

# Individual Case Study Reports

## Massachusetts

### Re-engineering Category

Massachusetts was selected as one of the six case study States because of its innovative approach to implementing outreach initiatives to increase accessibility to the FSP after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). In 1998, Massachusetts began operating the Follow-up Outreach and Referral Families Program (F.O.R. Families Program) to ensure that families who leave the Temporary Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC, Massachusetts' name for TANF) program, but who are still eligible for food stamps, continue to receive benefits. In particular, clients that fail to recertify for the FSP are contacted by the F.O.R. Families Program, often through a home visit, to ensure they know of their continued eligibility for food stamps. Along with this followup of clients, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) offices in the Boston area expanded their hours of operation to accommodate working clients. In addition, the State has been working with Project Bread, a nonprofit agency located in Boston, to conduct outreach for the Food Stamp Program. Project Bread manages social marketing campaigns, operates a hotline that directs low-income individuals to emergency food sources, and trains volunteers to assist FSP applicants with the certification process.

This case study report summarizes findings from interviews that were conducted in Boston from August 21 to August 23, 2000. State staff from DTA who oversee the FSP and State staff from the Department of Public Health (DPH) who administer the F.O.R. Families Program were interviewed. In addition, the regional coordinator and information specialist at the F.O.R. Families regional office in Boston were interviewed, along with supervisors and caseworkers in two local DTA offices, New Market and Roslindale. Because of time limitations, the F.O.R. Families Program home visitors were interviewed by telephone the following week.

## Food Stamp Program Context

### *The Massachusetts Food Stamp Program*

The Federal FSP is a State-administered program in Massachusetts. After welfare reform, Massachusetts also began the State Supplemental Food Stamp Program (SSFSP) to provide State-funded food stamp benefits to noncitizens who are ineligible to participate in the Federal FSP. SSFSP benefits are provided to noncitizens who have resided in Massachusetts for 60 continuous days or more before application. Eligibility and case management services for both programs are administered by DTA.

There are 4 DTA regions with 37 local offices that provide services to FSP clients. DTA has an interagency service agreement with the Department of Public Health (DPH) to provide outreach services for potential food stamp clients. DPH either provides the services directly through its F.O.R. Families offices or contracts out the services to Project Bread. Overviews of the F.O.R. Families Program and Project Bread are provided below.

### *The F.O.R. Families Program*

The F.O.R. Families Program was created by DTA and DPH after community advocates expressed concern over the well-being of former welfare recipients. The advocates argued that it was unwise to assume that clients would become self-sufficient once they left TAFDC. Many clients lacked the basic skills to get a job and faced significant barriers that needed to be addressed if they were to lead stable lives. The barriers often included poor access to affordable housing, substance abuse problems, domestic violence, and transportation problems.

In order to address these concerns, DTA set out to create an outreach program to help former TAFDC clients transition off welfare. They envisioned an outreach and referral service that could make clients aware of a broad array of community and government services. Through the program, clients would learn how to access the services and receive assistance if they had any problems. Officials believed that in order to be

effective, the program would have to be staffed by workers that were trusted by former TAFDC clients. Since many clients distanced themselves from DTA and the other services they provide after leaving the TAFDC program, a decision was made not to use DTA staff to conduct the outreach efforts.

DTA approached DPH to determine if it would be willing to administer the outreach program to former TAFDC clients. It was believed that the program would be a natural extension of outreach services the department provided. DPH was already well versed in providing early intervention for a variety of health and nutrition programs, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). DPH nurses and social workers were located throughout the State, and the department's field staff had experience working with community-based organizations. As a result, DPH staff were well received by the former TAFDC clients. DPH agreed to provide the services, and both departments worked together to design the program. In 1998, the F.O.R. Families program was established.

### ***Project Bread***

Project Bread is an organization begun in 1969 that conducts a wide range of activities to prevent and alleviate hunger. The organization's main objective is to raise money through various fundraising events to support soup kitchens and food pantries across Massachusetts. Its banner fundraising event is the Walk for Hunger, which raises about \$3 million each year. Project Bread also lobbies the legislature to promote antihunger policies and conducts outreach to promote participation in various nutrition programs, including the FSP.

Under a contract with DPH, Project Bread staff have developed and distributed food stamp outreach materials to increase awareness of the FSP and other nutrition programs. Project Bread also operates the FoodSource Hotline, which provides callers with information about FSP eligibility rules, the application process, and emergency food resources. The hotline staff also distributes FSP applications when they are requested. In addition, Project Bread collaborates with local contract agencies to provide direct outreach in communities. They train community groups to make presentations about the FSP, screen potential clients, and assist clients with the application process. Project Bread has worked with community groups to target the elderly and immigrants. Volunteers have been recruited

from local networks working with the elderly to assist seniors with completing food stamp applications. Volunteers have also been recruited from immigrant-focused networks.

### **Findings from State-Level Interviews**

At the State food stamp office in Boston, interviews were conducted with the Assistant DTA Commissioner and the DTA director of the Boston region. The Assistant DTA Commissioner is responsible for overseeing policy and program management for TAFDC, FSP, SSFSP, Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children (EAEDC) and Emergency Assistance (EA). The director of the Boston region oversees nine local DTA offices in Boston and the surrounding areas. In addition to DTA officials, interviews were also conducted with the DPH Assistant Commissioner, who is responsible for policy and program management, and the director of the F.O.R. Families Program, who oversees the regional F.O.R. Families offices. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain the State-level perspective on the outreach efforts conducted by Project Bread and the F.O.R. Families Program.

### ***Program Administration and the F.O.R. Families Project***

As was noted earlier, the majority of the direct outreach services provided by DTA and DPH are conducted through the F.O.R. Families Program. This program provides outreach and referral services to clients in five areas of need: housing and environment, family health, food and nutrition, economics, and social supports. There are six regional F.O.R. Families offices across the State. Each office is staffed with a regional coordinator, a resource specialist, and home visitors. Regional coordinators are responsible for managing the office and assigning cases to home visitors, reviewing cases as necessary, and facilitating contact with local DTA offices. Home visitors are either nurses or social workers with experience in public health, and are responsible for initiating contact with clients referred to the program by DTA. The home visitors complete their assessments over the telephone, or in person when clients cannot be reached by telephone, to determine whether a comprehensive home visit is needed. Once clients have been assessed, assistance is provided to help them access the services they need.

Resource specialists are responsible for managing the toll-free F.O.R. Families hotline. They assess clients over the phone and pass client information on to their

regional coordinator if clients need a home visit. They also refer clients to community and government services and assist them in accessing services when necessary. The resource specialists also support the home visitors by keeping them abreast of what community resources are available.

DTA caseworkers are in charge of referring clients to the F.O.R. Families Program. Caseworkers refer clients to the program if there are signs that clients will have trouble transitioning off welfare. Such signs can include an inability to access food, find work, pay rent, combat domestic violence, and/or overcome substance abuse problems. Caseworkers refer clients before they reach their 2-year TAFDC time limit so F.O.R. Families Program staff can contact clients soon after they stop receiving cash assistance. The referrals they complete include contact information and a description of the barriers the clients face. The referrals are then faxed to the F.O.R. Families Program administrators at the State office, who route them to regional F.O.R. Families offices.

Clients are also identified for the F.O.R. Families Program if they fail to recertify for their food stamp benefits after leaving TAFDC. While many clients remain eligible for food stamps after they reach their time limit, they must recertify within 30 days after leaving TAFDC in order to continue receiving benefits. Each month the names of clients that fail to recertify for food stamps are compiled on a computer-generated list and forwarded to the F.O.R. Families State staff by DTA State staff. The list is then distributed among the six regional F.O.R. Families offices. When the referral mechanisms were put into place, it was assumed that 90 percent of the referrals would come from the computer-generated list and 10 percent would come from local DTA offices identifying at-risk clients. In actuality, the majority of referrals are made by local caseworkers.

The regional offices are responsible for tracking the number of home visits that are conducted, the number of phone contacts that are made, and the numbers and type of referrals that are made to outside services. In order to compile the information, the resource coordinator obtains weekly summaries from the F.O.R. Families staff. The information is provided to F.O.R. Families staff at the State office.

### ***Program Administration and Project Bread***

Project Bread began conducting food stamp outreach in 1986 when it started operating a toll-free hotline. When clients called, the hotline staff referred them to emergency food services and conducted a basic screening to determine whether they could be eligible to receive food stamps. In 1990, Project Bread began conducting food stamp outreach for DTA after it was awarded a portion of the \$75,000 the legislature earmarked for food stamp outreach. Project Bread used the money to help fund the hotline activities and also searched for low-cost advertising venues to promote the hotline. In 1993, funding for food stamp outreach rose to \$350,000. In addition, DPH began managing food stamp outreach on behalf of DTA. DPH entered into a contract with Project Bread to implement a number of statewide social marketing campaigns to promote the FSP. As a result, Project Bread began promoting the FSP through such media as radio, television, newspapers, billboards, and transit posters. DPH also decided to involve five other organizations to train local groups and agencies to screen clients for the FSP and to make presentations to potential FSP applicants and those that serve them. Project Bread was asked to train and manage the five contractors.

In 1998, DPH awarded Project Bread a multiyear contract to continue conducting food stamp outreach services. Under the contract, Project Bread provides hotline callers with information on FSP eligibility rules, the application process, and emergency food resources. The hotline staff also prescreen applicants over the phone and distribute applications to callers deemed eligible for the program. If clients encounter administrative barriers when they apply for food stamps, Project Bread staff contact DTA to determine how the barriers can be overcome. In order to accommodate non-English speakers, Project Bread hired bilingual staff for the hotline and opened an account with AT&T's language line that provides translation services in 145 languages.

In addition, Project Bread continues to help local groups develop community-based outreach. Staff from Project Bread recruit local service providers to distribute food stamp outreach literature and train them to make presentations to prospective applicants, prescreen applicants, and assist them in completing food stamp applications. While these efforts are targeted to

the broad food stamp-eligible population, special efforts are made by Project Bread to target the elderly and immigrants.

### **Other State-Level Efforts To Improve Program Access**

In order to accommodate the needs of working clients, DTA expanded office hours in four local DTA offices. The offices were chosen because officials believed that they had the resources to handle the extended hours. In May 2000, the Pittsfield office, located in Western Massachusetts, the Lawrence office, which serves a large urban area with a large public assistance program, and the Davis Square office in Summerville began operating from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturdays. In addition, the Pittsfield and Davis Square offices stay open until 7 p.m. once a week. In July 2000, a fourth office, the Roslindale office in Boston, also started operating from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturdays. Unlike the other offices, the Roslindale office serves clients from all three DTA offices in Boston. Since it has limited access to information housed at the other three offices, the Roslindale office cannot offer full-scale eligibility services. However, staff members do accept applications and verification documents from clients that are later forwarded to the appropriate office. A number of clients have taken advantage of these extended hours.

### **Challenges Identified by State Officials**

The interviewees all felt that the outreach services offered through the F.O.R. Families Program and by Project Bread were effective. When asked about challenges they had encountered while promoting access to the FSP, they pointed to broader systematic issues.

- Massachusetts works with many nonprofit community-based organizations to improve access to the FSP. They are used to helping clients complete applications and to make presentations promoting the FSP. Respondents felt they could increase the number of FSP clients by using these organizations to enroll applicants, but noted that the role of these organizations is currently limited in order to assure that eligibility decisions are made by DTA employees.
- States have been told to keep their error rate down while increasing access to the FSP. Respondents noted that, at times, it has been difficult to achieve both goals. This is because States that undertake efforts to improve access to the FSP may end up

with higher error rates. In addition, officials felt that under-issuance should not count toward the error rate.

- Many clients do not realize that they remain eligible to receive food stamps even though they are no longer eligible for cash assistance under TAFDC. Respondents noted that efforts need to be made to differentiate eligibility rules in both programs.

### **Findings From Interviews With Direct Service Providers**

This section includes information obtained from interviews with staff that operate the various outreach efforts at the local level. There are two different food stamp outreach efforts in Massachusetts, one operating through the F.O.R. Families Program and one conducted by Project Bread. Findings from interviews conducted with staff from each of these programs and local DTA staff are included in this section.

#### ***The F.O.R. Families Program***

The majority of F.O.R. Families staff in the Boston region are employed by the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) and work out of the BPHC offices. However, the Regional Resource Specialist is employed by DPH and works out of a separate office. All communication between the resource specialist and the home visitors occurs by phone or fax. The F.O.R. Families program conducts a number of outreach activities designed to help individuals maintain their FSP eligibility. These efforts are discussed below.

***Serving Clients Through the Hotline.*** As noted earlier, the F.O.R. Families program maintains toll-free hotlines in order to provide potential FSP applicants with easy access to information about enrolling in the FSP. The F.O.R. Families hotline operated in the Boston region is different from hotlines in other parts of the State because it is part of a general health services hotline. The Boston region hotline operates from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, but clients also may leave messages for staff if they call when the office is closed. The Resource Specialist is responsible for staffing the hotline. DTA caseworkers are responsible for informing clients about the hotline before they lose their TAFDC. The hotline number is also included in a notice clients receive from DTA regarding the termination of their benefits.

When a call comes in, the Resource Specialist begins the conversation by gathering contact information

using a standard assessment form. Information collected includes citizenship status, employment status, family size, education level, race, marital status, and primary language. Over the course of the conversation, the Resource Specialist documents whether the caller has questions concerning housing, health, food, income or employment, and social services or family relations. He/she also documents whether the caller questioned why TAFDC benefits were not extended. If the caller is currently in a crisis situation, information regarding the circumstances is recorded, and clients are asked whether they are concerned about safety, domestic violence, housing, food, health care, emotional stress, depression, or financial stress. This information is provided to the Regional Coordinator, who then assigns the caller a home visitor.

Respondents noted that, in many cases, clients are in a desperate state by the time they contact the office. Many callers report not having enough food to eat, having trouble paying the rent, or being unable to cover the cost of utilities. If callers are not receiving food stamps, they are encouraged to apply and often are referred to Project Bread to receive assistance with the application. The Regional Resource Specialist in Boston often advocates on behalf of the callers. For example, if a client's landlord is threatening eviction, she will attempt to intervene by contacting the landlord herself.

If a non-English-speaking individual contacts the hotline, the Resource Specialist first determines if the caller's language is Spanish; if so, he/she enlists the help of another public health employee in the building who can translate for Spanish-speaking clients. If the caller speaks a language other than English or Spanish, the Resource Specialist refers the person to the Boston Public Health Commission, where staff has access to translation services.

**Following Up on Referrals.** Each month the Boston F.O.R. Families office receives a list of clients that have failed to recertify for food stamps, along with their contact information. The Resource Specialist contacts the clients on the list to determine why they did not complete the recertification process. Resource Specialists must make three attempts to reach each client, and through the use of an assessment form each call is documented. Over the course of the conversations, it is determined whether the clients are receiving food stamps, and if not, whether they need food stamps and any reasons for their not continuing participation in the FSP. If Resource Specialists determine

that a home visit is needed, they gather the demographic information noted earlier and document responses on the assessment form. Any referrals made over the telephone, such as to emergency food providers, are also noted. A week later, the Resource Specialist calls the client to determine if he/she was able to access the FSP. However, respondents report that in many cases, the client has not followed through with the application process. If this is the case, the client is referred to Project Bread in order to receive assistance with completing the application process. The Resource Specialist also passes the client's name and contact information over to the Regional Coordinator, who assigns the case to a home visitor.

Respondents felt that, for the most part, clients react positively to calls from the Resource Specialist. Many clients feel overwhelmed by their problems and need someone to simply listen to what they are going through. The Resource Specialists are empathetic, and clients are often willing to trust them.

**Home Visits.** Once clients are selected for home visits, their names and contact information are forwarded to home visiting staff. Home visitors initially contact their clients by mail. After the letters are sent, the home visitors make telephone calls to the client to try and arrange a visit. If a home visitor is unable to reach a client after three phone attempts or if the client does not have a phone, the visitor usually goes to the client's home. If the client is not at home when the home visitor first attempts to make contact, the visitor leaves a F.O.R. Families brochure and a note saying that he/she stopped by. If not successful in making contact with the client, the home visitor must attempt to reach the client two additional times. If still unable to contact the client, by phone or through visits, the home visitor often calls the DTA caseworker to verify contact information.

After successfully contacting the client by phone, the home visitor attempts to set up an initial home visit. Respondents noted that most clients agree to the visits, though some are initially reluctant to deal with staff from another State agency or to allow someone they do not know to come into their home.

During the initial meeting, home visitors use an assessment tool to help determine the barriers faced by the clients. The assessment tool covers questions in five categories: housing and environment, family health, family food and nutrition, economics, and social supports. Each area includes a checklist that

must be reviewed with the client. Each item on the checklist is rated with an intensity level, which ranges from 0 to 4. The higher the intensity level, the less stable the client is in that area. For example, to assess housing and environment, the home visitor must determine if the client: (1) owes back rent, (2) is facing eviction, (3) has trouble paying for fuel or utilities, (4) has safety concerns, or (5) has received emergency assistance in the past. The intensity levels are summed for each category to get an overall rating for clients' well-being in each area.

Once the assessment is complete, the information is used to determine which course of action the home visitor will recommend in order to assist the client. These recommendations are customized to the specific needs of the client. For example, clients who are unable to pay their gas bill will be linked to different services than clients who have been issued an eviction notice. The course of action and recommendations are then discussed with the client and documented on the assessment form.

In order to assess client needs in the food and nutrition area, home visitors ask clients whether they (1) are receiving food stamps, (2) have access to a food pantry, (3) are enrolled in WIC (when appropriate), and (4) have children enrolled in the School Food Service or Summer Meals Programs. In addition, they try to assess the client's overall food security status through asking a series of open-ended questions.

Home visitors are required to maintain contact and to follow up on their clients for a period of 1 year. The amount of contact during that time varies, based on client needs. During the year, the home visitors are required to contact their clients a minimum of five times after the initial home visit. Depending on the need, however, the home visitor may make contact several times a week for short periods or make a single contact each month to determine the client's status and whether further assistance is needed.

**Client Contact.** Home visitors reported that most of their contact with clients has been very positive. In many cases, clients are reluctant to open up during the initial home visits, but are quick to see the value of utilizing the home visitor's skills and access to resources. Home visitors noted that making clients feel comfortable is often the key to a successful visit. If clients feel that they can trust the home visitor, they are not only willing to allow the home visitor to conduct the assessment, but are also more likely to follow

up on the recommendations or referrals made during the visit.

Respondents noted that some clients are angry over the fact that they are no longer eligible to receive cash assistance. However, since the home visit usually takes place soon after clients leave TAFDC, the majority of clients are not yet facing a financial crisis, as many of their expenses are still being covered by their last TAFDC check. Providing clients with information to help them prepare for the subsequent months, when they will not have their TAFDC check to help cover expenses, is an important role for the home visitor. Respondents noted that paying rent becomes a particularly stressful issue when the household share of Section 8 housing costs increase because they are working.

All of the home visitors have encountered non-English-speaking clients. To accommodate their needs, the home visitors use translators that are either located within their office or provided by the State. While some non-English-speaking clients have relatives that are willing to translate for them, this practice is not encouraged as clients may be unwilling to raise certain issues in the presence of a family member.

All of the home visitors said they refer their clients to a wide range of services, most commonly to area food banks and the FSP. Other services to which clients are referred include MassHealth, in order to obtain free health insurance for up to a year, DTA for childcare vouchers, the Department of Revenue for child support services, and Legal Services to address issues related to housing. In addition, home visitors noted that they sometimes make referrals to such services as domestic violence intervention, substance abuse and housing services, and GED classes.

### ***Project Bread***

This section includes information from a group interview that was conducted with Project Bread staff responsible for food stamp outreach. The respondents included the food stamp outreach manager, a FoodSource Hotline worker, an outreach worker, and a legislative advocate.

### ***Piloting Food Stamp Outreach at Health Centers.***

Project Bread received a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services in August 2000 to implement a pilot program to provide food stamp outreach in health centers. This outreach effort was developed

on the premise that hunger and access to food assistance is a health-related concern, and should be addressed through a comprehensive health care setting.

The program has been operating in three cities: Fall River, Lawrence, and Boston. Outreach workers prescreen clients to determine whether they are eligible to receive food stamps. They help clients to complete applications, determine which verifications are required, and assist with making copies of required documents. The outreach workers send completed applications to DTA and contact caseworkers to make sure applications are not missing any required documents. If caseworkers need additional verification, they immediately send clients a list of the missing documents.

A number of resources are available to better serve clients who do not speak English. Project Bread hires bilingual staff, the health centers have translators available, and the outreach workers have access to a language line, when needed. Having access to these resources has made the application process less confusing for non-English-speaking clients. Staff believe that the outreach services offered through the pilot program have helped to eliminate language barriers that have kept people from applying for food stamps.

DTA staff have been very supportive of the food stamp outreach pilot project. They have trained Project Bread's food stamp administrator, who went on to train outreach workers at the health centers. DTA also has designated one worker in each local office in the pilot cities to address eligibility questions outreach workers might have. The pilot was targeted to end in October 2000, but one of the health centers will continue to offer food stamp outreach once a week, using graduate students.

**Reporting Requirements.** Project Bread is required to provide DPH with monthly summaries of its outreach activities. Each month staff prepare reports containing the number of calls received through the hotline, the number of callers that requested general information, the number of callers that requested food stamp information, and the number of followup calls made. The report also includes the number of orders taken for pamphlets and the number of agencies that contacted the hotline for technical assistance. Data are also reported on the number of non-English-speaking individuals calling the hotline, as well as information on the age of the callers. Finally, staff also report on the number of clients that were prescreened and the num-

ber who were deemed eligible and were sent applications. For callers deemed ineligible, the project documents the reasons for the determination.

**Evaluations.** In FY 1998, Project Bread conducted a survey at the request of DPH to determine whether callers were satisfied with the services they received through the FoodSource Hotline. Project Bread developed the survey and administered it to 150 callers. Ninety-nine percent of those surveyed felt that the hotline was a valuable service. Ninety-three percent said they received information that was useful to their situation. All of the respondents reported being treated with respect. The respondents also found the hotline accessible. Fifty-nine percent said they received immediate assistance when they called the hotline. Ten percent reported that they had experienced a wait time of 5 minutes.

Since 1997, Project Bread has conducted two evaluations with DTA and DPH to determine whether clients who are deemed eligible for the FSP actually do apply for and receive FSP benefits. The last evaluation took place from July 1997 to June 1998. During that time, Project Bread collected the names and social security numbers of callers who were thought to be eligible for food stamps and who requested food stamp applications over the phone. Each month, the names and social security numbers of approximately 75 of those clients were randomly selected and forwarded to DTA 90 days after the clients had called the hotline. The 3-month gap was used to ensure that there was enough time for applications to be submitted and processed. DTA then cross-referenced the names and social security numbers of the callers with its computer records to determine how many clients applied for benefits and were receiving benefits. It was assumed that callers whose social security numbers were absent from DTA records did not apply for food stamps.

During the last evaluation period, Project Bread forwarded 902 names and social security numbers to DTA. When social security numbers were cross-referenced with DTA records, 65 percent of the callers (588) did not appear in DTA's computer records, and thus had not applied for the FSP. Among the callers that did apply, 86 percent received food stamps and 14 percent were deemed ineligible.

#### **Local DTA Staff**

Of interest to this study was how local DTA staff worked with the two outreach efforts. This section

includes information from interviews with staff in two local DTA offices in Boston, the New Market office and the Roslindale office. The New Market office is the second largest office in Boston. It was created when the State consolidated three other area offices. The Roslindale office is the smallest office that serves clients in the Boston area. One supervisor and two caseworkers were interviewed in each office.

**Overview of Local Operations.** In addition to providing basic TAFDC, FSP, and Medicaid eligibility services, DTA also provides transitional services and postemployment services to TAFDC clients and former TAFDC clients through the Employment Services Program (ESP). Since Massachusetts currently uses a generic worker model to provide TAFDC services, individual TAFDC workers are responsible for providing all services related to eligibility, case management, and employment. The employment services responsibilities include developing employment plans, linking clients to employment resources, and encouraging clients to participate in employment and training services. The local offices also have food stamp-only workers. Staff at both offices said the caseloads carried by food stamp-only workers increased significantly after welfare reform.

**Roles and Responsibilities.** Roles and responsibilities at the New Market and Roslindale offices follow:

- **New Market Office.** During the site visit to the New Market office, it was noted that the office has experienced difficulty keeping food stamp-only caseworkers employed because their caseloads are so high. Just prior to the site visit, the office had lost 1 food stamp-only worker who was carrying a caseload of 220 to 250 clients. In contrast, the caseload for TAFDC workers ranges from 100 to 110. It was noted that with welfare reform, the characteristics of the food stamp caseload changed. The program now attracts more elderly people, immigrants, SSI recipients, and people who are employed.

The TAFDC caseworkers are responsible for providing eligibility and case management services to TAFDC clients. They also are responsible for food stamp certifications for TAFDC clients. The majority of TAFDC clients also receive food stamps through either the Federal or State-run program. When clients reach their 2-year time limit, caseworkers are required to inform them of their possible continuing eligibility for food stamps. If they believe that clients will not follow up on continued FSP participation

once they have reached their time limit, the client is to be referred to the F.O.R. Families program.

After a client loses the TAFDC benefit, caseworkers continue to carry that case for a month, and then pass it along to a food stamp-only caseworker. The caseworkers are also responsible for completing food stamp recertifications in the first month. Respondents noted that determining benefits for households with some members that qualify for State food stamps and others that qualify for Federal food stamps can be extremely confusing.

One of the primary responsibilities of the caseworker is to help TAFDC clients find work and obtain training. When clients enter their second year on TAFDC, caseworkers review their client status every month to make sure that they are progressing towards self-sufficiency.

- **Roslindale Office.** Staff in the Roslindale office have duties similar to those in the New Market Office. The Roslindale office has 900 food stamp-only cases in the office, which are divided among 9 workers. The office staff reported receiving a number of food stamp referrals from Project Bread, Catholic Charities, refugee resettlement organizations, and elderly outreach programs.

Caseworkers noted that in some instances, workload has increased since welfare reform even though caseloads have fallen. This is because the scope of their jobs has increased. In addition to normal TAFDC eligibility determination activities, caseworkers are also now responsible for employment services as well as for referring clients to the F.O.R. Families Program. In addition, caseworkers may continue to carry a client's case as a "food stamp only" case for 1 year after TAFDC eligibility ends.

**Food Stamp Recertification.** After clients lose their TAFDC benefits, they have 30 days to be recertified for food stamps. The staff at the local offices noted that clients are informed of the recertification deadline during their exit interview, along with being provided with information about other services available. In most cases, clients do not want to take time to go through the food stamp recertification process, but some are willing return to the office in order to apply for transitional childcare services. When clients return to the office to request childcare services, their caseworker reminds them that they are still eligible to receive food stamps.



DTA is trying to make the food stamp application process easier to complete. Clients are now allowed to request an application through the mail. They can also return their application through the mail instead of dropping it off at an office. In order to promote participation in FSP, food stamp outreach workers have also been stationed at the Social Security office, health centers, and housing facilities for the elderly. Before their application is approved, potential clients have to attend a face-to-face interview, although this can be waived for elderly and disabled clients.

**Referrals to F.O.R. Families.** The TAFDC workers noted that they often refer clients to the F.O.R. Families Program before they lose their TAFDC benefit. Clients are referred to the program if they do not have a plan for how they will transition off welfare or if their extension request for continued TAFDC benefits is denied. The referrals are faxed to the F.O.R. Families regional office, and staff from the F.O.R. Families Program follow up with the caseworker. Neither of the two local offices is tracking the number of former TAFDC participants who later reapply for the FSP through a referral from the F.O.R. Families Program.

**Project Bread.** All of the local DTA staff interviewed have a high regard for the outreach services provided through Project Bread. Respondents noted that Project Bread is responsible for referring a significant number of applicants to their office. Project Bread also helps clients gather verifications that are necessary for completion of the application process. If information is missing, caseworkers send clients a checklist indicating which documents they need to provide along with a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Staff at the New Market office said Project Bread played an instrumental role in establishing the Saturday office hours and gathered input for the health center pilot program from their office. In addition, Project Bread staff met with the supervisor at the Rosindale office to develop a checklist for food stamp applications. The interviewees said that Project Bread became more visible after welfare reform due, in part, to its social marketing campaigns. Staff at both offices make referrals to Project Bread, particularly in cases where clients are ineligible for food stamps, so they can benefit from area food pantries and food banks.

### **Challenges Identified by Staff in Local Outreach Offices**

The F.O.R. Families staff interviewed believe that the program is a success because it is not invasive and links clients with resources that help them obtain self-sufficiency. Staff said the program has increased awareness of and participation in the FSP. Without the F.O.R. Families Program, many clients would not know that they were eligible for food stamps. The staff also pointed out some barriers that still need to be addressed:

- Respondents noted that some clients report negative experiences when applying for and receiving public assistance benefits. As a result, some clients may be distrustful of the social service delivery system. When staff from the F.O.R. Families Program contact these clients, they are reluctant to accept help because they have had negative experiences with DTA in the past and are now distrustful of agencies associated with the welfare system.
- DTA caseworkers are supposed to inform clients that they may remain eligible for food stamps when their TAFDC benefits are discontinued. According to some respondents, clients report that they were not told they would still be eligible for FSP benefits. Additionally, clients have reported that they have not received food stamp recertification forms in the mail as they were supposed to; in some cases, by the time they do receive them there is not enough time to reapply in order to prevent a break in service.
- Home visitors carry a large caseload, ranging from 90 to 140 cases. Managing so many cases can be overwhelming, especially if a large portion of the clients have significant problems, as these cases tend to be very labor intensive. Home visitors suggested that if the resource specialists could be responsible for parts of low-intensity cases, such as making calls on behalf of clients, their workload would ease up. That would allow home visitors to work more closely with clients with multiple barriers.
- As mentioned earlier, the F.O.R. Families hotline for the Boston region is unique because it takes calls for several programs, including MassHealth, Healthy Start, and FirstLink, in addition to calls from F.O.R. Families clients. As a result, the Resources Specialist

has to be knowledgeable about a wide array of programs and services. At times, it can be overwhelming to be responsible for so much information.

Project Bread staff believes there is much to be done in the aftermath of welfare reform to ensure people are not going hungry. A major concern is the dramatic fall in food stamp participation in Massachusetts. The staff brought up the following problems when asked about issues that have yet to be addressed:

- The rules governing the SSFSP and the Federal FSP are complicated and can be confusing. The confusion often increases when caseworkers have to certify members of the same family for both programs. This occurs when some members are eligible for or receiving State food stamps while others are eligible for or receiving Federal food stamps. DTA workers often try to solve the problem by requiring all family members to bring in the same verifications, even if they are not required to do so under the rules of both programs. This approach causes confusion and can put an undue burden on the client.
- Administrators in Massachusetts pay considerable attention to fraud prevention. One byproduct of this is that the FSP pays a large amount of attention to preventing fraud during the initial client orientation. According to some respondents, this focus on fraud prevention may deter clients from completing the application process. Respondents noted that clients have informed them that because of this focus, they feel like they are treated with suspicion during the application process.

The staff at the local DTA offices felt as though the food stamp outreach services provided by the F.O.R. Families Program and Project Bread were successful. They said that Project Bread was particularly effective at increasing the number of applications coming into their office. They raised the following policy-related issues that they felt needed to be addressed in order to improve access to the FSP:

- Face-to-face recertification interviews can be problematic for clients who are working or who have children. Respondents suggested that elimination of the face-to-face interview requirement would increase FSP participation.
- Some respondents felt that outreach services to the elderly should be increased. The elderly are less likely to seek out the FSP, and outreach efforts directed

to them, while often needing to be more intensive in nature, may help to bring them in for certification.

- Respondents also believe that the State should make more of an effort to help the elderly meet their food needs. Staff believe this could be done if there were a way to increase or supplement the minimum food stamp benefit from the current level of \$10 per month.

## Texas

### Overview of Re-engineering Effort

Texas was selected as one of the six case study States because it established a centralized system for food stamp and other social service program clients to report changes in their eligibility status. These “change centers” are located in the Arlington, Beaumont, Houston, and San Antonio regions and are designed to allow participants to telephone in changes that may affect their eligibility status within programs. The change centers provide clients with access to State program staff, known as “change agents,” who make every attempt to verify and document the reported changes while the client is on the telephone. Change agents have the same job description and basic training as regular eligibility workers in local field offices, but receive additional training in change center procedures and customer service. The centers serve TANF recipients, food stamp clients, and children and pregnant women receiving Medicaid. The centers operate from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday. In addition, the centers have telephone message systems that clients may use after hours. As a result, clients can report changes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

This case study report summarizes findings from interviews that were conducted from September 11 to September 13, 2000. An interview was conducted with a Texas Integrated Eligibility Redesign System (TIERS) staff person who spearheaded the development of the change center in San Antonio. TIERS, which includes the change center pilots, is a large automation and re-engineering program directed by the central headquarters of the Texas Department of Human Services (TDHS). At the regional level, the TDHS regional director, the assistant to the regional director, two case analysts, and the change center program manager were interviewed. Additionally, two supervisors and two advisors working at the change center were interviewed. To complete the process, supervisors, advisors, and case

readers located in two local TDHS offices served by the change center were interviewed. The San Antonio change center was chosen for closer examination because it was the first change center established in Texas. The local offices in Brighton and Sutton were chosen for site visits because they serve clients living in urban areas.

### **Food Stamp Program Administration**

The FSP in Texas is a State-administered program. Overall program administration is conducted through the TDHS, with local services being provided by TDHS staff working in field offices throughout the State. Ten regional offices oversee the local offices. TDHS eligibility workers, known as advisors, are responsible for determining eligibility and conducting recertifications for food stamp, TANF, and Medicaid clients. Food stamp benefits are issued on a debit card called a Lone Star Card. The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) oversees employment and training activities for the FSP. Rather than operate local field offices, the TWC funds services provided by local workforce development boards and one-stop career centers.

### **Findings From State and Regional Interviews**

This section includes information gathered from the TIERS change center leader, who was the regional director when the change center was implemented in San Antonio. Also interviewed were the current TDHS regional director, the assistant to the regional director, two case analysts at the regional office, and the change center program manager.

#### **Overview**

The first change center was established in San Antonio, and was fully implemented in February 1997. It currently serves 38 local offices in 28 counties. The San Antonio region covers a diverse range of counties, including several on the Texas-Mexico border. In FY 2000, there were 48,982 food stamp households in the region. In addition to the San Antonio center, change centers have been opened in Beaumont, serving 15 counties in southeast Texas, and in the Houston region. The Houston change center serves only the city of Houston, although the region includes suburbs and several rural counties. Recently, a change center was opened in the Arlington region, which includes Dallas. The Arlington center currently serves 70 percent of the region.

### **History of San Antonio Change Center**

The change center in San Antonio was born out of a move to integrate and streamline eligibility services for 15 health and human services programs through the Texas Integrated Enrollment Systems (TIES) initiative. In order to promote efficiency and customer service, the State opened bidding for eligibility services to private companies. TDHS entered into a partnership with two private organizations, EDS and UNISYS, and proposed the establishment of call centers<sup>1</sup> as part of its bid for the TIES contract. In 1997, the Clinton Administration ruled that private employees could not determine food stamp eligibility. In response to the ruling, the Texas legislature scaled back the TIES initiative so it included only the automation of the eligibility system. Because of the modifications to the TIES initiative, eligibility determination remained a function of TDHS. Re-engineering and automation efforts, including the change centers, continue under TIERS, the successor to the TIES initiative.

The bidding process for the TIES initiative made it clear that State jobs could be endangered in the future if TDHS did not become more competitive. As a result, TDHS began looking for ways to make their programs more efficient, provide better customer service to clients, and improve quality control. In 1997, the regional director of the TDHS office in San Antonio sought approval to implement a change center that clients could access to report changes. Local TDHS offices had a history of either failing to document changes reported by clients or noting them long after they were reported. Their inaction often adversely affected clients, who were forced to repay benefits that were incorrectly issued. It also increased the State's food stamp error rate. Inaction on the part of caseworkers led to "failure to act" and "failure to act timely" errors.

Reported changes were often ignored because documenting them was not the highest priority in local offices and because the reporting process was cumbersome. The unwritten rule that governed eligibility services was that client certifications and recertifications should take priority over change reporting. As a result,

<sup>1</sup>The proposed call center would have allowed clients to be certified and recertified over the telephone. USDA determined that, under FSP rules, applications and reviews must be done face-to-face, except in cases where recipients are eligible for SSI. Texas requested a waiver that would allow most of the interviews to be conducted over the telephone, with the "closing" interview to be done at local offices. Its waiver request was denied.

eligibility workers who were often overworked put off their change-reporting responsibilities. The procedures local offices used to document changes were also complicated. Clients could not report changes directly to their eligibility worker. Instead, they had to report changes by mail, telephone, or in person to a clerk at their local TDHS office. The clerk entered the changes into the computer system, and forwarded paperwork noting the change to the advisor handling the case. If verification documents were not provided when the change was reported, advisors would have to “pend” the case and send the client a letter requesting additional documentation. The reported change would then get filed until the client contacted the advisor or clerk with the proper documentation. When the client forwarded the documentation, the change would be noted.

The change center in San Antonio was designed to simplify the change reporting process for local TDHS staff and for clients. In 1997, program managers in the Brighton and Sutton TDHS offices in San Antonio, the two largest local offices in the region, began creating change-processing units with six to eight advisors each, under the direction of the regional office. The advisors in the new units, who became known as change agents, were responsible for documenting all changes clients reported to the local office. Other advisors in local TDHS offices remained in charge of completing certifications, but were no longer responsible for tracking client changes. The new division of labor allowed advisors to become experts in completing certifications and recertifications, while agents became experts in change reporting. It also created a staff whose top priority was documenting changes.

Staff in the local TDHS offices directed clients to report their changes to the change units by fax, mail, or over the telephone. When clients reported their changes by telephone, they were directly linked to a change agent. The agent documented their changes and attempted to verify them through a three-way call with a collateral contact. In the majority of cases, the changes were verified during the initial telephone call. When contacts could not be reached, the agents had the option of using client statements as the “best available information” or they could ask clients to send verification documents through the mail. Because so many verifications were done over the phone, the number of paper verifications that were required dropped sharply.

The change processing units were eventually consolidated and housed in the basement of the Sutton office building. The consolidation took roughly a year. The regional office then began drawing advisors from other urban and rural TDHS offices in the San Antonio region to work at the change center. The change center is currently staffed with over 50 change agents.

### ***Sharing Case Files and Verification Documents***

A virtual file sharing system is used to enable TDHS staff and change center staff to access and update client information stored in SAVERR, the Statewide computer system. Client information is first entered into SAVERR by local TDHS staff as part of the eligibility certification process. An online application form, known as the Generic Worksheet (GWS), is used to enter the information. Once the information is saved, it is automatically stored in SAVERR. At that point, case files are accessible to change center staff and local DHS staff.

In order to ensure that case files are not duplicated, the system requires that the case files be checked out to one worker at a time. If change center agents need to access a record that has been checked out to a TDHS worker at a local field office, they notify their customer service representative, who contacts the local office to find out why the record is being used and who is using it. If TDHS advisors need to access a record checked out to the change center, they contact a liaison (usually a supervisor) in the field office. The liaison then contacts the customer service representative at the change center to try to get the record released. This process often takes place when change center agents have to pend cases because they were unable to reach a collateral contact. It also takes place when clients are served a notice of adverse action because a change they reported affects their benefit level. When the latter occurs, agents must hold the case for a 13-day appeal period.

Since change center agents try to verify reported changes over the telephone, the number of paper documents clients have to provide has been significantly reduced. When change agents ask clients to provide verification documents, the documents are mailed or faxed to the change center. Once the documents are reviewed, they are forwarded to local offices, where they are filed. At this point, the only change center that maintains copies of verification documents is the

Beaumont change center. In Beaumont, the documents are scanned and filed on compact discs. Scanning technologies have been purchased for the other offices through the TIERS initiative and will be implemented in the near future.

### **Quality Control Initiatives**

Several quality control initiatives were implemented in the San Antonio Region to reduce the food stamp error rate. A food stamp case reading project began in November 1998 to prevent certification errors. Local offices are required to read 100 percent of food stamp applications before processing and 50 percent of all recertification applications. The review of recertification applications includes high-risk cases, as defined by the program manager at each local field office. Under the project, each program manager must provide a monthly case-reading report to the regional office. In August 2000, the regional office added a validation process involving regional case analysts who review the results of food stamp case-reading procedures at the local office.

In September 1999, the regional office redefined food stamp certification periods. Local offices were provided with the new guidelines. One-month to 2-month certification periods were set for households facing unpredictable circumstances. This category includes households with an ABAWD who is reaching the 3-month time limit, households with a member whose alien eligibility status is about to change, and households with a member who applied for Unemployment Insurance Benefits but has not begun to receive them. A 3-month certification period was set for households with an employable adult who is unemployed or employed less than full time and does not meet the criteria defined for households facing the 1-month to 2-month certification period. Certification periods of 6 to 12 months were set for households with more stable conditions.

In March 1999, a recall project was implemented to reduce the number of changes that go unreported in the San Antonio Region. Through State error rate tracking, it was determined that the majority of unreported changes in the region occur during the first month after certification. To ensure that changes are acted upon in the first month, the region established a recall center at the change center with staff who are responsible for contacting food stamp clients in the four urban offices with the highest error rates a month after they are certified. The advisors take action on

any changes that clients report in the first month. In order for the case to be tracked, clients must be receiving between \$100 and \$499 in monthly food stamp benefits.

### **Evaluation**

In 1999, TDHS requested funding to expand the change centers statewide. The Texas legislature responded to the request by mandating that an evaluation of the change centers take place before granting funds. TDHS has been charged with overseeing an evaluation of existing centers. At the time of the interview, the department was in the planning phase of the evaluation and hoped to have it completed by the beginning of the next legislative session, February 2001. The evaluation will be based on data from all four of the change centers and cover a range of issues including customer satisfaction, accuracy, and timeliness.

### **Challenges Noted by State Officials**

The State officials and the officials in the regional office all felt that the change center in San Antonio had improved eligibility services. It has made the reporting process more efficient by allowing clients to deal with one worker and has improved customer service by putting clients directly in touch with change agents. Roughly 70 percent of the clients are able to report their change with one telephone call. In addition, supervisors monitor calls to ensure clients are being treated with respect. Also, because agents and advisors have been allowed to specialize, fewer changes go unreported. Nonetheless, there were still some problems and challenges the officials would like to see addressed.

- The interviewees would like to see the wait time that clients experience when they call the center reduced. When the change center first opened, clients were kept on hold for 30 to 45 minutes before their call was transferred to a change agent. The wait time was reduced to 1 minute and 15 seconds, but it has been steadily increasing because of job vacancies. Officials indicated that they need to address this issue to ensure that clients keep calling the center.
- Some policies were written with the assumption that change reporting would take place at the field office where clients and workers meet face-to-face. For example, if reported changes affect benefit levels or cause clients to become ineligible for food stamps, they receive a “notice of adverse action” and are told

that they have 13 days to appeal. Under existing rules, clients may waive their right to appeal during the 13-day period if they are in their worker's presence. Because all interactions at the change center take place over the telephone, the policy had to be interpreted by field staff. The interpretation used by the change center allowed clients to waive the action over the telephone and, as a result, have the change processed immediately. But during a State review, it was determined that under the existing policy, clients could only waive their right to appeal in the presence of a worker. The interpretation has increased the workload for change center staff, who can no longer process the change through one telephone call. The change center has submitted a waiver request to the State office requesting that the requirement be waived in San Antonio.

- When the change centers were first established, some local offices resisted relinquishing change reporting responsibilities. Once the functions were removed, the staff saw their local offices and the change centers as completely separate entities. But both offices must work in tandem for eligibility services to be seamless. Most caseworkers are willing to work with the change center now because it has made their lives easier, but some still need to be reminded that good customer service requires cooperation.
- Change center agents were pulled from the pool of TDHS advisors, but the skills that make a good advisor are not the same skills that make a good agent. The State needs to create a new job description for the change agents so the distinctions are better understood. The same holds true for supervisors who work in local offices and supervisors at the change center. The change center uses a "matrix management" style and requires supervisors to manage workers as a team, unlike local TDHS offices, which assign supervisors their own unit.
- There are major differences in the way the four change centers operate because they were established in different regions under different management. For example, the Beaumont change center still uses clerks to answer telephones rather than transmitting calls directly to change agents. State officials want to see things standardized so services are consistent when the centers are eventually expanded statewide.

## ***Findings From the San Antonio Change Center***

This section includes information gathered from the program manager who oversees the San Antonio change center. Two change center supervisors who oversee the change reporting process and two change center agents who respond to incoming calls from clients reporting changes were also interviewed.

### ***Overview***

The change center in San Antonio is located in the basement of the Sutton office building. It was modeled after the call center of the QVC Shopping Channel, which is one of many corporate call centers that were established in San Antonio after Southwestern Bell installed fiber optics across the city in the early 1990s. When TDHS first consolidated the change units from the Brighton and Sutton offices to form the change center, many of the agents were employed part-time at the QVC call center. Because the call center was a popular place to work, senior staff at the change center contacted management at QVC Shopping Channel to learn more about their business practices. TDHS staff developed a rapport with the management at QVC. QVC staff worked with TDHS staff to set up the change center and to train change center agents.

### ***Organization***

The change center is responsible for documenting client-generated changes and agency-generated changes that affect food stamp, TANF, or Medicaid benefits. Two call arenas and five specialized centers were established to carry out those duties. The call arenas house all of the change agents. Each arena is equipped with a running board that charts the number of callers on hold, the number of callers that requested services in English or in Spanish, and the average wait time. One arena contains a "super cube" that is equipped with a computer that tracks the status of all incoming calls. The supervisor on floor duty occupies the super cube. The other arena contains a cube that houses the customer service representative. The customer service representative functions as the liaison between the change center and the local offices. All of the change agents sit in cubes that are equipped with telephones and computers. Because of the proximity of the super cube, they can easily access a supervisor

when they have questions. During the core hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., there are 30 to 45 agents in the call arenas. Roughly 40 percent of the agents speak Spanish.

The technical center was developed to process agency-generated changes that result from database matches or reports, including SSI and social security match reports from other States, and reports on incarcerated household members. The technical center staff are also in charge of documenting new-hire reports. Over 6,000 new-hire reports are generated each month. Before they are documented, the reports are forwarded to clerical units in the Eagle Pass and Del Rio offices so they can be screened. New-hire reports that need to be documented for change reporting are referred back to the technical center in San Antonio. The technical center also processes TANF sanctions for the State, as well as cases that have been put on hold due to unclaimed or returned mail. Staff are also responsible for processing cases with clients transferring off TANF who are eligible for transitional Medicaid. The technical center is staffed with an assistant supervisor and seven technicians.

The clerical center monitors pending cases to ensure that actions are taken before their due dates. The center receives all agency-generated reports and is responsible for distributing them to change agents, the technical center, or units in the Eagle Pass or Del Rio offices. The center also maintains paper logs on all cases and uses them to track down information when there are inquiries about a case or disputes surrounding a case. The clerical center is also responsible for preparing and distributing written notices that are sent to clients to confirm that reported changes were made or to request that additional documents be provided. The clerical center is staffed with a supervisor, an assistant supervisor, and eight clerks.

The recall center is responsible for implementing a regional initiative to track error-prone cases 1 month after recertification. Staff at the recall center contact error-prone clients and take action on any changes that they report in the first month. Clients must receive between \$100 and \$499 in monthly food stamp benefits for their case to be tracked by the recall center. The recall center is staffed with a supervisor, assistant supervisor, and four advisors who handle between 400 and 700 cases each month.

The completion center was established in response to a review of practices used by the change center. Before the review, the change center was allowing clients to

waive their right to appeal an adverse action over the telephone. But, as was noted above, the State determined that the practice violated existing policy. The change center was directed to place the case in a pending file for the 13-day period. As a result, the center began pending all adverse action cases. The new policy interpretation significantly increased the change center workload because clients facing an adverse action could no longer be served through one telephone call. The completion center now processes all pending cases.

The policy support center is responsible for staying up-to-date on policy changes and interpreting policy for staff at the change center. They train staff, track data for the change center, and conduct case reviews.

### **Roles**

The roles of supervisors, agents, and customer service representatives are as follows:

**Supervisors.** The change center has five supervisors who are responsible for managing the call arenas. They are part of a matrix management team that oversees all of the change agents, unlike supervisors in local TDHS offices that oversee their own units. At the time of the visit, each supervisor had floor duty for 3 hours a day. During that time, the supervisor oversaw all incoming calls, responded to questions from agents, and silently monitored select calls to ensure that agents were providing strong customer service. The supervisors are also responsible for conducting yearly evaluations, quarterly reviews, and case readings. They also have other individual management responsibilities at some of the centers. One supervisor manages the clerical center, another the technical center, and a third the local computer system, while a fourth oversees the recall center.

**Agents.** At the time of the interviews, there were 53 change agents responding to client calls. The change agents do not carry a caseload like advisors in local offices. Instead, each day a certain number of calls are routed to them based on their availability. During peak time, agents may not be able to respond to clients immediately. As a result, clients encounter a wait time of up to 15 minutes. Informational messages about the change centers and welfare reform are played during the wait time.

Agents follow specific steps when responding to clients' calls. They begin each call by greeting the

client and requesting the client's name and social security number. They enter the social security number into SAVERR so they can access the electronic file. They ask the caller what changes he/she wants to report and enter the changes into the case file. Then agents attempt to verify the change through a three-way call with a collateral contact. In 75 percent of the cases, they are able to verify the change while they have their client on the telephone. If change agents are unable to reach the collateral contact, they may either use the client's statement as the best available information and process the change or request that verification documents be sent to the change center. If further documentation is requested, agents send clients a "notice of delay in eligibility" form with a return envelope. The client has 10 days to respond. The agents then "pend" the case. At the end of the day, all of the pended cases are moved to supervisors' open cases. When call volumes and wait times are high, agents document reported changes on paper to avoid spending time bringing up electronic files and initiate calls to collateral contacts without having clients wait on the telephone.

**Customer Service Representatives.** The change center has one customer service representative who serves as a liaison between the center and local TDHS offices. All contact between local TDHS offices and the change center are routed between the local office liaisons, typically supervisors, and the customer service representative. The customer service representative interacts with local field office liaisons when change agents and local office advisors must share virtual case records. The representative also handles customer service questions and complaints. Agents may transfer calls to the customer service representative or provide the caller with the customer service representative's number and e-mail address.

### **Quality Control**

The change center reviews food stamp cases through floor reviews and case readings. All reported changes that affect food stamp benefits are reviewed before they are processed through floor reviews. Floor reviews take place after change agents document and verify reported changes. To indicate that a case is ready for review, agents stand up in their cubes. While clients are still on the telephone, case reviewers or case readers look over the computer screens that include information on household composition, income, and deductions. These items are reviewed because they have historically caused the most errors. The reviewers also check the management screen that

lists household income and expenses side-by-side. If cases are free of errors, change agents process them. If errors are found, the agent corrects them and notifies the client of the changes.

Each month approximately 650 cases are reviewed after they are processed through case readings. The case readings are much more comprehensive than the floor reviews because the cases are read in their entirety. Each month, case readers review a sample of 250 cases drawn from the pool of cases that were processed. In addition, supervisors review three cases from the pool of cases change agents processed that month. The cases are then further reviewed by case analysts at the regional office. The case analysts read five cases that were read by each supervisor and five cases reviewed by each case reader.

### **Findings From Local Department of Human Services Offices**

Researchers visited two local TDHS offices in San Antonio to learn how they process food stamp applications and inform clients of the change center. At each office, they interviewed supervisors, eligibility workers (called "advisors"), technicians, and case readers. This section summarizes findings from the interviews.

#### **Overview**

The Sutton office and the Brighton offices are both located in San Antonio. The Sutton office is located on the east side of the city, close to downtown. It serves clients living in the east and northeast sections of San Antonio and clients living downtown. Its caseload is currently 4,710 food stamp households. The Brighton office is located on the south side of the city and serves clients living in the same area. Its caseload is currently 6,332 food stamp households. The staff in the local offices are responsible for carrying out initial certifications and recertifications for TANF clients, food stamp clients, and children and pregnant women receiving Medicaid. There is some variation in the way the local offices are organized and in the way they administer eligibility services, described below.

- **Brighton Office.** There are five ongoing units at the Brighton office responsible for overseeing food stamp certifications and recertifications. Each unit is staffed with a supervisor, an assistant supervisor, approximately 10 advisors, and a certification technician. The office also has an administrative unit with a supervisor, seven front desk clerks, two case



analysts, four case readers and a risk assessment unit with two eligibility examiners, and two verification technicians.

When clients walk into the Brighton office to apply for food stamps, they receive an application from a front desk clerk. While they are in the lobby, they may view a bilingual video about DHS services that provides an overview of the change center. After they complete the application, the clerk screens it to determine whether they are eligible for expedited food stamps. If they do not qualify for them, the clerk schedules an appointment with an advisor. Before the appointment, risk assessment unit staff use a data brokering system to verify the information clients provide on their application. They can assess information on property ownership, vehicle ownership, and marital status and access credit reports, which advisors use as case clues during the initial interview. At the initial meeting, the advisor informs clients about their rights and responsibilities, issues their Lone Star card, and notifies them about the change center. Clients receive a bilingual card with the telephone number and mailing address of the change center. They are also told that they can use the workstation to report changes. The workstation has a telephone, a fax machine, and a copier. All food stamp applications are forwarded to the administrative unit to be read before they are processed.

Clients who recertify for food stamps at the Brighton office are required to attend a group orientation meeting that is led by one of the advisors with the help of the administrative assistant. During the orientation, advisors review work rules and sanctions and remind clients to contact staff at the change center to report changes. After the orientation, advisors meet with clients one-on-one to guide them through the certification process. After gathering verification documents and entering their information into SAVERR, advisors forward food stamp cases to the administrative unit to be reviewed. After the review, the cases are processed.

- **Sutton Office.** The Sutton office has four ongoing units. Each unit has a supervisor, from two to three assistant supervisors, from six to eight advisors, and a certification technician. There is also an administrative unit with a supervisor, two case analysts, three case readers, and three clerks. In addition, the Sutton office has a specialized unit with risk assessment staff (which includes one eligibility examiner

and one verification technician) and support staff, including front desk clerks.

Clients begin the certification process by submitting a completed application to a clerk who screens it to determine whether the case should be expedited. Clients then receive an appointment to talk with an advisor. Before they meet with their advisors, TANF and food stamp clients are required to attend an orientation session where they are provided with general information about work requirements, sanctions, and change reporting requirements and procedures. They receive a card with contact information for the center and a stamped envelope addressed to the change center that they can use to report changes. They are also told that they can use the workstation to report changes. After the orientation, clients meet with their advisor, who gathers verification documents, reviews specific information about their case, including when they will begin receiving benefits and how much they will receive, and answers client questions. Before the case is processed, a case reader in the specialized unit reviews it for accuracy.

During the recertification process, clients meet with a certification technician who gathers and reviews their verification documents and recertification form. After the review, the technician forwards all of the paperwork to the advisor in charge of the case. The advisor enters the information into the client's case file in SAVERR. The advisor then forwards the case to the specialized unit where a case reader reviews it. After it is deemed to be error free, the case is returned to the advisor, who processes it.

Both local offices noted that they began using shorter recertification periods for food stamp clients in the fall of 1999. The shorter recertification periods, which were set by the regional office, are intended to reduce the number of unreported changes. Before that time, most food stamp clients were recertified every 6 months. Now, recertification periods for food stamp clients range from every month to every 12 months. Working clients with a fluctuating income are required to recertify every 3 to 6 months, depending on their expenses. Clients who are unemployed and lack stable housing must recertify every 1 to 2 months. Clients with a stable income and predictable expenses are allowed to recertify every 6 to 12 months. This group usually includes elderly recipients who are receiving SSI and are in good health. Most food stamp-only recipients are required to recertify every 3 months.

## **Quality Control**

Each local office is required to review all certification applications before they are processed and 50 percent of the recertification applications. Depending on the local office, case readers or assistant supervisors conduct the reviews. The Sutton office has five case reader positions. Four of the positions are filled by assistant supervisors who rotate out of their units for 4-month periods to review cases. The fifth position is a full-time case reader who reviews cases year-round. At the present time, only three of the positions are filled because of staffing shortages. All completed food stamp cases are forwarded to the supervisor overseeing the case readers. The supervisor selects cases that need to be read and assigns them to the case readers. Case readers in the Sutton office try to read 25 cases per day. The Brighton office has two case analysts and four case readers. Between 225 and 250 cases are reviewed in the Sutton office each month.

A selected number of cases go through a second review after they are processed to ensure that advisors and supervisors catch errors. Each month supervisors in both local offices review five processed cases from each advisor's caseload to ensure that they were completed accurately. Five cases are pulled from each case reader's caseload and reviewed by the supervisor to ensure they are being reviewed accurately. The most common certification and recertification errors relate to three aspects of client eligibility: determination of household composition, calculation of household income, and determining the shelter deduction.

## **Client and Staff Response**

Staff at both local offices said that clients were initially leery about using the change center. Since clients cannot go to the change center, they believed that the center was staffed with a bunch of operators rather than employees trained to take changes. In addition, they had established relationships with their advisors and staff at the local offices. The center, on the other hand, is set up so clients rarely interact with the same person. They did not see a need to involve another person in the change reporting process. Now most clients seem to enjoy using the change center because, unlike in the past, their changes are being documented. Each time they report a change, they receive a confirmation number and a letter in the mail. In addition, they no longer have to go into the local office to report a change. All they have to do is

pick up their telephone. That is particularly important for clients who face transportation barriers.

TDHS staff reacted to the change center in different ways. Some staff embraced the change center because they felt it would reduce their workload. Other staff felt as though their cases were being given away. They wanted to see them through rather than hand them over to someone else. When the local offices began to lose staff to the change center, staff had mixed feelings. On the one hand, the change center was reducing their workload by taking on change reporting responsibilities. On the other hand, it was leading to staff reductions at the local offices and increasing their caseloads as a result.

The staff interviewed felt as though the change center made their jobs easier overall. They indicated that not having to track changes helped to offset the increased client monitoring they are required to do under PRWORA. It also eliminated the need to stay abreast of policy changes that are related to change reporting. The staff also said that advisors face fewer interruptions in their workday since they have been allowed to specialize.

## **Challenges Identified by Local Staff**

The staff at the change center raised some of the same challenges that the State interviewees and regional staff pointed to when asked to list barriers they face. They noted that some policies were written for traditional caseworker-client interactions that occur in field offices rather than for services that are provided over the telephone, and they pointed to the confusion over the right to appeal an adverse action. They also said that staff in some local offices do not see the change center as part of TDHS and that this view disconnects the services offered at local field offices from those provided by the change center. They pointed to the following challenges:

- It is difficult to control workflow because of the variability in the number of calls that may come in on a given day. Because peaks are unpredictable, it is difficult for supervisors to assess staffing needs. If there are not enough agents in the call arena to handle the volume of calls, they document reported changes on paper and verify them later, rather than initiating a three-way call to verify changes on the spot and enter them into SAVERR. That approach can be frustrating because the underlying goal is to serve clients through one call.

- The change center generates a lot of paperwork because every change or request for information has to be documented in writing. The center purchased a bursting machine that is used to fold the notices. Use of this machine, however, requires clerks to spend a good deal of time inserting notices into envelopes. For a little more money, the center could have bought a machine that automatically prints the notices, folds them, and puts them into envelopes directly from the computer.
- The computers at the change center operate off of three local area networks (LANs). When one LAN crashes, it impacts the entire center. In August 2000, the computers were down off and on for 3 or 4 days. During that time, agents took changes manually and called clients back to complete the change reporting process.

The staff interviewed at the local offices felt the change center was successful. However, they cited two challenges that have arisen since its implementation:

- Staff in both offices said their workload had increased because they had lost workers to the change center. As mentioned earlier, the first units of the change center were composed of staff from the Brighton and Sutton offices. The staff from the units eventually moved to the change center settled in the Sutton building. Because they were never replaced, both offices have had to spread their work over a smaller pool of people.
- Staff indicated that accessing case files that have been checked out by change agents can be frustrating. Advisors cannot contact the change center directly. They have to go through their local office liaison with a request that the file be released. The liaison then contacts the customer service representative at the change center, who determines why the case is unavailable. In some instances, it takes a day or two to get a case from the change center.

## Georgia

### Overview of Re-engineering Category

With the advent of welfare reform in Georgia, State officials became concerned about the high level of certification errors in county-run social service programs. An investigation into the source of these errors found that most could be attributed to county-level caseworkers processing changes in client eligibility

status outside of the approved processing timelines. In looking for solutions to this problem, Georgia officials decided to pilot a project that established a State-run change center to assume responsibility for helping the counties process and complete changes in client enrollment status.

This project was modeled after a similar project that is taking place in Texas. However, one key difference between the Georgia pilot and the Texas program is that Georgia administers its social service programs through local county government offices, while Texas administers its programs using State employees. Up until the development of the change center, Georgia State employees were not involved in the day-to-day operations of the Food Stamp Program (FSP). With the advent of the change center, the responsibility for ensuring that changes are correctly reported in the pilot counties became a State-level responsibility. The initial pilot county for the project, which began in 1999, was Fulton County, encompassing parts of Atlanta. During the first year, the pilot was expanded to seven more urban counties in the greater Atlanta area. Finally, in the year 2000, a rural county (Baldwin County) was added.

The purpose of this case study is twofold. First, the study is designed to provide information on the development and implementation of the change center and how the project affected county-administered programs. Second, the study was interested in whether or not the change center was effectively serving the needs of the pilot rural county. To gather information for this case study, interviews were conducted with the State FSP manager, the director of the change center, the administrator of the Baldwin County Economic Support program, and program supervisors and caseworkers in Baldwin County.

### Food Stamp Program Administration

As noted above, Georgia administers its social service programs through county governments. State officials provide counties with policy direction for the FSP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid program, and operational responsibility for these programs rests with the counties. State officials noted that there is little difference between counties in the way the FSP is administered.

State staff responsible for overseeing these programs are located in a series of regional offices, which are called field areas. Georgia has divided its counties into

14 field areas, with a Field Area Administrator responsible for communicating and implementing program policy in each area. In addition, each field area has a number of program consultants who are responsible for helping county staff with policy questions, providing training on changes in policy, and monitoring program compliance with State regulations.

In 1999, counties in the Atlanta area were given the option of participating in the change center project. To fund the project, the State used funds that normally would have been returned to the U. S. Department of Agriculture as a result of the high error rate. Additionally, counties choosing to participate were required to transfer county-funded positions to the State for staffing purposes. Counties were initially requested to provide one position for every 5000 cases they managed. In turn, the change centers assumed all responsibility for recording and processing client status changes, including any error rates associated with the processing of those changes. The State plans to expand the pilot program in 2001, adding an additional change center to serve 70-80 smaller counties in southwest Georgia.

The organizational location of the change center is somewhat unique within Georgia's social service delivery system. The change center is not part of any particular field area, but exists as a separate entity. The change center is physically located in Atlanta, and uses State employees to staff the project. Clients who wish to report changes in their eligibility status are encouraged by the county caseworkers to telephone the change center. In addition, the center staff uses computer matching to identify potential client changes. When client records from the FSP are matched with data from other programs and potential changes in the client's eligibility status are identified, the change center staff take a proactive approach by contacting the clients to verify whether the change actually occurred. For example, staff use the Medicaid birth records database to match new births with FSP and TANF client records to determine if any infants should be added to the family record.

## **Findings From State Administrators**

### ***Background on Change Center Operations***

As noted above, the change center started out serving clients residing in Fulton County, and then expanded to seven other urban counties in 1999. Baldwin

County was added at the end of 1999 and was the first rural county in Georgia to be added. As previously noted, county programs were required to provide positions to staff the center. Each county was asked to identify appropriate positions within their organization at a civil service classification that could be used by the State for staffing the center. Because many of the civil service classifications used by the counties were consistent with those needed by the State, the position transfer process worked smoothly. However, it is important to note that individuals who may have occupied the positions at the county level were not transferred along with their positions. This fact was important to State officials, as the skills needed to work in the call center are different than those needed by local caseworkers.

The primary purpose of the change center is to record and document changes in eligibility status submitted by clients. Changes can be reported by a telephone call from a client or through a fax from a county caseworker. When a change is reported, it is the responsibility of the "change agents" to verify the change, collect documentation when needed, and process and record the change. In addition, a separate unit is responsible for recording and adding newborn infants to family records. Change agents are also responsible for matching client records with other social service databases, including Medicaid birth records and data from a "new-hires" database.

In January 1999, the change center began processing Fulton County changes, which involved 26,500 cases. In April, when the 7 additional counties were added, the center processed 63,500 cases. In September, when all of the counties were up and running, the total number of cases expanded to 119,500. This caseload continued to grow, and in March of 2000 the total number of cases processed by the center was 152,600.

The amount of time needed to respond to the calls averages about 4 to 5 minutes each. Most of the calls (55 percent) are related to the Medicaid program, with about 35 percent of the calls involving FSP changes and the remaining 10 percent being associated with TANF program issues. While the center is designed to be used by clients only for reporting changes, the change center supervisor reported that at least one-third of all calls are general inquiries about the FSP. When general calls are received, staff refer these clients to their local county programs.

## **Change Center Staffing**

The change centers are primarily staffed with change agents. At the time of these case study interviews, there were a total of 30 change agents working in the center. A recent assessment of the staffing needs for the center indicated that current volume would support a total of 55 agents. In addition to the change agents, there are three supervisors and three program consultants representing each of the three social service programs and one quality control supervisor. The program consultants provide assistance to the supervisors and change agents with regard to policy questions, while the quality control supervisor reviews a limited number of client records each day to ensure that they were properly handled.

The change center director requested and received approval for adjusting the job specifications for the civil service classification used by the center. The original classifications transferred by the counties, while at the same salary range, often were tied to job specifications that related to employment services. The new job specifications focused more on the ability to manage cases over the telephone. However, many of the staff hired into the positions had not worked with a system that used telephone calls for reporting client information along with a computer system for processing and documenting changes.

On-the-job training is provided to staff by the supervisors. New staff are first assigned to a mentor, someone who has worked there for a while and is familiar with the system. The change center supervisor noted that the first 2 weeks are very hard for new employees, as they are often not prepared for the constant telephone calls. In addition, agents are required to finish up their cases on the same day the report comes in, so there is pressure to complete all of their cases, but at the same time not to let clients remain on hold for long periods of time.

## **Processing Client Changes**

When a client first calls the change center, an automated answering system asks if they prefer to communicate in English or Spanish. The center maintains two Spanish-speaking agents to handle clients who wish to report in Spanish. Once the language of preference is established, the clients are asked if they wish to add a newborn infant to an existing family record or simply report another type of change. Clients are then transferred to the first available change agent, who will

process and record the changes. Once the changes are recorded, the change agent will send the county case-worker handling the case an e-mail or fax notifying them of the change. Each county has a contact person responsible for working with staff at the change center to resolve any outstanding problems or issues.

Clients may report changes any time the center is open, which is from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays. The average time for each call runs 4 to 7 minutes. The center is equipped to handle up to 60 calls at a time, but current staffing is such that only 30 calls can be processed at a time. The computerized telephone system used by the agents includes a feature that tracks how long clients have been on hold waiting for an agent, which clients hang-up, and how long clients waited before they hung up. In addition, the system can tell supervisors how many clients are waiting at any given time. Through this system, supervisors can monitor the flow of work and pull more agents into telephone service when calls are heavy. While no formal client satisfaction system is in place, agents report that clients seem to like the system and have not had problems with long waits. Most of the clients who hang up do so without waiting.

## **Challenges Identified by State Staff**

Both the State FSP manager and the Change Center director reported that the counties are happy with the services provided by the change center. However, they did note the following challenges:

- Training and retention of staff is often difficult, as there are not many State employees with the type of experience necessary to handle this unique job. Many people who apply for jobs at the change center have not worked with a computerized telephone system before. New employees report a great deal of stress in conducting their day-to-day business, simply because of the high volume of calls they are expected to handle. The requirement that all cases be completed on the day they are processed adds additional stress. State officials believe that the addition of more staff would reduce the amount of stress and lead to a more productive work environment. However, counties are not likely to transfer any more positions than they must to the change center, so the likelihood of obtaining increases in the number of staff is low.
- Even if new staff became available, a second problem identified by State officials is the limited amount

of space available at the current location. The change center site, which is in the basement of leased space in Atlanta, is currently very crowded and will not hold more desks or cubicles. In order to expand staffing, the change center would require additional space, at a significant cost (for moving telephone and computer lines). Currently, no funds are available to expand the center's physical layout.

- It is very difficult to consistently provide telephone coverage if a person is absent due to illness or vacation. The leave policy of the change center requires that only a limited number of change agents can be out at one time. This has created some resentment among staff who would like to take vacation time around holidays, but are denied because of staffing limitations. In addition, if a person is sick, the change center can not bring in a trained replacement. This means that staff who are there must pick up the workload of the person who is absent.
- The pay levels for change agents have created a problem with retention. The starting salary for a change agent is \$22,000 per year, which is low for the Atlanta area. In addition, while the skills needed for the change center are somewhat unique in State government, they are not unique on the open market, particularly in the areas of Internet customer support and telemarketing. Sometimes agents find that they can make more money with the same skills by leaving State government and working for private companies.
- State staff acknowledged that there were initial issues with county staff's resentment over the fact that they would not be handling the entire case file of their clients and that caseworker positions were being transferred to the State. While State officials feel that these issues have been resolved, they understand that in some counties the loss of even one position may have put a burden on the remaining staff. Officials are hopeful that if the pilot projects are extended and the program made permanent, the positions will be established in the State budget, and the ones transferred from the counties could be returned.

## Findings From Baldwin County

### Overview

Baldwin County is a rural county located in the center of Georgia. Much of the county's economic base is related to small manufacturing facilities, a local university, service industries, and agriculture. While the

county has a high employment rate, staff in Baldwin County believe that many of the jobs available to the low-income population they serve are minimum wage. There are some manufacturing facilities in the county, but they tend to limit their hiring to skilled workers. The Baldwin County Department of Children and Family Services is located in the county seat of Milledgeville, and the Economic Support Division is staffed with eight Family Independence case managers and two supervisors. Family Independence case managers generally serve a caseload of around 400-450 clients. The caseworkers handle enrollment for the FSP, Medicaid, and TANF programs. About 150 cases of each caseworker's load are food stamp recipients.

After welfare reform, TANF cases declined in the county, FSP cases stayed the same, and Medicaid cases increased. The county began having problems with their error rates in 1997, and had an error rate as high as 48 percent in 1998. At that time, the county was processing an average of 150 changes a month, and officials discovered that these changes were often not processed in a timely manner. In order to bring the error rates down, Baldwin County officials requested to be included in the change center pilot project. This choice was a difficult decision, as officials knew that they would lose one of their staff positions if they were accepted into the pilot, and this loss might create staffing problems in the future. However, county officials came to the conclusion that it was worth losing a position in order to reduce the error rates. Since their inclusion in the change center, the error rate for Baldwin County has dropped to less than 1 percent.

### County Program Administration

Baldwin County accepts applications for Medicaid, TANF, and the FSP 5 days a week, but schedules eligibility interview appointments only 2 days a week. This system was established to allow staff time to inform clients of the documentation they will need to bring to the interview and to allow staff the time to process the applications once the interview is complete. When a client submits an application, he/she is assigned a caseworker who helps with completing the application process. During the interview process, clients are informed about other social service programs for which they may be eligible.

When the application process is complete, and a client is found to be eligible for services, he/she is given an information packet describing the types of changes in economic and family situation that must be reported

and is provided a card with the change center telephone number. Clients are instructed to contact the change center whenever they have a reportable change. However, even with the change center information, some clients may still try to drop off change information and documentation at the county office. This practice is discouraged, as the county staff are then required to fax the client's changes to the change center for processing. Instead, if a person shows up at the office to report changes, the county has made available a telephone "hotline" for the client to use to call the change center.

At the time of the site visit, the office was short-staffed, with three of eight eligibility workers being new. It is often difficult to bring on new staff and have them begin serving clients right away. The State provides training to all new caseworkers through training sites located around the State. Once a new caseworker is hired, he/she must spend 5 weeks away from the County at the training site to complete all of the required training. This means that new employees can not begin serving clients until 6 weeks after they are hired.

### **Challenges Identified by County Officials**

In general, County officials are pleased with the use of the change center. There were some initial problems identified by county staff with changes getting recorded properly and in a timely manner. After the county was accepted into the pilot, caseworkers monitored the change center processing very closely to be sure the materials that were sent to the center were handled properly. During the first 3 months, caseworkers and county officials identified a number of problems with the way the change center was processing the information from Baldwin County, and supervisory staff spent a great deal of time calling these problems to the attention of change center staff. As a result of Baldwin County's followup, the change center made a number of adjustments to their procedures for recording changes, and all are now satisfied that the process is meeting the needs of Baldwin County officials.

Other implementation issues identified by county staff are described below:

- The major issue for Baldwin County officials was the loss of one staff person to the change center, representing a little over 10 percent of the total program staffing. While TANF cases have been declining, FSP caseloads have remained about the same, and

Medicaid cases have been increasing. The result of the staff reduction has been to put additional burdens on the remaining staff. Officials are hoping that in the future the State will assume responsibility for the change center staffing and the position will be returned to Baldwin County.

- Some workers miss not having complete control of a client's case. In the past, the caseworker was in charge of all aspects of the client's enrollment and participation in the programs. Now, the caseworkers find that they are unaware of changes in their clients' status until they are processed at the change center and the change is reported to the caseworker. While the reporting of changes to the caseworker is most often done in a timely manner (within 30 days), some caseworkers expressed a desire to have total control of the cases.

## **Kansas**

### **Overview of Re-engineering Changes**

Prior to the implementation of welfare reform in 1997, the Kansas Food Stamp Program (FSP) operated under separate program rules from other public assistance programs. With the passage of welfare reform, Kansas officials decided to avail themselves of the opportunity to consolidate and conform these various programs. To do so, they decided to make three major changes in how they operated their public assistance programs. First, through the efforts of the State legislature and the governor's office, they moved the programs toward emphasizing employment and self-sufficiency as a goal for all clients. Second, Kansas program administrators decided to combine operations for public assistance and employment programs, functions that were previously performed by separate organizational units. Finally, Kansas officials attempted to simplify program rules for the TANF, Food Stamp, and Medicaid programs in order to provide consistency in program policy whenever possible.

While Kansas officials were successful in accomplishing the first two of these objectives, the third objective, a consistent policy across programs, became more difficult. Originally, Kansas officials hoped to be able to consolidate a number of program rules and procedures to make the process of obtaining program benefits easier for workers and clearer for clients. However, they were able to report only limited success. While

they were able to combine the operations manuals for the three programs and were successful in conforming some of the rules and procedures, a number of factors—such as inability to obtain necessary waivers, conflicting program goals, inability to combine two diverse data collection systems, and resistance from some local offices—kept them from accomplishing their goal completely.

However, among the changes Kansas officials were able to accomplish, the largest single undertaking was changing the roles and functions of local caseworkers. The purpose of this case study is to describe how the role of the caseworker was changed in Kansas and to provide information on how these changes affected a rural program in Atchison, Kansas. To accomplish this purpose, interviews were conducted at the State headquarters office with the Director of Economic and Employment Support, the Food Stamp Program Manager, the Manager of the Economic and Employment Support training programs, and the Manager of Research and Planning. In the Atchison office, interviews were conducted with the Area Chief of Economic and Employment Support, two Economic Employment Support Supervisors, and three caseworkers.

### **Food Stamp Program Administration**

The Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitative Services is responsible for administering public assistance programs through State offices located in 11 management areas across the State. These management areas cover 105 counties, with at least one office located in each county. Total FSP caseload in Kansas averages around 117,000 clients per month in 53,000 households. After the implementation of welfare reform, FSP caseload dropped 30 percent over the period 1997-99. However, in 1999, FSP participation began to increase by about 4.5 percent. Kansas officials are unsure why FSP participation increased, as they had not enacted any type of outreach program to potentially eligible clients.

Program management in each of the 11 areas is provided by program directors, who, in turn, report to an area director. The programs administered in these 11 management areas include Economic and Employment Support (FSP, TANF, and Medicaid), vocational rehabilitation programs, and child support programs.

Program policy is developed at the headquarters office in Topeka, with input from regional staff. Each of the

major programs in the Economic and Employment Support Division has a program head, who is responsible for identifying program policy changes that may be required by Federal or State law. However, with the advent of welfare reform, Kansas officials decided to combine all of their Economic and Employment Services policies into a single manual. Kansas has created a Policy Development Team, composed of four central office staff and four representatives from the management areas. It is the responsibility of the Policy Development Team to review and approve any proposed policy changes the individual programs may wish to implement. In addition, the Policy Development Team identifies areas where program requirements can be conformed in order to avoid confusion about different program rules and regulations at the local level.

The growing number of Spanish-speaking clients has increased the need for bilingual staff and the production of Spanish language materials. Currently, there are very few bilingual staff, and many of the materials, including the applications and notices, are not translated into Spanish. Clients often have to rely on family members or friends to help them complete the application process. In addition, a growing number of Russian immigrants have moved to Kansas. A few areas have also seen a significant increase in clients who speak only Southeast Asian languages.

### **Findings From Interviews With State Headquarters Officials**

#### ***Changes in the Role of the Caseworker***

Prior to welfare reform, caseworkers worked with differing program regulations and multiple policy manuals for the three major public assistance programs. One of the major goals of Kansas officials in implementing welfare reform was to promote as much consistency between programs as possible. While local areas have flexibility in how they implement their programs, consistency in policy was pushed by headquarters staff as a means to better serve clients and eliminate confusion about different program requirements in similar areas. While consistency in policy development was the overall goal, Kansas officials realized that having multiple individuals responsible for implementing policies across programs might defeat the purpose. To prevent fragmentation of policy application at the local level, a decision was made to combine the job functions of staff responsible for program eligibility with those of staff responsible for employment programs.



In doing so, Kansas created a new civil service classification called Economic and Employment Support Specialist. The purpose of the new job classification was to combine activities related to determining program eligibility with those related to helping clients find employment and gain self-sufficiency.

Caseworkers were expected to become case managers, with an individual caseworker becoming responsible for all program activities related to an individual client. In combining these activities, State officials envisioned that clients facing the challenges of welfare reform would be more likely to respond positively to a single worker handling their case than to having to deal with multiple caseworkers.

The development of the Economic and Employment Support Specialist classification was a two-phased process. First, State officials had to create the classification and identify the existing positions that would be transferred to the new classification. With the cooperation of the State civil service board, specifications for the class were developed, and new requirements for qualification for the class were examined. To the extent possible, the job requirements mirrored those of the old classifications. However, the scope of responsibility for the new classification was much broader than that of the old classifications.

The formal work on development of the new job classification was rather easy compared to that for the second phase, which was to convince local program staffs that the change in job classification was appropriate and necessary. Initially there was much resistance from local caseworkers. This resistance was based upon a lack of familiarity with the duties being performed by each of the two groups of caseworkers and by concern as to how combining functions would affect individual jobs. For example, caseworkers responsible for program eligibility were not familiar with the activities of their counterparts in employment services, nor were those working in employment services familiar with program eligibility. While some areas accepted the change, others resisted cooperating. Finally, the secretary of the agency issued a letter to all Area Directors requiring them to cooperate with the job classification change. Some areas accepted this and moved ahead quickly to implement it, while other areas were not as cooperative. But by the end of 1998, the change was to be fully implemented.

### **Staff Training**

One of the major tasks faced by Kansas officials was retraining staff for their new positions. Employees needed training in three areas. First, because two different computer systems were being used to support employment services and eligibility services, staff needed to be cross-trained on at least one of the systems. Second, staff who had previously worked only in employment services had to be trained on eligibility determination, while eligibility caseworkers had to be trained on employment services. Finally, because a number of policies had been changed to promote consistency and a new, combined manual created to reflect these changes, all staff needed training on the new policies.

Once staff had been trained, local programs began reassigning cases to individuals. In order to provide support to staff who were working in an unfamiliar program area, teams were developed so individuals had a resource to provide support and answer questions they might have about a particular policy.

### **Challenges Identified by State Officials**

Kansas officials identified a number of challenges to implementing welfare reform and changing the role of the caseworker. A discussion of these challenges follows.

- More involvement of local caseworkers in the process of creating the new job classifications might have helped smooth implementation. Most of the work on the new job classification was done by headquarters staff working with local program directors. Caseworkers themselves were not involved in the process. As a result, caseworkers were probably more resistant to the changes than they might have been had they been directly involved.
- At the same time the job reclassification was taking place, Kansas made a number of changes in how it implemented employment programs. Kansas had traditionally emphasized client participation in education and employment training programs, which often had little impact on an individual's ability to find employment. However, over the years strong relationships had been developed between Kansas educational institutions, such as the University of Kansas, and State employment programs. Through

contracts with the State, these institutions provided education and training at various locations throughout the State. When the emphasis changed from longer-term training to job readiness and actual placement of clients into jobs, the educational institutions complained bitterly that they were being left out of the process, and that caseworkers without adequate training in employment issues would be responsible for implementing this important component of the program.

- Many of the staff who had worked in employment programs prior to welfare reform also had difficulty with making the adjustment to the Kansas “work first” philosophy. Local program staff had always viewed their work as helping clients to find long-term solutions to self-sufficiency and to identify potential long-term career paths. When caseworkers were required to shift this philosophy to one of finding clients employment as quickly as possible, it was a difficult transition. Caseworkers have expressed concern that the short-term employment opportunities usually found for clients will disappear if the economy takes a turn for the worse, and then clients will not have the training or skills necessary to find jobs requiring more skills.
- While combining functions has worked well in many areas, the sometimes conflicting service philosophies faced by caseworkers handling clients participating in multiple programs can be problematic. Caseworkers are often put in the position of pushing clients towards employment and self-sufficiency in order to help them leave the TANF rolls, while at the same time promoting participation in the FSP and Medicaid programs. This is often confusing to the clients, who when pushed to leave the TANF rolls believe they should be leaving the FSP or Medicaid programs as well.
- The antiquated nature of the Kansas computer systems is also a major problem that has not been resolved. One of the selling points for the combined jobs and policy manuals was a promise that the two separate computer systems used by caseworkers (one for eligibility, one for employment services) would be discarded and a new combined system would be developed. This, however, has not materialized. As a result, caseworkers must work with two different computer systems when serving their clients. State officials still hope to eliminate this problem, but currently, no funds are available for data system development and computer purchases.

- Within the next 5 years, a large number of caseworkers will be retiring. This will result in a need for new caseworker recruitment. Many of the caseworkers that are retiring are located in rural areas, where it is often difficult to recruit. In particular, the rural areas of Western Kansas are facing a severe recruitment problem in the near future.

## ***Findings From Interviews in the Atchison Office***

### ***Overview of Service Delivery***

The Atchison office is located in the northeast corner of Kansas, and is included in a service area with six other, mostly rural counties. Approximately 3,400 households are being served in the area, with around 500 in the Atchison office. Overall responsibility for the administration of Economic and Employment Support programs within the area belongs to the Program Chief, who in turn relies on program supervisors within each office. Each office has at least one program supervisor, who is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the office. The recently created Economic and Employment Support Specialists report to the supervisors and are responsible for enrollment of clients and providing case management services. The office has very little turnover, as the positions with the State are some of the best paying in this rural area.

In their role as case managers, staff in the Atchison office have developed strong ties to community organizations serving the same population. These strong ties allow the case managers to assist the client with issues that can not normally be resolved by the public assistance programs. For example, caseworkers noted strong ties to the local community action agency, which helps clients obtain energy assistance funds. Among the various other agencies with which the caseworkers coordinate are the local WIC program, the Salvation Army, the local independent living center, the county hunger task force, and local food banks. Program representatives from these agencies meet on a periodic basis to discuss community needs and to plan for future services.

### ***Changing the Role of the Caseworker***

In general, the caseworkers in the Atchison office are pleased with the change in their roles since the passage of welfare reform. All three of the caseworkers interviewed said that they enjoyed being able to provide true case management services by handling all of the

client's issues and that they were able to devote more time to case management than when they were responsible for only a portion of the case. The caseworkers also noted that under the old system clients would be passed back and forth between caseworkers, which created some frustration for the clients.

The Atchison office had a relatively easy time with the transition to the new job classification. Atchison was somewhat fortunate during the transition, in that one of the employment caseworkers had worked as an eligibility worker prior to coming to the county program and was knowledgeable about both programs. With her knowledge, other caseworkers had someone to whom they could go to for answers to questions or to receive help in working the computer systems. However, even with this assistance, the caseworkers all had to be cross-trained on systems with which they were not familiar. The program chief credits the enthusiasm of the staff with making the entire transition process move smoothly.

The single biggest change in the day-to-day activities of the caseworkers is working with clients under the increased emphasis on employment services. Prior to implementation of welfare reform, 70 percent of the AFDC participants who were required to participate in employment and training activities were attending the University of Kansas. However, only 14 percent of the clients completed the program. Of the group that completed the program, only 10 percent went on to complete a college degree program. Local officials believed that they were paying for a program that was not producing results.

The new emphasis of the caseworkers is on employment readiness and preparation for job seeking. Caseworkers have worked hard to build relationships with employers in the area, who are mostly in service-related industries. Local employers have provided the caseworkers with information about the kinds of issues they have faced with hiring public assistance clients. In turn, the caseworkers have begun working with clients to help build their practical skills, including such basics as showing up for work on time and notifying their supervisor when they will not be coming into work.

The major sources for employment for public assistance clients who live in this rural area are low-end manufacturing plants, tribal casinos, telemarketing companies, and food service providers. Over the past year, the economy in the area has been strong and

there have been labor shortages in many of the service-related areas. As a result, clients who seek employment often can find a job in the service industry. However, caseworkers noted that the major agricultural industries, such as the grain elevators, would not hire public assistance clients.

Another function assumed by the caseworkers has been increased effort to conduct outreach to FSP and Medicaid clients. Two of the priorities for the office are the enrollment of children in the State Child Health Insurance Program and working to end hunger within the region. As a result, the public assistance agency has teamed up with local private agencies to form what they call a "dream team" to address community outreach needs. This group meets to assess community needs and designs potential outreach efforts. Representatives from the Atchison office participate both on the steering committee for the dream team and on special committees that are created to work on specific problems.

Another benefit of their changing role cited by the caseworkers was the increased flexibility they have in working with clients. Because they are now responsible for all aspects of the client's case, they can work with the clients to develop individual plans for dealing with self-sufficiency issues. The caseworkers also believe that clients like the new system better, as they only have to deal with one caseworker, and clients can feel comfortable that the caseworker is familiar with their situation.

### ***Challenges Faced by the Local Office***

While noting that the staff in the Atchison office were very pleased with the changes in the role of the caseworker, there were some challenges the local office faced in making the transition, as discussed below.

- When welfare reform was first implemented, clients who could be easily placed into employment situations were the first off the rolls. Clients currently being served through TANF are very hard to serve, and require much more time than other clients. As a result, case management of clients is taking more time, and the problems identified as barriers to employment are much more difficult to resolve. Caseworkers noted that many of the clients they are currently serving have problems such as mental health issues, substance abuse problems, and chronic health conditions.

- Finding employment in a rural area is difficult, and can be frustrating for clients and caseworkers alike. While the Atchison office has had success in finding employment opportunities for clients who want to work, they have run into resistance with firms that pay higher wages. It is difficult to convince local employers that TANF and FSP clients will make good long-term employees. Many will not even interview clients if they find out they are on TANF.
- A large number of elderly individuals in the county live at or near the poverty level. One of the key outreach goals of the office has been to encourage elderly individuals to apply for food stamps. Caseworkers are concerned about the growing number of elderly who are at risk of food insecurity. However, caseworkers have found it very difficult to convince elderly individuals that it is worth their effort to apply for what end up being very limited program benefits.
- Using the dual computer system is frustrating and takes more time than it might if the two systems were integrated. While the caseworkers noted that they are now used to the two systems, it is still very time consuming for them to work with both. The caseworkers and the supervisors both noted that with a more efficient system, they could spend more time working on case management issues.
- While the caseworkers are pleased with their increased case management role, they worry that their FSP error rates are on the rise. Supervisors believe that this increase can be attributed to both the difficulty of the cases now being carried and the complexity of the rule changes that were implemented during welfare reform. Supervisors are encouraging caseworkers to spend more time on quality control, even if it means spending less time with the client.

## Arizona

### **Overview of Re-engineering Effort**

In 1997, the Arizona legislature passed a welfare reform measure designed to begin a process of privatization of the welfare system. Influenced by Wisconsin's attempts to involve private enterprise in managing the welfare caseload, the Arizona legislature established a nine-member procurement board and charged them with developing plans for contracting with a private agency to help move public assistance clients into employment and off the welfare rolls. Problems in the legislation and the inability to

obtain waivers for privatization of Medicaid and the FSP limited privatization efforts to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The procurement board issued a Request For Proposals in 1998 to pilot a project in Maricopa County (greater Phoenix area) to allow private companies to manage the TANF program.

Two companies bid for the project, with the award being given to Maximus, a company located in Virginia. The contract calls for a 4-year pilot program, with a rural county to be added after year 2. The contract is incentive-based, with a requirement that Maximus must show overall 10 percent savings in total program costs. The basic contract provides for funding of services provided to a specific caseload level (currently over 4,000), but does not include the cost of data systems and facilities, both of which are provided by the State. Incentives for additional revenue are built into the contract based upon meeting performance standards. The State named this project "Arizona Works."

The purpose of this case study is to examine how this privatization effort has affected the Food Stamp Program and how local State-run FSPs work with the contractor to coordinate services. Interviewed for this case study were the State's project director for the Arizona Works project, the coordinator for the Maricopa County JOBS program, which competes with the Maximus project in Maricopa County, two local JOBS caseworkers, and an FSP supervisor. In addition, the Maximus project director for Arizona Works was interviewed, along with a project supervisor. Finally, two FSP caseworkers at the Salt River Reservation were interviewed.

### **Food Stamp Program Administration**

The FSP in Arizona is administered by the State, with regional and local offices located throughout the State. State employees handle eligibility determination in most areas of the State for the three major public assistance programs, FSP, Medicaid, and TANF. Clients apply at local offices, where their applications are processed and eligibility is determined. Once determined to be eligible, clients who must meet work requirements are placed in a special JOBS program, where they are provided assistance in finding employment and building job-seeking skills. State officials report a strong job market, particularly in Maricopa County, and placing clients in jobs has been relatively easy.

There are two exceptions to the above description of program services. In Maricopa County, the Arizona Works program provides TANF and employment services to eligible clients, while a separate State-run office located next door to Arizona Works provides FSP and Medicaid services. The second exception to the above relates to a number of Native American Tribal programs that provide TANF services to clients on reservations. In this circumstance, the State provides caseworkers that work at the Tribal public assistance offices to certify clients for FSP and Medicaid services. In both cases, coordination between the State employees and the Maximus and Tribal caseworkers is important.

## **Findings From Interviews With Headquarters Staff**

### ***Overview of the State Program in Maricopa County***

Maricopa County is unique in that it has three separate agencies operating TANF programs within the county. The State-run TANF program covers the western part of the county, the Arizona Works program covers much of the eastern portion, and Tribal programs exist on reservation land located within the county. Each of the three programs works independently of the others. However, the State stations FSP and Medicaid eligibility workers at the Tribal public assistance office so that clients applying for TANF can also apply for these other services. In addition, caseworkers located at the Tribal offices process FSP and Medicaid-only applications for Tribal members.

The primary focus of the Arizona public assistance programs is to assist clients with finding employment and reaching a point of self-sufficiency. Major efforts are undertaken to help clients find employment, including motivational programs, resume development, job readiness training, and job placement services. Clients who are in a mandatory employment category (TANF and FSP Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents) are required to attend these different sessions, but all FSP participants are encouraged to attend.

Employment opportunities seem plentiful in Maricopa County. The State JOBS Program supervisor reports that a number of employers, including large trucking companies, State governmental agencies, small manufacturing plants, and temporary agencies, hire public assistance clients. The average wage for a public assistance client is \$7.40 per hour. Caseworkers are encouraged to make

followup contacts with clients to be sure that they are successful in maintaining their employment.

During interviews with caseworkers and the JOBS supervisor it was noted that the initial placement of clients was very successful after welfare reform, but the current group of TANF clients is much harder to place. Caseworkers cite mental health and substance abuse issues as problems with the population they currently serve. In addition, the lack of job skills has hampered successful retention of employment. Caseworkers note that many of the hard-to-serve clients will not show up for work if they have a minor problem at home and will not call their employers to let them know they will be absent. Many of these clients end up coming back into the system, and the State-run program has limited funds to provide support services to help returning clients succeed.

### ***State Services in Eastern Maricopa County***

In eastern Maricopa County, State employees are responsible for providing Medicaid and FSP services, while Maximus provides the TANF and employment services. The State office is located next door to the Maximus office, and they share a common entry area. When clients come into the State office to receive services, they are first asked if they are applying for TANF or for food stamps or Medicaid. If they are applying for FSP or Medicaid services only, their applications are taken at the State office. If they are also applying for TANF, they must complete a separate application in the Arizona Works office. The same is true if someone applies for TANF at the Arizona Works office and also desires food stamps or Medicaid. Therefore, clients applying for TANF and FSP/Medicaid services must go through two interview processes.

The State office in eastern Maricopa County is staffed with 31 workers who handle the FSP and Medicaid caseloads. While the State-run program and the Arizona Works programs operate as separate entities, they have worked out a memorandum of understanding by which each of the programs will coordinate operations on a limited basis. For example, caseworkers from both programs are required to coordinate with each other when making changes to client records. However, State-level caseworkers reported that they sometimes have difficulty obtaining the information from Arizona Works caseworkers, which often is the basis for eligibility errors and for clients having to return overpayments of their benefits.

## **Services Provided by Arizona Works**

The Arizona Works program began in 1999, with 4,000 TANF cases transferred from the State-run program in eastern Maricopa County to the new program. The primary purpose of the Arizona Works project is to assist TANF clients with finding employment. The program is responsible for taking and approving applications for TANF, providing support services to TANF clients related to job placement, and finding jobs for the clients.

The Arizona Works program manager reports to the State procurement board. The State Department of Economic Security has appointed a project manager to work with the Arizona Works program as a liaison between Maximus and the Department and to serve as a policy expert when policy interpretations are required. It is the responsibility of the State Project Director to coordinate and resolve issues that may come up between the Arizona Works program and the State-run program. For example, the program manager was recently involved in negotiating additional space for the Arizona Works program at the State's leased facility shared by the State-run program.

When Maximus assumed the responsibility for the TANF program, they were allowed to hire their own staff. This meant that a number of State employees who were previously serving these clients needed to find new jobs. Because Maximus had a short amount of time to implement this program after the contract was signed, they offered the State employees the opportunity to join the project team at Maximus and continue their work. Approximately 60 percent of Arizona Works employees are former State employees who chose to move over and accept employment with Maximus, usually at a higher salary but with fewer benefits. The remaining State employees were offered transfer opportunities to other State programs. State officials note that no State employee lost his/her job through this transfer of function.

The contract between Maximus and the State is a performance-based contract, with strong incentives for placing clients in jobs. To carry out its mission, the Arizona Works program has developed a number of unique programs to support clients in obtaining employment. Because the Maximus program can provide more support services than the State-run program, caseworkers are able to conduct an assessment of client barriers to employment and then provide financial and programmatic support to help the clients over-

come these barriers. Specific support services included assistance with paying rent and utilities to give the client a month to earn money; providing clients with transportation assistance to help them find and maintain a job; and providing specialized training in job retention or other employment-related skills. To provide clients with training and assistance in finding long-term employment, Maximus has established a training program in partnership with a local community college to help clients develop skills needed for employment. The programs available to clients range from specific job-related skills, such as computer use or basic trade skills, to employment readiness skills. Clients even receive college credit for some of the classes. In addition to the contract with the college, Maximus has developed a network of vendors that is used to provide support services. These vendors are local businesses that contract with Maximus to help with transportation, utility and rent payments, child-care, and other support services.

In order to meet the performance standards in the contract, the Arizona Works project operates in direct competition with the State-run program in western Maricopa County. Statistics from both sites will be compared to determine the extent to which Arizona Works has reduced caseloads as compared to the State-run program. Some of the State officials feel that this comparison is unfair, as they believe the western portion of the county contains a higher percentage of hard-to-place clients. In addition to this comparison, the Arizona Works project is being evaluated by Abt Associates, who will produce a final report in 2003. The procurement board will use this report to determine if the project will be expanded statewide, modified in any way, or discontinued.

Officials at Maximus point out a number of advantages their program has over the State-run program. In their initial year of operation, the Arizona Works program was able to reduce caseloads in their service area by 24 percent. In addition, Arizona Works officials point to the high level of case management and support services provided by the caseworkers as an indication of the extent to which they will help clients succeed in becoming self-sufficient. Officials also believe that clients are happy with the services provided through Arizona Works.

Maximus will open a second office in a rural Arizona county in 2001. Maximus officials see this new office as an important challenge, as employment opportunities in rural Arizona are not as plentiful as in the met-

ropolitan centers. In addition, transportation issues will be a challenge in the rural county. As with the urban center, the Arizona Works program in the rural county will be compared with another rural county where a State-run program exists. Planning for the new office was underway at the time of the case study interviews.

### **State Services on the Salt River Reservation**

Two State employees assigned to the eastern Maricopa County office are stationed at the Salt River Indian Reservation. The purpose of the two out-stationed workers is to provide FSP and Medicaid eligibility services to Tribal members. As was noted earlier, the Tribe provides all TANF services to its members.

Clients applying for public assistance are met at a counter in the Tribal office, where they are given an application. If they are applying for both TANF and for food stamps/Medicaid, the Tribal caseworker involves the State caseworker to determine joint eligibility. Because the Tribal program uses the State's computer system, the data on eligibility is readily shared between the two programs.

As is true with the Arizona Works program, the Tribal program operates on a different set of standards and rules from the State TANF program. For example, more efforts are made with the Tribal program to provide support services to clients. The Tribal program also uses different income standards and payment schedules. The main focus of the Tribal program is self-sufficiency, but unlike most of Maricopa County, employment opportunities on the reservation are very limited. Often the cases handled by the Tribal caseworkers are very difficult to serve, with caseworkers noting a high incidence of physical disabilities, health problems, mental health issues, and substance abuse problems as barriers to self-sufficiency. In addition, transportation is cited as a problem with both obtaining employment and attending scheduled appointments for certification interviews. The reservation covers a very large area, and many Tribal members do not have adequate transportation. As a result, the State caseworkers report a high no-show rate for clients who are applying for food stamps.

In contrast to the State employees at the Arizona Works site, the caseworkers located on the reservation feel the working relationship between the two programs is well managed. Information sharing is com-

mon, and the State workers feel that they have access to all of the information they need to manage their cases in coordination with the Tribal caseworkers. Because of the informal atmosphere, as well as the fact that the caseworkers do not feel as though they are in competition, services seem to be provided in a well-coordinated manner.

### **Challenges Reported**

A number of challenges are reported by both State-level staff providing services in Maricopa County and by the Maximus staff. The greatest challenge appears to be the competition between the Arizona Works program and the State-run program. There is an acknowledgment by both State and Maximus officials that the Arizona Works program is in direct competition with the State-run program, and, as a result, the two programs have some difficulties cooperating with each other on issues of mutual interest. One State official notes that it may be hard for State employees to help Maximus succeed when their own jobs may be in jeopardy as a result. Another official comments that State-level caseworkers feel resentment towards the Arizona Works program because it can offer clients more in the way of support services than the State-run program. Many individuals feel that this fact alone makes the comparisons between the two programs invalid.

Other specific problems and challenges include the following.

- The short startup time for the Arizona Works project created a high level of stress for both Maximus officials and State employees. Many State employees were forced to make a choice about whether to remain as State employees and work in other departments or join the private sector and lose their seniority in government. This level of stress caused some State employees to be fearful of an expansion of the Arizona Works program.
- State officials express some concern about the working relationship between caseworkers in the Maximus office and those working in the State-administered program. In order to keep error rates to a minimum and to avoid confusing clients, cooperation is necessary between caseworkers in the two programs. For example, if a client served by both systems finds employment, the information about

his/her new earnings must be passed on in a timely manner to the caseworker in charge of the FSP portion of the case; otherwise the client may be required to pay back benefits to the State. However, as one State official noted, it is difficult for State employees to cooperate and trust an entity that may, in the future, cost them their jobs.

Respondents express concern that requiring clients to undergo two separate eligibility processes may discourage them from participating in the FSP. In addition, officials are concerned that clients are becoming confused as to whom they should report changes in their status. As a result, officials are worried that clients who may still be eligible for FSP and Medicaid benefits after they leave the TANF program may not know they are eligible. At this time, Maximus does not track whether clients who leave the TANF program remain in the FSP or Medicaid programs.

- Maximus officials comment that under the current system they are required to utilize the State's data system to process TANF enrollments. This creates a situation that discourages the development of innovative approaches to computerizing enrollments and makes the project dependent on State technical support, which at times can be slow in responding to the project's requests for assistance.
- A number of small issues have also contributed to the lack of cooperation between the two programs. For example, a recent expansion of Arizona Works staff into space previously occupied by State caseworkers resulted in the State's caseworkers being moved into another building within the same complex. This move created resentment on the part of the State-level staff, as now the workers must travel between buildings to meet with clients. Workers questioned the need for Arizona Works to expand into the space, and felt that they were not given a say in the matter. Other issues include delays in providing information to caseworkers needed for determining eligibility (both entities noted this complaint), inconsistency in following agreed-upon office procedures, and delays in reporting client status changes.
- Expansion of the Arizona Works program into a rural county will create a new set of challenges for Maximus staff. First, Maximus plans to offer the current State employees the opportunity to leave State service and come to work for Arizona Works. However, if State employees wish to remain with the

State, it is unlikely that they will be able to find another State job in the county. This will mean that these employees will either need to relocate to an area where more State jobs are available or accept a position with Maximus, which they may feel forced to do to remain in the area.

- A second challenge for Maximus will be to find employment opportunities for clients located in this rural area. State officials point out that there are nowhere near the employment opportunities in the rural areas of the State that there are in more urban areas. In addition, training and vendor resources are limited in rural areas, which may limit the amount and type of support services the Arizona Works program can provide.

## Connecticut

### Overview of the Re-engineering Effort

Prior to 1995, the State of Connecticut administered its public assistance programs through a centralized organization. State headquarters staff were responsible for overall program operations, and programs were implemented by State staff placed in local offices throughout the State. These local offices were supervised by a district manager, who, in turn, reported to a Director of Field Operations in Hartford.

Connecticut began implementing welfare reform in 1996. One of the key elements to their welfare reform effort was the decentralization of program administration and operations. The State created five "human services regions" around the State, and it assigned responsibility for the implementation of public assistance programs within each region to a Regional Administrator. The Regional Administrators report directly to the Agency Commissioner, and program directors (e.g., of FSP, TANF, and Medicaid) have no line authority over Regional Administrators.

With the passage of Federal welfare reform and increased efforts on the part of Connecticut to move clients towards self-sufficiency, the regional offices were given broad authority to customize program operations within their areas (although the regions are bound by State civil service regulations). While overall policy is still developed at the State level, Regional Administrators play a strong role in deciding how policy will be implemented in their particular regions.



The purpose of this case study is to examine how welfare reform efforts were implemented in Connecticut using a regional approach. Site visit interviews were conducted with State headquarters staff in Hartford and with staff located in the regional office in Norwich. The Director of Family Services and the Adult Services Manager responsible for the FSP were interviewed in the State headquarters office. In the regional office, the Regional Administrator, a Field Manager, two program supervisors, and two caseworkers were interviewed.

### **Social Service Program Administration**

Responsibility for administering the FSP in Connecticut is shared between Policy Managers located in the State headquarters office and Regional Administrators located within the five regional offices throughout the State. Policy units are responsible for assuring that proper policies and regulations are developed and communicated to the regions, and the Regional Administrators are responsible for day-to-day operations of the program. The Regional Administrators have a great deal of discretion in how public assistance programs are implemented.

The Adult Services Division, located within the Department of Social Services, is responsible for the development of FSP program policies. These policies are communicated to the regional offices through a policy manual. Staff within the Division of Adult Services are responsible for communicating changes in policy to the regions and answering any policy questions from regional staff. In addition, the headquarters office is responsible for providing training to regional office staff on new policies, reviewing program data reports produced by the Department's management information system, and maintaining contracts with programs providing support to the regions, such as a contract with the University of Connecticut to provide training to staff.

Prior to welfare reform, the major emphasis of public assistance programs was to provide clients with program benefits. With the passage of welfare reform in Connecticut, the primary goal was revised to identifying potential employment opportunities for clients and assisting them in becoming self-sufficient. Connecticut's "Jobs First" program provides TANF, employment services, and safety net services to low-income families.

The State provides a very generous benefit package to its clients to assist them in making the transition from welfare to work. In determining benefits, the State disregards all earnings when total household income is below the poverty level. In addition to receiving a cash benefit, most clients also receive food stamps, Medicaid, and comprehensive support services to help them find employment. While employment-related services were transferred to the Department of Labor in 1998, staff continue to work with clients on providing support services to facilitate obtaining employment. However, clients subject to work requirements are only allowed to receive cash assistance for a total of 21 months. They may continue to receive cash benefits and services beyond this 21-month period only if they have been looking for work in good faith, if they are working but not earning enough to make them ineligible, or if they encountered circumstances beyond their control that prevent them from working.

### **Findings From Interviews of State Headquarters Officials**

#### ***Overview of State Headquarters Operations***

In 1995, the FSP caseload in Connecticut was averaging 110,000 clients a month. The current FSP caseload is 80,000 clients per month. State officials believe that clients' confusion about their eligibility for food stamps once TANF benefits have been terminated is responsible for the drop in caseload. It is the policy of the State program to encourage clients who have continuing eligibility for Medicaid and FSP to continue in these programs, even if their TANF eligibility has ended. Regional staff are asked to conduct "exit interviews" with clients leaving the TANF program to assess whether they are eligible to continue with Medicaid and the FSP. However, officials believe that inconsistent application of the exit interviews between regions may be partially responsible for eligible clients leaving the FSP.

Another issue identified as a barrier to ongoing participation in the FSP is that clients who remain in the FSP after their TANF eligibility has ended must then begin monthly reporting of potential eligibility changes. Headquarters staff believe that this monthly reporting "hassle" may be enough to discourage ongoing participation in the FSP. Officials also noted that once clients decide to leave the FSP, they tend not to return. The drop-off in caseload was also evident in the State-run Food Stamp Program for noncitizens. Prior to welfare reform, there were around 4,000 noncitizens participat-

ing in the FSP. With the changes brought about by welfare reform, only 2,000 of the noncitizens reenrolled in the State-funded FSP.

Headquarters staff were generally supportive of the regional structure used to administer the FSP and other public assistance programs. The staff felt that the centralized administrative structure had been too inflexible and often created situations that hurt program operations. By allowing the regions to adapt their programs to local needs, officials believe that the programs are in a better position to serve clients. In addition, headquarters officials noted that the flexibility afforded in the regional structure allows regional staff to develop strong working relationships with private service agencies within their region, and therefore allows for better coordination of services at the local level. In addition, regional offices have the capacity to write local contracts for support services, which allows the region to customize its support service network to meet the unique needs of the region.

On the other hand, headquarters staff found that the regional structure presented difficulties for the State-level Program Directors, since they have no line authority over the Regional Administrators. These individuals are responsible for programs that have Federal rules about eligibility determination and redetermination, definition of “good cause” for noncompliance, and other aspects of program operations. Yet, the Program Directors are limited in their ability to influence the decisions of the Regional Administrators with regard to program operations. Regional Administrators attend monthly meetings with the Department Commissioner, but Program Directors only attend these meetings if invited.

Headquarters staff were asked if they believe there are major differences between how public assistance programs are administered among the regions. The main differences they noted were between urban and rural areas. For example, officials noted that most offices in rural areas operate on a very strict appointment schedule, while offices in urban areas operate more on a walk-in basis. In addition, staff in rural areas tend to function more as case managers, while staff in urban areas tend to specialize as eligibility workers or workers reporting client changes, which means that in urban areas clients are more likely to work with more than one caseworker.

While headquarters staff believe that policy is implemented in a consistent manner, they believe that there

are a number of operational differences in how strict regions are with client documentation. For example, officials believe that some regions do a much better job in keeping clients on the FSP by allowing more flexibility in how and when clients produce documentation for reporting purposes. Another example provided by headquarters staff is the difference in the level of effort made by caseworkers to conduct exit interviews. In some regions, caseworkers are very aggressive in scheduling exit interviews and recertifying clients for FSP benefits. In other regions, caseworkers do not make the same strong efforts, and as a result, many clients do not come back to be recertified for the FSP.

### ***Challenges Identified by State Headquarters Staff***

As noted above, headquarters staff were generally supportive of the regional structure from the perspective of local operations. However, they did note a few challenges, as follows:

- In some cases, headquarters staff feel that they are responsible for an activity, but have little control over how the activity is managed. For example, error rates are calculated based on statewide (not regional) data and are handled through the headquarters office. However, the headquarters staff feel they have little say in directing the regional offices to undertake activities related to improving the error rates.
- State officials expressed concern as to how the TANF limitations and variable efforts on the part of caseworkers to continue clients on the FSP will be viewed if there is a downturn in the economy. If headquarters officials are correct in their view that operational flexibility at the local level is a contributing factor in the decline in FSP participation, then there is concern about an increase in food insecurity among low-income populations in the State.
- The waivers under which the FSP and TANF programs operate (including the 21-month time limits and earnings disregard) will end in September of 2001. At that time officials believe it will be necessary to make major changes to program operations. For example, when the waiver expires, earned income will be counted for TANF recipients when calculating their FSP benefits. There was some concern expressed that additional major changes in the way the programs operate will create more confusion at the local level, and may result in more

inconsistencies in program operations that could ultimately have a negative impact on clients.

## **Findings From Interviews With Regional Office Staff**

### ***Overview of the Regional Office***

The Norwich regional office covers a mostly rural section of Connecticut in the northeast section of the State. Currently there is an office in Norwich and a satellite office open part-time in the Killington area northeast of Norwich. Staff from the Norwich office travel to the satellite office 4 days a week.

The regional office is organized into three divisions, one addressing the needs of families, one addressing adult services, and one responsible for working with the elderly and persons with disabilities. Much of the FSP and TANF caseload is located within the Family Services Division. Workers in this division are responsible for enrolling clients into the programs, providing case management services, processing EBT cards for clients, and processing changes in client eligibility status. Prior to welfare reform, caseworkers were far more specialized, with some of them processing applications and others processing reported changes. With the flexibility afforded with the regionalization of services, caseworkers were provided the opportunity to act more like case managers and handle all of a client's needs. Local staff felt that this holistic approach to serving clients was more successful than the old approach.

Under the organizational structure of the regional office, three division directors, known as Field Managers, have responsibility for program operations within their division. Each of the Field Managers reports to the Regional Administrator. Reporting to the Field Managers are office supervisors, who in turn direct the activities of the Family Independence Representatives (FI Reps). Family Independence Representatives handle varying caseloads, based upon the programs in which the clients participate. An FI Rep who works with TANF clients, or clients participating in multiple programs, is more likely to have a smaller caseload than those working with FSP- or Medicaid-only clients. FI Reps handling TANF cases tend to have caseloads averaging around 100 clients, while FI Reps who handle FSP- and Medicaid-only cases tend to manage around 400 cases.

In addition to the three division directors, the regional office has two regional planners and one regional trainer. The regional planners are responsible for helping to design the service delivery system within the region, and for identifying any future activities that may be necessary to implement new policy. The regional trainer provides training to staff within the region on both program and policy issues, as well as general training on useful skill-building and management issues.

### ***Regional Service Delivery***

Because of the large geographic area and limited public transportation, the Norwich region offices work on a strict appointment system. Clients must come to the office to enroll, but may report changes through telephone calls or faxes. Clients enrolled in the TANF program are connected with a caseworker in the Department of Labor who can assist them with finding employment. Caseworkers in the regional office keep in close communication with the Department of Labor staff to track the extent to which clients are finding employment and to assist in providing support services to help the clients reach self-sufficiency. While much of the communication between regional office staff and Department of Labor staff is by telephone and fax, there are plans to install an electronic file-sharing system between the two departments to allow caseworkers to share files.

Employment options for clients living within the region are somewhat limited. The majority of clients who find work do so in the food service or hospitality industries. The FI Reps noted that there are two very large Native American casinos in the region, both of which pay well and will hire public assistance clients. However, experience has shown that it is very difficult for clients with children to maintain employment at the casinos, as employees are often asked to work different shifts and be available for overtime. Because childcare within the region is so limited, most clients with families can not be flexible enough to meet the demands of working at the casinos.

FI Reps work closely with other community agencies to provide coordinated services and referrals to clients. Staff within the regional office actively work with programs such as WIC, childcare providers, and housing agencies to assist clients in overcoming barriers. One of the FI Reps noted that their role is to identify the barriers clients may face in becoming self-sufficient

and assist them with accessing resources within the community to help them overcome these barriers.

The regional office staff also work with community organizations to promote the FSP and Medicaid programs administered in their regions. Supervisors participate in a regional speakers' bureau and travel to meetings around the region to provide information about the FSP and Medicaid programs to other programs that may be serving the same clients. In addition, caseworkers participate in outreach efforts for the Connecticut Child Health Insurance Program. Staff believe that most low-income families in their region are aware of the services provided by their office. Finally, regional office staff participate in monthly regional advisory council meetings, which include representatives from the community who can provide guidance to the region on how to improve program coordination.

Regional office staff have limited contact with headquarters staff. Most of the contact occurs between the Field Manager and the policy staff in Hartford. Communication revolves mostly around policy questions that require an interpretation. The majority of the questions are related to defining "good cause" for TANF clients attempting to extend their time on the program or interpreting a question regarding the definition of a "household". In addition, Field Managers are given the opportunity to participate in statewide workgroups. For example, recently a Field Manager from the Norwich office participated in a workgroup examining how to strengthen the help desk that assists with EBT issues.

### ***Regional Administration***

The Regional Administrator who was interviewed believes the flexibility permitted by the regional approach allows administrators to better customize their programs to meet the needs of their clients. However, it was interesting to note that while the Regional Administrator felt he had flexibility with regard to operational issues, he expressed the belief that the program continues to be much more centralized than it would appear. For example, budgets for the regional office are still controlled by headquarters, and the Regional Administrator has very little flexibility in making changes to the budget. A second example provided by the Regional Administrator involves the ability to reclassify positions within the region. The regional offices do not have the flexibility to change the job classifications of vacant positions in order to

meet what they view to be a local need. All changes in job classifications must be approved by headquarters staff. In addition, with a hiring freeze currently in effect, the regions must compete with one another to be able to fill the vacant positions within their regions. In some cases, positions are moved from one region to another based upon a strong justification for increasing staffing within a region.

The Regional Administrator also said that it is his belief that Regional Administrators have done a good job in customizing their programs to meet local needs. He did, however, acknowledge that there are differences in how some of the regions approach dealing with clients. He cited as an example the emphasis his region puts on followup with clients to be sure they are reporting changes to their eligibility status in a timely manner and providing proper documentation. He noted that his caseworkers often make three or four attempts to help a client in danger of being dropped from the FSP, while in other regions clients are dropped after only limited efforts to help or to understand why the required report was not submitted on time.

### ***Challenges Identified by Regional Staff***

The overall goal of regional administration of public assistance programs was to allow more flexibility in the day-to-day administration of program activities. With the implementation of welfare reform, the regional offices faced a number of challenges, described below.

- While the regional offices were responsible for implementing a number of changes as a result of welfare reform, they were not given any additional funds or staff with which to implement the changes. As a result, staff were very stressed during the transition phase. Because priority within the Norwich region was placed on ensuring smooth continuation of client services, the error rate within the region increased. Now that much of the implementation has been complete, the region will focus more on quality control and reducing errors.
- Lack of control over the regional budget and personnel system has created problems for the Regional Administrator in implementing innovative ideas. The Administrator noted that over the course of implementing welfare reform, staff have been able to identify uses for funds and staffing that will better serve clients. However, the Regional Administrator did not have the authority to make the necessary adjustments

to accommodate staff wishes. As a result, the Regional Administrator believes that the regional programs would be better served if they were given more control of budgets and personnel.

- Staff noted that the large geographic area covered by the region makes it difficult for clients to come into the offices for services. Staff are hopeful that additional field offices can be established in order to better serve clients living in the most rural parts of the region.
- The Regional Administrator would like to develop more internal quality control mechanisms. Currently program supervisors are responsible for overseeing the quality of the work of the FI Reps. The Regional Administrator would like to develop an independent quality control system in order to identify problems that may span the region. This independent quality control system would then be used as the basis for

changing program operations to improve program accountability.

- Overall, Connecticut's change in organizational structure to a regional organization resulted in a limited degree of decentralization. While it provides the advantage of some flexibility for Regional Administrators to develop relationships with local providers in order to tailor services, Regional Administrators have little control over budget allocation and personnel decisions.

There is an inherent conflict between administering programs that have federally mandated rules and encouraging local control. The State must continue to improve communication between headquarters and the regions, including providing data to the regions for program improvement. It was noted that there has been some movement back towards centralization, especially with respect to the FSP, in order to reduce certification error rates.