

An Evaluation of WorkFirst By Service Providers

A Field Report

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Introduction

Work first is Washington State's welfare-to-work strategy. It is based on the belief that everyone has abilities needed in today's workforce, and those who can work should. Washington initiated the WorkFirst program in August 1997 to help low-income families become self-sufficient by providing training and support services necessary for parents to get a job, keep a job and move up a career ladder. The Scholar Practitioner Program is designed to create connections between organized statewide efforts to support and inform traditional and non-traditional advocates and service providers focused on poverty and self-sufficiency.

Interview Methodology

Using qualitative data collection techniques our targets were composed of the following: Community based organizations, which deliver services to the poor particularly Work First clients of color, Government agencies delivering services to the poor particularly WorkFirst clients, Public and private agencies that deliver culturally specific services to the many race and ethnic groups of Washington State.

We conducted over 30 Interviews of individuals and groups to include Private Providers, Vocational Institutions Community Colleges as well as Faith-based organizations and Limited English speaking communities were also interviewed. Interviews were conducted with individual(s) and small work groups.

Sample Questionnaire

Question: What are the three most keys to success among WorkFirst Clients?

Question: What are the greatest barriers for clients leading to success in the workplace?

Question: What are the most important issues and or barriers facing WorkFirst clients?

Question: How do you break negative habits among WorkFirst clients?

Question: Does race, class and culture contribute to success of failure, if so why?

"Although there are exemplary efforts Washington State to support WorkFirst and TANF clients, people of color felt underrepresented in the policy and advocacy network in Washington State."- Case Managers

Previous Washington WorkFirst reports focused on successes and accomplishments by statewide service providers and the most favorable case studies without focus on disparities based on Race, Class and Culture. WorkFirst client and providers alike identify race and culture as impediments to success in entry level employment. Language barriers and cultural dynamics prevented clients from accessing essential

support resources. This report provides a cross section of interviews conducted spring - 2001 through Winter2002. Interview focused on Providers of services, however we also interviewed a few WorkFirst clients who felt underrepresented in previous studies and reports.

In communities of color, family members and other non-traditional advocates such as church members, trainers and community based organizations played significant roles in the success of WorkFirst Clients - WorkFirst Case Manager."

"Our commitment to this project is to encourage multiple voices to come forward and provide context for their comments to be included". La France, 2002. Interviews were conducted of service providers to assess how WorkFirst clients are succeeding and to explore key differences between those succeeding on WorkFirst and those whom are not. The opportunity to share challenges, barriers and frustrations not captured in previous reports conducted by academics and state officials in Washington State was of specific interest to clients and advocates.

I will present a sample of the consistent findings through out the report to assist in providing insight into the complicated web of services needed to support a very complex and diverse section of our society experiencing poverty.

I am hopeful that these recommendations will result in positive changes in the current WorkFirst support infrastructure leading to longer-term employment stability, interdependence and increased success for TANF clients, specifically those of color whom have felt in many ways excluded from participating in advocacy work to improve their own conditions.

Government Administrators in Washington State

After completing many interviews with advocates, case managers, and administrators of public and private agencies, I found it difficult to capture all of what was reported. As a result I will highlight specific interviews from a few agencies representing different perspectives but all supporting similar recommendations. Administrators were very forthcoming about challenges and successes in the WorkFirst initiative. They stated overwhelmingly, barriers to success among WorkFirst clients range from training to childcare issues.

"Why do I have to pay for my childcare at 100%, it's too hard." - WorkFirst Clients

Administrators state the successes of WorkFirst are a credit to the hard work exhibited by their staff primarily case managers who are oftentimes overlooked. We as administrators often get a bad rap when the work they're required to do is at times impossible. Examples used are the way media portrays car repair assistance. Resources were allocated to repair a TANF client's vehicle as the main mode of transportation. The amount of basic repair for some vehicles were at times higher than average. These cases were featured on whistle blowers "a local news program which uncovers waste in government." As a result of that feature we were encouraged to reduce the amount of financial assistance clients receive for car repair from \$500.00 down to about \$50.00 per 12-month period. This has created difficulty for clients to get to work and handle basic task such as shopping meeting appointments and childcare.

"We feel pressured to focus on a back to work fast strategy in order to merely reduce caseload and meet targets." Administrators, 2001

Additional challenge for administrators is the notion of caseload reduction. In Washington State there has been a 50% reduction in TANF caseloads as a result of WorkFirst initiatives. Unfortunately, as a result of this success many of the clients left on assistance are deemed un-employable due to substance abuse, mental health, poor communication skills and meager educational backgrounds. In essence those who become employed are the most employable needing limited support to obtain entry-level service positions.

"We have not figured out how to rebuild the human spirit to succeed, after years of support services clients need to transition in way that creates long-term sustained change in behaviors and survival skills." - Administrators

Clients on the other hand were pressured into accepting low paying jobs, which served as a short-term strategy leaving them un-able to make ends meet. Recommendations by providers called for increased training opportunities up front directed towards living wage employment opportunities as opposed to short-term entry level positions.

Administrators were consistent with research finding in their responses

Child Care services are essential for young mothers on WorkFirst.

There is strong evidence that women's decisions about whether and how much to work depends upon the availability and cost of childcare and that these factors are significant barriers to employment for WorkFirst Clients. Working mothers supporting young children rely heavily on childcare.

To escape dependence on TANF requires a public commitment to supporting their childcare needs. Dollars available to support crisis in housing, transportation and food.

Administrators agreed that providing support for greater than 36 months will improve the ability of clients to become self-sufficient. Generational poverty has no overnight solution but certainly requires adequate longer-term support. This increase would support a much higher percentage of clients in becoming self-sufficient.

The "work first" approach also ignores individual variation; that is, although many welfare recipients will be able to get and maintain paying jobs, others will be so significantly disadvantaged, medically, personally, and/or socially, that they have very little hope of being placed in what most would consider an adequate, paying job . - Administrators

3.) Mental Health Services - Drug and Alcohol treatment, counseling services.

Women on welfare with drug and alcohol problems, like other Americans with these problems, will not be able to rise to the challenge of becoming self-sufficient without first receiving appropriate treatment for their addiction. Likewise, many children of welfare recipients who have alcohol and drug problems will not be able to avoid the cycle of welfare dependency without prevention services as early as possible.

When there is a cost for these necessary services clients often have to choose supporting their family as opposed to supporting themselves. Most clients are making an average of \$8.75 per hour and lunch alone will cost about \$6.00. Clients receive support services for up to 12 months and after that they're on their own. The ability to sustain yourself overtime takes about five years.

There is truly no fail-safe net for these clients. Administrators have a specific function to perform -“WorkFirst” as opposed to school first or self-sufficiency first. This has caused the complex dilemmas for their staff and themselves as administrators because success is not based on long-term self-sufficiency. When asked the questions what supports should be provided to insure that clients had a fair chance at success in the work place and in life the ideas ranged from the following recommendations and improvements:

- Clients currently receive a maximum of \$500.00 for the first three months and \$500.00 after the first three months - we recommend increasing the length and amount of this support.
- Interest free loans towards the purchase of a home or an automobile leading to self-sufficiency and the establishment of credit.
- Provide incentives for the first 12, 18 and 24 months to encourage long-term success by acknowledging shorter-term accomplishments.
- Reinstatement of the automobile enhancement program.
- Focus on Higher Educational support to secure better and long-term employment.
- Employers could provide tuition incentives for up to 5 credit hours of training in higher education for entry-level clients.

Interviews showed that WorkFirst activities including job search workshops, subsidized employment, skills training and pre-employment training increased the chances of employment and/or increased wages. - Administrators, 2001

Private Providers, Trainers and Job Developers

Providers found it difficult to serve the interest of unique individuals when the goal is to train, employ and remove clients from TANF assistance. Interviews with private providers uncovered challenges in the relationships between practitioner client and employer. For private practitioner it becomes most important to maintain the integrity of the contract between trainers job developers the service organization and employer. After one or two unfavorable client placements employers either choose another provider for WorkFirst clients or refuse to accept them at all. Interviews were conducted with private providers whom are contracted to provide Hard skills training such as such as Microsoft Office suites, ten key, phones databases and basic typing. These are skills associated with actual work to be performed in the workplace. Additionally they provide what’s coined as Soft skills training such as conflict resolution, communication skills, and time management, considered to be no-

direct but essential to the success of many clients in the workplace. I will highlight interviews with the program directors, case managers trainers and developers.

Overwhelmingly most responded - “Mentorship”, moving from the here and now into the future is essential.” Clients spent years waiting for the case manager, waiting for the paycheck, waiting for medical assistance and now they have to exercise an intestinal fortitude that they many have not practiced developing.

There are multiple levels of complex issues impacting the success of WorkFirst clients such as: Aptitude and literacy, mental health issues, Domestic violence and Substance abuse.

“Clients are taught to stand in line and wait as opposed to going for it”

“As trainers we are charged with the task of breaking the negative habits of clients and instilling positive habits to support them in reaching their goals”

Key Challenges

- Lack of positive support systems
- Triangulation between employer, provider and client
- Lack of time to develop soft skills
- communication, time management and other essential workplace skills
- Childcare issues and healthcare services
- Clients limited educational background
- Limited English proficiency

Trainers and job developers agreed there should be a non-traditional support group for WorkFirst Clients. Subject(s) went on to discuss the support group concept- “The Community Living Room .” This is an innovative model developed by clients in transition started by women needing to reach out to those who were in similar transitions. They meet weekly in one of their living rooms to discuss workplace issues, share in training ideas, innovative child care methods, and for those attending school, provide homework and study assistance. The powerful concept behind this model is empowerment, interdependence and self-sufficiency. There are a few examples of these models in Washington State. I found for instance in Spokane there’s a woman’s support group started by local faith-based organizations, In Tri-Cities there is an independent retired case manager who has committed her retirement to advocating and supporting WorkFirst clients and in --South Seattle women meet weekly to discus issues of support, meal preparation and car

pooling. There is a similar initiative developed by a case manager working with the Kitsap Department of Social and Health Services who meets with 10 to 12 women weekly to provide and share assistance, survival skills and ideas on pathways to success in the workplace. These mentoring groups and non-traditional advocates are very important in the success of WorkFirst clients.

"Many clients express frustration at being forced to take minimum wage jobs that would either lower their standard of living or force them to remain on welfare."

The WorkFirst Externship Program

This program is designed to provide 11 week internship experiences for WorkFirst clients to apply skills acquired through vocational training programs.

To explore this complex correlation I decided to accept two externs to assist with a long-term consulting contract. As did many advocates thought that I might have the ability to support the needs of these of these two clients with goals and dreams to care for their families in the way that I wish to care for my own. Over time I found this task to be very difficult, balancing work-task needing to be accomplished over the needs of the client.

For the sake of anonymity I will use the client A and Client B. I found the employer sentiment to be true, and had to expend an extraordinary amount of effort to support WorkFirst clients.

Assisting the client in maintaining their personal and professional goals may often times work against what the employers need for competent responsible staff. I had to remind myself that this was an externship as opposed to a new employee. WorkFirst clients engaging in externships are oftentimes given minimal skills to commit to and uphold workplace expectations.

Client A has three children, interest in technology, participating in an externship through Seattle Vocational Institute, living with her fiancé. Has a strong family connection, receives a lot of support from her mother and siblings with childcare issues so she can go to work. Client A has good skills but has challenges with timeliness and childcare issues. Even though she has additional support she found it difficult to attend work regularly when scheduled. Client A had specific interest in technology so we connected her to the technology officer within the organization and she seemed to soar. Although the externship was not specifically geared to technology I wanted to insure that the incentive and experience would spark

interest enough to have her gain necessary skills to secure employment in her area of interest. Extern A seemed to have extraordinary focus and a clear path to success. Challenges arose regarding difficult relationship dynamics in the home in addition to childcare illnesses. I began to get the sense that the closer she came to success the more fear she seemed to have around self-sufficiency. Client A completed her externship with much additional support and coaching. Client A is currently seeking employment and attempting to enroll in college in the fall of 2002 with support from her parents and small educational awards she discovered through the externship.

Client B has two children recently discovered that she's expecting and third child, in the process of moving to a new apartment. Her interest was in getting off TANF and on to a new life of self-sufficiency.

She became very involved in the church as her advocacy network. Client B has limited administrative skills. I assigned her task such as light administrative duties to include but not limited to; filing, email management, copying task and database distribution. Client B, scheduled to work 10 hours per week found it difficult to make it to work on time and additionally had several challenges with childcare, illness of children and housing. Although it remained difficult for her to show up consistently she struggled to accomplish her task by working additional days and working at non-scheduled times. Due to heavy caseloads her case managers attempts to assist her with child care and transportation proved to be moderately useful. As her employer/mentor during the externship I extended support to insure she had the resources and additional contacts needed to successfully complete her externship by allowing additional time for her to complete her task, take her work home and meet critical housing and child care appointments during her work day.

My insight into the complexity of her life and barriers to success proved useful in understanding what a typical WorkFirst client deals with in their quest to become self-sufficient. Client B eventually became employed as a banking teller but due to issues of childcare and transportation has had to cut back to part time employment which increases her childcare medical and food support. She recently stated that

"It seems impossible to make it with out assistance on my own, I can't afford It." - WorkFirst Extern

Externship duration for both clients = 11 weeks

Client Interview Sample

Stayer - "Real Story Real Life"

The following story is not unlike many stories of clients left on the TANF roles for years with out a sense of hope for the future.

African American Male - 60 Years of age allegedly threatened the Yesler Terrace Security Officer. John admits to having an issue with anger as a result of years of oppression and frustration. As a result he was required to appear before a judge, and was requested that he be removed from the housing authority after living there for sixteen years. After being referred to a public defender, he appealed his case in addition received advocacy from a community advocate who spoke to key administrators and SHA attorney on his behalf. If John had been removed from Yesler Terrace he truly believes that he would have been homeless due to high rent and low vacancy in Seattle.

John considers himself to be very fortunate to have had the opportunity given his circumstances to have someone speak and articulate on his behalf regarding his integrity and good citizenship. John has wanted to work for many years but could not work and receive medical benefits, childcare resources and assistance to put his children through college. John's children were born out of wedlock. He and the mother of these two children are very estranged and John has been the primary caretaker for over 15 years. John is raising his two children while battling diabetes and his daughter has suffered from kidney disorders from a very early age. Both son and daughter are attending local junior colleges with federal assistance "TANF support" and social security resources. John's goal in life is to create self-sufficiency for his children. Six months after our initial interview, John reports that his daughter is now a mother of one child and he is a grandfather. He's truly concerned about his daughter abandoning her education for a future of poverty and unemployment. I referenced a few resources at the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle and other organizations to provide support resources and educational assistance to her. She is currently back on track but is struggling with childcare resources and transportation, as are many WorkFirst clients.

Community Based Organizations

Community Based Organizations provided insight into the cultural and racial barriers in the WorkFirst program. I spoke primarily with community advocates from faith-based organizations and smaller Community Based Organizations. These subjects seemed to

suggest that WorkFirst is a microcosm of society, if there's racism in society then there's racism in WorkFirst. I requested that they provide specific examples of their experiences and they listed the following:

"When we go to white communities we see clients with access to more resources." There are workshops and support groups to assist young mothers and WorkFirst clients to attend Community College; they make it easy for them.

Community Advocates

"Advocates felt that they are not trained to assist clients in accessing higher educational assistance as other communities are."

In communities of color although some short-term programs exist in Community Colleges to provide vocational supports, their designed to prepare clients for entry level jobs as opposed preparing them to peruse additional education to get a better job. Other examples of racial disparity pointed to quality of childcare referrals, healthcare and quality of case management support.

"In suburban communities there are programs that allow TANF clients to work on campus while attending school, we don't have those opportunities in our communities.

To attend programs for women such as Highline Community College you need good transportation and someone to guide you through the paperwork and process." - Advocate

Challenges

- Lack of access to higher educational supports
- Misunderstanding of system and assistance - support services
- In-adequate training provided to clients of color
- Transportation (auto repairs and bus passes) to access key resources
- Language barriers to serving non-English speaking clients
- Lack of adequate translation services
- Non-accountability and lack of collaboration among caseworkers
- Caseworkers typically do not care about clients
- Small Non-profits are under-funded

Some African Americans say social, cultural and systemic factors contribute to the disparity between blacks and whites and that economic disparity fuels all of it.

Recommendations to improve the system

“Case management is one of the only consistent support figures in a clients life, they need a deeper connection to assist with the transition from TANF to sufficiency.”

Organizations providing support services were operating independently, rather than integrating services to create a progressive track. For example, case managers coordinating services with job training, childcare, ESL and employment resource programs.

- Extensive case management expansion and extended time for client supports
- Counseling and Mental Health Services
- Case-Management and collaboration with WorkFirst program
- Work Clothing and Food assistance
- Employment Support
- Sick Child Daycare needs to be affordable

In order to have access to quality employment, clients need comprehensive support in counseling, health services, communication skill, and housing. Caseworkers should provide access to neighborhood and community jobs where clients are invested in the outcomes of their work. Clients should be viewed as individuals, recognizing their social barriers and environmental factors.

Client Perspectives

“I was raised in a two-parent family and I wanted that for my sons, too,” says Client, of Seattle. “At least I have a good support system. If I didn’t have any help, I’d probably go crazy.” WorkFirst Client, 2001

Conclusion

I gained keen insight through interviewing traditional and non-traditional providers advocating for TANF recipients. As noted by our academic mentor “We wanted to insure that we gained insight in to communities of color as it relates to ethnicity of Leavers and Stayers of the WorkFirst program. There did not seem to be tangible evidence of excessive racism as reported but certainly subtle issues of disproportional supports.

A recent analysis indicates that there are significant barriers to the success of the WorkFirst program, designed to get families on welfare employed. Findings indicate that women under the age of 24, with children under the age of 3, are most impacted. Typically these women are of

African-American descent, with less than 12 years of education. A lack of adequate childcare, language barriers and racism also negatively impacts their opportunities to become productively employed. Anderson-Bond and Dr. Scott discovered some racial differences to the issue of hunger. Although 40% of both minority and white parents surveyed reported eating insufficiently due to a lack of money, there was a slight difference among their children. 11% of the white parents surveyed said their children sometimes had insufficient amounts of food, compared to 15% of the minority parents.

Interviews were conducted with support services to women, including churches and community based organizations, case managers, ESL and non-English speaking communities.

Key Research Findings

Caseload reduction strategies

Priorities were made to provide a “back to work fast” solution in order to merely reduce caseloads. Recipients were pressured into accepting low paying jobs, which served as a short-term strategy, as they were not able to make ends meet. Recommendations were made to provide training opportunities directed to living wage employment opportunities. Harder to employ clients left on caseloads. After several interviews with service providers and TANF client support service agencies, many have reported up to a 50% reduction in caseloads. This reduction is directly related to internship and employment placements for the most employable clients, while those with mental illness such as drug addiction, learning disabilities, and limited English speaking skills are left on active caseloads with very little support for what’s deemed intensive case management services.

Sustained employment vs. childcare

The goal of the work first initiative is to transition TANF clients from dependence on public assistance. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, that line is represented by employment. Once the primary care giver becomes employed – “usually women” they are given childcare support vouchers and or services for the first 12 months after they’ve received full time employment . Unfortunately, after one year, childcare vouchers are reduced and in some cases eliminated, and the low rate of pay for these full time jobs is insufficient to cover the high cost of childcare and other living expenses.

Benefits in part-time vs. full-time

As a result working without food, childcare support and transportation assistance, clients would rather be on TANF support as a more favorable option than working full time. In these cases many find it equally beneficial to work part-time allowing them to still receive the full allocation of childcare resources.

School vs. Employment

As mentioned in interviews, there are programs offered at Highline Community College, Seattle Central and North Seattle Community College for TANF clients to be trained in occupations that pay a living wage. However, each year there are thousands of unused stipends returned to the state because the goals of most case managers are to find employment within 6-9 months. An Applied Arts Degree takes 2-3 years on average to complete. According to clients and Higher Education counselors, case managers apply inordinate amounts of pressure for English and ESL students to accept full time minimum wage jobs as opposed to encouraging them to remain in school to complete necessary advanced degrees. Interview finding indicated that the more education one attains, more opportunities are available for clients to increase their income and additionally stay employed longer.

Partners and caseworker incentives do not support clients

Many TANF support service organizations participate in what's called the statewide bonus initiative, awarding bonuses from the state fund to organizations that attain the highest numbers of clients placed in full time employment. State awards are also given to these "exemplary organizations based on simply number of clients transitioned to full time employment for 12-16 months. The pressure on case managers is not to gainfully employ but to simply employ clients while reducing their caseload. Lack of coordination between supportsLack of coordination between support organizations creates a gap in long-term support for clients.

Caseworkers and Advocate Recommendations

Organizations and advocates delivering support services recipients recommend that clients and the community need to understand reform and advocacy information and clients should be presented with opportunities to participate in the reform movement.

There is a general awareness that caseworkers are disinterested in the success of recipients, rather preferring to reduce their caseloads. Therefore it is

recommended that caseworkers be trained, mentored, and supported in assisting their clients to be successful.

Current client services need to be evaluated for their effectiveness. Program strategies should be targeted to provide sustainable, living wage employment where clients can be mentored and coached in their careers, obtaining and keeping a job .

There have been several research studies conducted nationally and in Washington state to evaluate "welfare to work" or in this instance WorkFirst successes and challenges. Few findings focus on disparities based on ethnicity lack of availability of resources such as ESL training identified as a high priority in new immigrant and refugee populations , appropriate communication skills and lack of appropriate and affordable childcare services. More importantly honest input form service providers and clients indicate the lack of involvement in advocacy work statewide by people of color most adversely impacted by thee policies.

In closing, many caring advocates provided a network of support for many WorkFirst clients not captured in many of the previous reports and publications of the Washington WorkFirst initiatives an in many ways I've not captured the extent of hard work and efforts many place in supporting WorkFirst clients. Many volunteers, administrators and advocates were eager to give me their perspectives on WorkFirst and how to improve service delivery. Unfortunately most were usually unaware of how to tap into the statewide advocacy network. In many cases these clients were Young women of color and limited-English speaking populations who felt their true perspectives had not been heard. It is important to have those impacted by statewide policies be involved and understand clearly how these policies are developed and how they might change conditions leading to their success or failure.

Acknowledgements

CAMP - energy assistance program	
Casey Family Programs	Family Developer
Children's Alliance	
Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs	Staff
Dress for Success	Executive Director
DSHS - Central Area	Administrator
Fremont Public Association	Program Coordinator
Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce	Business Relations Manager
Homesight	Housing Representative
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Management Consultant Services	
Personnel Pool	Area Manager
Project Lift-Off	Advocates
Quality Food Centers	Recruiter
Rainier Family Support Center	Program Coordinator
Retail Skills Center	Director
Seattle Central Community College	Director Community Outreach
Seattle Emergency Housing Service	Program Coordinator
Seattle Jobs Initiative -	Trainer, Case Manager
Seattle Vocational institute - SCC	BCA Externship Coordinator
Seitel Leeds & Associates	Network & Communications
The Seattle Times	Staff Reporter
Trac Associates	Case Manager
Trac Associates	Retention Services Supervisor
Vision- Seattle Human Services Coalition	Community Organizer
Washington State Employment Security	AmeriCorps Leader
Wilson Gabriel & Associates	Managing Principals
Worksource Rainier Affiliate	Business Outreach Coordinator
Worksource Rainier Affiliate	Employment Specialist
DYFS- Voices of Families Project	Case Manager

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Acknowledgements

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Dr. Joan La France, Scholar Practitioner, Consultant

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