

**WORK FIRST JOB RETENTION AND
ADVANCEMENT PROJECT**

FINAL REPORT:

**COUNTY RESPONSES TO WORK FIRST
JOB
RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT SURVEY**

North Carolina Division of Social Services
Economic Independence Section

August 2000

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The area of job retention and career advancement in the welfare reform arena is a relatively new field of study. Because of the uncharted waters, the federal Department of Health and Human Services, through a competitive bid process, awarded grants to 13 states to look into activities that support job retention and career advancement in the welfare-to-work population. North Carolina was awarded one of the 13 grants. In an effort to get specific information about what is going on locally in the area of job retention and advancement, staff in the Division of Social Services conducted a structured survey of 100 county departments of social services. The survey was designed to solicit information about existing retention and advancement efforts and to gain an insight into how counties viewed these efforts and how they looked at job retention and advancement in general. [Since the survey was conducted in the spring and summer of 1999, county services may or probably have expanded to include retention activities and services to families at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level and non-custodial parents.] In addition, the survey is one component of the federal grant. As a result of the survey, we learned that many counties in North Carolina are being creative, innovative, and proactive in their implementation of retention and advancement strategies. These “out-of-the box” efforts include, but are not limited to:

- Counties focusing on job retention at the front end, such as at reception, screening and assessment and application, as well as job placement prospective;
- Counties hiring full-time job retention specialist;
- Counties further enhancing case management and tracking activities that are geared to job retention and advancement;
- Counties working with other state, county, and community agencies as partners in their efforts to assist Work First participants to become employed, keep their jobs, and advance into better jobs.

Further, survey responses indicate that counties are eager to learn what other counties are doing and what works. While the survey results cannot say with certainty what works and what doesn't, sharing the responses may lead to more creative approaches.

The survey responses, however, are not intended to confirm that any of the stated efforts are a best practice or a program “that works”. This report and the accompanying survey results are a first step in increasing knowledge and awareness of retention and advancement strategies and sharing what we learn with all 100 counties.

The survey as a whole yields many helpful insights, such as, the incredible, and broad array of retention and advancement efforts taking place in many counties. Moreover, the differences in local needs and circumstances is an important factor in creating the great variety in job retention and advancement programs, strategies and other activities.

At the same time, there are some limitations to the data collected through the survey. For example, a significant number of counties did not explicitly mention case management, or First Stop when asked about their retention strategies. We know, however, that 100 counties use case management and First Stop and that they, on some level, are job retention and career advancement efforts.

How counties defined job retention and advancement had a great impact on what they listed as “retention” and/or “advancement” efforts and the resulting analysis. Counties seemed to fall under one of the following groups:

- Those counties that considered only transitional and supportive services such as child care and transportation as job retention services. Usually, these counties were offering these services to former participants post assistance.
- Those counties that defined retention services to include any program, strategy or other effort that might lead to longer attachment to the labor market. Most of these counties offered these activities pre-employment, post-employment and/or post-assistance.

An encouraging aspect in the vast majority of survey responses was a palpable desire to improve delivery of services, to learn from others what is working, and to assist more and more participants with equipping themselves to achieve greater self-sufficiency. Also the greatly increased number of retention and advancement strategies that have been implemented recently is heartening. Keeping track of further expansion of these activities will hopefully show the trend toward accomplishing these goals.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, awarded North Carolina and twelve other states Employment Retention and Advancement Project grants in August 1998. North Carolina, as part of the first phase of this project, called the Work First Job Retention and Advancement Project, conducted a survey of employment retention and advancement programs and strategies, related to Work First, in 100 counties.

The survey was developed with help from members of the Division of Social Services Job Employment Retention and Advancement Work Group (an advisory group comprised of the Division, a County Director, and other state and community agencies) and feedback from five field-tested counties.

In addition to providing an inventory of current retention and advancement strategies, the telephone survey was designed to determine:

- ◆ Whether counties follow-up with current and former participants;
- ◆ Whether the counties believe their efforts are having a positive impact;
- ◆ What additional information and resource(s) are needed to improve job retention and advancement services

As a part of the survey, the counties identified a county DSS contact person to share information about job retention and advancement strategies with other counties.

The central question asks counties to inventory their Job Retention and Advancement strategies, components of the strategies, and interventions, services, and activities. A related question asks counties to describe what Work First participants need most in the areas of job retention and advancement.

The Job Retention Work Group members pondered whether to give counties a definition of retention, and decided instead to ask counties for their definition of retention. We also asked counties what they need to enhance their job retention and advancement efforts, and how they would like us to share survey results.

In terms of on-going contact, tracking, and support of participants, the survey asked whether follow-up occurs with participants who continue to receive cash assistance, and those who no longer receive a Work First payment.

Further, the survey sought to determine the county's perception of whether its job retention and advancement strategies are producing a positive impact, and if so, how the county knows, given the lack of scientific evidence of these outcomes.

Finally, since we and counties both are eager to learn about retention and advancement strategies that work, we asked counties whether they believe any of their retention and advancement strategies can be considered a "model" program or intervention.

County departments of social services have great flexibility in determining how to assist Work First participants to become self-sufficient. The ability to make choices and tailor a program based on local needs is apparent in the information collected through the survey. The range of counties' answers reflects the differences among their Work First programs. In addition, staff at different levels of the organization, varying from county directors to employment services workers provided information. In some counties income maintenance staff and employment services staff are in separate divisions or sections. In others, the same worker might handle both income maintenance and employment services. Certain counties designated a job retention specialist or program manager to answer the survey. This variety among respondents combined with the difference among Work First program components from county to county contributed to the vast amount of information that we hope will prove useful and informative to all stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

Five Work First Project staff members contacted each of the one hundred North Carolina counties. All one hundred counties completed the survey. This survey report will be shared with all county departments of social services, members of the Retention Group mentioned above, and others that have been involved with the Project, or have stated an interest in this Project.

The current state Work First plan broadens the scope of retention services, in part by encouraging counties to think of retention and advancement as important considerations as soon as a Work First applicant walks in the door. Retention and advancement services are integral to Work First's goals, and ultimately, families' success; attention to retention and advancement should continue beyond receipt of cash assistance.

RESULTS

Staff with different responsibilities and expertise responded to the survey, which may reflect the degree of detail and focus on retention and advancement and may contribute to the overall difference among county responses. As a result, various county responses were counted under one classification of activities or another, such as "HRD" or "survival skills training". For example, one county might say that they referred participants to their community college's HRD course while another county would describe characteristics of an activity that possessed the elements of a HRD program.

At other times county staff separated employment services from retention/advancement services or interventions, an interpretation that places retention efforts as an activity that occurs subsequent to employment services. Consequently we occasionally compiled and analyzed results using cautionary language like "almost" or "approximately".

A significant number of counties, approximately 15 percent, responded that all of their retention and advancement efforts involved supportive or transitional services. With some counties their responses made it difficult to determine if their retention and advancement efforts are limited to supportive or transitional services, or not.

Some counties defined these retention and advancement strategies solely as child care and transportation. Others defined their transitional or supportive services much more broadly, to include activities such as case management and/or community involvement. In some instances, it was not entirely clear what a particular county's interventions entailed. But when counties answered that they maintained some form of contact with former participants, we counted that as case management and, additionally, as follow-up.

Some counties currently have limited retention and advancement efforts, demonstrated by responses such as, "unless the former participant had a problem and came in or called, we didn't hear from her, (and we assumed she wasn't having any problems)." In these counties, follow-up contact only occurs when a former participant initiates the contact.

County Perceptions of Participants' Retention Needs (Question 4 Responses)

Ten counties referred to motivation and/or improving self-esteem as a need for participants. Several others added improved attitude and solid work ethic as needs of participants. This supports the belief of some - that job readiness, not job-specific skills, must come at the first phase of service delivery to help participants retain employment. However, depending on the county, job readiness programs or courses might be provided either pre-employment or post-employment. Two counties said that they hold self-esteem classes.

Only 25 counties listed case management as both participants' retention and advancement needs and as a service response. Several counties described activities that "sound" like case management, but didn't "say" case management. Some of these counties were referring to the necessity to implement case management in a more focused or intensive manner. Others merely focused on the importance of providing adequate coordination of services rather than case management in terms of interaction with the family.

55 counties listed transportation and 39 counties listed child care, as their participants' two most needed services. Almost 75% of the counties reported providing transportation and child care. A repeated response was that even with transportation and child care assistance available, it may not be adequate or reaching all participants who may need transportation and/or child care assistance.

Counties' Existing Retention and Advancement Strategies (Question 5 Responses)

Certain programs, services, interventions, initiatives and other efforts are common or universal to all counties. These include HRD at community colleges, First Stop through ESC, and the substances abuse initiative. Although these services are in every county, many counties did not mention all or some of these strategies. This may be because the staff person responding interpreted the questions to be about retention and advancement strategies other than core efforts. They also may not consider such services to be related to retention or advancement.

Human Resource Development (HRD)

55 counties mentioned HRD at community colleges, and/or elsewhere, as a retention activity. Some counties specifically referred to HRD at their community college while others listed HRD without linking it to their community college. Other counties specified Pathways to Employment or other models as their HRD program. Some counties mentioned job readiness courses at their community college, which may or may not be part of their HRD courses at their community college.

While HRD is available to all 100 counties through the community colleges, a third of the counties referred specifically to the availability and provision of HRD, job readiness, basic skills, survival skills, and related courses at their DSS, community workshops, or at other locations on a contractual basis. This is a good illustration of how local DDSs, driven by local needs and circumstances, created on site HRD/Job readiness workshops and classes. Frequently, these activities are adaptations of the community college models. Four other counties stated that either they were having difficulty forming HRD classes with the required minimum number of students, or that they send participants to HRD courses in neighboring counties. In some counties participants must travel 20 to 30 miles to the classes.

Basic, Life, and Survival Skills

Fifteen counties responded that they hold various life skills [sometimes called “survival skills”] courses, such as parenting, budgeting or money management, nutrition, and others. North Carolina Cooperative Extension, and many other community agencies or third party contractors offer many of these courses.

Responses from 14 counties indicate that the “Dress for Success” approach is beginning to develop via clothes closets and paying for uniforms or other work clothing. That approach teaches what clothes and personal hygiene and appearance standards are appropriate for job interviews and for the workplace. Two other counties indicated that they work with their participants in selecting clothes.

Case Management

About 50% of the counties identified case management as a retention strategy, although their descriptions of case management varied greatly. A significant number described their activity as “intensive case management”. Others added that they use “generic” workers for the provision of all services. In this context, the term generic worker refers to a worker that addresses both cash assistance and employment and retention needs of participants. A couple of counties stressed treating participants as “family” or offering a “holistic approach”, which inferred enhanced case management.

Faith Community Involvement

Many counties are exploring collaboration with their faith communities. Nineteen counties refer to “churches” as a retention/advancement strategy. 10% of the counties have hired, or are planning to hire, faith community coordinators. Most of these counties utilize this resource for various supportive services, transportation assistance and car repair, participant family support, mentoring, and problem solving.

Employer-Focused Efforts

24 counties listed working with employers, local Chambers of Commerce and job developers as retention/advancement strategies. A related effort, job coaches, is occurring in 20% of the counties. Many job search/networking/placement activities were listed including Job Clubs in 15 counties, and JobLink in 18 counties.

Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) was cited in about 20% of the counties as a retention or advancement strategy. Many more counties likely refer Work First participants to VR, though they may not consider it a retention/advancement strategy.

Follow-up with Current Employed Participants (Question 6 Responses)

With few exceptions all counties had some form of post-employment follow-up with current participants. One county reported that participants often fail to keep appointments, and that there is no standard contact system. Several counties went well beyond the common practice of requiring participants to submit monthly time cards and monthly contact. In some counties, workers actively engage in helping participants problem solve, and/or serve as “coaches” or “cheerleaders”, providing encouragement and guidance.

Follow-up with Former Participants (Question 7 Responses)

20% of counties responded to question #7 by stating that they have no follow-up with former participants. Several of these counties commented that if participants have a problem they can or will contact the DSS, otherwise there is no formal follow-up procedure in place. Some counties that indicated they do have follow-up with former participants, equated follow-up solely to transitional or supportive services.

About 10% of the counties that answered “yes” stated that third party providers did tracking and follow-up, or that a retention specialist or other staff person attempted to maintain contact with former participants. Several other counties are planning to expand their process by hiring job retention specialists in the near future.

Approximately 10% of the counties use written follow-up tools of one kind or another, such as congratulatory letters. One county is conducting a survey, and another county sends out a questionnaire. Overwhelmingly, counties desire to do more, but indicated they either didn't have the time or staff to expand this effort.

Definition of Retention (Question 10 Responses)

In question # 10, we asked counties to define “retention.” Many counties gave very insightful replies. One county said, “staying off assistance long enough that they are pursuing a career path”. Another replied, “ability to obtain resources, problem solve, organize, [and] maintain stability through employment”. Still another county explained, “keep in labor market until [she] is able to support [her] family”. Several counties attached time frames to their answer. The range of time given, to remain employed, usually ran from three months to a year. Counties cited many commonly used criteria for defining “retention”, e.g., length of time employed, increased earnings, pursuing a career track, increased financial stability, and possessing “soft” skills to remain employed.

One county responded to the question involving job retention/advancement effort with, “None at this time”. This confusion between employment and retention services may be due in part to a belief that workers consider retention services as activities received after cash assistance terminates.

For instance, if one county defines retention and advancement as only activities that follow employment, that county might not include job readiness as a retention strategy. A county, however, that thinks retention and advancement includes pre-employment activities might list job readiness as a retention and advancement strategy. This may explain some of the differences among county responses. In fact, a significant portion of survey results could be skewed because of the wide range of definitions of retention.

County Needs In Order to Provide Better Retention/Advancement Strategies (Question 11 Responses)

Responding to question #11, staff expertise was the most frequently given answer: 42 counties cited this need, with training listed in an additional 14 counties. Time [37 counties], money [29 counties], and additional staff [28 counties] were the next most commonly reported needs of the counties.

An underlying concern, stated several times by counties, was how to work within limitations in state and federal law, policy, and time, coupled with greater expertise to better serve the current Work First population. There also seems to be a correlation between this concern and the significant number of counties that listed staff expertise and training as a primary need for more efficient delivery of services.

MAXIMUS SURVEY

Maximus is a private research firm that has contracted with the Division of Social Services, to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Work First Program. One aspect of the evaluation is a series of surveys to determine the work status, and related impacts of Work First participants leaving cash assistance. In May 1999, Maximus released its report titled *Status of Families Leaving Work First After Reaching the 24-Month Time*

Limit. Maximus interviewers targeted 315 families that left Work First in August 1998 solely because of the 24 month time limit.

Although there were no retention-specific questions in the Maximus survey, the results confirmed a correlation between level of education and the percentage of former participants who were employed. Further, the three most frequent services requested during the last three months of participation were help finding a job, help with transportation problems and help with child care problems. In the retention and advancement survey, counties also reported that these are three of the most frequently needed services for participants in our survey.

CONCLUSION

Since the completion of the survey, job retention and advancement continue to be an integral concern of policy and decision-makers. Specifically the legislature in its 1999 session expanded the provision of employment/job retention services to families at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level as well as non-custodial parents. The vast majority of North Carolina counties in their county plan amendments submitted last fall, decided to extend these services to those populations.

Counties continued to request additional guidance about job retention programs and activities from the Division following the completion of the survey. This reflected their intention to expand and enhance their efforts. Many counties participate through ongoing pilots that relate to job retention and advancement, such as housing assistance programs and the call-in center in eight eastern counties. These activities reflect a trend toward greater awareness and commitment to enhanced job retention and advancement efforts.

PROGRAMS WITH JOB RETENTION AND/OR ADVANCEMENT COMPONENTS

In response to the Job Retention and/or Advancement survey, county staff mentioned a number of specific programs, some of which are listed below. When the program was mentioned by or only applicable to certain counties, those counties are noted.

- **Asheville-Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM)**- combines the human and financial resources of Buncombe County churches to meet the emergency needs of those who contend with poverty.
- **ASPIRE**- “attitude buster” pre-employment designed specifically for Work First population. This is a three (3) week confrontational attitude adjustment course, modeled after the STRIVE program from New York City. (Buncombe)
- **ASTEP/Pathways to Employment**- programs designed to help participants become self-sufficient through the collaborative efforts of the community college, Vocational Rehabilitation, ESC, Mental Health, Employers, Faith community, mentors, business and professional women’s organizations, and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension; ASTEP-life skills. (Moore county)
- **CasaWorks**- substance abuse treatment program offered in Orange county.
- **EEAP**-an employment/ retention program, which targets small business that are responsible for hiring a large percentage of Work First participants; substance abuse treatment referral is offered as one component in the eleven pilots in North Carolina. (Duplin, Sampson, and Mecklenburg)
- **Empowering to Succeed**- program coordinated and offered by North Carolina Cooperative Extension Services- six month training program: personal development, financial management, health and nutrition, job seeking, parenting, to help WF participants move from dependence to self-sufficiency. (Bertie County)
- **Even Start**- Literacy program offered to children of participants in Richmond county.
- **Families FIRST** is a part of ABCCM’s Crisis Ministry in Buncombe County. The program partners church volunteers with struggling families in a supportive, mentoring capacity.
- **Family Resource Centers**- provide Family literacy, GED, Basic Skills, Parenting Skills, Computer Skills in a one stop setting. (Gates)
- **First Stop (Employment Assistance program) via ESC**-all non-exempt Work First participants are required to register with First Stop prior to receiving cash assistance. Participants are given a job readiness screening in order to identify employment-related needs. Job placement services are also offered. (Offered in all counties)
- **Goodwill Industries**-job readiness/skills/placement services; contractual provider in several counties. (Davidson, Forsyth, Lincoln, Mecklenburg and Stokes)

- **Job Club**-gives some group and individual assistance in job search, interviewing, networking, etc. (Burke, Franklin, Halifax, Haywood, Northampton and Hertford)
- **JobLink (Career Center System)**-assists all county residents, including Work First participants, find employment, and assist area employers fill job openings. (Alleghany, Ashe, Hertford, and Wake)
- **Ladder to Success**- job readiness program in Columbus County.
- **Out for Lunch**- nutritional & food management program offered through North Carolina Cooperative Extension. (Alexander, Burke, and Pamlico)
- **Positive Employment Prospective (PEP)** job readiness program, conducted at DSS in Guilford county.
- **Practical Assessment Exploration System (PAES)** – job skills program offered in Person and Caswell counties. “Hands-On” activities in four major areas:
 - Business and office technology
 - Consumer economics
 - Industrial technology
 - Manipulation and production
- **Something Special Enterprises & Career Opportunities (SSEACO)** – sheltered workshop environment providing job readiness training for Hard-to-Serve participants in Henderson County
- **SKILLS**- job readiness program for challenged participants through Vocational Rehabilitation (Bertie)
- **STEPS**- job readiness and job skills training utilized in Cleveland county.
- **Transitions**-a job readiness/training/placement program that takes a holistic approach in addressing the multiple barriers faced by Work First participants. (Person and Caswell)
- **WIN & REACH**- survival skills programs: support groups, job readiness and job coaches. (Jackson)

COMPILATION OF COUNTY SPECIFIC SURVEY RESPONSES

To provide as much information as possible, we believed it important to provide a compilation of specific counties' responses to the survey. The compilation includes not only the questions and responses, a county contact person is provided in case additional information is needed.

The following compilation of responses is organized so that each county's response to questions 1-6 are shown first by county; responses to questions 7-12 are shown next for each county. Also included in the compilation is a list by county of the specific job retention/advancement efforts mentioned by the county in response to Question 5.