Caseworkers And Welfare Reform: How Is It Working?

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Abstract

The success of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) depends, to a large extent, on the way its message of limited eligibility, personal responsibility, and work first is internalized by caseworkers and presented and reinforced with clients. This paper focuses on the experiences of 20 caseworkers, supervisors and administrative personnel from three agencies in San Antonio, Texas, in implementing welfare reform. It is based on a qualitative study, part of a larger, national project. ¹ In general, caseworkers interviewed supported the goals of welfare reform but cited a number of barriers to its successful implementation. These included high caseloads; numerous policy changes; and lack of coordination between the two agencies responsible for mandated services to TANF clients. Caseworkers reported that clients currently on TANF are harder to serve and have more barriers to employment, including lack of education, transportation, and childcare. Further, two tensions emerged in their discussions of barriers to client self-sufficiency: between client motivation on the one hand, and the reality of low-wage work in San Antonio on the other, and a functional definition of "self-sufficiency" as "not on TANF." These tensions question whether the purpose of welfare reform is to encourage families to support themselves above the poverty level or to simply push them off the rolls.

¹ Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study, Andrew Cherlin, Principal Investigator, Johns Hopkins University; for more information please see www.jhu.edu/~welfare.
Caseworkers and Welfare Reform: How is it Working?

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) represented a dramatic social policy change, the largest since the New Deal. Under this legislation, three programs devoted to providing support and training to low-income persons (AFDC, JOBS, and Emergency Assistance) were combined into one block grant called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (TWC, 2000). This block grant was then available to the states, which were granted considerable local control in how the funds are utilized. In addition to the emphasis on local control, four major changes were introduced by the new legislation: conditional availability of cash assistance (as opposed to entitlement), promotion of rapid entry into the labor market (“work first”, instead of focus on education), increased emphasis on services that support work, and limited expansion of services for non-working TANF recipients (Pavetti, 2000). While this legislation had profound implications for the recipients of public assistance, it also affected people at the frontlines of public assistance agencies: caseworkers. This study explored how caseworkers in a specific locale experienced the change in policy; how they understood it, how they implemented it, how it worked, from their perspective, and what barriers they perceived to its successful implementation. It focused on a group of caseworkers, supervisors, and administrative personnel working in three agencies in San Antonio, Texas.

Why Study Caseworkers?

Hercik (1998) argued, "Making welfare policy changes without tandem organization adjustments can lead to inefficient, inconsistent, and less effective policy" (p. 1). Citing early research by Lipsky, (1980), and Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) she suggested that organizations must change the culture at the front line if policies are to be successfully implemented. Bane and Ellwood (1994) suggested that the required cultural change requires a shift from an "eligibility–compliance culture" to a "self-sufficiency culture." Worker-client interactions must change from those that are routinized, impersonal, and focused on clients' eligibility for benefits, to those that focus on preparing for work and providing assistance for clients toward that end. This shift in organizational culture, required for the successful implementation of PRWORA, presupposes that workers understand the new rules, accede to them, and choose to administer them in a way consistent with the intent of the policy.
Several studies of caseworkers and cultural change under welfare reform demonstrated that most workers agreed with the changes (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2000; Marks, 1999; Meyers, Glaser & McDonald, 1998; Nathan & Gail, 2000). Marks (1999), however, found that many workers did not believe that time limits would be implemented. Some also disagreed with the focus on "work first" rather than education (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2000). Even when they agreed with the policy, caseworkers either did not focus consistently on the message of "work first" (Meyers, et al., 1998), delivered a mixed message (Gerdes and Brown-Standridge, 1997), or delivered a different message to black and white clients (Gooden, 1998).

Several preliminary studies also identified structural barriers to successful policy implementation, including high caseloads (Hudman, 2000; Meyers et al., 1998; Poverty Law Center, undated), inadequate training (Marks, 1999; Meyers et al., 1998; Poverty Law Center, undated), and increasingly hard-to-serve clients (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2000).

The focus on local control over welfare programs dictates that welfare cultures will evolve differently in different locales. This study focused on the local context of welfare devolution in three agencies in San Antonio, Texas. How caseworkers interpreted, operationalized, and evaluated the changes resulting from PRWORA will be addressed.

Methodology

The present study is part of a larger ongoing study: Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study, which gathered longitudinal data on poor children and their families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, as well as the neighborhoods in which these families lived. Three neighborhoods in San Antonio were selected as study sites.

Sample

Twenty employees of three agencies that served low-income families in the three neighborhoods were interviewed. These respondents included employees of the state public assistance agency (PA) which determined eligibility for TANF, Medicaid, and Food Stamps; employees of a private non-profit agency charged with providing employment and training services (E & T), and one caseworker with the public housing authority, which collaborates with the other two agencies in public housing projects to assist residents of public housing become self-sufficient. Researchers interviewed workers from various levels of the agencies. Twelve frontline caseworkers were interviewed, as well as eight supervisors and
administrative personnel. While the focus of the study was frontline caseworkers, supervisors and administrative personnel were interviewed to gain access to frontline caseworkers and to gain a sense of the organization's history, context, and changes as a result of welfare reform.

Method

Caseworkers, supervisors and administrative personnel were interviewed with a semi-structured protocol that asked them to describe their jobs, their clients, and their opinion of the changes as a result of welfare reform. Interviews were begun in the fall of 1999 and continued in the fall of 2000. The first six interviews were transcribed verbatim; the rest were selectively transcribed.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using QSR NUD*IST (1999), a software program for qualitative data analysis. Responses to each question were compared and categorized. Responses were then compared across questions. Several themes emerged, including a discussion of how the particular structural manifestation of welfare reform in Texas influenced caseworkers' daily interactions with clients, their assessment of the reforms, and how caseworkers perceived clients' motivation and ability to become self-sufficient. These themes will be presented in the following section.

Findings

One of the goals of welfare reform was to foster increased local control over the way in which block grant monies were spent. It is therefore important to understand caseworkers' experiences within the local context in San Antonio. This section will provide a brief description of the social context of San Antonio, and the process of welfare devolution in Texas and in San Antonio, specifically. It will then consider caseworkers' experiences and opinions of welfare reform within that context.

Context of Welfare Reform in San Antonio

San Antonio is the eighth largest city in the U.S. and the third largest in Texas (City of San Antonio, 2001, p. 21). According to the 2000 census, the population was over one million, with an ethnic breakdown of 51 percent Hispanic, 39 percent Anglo, six percent African-American and 1.5 percent Asian. Twenty-two percent of the population of San Antonio lives in poverty (Pfister, 1999, September 12). Single mothers head 8.7 percent of all households, compared with the national average of 7.2 percent (Sylvester, S., 2001, May 23). Thirty-four percent of the adults in San Antonio are illiterate, a rate that
exceeds that of the U.S. at 23% (Cruz, 1999). Tourism is a major part of the local economy, and the jobs associated with it are often low-wage, low-skill jobs (Cruz, 1999) and, as a result, San Antonio workers earned the second lowest average salary among the 50 largest metropolitan counties (Pesquera, A., 2001, March 16). The city has one of the state’s largest welfare caseloads (Cruz, 1999) and Texas’s rapid changes in welfare policy have important consequences for the citizen’s wellbeing.

Until 2002, Texas is operating under a federal waiver to PRWORA, instituted in Texas House Bill 1863, signed into law in June of 1995. (TWC, 2000). In line with the philosophy of PRWORA, the state legislation emphasizes a "work first" model, personal responsibility, time-limited cash benefits and the goal of work, rather than welfare (TWC, 2000). Texas is a particularly low-benefit state: the maximum TANF cash benefit is $187 per month for a family of three, compared, for example, with approximately $377 per month in Illinois and $565 in Massachusetts (Winston, et al., 1999). Welfare rolls in Texas declined from 264,455 families in September 1995 to 127,774 in May 1999, over a 50% reduction (TWC, 2000).

While not a function of welfare reform, a concern about accuracy in determining eligibility has been and continues to be a concern for the state. In order to reduce error, TANF, Medicaid, and Food Stamp cases are recertified more frequently, and a second caseworker review 100% of all Food Stamp cases. These frequent recertifications and case reviews keep the workload for the caseworkers high. The state also anticipated the drop in TANF rolls by cutting back on staff. According to PA personnel interviewed, the staff decline is occurring faster than the decline in overall caseloads, creating tremendous stress on PA caseworkers and contributing to high turnover. One supervisor estimated the turnover rate of caseworkers in San Antonio at 35% per year.

HB 1863 also consolidated workforce-related programs from ten different state agencies into a new agency, The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC, 2000), and 28 local workforce development boards to provide the workforce component of welfare reform. The local workforce development board serving the San Antonio area does not itself provide services, but subcontracts with a local non-profit agency to provide employment and training services to clients. By all accounts, the transition of functions from TEC to the local non-profit has been rocky. First of all, the transition involved layoffs of 17% of the workforce or about 90 individuals. The agency has several times been sanctioned by TWC for poor performance (Russell, 2000, April 4; Russell, 2000, June 23) and was responsible for the de-obligation of $4.4 million in
childcare funds for low-income parents (Russell, 2000, April 1). The agency has experienced tremendous staff turmoil. It lost 119 out of 208 employees in a 12-month period ending in July, 2000, including its CEO. In late 2000, the local workforce development board considered replacing the agency as the San Antonio contractor, but as of December, 2000, it decided to continue its contract pending improved performance (Russell, 2000, December 20).

This unique local context, with two separate agencies responsible for administering the functions of welfare reform, influenced the choices and responsibilities of local caseworkers serving San Antonio's low-income population. Local collaborations between the three agencies involved also provided new resources to clients and expanded the message of "work first" beyond the mandated systems. How caseworkers in the agencies responsible for implementing welfare reform understood and acted on these changes will be addressed below.

Job Duties under Welfare Reform

According to the PA caseworkers’ accounts, the bulk of their interactions with clients continued to focus on eligibility determination, albeit within the context of personal responsibility. The primary focus of "work first" at their agency was a strong diversion or "redirect" program. Before clients can apply for TANF, they must fill out a Form 1181, which asks about their work history and availability, and they are sent to a Resource Room or Career Center, where caseworkers assist applicants with interviewing skills, help them make or fax a resume, and download job vacancy information from the internet. One supervisor mentioned the Commissioner's Cup, an award that goes to the regional office that has the most redirects. The region that served San Antonio and the surrounding counties held the Commissioner's Cup during the fall of 2000.

In their interactions with clients, the PA caseworkers interviewed described informing clients of their responsibilities according to the Personal Responsibility Agreement. These included the requirements that children must be immunized and attend school and parents must cooperate with the Attorney General's office to establish paternity and file for child support. The caseworkers also explained the time limits and work requirements, warning and sanctioning clients, but not providing much assistance in obtaining jobs. During recertifications, they sanctioned non-compliant clients by reducing their benefits. Other than this, they did not report providing much assistance in obtaining jobs. They relied on E & T caseworkers to provide the necessary tools to clients to become self-sufficient.
The Texas Workforce Commission, in its previous incarnation as the Texas Employment Commission, had always had a focus on job readiness, referral, and training. However, under welfare reform, its function with regard to TANF recipients has changed. First, its ties to public assistance were more direct, with some offices co-located. Second, TANF clients were now mandated to participate, and their receipt of TANF was directly tied to their participation. Third, with the institution of time limits, TANF clients had a more direct incentive to participate in the workforce. Within these parameters, the E & T caseworkers interviewed outlined the following process of working with clients. Mandated clients first went to WOA, Workforce Orientation, a three-hour session where they heard about time limits, the hours of mandated participation (35 hours/week for two parents, 30 hours/week for single parents) and the activities in which they must participate, such as job readiness and job search. At the end of the WOA, they were then given a written appointment letter/notice for a two-hour EPS (Employment Planning Session), which included further assessment and planning for employment including the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to assess their skill level in math, language, and reading. At that time each was assigned to an E & T caseworker that conducted a more thorough assessment of the client's history, goals, and abilities. However, there was no formal screening for mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence and learning disabilities, problems which could significantly impact a client's ability to obtain and retain a job. In probing with caseworkers exactly how such issues were assessed, most explained that they relied on clients to tell them if they had such problems. If the client had persistent problems in getting or keeping a job, he or she might be referred to a state rehabilitation agency for further evaluation.

After the EPS session, clients were sent to two weeks of training, including one week of Job Training and one week of Life Skills Training. These sessions covered topics such as understanding the labor market; writing a master job application, cover letters and resumes; developing job interview and job search skills; setting employment goals, planning a job search; and building self-esteem (TWC, undated). They were then to go on "job search" for 30 hours per week and make 15 applications per week until they found a job. Clients who did not obtain employment in four weeks of job search and who didn't have a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) were generally referred to GED programs. E & T caseworkers also routinely referred clients without GEDs or prior work experience to another agency's program where clients were paid while they looked for a job and gained work experience, after which time
they were then sent back to job search. Only if they were still unable to obtain employment would E & T caseworkers suggest further training toward such occupations as licensed vocational nurse or childcare worker. Clients who failed to comply with work search or other requirements of the program could be sanctioned, losing the caretaker portion of their TANF benefit of $78/month. Those who did obtain employment were still responsible to report to both their PA and E & T caseworkers to avoid sanctions and continue to receive transitional benefits such as Medicaid, childcare, and assistance with car repairs, utilities, and uniforms for work.

It was within the organizational and structural changes dictated by state and federal welfare reform laws that caseworkers created and adapted a new organizational culture. Their understanding of the laws and policies, and their experiences of how they work in practice, will be discussed in the following section.

Workers’ Opinion of Welfare Reform

Overall, the workers interviewed liked and supported the basic concept of welfare reform. They talked about their new roles giving clients a "push" to become self-sufficient. As one said,

When the welfare to work came, I was excited about it because it gave us a little bit more control. Before we couldn't tell somebody they should go to work. We could get in trouble for that. They could file a complaint. With welfare to work it gave us a little bit more leeway.

However, the majority also expressed concerns about its implementation. For the PA workers, these largely focused around the increased workload. The dramatic decrease in the TANF caseload did not result in decreased workload for individual PA caseworkers. This affected the way they were able to implement the new roles instituted by welfare reform. As one PA caseworker put it:

It was hard at first. It was all these, you know, different rules and things. We not only just determined eligibility for clients, but in fact we became more of a social worker. I mean we had to try to help these people find a job. . . . There's more things we have to explain to them - all the rules and the procedures they have to follow. The interviews take longer because of that. We have to warn them of all their rights and responsibilities and how their benefits are time-limited, how many months they have left. . . . It's not really harder. It's just more time-consuming. . . . people say the welfare rolls are declining, but I don't see it. It doesn't feel like they're declining because there may be less people on welfare but the work is more.
In addition to complaints about the high caseloads affecting their ability to assist clients with tasks of self-sufficiency, the majority of the PA workers interviewed believed that full-family sanctions would better stress the dramatic change being required of clients. As one said:

I think that the time limits, I mean, it's good but, the thing is, OK, they - the mother's gonna be taken off, but not the children. So it's really not - it's not like a threat to them. You know, they can still receive TANF and cash for the children.

Texas is one of a number of states that does not apply sanctions for non-compliance to the entire family, but only to the caretaker.

With two agencies responsible for implementing the tasks of welfare reform, coordination between the two emerged as an issue. PA workers complained about the work of the employment and training agency:

. . . I don't see enough push on the clients to get them self-sufficient. Don't get me wrong, but I don't see enough coming out of these people next door [meaning the employment and training agency] to get these people into programs. It seems like it's, to me, it's a lackadaisical approach, you know. . . . They just seem to stick them in a program, "OK, there's your GED program," and there's no follow-up.

PA workers also complained about problems with transitional childcare and were concerned that some clients "fell through the cracks." As this PA caseworker complained:

I've had clients who tell me that they have been told that if they want childcare immediately, they can leave their job, go on TANF, that's how to get childcare. They've been told that . . . , by their [E & T] caseworker . . . .

Other workers discussed problems accessing transitional benefits for Food Stamps and Medicaid. These typically occurred either because clients obtained jobs before the end of the three months required to become eligible for transitional benefits or because they did not know that they were still eligible for transitional benefits when their income made them ineligible for TANF. One E & T supervisor talked about how clients feared that they would lose all benefits when they went to work, as they had under the old AFDC system. Helping clients understand and access the programs available to low-income working
families was one of the cultural changes that caseworkers had to incorporate in order to conform to the intent of welfare reform.

E & T workers questioned welfare reform’s "work first" philosophy, given the characteristics of the clients they served. As one stated: "Our motto is, 'Get a job. Get a better job. Get a career.' But how do I get a job, or even try to move to a better job if I don't have the basics of education?" Another estimated that 95% of her clients didn't have a GED and noted, "A person without a GED is seldom going to be able to make enough money to support their family. Temporarily, we may be assisting them. But in the long run, they're going to have to come back to TANF if we don't help them get a higher leg up."

A number of workers questioned how people could hope to support their families on minimum wage work. As one said, "They may be working a whole year and still be making minimum wage. That's not self-sufficient." However, conversations with caseworkers at both the public assistance agency and the employment and training agency revealed that their functional definition of "self-sufficiency" was "not receiving TANF." A conversation with the housing caseworker made this clear as he contrasted the goals of the housing program with the "work first" philosophy of both the public assistance and employment and training agencies:

. . . that's the essence of our program, to be self-sufficient, whereas anyone not in public housing, and not receiving any financial assistance, can make it out in the world. This is what we want, in the [housing] program. This is over against what, like, for [the employment and training agency]. Their concept is to "work first". They want you to have a job. Well, even flipping hamburgers at a local restaurant, you need a GED today, unless you are in high school. But if you are a single mother with three kids, are you going to be able to support these three children flipping hamburgers or being a cashier at a fast food restaurant? So the concept is different, whereas, you go to work first. If you want to work, well, San Antonio's economy is very good right now, so you won't have too much difficulty finding a job. But we are looking at low paying, minimum wage jobs. At minimum wage, you'll make approximately $11,000 a year. Yet, a family of four, to be self-sufficient, you need a salary of approximately $24,000 a year. If you're going to get a job at $11,000 a year, just by my experience, you're going to be needing some type of government
assistance, Food Stamps, Medicaid, any type of assistance. In reality, that's not being self-sufficient.

The presumption by caseworkers that clients would continue to receive some sort of assistance or subsidy could serve to muddy the message of self-sufficiency. Further, as another caseworker pointed out, becoming self-sufficient was one thing, remaining so another, when a sick child or other family emergency could cost a woman her job. Several caseworkers pointed out that for these families, the stresses of juggling work and family responsibilities were not outweighed by the slight increase in family income produced by work. Many low-wage workers lack health insurance, and a PA caseworker mentioned that many people stay on TANF to keep their Medicaid.

The E & T workers complained about the lack of supportive services for clients and the lengthy reimbursement procedures for work-related expenses like uniforms and transportation that hampered client services. Nearly all of the E & T workers mentioned childcare and transportation as obstacles to client self-sufficiency. In both cases, they stressed that the services needed to be available to accommodate the kinds of jobs that clients were most likely to have, namely shift work. Workers also mentioned the need for childcare for families with multiple children, as well as the need for childcares that provide transportation.

The privatization of the employment and training programs formerly under the Texas Employment Commission created some difficulties for E & T workers, especially those who had transferred from the state agency. As one E & T caseworker said,

It just seems like with the state it was easier because with the state, there's the state, there we are. Now with this job, here's the state, here's AWD [Alamo Workforce Development Board], here's [the employment and training agency], here I am. . . . Too many middle men. Too many chiefs and not enough Indians, is what it boils down to.

In summary, while most workers supported the goals of welfare reform, they cited structural obstacles to its implementation including high caseloads, inadequate support services for clients, lack of coordination between the two agencies, and the realities of low-wage work as a barrier to client self-sufficiency. They also described clients as increasingly hard to serve, an issue that will be discussed further below.

Client Barriers
Workers from all three agencies identified a common client profile: single female, two or more children, no high school diploma or GED, and limited work experience. Education was generally mentioned as the most significant barrier to self-sufficiency. The majority of both E & T and PA caseworkers characterized the families currently on the rolls as hard to serve. They could name a host of psychological, social, and behavioral barriers, including uncooperative attitudes, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, lack of aspirations, drug abuse and co-dependency, depression, lack of life and problem-solving skills and complex family problems.

A persistent theme, mentioned by the majority of the caseworkers, supervisors and administrative personnel interviewed, was the importance of client motivation as one of the factors that distinguished "successes" from "failures." As one caseworker said,

The individuals who really want to accomplish something will find a way around every barrier that they possibly can. But there are some individuals who just wait around for someone to give them whatever they want. They don't go around asking. They don't try to get answers for themselves.

The importance of this "can do" attitude was echoed by workers from all three agencies. A number of caseworkers distinguished two groups of clients – those who wanted to succeed and those who would not succeed regardless of the resources they received, because they were not motivated.

The majority of the workers interviewed pointed to generational welfare as one of the causes of clients being in the second, unmotivated group. As one E & T caseworker put it:

I do have individuals – clients – who live here [in public housing] and so do their moms, and their grandmothers also lived in public housing. See, so I think that's a big barrier. It's harder for them to think of what else there is out there for them, like a goal that they can work toward, moving out of housing. If that's all they've known all their life, I think it's a lot harder for them.

Caseworkers’ discussions of motivation and generational welfare tended to assume that low motivation led to generational welfare rather than the other way around. They defined motivation as a quality that a person either possessed or didn't. With rare exceptions, caseworkers did not attempt to consider other reasons why clients might appear unmotivated, even when prompted by the interviewer. Caseworkers’ descriptions of their assessments of potential barriers such as mental health issues, substance abuse,
domestic violence and learning disabilities, were fairly superficial. They relied on clients to know and name these barriers for them. PA caseworkers were overburdened with eligibility-related tasks and E & T caseworkers tended to rely on a "one size fits all" program for these identified "hard-to-serve" clients. In practice, then, the definition of "hard to serve" was "unmotivated." This understanding of motivation led caseworkers to rely on threats and sanctions as a way to motivate clients. One E & T caseworker gave the following example:

. . . I use a little cartoon. . . . I show them a bridge. Fire on one side. And I show them two chickens. Green grass on the other side with chickens. And I tell them that the chickens are going over the bridge are the ones who were motivated, flew over the creek. And it says, "If you don't go over, you've got Kentucky Fried Chicken."

In contrast, one PA caseworker had a much more subtle idea of motivation. Even though she reminded clients that their benefits were time limited, she also spent time trying to understand what motivated their current behavior, and what barriers they might experience if they tried to make a change. She also addressed the problem of clients who had grown up on welfare by encouraging clients to get on the bus and try to see another way of life. Further, she actively encouraged them to learn to dream and keep a journal of their aspirations.

While acknowledging the substantial barriers faced by these single parents with little education and few work skills, the majority of caseworkers largely attributed clients' lack of success to a lack of motivation. How caseworkers defined clients' problems also defined their approach, which typically involved referring all clients to a few programs, relying on clients to identify special needs and request assistance, and using threats and sanctions to motivate "unmotivated" clients.
Conclusion

This qualitative study highlights caseworkers' concerns in implementing welfare reform in San Antonio, Texas. While the successes and failures of implementation cannot be generalized, certain themes emerged that may help illuminate the larger challenges of implementing this sweeping policy change in other sites. A number of the findings reported here have been corroborated by other studies.

On the positive side, as previous research has shown (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2000; Marks, 1999; Meyers et al., 1998; Nathan & Gail, 2000) the caseworkers, supervisors and administrative personnel interviewed support the overall goals of welfare reform. Further, there are certain organizational structures in place that make the goal of work clear, such as a strong diversion program and work requirements tied to benefits.

However, workers noted structural barriers that mitigate against the full presentation of the "work first" message. As found in other studies (Hudman, 2000; Meyers et al, 1998; Poverty Law Center, undated), high workloads at the public assistance agency mean that the PA caseworkers have very little time to do more than eligibility determination. Further, there appears to be very little coordination between the public assistance and employment and training agencies, resulting in some clients not receiving the transitional benefits and supportive services that are meant to support clients' transition to work.

As Danziger and Seefeldt (2000) found in Michigan, many caseworkers felt that their clients were not ready for a "work first" approach, since most do not have a high school diploma. Even though they described many clients as hard to serve, as Marks (1999) found, caseworkers tended to refer all clients who could not find a job to the same program, while attributing many of clients' failings to a lack of motivation.

In fairness to these caseworkers, they are also presented with impossible obstacles to their own success. As Kingfisher (1996) has pointed out, caseworkers and clients share a similar dilemma. Each is being asked to function without adequate support and each is held responsible for the result. Low-skilled, uneducated women are asked to enter the low-wage job market and support their families. If they don't, they are blamed for lack of motivation. Caseworkers are asked to make these women ready for the job market. If they don't, their negative organizational culture is the culprit. In both cases, larger social and economic problems that keep poor women poor are ignored.
Caseworkers’ functional definition of self-sufficiency, which in practice turns out to be "not on TANF," raises a larger question, namely, "What is the real goal of PRWORA -- to get people off TANF or to help them support themselves and their families?" In Texas and across the nation, states have had success at reducing TANF caseloads. Whether former TANF recipients are able to raise themselves out of poverty is another story. If the state of Texas is committed to the second goal, then administrators would be well advised to consider the recommendations of Danziger and Seefeldt (2000) with regard to working with hard-to-serve clients. They suggest that clients should be routinely screened for mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, and learning disabilities routed immediately into programs that can address these needs, rather than putting them through another exercise in failure in either a job search or GED program.

Further, administrators and legislators need to address basic infrastructure problems in San Antonio such as a lack of public transportation and the low-wage economy identified by caseworkers. As Meyers, Glaser and MacDonald (1998) argue, lack of information about options is not the reason families go on, or stay on, welfare:

Even with more and better information about welfare rules and services, and a clearer message about their obligation to become self-sufficient, families cannot achieve self-sufficiency without employment, health care, child care, and a combination of wages and income supplements that allow them to escape poverty. (p. 20)

These conversations with caseworkers demonstrate that the enormous changes envisioned by the framers of PRWORA are having an effect at the frontlines. However, it will take more than an organizational cultural change, no matter how sweeping, to assist families in escaping poverty.
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