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STATE GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE--OREGON'S WELFARE REFORM STORY

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With welfare reform, the Adult and Family Services (AFS) of the Oregon Department of Human Resources has undergone a “cultural shift.” What was once viewed as a process-driven, welfare maintenance system is now a mission-driven, self-sufficiency focused welfare-to-work program model.

Oregon's Experience with Welfare-to-Work

Oregon AFS has extensive experience with welfare-to-work programs. Oregon's Job Opportunities and Basic Skills program (JOBS)¹ and self-sufficiency focused strategies and successes pre-date federal welfare reform implementation.

The federal welfare reform effort, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), has profoundly changed the federal-state welfare-to-work relationship. Instead of federal entitlements, there are now block grants to states. TANF has not significantly changed Oregon's welfare-to-work program and focus. Combined with Oregon's successful JOBS program, TANF has, instead, enhanced welfare-to-work efforts by allowing greater freedom in the design of programs and components and has enabled AFS to expand welfare-to-work services to the entire caseload.

Oregon's Welfare-to-Work Model

Oregon AFS has a three-tiered approach concerning welfare-to-work:

- Holistic and strategic services are offered which address the entire spectrum of client family circumstances—from the “immediate” job-ready to the “soon-to-be” and “eventual” job-ready individuals. Our philosophy is “everyone is capable.”
- Local community program design is offered. This means it is the state's role to facilitate local community partner efforts to reach locally defined and mutually agreed-upon outcomes.
- An integrated individual case management approach is used which is needed to connect families with appropriate services.

The Results

- More than 44,000 clients in Oregon were placed in employment at an average starting wage of \$6.27 to \$7.06 per hour. Of these clients, 90 percent are off welfare 18 months after TANF closure due to employment.
- Approximately 40 percent of the people found employment before going on welfare. This is the result of strong “up-front” assessment, support, and job-search services.

¹ JOBS is an employment training program. Oregon AFS requires clients who meet program eligibility requirements to participate in self-sufficiency activities such as JOBS.

- Since 1993, Oregon’s welfare caseload has declined by over 60 percent.

The Future of Oregon’s Welfare Reform

Our vision of responding to the present and future challenges of helping families achieve self-sufficiency includes the following goals:

- Helping more people move toward self-sufficiency by designing and expanding services to address the more significant barriers to employment.
- Helping former clients maintain financial independence by designing and expanding services for the newly employed families.
- Supporting employed clients as they improve their employment situation and personal life by designing and expanding services to help families increase their wages.
- Helping children in families we serve to develop in a positive way by designing and expanding services to address generational dependence, (e.g. teen pregnancy, juvenile crime, etc.).

Keys to Success

Oregon AFS sees five keys for future success:

- *Experimentation* must be continued to encourage creativity and cultivate new ideas.
- There must be continued *flexibility* in state and federal policy to implement new ideas.
- Continued and expanding *collaboration* with other local organizations is necessary to meet future welfare-to-work challenges.
- *Employee development* must be continued to keep agency staff prepared to meet the present and future challenges of welfare-to-work.
- Further *structural realignment* must be done within Oregon AFS to meet our goal of being a “learning organization.” This strategy encourages continued creativity, outcome management and program improvement.