

Report says feds blocking welfare-to-work successes

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

RALEIGH — Restrictions contained in federal welfare laws are holding back North Carolina's progress in welfare reform, according to a new report released by the N.C. Justice and Community Development Center, the state's leading anti-poverty advocacy group. Called "Holding Families Back: Federal Roadblocks to Work First Success," the report finds that many of the problems that Work First families and county social services agencies are facing are attributable to the lack of adequate support and interference by the federal government.

"North Carolina social services agencies and welfare families have embraced the Work First philosophy of federal welfare reforms passed in 1996," said Sorien Schmidt, author of the report and a public interest attorney with the Justice Center. "As a result, thousands of North Carolina families have left the cash assistance rolls and gone to work. Unfortunately, most of them are earning low wages that keep them stuck in poverty and in need of assistance for health care, transportation, child care and housing — critical components of economic self-sufficiency."

In 1996, the federal government transformed welfare from an "entitlement" program called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) into a "block grant" called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

Rather than guaranteeing cash assistance to all who were eligible for as long as necessary, TANF was designed to provide families with time-limited help until they could be directed into the work force.

The report makes several findings about the impact reforms have had in the state. Work First, North Carolina's cash assistance program, has seen its rolls decline more than 60 percent since 1995. Seventy percent of families leaving the rolls have earnings, but on average they are earning only \$7,500 their first year off the program. In 2002, that amounts to only about 60 percent of federal poverty level. From 1990 to 2000, there was a 12 percent increase in N.C. children living in poverty.

"Congress created a road map for the state to follow," Schmidt said, "but they blocked the way with barriers in the road." The report identifies five key areas in which Congress must act if North Carolina's welfare reform efforts are to be successful.

1. Inadequate funding for TANF, child care and child welfare prevents the state from providing the services required by families and required to meet federal TANF goals. Congress must provide more dollars.

2. Federal measures of state performance focus primarily on caseload reduction, ignoring whether families who have left are employed or self-sufficient. This sidetracks the state on meeting measures that don't achieve the goals of TANF or North Car-

olina's Work First program. State performance should be measured by state success in helping families get and keep work, and earn a living wage.

3. Narrowly defined allowable work activities prevent North Carolina from helping families address many of the barriers they face to obtaining employment and restrict the state from training families for better-paying jobs. States must be given flexibility to define work activities more broadly.

4. Inflexible time limits are unresponsive to economic downturn, family hardships and natural disasters. States must be given flexibility to implement time limits as appropriate based on individual family and county circumstances.

5. Restrictions arbitrarily prevent North Carolina from serving many legal immigrants. With nearly 500 percent growth of the North Carolina Latino population over the last decade, this restriction on the use of federal funds puts the state and counties in a difficult position when addressing the needs of this new and growing population. States should be given the option to serve legal immigrants.

The report shows how these federal restrictions impact county social services agencies, and local officials echoed Schmidt's conclusions.

"Funding is a real issue for us," said Evelyn Dawson, director of social services in Halifax County. Forty percent of the chil-



Congress is expected to review the controversial welfare reform laws, which are scheduled to expire by the end of September. Critics hope that the legislation will be altered.

dren in Halifax County live in poverty, and the county has few job opportunities or existing resources. "It took us a while to start fully spending our money. We aren't like the big counties. We don't have enough services already existing in our community. If we needed more child care we had to create it, but we have to keep serving people at the same time. We are building the plane and flying it at the same time. To make Work First work, we have to build lots of planes, not just one."

Dawson pointed out that despite these obstacles the county has reduced its caseload by nearly two-thirds since 1995, although the downturn in the economy has resulted in more people returning to welfare. "Just as we get the services in place and are able to use the money, it is at risk due to

increasing caseloads and the budget deficit."

Narrowly drawn federal work participation rules are among the barriers to family self-sufficiency, according to Anna Green, director of Multicultural Community Development Services (MCDS) of Spring Lake. Green and the MCDS staff work with Work First recipients every day.

She said educational programs and health care are critical support services for those trying to attain economic self-sufficiency. "It is worth it to invest in education so people can get a skill and don't have to go back on the system. The rules should be changed so people can go to school with Work First help. That way, when they leave the program they can get a job with decent wages and benefits. Now people go off Work First into low-wage

jobs with no benefits. When they get so sick they have to go back on Work First, they're in worse health than when they started."

Congress is reviewing the TANF and child-care block grants, which are set to expire on Sept. 30. The U.S. House of Representatives has passed its version of TANF reauthorization legislation and the Senate is taking up bills.

Schmidt said, "North Carolina is poised to move forward to the next phase of welfare reform; however, remaining federal roadblocks must be removed to further these efforts. The information in this report provides a guide for TANF reauthorization that would help North Carolina welfare programs to improve the lives of low-income families so their children can turn off the dead-end road to poverty."

Happy Hill

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Organization of the Piedmont, we extend our thanks. The connection between our two people — Liberians and African Americans — is very unique...Our connection is no mistake," Hunder said. "I look forward to living on Liberia Street soon. I signed up today through the Southside CDC. Liberia Street will be revitalized. I hope that other Liberians will follow so that the dream of our ancestors will be perpetuated."

Tory Woodbury of the New York Jets offered encouragement to the youths in the circle.

"I love all of my people in Happy Hill. You kids don't know how blessed you are to have the support of people like Mrs. (Yvonne) Jefferson (who works at the Happy Hill Community Center), Mr. Piggott and Mr. Bitting. Y'all look up, and stay out of trouble," Woodbury said. "There is a lot of trouble around here, but let's have some fun."

On Friday night, Elder Sam Davis — a native of Happy Hill, associate minister at Mt. Olive Apostolic Church and sports editor of The Chronicle — served as the keynote speaker. The topic of his address was "Can Anything Good Come Out of Happy Hill? Come and See." His scriptural text came from John 1:46, in which Nathaniel asks Philip about Jesus, who went about doing good. He asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

A large crowd of reunion participants come home to this gathering for various reasons.

John Rivers traveled from Baltimore, Md., to attend this family affair. Although he has lived in Baltimore for 22 years, he feels compelled to come to the reunion. His family has lived on Gill Street, Pitts Street, and Alexander Street in the Happy Hill community. Rivers is the third of four children in the Rivers family, and they moved to this public housing community in 1951. This is his third time coming to the festivities.

"I got to show my face in the place. I am glad I came," Rivers said. "When you coming home, you don't worry how far you have to travel. I was born and reared here. This is home."

While he told his story, two of his friends — Alphonzo Webb and Jasper Turner of Winston-Salem — sandwiched him in the middle of a heartfelt hug. They attended Columbia Heights, Anderson High School and Atkins High School. They ran to greet Rivers because they had not seen him in 20 years.

Webb comes each year to win a reunion T-shirt during the bingo game and to see old friends. Rivers, Webb and Turner also remembered another special friend named James Stalks, who is deceased.

"We all have been friends since the 1950s. Rivers has been hitting me upside my head all of my life," Webb said. "I decided that if he hits me this time, I am going to knock him out. We have always had fun together. I get happy when I see them."

Jerry Hinson and his family lived at 503 Willow Street and on Pitts Street. They lived in a shotgun house. He recalled that he could see through the floor to the ground because the wooden slabs were not meshed well. They were glad to finally move into the "palace" on Free Street.

Jazz musician Joe Robinson lived at 716 Gill Street. He comes to the reunion to perform each year.

"Ben does the work that in my heart I would like to do with the young people. I come each year so that I can inspire some child that way Harry Wheeler and Bernard Foy inspired me. They often played their instruments at the community center dances, and they would let me in to play one song with them," Robinson said. "It was an adult thing, but I had my trumpet, and they let me in to play my song and leave. I come back to connect with my history. I come back to pass it on."

Tim Watson of Winston-Salem lived at 1236 Alder Street for about five years during the 1960s. He and brother Joe Watson and other siblings liked to play in the tunnels. Watson's most vivid memory is that of Wendell and his whistle. "He scared every child in Happy Hill during the 1960s," Watson said. "I remember he sang a song that said, 'I see a girl and a de' dowdy do.'"

James Funches and sister Beverly Funches Williams lived at 1244 Free Street from 1952 to 1962. They come to the reunion each year. Williams was honored at the Friday night ceremony for mentoring young people in the community.

"I was deeply touched last night. They said I did something good," Williams said. "Everybody's space is important. Everybody has to find a space and fill it."

Kimm Stanback grew up on Powell Street. When she came to the reunion three years ago, she saw her childhood face in one of the pictorial exhibits. The photograph portrayed her as a child playing in the former recreation center. Her family moved out of the Gardens in 1980 and moved to California. Stanback makes no apology about being from Happy Hill.

"This is where I grew up. I am not ashamed. This is me," Stanback said. "People want to see old friends and we want to see new ones. This is a family thing to me. I come to see people I have not seen in 20 and 30 years."

Moses "Mo" Lucas accompanied the BOSS Drummers, under the direction of Eric Lowery, and the Y-ett's, under the leadership of Robin Carpenter, during their performance. When he was married, he and his wife lived at 609 Gill Street in the 1950s. They resided in the area for 10 years. He recalled that there were many rules that the low-income families had to follow.

"Everything was under control. We could not have cars or televisions and live in the projects," Lucas said.



Several former and current residents of Happy Hill were honored Friday at a special program. Many of them posed for a picture after the program.

A Business and Personal Success Series

SPOTLIGHT ON Success

from Office Depot

RELATIONSHIPS PROVE KEY

At the age of 7, Wayne Gill watched his grandfather transact business as they traveled around Jamaica. One day after his grandfather completed a business deal, little Gill gave an opinion to him about the matter. His grandfather's response would set the foundation by which that little boy would live for the rest of his life.

"He (said) to me, 'You know, you've got a lot of opinions, you should be my lawyer.' A little bell went off in my mind," says A. Wayne Gill, chairman and president, Gill & Associates, P.A. (G&A).

"Since then, I've only wanted to be a lawyer and an entrepreneur."

Some 30 years later, Gill runs his own firm of five lawyers and a 13-member support staff of legal assistants, legal secretaries and various administrators, including his wife as CEO. Located in Boca Raton, Fla., G&A specializes in creditor's rights and commercial litigation. Gill attributes his success to one underlying principle: building good strong relationships.

It was April 1997 when Gill set out to start his own firm. With \$1,000, he purchased a computer and made a phone call to a man he met a few years before.

"I said, 'I'm going out on my own, and I'm opening a law firm. I was wondering if you guys need anyone?'," says Gill, recounting his conversation. "He told me I could come right over and sit down and talk to him and his partner."

They gave him an office that included a receptionist, overhead expenses and a retainer, and from that he grew G&A.

"He did our collections and our corporate work, and he was awesome," says Jack Levine, president of Tricom Pictures, a TV productions company. "We were referring some work to him and other people were coming in to him, and he actually outgrew us." Gill found Tricom a replacement and moved on but still occasionally assists with the company's legal needs. With \$1 million in annual billings today, Gill has carved out a niche to become the creditor's rights attorney for Fortune 500 or Fortune 1,000 organizations.

One of his first Fortune companies was Office Depot, which he says shows the company's corporate responsibility to the community.

"I am so thankful that Office Depot gave me that first opportunity," says Gill, who has represented the company for more than four years in creditor's rights. "I think it's incredibly important that Fortune companies do business with minorities because we are a culturally diverse country and that should be reflected in all corporate structures."

"I'm not interested in patent law or in employment law or other areas. I would like to grow my firm to become recognized nationally and internationally eventually as the finest creditor's rights specialist there is," says Gill.

His success track is right on track, says economist George R. Auzenne.

"Success is achieved by identifying the correct niche and then exploiting that niche," says Auzenne, director of professional development in the department of economics at Florida A&M University. "That holds true whether one is producing a product or whether one is providing a service."

But, it is not only branding and niche carving that Gill says has made his company a success. It is the relationships he has developed on his road to that success.

"Every single person I referred to him loved him," comments Levine, who Gill refers to as

a mentor.

Gill sums it up by saying, "At the end of the day, you're a person, and you need people who love you and people to love, that's the whole key to life."

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Gill & Assoc. chairman, Wayne Gill, found entrepreneurial inspiration from his grandfather.

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