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The Massachusetts Welfare to Work Program: How Well Will It Serve Its Customers?

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The author examined the initial two-year Massachusetts Welfare to Work plans to identify early signs of potential program strengths and weaknesses when the states were just beginning to implement it. She surveyed the then current literature that defines the work-first philosophy and its social context, outlining the essential elements of work-first programs for participants' success. The author then reviewed Massachusetts's sixteen regional plans to determine the degree to which they incorporated these elements in their program designs. Finally, she outlined the challenges, potential risks, and advantages that arise when national social policy shifts and local planners and policymakers must adapt theory to practice.

M y purpose in examining the initial Massachusetts Welfare to Work plans was to identify the early signs of potential program strengths and weaknesses. Because this program was in its first year of implementation and based on the fairly new "work first" philosophy, each region was inventing its program design and delivery scheme. Many regions looked to each other and to national program models for examples of best practice to help them in this work. The Corporation for Business, Work, and Learning (CBWL), in its role as administrator of Welfare to Work funds in Massachusetts, wished to serve as a technical assistance resource for the sixteen Massachusetts regions. This analysis helped CBWL to identify critical topics of interest to regional planners, deploy its technical assistance resources effectively, and develop a useful evaluation strategy for local programs.

Origins of the Welfare to Work Program

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) represents President Bill Clinton's welfare reform effort. Within it, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program was created to replace the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). While the impact of this change is outside the scope of this work, it is important to point out the philosophical and policy shift that it represents. As stated in the Employment and Training

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Administration's (ETA) Interim Final Rule, 20 CFR, Part 645, "The TANF provisions substantially changed the nation's welfare system from one in which cash assistance was provided on an entitlement basis to a system in which the primary focus is on moving welfare recipients to work and promoting family responsibility, account-ability, and self-sufficiency."[1]

This change in focus to moving welfare recipients to work and self-sufficiency — *not out of poverty* — within a limited period of time explains the creation of the Welfare to Work (WtW) program. Again, the ETA's Interim Final Rule explains: "The purpose of WtW is to provide *transitional* assistance which moves *hard-to-employ* welfare recipients living in *high poverty areas* into *unsubsidized* employment and *economic self-sufficiency* (italics added)."[2]

WtW provides federal funding to states for two years to provide a range of ser-vices to those most vulnerable and most likely to reach their time limits for receiv-ing assistance. The goal of such services should be to place people in employment that will lead to economic self-sufficiency.

The Welfare to Work Program Structure

For WtW to accomplish its purpose, $3 billion has been allocated nationwide — $1.5 billion will be distributed in fiscal year 1998, the remaining $1.5 billion in fiscal year 1999. States will be given three years to spend these funds, all of which must be spent by September 30, 2001. Seventy-five percent of the funds will be distributed to the states in each fiscal year according to a formula. To receive its portion, each state must match half of the federal allocation with its own funds. As a result, Massachusetts's WtW program will total approximately $30 million. The remaining 25 percent of the funds will be distributed by the U.S. Department of Labor through competitive grants.

Each state must immediately transfer 85 percent of the program funds to its Pri-vate Industry Council. (In Massachusetts, except for the city of Boston, PICs are known as Regional Employment Boards.) PICs have authority over the design and implementation of WtW programs in their regions. The governor of a state may, at his or her discretion, use the remaining 15 percent of the funds to support the program.

Three key elements of the structure of the WtW program are important to consider in this discussion: eligibility, performance standards, and authority. Programs will be evaluated by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) according to their ability to meet the needs of participants who will be, by definition, the hardest to serve. To be eligible for participation in the WtW program, individuals must be long-term recipients or face termination from welfare in twelve months and have two of the three following characteristics: (1) lack of a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma and low mathematics or reading skills; (2) require substance abuse treatment; and (3) a poor work history. At least 70 percent of the funds must be spent on individuals or noncustodial parents of children in TANF households who meet these criteria. Up to 30 percent of the funds may be spent to assist other individuals who are TANF recipients or noncustodial parents who have the characteristics associated with long-term welfare depen-dency, namely, school dropout, teen parent, and poor work history. One hundred million dol-lars will be set aside from the 1999 available funds for performance bonuses to states to be awarded by the secretary of labor in fiscal year 2000.

As of early April 1998, DOL has provided only minimal guidance on expected program outcomes and performance standards. Other than its general statement of purpose, there are still no specific standards or definitions to guide program planners or operators. For example, "economic self-sufficiency" has not been defined, nor have the variety of ways in which a participant may exit the program been categorized as positive or negative outcomes. Without a common standard of program success, each region in Massachusetts has defined success for itself or, more worrisome, declined to do so. In any event, the likely impact for welfare participants is uneven quality of services from one region to another as a result of varying program goals, standards of success, local resources, and abilities. Such variation in program designs will be clearly seen in Massachusetts's local plans.

Finally, it is important to note where the program authority rests when considering how best to address program weaknesses. Never before has so much authority for a job training program been given to the local level by the federal government. In contrast, the role of the state in providing guidance and maintaining standards and consistencies across programs is extremely limited because of its limited authority. As a result, each region may, and will, design its program differently; Massachusetts will have sixteen distinct WtW programs rather than just one. Therefore we have a significant opportunity to learn about the effectiveness of different program approaches and components, with little leverage to encourage regions' use of best practice or foster learning across regions.

What Welfare to Work Offers:
The Work-First Approach

Briefly, the work-first approach to job training maintains that the best way for welfare recipients to become self-sufficient is to enter the labor market as quickly as possible. The best preparation for work is work itself, and any job is viewed as a good job, providing a starting point and an opportunity for recipients to develop work habits and skills that, over time, allow them to move on to better jobs.[3]

In addition, the work-first approach is characterized by a focus on both the employer and the individual as equally important customers. Employers' needs are the drivers for all education, training, and work preparation activities. Program planners' chief task is to assess and even anticipate the skill requirements of local employers in order to provide them with job candidates they will be likely to hire and retain.

Two very different perspectives, one on workforce development and the other on limiting public assistance, converge to promote the work-first philosophy for the program. The workforce development perspective fosters this view of training largely as a result of ten years of experiments with school-to-work efforts. Jobs for the Future (JFF), a national policy organization that focuses on youth development, asserts that well-designed workplace experiences, tied to supports and learning opportunities outside of work, can have powerful effects on the attitudes, aspirations, and performance of young people. There is growing evidence from the school-to-work movement that work-based learning improves self-esteem and teaches and reinforces basic and technical skills. It also provides a valuable opportunity to understand workplace culture and expectations.[4]

Clearly, there are important differences between the ways youths and adults make the

transition to work. However, evidence from JFF research suggests that lessons from work-based learning approaches can be useful in the welfare to work environment to help low-skill adult workers get and keep better jobs. These lessons include the importance of mentoring relationships, contextual learning and instruction, and credentialing skills learned at work.[5]

The second perspective, the public's growing pressure to limit the time for recipients' public assistance, combines with the lessons from school-to-work to create an environment in which the focus is on immediate employment, vis-à-vis job search and retention, rather than job preparation. As a result of this goal, services in a work-first environment are offered only briefly on short-term pre-employment services, for example, job search activities and work preparation services lasting an average of only three to four weeks. They are more thoroughly concentrated on longer-term post-placement services that may include basic education, English as a second language, occupational skills training, mentoring, transportation, child care, substance abuse treatment, and counseling. While the WtW regulations severely limit pre-employment services, they allow post-employment services to continue almost indefinitely. In fact, one issue discussed by Massachusetts program planners is the definition of "program completion." At present, there are no regulations to determine when a participant has completed her involvement and exited the program.

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Differences between WtW and Other Approaches

It is important to consider how the work-first philosophy departs from other approaches to workforce development when assessing its potential risks for participants and employers. The WtW initiative follows a forty-year growth in programs offering training for employment. Following the manpower demonstration programs launched in the 1960s and funded through the Manpower Development Training Act, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act emerged in the 1970s, as did the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) in the 1980s. JTPA was accompanied by the welfare system's Job Opportunity and Basic Skills program of the Family Support Act of 1988. Over time, programs have been developed for specific populations, such as dislocated workers, older workers, and youth. States have funded their own workforce development and economic development programs to meet specific needs of communities and employers, and proprietary schools have also expanded.[6]

One result of this expansion in training programs is that a distinction has grown between "education" and "job training." In *Learning to Work: The Case for Reintegrating Job Training and Education,* W. Norton Grubb characterizes the differences between education and training. I have summarized them here because they describe significant ways in which job training in general and the WtW program are vulnerable.[7]

1. Job training programs are shorter in length than education programs. Typical training programs may last from ten to fifteen weeks, with as few as forty contact hours. The shortest common postsecondary programs last two semesters on average with about 360 to 1000 contact hours.

2. Educational programs are open to all members of a community, but job training programs are available only to those who are eligible through having experienced some significant problems related to their employment.

3. Job training programs are offered in a variety of settings with no commonly accepted standards or practices, while educational programs are offered in institutions that have standards and are institutionalized.

4. Services in educational programs are standardized to a large degree, while those offered through job training programs vary greatly from one program to another. The design of programs, the mix of services, their duration, and their quality are all quite different.

5. The goal of job training programs is to enable participants to find employment, while the goals of education are much broader and ambiguous. The specificity of training programs allows them to be evaluated more easily and they have a long history of analysis, while educational programs have escaped public scrutiny until the last ten years.

6. Job training has been federally funded for the most part, while education has been supported at the state and local levels. As a result, states have a greater commitment to their educational system than they do to federal training programs.

7. The educational system offers a continuum of services from early childhood education through the university level. If someone leaves the educational system without the ability to find employment, the training system becomes his or her second chance. However, the second-chance system, which is vulnerable to political pressures, has been revised by nearly every president. As a result, it is more unstable and less defined than the education system.

Just as the social climate propels training programs toward faster entry into employment, we have increasing evidence that the surest path to a stable family wage is through long-term education. In MassINC's *Closing the Gap: Raising Skills to Raise Wages,* Edward Moscovitch charts the increases in real earnings for Massachusetts families between 1979 and 1994.[8] Moscovitch shows that the earning power of persons with less than a high school diploma *fell* from $26,842 in 1979 to about $22,664 in 1994, while the earning power of college graduates increased from $58,779 in 1979 to $69,652 in 1994.

Moscovitch points out, however, that the best illustration of the importance of college education is the increasing premium that is placed on it in Massachusetts, even in light of the increasing number of college graduates available to employers. As the number of college graduates increased from 20.5 percent in 1979 to 32.0 percent in 1994, one would expect that employers would pay them lower salaries. In fact, the 11.5 percent increase of college graduates enjoyed an 18.5 percent increase in earnings. National income data for women is even more dramatic. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "The Condition of Education, 1997," women college graduates earned 91 percent more in 1995 than women with a high school diploma, while those with some college increased their earnings by more than 28 percent.

Although data showing the value of an associate degree in Massachusetts is less comprehensive, Moscovitch cites national data from the Survey Research Center of the University of California at Berkeley showing that in 1990, men with an associate degree earned 26.8 percent more than their counterparts with a high school diploma. Similarly, women associate degree holders earned 37.4 percent more than women with only a high school diploma.

Risks of the Work-First Philosophy

The overarching concern with the work-first philosophy is eloquently expressed by Jobs for the Future, one of its chief supporters. The school-to-work effort has proved the importance of integrating workplace learning and school-based learning. However,

> In its determination to make work the centerpiece of welfare policy, the new welfare legislation creates disincentives to pre-employment education and training. Contrary to evidence that argues for creative strategies to integrate work- and classroom-based learning, welfare reform promotes the *substitution* of work experience for educational programming. The pendulum will have to swing back toward greater integration with the education system if welfare reform is going to help a large segment of the population keep, and advance in, jobs.[9]

Grubb echoes this concern in *Learning to Work.*

> As it now stands, virtually the only way to get low-income individuals out of poverty or off welfare is to get them into education programs, like the certificate and associate degree programs of community colleges that have prospects for enhancing earnings . . . The disconnection of education from job training . . . has been counterproductive for both. Many of the reasons . . . for the ineffectiveness of job training . . . come from this divorce.[10]

Risks encountered by individual participants and employers include the following.

1. The target population for WtW programs, the hardest sector to employ, is comprised of persons with poor work histories, math and reading skills, and substance abuse problems. Evidence shows that this group fared poorly in earlier work-first programs. For example, an analysis of the Riverside GAIN program, one of the most publicized WtW efforts, shows that three years after enrollment, only 23 percent of the participants were employed and no longer received AFDC payments. Moreover, within eleven months of orientation, 35 percent of welfare participants were deferred — *not* an explicit option in the WtW program — because of illness, family crises, emotional or mental problems, alcohol or drug addiction, legal difficulties, lack of child care and transportation.[11]

Just as alarming, the most disadvantaged participants in San Diego's Saturation Work Initiative Model experienced significant reductions in AFDC payments after completing the program but had *no* significant gains in earnings. Three years after starting the program, 41.3 percent of participants were still receiving AFDC assistance.[12]

2. Program success relies heavily on employers making positions available to welfare participants and to providing opportunities for post-employment training and advancement. Although unemployment is low in Massachusetts at the moment, the majority of entry-level jobs are in regions that raise significant transportation and child care obstacles for likely welfare employees.[13] A slowdown in the economy and an increase in unemployment will further complicate employment prospects for welfare workers.[14]

Of even more concern to the WtW program, research illustrates that employers are reluctant to invest in training when they doubt that they will recoup their costs.[15] They might be unwilling to train for a variety of reasons, one of which is certainly

worker mobility and high turnover. In any event, without significant employer commit-
ment to training welfare employees, the likelihood of participants advancing in their
careers and achieving economic self-sufficiency is severely threatened.

3. Finally, the Corporation for Business, Work, and Learning (CBWL) has had a great
deal of practical experience in training incumbent workers in companies as large as
Malden Mills and as small as a ten-person metalworking shop. Even when employers are
eager to train their employees, the many other pressures of business often make this quite
difficult. For example, finding adequate space to train along with the time and available
machinery and qualified, able trainers, managing last minute changes in production
schedules, and so on, all present significant obstacles to training.

WtW post-placement training and support services can be provided only to welfare
employees. Employers face a number of challenges in balancing the needs of a diverse
workforce who are not all eligible for the same supports and services. Significant man-
agement problems arise when only a segment of a company's workforce is entitled to
receive benefits that many others would like to have. Dealing constructively with such
conflicts requires considerable management skill. In addition, making the transition from
welfare to work is not a simple process for most individuals. Inevitably, welfare employ-
ees must cope with problems that necessarily spill over into their lives at work. The
ability to recognize and deal with such events also requires skill, experience, and will-
ingness on the part of employers. Many are not immediately equipped to handle the
situations that arise.[16]

Lessons from the Field: Critical Program Features

A review of evaluation literature specific to WtW programs suggests that successful
plans share the common features described below.

1. *Conscious shift to a work-first philosophy.* This shift should pervade the pro-
gram from frontline staff to operation and service delivery systems. Program staff
must convey the message that preparing for and attaining work is the primary goal
of the program in their everyday work with participants.[17] Reinforcing that message
while supporting individuals is a crucial mix of messages and skills. Denver's ACES
program staff provided this advice to other practitioners: "To be honest, enthusias-
tic, encouraging, empathetic, and compassionate in assisting this client population
and, at the same time, continue to help them remember their initial vision and goals
of being in the program: self-sufficiency."[18]

In addition to staff impact, however, the right range of services should be avail-
able to participants so that their varied needs can be met. There must also be enough
flexibility in program operations to enable participants to access services easily and
at the appropriate time. Last, rather than focusing on "process" as programs have in
the past, services must be designed and delivered with a career path consciousness,
meaning that whether counseling, transportation, training, or mentoring is being
provided, its content will in some way contribute to the advancement of the partici-
pants' careers.[19]

2. *Emphasis on case management.* A case manager should remain involved with
each participant from the outset of the program until its completion. This relation-
ship is critical to participant success, so caseloads need to be reasonable. The case
manager's responsibilities and authority must be clear to all parties so that there can be a

swift and effective advocate for clients, identifying needs, accessing services, actively assisting in job search, working with employers, et cetera.[20]

3. *Communication and coordination of services.* Most successful WtW programs involve a variety of staff, often at more than one agency or community-based organization. Communication and coordination of services is critical if employer and participant needs are to be met efficiently. Linkages between agencies should be developed early on in the planning stage, and responsibilities clearly assigned. Resources, whether financial, staff time, space, and more, should be pooled so that partners share a stake in program outcomes. Shared location is also a factor critical to assisting in communication between staff and ease of access for participants and employers. Finally, creating formal interagency teams builds a structure in which problems and client progress can be addressed and future planning can be undertaken.[21]

4. *Employer involvement.* The Center for Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, California, is a landmark example of the impact of including employers. CET has made a practice of working closely with area employers from the outset, involving them in program planning, continually fostering their commitment to hiring welfare employees, and working with them in coordinating post-placement services. This kind of close relationship with employers is one critical explanation for CET's impacts on earnings. One random assignment evaluation targeting single parents found that CET participants earned, on average, $2,062 (22 percent) more than control group members after a thirty-month follow-up period. More recent data show that earnings gains were still holding up after five years.[22] Unless WtW programs are closely linked to the employers in the area, the chances for placement and advancement of participants are greatly reduced.[23]

5. *Outcome orientation.* This important feature ensures that program resources will be strategically focused. It requires a knowledge of the needs and attributes of program clients along with their specific program goals and outcomes. The goals should be clearly articulated and activities, services, and resources targeted in support of them.[24]

6. *Strong support services.* Not surprisingly, the provision of child care and transportation to and from work and, in some cases, to and from child care, were the most critical support services, without which program failure was virtually assured. In addition, furnishing appropriate work clothes, referrals for housing and medical needs, and alcohol and substance abuse counseling were also key. This need is considered from both the employer side of WtW and the staff perspective.[25] Finally, as in other program features, a high degree of responsiveness to the needs of clients is the hallmark of successful programs.

Other elements are important to the success of WtW programs, but because they are beyond the scope of CBWL's technical assistance role, I only mention them here. They include (1) sufficient resources to fund a quality program, hire qualified, skilled staff, keep caseloads low, and provide the supports necessary to WtW participants, and (2) sound, cost-conscious management practices that track participant activity and program expenditures and respond quickly to management problems as they arise.[26]

Methodology

The Corporation for Business, Work, and Learning (CBWL) distributed to each Regional Employment Board (REB) a planning package that included instructions for preparing their year one Welfare to Work plans. In brief, REBs were asked to describe the following program elements in the narrative section of their plans: the target population, local program planning process, participant assessment process, anticipated activities and case management system, plan for coordination with existing services, strategy for employer involvement, support services, and program performance goals. As noted earlier, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) had not yet defined what would constitute a positive program outcome, a hazy area that was acknowledged in the instructions.

As administrator of the WtW funds, CBWL was responsible for reviewing the plans to ensure that they were in compliance with federal regulations. My purpose in reviewing the plans was to assess the degree to which the critical program features described above were considered. This information would give CBWL staff an early indication of likely program strengths and weaknesses, areas where technical assistance might be useful, and suggest possible evaluation strategies. To carry out the assessment, I amplified each key element with a set of specific features and characteristics, which appear in Table 1.

Table 1

**Assessment of Specific Features and Characteristics of
Massachusetts Work to Welfare Program Plans**

Shift to Work-First Philosophy	*Employer Involvement*
Shift message is clear and consistent	Employer committed to hiring WtW employees
Flexible services to meet clients' needs	Employer's role in local program planning
Variety of services	Employer's role in post-placement services
Career path consciousness	
Case Management System	*Outcome Oriented*
Case manager assigned at the outset	Performance goals articulated
Case management remains connected until completion	Activities and services geared toward outcomes
Clear responsibility and authority	
Coordination of Services	*Support Services*
Multiagency involvement	Primary services available
Shared location	Secondary services available
Pooling resources	Other services available
Interagency teams	

I scored each local plan according to the strength with which the characteristics were considered, adding comments and concerns as necessary. Each characteristic received a score of 5 if it was given strong consideration, 3 if the consideration was adequate, 1 if it was given only weak consideration, and 0 if the characteristic wasn't considered at all. If each of the twenty characteristics in a plan received a perfect score of 5, its total score would be 100. This system enabled me to review each plan independently in addition to the group as a whole.

Findings

Overall, the local plans fell far short of the level of detail and development for which we had hoped. Several plans offered very little narrative; two REBs that work closely together submitted identical plans. Because of our working relationships with the REBs, we knew that one of them had progressed much further in its planning process than its narrative expressed, others were not quite as far along as they suggested, and still others had obviously made minimal progress in defining their plans. Although I relied only on what was included in the plans' narratives when scoring them, it was clear that they did not always fully represent a REB's complete program design.

Having worked with REB staff on several committees developing WtW policy for Massachusetts, I believe that three significant reasons explain the disappointing provisions in the plans. First, many REBs were skeptical about the work-first philosophy and reluctant to engage fully in the WtW program, even though they were aware of the time limits that face many of their residents. Second, REBs, with little experience of the work-first approach, did not take into account the importance of these program features. Third, the REBs' high degree of control over program design made CBWL's role largely irrelevant regarding this exercise. There was little impetus to communicate more to CBWL than was sufficient to assure reviewers that a REB was in compliance with the regulations.

Given these caveats, clear trends were evident in the plans, and several major concerns arose.

1. *In general, the narratives portend lackluster programs.* Support services, the program feature that received the strongest consideration across REBs, obtained an average score of only 66, while the scores of the top five plans ranged from 79 to 64, hardly a strong showing. Similarly, the five weakest plans had alarmingly low scores ranging from 31 to 37, a real cause for concern regarding the quality of service that customers of these REBs may receive.

2. *The evidence of employer involvement and commitment is minimal.* Some REBs had included local employers in their planning, referred to them as important customers of the WtW program, and considered how they would be involved in post-placement services. Still, only one REB had really sought out and depended on local employers' input for their WtW planning efforts. This REB developed a unique, industry-focused approach to WtW and recruited businesses in four growing industries that rely on attracting low-skill, entry-level employees. These firms were deeply engaged in program planning early on and consistently. The REBs' entire WtW program centers on preparing participants for those specific industries with the skill sets, attitudes, and expectations that will be appropriate. Even so, there is still no evidence that those particular employers, or any others, have made a commitment to hiring and subsequently training WtW participants.

Because employers and participants are considered equally important customers, this lack of engagement suggests that both groups are likely to be poorly served. The difficulties in providing training and support services in the workplace have already been described. If program staff and employers don't address at least some of these issues in the planning phase, they will be even more difficult to resolve constructively when they arise on the job.

3. *Nine plans had very weak strategies for case management.* Many plans expected case managers to have an unrealistic blend of skills and experience, requiring them to function as mentor, trainer, advocate, job developer, and counselor.

Moreover, they were often left without the authority they will need to fulfill their varied responsibilities. Much of the success of participants in a WtW environment depends on the assistance of skilled case managers. As a result, their role must be well-conceived and their authority clear so that they can be effective advocates for their clients. Without an explicit and realistic definition of their responsibilities along with the authority to carry them out, they will be unable to meet the needs of their clients.

4. *More than half the plans had poorly defined strategies for coordinating services.* Of the nine with weak case management strategies, eight, plus two other plans, also had weak strategies for coordinating services. An agency cannot achieve success for its WtW clients and employers alone; at the very least, coordination with the Department of Transitional Assistance and the Division of Employment and Training is critical owing to the necessity of sharing client records. However, real success will be a factor of more than the minimal sharing of information on client status and eligibility. There is little indication that these REBs have developed the kind of rich working relationships with the agencies, educational institutions, and community-based organizations that can play an important role in moving participants from welfare to work. The likelihood of losing participants through the cracks because of poor communication is high.

5. *The plans indicated considerable awareness of the need for support services.* One REB, for example, showed great knowledge of its clients, which it expressed in the array of services it planned to make available to them. These services included backup child care, driver education, bus passes, transportation of dependents, payments for work-related tools and uniforms, income tax filing assistance, particularly the Earned Income Tax Credit, general equivalency diploma test fees, and materials for individuals with disabilities. Understanding participants' basic needs and making arrangements to provide for them will go a long way toward enabling individuals to succeed.

6. *One third of the REBs articulated specific program goals.* Five REBs were willing to express their own program and performance goals, even in light of DOL's lack of guidance. Because of their concentration on outcomes, these plans were more coherent and focused than the others. In fact, four of the five highest scoring plans had perfect scores in this category. Such strong consideration of outcomes is in stark contrast to several others that were patently unwilling to set any goals for themselves. In general, these programs appeared to be more of a patchwork of services and relationships than a coherent program and did, in fact, receive low scores throughout.

Implications for Technical Assistance and Evaluation

Technical Assistance

The generally unimpressive program plans clearly indicate that technical assistance will be useful in all areas, particularly regarding employer involvement and coordination of services. If assistance is to be successfully provided, the following criteria should be considered:

1. The time line for implementing programs is quite short; whatever assistance is provided must be on topics of immediate concern.

2. The information offered must be practical in nature so that program staff can quickly put it to use in their current work.

3. The need for knowledge of best practices is widespread and resources are scarce; assistance should be offered in ways that will reach the broadest audiences.

4. CBWL must be sensitive to the limitations of its role; it may *only* offer assistance, it cannot mandate program achievements.

Although it is prudent to address weaknesses in the WtW plans, it is also important to recognize the strengths that several Regional Employment Boards have shown in their designs. REBs are just as, if not more likely to learn from each other as they are to learn from models functioning under different conditions and in different economic and social climates. Developing ways in which program successes and lessons learned can be shared among the regions will go a long way toward raising the level of performance for all REBs. In addition, it may strengthen existing partnerships and open doors to developing new ones.

Overall Evaluation

It is worth attempting to tell two different stories as the Welfare to Work program unfolds. The first is clearly the effect that it will have on participants. Does WtW help them move toward economic self-sufficiency and ultimately economic well-being? If so, how and why? What benefits, if any, do employers gain from their involvement and at what cost? What components were most helpful and what made them so? How can we understand the lessons learned from WtW and apply them to other aspects of social welfare policy and workforce development policy?

The data that might supply some of the answers to these questions will be captured by the REBs throughout the course of the program. Only some of the questions will be addressed, however, and even those will not be answered thoroughly by figures. Finally, whether the data will be reviewed and analyzed on a systemwide basis remains to be seen. REBs may not have the opportunity to know how their performance compares with that of their colleagues, or more important, which expert REBs have valuable lessons to offer.

The second story grows out of the shift from federal and state control to local control over program policy and design. Here is a chance to learn how policy is built at the street level and about the relationship between local program policy and local program success. Are programs more effective when they are built by practitioners? What system supports, if any, can help practitioners in their role as program architects? How is the quality of services affected when program policy is shaped in the absence of guiding principles and purpose? What is the impact on customers when that void is filled from the local perspective, as some REBs have done, or remains unaddressed?

This kind of qualitative evaluation cannot be carried out by an organization that will be held accountable for the outcomes of the WtW Program. Practitioners would not relinquish their knowledge of how events transpired, why — what impacts were intended, and what impacts were achieved — to an organization with any amount of control over their resources. Only when both parties trust that they share the same purpose can they communicate authentically and to good effect.

Could the Corporation for Business, Work, and Learning's reduced authority be turned on its head, then, and become an asset? Could the lack of control and authority enable CBWL to become a partner to the REBs, observing and assisting rather

than posing a threat? Could the lack of power enable CBWL to work alongside the REBs and see WtW from their point of view, collecting and organizing stories to create a systemic picture of WtW in Massachusetts?

It would be naive, I suppose, to think so. As W. Norton Grubb reminds us, job training is a political product and WtW is political in the extreme, with only a two-year life span. The players in the Massachusetts workforce development system have had a long history, and they will continue far into the future, jockeying for control and resources long after WtW has been replaced by the next job training fashion statement. If we are to take advantage of the tremendous learning opportunity that the WtW program offers, I think that, unfortunately, we had best look elsewhere for instruction. ✂

Notes

1. *Federal Register,* November 18, 1997, Part II, Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 20 CFR, Part 645, Welfare-to-Work Grants, Interim Rule, 61588.
2. Ibid.
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