

## REAUTHORIZATION OF THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK OPPORTUNITY RECONCILIATION ACT

### IMPROVING PROGRAM PERFORMANCE: BUILDING THE CASE FOR A QUALIFIED, STABLE, PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE

#### THE WORKFORCE

To implement the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), agency workers have been called upon to assume numerous new and challenging responsibilities.

Staff, who had been primarily gate-keepers determining eligibility, now are also coaches, mentors, enforcers, and trainers responsible for conducting client assessments, assisting in job search, identifying barriers to employment, tracking participants' progress, and making referrals to related programs and services.

- **More than 73 percent of workers surveyed in Illinois said that four or more major new activities had been added to their workloads since AFDC was transformed into TANF.**

Agency staff, the majority of whom have only high school diplomas or unrelated college degrees, have not been given access to the training needed to be successful in their new roles.

- **In Illinois, 78 percent of caseworkers wanted more training than they were receiving.**
- **Less than one percent of the National Association of Social Workers' membership is employed in public welfare.**

Providing new, high quality services not only requires greater effort, skills, and experience, but also much more time. Add to that the additional time required when assisting participants with multiple barriers, who represent an ever greater percentage of the caseload, and the result is that even as overall welfare caseloads have declined, the workloads of individual workers have actually increased.

- **More than 90 percent of all Illinois caseworkers have seen their workloads increase; 53 percent have seen their workloads increase by more than 40 percent.**

Such conditions—inadequate training, heavy workloads, and often lack of access to helpful technology, such as computers or even voicemail—often result in staff turnover rates reaching 50 percent a year.

#### **In Their Own Words . . .**

- *When I started [in 1969], we were told that it would take one full year to understand the ins and outs of the entire system. Today, these workers are expected to know the nuances of this job in a few weeks. The job is much more complicated than it was in 1969 and yet there is less training and we are expected to learn duties more quickly.* (Illinois)

***...the Power of Social Work...***

- *There is no way someone can manage 90 cases. And you are supposed to see each person at least once a month. . . . Just using common sense and breaking it down, how much time you would have with each person would be minutes. . . you lose quality case management in having. . . such a large caseload.* (Oregon)
- *I never have a day when I feel good about where I am with my caseload. . . . We were asked to work with other agencies, to contact other people, to do what you need to work on issues with the clients. . . [but] you know it's not realistic, it's never going to work with this many clients.* (Oregon)

## **THE PARTICIPANTS**

Despite the obstacles, many agency staff have been successful in helping families access needed services and make the transition to the workforce. However, in too many circumstances, the obstacles have been almost impossible to overcome.

Many families making the transition to work have failed to receive essential work supports.

- **An estimated one-third to one-half of all families leaving welfare for work do not receive the medical assistance, food stamps, or child care for which they are eligible.**

Many families are unaware of the full range of services available to them in their quest for employment.

- **More than 88 percent of recipients interviewed in Michigan (Lansing) said some caseworkers deliberately do not inform recipients about their eligibility for services or benefits.**

Many families have been unjustly and improperly sanctioned for noncompliance.

- **In two counties in rural Virginia, 54 percent of racial or ethnic minority cases, but only 39 percent of white cases, were closed because the recipient failed to comply with program rules.**

Many families with barriers to employment have gone unrecognized and untreated.

- **By 1999, 31 states had adopted plans to screen participants for substance abuse, but the number of referrals to treatment programs has not changed.**

### **In Their Own Words . . .**

- *Caseworkers don't look for signs of abuse and they don't ask the right questions, because they don't have to, and so they choose not to. And now there are these marriage initiatives that stigmatize single motherhood and praise marriage. They are just going to put more pressure on women to stay in violent homes.* (Montana)
- One white woman said, *The caseworker was helpful and lovely. . . . She registered me for disability—I had nothing with me [no documents]. She said, “Just mail me the papers when you get them.”* In contrast, an African American woman with a college background who went to the same office said, *It doesn't matter how far you've gone in school, how you speak or dress—they treat you like dirt—they don't treat you like people. . . . They don't do anything to help you.* (New York)
- *[There is a] lack of communication between the caseworkers and the people on assistance. Like, they don't know you, they don't know your children, they don't know your background in which you're struggling through and how hard you're trying to get out. They just know you as another file.* (Michigan)

## **THE PROPOSAL**

To improve overall program performance and the well-being of children and families, the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare law must include provisions to help states create a more qualified, stable, professional workforce. Among the issues states must address are staff training, staff turnover, workloads, case management, and cultural diversity.

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