



Recipients' Opinions About Welfare Reform

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Recipients' Opinions About Welfare Reform</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 3 No. 1</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>31025</i>
Page Number:	<i>25</i>
Year:	<i>2000</i>

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Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

Recipients' Opinions About Welfare Reform

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Those who currently work in the field as DSS Administrators, supervisors, and front-line workers may not know how welfare recipients actually view recent reforms. This lack of information might come from DSS employees not asking recipients their opinions, or it might be because even when asked, recipients are reticent to express their opinions to those who have power over their benefits. It is obvious, however, that no one has experienced the results of welfare reform more directly than the recipients themselves have and their insights can be instructive to those working in the field.

In all that has been written about welfare reform before and since passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, very little has been the expression of recipient opinion about strengths and weaknesses of the new welfare programs and how they should be changed (Hagen & Davis, 1994, Kraft, 1998, Seccombe, Walters & James, 1999). Reporting the comments of welfare recipients, Seccombe et al, state "...the participants of social welfare programs, primarily poor or working class women, have had little input into the welfare reform process. Their needs, desires and suggestions have not been uniformly sought." (Seccombe, Walters & James, 1999, p. 204)

Suggestions for modifications to federal and state welfare programs usually come from academics, advocates, policy analysts, politicians, and those who advise them (Collins & Goldberg, 1999, Jencks, 1997, Ozawa, 1995, Piven, 1999). Success stories have also been widely reported by social service administrators and legislators (Collins, 1998, Edelhoeh, 1999). Mostly missing from the debate, however, are the perspectives of recipients. This article presents recommendations made by customers of Maryland's Departments of Social Services (DSS) on how they themselves would change Maryland's present welfare programs.

In October 1996, Maryland became one of the first states to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Maryland's public assistance programs, including TANF and Food Stamps, are delivered by local Departments of Social Services in each of the State's 24 localities – Baltimore City and 23 counties.

Key elements of Maryland's TANF-consistent program are: devolution of significant policy control from the state to the local level; a work first/initial job search requirement; a full family sanction; and an exemption from the work requirement for certain clients, including mothers of children under the age of one year. Maryland's program is bound by the federally mandated 60-month lifetime limit for receipt of cash assistance.

Methodology

Recipient recommendations for how to change welfare were part of a survey conducted in the Spring of 1998 by Maryland Welfare Advocates, a statewide advocacy group focusing on issues relating to public welfare. This survey was a follow-up to a similar study which had been conducted five years previously, prior to implementation of TANF (Born, 1994). The survey had two principal objectives: first, to learn recipient opinion on welfare and recommendations for modification; second, to disseminate recipient opinion about suggested welfare changes to policymakers and advocacy groups across the state.

The survey consisted of five open-ended questions. "What do you think is good about the new welfare program?" "What do you think is bad about the new welfare program?" "How have the welfare changes affected you and your family?" "What would help you to get off of welfare?" And, "What changes would you make to the welfare pro-

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gram?" In addition to the five survey questions, data was also collected on type of assistance received at the time of the survey and recipients' county of residence.

In order to prevent response restriction during data collection, and to ensure personalized and accurate recipient feedback, the five survey questions were in open-ended format. Responses to the question "What changes would you make to the welfare program?" were not quantified in order to retain the uniqueness found across recipients. It is counterintuitive to attempt to aggregate responses because they have proven to be so rich in variation. Therefore, responses to this question, which is the focus of this paper, are reported in qualitative format.

Surveys were distributed during April and May 1998 at venues including DSS offices throughout the state, soup kitchens, shelters, and other social service agencies.

A total of 1505 surveys were obtained with representation from 23 of Maryland's 24 local jurisdictions. The study sample is thus a convenience sample and is not geographically representative of DSS customers statewide.

Although it is not a representative sample of the DSS customer population, the volume of responses and the variety of assistance received by the respondents sets this study apart from previous studies of recipient opinion. The study conducted by Secombe, et al, (1999) consisted of interviews with 47 women who received cash assistance, while Hagen and Davis' study (1994) involved focus groups comprised of a total of 16 participants receiving AFDC.

Respondents who completed the Welfare Advocate's survey were receiving multiple types of assistance – Food Stamps, Medical Assistance, housing and energy assistance, as well as cash assistance. Consequently, this survey provides the perspective of public assistance program users beyond the normative recipient – AFDC or TANF cash recipients. Types of assistance received are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of Assistance Received

Food Stamps	61.7% (928)
Medical Assistance	54.0% (812)
Cash (TCA or AFDC)	32.7% (492)
Housing Assistance	11.8% (177)
Energy	5.3% (80)
N=1505	

Food Stamps were the type of assistance received by the largest number of respondents (61.7%); and slightly more than half reported receiving Medical Assistance. Only one-third of the 1505 respondents said they received cash benefits at the time of the survey. The survey did not ask whether persons had received benefits in the past, but which types of benefits they were currently receiving.

Findings

The purpose of this paper is dissemination of recipient opinions about innovation/change in welfare. Consequently, we are not directly reporting on the other four survey questions. "What do you think is good about the new welfare program?" "What do you think is bad about the new welfare program?" "How have the welfare changes affected you and your family?" "What would help you to get off of welfare?" We believe key elements of these questions are embedded in respondent's analysis and recommendations for change. A recommendation for change implies an opinion that something is "bad."

Responses to the question "What changes would you make to the welfare program?" were not quantified. Findings are presented as themes with quotations from the surveys to illustrate the concept. We found recommendations divided into two broad categories: recommendations to improve the existing welfare programs and recommendations to transform the fundamental structure of the welfare system. Findings are discussed under these two headings.

Improving the Existing Welfare Programs

Recommendations for improving the existing welfare programs had three dominant themes. One theme related to refocusing the outcome or purpose of the existing programs. The second theme is related to improving the process of welfare. The third set of suggestions proposes changing the welfare system so that it does not support negative recipient behavior.

Theme one was to improve the existing program by targeting a good job for the recipient as the goal of welfare. Welfare mothers interviewed by Seccombe, et al, (1999), previously emphasized this theme. Examples of comments identifying the importance of refocusing the existing program into helping recipients get good jobs, not just any job, include more investment in "helping parents find a decent job," "higher paying work training programs," and making "sure the jobs people are getting are good career jobs and pay enough money."

Recipients offered policy recommendations that reflect and uphold this program change. These specific suggestions underscore the importance that the recipients place on transition supports and education and training in achieving the goal of getting "a good career job."

Suggestions concerning transition supports mention both their extent and duration. Sample comments reflecting this concern include allowing "a client to keep full benefits for 3 months after getting a job to allow a chance to get ahead." "Working single parents should be allowed to receive TCA for 1 year to assist and prevent any reason to return." "I feel like once you start to work, they push you out in the deep water without help." "Would extend child care and medical assistance."

Education and effective training were equally important antecedents to self-sufficiency. Dozens of respondents made suggestions to enhance education and training. "Define education as a work activity." Provide "grants to technical schools." "Stipends for job training programs." "Allow people to attend college full-time if they maintain a 2.5 GPA while still

receiving full benefits if needed." "Include serious training so people could get jobs with benefits." "To be able to use college as work training." "More emphasis on education and other programs which would lead to self-sufficiency." "Put people in high-tech training programs." "Social Services should make people who have no high school receive a GED before they are kicked off."

The second recommendation for improving the existing welfare programs was to improve the welfare process. This was defined as how recipients are treated by the welfare system and its staff and their experiences at navigating through the system. In a previous study conducted by Hagen and Davis, a similar recommendation was phrased as "changing the welfare culture" (1994, p. 35). Sub-themes that emerged were the desire for a system that is more efficient and effective for recipients, and that treats them fairly and with respect.

A more efficient and effective system would result in reduced waiting time in the office, greater access to workers at off-hour times ("don't make appointments early that cut into work time"), quicker processing, less frequent return to the office ("recon only necessary when have changes in the household"), more workers and more supports for workers ("a person to take messages from callers and put it on workers' desks").

An improved welfare process would be one that communicates clearly with customers, informing them of policy changes in a respectful manner. "I would hire true workers that want to help people." "Welfare staff would only ask important questions and not be all in someone's business." "To be more courteous and respectful to people." "Be more caring of others' needs." Some respondents specifically mentioned wanting encouragement and understanding from workers. Alternatively, one respondent suggested that workers who go out of their way to be helpful and courteous be recognized for their efforts. "Recognition and appreciation for workers who go above and beyond the call of duty."

The third suggestion for improvement of the

existing programs was to modify policy and practice that contributes to problematic recipient behavior. Two circumstances mentioned were drug use and non-compliance with child support. Specifically people on drugs should not receive cash directly because it can be used to support their habit. "Give people drug tests and only help those who are clean." "People on drugs need to get a job." Fathers who are non-compliant with child support requirements were also mentioned. "Fathers who don't pay child support should baby-sit children while mothers work." "Start sending some of the deadbeat fathers to parenting classes." "Get fathers of children in job training or job placement."

A radical suggestion for improving the existing programs was the call for greater collaboration among recipients. "For some who can't afford a place, maybe the clients could combine income and get one." "Encourage families and neighbors to help each other with child care needs instead of institutionalizing all the poor children in substandard child care centers." Mutual assistance and problem solving was an innovative suggestion that could be implemented without significant policy change.

Thus recipients suggest improving the existing TANF programs by:

- Making the outcome by which they are evaluated be the number of recipients who achieve good, career jobs that pay a living wage;
- Maintaining transitional supports until the recipient is stabilized within a living wage job;
- Changing policy to include investment in education and training that leads to a living wage job;
- Making the system open, efficient, and respectful;
- Developing avenues of collaboration, cooperation, and mutual aid among and between recipients;
- Changing those aspects of the programs that negatively interface with problematic recipient behavior.

Transformation of Welfare

Not surprisingly, respondents are "outside the box" thinkers when it comes to how to transform the welfare system. They do not restrict themselves to tweaking the existing programs. The survey contained a series of creative suggestions that when taken together provide the blueprint for a transformed welfare system that would better meet people's needs. They include suggestions for broader coverage, altered eligibility, a more active role for recipients, and a paradigm shift of what welfare should be: who it should help, how they should be helped, and to what end. Respondents were way beyond the current TANF program – temporary cash assistance and support services to families with a child deprived of parental support due to the death, absence, disability, or unemployment of a parent.

One key point was that the help provided should be individualized. "Rules are made on a general basis, but really need to observe on case by case situation." "Judge the limited time available by the person's circumstances instead of setting a flat 3 year maximum." "Handle cases individually and take into consideration each unique situation." "Those most in need should get most help."

Further, recipients do not feel that welfare or safety net help should be limited as it currently is. Sets of people who are presently ineligible for TANF and its support services were identified as important targets of a broadened system of assistance. "Help younger girls before they become young mothers and have to get on welfare." "Put the young people to work and let the older ones that worked all their life get the benefits." "Offer apprenticeship programs for older black males." "Parents with children ages 0-3 should have choice to work or not." "Cash for single people, not just food stamps." "Would make emergency grants available to seniors and the disabled." "Should let people under 18 get cash and food." "People over 18 and attending school should get medical card if not working." "More or different opportunities for uneducated, unemployed persons."

A third dimension of the reconceptualized system is that the benefits would be more comprehensive and organized as an exhaustive safety net. For example, housing costs and medical benefits were mentioned as difficulties that need to be addressed. "Emergency assistance for those who need it." "Income guidelines higher for working poor so they can still qualify for food stamps and MA." "Keep medical assistance at all times." "Health care for all." "Provide medical coverage for all school age children." "More help with utilities." "People should not have to worry about having a place to live." "Let people get assistance for all their children."

Finally, from the perspective of recipients, a transformed welfare system would be an integrated, comprehensive system of cash, in-kind, and education and training assistance based on individual needs gleaned from a comprehensive assessment. Most importantly, it would not be categorically restricted as TANF presently is. Access to cash and in-kind help would be based on individual need.

For those currently employed in the field of public welfare, the continuing education implications of this study are evident. There is a clear congruency between recipient perception of "core American values" (e.g. self-sufficiency goals) and the general public's endorsement of self-sufficiency. These recipients are often eager to work and to support themselves and their children; and out of their lived experience, they offer those within the system improvement-oriented, action-based, specific feedback and articulation of needs. Through

increased dialogue among recipients, social workers, and community agents, mutual understanding can develop. The relationships built through increased awareness, communication, and understanding of recipient experience and perceptions will result in improved client advocacy and mutual respect. Thus the "welfare culture" will be changed.

To summarize the findings of the recipient survey of changes to be made to welfare, the following modifications would be made to the present welfare programs: 1) Make the outcome by which they are evaluated be the number of recipients who achieve jobs that pay a living wage; 2) maintain transitional supports until the recipient is stabilized in a living wage job; 3) change policy to include investment in education and training that leads to that living wage job; 4) make the system open, efficient, and respectful; 5) develop avenues of collaboration, cooperation, and mutual aid among and between recipients; and 6) change those aspects of the programs that negatively interface with problematic recipient behavior.

On the other hand, recipients also visualized a redesigned welfare system. Their recommendation for a transformed welfare system would be for a non-categorical system that integrated cash, in-kind, and education and training assistance into a comprehensive package based on individual need. This transformed system would still have as its primary purpose assisting people into obtaining living wage jobs, but the safety net for those in need would continue.

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