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A Human Development Approach to Welfare Reform Phase II: Giving Families Choice

Toby Herr, Executive Director - Project Match

Summary of Presentation by Laura Bates and Betty Tableman

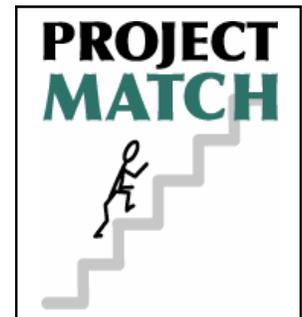
Introduction

The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 brought about some unanticipated results. As Jason DeParle commented in his case history of welfare families [1], both liberals and conservatives were more wrong than right about the consequences of these changes. Liberals underestimated the ability of welfare recipients to engage in work, and conservatives overestimated the degree to which work would improve people's lives.

Why were policymakers wrong about how people would behave? At Project Match we believe it is because policy is overly focused on economic incentives as shapers of decision making, giving little attention to psychological factors. It is our experience from research and practice that many psychosocial factors influence a welfare recipient's decision to participate in and be successful at meeting work requirements – factors such as self-confidence, determination, the ability to cope with uncertainty and face unfamiliar situations. People not only need to have the skills to succeed in new situations, they also have to believe that they can do so.

Lessons Learned from Project Match

In our 20 years of experience in welfare-to-work and workforce development, Project Match has learned several lessons that are relevant to moving families in the welfare system toward economic and family stability. Project Match is a Chicago-based organization that has been providing transition-to-work services to poor families since 1985.



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The human development approach developed in our community-based program has been adapted for agencies operating mandatory programs through the Pathways Case Management System, which has been implemented in counties throughout the country.

These are some of the lessons learned from our experience.

Lesson 1: Most welfare recipients will need multiple jobs before making a permanent attachment to the workforce.

In our community-based program we have followed a small sample of clients who have stayed in the program for at least 5 years. Within this group, we have identified subgroups that follow four distinct pathways [2].

- ♦ **Steady Worker/Advancement Pathway (36%).** This group makes fairly steady progress through employment, and for some, education as well. Most start with entry-level jobs and over time gradually increase their hours, months worked, and wages. At the end of five years, on average, they are working full time and no longer receive TANF.
- ♦ **Job Cycler to Steady Worker Pathway (14%).** People in this group make many false starts initially, quitting jobs and/or education classes frequently. Repeated changes make it difficult to increase wages. These workers gradually improve in their ability to keep a job until at the end of five years they are working steadily, although still receiving a reduced TANF grant.
- ♦ **Intermittent Worker/Welfare Cycler Pathway (27%).** Workers in this group are good workers when on the job but setbacks in their personal lives result in quitting jobs or training programs. An unstable work history makes it difficult for workers in this group to make improvements in their income and they continue to be dependent on TANF whenever they quit or lose another job.
- ♦ **Low/No Work Pathway (23%).** Workers in this final group never make an attachment to the workforce, although they continue to participate in the program. Over a five-year period they worked either not at all or only for short time periods and continued to be dependent on full TANF grants.

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Our experience led us to conclude that welfare-to-work is not an event about getting a job, but is, instead, a long and difficult process of personal growth and development. Project Match's results mirror other studies of persons who have left welfare in Illinois, [3] indicating that half or less of former welfare recipients end up working full time.

Lesson 2: The "barriers to employment" approach to helping people prepare to go to work needs to be rethought.

The barriers approach is based on the premise that many welfare recipients have personal or family circumstances that will make it very difficult for them to obtain or retain employment. These barriers include factors such as medical or mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, low basic skills, or children with special needs. The goal is to address barriers first before moving people into the workforce. It is Project Match's belief that this approach does not work for several reasons.

- ♦ **The premise that the barriers to employment are what prevents welfare recipients from working is not supported by data.** Table 1 below compares the recent work experience for women receiving and not receiving welfare. As you can see, in both categories, fewer persons with barriers than without are employed full time. However, *non-recipients* with barriers are far more likely to be working than are *recipients* with the same barriers. Therefore one could conclude that it is not the barriers in and of themselves, but rather something about the people who end up on welfare that keeps them from working steadily.

**Table 1.
Comparison of Recent Work Experience for Women
Receiving and Not Receiving Welfare**

	Percent of Workers Employed Full-Year			
	Current Welfare Recipients		Non-Recipients	
	With Barrier	Without Barrier	With Barrier	Without Barrier
Presence of Any Barriers to Employment				
• Serious barriers excluding low skills	6.81	24.51	69.27	78.18
• Serious barriers including extremely low basic skills	10.99	26.75	67.35	79.26
• Moderate or serious barriers excluding very low skills	17.37	22.56	74.38	78.61
• Moderate or serious barriers including very low or extremely low skills	17.56	31.06	73.50	80.66

Source: Krista Olson and LaDonna Pavett, "Personal and Family Challenges to the Successful Transition from Welfare to Work." The Urban Institute, May 17, 1996, p. 33, table 8.

- ♦ **Assessment of barriers focuses on the negative with people just entering the program.** The process of assessing barriers to employment occurs during the recipient's entrance into the program and necessarily focuses on a negative set of questions. Thus it can set a negative tone by focusing on the recipient's problems and deficits.
- ♦ **Many barriers take a long time to identify.** The barriers approach is based on identifying problems up front so that services can be offered to eliminate or alleviate the circumstances. However, many barriers are not revealed initially but only over time in the context of a trusting relationship between a recipient and worker.

Project Match believes that a more constructive approach is “employment with barriers” that helps people learn to balance their many life roles.

It is psychologically healthy to make active decisions about life choices rather than passively letting things happen to you.

The Human Development Approach: Focuses on helping recipients build personal competencies that are valued in the workplace & in life roles.

Promotes active decision making.

Individualizes work preparation activities to level of competence.

- ♦ **To work steadily, one needs to learn to live with life’s problems rather than “get over” them.** Many barriers to work cannot be “fixed” and even if some are removed, others may take their place. To be a successful worker, one needs to learn to balance work with other personal and family problems.

If the focus of programs isn’t on helping people develop the ability to balance work and personal/family problems, they are likely to quit work whenever problems arise. Project Match believes that a more constructive approach is “employment with barriers” that helps people learn to balance their many life roles.

Lesson 3: Individual Motivation Trumps Mandates.

Studies of those who left welfare including our own data indicate that when work requirements are instituted, many TANF recipients will accept sanctions or leave without a job [3, 4]. Many of these families leave without the skills to sustain employment or adapt to life crises and may end up back on welfare or in some other social service system.

Our own study of the Pathways Case Management System implementation in Oswego, NY [4] found that over a two-year period 34.9% of TANF cases were closed for noncompliance with program requirements: 24.3% for noncompliance with Pathways monthly meeting eligibility requirements, and 10.6% for other eligibility requirements. Because they left without communicating with caseworkers, their post-TANF employment status is not known.

We learned from this experience that “upping the ante” through stricter requirements creates a decision point for many TANF recipients. At this decision point agencies should work hard to make sure leaving TANF is an active rather than a passive decision for two reasons:

- ♦ Passive leavers do not have opportunity to learn about other services and benefits that they are still eligible for, such as Medicaid or food stamps.
- ♦ It is psychologically healthy to make active decisions about life choices rather than passively letting things happen to you.

How Does the Human Development Approach Differ from Traditional Workforce Preparation?

For those who choose to participate in work requirements, Project Match believes a system that addresses psychosocial issues as well as work preparation and education is more likely to be successful because:

- ♦ It focuses on helping recipients systematically build personal competencies that are valued in the workplace as well as in other life roles.
- ♦ It promotes active decision making by recipients.
- ♦ It individualizes work preparation activities to each person’s level of competence through the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence.

The Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence (Figure 1) is the centerpiece of the human development approach. It incorporates a broad range of activities in the work requirements, providing experiences that are manageable, productive and meaningful for every welfare recipient. These activities are designed to serve as incremental, measurable stepping-stones to economic and family stability. The five columns represent the breadth of activities that can serve a work-prep function. The lower rungs include activities with children – such as taking children to appointments or volunteering for a school or Head Start activity – and self-improvement activities – attending family counseling, taking an exercise class or attending treatment for substance abuse.

These activities build base skills (time management, social skills) that are necessary to get and hold a job. The middle rungs include regular volunteer community service and education/training programs. The highest rungs include subsidized and unsubsidized part-time and full-time employment. We have found that most participants engage in activities at all levels of the ladder at some time in their preparation.

Besides taking into account the varying levels of skills and competencies among welfare recipients, the different levels and types of activities represent the many different roles that recipients must learn to balance: worker, parent, partner, community member. In Project Match's experience, the ability to balance these competing roles is a characteristic that often distinguishes successful from less successful participants.

The Pathways Case Management System

The goal of the system is to help all types of welfare recipients... move onto and along their own unique routes toward economic and family stability.

The Pathways Case Management System was developed by Project Match for state and local agencies operating mandatory programs. The goal of the system is to help all types of welfare recipients – not just those deemed employable – move onto and along their own unique routes toward economic and family stability [5].

The Pathways system changes the interaction between casework or employment workers and their clients. In the traditional system, the worker plays the role of "expert" — the person with the knowledge who can help the recipient make the "right" decision. In the Pathways system, the worker's primary role is to be a facilitator, resource person and monitor of activities but not a decision maker. The worker's job is to be sure that the recipient knows all of the options available to him or her and the consequences of each, so that he or she can make more informed choices.

The system provides welfare agencies with a set of tools and protocols for ensuring monthly contact between caseworkers and recipients, developing and monitoring individualized monthly plans, and promoting a teamwork approach among agency staff and partners.

The Pathways "toolkit" includes:

- ♦ **Monthly activity diary.** The diary consists of a menu of activities – some countable toward the federal work requirement and some not — and a self-sufficiency plan for each participant. It includes space for up to four activities that the participant agrees to do that month. The menu has standard work prep activities in addition to activities at all levels of the incremental ladder to economic success.

- ♦ **Monthly group meeting.** The centerpiece of the Pathways system is the monthly meeting of 10-15 recipients facilitated by a team of 3 welfare caseworkers/employment workers. Each participant has 15 minutes to review his or her prior month's plan and to negotiate a new plan for the coming month, based on accomplishments of the prior month. The facilitator as well as other participants can offer advice and support. This method assures that caseworkers have regular contact with everyone and no one slips through the cracks. Some agencies have chosen to sanction people who do not attend the monthly group meeting, by imposing strict consequences (e.g., closing the case) thus forcing them to make hard choices about participation.
- ♦ **Computerized tracking system.** The tracking system captures information from the activity diaries and group meetings and generates a cumulative record of each person's monthly plans, successes and setbacks. The record can be used by participants as documentation of their progress and by caseworkers for monthly case reviews.
- ♦ **Case reviews and debriefings.** Regular staff meetings before and after group meetings provide an opportunity for facilitation teams to prepare for group meetings, review progress in previous meetings and plan follow-up activities. These meetings are intended to generate new ideas for helping recipients set and meet their goals and to encourage cross-agency collaboration.

A recent study of implementation of the Pathways System in three counties found considerable progress but also some challenges [5].

Accomplishments

- ♦ The group case management meetings make it administratively feasible to see all cash assistance clients every month. This was true even though group meetings take far more time than originally anticipated.
- ♦ The groups provide a forum in which recipients can share successes and challenges and receive information on a broader range of employment resources than they would receive from agency staff alone. The peer-to-peer dialogue offers important information and recognition to participants and allows caseworkers to learn far more about their clients lives than they would from individual contacts.
- ♦ The broad range of activities in the diary encourages recipients and staff to recognize and include small steps toward self-sufficiency in monthly plans.
- ♦ Co-facilitation between welfare and employment workers encourages collaboration.

Lessons Learned

As states are required to engage a higher proportion of their caseload in work and work-related activities, the Pathways experience offers some important insights into what may be required to engage all TANF recipients in some type of productive activity.

- ♦ **Effective individualized case planning requires a highly skilled staff.** Effective case planning requires staff who can 1) help recipients identify their strengths and weaknesses; 2) develop plans that set goals and break them down into identifiable steps; 3) monitor and encourage progress. Good staff training is a must.
- ♦ **TANF program administrators and line staff are unlikely to embrace the concept of individualized planning if performance is tied to a narrowly defined set of work-related activities.** A strong program emphasis on “countable” activities will not lead staff to see the value of developing more individualized plans.
- ♦ **Monitoring program participation and outcomes is more complicated when a broad range of activities is acceptable.** Because the system focuses on individuals making progress through a series of small steps over an extended period of time, traditional measures of program performance, such as employment placements and job retention, will not capture all aspects of individual or program success. Alternative indicators need to be identified.

The Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence:

- **Starts where people are**
- **Makes sure there is an appropriate first and subsequent step for everyone**
- **Celebrates big and small successes**

Conclusion

Project Match’s program design work in the fields of welfare-to-work and workforce development reflects our growing understanding of how individuals change and how their growth is linked to increases in economic and family stability among poor families. With these understandings in mind we developed the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence, the conceptual underpinning of our model. The ladder reflects our core beliefs: start where people are, make sure there is an appropriate first and subsequent step for everyone, and celebrate big and small successes. There are three ways in which the ladder provides a first step and pathway to success for everyone:

1. Gradually increasing time commitments;
2. Gradually increasing demands – from simple to more difficult challenges;
3. Broadening what counts in work preparation.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our experience of research and practice, we can make the following policy recommendations:

1. **Write into the state plan a wide range of allowable activities to the extent possible within federal regulations.** Allowable activities should be those that 1) promote skills and personal competencies that are valued in the workplace and 2) can be monitored on a regular basis. Skills such as punctuality or working well with supervisors are valued in the workplace but can easily be practiced first in more familiar settings, such as the neighborhood school, clinic or Head Start program.
2. **Train staff to better support the development of recipient competencies and active decision-making.** Consider use of the Pathways model, if not universally then within one office or county. As the Pathways implementation study noted, successful implementation of a work participation program for many types of welfare recipients requires highly-skilled staff.
3. **Consider policies to promote more active case closures.** Active decision making is better for psychological well-being and is in itself a personal development competency. If recipients actively close their cases for whatever reason, rather than passively drifting away or through sanctions, caseworkers can inform families of benefits still available to them and assure that they are aware of the consequences of the decisions they make. Follow up with those who leave passively through noncompliance to find out why they left (e.g. found employment, became eligible for SSI, etc). Those who leave without work or other means of support are likely to return or become recipients of other services at some point.

For more information and to download research reports about Project Match visit our Website: www.pmatch.org.