

001 - WORK FIRST PREFACE & PHILOSOPHYChange # 03-2009December 1, 2009**THE MOVE TO WORK FIRST**

In 1996, the federal government enacted the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). In 1996, North Carolina implemented its' TANF program under the name of Work First. North Carolina's Work First Program was built upon the premise that "all people have a responsibility to their families and communities to work and to provide for their children."

The Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005, formerly known as the Budget Reconciliation Act, was signed into law on February 8, 2006. The DRA reauthorized TANF through 2010. The DRA:

- Maintained the 50% all-family work participation rate and the 90% two-parent family rate.
- Changed the base year for the Caseload Reduction Credit from 1996 to 2005.
- Required the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to define each work category more precisely.
- Added additional categories of individuals into the State work participation calculation.
- Established new work verification plan requirements for which the state can face sanctions for failure to comply with the approved plan.

THE EFFECT ON FAMILIES AND LOCAL SERVICE DELIVERY

The *Work First* Program represents a significant departure from the traditional roles of public assistance clients and programs. Work First establishes two significant concepts: that the family has a larger responsibility in achieving self-sufficiency and that services from a local agency are short-term and directed toward a quick return to the local labor market.

Families must be given the opportunity to become independent. This means that their package of services should allow for "life after public assistance." In the past, cash assistance was a long-term option for many families. Under *Work First*, *Work First Family Assistance* benefits provide only short-term services while the family builds their

own "safety net." Families are expected to work actively toward and share in the responsibility of becoming self-sufficient.

It is necessary that the delivery and packaging of agency services reflect the needs of *all* families. Local departments of social services should begin to integrate services that provide an alternative to dependency and promote employment. This requires interaction and discussion with all staff in the agency, beyond a simple referral. It is crucial, therefore, to establish intra-agency procedures which promote communication and result in a true blending of family-focused services.

PHILOSOPHY OF *WORK FIRST*

All programs administered by the North Carolina Division of Social Services follow the same mission, vision, and values which are strong statements of our advocacy for families and children and especially those who come in contact with the Work First system.

The mission makes our purpose clear and tells everyone that we are to provide family-centered services to children and families to achieve well being through ensuring self-sufficiency, support, safety, and permanency.

The vision is a clear statement of what we believe the system should look like. Programs will embrace family-centered practice principles and provide services that promote security and safety for all.

The values are what we promise to do, the link between our agencies and the public. The principles of family-centered practice reflect the belief that the family is its own primary source of intervention and determines who its members are. The family is viewed as a system within a larger social and environmental context. As a result, interventions focus on accessing the family's immediate and extended community through needs assessment, resource identification, and service delivery. Family-centered practice respects the family's right of self-determination and capabilities, and assumes the family has the capacity to grow and change when provided the proper supportive interventions. A family-centered approach provides a guide for service delivery and staff behavior.

The six family-centered principles of partnership are:

- Everyone desires respect
- Everyone needs to be heard
- Everyone has strengths
- Judgments can wait
- Partners share power
- Partnership is a process

North Carolina's *Work First* Program is based on the premise that parents have a responsibility to support themselves and their children. Through Work First, parents can get short-term training and other services to help them become employed and self-sufficient. However, the responsibility is theirs, and most families have two years to move off Work First Family Assistance. Work First emphasizes three strategies: Diversion, Work, and Job Retention. Work First Family Assistance is also provided for eligible children whose caretaker is not eligible for benefits themselves. Work First Family Assistance provides monthly financial assistance to help in meeting the basic needs of families with children such as food, shelter, etc.

The four goals of Work First are to:

- Assist families so that children can be cared for in their own home
- Reduce the dependency of parents by promoting job preparation, work and marriage
- Prevent out of wedlock pregnancies
- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families

To accomplish its important mission, county *Work First* programs are required to provide the following:

- Ensure that adequate employment and training efforts and the necessary supportive services are available to all families, especially those subject to time-limited benefits;
- Provide all families with access to a basic level of employment services;
- Provide services to families with children living with relatives, children of SSI and SSDI parents, and children of undocumented immigrants. These services should be focused on assisting families with maintaining safety, permanency, and well being;
- Reinforce the importance of personal responsibility and employment during all agency contacts with a family;
- Serve all work eligible participants;
- Ensure that active participation is intensive, short-term, and directed toward immediate employment; and
- Meet or exceed the county's fair-share of the State-wide Work First work participation rate.

ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

The goals of *Work First* cannot be accomplished by government alone. Understandably, moving families off the public assistance rolls and toward self-sufficiency requires the efforts of each stakeholder in the community. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to:

- Businesses and business leaders, including landlords and utilities providers
- Local civic groups
- Places of worship
- Workforce Development Boards

- Educational institutions
- Child care providers
- Elected officials
- Non-profit agencies
- Families receiving Work First Family Assistance **and**
- Local governmental agencies and staff (Local Management Entities, Employment Security Commission, Vocational Rehabilitation public health board, local school systems, child welfare staff, etc.)

Local stakeholders represent those individuals, organizations, and agencies that have a role in moving families into employment. Put simply, they have a "stake" in designing and implementing the local *Work First* Program. These partnerships ensure the availability of financial assistance, assessments, rehabilitative services, training, childcare, transportation, and employment opportunities. These partnerships also represent the fundamental tenet that a successful *Work First* Program requires the efforts of everyone in the community.

Understandably, the active participation of local stakeholders should not be limited to a single contact or meeting. Stakeholders input and resources should be continually solicited as agencies move families off public assistance and into employment. At a minimum, stakeholders must be included in the agencies annual planning process.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF WORK FIRST

The federal regulations resulting from the DRA placed increased emphasis on the work participation rates and established new penalties for failure to comply with the State's approved Work Verification Plan. In an effort to improve participation rates, all work-eligible Work First participants must complete all aspects of their Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) Core Requirements and MRA Plan of Action each month before receiving Work First Benefits (WFB), unless there is good cause (See Section 120). Therefore, it is even more imperative that county departments of social services partner with community agencies, employers and families to ensure that Work First families are moving steadily toward self-sufficiency.

All Work First staff must make appropriate accommodations for Work First participants who have a disability (See Section 117). In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against any individual with a disability that places substantial limitations on an individual's major life activities such as caring for one's self, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.