SPEAKING WITH MANY VOICES:
THE FUTURE OF WELFARE REFORM IN APPALACHIAN OHIO

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As the initial five-year authorization for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) nears an end, there is much discussion concerning reauthorization. This paper enters that discussion from the vantage point of the distinctive region of Appalachian Ohio. We investigate the perspectives of those most affected by welfare reform: Recipients, agency directors, employers, front-line workers, and county commissioners. We focus on two of the primary goals of PRWORA: Family support and labor force attachment. Additionally, since meeting these goals depends largely upon levels of federal and state funding, we also investigate expectations and concerns regarding levels of financial support.

The purpose of this study is to determine the lessons that can be learned concerning the reauthorization of PRWORA, especially ones that pertain to poor, rural regions such as Appalachian Ohio. Some lessons are familiar ones and have been illustrated in other contexts. For example, we show that high levels of funding should be maintained and also that most families remaining on welfare rolls face multiple barriers to employment. Other lessons, however, are shaped by the characteristics that make Appalachian Ohio so unique. One such lesson is the essential nature of economic development; we give evidence that Appalachian Ohio DJFS agencies fund projects related to economic development more than Ohio’s non-Appalachian DJFS agencies. Other such lessons result from the special challenges posed by meeting the goals of PRWORA in counties with low capacity (in terms of referral agencies, support services, infrastructure, and other factors).

The organization of this paper is as follows. First, there is a brief review of some of the primary concerns in the reauthorization debate. Second, Ohio Works First (OWF), the Ohio response to PRWORA, is explained. Third, the Rural Welfare Reform Project (RWRP), the research group behind this paper, is described, including its data collection efforts and setting. Fourth, this paper gives voice to various populations within Appalachian Ohio with respect to the future of welfare reform. Finally, a concluding discussion attempts to reconcile these disparate voices and to offer recommendations for reauthorization.

PRIMARY CONCERNS IN THE REAUTHORIZATION DEBATE

“I made my principles for real welfare reform very clear from the beginning. First and foremost, it should be about moving people from welfare to work.” These are President

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Clinton’s words, spoken on July 31, 1996 as he described his views on welfare reform legislation (Clinton 1996). Labor force attachment was one of PRWORA’s primary goals and remains a key concern as the time for reauthorization nears. Labor market attachment as a concept incorporates numerous components. These include but are not limited to education and training for recipients who seek jobs, post-employment services for those who have gotten jobs, and economic development.

Concerning education and training for welfare recipients, the authors of a Brookings Institution policy brief contend that during the reauthorization debate, “there will almost surely be amendments to expand the number of hours of education that can count toward fulfilling the work requirement” (Haskins, Sawhill, & Weaver 2001, 7). While expansion of allowable hours is a key issue, perhaps more important is the fact that the training programs in which recipients get placed must provide them with skills that are relevant for both time and place. Based upon her review of public training programs in several western democracies, McFate argues that such programs “must anticipate market developments and train for them.” Hence the development of training programs can be “time-consuming and … capital-intensive” (emphasis in original; 1995, 647).

Obviously the process of getting someone into a job is only a first step. The next step, that of ensuring the individual retains the job, can be equally if not more challenging. Tweedie speaks of this when he claims that states will have to strengthen “the post-employment services available to former recipients and other working families so they can stay in jobs” (Tweedie 2001, 5). These services can and should be comprehensive, and will necessitate simplification and expansion of the food stamp program, expansion of state Medicaid programs, extension of benefits to working poor immigrants, and expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (Primus 2001).

Finally, policies oriented toward getting recipients ready for jobs and keeping workers in jobs require that the jobs exist in the first place. Pindus, writing for the Urban Institute, unites these concerns. In her assessment of rural communities’ needs, she states that they “need greater support of education and economic development activities to expand employment opportunities. Improving education goes hand-in-hand with economic development, and policies should address both individual and community needs” (2001, 20).

While labor force attachment—and all of its associated aspects—represents one primary goal of welfare reform, another key goal can be broadly referred to as family support. One finds clear articulation of this second goal in the language that describes the funding stream of PRWORA, namely the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. One of TANF’s four purposes is that the program seeks to “end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage” (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act 1996). Such a goal may be relatively easy to achieve when one’s point of reference is a family with a single barrier, such as the lack of reliable transportation. However, when a family faces numerous barriers—domestic violence, child abuse, mental and/or physical disability, drug and alcohol problems—then progress toward the goal is much more difficult to attain. Hence one of the primary concerns for those who are interested in PRWORA’s reauthorization is the family that faces multiple barriers.
Nathan and Gais note that “the ‘silos’ of governmental bureaucracies make it hard to look across these families’ needs and connect work-related human services, such as child care, job aid, transportation aid, and treatment of drug and alcohol problems, with other services, such as dealing with threats of domestic violence and child abuse” (Nathan & Gais 2001, 4). Primus adds that several aspects of PRWORA need to be adjusted in order to help multi-barrier families. These aspects include the federal five-year time limit, the 20% caseload exemption, and the tendency to sanction non-compliant families rather than work with them in solving their needs (Primus 2001).

Another purpose of TANF is to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.” Tweedie discusses the tenuous nature of post-welfare reform families. He asserts “that welfare reform so far has succeeded only in transforming poor welfare families into poor working ones.” He points out that state governments need to assess “the effectiveness of new programs aimed at … strengthening families so that increasingly limited resources can be targeted where they do the most good” (Tweedie 2001, 3-5). The nation’s governors agree. A National Governors Association brief equates strengthening families with supporting marriage and preventing out-of-wedlock births: “Governors recognize that initiatives in these areas can help prevent welfare dependency.” The brief continues: “Any reduction in TANF funds or restrictions on TANF flexibility will decrease states’ ability to meet future challenges and further improve the well-being of low-income families” (National Governors Association 2001, 2-3).

The issue of increased funding impinges on the two broad goals discussed in the preceding paragraphs. That is, in order to facilitate labor force attachment and family support for welfare recipients, governments must ensure adequate financial backing of relevant programs. The officials who operate welfare agencies are perhaps in the best position to argue for higher funding levels. The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) stresses the need for maintaining current funding levels (adjusted for inflation), renewing and enhancing supplemental grants to states, as well as an assortment of other funding-related suggestions (APHSA 2001). Primus builds on the APHSA position and argues that not only should the current level of funding be maintained, but that the multiple goals of TANF necessitate greater funding levels than existed in the original five-year authorization. Furthermore, he notes the TANF “contingency fund” would be ineffective in the event of a recession and needs to be replaced with a “measure that works” (Primus 2001, 4).

**OHIO'S BUSINESS FRANCHISE MODEL**

Ohio’s system of welfare reform “is based on a business franchise model that holds counties accountable” (Reinvesting in Ohio’s Communities 2000). Ohio’s system is distinctive in that the state, through OWF, devolved responsibility for program development and administration down to the county level. The means by which this is executed are Partnership Agreements that are signed between the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) and boards of county commissioners within the counties. Two primary components constitute Ohio’s welfare system: one provides cash assistance and another provides short-term monetary assistance or non-monetary services.
“The Ohio Works First program is the primary program for providing cash assistance to needy families and requires participants to engage in work activities based on a Self-Sufficiency Contract. OWF encourages family self-sufficiency through employment while it meets temporary needs through the provision of cash assistance” (State of Ohio 1999). It is important to note that OWF differs from federal welfare guidelines in that it permits cash assistance for three years instead of five.

The other major component of Ohio’s system of welfare is the Prevention, Retention, and Contingency Program (PRC). “PRC services are: 1) services that have no direct monetary value to an individual family and that do not involve implicit or explicit income support; or 2) one-time, short-term assistance which is limited to the amount actually required to meet the presenting need” (PRC State Model 1997). The 18-month period beginning January 1, 2000 and ending June 30, 2001 brought with it an extension of PRC funds. These new funds, called PRC DR (PRC Development Reserve), enabled the expansion of PRC services within communities” (Reinvesting in Ohio’s Communities 2000, 1).

While OWF and PRC were initiated in October 1997, an important event in July 2000 further changed the welfare system in Ohio. That is the date when the former Ohio Department of Human Services (ODHS) merged with what was then known as the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services. The new agency became what is now known as ODJFS. The merged agency “develops and oversees programs that provide health care, employment and economic assistance, child support, and services to families and children” (ODJFS 2000).

One cannot understand Ohio politics of the last decade, including the factors that have shaped welfare reform, without highlighting the role that kindergarten-12th grade education funding has played. For the last ten years the state’s educational system has been under an Ohio Supreme Court-ordered mandate to revise the way that Ohio’s public schools are funded. (Historically they have been funded through a heavy reliance on local property taxes.) Twice the legislature has devised plans to change the system of funding and twice the court has overruled the plans. A third plan is currently under the court’s review. This ongoing political saga has ramifications for the funding of the welfare system, as evidenced by a $9 million hit that one of the Appalachian counties’ DJFS offices took in the 2002-03 biennial budget with respect to its funding (Frech 2001).

Finally, it is important to take note of Ohio’s declining welfare caseload. In June 2001 the state reached a milestone; it achieved its lowest caseload since March 1967. The 196,622 who were on the rolls in that month represented a 74% decline from the largest caseload of nearly 750,000 in March 1992 (ODJFS 2001). A declining caseload also exists in the counties of Appalachian Ohio.

THE RURAL WELFARE REFORM PROJECT

The Rural Welfare Reform Project is an on-going initiative assessing the impact of welfare reform in rural areas. In 1998, we began by collecting baseline data on the 29 counties constituting the Appalachian region of Ohio. We looked at the constitution of labor markets, recorded rates of unemployment, and information on dependence upon transfer payments. We
also conducted interviews with 29 county-level directors of ODHS (now ODJFS). Extrapolation from the baseline data led us to select four “showcase” counties that represent the spectrum of socio-economic conditions in the 29-county region. We conducted focus groups with recipients in each of the four counties. These focus groups allowed us to refine our survey instruments and we then conducted surveys of 100 recipients in each county. Employers in the four-county region were also surveyed with 144 responding of the 381 surveys mailed (37.8% response rate). This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 48 recipients and 12 employer interviews in each county. The 48 recipients constitute a panel, the members of which have been tracked over three years. Of the original 48 individuals, we were able to interview 33 in the second year and 34 in the third year. Another group of employers is being interviewed this year. Focus groups with selected DJFS front-line workers were conducted last year in four counties with surveys recently administered to all workers in those same counties. Finally, we conducted interviews with 11 of 12 county commissioners in the “showcase” counties. These interviews were followed by a mail survey distributed to all 87 county commissioners in the 29 Appalachian Ohio counties; 43 were returned (49% response rate).

The research was designed to provide qualitative data from three groups most affected by reform—front-line workers and county commissioners were added to the study after its initial design—at the beginning of reform and after initial eligibility expires. This design was created in order to discover the subjective meaning of these changes from both bottom-up and top-down perspectives, rather than merely imputing or imposing them from above (Reinharz 1992; Schram 1995). The 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio 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 1 shows the poverty rate, unemployment rate, and median household income for the 29-county area, using the most recently available statistics.

(Table 1 about here)

FINDINGS

The issues discussed in this section are particularly relevant to the topic of reauthorization of PRWORA. They emerged from one or more of the populations studied through the work of RWRP. The first three issues are features of the broad goal of labor force attachment: 1) education and training for recipients; 2) post-employment services; and 3) economic development. The following two issues are aspects of the broad goal of family support: 4) dealing with families facing multiple barriers; and 5) strengthening families. The final issue—6) increased funding levels—affects the first five. Taken together, the viewpoints expressed help illustrate the necessity of taking into consideration the voices of all those who have first-hand experience with the welfare system and its reforms.
LABOR FORCE ATTACHMENT

Education and Training for Recipients

Among the respondents in the recipient survey, nearly 82% reported that their highest educational achievement was either a high school diploma or a GED. While an education at the high school level or its equivalent may help one obtain an entry-level position, higher levels of education are typically needed to get promoted or find a better job. Therefore the respondents were asked a series of questions about the factors that would help them get additional training or into school. Not surprisingly, the most commonly mentioned factor was tuition money, cited by nearly 51% of the respondents.

In an interview, one recipient was asked what advice she would give the president with respect to helping families on welfare. She had this to say:

I’d say probably the training. You need to give the people the right training. … I mean you can’t get a job and then … ‘cause that’s what they’re doing, they’re getting people jobs and then two to three months down the road they ain’t gonna have no jobs and then they’re gonna say ok, well you can have this job, but first you have to do this test again.

Another recipient, when asked the same question about what she would tell the president, spoke to both the importance of education/training and the related necessity of economic development:

Well to raise benefits a little bit, you know. And to improve the school thing. You know, give us more school and training … and you know, more jobs … because you know, right now the reason I’m havin’ trouble findin’ a job is because there’s that, some kind of blasting company … … so all those people got laid off. They’ve all, you know, scattered out takin’ jobs and there’s just no jobs. You know, I mean if he could make more jobs and give more people training. You know, offer more for us to be able to do for ourselves … instead of, you know, having the welfare department to tell you, ”Well, this is what you’re gonna do.” And that’s it.

In an interview, an employer expressed a willingness to do exactly what the above recipient mentioned:

I think as a taxpayer, I think any time we can support people to get them, you know again, generally, if they’re in entry-level positions, as much stuff as possible so that they can be less, somewhere down the road, but if we could provide, you know, hook them up with education programs, we’re going to help them become self-sufficient.

Employers who responded to the business survey were asked several questions about obstacles to hiring welfare recipients. They were also surveyed about whether or not their place of business provided training. Over 57% agreed that a lack of job skills served as an obstacle to hiring welfare recipients. Interestingly, just over 19% noted that they had trained welfare recipients in the previous year. This in spite of the fact that over 52% stated that their business
provided paid job training and over 9% stated that their business provided unpaid job training. Finally, just over 24% reported that they were aware of a local job training program.

It is likely that employers have made their views about recipients’ lack of job skills known to welfare agencies. In an interview an agency director alluded to this:

(1)t's becoming increasingly hard for employers to find the type of individual that they want to hire in terms of our clients. I think that our objective now is to try to diminish the gap between where they are currently in terms of employment potential and try to adapt that more to the employers and the community that are looking for a little bit higher standard than what most of the people we have left now have.

The director represents a common viewpoint that is held among the region’s directors. In interviews nearly 83% of the directors went beyond a cursory acknowledgement of the importance of education and training; they elaborated on how and why these efforts were significant, sometimes providing detailed examples.

Post-Employment Services for Former Recipients and the Working Poor

In the business survey employers were asked who should be responsible for a variety of factors often considered as post-employment services, including childcare, transportation, and health care. In the area of health care, 66% expressed a belief that employers should be held responsible. In contrast, only 7.7% stated that employers should be responsible for childcare and an even smaller 4.9% stated that employers should be responsible for transportation. Similarly small percentages of employers asserted that local, state, and/or federal governments should be responsible for these services. On the other hand, 90.1% responded that employees should be responsible for childcare and nearly 94% believed that employees should be responsible for transportation.

Responses to the recipient survey provide a glimpse into how these issues affect their lives. With regard to health care, nearly 60% reported that either the respondent him/herself or someone in the household had “not seen a doctor when you felt you should.” With respect to childcare, over 22% reported that they did not leave their children unattended. (One should note that this could result from parental choice rather than a lack of adequate and/or accessible childcare.) Finally, just less than 70% reported that their car/truck was reliable most of the time. Viewed from another perspective this means that nearly one-third of the recipient sample responded that their vehicle was not reliant most of the time. One should keep in mind this is in a region where very few systems of public transportation exist.

Services in the areas of medical care, childcare, and transportation are not the only ones that prove useful to those newly attached to the labor force. One recipient in an interview discussed some basic needs:

Well I think when they push people to get jobs and they help people to get jobs and stuff, but then they shouldn’t automatically take ‘em off the medical card and take the food stamps away cause that’s the reason a lot of people won’t keep their jobs. And why a lot of people won’t get jobs,
it’s because they take ‘em away and then they don’t have a chance to, you know, get adjusted to it.

Regarding the health care and transportation issues, a recipient offered the following ideas about how agencies could help with recipients’ needs:

(T)he big thing would be medical insurance for everyone who is working, everyone that is putting forth the effort deserves it … programs for people to either repair their cars or get vehicles so they do have access, maybe a program where they can have a car paid for them, if they quit the job they get the car taken away … you know something like that just to give these people incentive. I bet, you know, I mean that would still be givin’ them the transportation they need … maybe not just handin’ ‘em somethin’ and havin’ ‘em taking advantage of it … it’s still givin’ transportation they need. That’s the two biggest things that I’ve seen is transportation and medical insurance.

Agency directors are well aware of the critical nature of health care and are in a unique position to see the issue from both recipient and employer perspectives:

(I)n our area again we’re more of a service oriented small business or you know small operation and these people cannot afford, you know, health care for their employees. So what we’re looking at, that’s fine, we’re covering the children up to age 18, but what happens to the parents after a year. They lose their, all medical insurance and if, you know, mom and dad doesn’t feel real well, they’re eventually not gonna be able to continue working due to lack of the health care.

Finally, from the vantage point of a county commissioner comes this statement. It expresses a fairly comprehensive assessment of the services potentially required by those who enter the labor force:

A lot of times it’s easier to keep a medical card than it is to go to work and try paying for a policy yourself. So I see the insurance issue as something we need to address. In some areas transportation’s still a problem and daycare. I think we have daycare. It’s whether it’s convenient to them … and what they need. And I would hope we would continue to work with families and not just get ’em the $5.45 or whatever minimum wage job … but if they truly want to succeed, that we would work with them. … But if somebody truly wants to better themselves, I think we owe it to them to help ’em.

Economic Development

Particularly in an impoverished region such as Appalachian Ohio, there exists a need for economic development. Sometimes initiatives oriented toward economic development occur at the national level. A recent example of this would be the Appalachian Regional Commission’s (ARC) November 2000 decision to funnel a greater percentage of its money toward distressed counties. Since ten of Appalachian Ohio’s 29 counties are categorized as distressed, this policy change could ultimately prove beneficial. This ARC effort includes goals in the areas of capacity building, telecommunications, and information technology (Appalachian Regional Commission 2000).
Other initiatives aimed at economic development occur at the local level. One of the ten areas approved for PRC funding includes economic development projects. It is worth noting that DJFS agencies within Appalachian Ohio are more likely to undertake such projects than are non-Appalachian Ohio DJFS agencies. To illustrate this point, statistics show that 4.9% of PRC funding statewide is directed toward economic development projects, while in Appalachian counties the figure is 9.1% (Reinvesting in Ohio’s Communities Executive Summary II 2000; Reinvesting in Ohio’s Communities Ohio Appalachia 2000).

Citizens may not be aware of the extent to which Appalachian DJFS agencies must engage in economic development, at least if this employer’s views are any indication:

(I)t seems that if the welfare system could move some of its resources over, whatever, I’m not even sure resources is a good word, but more toward creating possibilities for people ... instead of tryin’ to create possibilities in people ... you know people have the potential and everything, anybody that’s got any brains at all’s got potential. But if we don’t have opportunities for them to use that potential ... then it’s just wasted.

According to responses to the business survey, employers are not hopeful that these economic development efforts will have any short-term benefits. Only 21% of employers agreed that job expansion would occur in the county within their business.

Agency directors fully recognize the absolute necessity for economic development efforts to succeed. One had this to say when interviewed:

I don’t see that you can have welfare reform if you don’t have economic development, especially in the Appalachian area. We don’t have a lot of industry so if you really, if economic development really starts rolling in our county, certainly there’s gonna be more jobs. There’s gonna be more jobs for everybody to do and therefore easier to have people leave welfare rolls and get on payrolls. That just, in my opinion, makes just lots of sense.

This opinion is widespread among the agency directors. All but one (28/29) affirmed the significance of economic development if welfare reform was to succeed in their county.

Many respondents to the recipient survey noted the futility of conducting a job search in the region. Nearly 16% of recipients claimed they were not working because no jobs were available. Those trying to find employment in the area’s counties know all too well about the importance of economic development, even if they do not use that term when they describe the problem. One recipient had this exchange with the interviewer:

Interviewer: So how do you think that the welfare department could better help families today?  
Recipient: Getting some more jobs in Meigs County. That would help.  
Interviewer: Is that a real problem around here still?  
Recipient: Yep, especially people that’s trying to look for jobs. You got to know somebody that’s in there to get you in or else you ain’t going to get in there.
It is important to point out one additional lesson to be learned from the previous recipient’s comments. The counties of Appalachian Ohio typically have very small populations, some as few as 12,000 individuals. As is typical in any area with such a small population, it often seems that everyone who has lived in the county for any length of time either is related to or knows everyone else, or at least the family from which they come. One negative effect of such kinship and friendship ties is nepotism, or at least the perception that it exists.

Another recipient who was interviewed combined the issue of economic development with the issue of a living wage:

Get more jobs in … the rural areas of the country, … there definitely needs to be more, higher paying jobs. … I think (the) minimum wage should be raised.

County commissioners, when interviewed, were asked how the state could improve the Partnership Agreements between county agencies and ODJFS. In answering the question, one county commissioner took the opportunity to discuss the lack of jobs in the context of the state’s expectations of counties:

I would just say for the state to continue to listen to the local level and their needs and be flexible in the adjustment and the agreements and well, going along with that, and the Workforce Investment Act … one of our problems is we’re still wondering what our performance standards are going to need to be and we need to all work through that and they need to know that there’s certain areas of the state where the performance standards are not going to be able to be met because of the high unemployment rate and the distressed … county, like we’re designated a distressed county. These are going to be tougher areas to meet those goals in the beginning.

Another county commissioner expressed a fairly common notion, namely that the state and federal governments exhibit little understanding of the special needs of Appalachia Ohio. This commissioner emphasized how much property in the region is federally owned and therefore yields no property taxes and little or no opportunity for economic development:

I doubt if the federal people have the vaguest notion of what … the problems are faced in one of these little towns that have 60 residents in ‘em and … nothing but national forest around ‘em. You know 25% of Washington County is national forest which is … non-income producing, and it’s pretty hard for people that live in those areas around the national forest. They have to go someplace else to find work … I don’t think the people in Washington understand this.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Dealing with Families Facing Multiple Barriers

In many respects the families who remain on the welfare rolls in Appalachian Ohio are not very different from those who remain on the rolls elsewhere; they have more than one barrier that prevents them from becoming permanently attached to the labor force. One of the agency directors had this to say about these families and the specter of Ohio’s three-year time limit:
(A) lot of the people that we’re dealing with now with the multiple problems, we are really concerned that they’re going to be, not going to be self-sufficient in that length of time. It's going to take more time to get them there.

While nearly all directors expressed similar views, their opinions were mixed as to whether the state would rescind the limits. One who thought the state would do exactly that said this:

Secondly, do I really think that the time limits will go into effect? No I really don't … after three years that they'll cut these individuals off. I've … really look for them to say, ok, you know we'll scrap, throw away time limits. I look for them to say 'well let's give 'em, you know, some more time.' We understand these problems, you know they have many problems, but just kicking them off, I don't think that'll fly.

A common theme among the directors was the extent to which these multi-barrier families consumed their agencies’ resources:

Yeah your caseloads have dropped from let's say 150 to 70, but those 70 people that you have, you probably have a lot of work to do on those people.

Another talked about the same issue, but illustrated that success in dealing with these families requires a multi-agency effort:

(W)e are now dealing with the population of the greatest barriers to self sufficiency and this requires more time, money, and cooperative efforts among various county agencies.

Recipients are keenly aware of the many barriers that some fellow recipients face, often because they help family members and friends cope with their problems. One discussed her assistance with a fellow recipient’s childcare, the problem that necessitated the assistance, and her prescription for dealing with the problem:

(T)here should be mandatory drug testing. That is like my major thing, because I take care of, there's a girl down in Parkway, and I take care of her baby a lot, and for the first four months of his life he lived here, because I would go down there and there'd be no formula, no diapers, nothing. And so I just kind of adopted him for a while and took care of him, because she was sellin' her food stamps. She was selling her formula.

One of the potential barriers to full-time employment faced by welfare recipients is not their health but the health of their family members. In the recipient survey nearly 11% reported that they were not working for pay due to the poor health/disability of a family member. Similarly, 9% noted that they went on OWF/TANF due a family member’s illness.

Employers acknowledge that family problems can be a barrier for a welfare recipient who tries to retain employment. Among employers who responded to the business survey almost 39% expressed a belief that such problems had been a concern in their employment of former welfare recipients. Furthermore, 12% admitted that these problems were barriers at the hiring
stage. Interestingly, employers’ support for the concept of providing family leave exceeds their actual provision of leave. While nearly 53% support the idea of paid family leave, only 17.3% provide it. Similarly, just over 86% support the idea of unpaid family leave, but only 36% provide it.

Many employers acknowledged an awareness of the many problems facing those still on welfare. One employer invoked a stereotype of Appalachians, that they are a people prone to violence, but in doing so highlighted one of the barriers with which these multi-barrier families often must cope:

There’s a huge amount of domestic violence here in Appalachia. Somebody has got to invest some funds into that, I mean, and it all boils down to when you have domestic violence you end up having spouses who aren’t married who have children, who have no place to go. They don’t work, or maybe they’ve never had a job, and all the sudden they’ve gotta use welfare programs. So it’s a snowball effect.

Strengthening Families

As noted earlier in this paper, one of the purposes of TANF was to strengthen two-parent families. Recipients agreed with this goal. One had this exchange with the interviewer:

Recipient: I think they should get, if there’s a two-parent family and the mother or the father wants to stay home, I think they should get more money.
Interviewer: Oh ok, so the mom can stay home then?
Recipient: Yeah, and it would make it easier for them.

Another recipient made an argument for more programmatic support of families. This person discussed the breadth of programs that may be necessary to fulfill this purpose of TANF:

I think they need to install more programs…and work with them. Like meeting people once a month to kind keep the constant contact …and as crises come up they’ve got some support. They don’t have anybody else to kind of help them work through it. Maybe training programs for parents … maybe better parenting skills in order to be able to have a functioning family … and I can see them saying well, that’s what mental health is for, but I think … you can’t offer enough to parents and children these days.

Directors are quick to note that their agencies are well aware that one purpose of TANF is to strengthen two-parent families. This director, although painting all welfare recipients with a broad stroke of a brush, expressed a typical sentiment about state and federal governments, namely that they are slow to recognize the obstacles faced in Appalachian Ohio:

The state and federal government must understand that all areas do not have the same capacity. Now areas like ours should need additional help since we’ve been struggling with economic growth even before we had welfare reform. But we work with children at the grade school level. We help increase their self-esteem. We understand what they’re up against in a
welfare lifestyle. But while we need to make people self-sufficient, we also cannot simply ignore that these are poor children and families.

Increased Funding Levels

When the work of RWRP began, the general feeling among agency directors was that there existed sufficient monetary resources to accomplish the goals of welfare reform. What was uncertain was the level of future resources and whether they would be sufficient to continue and/or complete what was begun. One agency director typified this line of thinking:

I would think that the biggest problem would come from a lack of continuation, cause I feel that we have made a good start. A lot of agencies have come together and have tried to make some plans. So the only problem that I can foresee is if the state department or if the legislature doesn’t continue with what they have promised as far as the funding …

Ohio’s county commissioners are also keenly aware of the potential for a governmental funding crisis. One commissioner had this to say:

Interviewer: If you could tell policy makers in DC or Columbus one thing about welfare reform in the future, what would that be?
Commissioner: Don’t underestimate the cost of reform. Give us enough resources to do the job right.

Another county commissioner echoed this sentiment and called attention to the large number of demands on a county’s coffers:

Well the biggest thing is where have you been and why did you let it get in such a mess that it got in to start with, and now why did you turn it over to us? Not that I’m not willing to do what we can down here. It sure is an added burden with everything else that’s going on in the commissioners’ office. But we had a big enough problem trying to scrape up enough money to operate the county and keep the courthouse open, but we’ll try our best. I just hope the funding don’t dry up, that’s the main thing.

Yet another county commissioner expressed a point of view that was not uncommon throughout the region, namely that Appalachian Ohio is given less attention than the large urban areas:

The Governor in the capital bill this year gave $147 million to the city of Cleveland, not Cuyahoga County, to the city of Cleveland, in his capital budget, $147 million. For the poor 29 counties in Appalachia he said, “Here’s $4 million, divide it up.” Now, how in the hell will we ever get off of first base with that kind of support from the Governor?

Finally, recipients are not unaware of the cost of financing welfare reform. In an interview one recipient had this succinct answer that sums up the feeling of different populations throughout the region:
Interviewer: If the President was sittin’ here with us right now and he asked you for advice about how he could help families on assistance or welfare families, what would you tell him?
Recipient: More money.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Virtually every aspect of the foregoing discussion hinges on funding levels. As a result that topic provides a jumping off point for this concluding discussion. As noted earlier, Ohio’s education crisis creates a highly volatile situation with respect to all political endeavors in the state. A 1999 interview with one of the agency directors revealed a prediction as to the impact that court-ordered reform of K-12 funding would have on welfare reform in Ohio:

The money's there … however, what bothers me at this point is I'm not hearing, legislators are seeing all this money out there that we have yet to use and are looking at education reform and they would like to dip into (it). … So what can happen? Worst-case scenario, recession comes along, our rolls go up, our money has been depleted or ... taken away for education reform ...

Two years later there is evidence that the Ohio General Assembly did exactly what the director predicted. A recent story in the *Athens News* chronicles a recent turn of events. The director who is being quoted is reacting to the legislature’s decision to cut his county’s share of federal welfare dollars from $13 million to $4 million ($20 million was cut from all counties combined).

It’s ridiculous not to call the decrease in funding a cut … the cut came about because state leaders shifted the welfare money to other programs so that more money could be set aside for the Ohio Supreme Court-ordered solution to the school funding problem (Claussen 2001).

In southeastern Ohio one thing is clear: The goal of moving welfare recipients to work requires funding levels at or above what they were after the passage of PRWORA. Continued funding reductions as have occurred in Ohio will be seriously detrimental.

A focus solely on funding levels leaves much unexplained. With respect to the broad goals of family support and labor force attachment, our five populations offer much in the way of advice, and it is particularly applicable for regions comparable to Appalachian Ohio.

First, consider the broad issue of labor force attachment and the necessity of post-employment services. The director who noted the excess of small employers in the region makes a noteworthy point, specifically that few businesses are able to provide the entire range of services one might expect from large employers. Although most employers we surveyed acknowledged the need for such services, for whatever reason most do not provide them. It is important to note that sometimes provision of these services costs the employer nothing. For instance, Athens County DJFS provides some employers with an on-site job coach at agency expense. More such creative collaboration is needed.

Second, also related to labor force attachment, economic development is an issue that makes the distinctiveness of the counties of Appalachian Ohio readily apparent. One important
aspect of economic development is living wage jobs, something discussed by numerous recipients. Jobs that provide living wages are in short supply throughout the nation, yet their shortage is particularly acute in this area. While recipients may benefit from economic development efforts, county commissioners must initiate them. One commissioner lamented the large amount of non-revenue producing land that the national forest consumes and the challenge that creates. A lack of living wage jobs and the existence of large amounts of non-revenue producing land are serious, everyday concerns for the people of Appalachian Ohio.

Third, an overlooked factor that affects labor force attachment is nepotism. One can certainly debate whether it occurs more in the counties of southeastern Ohio than elsewhere. However, throughout our study of recipients we find a common perception that nepotism exists. Due to a lack of personal connections, recipients often believe that employers will not consider hiring them. This belief is especially common among recipients not originally from the region. So whether the concern is nepotism, provision of a living wage, or non-income producing national forest land, we see that economic development ultimately influences labor force attachment to a great degree in this region. It is not surprising DJFS agencies in Appalachian Ohio engage in economic development to such a large degree; they must continue to do so.

Fourth, reflection on the broad goal of family support reveals the challenges posed in dealing with families who face multiple barriers when it comes to entering the labor force. While the barriers faced by those living in Appalachian Ohio are similar to those faced by families everywhere—drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and others—the fact that families confront these issues in the context of a region with entrenched poverty exacerbates the problems. As we have discussed elsewhere, to deal with these barriers county commissioners can use their clout to facilitate multi-agency collaboration both within counties and across county lines (Tadlock et al. 2001). Directors can also use their influence to accomplish this.

Additional evidence of the way in which the region affects the broad goal of family support can be seen when agencies attempt to strengthen families. It is significant that one of the directors when asked what could be done to strengthen the county’s families took the opportunity to highlight the low capacity of county agencies in Appalachian Ohio. As the region’s 29 directors continually deal with the challenges facing recipients, they get discouraged with the region’s pervasive lack of services that their agencies can tap into on behalf of recipients.

At the beginning of this paper we cited President Clinton, who made clear his priority for welfare reform, namely that it should be about moving people from welfare to work. If declining caseloads serve as a guide, then that has occurred in Ohio. In the same speech he addressed the inadequacies of PRWORA, saying we need to “do everything in our power to reward work” (Clinton 1996). Appalachian Ohio’s poverty rates, exceeding 20% in some counties, plus the fact that many available jobs do not pay a living wage or provide adequate benefits, suggest that much effort remains before we properly reward work. These factors are combined with the fact that relatively few jobs exist in the region, as evidenced by employment rates that are high throughout Appalachian Ohio, exceeding 10% in some counties. Thus there are challenges to confront at the level of the individual worker and also at the structural level. Workers’ jobs need to provide a living wage and benefits; the region needs more employment opportunities. These should be priorities of reauthorization.
References


Prevention, Retention, and Contingency State Model.  1997.  


*Reinvesting in Ohio’s Communities: A Summary of Prevention, Retention & Contingency (PRC) Programs Executive Summary II.*  Ohio Job & Family Services, November 2000.


TABLE 1
Poverty, Unemployment, and Median Household Income in Appalachian Ohio by County

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