

A spark for change

Coordinated social service program aims to boost families

A pilot project funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation aims to better integrate the labyrinth of social services programs that families on welfare must navigate. The key, say project leaders, is involving welfare recipients in efforts to improve the system to help free them from dependence on it.

BY DAVID E. BROWN

Warrenton
The welfare system often is like a lead weight around the necks of the people who provide public assistance. That's doubly true for welfare recipients.

Whether they deliver services or need them, people involved in the welfare system must navigate conflicting state and federal regulations; miles of red tape and stacks of forms.

Vanessa Williams knows the drill. The Warren County woman wants to work, but the income would put an end to some medical benefits her disabled daughter gets from the federal government, and job benefits wouldn't replace them.

Williams, a nurse's aid, is going back to school; she earned a 4.0 grade point average in her first quarter studying micro-systems technology at Vance-Granville Community College. She hopes alternative approaches such as the Opportunities for Families Fund — a project of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation — can spur some change in the system before she graduates.

In North Carolina, social service programs are primarily the responsibility of county government. So it is to the counties that the Reynolds Foundation turned with a five-year, \$5 million attempt to make some sense of human service delivery.

For the Winston-Salem-based foundation, the Opportunities for Families Fund, or OFF, is another chapter in a long history of grass-roots involvement in the state's social problems. It continues a Reynolds theme of involving the poor in shaping a system that works.

OFF's goal is a long-standing ideal: Move poor families away from

dependence and toward self-sufficiency by addressing their needs as a related set of challenges, rather than attacking each need with a separate program.

"Most people don't really want to have anything to do with public assistance," says Pheon Beal, who coordinates the OFF project. "But the reality of the system is they come into a revolving door...Reducing dependency on public assistance is easy: Just cut public assistance. But what have you done with poverty?"

The federal JOBS program gives recipients a limited period in which to become self-sufficient — improve their education levels, become more employable.

In a fragmented delivery system, this window often closes before recipients can get themselves on solid ground, critics say.

Schooling may be available, they say, but day care may not be. A job opportunity may vanish for lack of public transportation. A job without health care and child care benefits eventually can become less lucrative than the welfare system.

The counties must be eager for help; 86 of the state's 100 counties applied for the Reynolds Foundation program. Sixteen proposals representing 20 counties received planning grants, and five of those — Warren, Scotland, Forsyth, Cleveland and a Mitchell-Avery-Yancey consortium — were chosen for \$1 million grants.

\$3 PER MONTH

Poverty is not a single problem, but a set of circumstances — usually addressed separately by the social service system. OFF works on the premise that those circumstances are interrelated, and the solutions should be too.

Warren County is typical of the way the system operates.

Vanessa Williams laughs ruefully about her \$3 per month in food stamps. Given her husband's income, that was the allotment at one time. Hardly worth the 29 cents and the time to stuff the pay stubs in the envelope — to say nothing of the effort on the government's end.

But the laughter she shares with family outreach coordinators Nina Goode and Juanita Tate is genuine. They work for The Family Institute,

the Warren County agency that is coordinating an OFF pilot project. They can laugh about the sad, fragmented shape of the welfare system as they see it because they're going door to door to try to make it better.

Warren, the state's poorest county — with 28 percent of its population below the federal poverty line — earned its grant by convincing the Reynolds Foundation that solutions would come from people such as Williams. She was part of a committee of local citizens who surveyed their neighbors on how to improve the services they receive.

With the grant in hand, part of the committee merged with local counselors, teachers, clergy and business leaders to form the board of the institute. The core of the Warren program is an intensive study of 35 families like the Williamses — examining their needs and the roadblocks in their way.

Tate and Goode, social workers by profession, each took half that number to interview.

"Contrary to what agencies think, families do know what's best for them," Goode says. "They may not be able to relate that, but once they get comfortable with being a part of the solution, they can."

"That's it," Tate says, "just getting them to talk. So many of them have been so down about this system for so long. I think the families we're working with are starting to gain a lot of self esteem."

The Warren County project does things that high-volume social services programs can't. If a family needs housing, Family Institute staffers like Goode "ride down the road 'til you see an empty house — get in folks' business."

They persuade people to clean up their debts and plan five years down the road for a house. They talk the Vanessa Williamses into going back to school.

Warren would need an army of Tates and Goodes to transform service delivery to the whole county, Beal says.

"I think the fundamental problem is, we're used to doing business as usual. There has not been enough pressure to change the system, and the people that can be most effective

have had a very small voice."

Cathy A. Lawrence, who directs the Warren project, says that after three years, the problems are clearer.

There is not enough successful participation in the county's Graduate Equivalency Degree high school completion program. Social services agencies are in several different

Warrenton locations, and the food stamps office is miles away in Norlina.

There are no domestic violence shelters anywhere. Housing is unaffordable, substandard or nonexistent. There is no day care. The employment outlook for the small rural coun-

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Short Takes

IRS seeks back taxes from senior citizen group

The national American Association of Retired Persons has paid \$135 million to settle part of a tax dispute with the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS claims the nonprofit owes taxes on royalty payments it received from insurance and investment companies that market products bearing AARP's logo. The AARP says the income is related to its primary mission and should be tax-exempt.

President Clinton nominates Duke professor to board

Thomas Ehrlich, visiting professor at Duke University's Terry Sanford Institute for Public Policy and former president of Indiana University, was nominated by President Clinton to the board of directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service which runs the new AmeriCorps program.

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