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## Administrative Reforms in US Welfare Policy

— Focusing on Administrative Issues Raised by TANF —

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Reversing US welfare policy that was entitlement based and federally driven, the US Congress's passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act of 1996 abolished federal cash assistance under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The primary effect of TANF is to give states considerable discretion in designing social welfare policy. Within the context of flexibility for states to administer welfare programs, TANF imposes work requirements on both welfare recipients and states. These profound changes have the potential to alter the nature of the state and local administration. For the purpose of analyzing many administrative challenges and opportunities raised by TANF, this article review the main provisions of TANF, administrative changes under TANF, and major policy analysts' arguments on the welfare reform. Next, problems and possibilities at the state and local levels are discussed in

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order to examine the feasibility of TANF. Finally, the article suggests considerations for administrative reform at the state and local levels.

□ Key words: welfare, administration, reform, TANF, PRWORA, PRA, AFDC

## I . Introduction

There are various efforts to change the way social welfare programs are administered, funded, and used. The most significant recent attempt to welfare reform occurred during the Clinton administration with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, known as the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA). Among other things, the act abolished the cash assistance program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which had provided income support for poor single mothers and their children since its inception as Title IV of the 1935 Social Security Act. AFDC was replaced by block grants for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

In the past, the cash value of AFDC benefits has fallen steadily in almost all states. The cash support system of AFDC has become increasingly tied to work requirements for welfare recipients, since all states run welfare-to-work programs mandated by the Family Support Act of 1988. For most recipients, these programs consist of short-term training in how to look for and hold a job, followed by job search assistance. By the mid-1990s, most states had about 20 percent of their caseload either working or in work programs. Another important alteration of AFDC in recent years has been states' use of waivers from federal programs requirements to run experiments in their welfare programs (Blank, 1997b). These waivers have allowed states to experiment with different AFDC eligibility provisions or to increase work incentives and work mandates.

The 1996 welfare reform legislation continues these recent program trends in AFDC, limits to cash support, and mandates for stronger work requirements,

while giving states more discretion over program designs (Blank, 1997b). In this sense, it is important to analyze many challenges and opportunities for state and local administration raised by the TANF legislation that is the heart of the welfare reform. For the purpose, this article examines the main provisions of TANF, administrative changes under TANF, and major policy analysts' arguments on the welfare reform. Next, problems and possibilities at the state and local levels are discussed to review the feasibility. Finally, the article suggests considerations for successful administrative reform at the state and local levels.

## II. Administrative Changes under TANF

The welfare reform introduced a variety of changes in the administration and financing of income support for poor families as well as in eligibility requirements and benefits. The law shifted public assistance to poor families from a federal entitlement program to a fixed block grants program administered by states. TANF devolves to states full responsibility for designing and managing a welfare-to-work program intended to help unemployed parents find and hold jobs so that they can provide economic security for their minor children.

The main provisions of the PRWORA and TANF in terms of the changes of state and local administration are the following: (1) The end of the previous program 'AFDC'. (2) States' determination of whom is eligible for aid, the form of the aid, and the conditions under which it is granted. States are responsible for designing and managing programs with money from block grants. Federal rules are few and focus primarily on reducing expenditures by reducing the welfare rolls. (3) Fixed, block grant funding to states rather than an open-ended matching-grant formula. (4) A lifetime limit of no more than 5 years of assistance to any individual, although states may elect shorter lifetime limits. (5) The requirement that all mothers and a limited number of

fathers must be in a work activity no later than after 2 years on welfare. States are free to set a shorter period. (6) The requirement that participants must be moved into work in increments with financial penalties for states that fails to comply. States may exempt up to 20 percent of their current caseload. (7) The restriction of opportunities to receive 1 year of job-focused training to less than a third of participants. States are permitted to set a lower percentage. (8) The option for states to provide cash to subsidize child care for working parents. After participants obtain jobs, they may continue to be eligible for Medicaid and food stamps for a limited period. However, they must reapply for these benefits. (9) The denial of aid to teenage parents unless they are enrolled in high school or are in programs to receive general equivalency diplomas and are living with parents or in a group home. States also have a numerical goal for reducing the illegitimacy ratio and the number of out-of-wedlock birth with penalties imposed on states that fail to achieve these goals. (10) The ability of states to enact a 'family cap' for participants and rewards to states for reducing the number of abortions that occur each year. (11) The option for states to enact more lenient rules and time lines for women who are victims of family violence. (12) The ability of states to apply financial sanctions and ultimately dismiss participants from programs for infractions of the rules and regulations (U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, 1998; Dinerman, 2000; Hasenfeld, 2000).

### III. Arguments on US Welfare Reform

Supporters of the welfare reform claim that it will substantially reduce the use of public assistance and increase employment and earnings, and in the long run, decrease out-of-wedlock birth rates and increase marriage rates. Opponents claim that it will further impoverish many already-poor families, leaving them without a safety net of public assistance. Focusing on Blank, Handler and Hasenfeld, and Abramovitz who are major policy analysts, arguments on the welfare reform are reviewed.

## 1. Blank's Arguments

Blank's main arguments on the welfare reform are as follows. First, the belief that poverty is more behavioral, more ghetto based, and more a problem experienced by people of color is an error. Second, jobs are less effective at reducing poverty since the primary change in the lives of the poor over the past 20 years is the deteriorating set of economic opportunities available to less-skilled workers. Third, the nihilistic reaction of 'nothing works' is a serious misinterpretation of history.

Blank evaluates that TANF targets to particular groups who meet behavioral or other eligibility criteria, establishing 'worthiness' by enrolled into job training programs and so on. This sort of mandate and behavioral requirements are more expensive than cash assistance because it needs more monitoring. She also thinks that states and localities have been greater discretion in the design and administration of certain programs reducing governmental interference in people's lives, but by mandating behavioral conformity and income eligibility for public assistance, this program actually gets the government become invasive to people's lives.

Blank seems skeptical that the legislation will have dramatic positive effects because the most disadvantaged populations have proved hard to reach through policy interventions and appear to have only limited labor market options. She is concerned about women who are at risk of long-term welfare use, who have multiple out-of-wedlock children and whose job preparation is lowest. While it may be possible to move women with multiple environmental and personal problems into greater self-sufficiency and employment, it is unlikely to be cheap, quick, or easy. Given the limited funds and the very short time frame for public assistance, it may be impossible under this legislation to deal adequately with women who face multiple environmental and personal problems. She also doubts whether women and their children will end up economically or socially better off as a result of these programs. If the jobs open to these women are unstable and low wage, they may not be able to replace fully their public assistance income with earnings. The legislation is

likely to find it even harder to improve their overall economic situation.

In addition, Blank seems to recommend policymakers to consider ways to increase job opportunities through temporary public sector slots or through wage subsidy schemes. If this legislation seriously erodes the social safety net available to these families, then the legislation could seriously worsen conditions among some of the poorest populations (Blank, 1997a). She thinks that the question of how work improves the well-being of the poor will also be tied up with what other types of public and private assistance are available to working low-income women. Recent expansions in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which provides wage subsidies to low-wage workers, should make work pay well. She argues that other key complementary policies will involve the states' efficacy in collecting and enforcing child support orders from absent parents and the availability of child care and of health insurance for the working poor.

Blank thoroughly discusses why the economic expansions of the 1980s and the 1990s have not solved the poverty problem as declining real wages among the less skilled offset the opportunities provided by economic growth. The relationship between wages and work behavior is discussed along with an explanation of how the movement of jobs from city to suburban locations has affected poverty. Multiple examples demonstrate that, for less skilled workers, weekly earnings are not a sufficient mechanism for escaping poverty.

## 2. Handler and Hasenfeld's Arguments

Handler and Hasenfeld contend that the most recent wave of welfare reforms suffers from a disjuncture between rhetoric and reality that stems from a moral mistrust of the poor and a desire to enforce the work ethic symbolically. They present the reality of the low-wage labor market for both men and women, emphasizing the implications of declining wages, rising inequality, and the increasing prevalence of part-time, low-security job opportunities for families in poverty. They offer a variety of recommendations for creating welfare-

to-work policies and practices that are more in line with the realities of the labor market. Their argument calls for a shift away from interventions that blame the poor and toward policies that address the inadequacies of welfare bureaucracies and the structural employment barriers faced by low-income men and women.

Handler and Hasenfeld's recommendations focus on job-creation strategies, the expansion of income subsidies including the Earned Income Tax Credit and minimum wage increase. This discussion is complemented by a thoughtful critique of the various other systems in which low-income workers participate or from which they potentially benefit, such as child support systems, disability benefits, child care services, and health care. Of particular note is their overview of unemployment insurance programs, the requirements of which often excluded welfare recipients due to the tenuous nature of their attachment to the low-wage labor force. Exclusions based on part-time work status prevent many recipients from receiving unemployment benefits, despite the reality that the low-wage labor market increasingly offers part-time, less secure employment opportunities. In reviewing various employment-related benefits, they pay refreshing attention to the existing shortcomings of these benefit systems for both women and men. They do offer several solutions that are politically feasible, but mostly present issues to consider rather than concrete possibilities. Still, this is an important and practical discussion to have, given that much of the debate surrounding welfare reform has paid little attention to the interconnections among different employment benefit systems.

One of Handler and Hasenfeld's strong points is their detailed discussion of what employment services for welfare recipients should look like. They cite several examples of effective employment and training programs. They attribute the success of these programs, in part, to organizational ideologies that recognize the importance of respectful, trusting, and cooperative client-worker relationships in achieving the highly individualistic and long-term employment needs of the clients. They admit that such programs require external political support to establish legitimacy. However, they think, by requiring these programs to adhere to explicit outcome objectives and



making the resources available to attaining these objectives, the program is prevented from subverting or displacing its service goals.

A key point that Handler and Hasenfeld make regarding employment services is that participation must be voluntary. Sanctions and time limits institutionalize an ideology that blame the poor. Employment service workers become preoccupied with making clients follow rules rather than helping them achieve meaningful employment goals. In fact, they recommend that employment services be decoupled from income maintenance tasks and that the receipt of welfare should not be made contingent on participation in employment-related activities. Furthermore, they admit that there will always be individuals who are not able to participate in paid employment for a variety of reasons and that mandatory programs will not be effective tools for moving people from welfare to work.

Handler and Hasenfeld devote significant attention to teenage parents. They argue that teens represent our era's chosen "category" responsible for eroding society's moral order. After reviewing the trends in teenage birth, the evidence on the causes and consequences of teenage parenthood, and the modest impact that teen pregnancy prevention programs have demonstrated, they conclude that recent welfare reform policies aimed at teenagers are largely symbolic in nature. They serve to uphold dominant family values rather than address the real cause behind teenage childbearing and a lack of economic and social opportunities.

Although Handler and Hasenfeld articulate a more effective strategy for attaching low-wage workers to the labor force, their approach will only go so far in overcoming the society's long-standing tradition of morally condemning recipients of public aid based on their behavior and their membership in particular groups. They continue commitment to highlighting the myths and ceremonies of welfare provisions.

### 3. Abramovitz' Arguments

Abramovitz thinks that the welfare reform threatens to bring much harm to poor and working class people, especially women and children. She examines the most recent welfare reform debates in the legislatures, highlights the myths about women and welfare that led Congress and the states to dismantle welfare programs without any concern for the consequences. The debate over welfare through the history includes four major assaults on poor women and AFDC. All these assaults are based on negative stereotypes of both poor women and welfare, and none can pass the test of empirical research. First, she argues that AFDC does not consume vast amount of money. Reality is that medicaid cost is much larger and the dollar amount for AFDC is actually small. Second, she argues that welfare does not lead women to avoid work. According to her, when wages fall below the welfare grant or when employers want to increase the supply of low-paid workers, policymakers try to reform welfare to make sure that the most desperate choose welfare over employment. Politicians invokes negative stereotypes against women's work behavior - using welfare for avoiding dirty, danger, and low-paying job - and justify their attack on welfare. Third, in relation to "family ethic", she argues that AFDC is not responsible for changes in family structure. On the contrary, she insists that reduction of benefits increases poverty among women, which makes it actually difficult for them to carry out parental responsibility. Time limits and mandatory work programs devalue women's caretaking work and leaving children unsupervised. What breaks up families is poverty, not welfare. Fourth, as a result of the welfare reform, she thinks that federal oversight and accountability will be lost, thus states can reduce benefits levels and establish certain rules.

According to Abramovitz, these war on welfare threatens the rights of all women to decent pay and a choice of families that do not fit the two-parent model. Current welfare reform can weaken women's caretaking support, threatens their reproductive rights, and undercut their independence. This reform diverts attention from the underlying causes of the nation's problems

and focuses on the values and behavior of the poor. With this way, the poor women are scapegoats and blamed as social and economic problems.

To show that welfare reform has penalized single motherhood and exposed poor women to the risks of hunger, homeless, and male violence, Abramovitz analyzes the history of early attacks on women's work and family life in the past and in the present days. Her analysis shows that poor women and public assistance have been scapegoated regularly to enforce both the work and family ethic. According to her, social programs have always been a double-edged sword for women, regulating their lives on the one hand, and providing needed resources on the other.

#### 4. Welfare Reform Is Working?

A welfare-to-work policy intends to enable single mothers and other parents of economically dependent children receiving public assistance to move into the workforce. However, the welfare-to-work policies incorporated in TANF are based on a number of flawed assumptions.

First, many of the jobs available in the private sector do not pay wages sufficient to support a family, particularly single-parent families. The TANF program is based on the premise that able-bodied recipients can find at least minimum wage employment and will earn enough to provide the basic necessities for a working family with children (Hansan & Morris, 1999). Two thirds of workers who start at subpar wages are unable to lift themselves to a decent wage even after a decade of continuous full-time work (Schwarz, 1998).

Second, there are some parents in the society whose physical, mental, emotional, or family circumstances prevent them from working successfully in the private sector. TANF reflects the view that every parent should be able to work and support her or his family. The legislation makes little or no provision for helping children where the parent is unable to work full time in the private sector. However, TANF recipients experience a broad range of family and personal difficulties that make employment difficult, such as physical

disabilities, health limitations, health or behavioral problems of children, low basic skills, learning disabilities, and so on.

Third, state and local governments do not have the finances or taxing authority to cope with serious unemployment and poverty during times of economic recessions. The euphoria among policymakers about the initial success of the welfare-to-work initiatives in TANF is sustained by an unusually strong economy, very low employment, and a continuing drop in the number of welfare recipients (Hansen & Morris, 1999).

#### IV. Problems and Possibilities at the State and Local Levels

The most significant provision of TANF in terms of the state and local administration is the explicit ending of the federal entitlement to cash assistance for needy families and their children. Under AFDC, if mothers and their children meet the income requirements by states and the eligibility requirements by the federal government, they were guaranteed cash assistance. States now have both the authority and responsibility to establish all eligibility requirements, and they are under no obligation to serve any particular type of family (Hagen, 1999). There is no longer specific federal requirements that states must follow in determining eligibility for welfare, and states can impose additional behavioral conditions on welfare receipt. In essence, TANF abdicates federal responsibility for needy family and children by abolishing any entitlement to welfare benefits (Bane, 1997).

States can use TANF money for any programs that accomplish the purposes of the block grant, which are stated in the legislation as providing assistance to needy families, ending the dependency of needy parents on government benefits, preventing and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation of two-parent families. However, the federal government limits its financial obligation to states. For states, there is no longer the guarantee that federal funding automatically expands to help them meet the needs of

poor families (Hagen, 1999). Unlike AFDC, TANF does not have matching requirements for states. With the block grant funding for TANF, the amount of federal money that each state receives is a fixed amount based on the state's prior spending levels for welfare programs (Hagen, 1999). The federal dollars are also fixed at the same nominal level, so their real value will diminish over time with inflation (Blank, 1997b). As a result, it prevents states from withdrawing all their funds from welfare programs by requiring states to maintain a specified level of spending based on past expenditures.

States also face mandatory time limits on support. No family can receive funding from TANF if an adult in that family has already received 60 months of assistance over his or her lifetime. At their option, states can impose even shorter time limits and are allowed to exempt 20 percent of their caseload from this five-year limit. Currently, states are in a position to extend benefits to the recently unemployed through their TANF programs by developing specialized eligibility rules for such families. However, if states wish to use federal funds for this, they are limited by the federal time limit structure. Although they could use state funds to do this, the current emphasis on caseload reduction limits the fiscal and political viability of such strategies for many state TANF programs (Greenberg & Savner, 1999).

States have a strong incentive to terminate recipients from welfare as a way to meet the work requirements. Activities that can be counted as 'work' include employment, work experience, community service, job training, job search, job readiness assistance for only 6 weeks, and vocational education for no more than 12 months. The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 sets a limit that 30 percent of the cases counted toward the work participation rate can be in vocational training. The act does not allow states to count in the 20 hours per week many educational activities such as high school or GED completion, ESL, or postsecondary education (Hasenfeld, 2000). The legislation offers no new federal funds to assist states in expanding their work programs.

In summary, TANF presents both problems and possibilities to the state and local governments for responsibly serving welfare recipients under conditions of time limits for benefits and work participation requirements. States are given

broad discretion in determining whom to assist, how long to provide assistance, and when to terminate assistance, but the strongest message of TANF is the importance of caseload reduction. While the law stresses the need to reduce caseloads, it gives no comparable messages about addressing job quality such as assuring food stamps, child care for families beginning work, and using freed-up block grants to improve the economic well-being of low-income families (Greenberg, 2001).

## V. Suggestions for Administrative Reform

Under TANF, some states are beginning to recognize that reducing caseloads without providing safeguards causes families with the most severe employment barriers to fall out of the public system. However, TANF neither requires nor encourages states to work with families to identify and address obstacles to employment (Greenberg, 2001). In this sense, successful state and local administration under TANF is up to developing specific policies at the state and local levels. The following are suggestions for administrative reform under TANF.

First, implementation of the current welfare-to-work policy requires changes in state and local governments responsible for implementing the new legislation. The state and local governments administering TANF need to shift from an emphasis on eligibility determination and verification to one of welfare service, stressing transition assistance and support necessary to move TANF recipients from welfare to work. The state and local offices need to create case management or teamwork structures to determine how to maximize the use of available resources and restructure the design and delivery of service components to meet the needs of families that lack employment skills. That is, considerable attention and investment of state resources must be given to helping poor families overcome obstacles to employment. State and local governments are in a position to better organize resources low-cost housing,

accessible child and health care, transportation, training, and education.

Second, a critical issue is how to preserve and build on a framework of the state and local flexibility. The law expands states' discretion in deciding how to spend federal and state funds, whom to assist, what services to provide, who should deliver services, and how to structure approaches to welfare reform (Greenberg, 2001). In fact, however, states' granted flexibility can only be used to implement a 'work-first' approach to welfare reform (Lens & Pollack, 1999). To decrease the threat of fiscal sanctions and expand states' social services, new federal fund needs to be offered sooner or later. When funding is adequate, states can begin addressing the needs of low-income families.

Third, accountability should be strengthened. TANF requires each state to submit a biannual state plan, but requires only skeletal information about policy choices or how funds are being used. As to performance, state data about caseload declines can be reviewed. However, in the absence of common eligibility rules across states, it is not reasonable to tell to what extent a decline in a state reflects reduced need or contracted eligibility. To generate better information about state policies, practices, use of funds, and provision of benefits and services, annual reports should explain what states did (Greenberg, 2001). In addition, it is important to reach consensus on outcomes for which it is reasonable to hold states accountable.

Fourth, the flexibility allowed under TANF combined with federal work requirements and time-limited benefits may serve as an impetus for major administrative changes at both the state and local levels (Hagen, 1999). TANF challenges the state and local administrators to change the organizational culture, moving it from an emphasis on accuracy in providing income assistance to providing services that promote recipients' secure employment. A major administrative effort must be building the agency's capacity to serve increasing numbers of recipients with a greater intensity of services (Hagen, 1999). Building interagency and intraagency coordination at both the state and local levels is not to be overlooked since most public welfare agencies are complex bureaucracies with separate units for various employment services, public assistance programs, and protective services.

## VI. Conclusion

The goal of US welfare reform is to promote self-sufficiency for welfare recipients with the implications that self-sufficiency is the outcome of getting a job. If it is to assist them to become economically independent, it is based on consideration of their circumstances as well as economic and political causes of poverty. Therefore, a successful welfare-to-work administration in TANF must be based on a readiness to develop discreet policies, such as economic policies, family and children's policies, education and training policies, and administration.

First, economic policies need to connect the realities of the labor market and client diversity, achieving balance between the supply of employable welfare recipients and the private-sector demand for their labor. Economic policies are connected with individuals and economic groups, whereas welfare policies are connected mainly with families and personal well-being. Economic policy is effective to the extent that it does not distort the working of the economy and it increases productivity and the gains from which are equitably by investors, managers, and employees. Those economic policies might alter the demand for low-skilled workers in the private market and raise the minimum-wage level. Some tools could include raising the minimum wage and wage supplements, stimulating growth in the macro-economy and public subsidies, and strengthening policies that increase the capacity of employees to speak on equal relations with their employers (Hansen & Morris, 1999).

Second, policies that enhance family and children's security within a welfare-to-work policy are concerned with policies intended to resolve other societal needs, such as the persistent prevalence of poverty, family disorganization, individual dysfunction, and so on. Therefore, if welfare-to-work policies are to succeed, serious attention and greater investment of state resources must be given to helping welfare families. Some areas include safe and affordable child care, qualification for health care, and support services. Support services also need to include transportation, housing



assistance, basic education, counseling, publicly funded community jobs, and sheltered work opportunities for structured job-training opportunities.

Third, education and training is an important area on which a successful welfare-to-work policy must be forced. Deficiencies that exist in the organization and approach of work-training programs affect young people approaching working age as well as unemployed adults, resulting in an under-skilled labor pool (Hansen & Morris, 1999). TANF recipients are the large population of unemployed and never-employed potential workers for whom the existing system of vocational education and job preparation has proven inadequate. Integration of the welfare-to-work and work-preparation systems is proposed as means of maximizing the potential benefits of training programs for both welfare recipients and employers.

Fourth, administration for the welfare-to-work policy is the final area identified as needing serious attention by policymakers. TANF requires changes in the organizations responsible for implementing the new legislation. Agencies and staff administering TANF need to shift from an emphasis on eligibility determination and verification to one of client service, stressing transition assistance and support necessary to move a TANF recipient from welfare to work. State and local offices need to create case management or work-team structures to determine how to maximize the use of available resources and restructure the design and delivery of service components to meet the needs of families that lack employment skills or have not fared well in earlier welfare-to-work programs (Hansen & Morris, 1999). TANF block grants offer states an opportunity to rearrange services and programs necessary to help welfare recipients prepare for and maintain jobs. States are in the best position to organize resources, such as low-cost housing, accessible child and health care, transportation, and education and training.

Amid arguments on the welfare reform, the clearest fact is that the state and local administration will be the primary mechanism for achieving and enforcing the state's commitments to needy families as each state has complete responsibility for the lives and well-being of millions of poor families and children. Especially, administrative efforts on the state and local levels need to

be focused on increasing state funding of welfare programs, developing fair and equitable eligibility requirements for welfare benefits, providing state-funded welfare benefits for those no longer eligible for TANF, and building welfare employment programs that are responsive to welfare recipients' needs.

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