director could be classified as unsupportive, and it might be argued that this judgment is more a reflection of political views that favor a more drastic curtailment of welfare than of disapproval of reform efforts per se. This individual is very much alone in both a strong expression of partisan ideology and in failure to express support for reform. Another seven directors (24 percent) could be classified as expressing some degree of skepticism about reform, but this was the dominant opinion for only two of these officials. The other five combined skepticism with general support. Support was strong and unconditional among the remaining directors.

Typical comments about the positive aspects of welfare reform include large drops in caseloads; the opportunity to encourage a positive work ethic, increase in self-esteem, and independence among recipients; reduction in public burden or responsibility and expense; the end of what they termed “generational poverty”; and the opportunity to generate public support for public assistance given that welfare is no longer seen as an inducement to sloth and dependency in public opinion. The idea that public opinion is changing looms large in many of the directors’ assessments:

I think there's a general perception, "[H]ey, you guys are finally doing something right down there." You know, I think people want to see the quid pro quo. People are employable. That we're getting ourselves and them off our butts and doing something about it. So yeah, I think there's generally a positive impact from the community.

I think the American people . . . after all the bad publicity . . . [have a] very bad conception that all they do is stay at home and make more babies . . . If you look at the facts . . . you know that doesn't hold true, but this whole vision . . . of our welfare population . . . became a political hot potato and obviously something had to be done and . . . they've come up with a workable solution . . .

Negative comments mainly take the form of skepticism about the ultimate success of the efforts and the political will of policymakers whose support is necessary.

So what can happen—worse-case scenario—recession comes along, our rolls go up, our money has been depleted or taken away for education reform or other things, then, worse-case scenario, welfare reform has failed . . . When it's all said and done, if all those worse-case scenario factors would come into play, we could be in the same position we were three years ago.

There was no apparent pattern in the degree of support among directors. The only overtly oppositional view was expressed by a director from one of the better-off counties. The seven skeptics represented some of the poorest and some of the more affluent counties. Similarly, directors' backgrounds seem to matter little. In part, this reflects lack of variation in this population. Although their education varies from little more than a high school diploma to several with graduate work or degrees, in other respects they seem more similar than different. They are usually from the region and are long-time, often life-long, residents of their communities. They have worked in this or similar agencies for many years and have numerous local attachments that give them deep roots and civic prominence. They are also white and, unlike their employees, predominantly male. In general, this group of officials is locally oriented and somewhat insulated from experience beyond their counties and the state of Ohio.

This combination of local boosterism and insularity was highly ev-

ident in their response to the question of how their county is doing compared with others, resulting in the broad assessment of “above average,” regardless of where their county stands on objective measures. Ohio also is seen as doing better than other states. These views are widely held, despite a realistic assessment of the problems that face their communities, agencies, and clients.

Problems of Welfare Reform

Favorable views about welfare reform do not preclude candid assessment of the problems facing both recipients and their agencies. Themes that emerge from their evaluations range across a broad array of practical problems, including deficits in both individual characteristics and local opportunity structure. The former include numerous attitude and character issues attributed to recipients, such as lack of work ethic, lack of interest in education, substance abuse, domestic violence, and passive acceptance of “generational poverty.”

One of the challenges that we have with the hard-to-serve ones which we currently have is basic skills such as personal hygiene, working your full eight hours each day. We’ve had people just walk off the job without telling the supervisor where they’re going or not reporting to work in the morning.

Structural issues that were widely and repeatedly mentioned include inadequate transportation, child care, health care, poor educational facilities, and a general lack of infrastructure and economic development. The problems that emerge with greatest frequency are a recognition of the serious transportation problems facing even the most dedicated welfare-to-work participants and concerns about the quantity and quality of jobs, especially if the economy were to falter.

The problem now is do we have enough jobs? Is the economy gonna be strong? Will it weaken or will it be [sic], if it does and we go back down and lose a step or two because never in the history has the country been in better shape.

These concerns are mentioned often both as stand-alone issues and as particular vulnerabilities of rural location, political isolation, and regional development issues.

This is a region in the state that needs economic development . . . They need health care. They need roads . . . I think we're one of the few counties that does not have a four-lane highway . . . I don't think they really address the needs of the Appalachian area when they come up with these policies . . .

These views mirror the larger policy and academic debates about individual, cultural, and structural approaches to explaining poverty and welfare use, except that they are not held as alternative views or "moral practices" (Hasenfeld 2000) but are held concurrently. Recipients are blamed for lacking a work ethic, being "generationally" dependent on welfare, suffering personal deficits in motivation and education, and being victim and perpetrator of a variety of abuses from substance abuse to domestic violence. At the same time, directors are quick to recognize strengths in their clients that surface in the face of structural adversity, including lack of jobs and all the support services necessary to maintain steady employment, from lack of transportation to lack of teeth. Virtually all variations on these themes can be found in these interviews, most often simultaneously by the same individuals. In other words, the same director will blame Appalachian culture both for promoting and overcoming poverty and adversity, criticize recipients for their personal problems and simultaneously acknowledge structural barriers. These are not seen as either/or phenomena but rather are rolled into sometimes contradictory, generally more complex, multilayered views, as the comments below reveal.

They are facing many barriers be it education, drug or alcohol abuse and it is quite costly to get 'em to the point where they are . . . employable. One thing is the local job market. What we're looking at, I really hate to say it, but what we're looking is transporting our people [out] of the county.

And so we've got these essentially, I don't want to say dysfunctional, but sort of aberrant family patterns that have emerged, and if we're gonna get anywhere with that, then we need to get to some of the root causes . . . We got the rural cultural orientation that we have to do there, and I think that's gonna take a real concerted effort to get it . . .

I think willingness to work has a lot do with opportunity, and I think personal responsibility, I mean I think in general, . . . Ameri-

ca's, you know, sort of evolving this, "I don't want to take responsibility for myself, you caused my problem." I don't think that's something that just goes along with poor people, so that could be a social problem that we face in the broader scale . . . I don't think we had a real work ethic problem with a lot of people. I think what we did, I mean, surviving is work when you're poor. Some of the most industrious people I've ever met in my life have been on public assistance or SSI, but they were very industrious about keeping themselves and their family alive. They just didn't get paid or recognize that as work.

I just know that in this particular part of the country, in Appalachia, I know there's been a real sense of folks taking care of one another, and I don't know about the extended family anymore.

When DHS directors' views are compared with those of the recipients they serve, there is a large discrepancy in the relative seriousness of and frequency that certain problems are mentioned. For example, child care is critical in the minds of recipients (Tickamyer et al. 2000) but is seen as much less important by DHS directors. Although directors mention child care issues, they are more likely to think that this problem is relatively easily solved as they increase efforts to train and certify local child care providers. Issues of quality and access to child care are mentioned repeatedly by recipients but dismissed by most directors or seen as exaggerations or rationalizations of compliance failure.

The use of sanctions ranks low on DHS director horizons; they perceive that they are used judiciously and only after following elaborate rules that guide their application. Sanctions, however, loom large for recipients, who are vocal in their resentment of a sanction system that seems irrational, capricious, and personal. Similarly, while both worry about the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, recipients are more focused on managing what they see as competing responsibilities of caring for children and other dependents than on employment. Directors dismiss these concerns as either failures to develop a realistic work ethic or cultural aberrations associated with class and region.

As a corollary, directors are much more concerned about immediate and long-term prospects of employment for welfare recipients than the recipients themselves; recipients want to work but are more likely to worry about the necessary tradeoffs, such as their families' safety. In

some cases, they have traded jobs in urban areas for their child's security in smaller rural communities. Directors worry about the economy; recipients darkly predict dire consequences for law and order, child custody, and their own fates should a recession occur (Tickamyer et al. 2000). A couple of directors echo recipient predictions of social problems and unrest in the event of economic downturn, but these are the exceptions, and even among these, concerns focus more on problems for administrators (security of the agency and increased caseloads for agencies and courts) rather than recipients. Only transportation problems are accorded equal levels of concern by both groups.

The Bottom 20 Percent

The means by which directors reconcile their seemingly contradictory views appear to be through making sharp distinctions among the clients that they serve. Teles (1998, pp. 183–184) divides the welfare universe into five groups: “those receiving aid while working off the books; those eligible for aid but not receiving it; those who are ‘job ready’ and using welfare on a very temporary basis; those with poor work histories but capable of training for low-wage jobs; and those who are dysfunctional for physical, mental, psychological, or emotional reasons.” Welfare-to-work programs can have a substantial impact on members of the first three groups, providing means to find employment under current economic conditions. It is only the last two groups that require massive effort and investment of time and resources, with little prospect of success in a purely market economy.

Although few DHS directors apply such fine distinctions to their clients, they de facto adopt this view in their assessment of welfare reform prospects. Their analysis tends to distinguish program participants into those who really only need some form of temporary assistance—whether it is job training, transportation, or health care assistance—and a smaller group of more problem-prone individuals who have serious physical, mental, or family barriers to finding and keeping jobs. As one director elaborates,

[A]nd some of those are just, you know, just had bad luck and are ready and . . . need assistance, and we try to assist them into getting them jobs and so forth. But there are those ones who . . . just

don't want to work . . . Mama and dad didn't do it and so I'm not going to do it. It's habit that they have formed in their . . . lifestyles.

Similarly,

So, I think because some of the people, especially the few that we have left on are kind of generational welfare and that's exactly the people we have left on pretty much, people that their parents were on and . . . the system's always been there for 'em and now we're saying you need to become self-sufficient, you need to work and we'll give you the supporting services. It's not a message that some of these people want to hear.

We're always going to have that group . . . the 20 percent that just aren't going to be successful . . .

By law, 20 percent of the welfare population can be exempted from federal and state mandates that the majority of welfare recipients leave the rolls by the end of the 36-month eligibility period, backed up with the threat of sanctions if this quota is not met. This analysis has the effect of diminishing the significance of real structural barriers and elevating an explanation that stresses the importance of individual failure as the ultimate source of problems. This has the somewhat paradoxical effect of providing issues that directors feel more able to influence and, simultaneously, a built-in excuse for failure if their best efforts do not work. Even directors who are most aware of the lack of living-wage jobs, the poor prospects for economic development, and the failures of infrastructure and institution-building in their communities resort to a moral analysis that emphasizes the individual's personal problems by differentiating between the potentially successful versus the bottom 20 percent.

“Lead Them by the Hand”

In many cases, the focus on individuals is expressed in highly paternalistic images that reflect concern with the depth of problems that remain in the welfare population. One director states,

[I]t's just the folks that we're dealing with now, many, many barriers. They don't know how to get out of it themselves so you have to lead them by the hand to get through these issues and work

them one at a time . . . it's almost like taking a small child and trying to teach it how to walk or talk . . .

The analogy to rearing children was elaborated by another director:

This kind of intervention we've seen over and over again if you have the patience and the understanding . . . it's kind of like raising your children. I don't mean to be derogatory about that, but you don't just tell your children to do this and they do it right from that point, that's constantly overseeing them and reminding them and encouraging them . . .

Others provide elaborate anecdotes that illustrate the same perspective. Rather than invoking the simplified rational choice model favored by policymakers, directors adopt an alternative model that accepts the premise of requiring personal responsibility on the part of recipients, while believing in the necessity of significant interventions before such responsibility can be expected. Their view leads them to assume responsibility for intensive intervention to manage clients who are not fully able to take responsibility for themselves.

Organizational Changes

The key to DHS directors' views lies more in their response to organizational changes and mandates of welfare reform than in their assessment of prospects for success or failure among clients and program participants. Perhaps not surprisingly for administrators of large agencies (which vary from fewer than 50 employees to close to 200), their concerns are much more focused on how welfare reform is organized, managed, and implemented than on the clientele that it serves. Both in spontaneous remarks and in response to interview questions, directors were most likely to raise issues that affect their organizations, their jobs, and their resources.

A consistent theme is the changing nature of the tasks confronting the agencies and their personnel:

We need to go far beyond simply determine eligibility and, and sitting down and taking re-applications from the individuals.

[W]e went from an agency that gave services based on income eligibility to helping people become self-sufficient through other means. So it was like a total change for not only our recipients but for our staff, too.

[Y]ou know, you're more of a social worker now and you don't really focus so much on getting a person a check . . . but you're doing a lot of this other hand-holding and mentoring with the people.

Flexibility

Although numerous sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction were mentioned by directors, the strongest and most consistent theme running through the interviews was the idea that welfare reform provides increased flexibility for them and their agencies. This was expressed in a variety of ways, from describing particular program innovations that they had implemented to larger philosophical statements about the changing nature of the agencies, the new ways they would have to serve clients, and the new populations they might serve. Directors praised the end of a “cookie cutter approach” and were particularly enthusiastic about the reduction of rule-oriented procedures.

We went from a system that was so totally irrational, it was a system of dotting i's and crossing t's and filling out forms without any real regard to what the end game was, what we really wanted to accomplish, and that was to help people become independent.

[W]hat I think welfare reform was all about [is] when we started talking about devolving and bringing the programs back to the local level and letting the local communities be responsible to identify what the needs are and how we go about addressing those needs. One of the greatest barriers before welfare reform, and one of the greatest reasons that I think brought us to the need to reform welfare, was what I call mid-level bureaucracy. You know, you have the federal bureaucracy or national bureaucracy, and you have the state-level bureaucracy, and then you have the local bureaucracy, who actually implements or administering the program. In the past, we had 75,000 paragraphs of rules and regulations and interpretations, and these things always came out of that mid-level . . .

Flexibility brings its own problems, however:

But, my biggest problem is . . . I know that there's all these things out there that all these counties are doing, and you know the county flexibility is great, but trying to keep up with what everybody else is doing . . . and what's working for them.

Funds

Flexibility also went hand in hand with increased resources and greater ability to spend money when deemed necessary, especially to find the funds to create new programs and approaches.

For probably the first time in the nine years that I've been here . . . we have the adequate funding to do what we need.

We went from never being able to spend money on much anything . . . so now they're saying spend all you want, if you need more call us, we'll get it to ya . . . I think that's the hardest thing for me. I still want to pinch pennies and I don't need to anymore.

[T]his year we chose to have consolidated allocations . . . and we'll choose what meets the needs of our community best and we'll spend the money which every way we feel we need to rather than having this little tiny pots of money everywhere and having to meet the criteria to each one that's attached to each one of those pots.

Somewhat to our surprise, with one or two exceptions, directors stated that amount of money was no problem, even though they generally pointed out that the reform effort and the mandate to move recipients into employment was more expensive in both the short and long run.

[I]f the taxpayer actually knew what we were trying to do . . . they would be appalled at the . . . actual expense . . . versus just leaving clients sit on public assistance.

Using the money was sometimes seen as problematic, however.

I guess the big problem we've had here is cash flow because we have to spend the money before we get the money.

Sanctions

It is in this area, sanctions, that the most interesting parallels can be found between DHS directors and program participants. In particular, directors express some of the same fears of sanctions as recipients, but directors' fears center on the apparent irrationality of sanctions. Thus, directors worry about meeting state numerical goals or quotas or the economic sanctions that will result if they are unable to meet ex-

pectations, and they often view the state as an irrationally organized, or disorganized, bureaucracy that they must successfully negotiate in order to run their own agencies.

[T]he drawback is . . . the sanctions. What if we can't meet all these participation rates or all the requirements that we have to. Any sort of a sanction against a small county like mine would basically bankrupt us.

[A]nd of course if you don't meet the goal as a state, you get sanctioned from the federal government, which amounts to having money withdrawn, and the state, of course, would turn around and probably—this hasn't happened yet—but probably what they'll do is they'll look for counties who have low—lower than 90 percent—participation rate and spread the sanction across those counties . . . And, you know, we're kind of at a disadvantage down here 'cause I think our last unemployment figure was 11 percent.

The difference is that the directors understand the sanction system and what they must do to avoid them. Recipients do not, a circumstance that is understood by only a very few directors:

I see that the clients don't really understand fully the impact of time limits, nor do they really fully understand the fact that they need to take responsibility for the position that they're in at this point and time, and they end up wanting to blame the, you know, the agencies or the systems for why they are being punished or sanctioned.

CONCLUSION: IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

Directors of human service agencies responsible for implementing welfare reform share the values that drove the reform effort, but they do not fully subscribe to the underlying behavioral model. Rather, they substitute an interventionist and paternalistic approach that emphasizes the need for their services. Like both the elites who created the policy and the recipients whose lives are its ultimate test, they accept the values of work, personal responsibility, and family values. They agree with the impulse that carried reform legislation to its successful pas-

sage. They endorse the idea that the old system was broken. However, their analyses of the reasons for failure are more complex and, hence, so are their views on the prospects for success. They generally reject simple, polarized models of individual responsibility versus structural impediments. They are well aware of many of the barriers their clients face, and they are often deeply pessimistic about long-range prospects given their rural location, lack of jobs, lack of infrastructure, and lack of political interest on the part of policymakers to address these issues.

This knowledge is contradicted by their actions, however, which are oriented toward fixing the individual problems that clients face. Directors are all too aware that they are dealing with a larger structural issue, endemic to the region, but it is beyond their power to do anything at this level. Thus, they are constrained to addressing even large-scale structural problems on an individual basis, case by case. For example, the large and pervasive problem of transportation that affects virtually every county and most program participants can only be addressed by band-aid interventions of small loans for vehicle purchase or repair, or by providing temporary or emergency taxi and shuttle services. Interventions are designed to make participants “work ready.” Much of it is focused on instilling work discipline, from knowing how to get up on time to proper dress and hygiene. In the worst case, the most that the agency can do is threaten and sanction with little backup assistance. Directors’ hands are tied in this respect. They can institute individual interventions more so than structural changes.

Perhaps because of their awareness of the real restrictions on their ability to make meaningful changes at a structural level, or perhaps because they are administrators whose interest centers on the operation of their organizations, they reserve their greatest enthusiasm for the expanded opportunities and material benefits that have accrued to their organizations as the result of reform. They particularly relish the increased flexibility, autonomy, and material resources. They appreciate the loosening of bureaucratic rules, and it may be argued that the greatest benefit they perceive is a reduction in state paternalism governing their operation. In bringing devolution to the counties, the state has given them a freer environment to design programs and use resources in a manner that seems meaningful to the directors.

Ironically, at the same time that directors have experienced expanded authority and autonomy, the same cannot be said of program partic-

ipants. Directors appear unaware that the same oppressive bureaucratic structures, rules, regulations, and red tape that they resent are, in the opinion of program participants, applied with increasing pressure and lack of clear purpose. Program participants lack understanding of the parameters of welfare reform and particularly fail to see the logic of sanctions (Tickamyer et al. 2000). They perceive these as capricious and irrational obstacles in much the same way that overly regulated, overly rule-oriented bureaucratic policies appear to the directors. The larger policy calls on recipients to take responsibility for their lives, to move away from a system of dependency to one of self-sufficiency, yet programs are designed in a highly paternalistic fashion, and the general assumption is that clients are incapable of making judgments or decisions for themselves; instead, interventions must be designed to “lead them by the hand.” Although agencies will work intensively with clients to deal with their problems, it does not occur to directors to solicit participant views or to include them in planning efforts for designing and implementing reform programs.

Interestingly enough, many directors do recognize that successful welfare reform must be a community-wide effort. They discuss the responsibilities of county officials, local employers, and the public at large. They speak proudly of mobilizing their communities in the planning process in the first stage of their efforts. They know there are few quick fixes, and although they are optimistic and appreciative of some of the aspects of welfare reform, they are realistic enough to know that the larger issues take a community effort, at the very least.

What’s gonna be the solution to their problem a year from now when cash benefits go away? . . . I guess I’d like to see a little more fire in the belly and aggressiveness out in the community, and I’m trying to instigate that . . . I think that just increasing the awareness of the public that this is a long-term problem, not a little three-year fix, and we all got to pull together to get something done about it . . . It really does take a community strategy to take care of each other . . .

What they have yet to fully incorporate into their thinking is that recipients are part of the community, and their input and cooperation are also required.

Notes

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1. The interviews are one phase of a multiyear, case comparative study of devolution and welfare reform in poor rural counties of Appalachian Ohio. In subsequent developments, the agencies reported in this research have been reorganized and renamed to include job and family services. Other components of the study include existing statistics and primary data collection from focus groups, surveys, and in-depth interviews with employers, human service agency personnel, and local decision-makers.
2. Greatly simplified, the culture of poverty assumes that the poor become purveyors of deviant values, attitudes, and behaviors that perpetuate their poverty. This "culture of poverty" differs from the mainstream and is transmitted intergenerationally.

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Part 3

Employment and Family Well-Being under Welfare Reform

Rural Dimensions of Welfare Reform

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