
From Income Support to Child & Family Support: Some Rather Surprising Consequences of National Welfare Reform

By Thomas Corbett

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act has accelerated policy and management trends that are transforming public assistance. One group of senior welfare administrators from the seven upper Midwest states—the Midwest Welfare Assistance Network or WELPAN—has made culture change a major issue since federal welfare reform became a reality. In recent years, welfare culture change typically has involved a shift in focus from income support to work and self sufficiency. Currently WELPAN sees further shifts toward concerns about family and community functioning, particularly the well-being of children. The chapter thinks through the nature of culture change in the present and how past reform themes contribute to change in the present. The chapter takes a look into the future and speculates on where we might be headed. The final part presents real examples of how states and localities are transforming the culture of welfare reform from income support to child and family support.

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

In the three years since its passage, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) has accelerated policy and management trends that are transforming public assistance in this country. When applicants typically interact with a welfare-type agency, they encounter a set of expectations, procedures, attitudes and environmental cues—in short, the “culture” of the agency, which defines the character of the program administered through the agency.

One group of senior welfare administrators from the seven upper Midwest states—the Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance Network or WELPAN—has made culture change a major issue and concern in the three years since federal welfare reform became a reality in 1996.

Transforming the entire culture of an organization, which in turn changes the character of the program, typically begins with a restatement of the program’s mission. But that is just the beginning. Often, it requires alteration of agency structure, operations, and ambience in ways that completely reshape the experiences of participants. True culture change ultimately informs participant decisions and informs their fundamental behaviors. In recent years, welfare culture change typically has involved a shift in focus from income support, often measured by payment accuracy, to work and self-sufficiency. Currently, we see further shifts toward concerns about family and community functioning, and particularly the well-being of children.

Creating culture change in the welfare arena does not dictate the type of program you will have. In fact, culture change has had very different outcomes in past decades. However, recently emerging program cultures have reflected, in many cases, mutual responsibility between the participant and the agency that is focused on self-sufficiency and other mainstream behaviors and values.

For workers in the field, culture change typically examines attitudes, values, philosophies, staff roles, and the need to continuously upgrade knowledge and skills. For participants, culture change can mean assuming personal responsibility, committing to job preparation, identifying necessary resources such as child care and child support payments, taking advantage of work opportunities, and assertively working to become part of mainstream society. For members of the larger community, it may require rethinking stereotypical views of welfare and welfare recipients and more active involvement in addressing the issues of low-income and disadvantaged families.

How Does Our Past Shape Our Current Direction?

We cannot really grasp where we are going until we better understand our past. Likewise, we cannot create a vision of where we want to be until we appreciate where we have been. We change a system's culture because we sense fundamental flaws in how it is designed and managed. This section explores the nature of welfare, the flaws that emerged and became increasingly evident, and how social assistance for poor families evolved over time. All these issues offer important clues about the current push for change.

Changes in welfare systems in recent years seem to represent qualitative, not incremental, change. The core concern with Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) has been the real or imagined negative effects on behavior at the individual, family and community levels. Consequently, behavior change at all these levels is replacing income support as the primary purpose under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Emerging policies under the new philosophy seem less directed at ensuring certain outcomes—having a minimal level of economic resources—and more oriented toward facilitating full participation in the opportunities society offers, and perhaps also remedying areas where private markets and systems fall short.

New welfare policies are now expected to solve societal issues including everything from poverty and unwise fertility decisions to family instability and poor parenting. New programs seek to facilitate connections between those isolated from mainstream society and institutions that can help them achieve full potential. Programs appear to refocus, from what is wrong with people, to what they can achieve with a little assistance.

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

As summarized in Table 1, the early decades of federal welfare for families focused on the children, particularly how government could help women raise their own children. The cash assistance was important, but secondary to the broader goal of helping mothers be mothers. Local jurisdictions helped “fit” or “good” mothers raise their children better. The War-on-Poverty era, which also included what we have called the “social service” strategy for reforming assistance, built upon the basic culture of assistance in those early decades. The relationship between worker and client was intense and personal. Social service workers cajoled, counseled, and used a variety of casework techniques to ensure the proper stewardship of the family.

During the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, an “income definition” of poverty emerged, with the solution being to correct the income shortfall in a simple, efficient, and standardized manner. Economists moved to the forefront of policy development. Services were separated from cash assistance. Flat grants were introduced, instead of individualized budgets. Lawyers joined the economists, and client protections were strengthened. AFDC became an entitlement, with benefits based almost solely on categorical status (single parenthood) and economic need. Much of the machinery from the earlier era was dismantled. Government no longer tried to change people, except for changes that could be obtained through altering economic incentives.

In entitlement programs, the efficiency principle predominates - provide benefits in a simple, standardized way without conditions. “Check-issuing” approaches to helping low-income people are easily routinized, making them easier to design and operate.

A strictly income-based solution to child poverty, particularly solutions coming out of Washington D.C., were under serious attack by the late 1970s. By the early 1980s, a new paradigm had emerged. Explanations for poverty shifted once again toward the individual (behavioral dysfunction) and away from institutional factors, such as market failures. The locus of action shifted to the states. Slowly at first, and then more quickly, state-sponsored welfare demonstrations began. Under the slogan of the “new social contract,” the basic welfare structure that prevailed as recently as 20 years before was partially restored.

Table 1. Reform Goals

The Early Decades:

The “Family Saving” Era
mother’s pensions
moralistic era
local discretion permitted

The 1960s:

The “War on Poverty” Era
community empowerment
human capital

Early “Dependency Reduction” Era
counseling/social work
labor market attachment
labor demand enhancement

The 1970s:

Improving Economic Well-being
welfare entitlements
earnings supplements

The Parental Responsibility Goal
child support enforcement

The 1980s:

Enhance Family Formation/Stability
Reduce Teen and Nonmarital Births
Moving Beyond Work
Learnfare and such

The 1990s:

Enhance Family Functioning/Parenting
The Extended Family Goal
bring the father back

2000 and Beyond:

Saving the Children (the next generation perspective)

But for the past decade or two, we have been recreating aspects of the earliest welfare system, applying these technologies to bold new objectives. We have retied morality, behavior, and a concern with the quality of parenting and family to welfare. Work remains the major goal, but increasingly as a way of stabilizing families and improving the discipline and focus of the adult caregivers. In effect, we have attached all the complexity and ambition inherent in the early welfare programs back into contemporary policies.

But most of all, we have returned to local control, with all the risks and rewards inherent in such a concept. On one hand, we have enormous potential for innovation and entrepreneurship. On the other, we have variation across agencies and even among workers.

What Cultural Changes Are Occurring?

It appears that what we call the culture of an institution is becoming increasingly important. The following table lays out the attributes that characterize the new forms of social provision, and compare them with earlier ways of organizing and operating welfare programs.

Table 2. Emerging Attributes

<u>Traditional Attributes</u>	<u>Emerging Attributes</u>
focus on benefits -----	focus on behavior
autonomous agency -----	collaborative agency
unidimensional -----	complex and multipurpose
agency-dominated interactions ---	participant-initiated interactions
top-down communications -----	peer-to-peer communications
autonomous staff -----	teams/collaborative staff
rule-oriented -----	worker discretion
data-oriented -----	people-oriented
ameliorating problems -----	preventing problems
limited target populations -----	broader target populations
treating all participants alike -----	personalized treatment
process-oriented -----	outcome oriented
static operations -----	dynamic operations
point-in-time concept -----	point-in-process concept

Ten years ago, the target groups of interest were limited mainly to adult recipients, though on occasion the children might receive some attention. The worker-client interaction tended to be uniform, episodic, and routine. Recipients were viewed primarily as providers of data, workers viewed themselves as passive data collectors. The basic recipient-worker relationship was often marked by distrust and suspicion. Personal involvement with recipients was discouraged because it might interfere with the primary agency mission of payment accuracy, which was the only factor measured and rewarded through the Quality Control system. Typically, no one asked applicant families about their problems, strengths, or strategies for moving into society's mainstream. The primary program function was to separate the eligible from the non-eligible.

Thus, the dominant program philosophy was characterized by process and bureaucracy. At the extreme, local agency and worker discretion was severely constrained by the introduction of automated welfare case management systems in the late 1970s. During this period, a signature event in Wisconsin was the creation of the Computer Reporting Network, which was an automated case management system that radically centralized decision making. Important program rules were built into the system, and the manuals were rewritten to translate all discretion into clear-cut binary decisions: if the situation is A, you must do X, if it is B, you must do Y.

In the old system "...everything was eligibility oriented, the emphasis was on meeting the needs of the system to document eligibility under the rules, not to meet the needs of the individual. The mission of the old system was to treat everyone equally and to make sure that each applicant received all of the benefits, and only the benefits they were entitled to, under the law." - Mary Ann Cook, Dane County, Wisconsin

The emerging paradigm is new and, at the same time, very old. The program challenge is to encourage and facilitate positive behaviors. Where possible, counterproductive behaviors, such as dependency, are to be discouraged and prevented. The emerging systems have varied and multiple purposes, such as work, marriage, responsible parenting, that include multiple targets, including parents, children and non-custodial parents. Complex, behavior-focused programs tend to be dynamic and longitudinal, based on change over time, not static systems in which each month is an independent accounting period. New programs tend to be so multi-dimensional and individualized that workers must adopt professional norms eschewing bureaucratic rules. In turn, the organizational forms in which the workers function are transformed, becoming less hierarchical. Communication between workers becomes more collaborative and less top-down. Agency boundaries become more gray as interagency agreements and one-stop agency models emerge.

At the heart of the issue is the idea that individual workers, teams of workers, and institutional partnerships will tackle the most difficult of society's problems together. Programs no longer will be executing policies, but will be creating policies. They will no longer be functionaries, but rather professionals. They will no longer dwell on symptoms, but will work on creating fundamental cures. Rather than ignoring the most difficult cases, they will be engaging the most troubled families in creative ways.

One of the things I know is the signage is different. There's not a sign that says this is the Department of Welfare. All our signage says that this is the Division of Family and Children. Almost every bulletin board in every waiting room that you go in the 92 county departments, you see notices about employment and jobs. You always see the question, "What can we do to help?" "Where is it that I might help you?" There's the real change... - Thurl Snell, Indiana

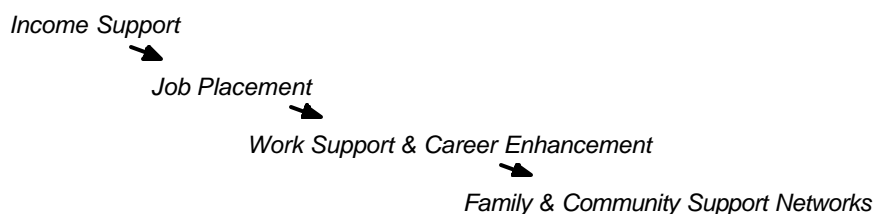
Given the new mission, the population of interest can no longer be defined in narrow, categorical terms. More often these new missions strive to meld the traditional AFDC/TANF population of women and children into the broader community that includes, for example, all low-income workers.

Where are We Going: Peering into the Future

If you're just looking at the employable adults, you're not looking at the whole dynamics that we set up a family for success or perhaps (for) failure and return to welfare. What we want to be able to do is also focus within that family on prevention. That could be teen pregnancy prevention, juvenile crime prevention, some of those adolescent risk factors—helping those kids to stay in school and stay engaged in school. Hopefully, that will lead to graduation and to the world of work for the children themselves. - Shirley Iverson, Oregon

There are clues to the future that can be seen in the changes that have already taken place in the brief existence of national welfare reform. Table 3 lays out a set of changes that, in part at least, are taking place.

Table 3. Primary Program Purposes



At a simple level, these changes are easy to describe. Programs clearly moved from income transfer systems to job placement systems. But that process did not end there. Getting a person into a job was not enough. The early “leavers” studies suggested that, while most of those who left cash assistance were working at jobs above the minimum wage, their labor market attachment seemed tenuous. For some, the real work was just beginning when a person got a job. And as active cash assistance caseloads collapsed, those that remained were challenging, requiring completely new service approaches and resource investments.

Income Support. Between the early 1970s and the early 1990s, cash welfare was clearly an income support program. While work obligations had been attached to welfare since the 1960s, they were not seriously applied until the Family Support Act of 1988, or even later in many cases. The transition from income support to a work orientation took many years and much debate to complete.

Job Placement. Once the transition to a work orientation was complete, agencies focused on job placement goals. In just five years, from early 1994 to 1999, caseloads have fallen from 15 million to 6.9 million - an extraordinary success. Yet, this success has almost immediately raised a new set of concerns. How are new entrants into the labor market sustained and nurtured? How can their career progression and earnings growth be enhanced?

The very fact that we're doing all the welfare delivery system inside a one-stop job center conveys the message to the recipient that this is why they come here. They don't come here for welfare; they're coming here to get a job...In terms of notices, the idea of getting a job, being successful in job search is the primary message we send to participants. Throughout the job center, the “expect success” motto is very prominent. --Larry Jankowski, Kenosha County, Wisconsin

Work Support. Agencies are now grappling with work-based and work-focused strategies, shifting from a focus on the non-working poor to the working poor. Job placement agencies are moving from a job placement perspective to a work support and career enhancement perspective. This shift is challenging and contains significant implications for agencies and workers. How do you engage customers who are working and may no longer see what was welfare as useful? Do you need to develop new types of relationships with the private sector? Must you develop non-traditional office hours, evenings and weekends? Should you place office sites out in the community, where the employees can be found?

I think what's on the horizon right now is a great adventure around our working clients. They could be working and receiving employment-related day care, or they could be in the food stamp program. We're looking at how to build retention activities so they will keep their jobs....and use the skills they learn on their first placement to get the next better job. How can we provide...those skills that the employer wants for a promotion or again that wage enhancement piece? That's what I see as exciting. - Shirley Iverson, Oregon

Family and Community Support. Another immediate set of challenges involve the remaining cases who are still on welfare roles, who tend to be very hard to serve because of multiple barriers to employment. In addition, other needs that never could be addressed in the era of income transfers and high caseloads now become manageable. Suddenly, some agency workers who think along the lines of work support agencies are already engaged in planning for what it will take to redefine themselves as family and community support entities.

Today's former welfare agency staffers are dealing with child welfare issues, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, education issues, health care and mental health care, crime and delinquency, and a host of personal, family, and community issues. Activities are focused on children doing their homework, youth making the difficult transition to adulthood, communities struggling with identity and empowerment issues. All of these concerns were not part of welfare agencies since at least the 1960s.

Our GOAL in doing this is to take the best of what our child welfare system has to offer. In terms of understanding the importance of inter-familial dynamics and the things that happen in families that affect a family's well-being and the safety of children and link that to the best that we have in our self-sufficiency program, including the importance of getting work, of completing an education, of being able to take care of one's own family. We're talking about...dealing with families in a very holistic and strength-based way. - Barbara Drake, El Paso County, Colorado

Yet another transformation may take place shortly. The point is that change is now endemic. It will not come from the top down, but will emerge in agencies across the country. Culture change is becoming a process, not an event.

What Changes Are Still Likely to Occur?

What we already see may only be a small reflection of what will be. The explosion of innovation and entrepreneurship have been remarkable. But what is still to come? ...to work with families in a much broader context is to recognize that we don't want to create dependency, we want to help them use their strengths to be as self-sufficient as possible and to support them in many different ways; through work, through child care, through helping them realize their own potential. - Lynda Crandall, Michigan

This list captures dimensions of change and evolution. They are not necessarily listed in order of importance:

* **Getting the question right.** The future may see the organizing principle of social assistance move away from strategies to one of ultimate purpose. What was welfare is not about income support, not about getting a job, not even about self-sufficiency. We may be seeing a return to original purposes-nurturing and raising competent and healthy children. Economic well-being, work, and family stability are interim measures of success with respect to this ultimate goal.

* **Shifting from individual to institutional entitlements.** The individual cash assistance entitlement has shifted to a state entitlement of a flat amount of federal dollars. The future may see a further flow of dollars percolate down to the local and community levels.

* **Shifting from “solutions at the center” to “solutions at the front lines.”** Washington can collect and distribute money efficiently, but it cannot run social service interventions very well. Authority and real decision-making will not stop at the state level, but will drift downward to counties and local communities, then perhaps neighborhoods. In some respects, real authority will ultimately rest with the professionalism of the worker or case management team.

* **Universality, or less targeting.** Targeting created perverse incentives, since there was always the temptation to change behavior or circumstances to gain access to benefits. If program or agency services are generally available to the broader community, there is less need to bend one's situation to fit program requirements. No need to have a child, leave a child's mother, lose a job, or hide the fact one is working. In addition, there is apparent advantage to merging disadvantaged people into programs and agencies designed to serve the entire community, as is done in comprehensive job centers.

* **Replicating the real world.** Another way to say less targeting is to treat poor people as everyone is treated. Raise expectations, rather than lowering the bar. If you treat the non-working poor differently and better than the working poor, troublesome signals are sent to the community that can generate antagonism and opposition to poverty programs.

* **Decoupling transitional supports, including child support.** Welfare used to be a passport to an array of services and programs, from child care subsidies to free help with child support to education and training support. Programs are now decoupling these forms of assistance from welfare status for reasons of fairness and to reduce the incentive to become dependent in order to access other programs.

* **Promoting community responsibility.** Reform is increasingly seen as a community responsibility, with employers, service vendors, volunteer groups, and faith-based communities all playing an important role. Government used to have a monopoly on providing social assistance. It is likely to remain the responsible authority, but much more is expected from non-profits and even for-profits. The best programs are viewed as ones where an environment of cooperation and competition exists, at least to some degree.

How Are States and Localities Transforming the Culture of Welfare Programs?

Many people see TANF as welfare by another name, even if it is more work-oriented. It still includes guarantees, sanctions, accounting periods, and marginal tax rates. People continue to focus on the income transfer functions that have dominated the welfare debate for 30 to 35 years. But those on the frontlines sense the profound changes taking place in communities across the country. At a Welfare Peer Assistance Network (WELPAN) meeting in 1998, one member paused during the discussion and mused, “You know, we are not talking about welfare anymore, are we?”

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When a **Wisconsin** mother with small children needs help, she doesn’t go to a welfare agency. She goes to a Job Center or workforce development center. She may go into a government agency, non-profit, or for-profit, depending on where she lives. In many areas, the agency is a network of vendors that weaves together many services to help all members of the community into the mainstream. This is not far removed from the European movement of social inclusion, with the primary purpose of the safety net to ensure that all members have a chance at full participation in the economy and in conventional family and social institutions. Increasingly, we see Wisconsin agencies focus on issues of personal, family, and community dysfunction— domestic violence, teen pregnancy and education, parenting, and progression into the labor market.

On the south side of **Chicago**, in the community once dominated by the notorious Robert Taylor Homes, young mothers meet and discuss their lives as part of the Pathways Program, a structured program to help disadvantaged people work toward self-sufficiency, developed by Toby Herr and her colleagues at the Erickson Institute. These TANF recipients discuss welfare and work, but spend even more time talking about children, parenting, relationships, and family functioning. They are building lives. If these young mothers find work, they can be helped with their tax returns to ensure that they receive the Earned Income Tax Credit and other credits to which they are entitled.

In **Indiana**, community involvement and responsibility are stressed. Welfare is not just what government does. In 1995, the legislature established a mandate that created a grass roots community planning process to inform and shape future welfare plans.

Innovation and change know no geographic boundaries. In El Paso County, **Colorado**, local officials are blending together the child welfare and TANF systems, trying to create a wrap-around set of services to attack community poverty.

When I first came here about 2.5 years ago, I was interviewing with the board of commissioners and they asked me how I was going to reduce the welfare caseload. Together, we reframed that question to - how are we going to work with the community to eliminate poverty? So, we define our success not only in the way that we get people into jobs, but the quality of the jobs. - David Berns, director, El Paso County, Colorado in Colorado Springs

Programs are now creating vision for the agency. TANF will be the preventative program for child welfare, and child welfare will be the anti-poverty program. Agencies have reorganized all their resources and developed entirely new sets of relationships with communities.

In **Oregon**, the TANF caseload has fallen from 44,000 cases to less than 16,000. Entry-level wages are above \$7 per hour. But the state and its local agencies focus on the larger picture. Falling caseloads and putting people into jobs are only intermediate goals. The real work is to stabilize families and ensure that children are being raised in the best possible environment. Toward that goal, agencies are making huge investments in mental health, Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA) services, and other programs to deal with the challenges faced by the hard-to-serve population.

As in El Paso County, **Colorado**, the emphasis has shifted to holistic, preventative work to stabilize and strengthen families and communities. The phrase heard repeatedly among managers and workers is, "Whatever it takes."

...We work with teens to stay in school; we also work with our partners in the community who may provide vocational options for kids. For individual kids, we may...look at if that kids may be spending too much time in the home caring for younger children or may be feeling too much pressure from whatever the family crisis is. We may set up a plan where we look at what the interests of the child are, whether that's art classes or swimming. And then we do whatever it takes to get them to those places. So this summer, if they enjoyed swimming and needed a chance to get there, we help them with bus tickets or whatever they might need so they can be a regular kid and they can also get out and start exploring who they are and looking at their futures. - Leslie Anderson Freck, TANF manager, Portland, Oregon

Conclusion

Sustaining momentum means continual vigilance to "get the question right." That means an ongoing dialogue about what we are trying to achieve. When WELPAN first met during the first days of TANF, there was a temptation to focus on how to do reform. The group focused, however, on a different issue - how to define success. Ultimately, that is the most important and difficult job that state and federal officials have. Ultimately, we must seek to find consensus on ultimate goals, forgetting about the futile arguments around strategy as if they were ends in and of themselves. Performance must be measured, not effort.

The reauthorization debate surrounding TANF is upon us. Some will look at caseloads alone and conclude that welfare is reformed, and that many of the resources can be diverted. But if caseloads were the only measure of success or failure, or even the most important measure, welfare reform would have been an easy policy issue to deal with. The program could simply have ended, and there would be no caseload to worry about. We are only now beginning to sort out how to effectively reinvest TANF resources. Culture change is merely a code word for the courage to confront the future. Since the future is always in front of us, the challenge of culture change is never finished.

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