

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at:
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7885128>

The Largely Untold Story of Welfare Reform and the Human Services

Article in Social work · May 2005

DOI: 10.1093/sw/50.2.175 · Source: PubMed

CITATIONS

69

READS

579

1 author:



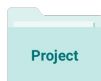
[Mimi Abramovitz](#)

City University of New York - Hunter College

54 PUBLICATIONS 421 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The Impact of Privatization(Mana serialism)on the Human Service Workforce:
An Empirical Study [View project](#)

All content following this page was uploaded by [Mimi Abramovitz](#) on 08 September 2017.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

The Largely Untold Story of Welfare Reform and the Human Services

Mimi Abramovitz

Welfare reform has placed the lives of clients, the jobs of social workers, and the mission of agencies in jeopardy. Based on interviews with senior staff at 107 nonprofit human services agencies, this article documents the largely untold story of how nonprofit agencies' workers responded to the impact of welfare reform on their clients, their jobs, and the delivery of services. Workers reported less time for social services because of welfare-related regulations, penalties, work mandates, crises, and paper work. They also reported more service dilemmas including less control of the job, more ethical conflicts, less efficacy, and increased burn-out. Even so, workers felt that they were making a difference, and agencies indicated increased advocacy. Relying heavily on the voice of social workers, the article illuminates the experiences and feelings of agency staff as they try to do their best for clients in difficult times.

KEY WORDS: *burn out; ethical dilemmas; nonprofit agencies; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; welfare reform*

The relationship between social policy and human services delivery has always been complex and riddled with contradictions. Welfare reform intensified long-standing conflicts and introduced new tensions. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193) replaced Aid To Families With Dependent Children (AFDC)—the federal entitlement to cash assistance that enabled single mothers to stay home with young children—with Temporary Assistance To Needy Families (TANF), a state-operated block grant designed to move mothers from welfare to work. The first five years of funding (\$16.5 billion a year) expired in September 2002. At the time of this writing Congress had extended TANF funding several times, but continued to debate President Bush's stricter work, marriage, and education proposals.

The welfare rolls plummeted by more than 50 percent nationwide following welfare reform—fueled by the booming economy of the 1990s and welfare's stricter rules. Most policymakers assumed that women who left welfare would find work, rely on their families, or receive help from nonprofit agencies. Researchers tracked the progress of the former recipients while measuring caseload reduc-

tions. Only a few observers seriously considered the impact of welfare reform on the job of social workers or the mission of human services agencies that had to absorb the fall-out of the welfare overhaul.

The following discussion of welfare reform and human service workers is part of a larger study that explored the impact of TANF on the needs of clients, the job of social workers, and the mission of nonprofit agencies. The workers vividly described the toll welfare reform has taken on the capacity of social workers and agencies to assist the hundreds of clients who turn to them daily. The study concluded that welfare reform placed, and continues to place, the wider social services system in jeopardy. The massive tax and social spending cuts, along with the sagging economy and rising unemployment, have only exacerbated the problems raised by workers in this study.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For more than 60 years before the passage of TANF the government and the nonprofit sector had developed a flawed but basically sound system for providing services to individuals and families. With the 1935 Social Security Act, the federal government accepted responsibility for providing at least

a bare-minimum safety net and the welfare state expanded steadily during the postwar years. By the 1960s, rising costs and growing demand led city and state governments to contract with local non-profit agencies to provide social services.

In the 1970s, poverty and other social problems intensified as deindustrialization and globalization caused low-paid work in the expanding service sector to replace higher-paying manufacturing jobs. Nonetheless, in the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration cut taxes and social spending. The economy improved during the late 1990s, but tax cuts, continued hostility to government programs, and reduced social spending left low-income communities and social agencies without crucial resources. Following two decades of austerity, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 further strained the fiscal capacity the nonprofits. Because of sanctions and other penalties, recipients lost access to Medicaid and public assistance benefits that helped pay for agency services. The law also brought more for-profit and faith-based organizations into the pool of providers competing for public dollars. In 2000 about half of New York City's nonprofit sector faced at least some competition from the for-profits (Seeley & Wolpert, 2002). A Brookings Institution study of four cities found that the for-profits received more than two-thirds of the employment-related contract dollars during 2000–2001, including 67 percent in New York City (Sanger, 2001). The adverse impact of welfare reform fell heavily on women and children—the prime users of public assistance and nonprofit agency services. Studies by Delgado and Gordon (2002) found that welfare department caseworkers and local employers treated white women more favorably than women of color. Others reported that the use of sanctions was greatest in states with most people of color (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001).

METHOD

We conducted in-depth interviews with senior staff at 107 agencies in New York City. Drawing on the CARES™ Directory published by the United Way of New York City, we contacted every other appropriate agency—approximately 1,000. Within a month—and without any follow-up—150 agencies volunteered to participate. Of these, 107 matched our criteria. With only enough funding to conduct 100 interviews, we did not enlarge the

sample. The study was conducted under the auspices of the New York City Chapter of NASW and funded by the United Way of New York City.

Sample

The sample represented a wide range of primary service areas: social services (37.3 percent); emergency food and housing (21.4 percent); employment-related (14.9 percent); health and mental health (14.1 percent); community development (9.4 percent) and other services (2.8 percent). This distribution of service areas approximated that of a 13-state study of the impact of welfare reform on nonprofit agencies (De Vita, 1998). Our sample included all five New York City boroughs: 60.7 percent of the agencies were located in Manhattan, 15.0 percent in Brooklyn, 12.1 percent in the Bronx, 6.5 percent in Queens, 1.9 percent in Staten Island and 0.9 percent in Suffolk County, Long Island. The geographic distribution paralleled the United Way CARES™ Directory, although it overrepresented Manhattan agencies, somewhat underrepresented Queens, and to a lesser extent the other three boroughs (Personal communication from Raquel De Silva, director, Information Management Group, United Way of New York City, June 25, 2001).

The self-selection process may have led to an overrepresentation of the agencies most severely affected by welfare reform and an underrepresentation of agencies in the outer boroughs, which serve more immigrant neighborhoods. However, implementation strains (Iversen, 2000) stemming from New York City's larger than average workfare program and its stringent work and sanction policies suggest that the negative impact of welfare reform reported in this study closely reflected the realities of the city. Although the sample is larger than many comparable studies (Bischoff & Reisch, 2000; Fink & Windom, 2001; Hasenfeld & Evans 2000; Padgett 2000; Reisch & Sommerfield 2000), the results must be generalized with caution.

Interviews

From January 2000 to May 2000, we taped in-person interviews using closed and open-ended questions. The respondents included four executive directors, eight associate or assistant directors, 23 division directors or associate division directors, 28 program directors, five program specialists, seven program coordinators, nine supervisors, and 11 senior social services workers. Sixty-three percent had

a social work degree and 37 percent did not. All had worked at their agency for a minimum of three years. The timing of the study—three years after the implementation of federal welfare reform in New York State but before anyone reached the 60-month time limit—ensured that agency staff had been adequately exposed to the workings of the new welfare law. The data reflect the perceptions of those interviewed and were not verified further.

RESULTS

The job of a human services worker has never been easy. It became harder after 1996 as welfare reform caused agencies to shift significant proportions of staff time and resources from social services to managing the impact of welfare on the lives of clients and the mission of agencies. As a result workers had less time to provide services and faced an intensification of dilemmas resulting from less control of their work, mounting ethical conflicts, and burnout.

Although welfare reform troubled workers and adversely affected the overall delivery of services, many workers still felt that they could make a difference in the lives of clients and evidenced a renewed interest in advocacy. The workers demon-

strated far more concern for the impact of welfare reform on the well-being of their clients than its effect on themselves.

Less Time for Services

Welfare reform has had an adverse effect on the quality of life in low-income communities. Most studies that followed former recipients found that regardless of why the women left welfare (for example, found a job, received a welfare department sanction leading to loss of benefits, or a case closing), most could not make ends meet (Acs & Loprest, 2001, Loprest, 1999). Like agency workers studied by other researchers (Bischoff & Reisch, 2000; Padgett, 2000; Pirog, Byers, & Reingold, 2001; Withorn & Jons, 1999), the respondents in this study noted an increased demand for services since the advent of welfare reform. Forty-nine percent of the agencies reported increased caseloads, and 44 percent reported increased staff overtime (Table 1). At the same time, managing the demands of welfare reform discussed in the following section reduced the time available to workers for addressing their client's other needs.

Handling Welfare Regulations. Seventy-five percent of the agencies reported that workers spent

Table 1: Changes in Activities and Staff in Agency Operations since Welfare Reform, by Number of Respondents (N = 95)

Activity	Increased		No Change		Decreased		Don't Know/ Not Available	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Documentation/paper work	86.0	92	12.1	13	0.9	1	0.9	1
Need for new services	85.0	88	14.2	15	0.0	0	2.8	3
Collaboration with other agencies	79.4	85	17.8	19	2.8	3	0.0	0
Need different staff skills	77.4	82	21.7	23	0.0	0	0.9	1
Contacts with welfare office	76.4	81	16.0	17	3.8	4	3.7	4
Staff training on welfare	74.5	78	23.4	25	0.9	1	0.9	1
Referrals to other agencies	71.4	75	26.7	28	1.9	2	0.0	0
Use of outreach services	70.5	74	26.7	28	1.0	1	1.9	2
Creation of new services	61.3	65	34.9	37	1.9	2	1.9	2
Organizational tensions	57.3	59	36.9	38	1.0	1	4.9	5
Fundraising	50.9	54	31.1	33	0.8	1	17.0	18
Staff caseloads	49.5	52	40.0	42	6.7	7	3.8	4
Staff overtime	44.2	46	47.1	49	1.0	1	7.7	8
Contracts with the city/state	37.5	39	42.3	44	6.7	7	13.5	14
Staff turnover	35.2	37	56.2	59	3.7	4	6.7	7
Staff requests for sick leave	23.8	25	58.1	61	1.9	2	16.2	17

more time helping clients understand new and typically unclear welfare rules (Table 2). Beginning in 1996, workers had to "learn the rules ourselves" and to "break down some myths that [the clients] have had about what they are and are not entitled to." A domestic violence program director observed that the workers now spent "more time teaching clients about the new regulations [and] less time providing clinical services." The division director at a battered women's program explained: "Welfare reform has forced us to deal with concrete issues at the expense of psychological and intra psychic issues. The emotional issues get put aside because the concrete stuff is so overwhelming."

Dealing with Welfare Reform's Penalties. Workers also devoted enormous amounts of time helping clients contend with welfare department penalties. Since welfare reform, 72 percent of the agencies spent more time on case closings, 66 percent on fair hearings, and 60 percent on sanctions (Table 2). At a substance abuse program workers "have to spend a whole session just helping someone find shelter because our clients lose benefits for not cooperating with the [welfare] system." The clinical director of an ex-offender's program explained: "Sanctions are much more an inherent part of the whole system now. So there is more time involved finding out about the sanctions and explaining them to the clients," or "explaining to the judge why due to sanctions we might not be able to get somebody into a detox program." A social worker serving homeless people observed: "I spend a lot of time putting out fires caused by welfare

reform. My time is so consumed by welfare that the programming for the long-term benefit of the people here is diminished."

More Work-Oriented Activities. Driven by policy changes and funding needs many social services agencies focused more resources on services related to employment. Requests for help with job training rose at 78 percent of the agencies (Table 1). At 72 percent of the agencies workers spent more time on workfare, and at 66 percent they spent more time on job search (Table 2). The shift to "work-first" brought on by welfare reform left less time for treatment and rehabilitation. Although substance abuse treatment improves employment outcomes, a unit supervisor at another program for addicts lamented: "We're a very clinical program in that we help clients deal with the trauma and abuse issues that really keep their substance abuse going. Now, it's much more about 'what are you doing to get a job?'"

Welfare reform's emphasis on employment also led about one-third of the agencies to replace or supplement their existing roster of services with strictly employment-focused activities. A drug treatment program added "a full-blown vocational service department to provide education, employment, and training assistance to the population." The director of social services for people who are homeless explained: "We have been required, and I would say forced, in response to work requirements, to develop our own employment readiness program here to help our clients find jobs or enroll in a job training program to serve as a substitute for WEP."

Table 2: Amount of Time Spent by Workers on Welfare Procedures since Welfare Reform, by Number of Respondents (N = 95)

Procedure	More Time		About Same		Less Time		Not Available	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Help clients understand new welfare rules	75.5	79	15.1	16	5.7	6.0	4.7	5
Workfare (WEP)	71.7	76	12.3	13	3.6	4.0	12.3	13
Case closings	71.7	76	12.3	13	4.7	5.0	11.3	12
Job search	66.0	70	13.2	14	5.7	6.0	15.1	16
Fair hearings	66.0	70	16.0	17	4.7	5.0	13.2	14
Sanctions	60.4	64	19.8	21	3.9	4.0	15.1	16
Waivers (all kinds)	52.4	55	24.8	26	6.7	7.0	15.2	16
Medicaid applications	49.5	52	27.6	29	6.7	7.0	16.2	17
Food stamp applications	46.7	49	29.5	31	5.7	6.0	18.1	19
TANF/AFDC applications	39.3	42	26.4	28	5.6	6.0	27.4	29

More Unmet Needs

Welfare reform's reliance on deterrence and punishment to reduce the rolls tipped the financial and emotional balance of already vulnerable families. Since welfare reform, agencies found that more clients without work or benefits needed emergency aid. Requests for food pantry referrals rose at 70 percent of the agencies, for Medicaid/Health Insurance at 63 percent, for emergency cash at 58 percent, for shelter at 53 percent, for food stamps and regular cash benefits at 50 percent.

Before welfare reform, workers could assume that government programs—however meagerly—met their clients' basic need for income, food, housing, and medical care benefits. The availability of these benefits reduced family crises and freed workers to address other issues. A health program coordinator explained: "The absence of benefits [has] distort[ed] all the work. Until that is in place, we really can't start almost anything else." A respondent who worked with ex-offenders noted: "We're spending more time to make sure that they have their basic needs. So it's not casework counseling, it's not parenting, it's not all the other things that you want to give them, but it's so that they have their basic needs met." A social worker at a battered women's shelter concluded: "We sometimes take the role of the system that is no longer there. We have become the safety net, which is not the way it is supposed to be."

Mounds of Paper Work. Since welfare reform, paper work increased at 86 percent of the agencies (Table 1). This also took time from social services provision. The division director of a program for battered women stated: "You don't feel like you doing anything by moving papers. It just becomes worse and worse" and "leaves so little time for listening to someone talk about what happened to them, the domestic violence, the emotional issues." A family services agency program director said, "If you are doing paper work, you are not running groups, you are not providing individual therapy, your clients have less access to you."

Speed-Up. Welfare reform's rules and the greater use of performance-based service contracts also reduced the time available for clients. The emphasis on higher productivity and lower costs prescribed immediate job placements, numerical caps for client visits, shorter lengths of stay, and otherwise speeded up services provision. The unit supervisor at a drug treatment program explained: "We have to do [everything] quicker now." The division di-

rector at a battered women's shelter declared: "Everything is now on a clock." At an employment program for substance abusers, a social worker commented: "The needs of the clients aren't being met in the way that they were met before simply because you don't have the time."

MORE SERVICE DILEMMAS

The impact of welfare reform on workers also undercut service delivery. Almost 90 percent of the agencies indicated that welfare reform affected how workers carried out their jobs. Regardless of the type of service an agency provided, workers reported declining control over their job, mounting ethical dilemmas, and reduced feelings of professional efficacy. Taken together these changes both limited the capacity of workers to respond to clients and diminished the overall quality of social services provision.

"We Have Less Control"

Researchers have found that when workers experience less control of their working conditions it can interfere with effective practice (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth 2002; Rafferty, Friend, & Landsbergis, 2001). In this study agency respondents indicated that the welfare overhaul deprived staff of five conditions they needed to carry out their basic responsibilities: (1) the predictable presence of clients, (2) enough time to think and plan, (3) access to timely information, (4) adequate government resources, and (5) shared values. Speaking for many, one worker said: "The welfare department is the one that is dictating and no matter what, I have to follow."

Loss of Clients. At many agencies workers said that they had less control of daily work because sanctions or work fare regularly removed clients from their programs. A specialist working with homeless people explained: "When [our clients] loose public assistance [due to a sanction] they are not eligible for the service anymore." Substance abuse clinic clients were often "terminated," because "they are not in compliance with Medicaid." Workfare also moved clients out of agency activities. The director of a food center explained that people now went to WEP for most of the day instead of attending the agency's "counseling, nutrition, and harm reduction sessions. Staff see them afterwards, if at all." Even TANF-funded employment programs had lost clients to workfare. The

executive director of one such program declared: "Workfare has been the single most destructive thing to the integrity of our program." Another social worker concluded: "It is very frustrating when clients are doing well and then all of a sudden you don't see them any more because of lack of coverage or ability to pay." A national study of community-based agencies found that many workers worried about the impact of client attrition on the well-being of clients and the effectiveness of their services (Withorn & Jons, 1999).

Less Time To Think And Plan. Squeezed by welfare's pressures workers have less time to organize their daily activities. A battered women's program director noted that "the staff does not feel in control of their time." With more crises cropping up, it is more difficult to be planful and organized." An employment program specialist said, "Welfare reform takes away from my structure and my routine. I come in planning to do certain things [according to] a particular curriculum. When some of the students are missing, it throws the day off." Lacking the time, workers cannot develop appropriate service plans, make full use of known methods, learn from their own experiences, or think critically, if at all, about their work (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002).

Lack of Access to Information. The constant changes in welfare policy without notice or explanation further undercut the worker's sense of control. The social services director of a health agency put it succinctly: "There's a lot of changes, but not enough information." Workers at a housing agency became "frustrated" and "blocked" when they "do not know exactly what the rules and regulations are or how they can best advocate for their clients." The director of social services at a mental health program explained that it was "nigh impossible to keep up with [welfare department] policy "because it keeps changing."

Lack of Government Resources. The lack of both resources and official cooperation has also undermined workers' sense of professional control. Welfare reform expanded the role and discretion of local welfare workers. Although the relationship between the welfare office and nonprofit agency workers was never easy, with this shift most agency staff found the welfare case managers to be more "inaccessible", "uniformed", "negative" and "rude" than before. Some agency workers also interpreted inadequate resources as a signal of government dis-

interest. The executive director of a preventive service agency stated, "My workers do not feel that the system even cares about the people they try to serve. They think the system is against them. They are trying their best to help families with no support." The senior social worker at a preschool program believed that "the government is not particularly interested in what we're doing. They just want certain results." Some agency staff working with the homeless put it more strongly. "It seems [that the political leaders] have declared war on the poor in so many different ways."

Value Conflicts. Some workers felt a loss of control because they disagreed with the values that underpinned welfare reform: "I feel like I am an instrument of something else that really was very distasteful to me," declared one respondent. The director of a program for battered women noted: "When workers try to help clients understand why the system is so punitive, [it] makes them feel like they're part of the system and that is not good." Another director wondered if her workers "were getting the feeling that they are police—and you know I mean gatekeepers. To a certain extent social workers have a gate keeping function, . . . but welfare reform has exacerbated it." Welfare reform has turned "social workers into investigators and not helpers. Can they be both?" she asked. A health care program coordinator wondered: "How can one participate in a system that does not value what you believe is crucial to society. It leads people to ask why should I go along with a system that I believe is flawed?"

"We're Close To An Ethical Edge"

The new welfare environment left many social workers on "an ethical edge." The *NASW Code of Ethics* (2000) places the interests of clients first. In contrast, welfare policy requires social workers to carry out mandates without adequate time or resources and to take actions that may harm already vulnerable clients. The conflicting agendas—always present but intensified by welfare reform—left practitioners with an untenable choice between honoring either government rules or professional commitments (Orfield, 1991).

Staff concerns about ethical issues increased at 49.5 percent of the agencies (Table 3). One program director working with homeless people admitted: "We're ethically challenged." A senior social worker serving the homeless divulged: "Oh,

man, my ethics have gone down trying to serve.” Concerns about protecting client confidentiality, maximizing client self-determination, promoting the general welfare, and supporting advocacy for social justice loomed especially large as they troubled individual workers and impeded effective service delivery.

Confidentiality. Welfare reform exacerbated the longstanding tension between the professional commitment to protect client confidentiality and the welfare department’s reporting requirements. The *NASW Code of Ethics* (2000) recommends that social workers hold all information obtained in the course of professional service in confidence. And workers are not to disclose personal information without first obtaining the client’s consent—except when reporting is legally mandated. In sharp contrast, welfare rules require workers to provide considerable amounts of client information to the authorities. The increased readiness to sanction recipients for minor infractions made workers particularly concerned that such reports would jeopardize their clients’ source of income and break the trust on which client-worker relationship depends.

Welfare’s income reporting rules often put human services workers in an ethical bind. “We all know that no family can live on public assistance alone,” admitted one practitioner. “We have to decide how we deal with the fact that ‘the money comes from somewhere.’” The associate director of a teen parenting program asked: “Do we look the other way if a kid receives \$100 a week in a stipend? Do we have to report it or not?” The law requires substance abuse programs to inform the welfare office of a recipient’s attendance as well as a relapse (Rosado, 2000). However, “some workers feel reluctant to report certain things,” explained one director,” because the information can cost the client access to cash benefits, Medicaid reimbursement, and drug treatment. Workers also worried about maintaining the client’s trust, which is so essential to securing behavioral change. The director of a drug treatment program for people with AIDS stated that “because our clients fear that sharing information [with us] will get back to the welfare department, we have to decide how honest we should be when we fill out forms.” Another substance abuse program director sighed: “We are stuck. We try to build trust so people do tell us what’s really going on. But, then we are in a position to use that information against them.”

Self-Determination. Professional ethics stress maximizing client self-determination (NASW, 2000). Workers are told to protect the right of clients to make their own decisions, barring actions that pose a serious foreseeable threat or imminent risk to themselves or others. In contrast, welfare reform’s work requirements and penalties can force agency workers to promote behaviors that may not serve their client’s best interests.

Pressed by welfare reform, agency workers often pushed clients more than workers believed they should. A substance abuse program unit supervisor stated, “We are pushing people through that aren’t ready. If we’re not pushing, they are pushing themselves because they are terrified about going to work.” At a school-based mental health, the program supervisor said, “There are times when we really have to push people to do things that they really don’t want to do, to meet the needs of their children and other family members.” However, she said, “I think that this [pressure] has definitely increased as the rope has tightened with mandated reporting. This raises ethical issues because you really are talking about someone’s autonomy as an adult, making choices in their lives.” Performance-based contracts also led workers to override client preferences. “Now that we have to show more numbers and more services workers may say, ‘If I’m killing myself doing this and it looks good, five more little tics will make me look better. Why not? My job developer is looking over her shoulder at me and saying, ‘Our numbers are down.’”

Enhancing Human Well-Being. The human services worker’s ethical responsibility is to help all people meet their basic needs (NASW, 2000). In contrast public policies such as welfare reform often deprive clients of key resources. “I think we get lots of ethical problems because the people that are supposed to be providing these things don’t provide them anymore,” declared a supervisor at mental health agency. “We’re dealing with a social services system that is supposed to work one way—to help clients—but it actually hinders them. So we have to help clients address the contradictions in the system. If we read them incorrectly, they have serious consequences.”

Challenging Social Injustice. Since 1996, the *NASW Code of Ethics* has mandated that social workers advocate for social policy that improves social conditions and promotes social justice. However, in New York City, fear of reprisals from city

officials or loss of funding from city officials left workers and administrators hesitant to publicly acknowledge any misgivings about welfare reform.

The majority of agencies in this study received public funds. More than three-quarters depended on city grants and contracts, 70 percent on state grants/projects, and 40 percent depended on federal grants or contracts. Other large sources of funds included private donors (64.5 percent) and Medicaid (21.5 percent). Far more than one-half of the agencies had neither lost nor gained funds since welfare reform, yet 43 percent indicated that concerns about funding had affected their response to welfare mandates.

Only a few respondents would discuss this sensitive topic with us. Some indicated that their directors "did not want to be seen in an adversarial position with the Human Resources Administration" because "we really do depend on those funds." A housing program director explained: "You have to be very circumspect. It has to do a lot with the current climate. After one well-known agency had its hand slapped for openly criticizing the mayor, you have to realize that, all right, I can be out there and I can be penalized. But if I'm penalized, I don't get the money, and then how long can I possibly continue to provide services? People aren't just dropping in here to give us money. So it's raised some very interesting philosophical questions, like when do we put ourselves on the line?"

Fear of reprisals limited the words and deeds of agency staff. The division director at a domestic violence shelter advised that "the people who are enforcing welfare reform are also the people that pay [for the beds we fill]. Since we are getting funded by the city, we're trying to make internal changes to accommodate welfare reform as opposed to saying that "we're not going to do this. You can't do that because you won't get paid." Shelter administrators who opposed New York City's plan to deny residence to welfare recipients that did not comply with workfare rules, "tempered their vocal opposition." One shelter director explained: "We believed that we would definitely suffer a loss of city funds for serving any shelter resident who failed to follow the work mandate." The executive director of an employment and training program indicated that "in the past I would talk to reporters all the time. I would never be afraid to speak because of retribution." In the currently "hostile political climate, I think we have all been very gun shy about speaking

publicly and to the press." In contrast, the staff of a program for the homeless resolved the ethical conflict by deciding "not to bid on welfare-to-work money" based on what "we believed is best for our clients."

Becoming More Creative. Agency staff became highly "creative" in managing ethical conflicts. However, the constant juggling tired them out and raised concerns about breaking the rules: "I think about it. Have I crossed the line, have I not crossed the line? It comes up a lot. It does." The program director of a parents' resource center explained that "sometimes workers have to go against the rules to help people while trying not to do anything that is going to put anybody in severe jeopardy." At a domestic violence program, "there may be times when we make someone sound more acutely distressed to give them more time to get themselves together." Substance abuse workers are "flexible. You want to make it more difficult, okay, so we'll try to modify our way of doing things. We become very creative in our efforts to gain services. We don't lie, we just creatively manage to try to get our folks what they need." The assistant director at a child care agency told us: "We try to make accommodations for whatever the [parents] need. We may be doing some things that violate the rules or the law. It happens. Believe me it happens. We put ourselves on the line. Whatever it takes." The associate director of a teen parenting program declared: "Take me to the NASW and take my license away but to protect my client there's a lot of stuff that I want to overlook."

"We're Feeling Less Effective"

Working under these changed conditions reduced workers' sense of professional efficacy. Agencies report that since welfare reform workers feel that they are running in place and generally less able to help their clients.

Running in Place. Whereas workers at 43 percent of the agencies perceived an increase in productivity, many still felt that they were accomplishing less (Table 3): "There is too much paperwork and you don't get the same results as before welfare reform," maintained a supervisor at a mental health agency. "We are doing more to meet the same goals," stated a school-based mental health program supervisor. A settlement house director observed that "even though we are working three to four times harder, taking many more steps and usually being successful in some way, we are not feeling it."

Table 3: Change in Aspects of Work since Welfare Reform, by Number of Respondents (N = 95)

Aspect of Work	Increased		About Same		Decreased	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Burnout/stress	83.2	89	15.9	17	1.9	1
Ethical issues	49.5	53	42.1	45	3.7	4
Productivity	43.0	46	32.7	35	23.4	25
Positive feelings about role	29.9	32	34.6	37	34.6	37
Sense of ability to help clients	23.4	25	15.9	17	60.7	65
Overall job satisfaction	19.6	21	38.3	41	41.1	44
Morale	6.5	7	31.8	34	61.7	66

Less Able To Help. Many people enter the human services field with a strong desire “to help others”—a sentiment that keeps them going when the going gets tough. However, since welfare reform workers at 61 percent of the agencies felt less able to help their clients (Table 3). An education program director revealed that “a lot of my staff just feel like they’re stuck. You can only do so much with this problem and only do so much with that problem.” At a teen pregnancy program the associate director said, “The problems have become so intense that sometimes you walk away at the end of the day wondering if you did anything.” A literacy assistance program director mused: “Sometimes I guess the workers feel like they are just putting band-aids on things.” Working with ex-offenders, one respondent noted that “it’s like the babies are flowing down the river and we’re pulling the babies out. At the same time we have to ask the question who’s throwing the babies in up there?” These New York City workers were not alone. Workers at two-thirds of 35 Boston-area agencies also felt unable to adequately respond to their clients’ requests for help with welfare problems, job hunting, and staying in school (Leonard, 1999).

Demoralization. The dictionary defines *morale* as a moral or mental condition bearing on courage, zeal, confidence, discipline, enthusiasm, and willingness to endure hardship. Unfortunately, morale decreased at almost 62 percent of the agencies since welfare reform (Table 3). At a program for homeless people, workers were “mired in that feeling of hopelessness and frustration and feeling blocked.” Their “morale is affected” explained the program director “when they do not know the rules and cannot best advocate for the client.”

Speaking of the more restrictive service requirements for substance abuse treatment a supervisor observed: “It’s almost like we look at clients and we know that they are not going to make it. And there is nothing you can do. It is so frustrating.” The program director of an information and referral agency believed that the increase in clients with public assistance problems, cut off for months, made her staff feel “confused,” “frustrated,” “unimportant,” and “powerless.” Working in a housing program the social services director said, “We are banging our head against the wall and we cannot do anything about changing the system at this particular moment.”

Dissatisfaction. Job satisfaction typically depends on adequate compensation, opportunities for advancement, new challenges, as well as a sense of mastery, personal autonomy, self-actualization, recognition from others, and other nourishing workplace conditions (Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, & Cheses, 1994). Sadly, since welfare reform job satisfaction decreased at more than 40 of the agencies (Table 3). The program director at an employment and training center observed that “people are feeling like ‘I’m a paper pusher here. I don’t have a way to do all the things that can give the client the best experience in the program because I have to put these numbers in and those numbers in.’ That leads them to just feeling, ‘Oh well, this is a job.’ The executive director of a substance abuse program pointed out that the new emphasis on job development has made his workers “feel like they are going from a helping profession to a marketing profession. So they are doing a lot less of the work they like to do.”

Burn Out. Feeling dissatisfied, demoralized, and ineffective can affect the health, mental health, and

job performance of workers. Frontline staff, who typically bear the brunt of client, agency, and policy inconsistencies can become emotionally and physically depleted, uncertain of their value, and unsure of the relevance of their organization (Latting, 1991; Lloyd et al., 2002; Rafferty et al., 2001; Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Wang, 1995; Vinokur-Kaplan et al., 1994). Although representatives from two-thirds of the agencies (69 percent) reported that their staffs felt equipped to do their job, speed-up, never-ending emergencies, work overloads, and ethical dilemmas have taken their toll so that an astounding 83 percent of the agencies reported higher burnout and stress among their workers since welfare reform (Table 3).

The executive director of an information and referral service indicated that a worker might say, "Okay, that's my profession, I like it. That's what I want to do. But because of the inability to help clients, they still can have burnout feelings." At a teenage pregnancy program the associate director observed: "We get less support from the system, so the workers burnout much quicker." For workers in the mental health division of a foster care agency, "the punitive nature of this whole welfare reform increases stress and debilitates both clients and staff." "I know that the stress levels are up because I can hear my staff sounding off more, swearing," recounted the director at a program for the homeless.

More requests for sick leave and higher turnover rates also pointed to burnout. Although no respondent attributed it just to the new policy, 24 percent of the agencies reported rising requests for sick leave since welfare reform (Table 3). "People are working longer hours and they are more stressed out and there is more burnout. They get sick more," observed the associate director of an HIV/AIDS program. A housing program specialist explained that "the problems today are just too big. The workers can't leave them in the office. They take them home and its affecting their private lives." At a legal service program, a client advocate divulged: "When I find [that] the system, whatever one it is, is getting in the way, I go home and feel very bad. It's frustrating." Commenting on the mounting stress, a food pantry program director said, "Sometimes we just have to take a day and go out of the office."

One-third of the agencies experienced increased staff turnover (Table 2). The executive director of a program for immigrants worried: "I am losing people. They come in here and they get so de-

pressed that most of them are going somewhere for counseling. You have to be a real hard nut to be in this business." Low pay does not help. A foster care agency program director concluded pointedly that staff turnover had increased "because of low salaries and increased obligations."

Rising dissatisfaction, demoralization, and burnout among workers is not unique to New York agencies. A study of 47 of Louisiana's nonprofit social agencies also found increased burnout in more than 46 percent of the organizations surveyed since welfare reform (Padgett, 2000). These outcomes linked to welfare reform do not bode well for workers or for clients who turn to the human services system for support, treatment, and advocacy. Burned out workers often withdraw psychologically, lose their compassion for clients, and reduce their work effort (Latting, 1991). As the executive director of a child care agency explained: "If they [workers] don't feel good about the job, it is going to be hard for them to really help our clients." When these reactions sweep through the nonprofit human service sector the quality of services surely suffers.

"We Can Still Make A Difference"

Despite the dissatisfaction, demoralization, and burnout—and reflecting a gritty determination to provide meaningful service—one agency worker explained: "We try to handle everything, no matter what." As noted earlier, workers at many agencies felt less positive about their role, less able to help clients, and less satisfied with their job. At the same time, more than a few workers held on. "Positive feelings about their role" increased among workers at 29.9 percent of the agencies, the "sense of ability to help clients" increased at 23.4 percent; and "overall job satisfaction" at 19.6 percent (Table 3). What has enabled these workers to sustain themselves in these hard times? A perception of success, however small, provided at least some workers with a sense that clients needed them, gave them a feeling of accomplishment, and left them with the belief that they could still make a difference.

Feeling Needed. When workers felt needed, it kept them going. A mental health program supervisor declared: "While it has become harder to do so, people feel good when they are able to help the clients." Working at a community development agency, a program director explained: "It's a double-edged sword. There are times when we can't really help, but when we can, helping makes me feel that

we are needed". "Every day you get up with your own problems," explained a social work director at a child care program, "so you say, 'you know what? I'm going to help everybody that comes through the door today.'" At a settlement house, the director of social services explained that "although the chaos sometimes gets you down, the job is very satisfying if you want to help people." The director of social work at a hospital observed that the workers "may be unable to do as much as before, but I'll tell you, I think that they feel even more how needed they are."

A Sense of Accomplishment. Other workers managed to gain a sense of accomplishment. The program director at a food pantry remarked: "If one person, one family, comes up to me and says: 'We don't know what we would do without you,' it makes my whole day. I feel that we have accomplished something. We get a lot of that. The feeling is so good." At a program for homeless people, the supervisor explained that her workers feel positive "because they see that they play a major role in advocating for their clients. When they finally get through to public assistance, it's a sense wow, you're really a hard worker, you did a good job. 'Cause you know that was a hard job and you came out on top." The director of nonresidential services at a program for battered women stated: "You just push yourself because you realize how important it is to really advocate for the women. You feel if you advocate for women then you are able to help them get what they need, [and] that's a positive feeling."

Making A Difference. Paradoxically, the hardships of welfare reform expanded the opportunity for workers to feel that they have made a difference. Despite knowing that "the system as a whole is punitive," observed a program director, "I have to say that in working with domestic violence victims there's that positive feeling in knowing that as an advocate I can make a difference just because I know some of the welfare rules." The program director at a homeless prevention initiative said, "It might sound like a cliché, but I strongly believe that you know you're really making a difference when you see the person [you are working with] find a stable home and they tell you, 'I've never had a home before.' It's things like that that make you feel better about your job." An executive director of a program serving immigrants reported that when evaluating the work at the end of the year "we see what we've actually accomplished [and where] we've increased

you think, you've done it. You've made a difference. That's basically the bottom line, that you feel that you've made a difference."

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: ADVOCACY RENEWED

Historically, the staff of nonprofit agencies have spoken out on behalf of issues related to the well-being of their clients. Although the political climate of the 1990s tempered this public advocacy, welfare reform became a wake-up call for many agency workers in this study, jarring them to think that they had become too complacent.

The staff at nearly 86 percent of the agencies either disapproved or strongly disapproved of the ways in which welfare reform had affected their work. The nature of advocacy changed at 77.8 percent of the agencies since welfare reform; and at 62.3 percent the staff became involved in efforts to modify welfare policy. The intake worker at a mental health center declared: "Welfare reform has brought us closer to our original challenge. I don't want to say that we ever moved away from it, but you know, at different times during different years, depending on what was impacting social services, we had to make some kind of change and adapt to meet the needs, the funding needs. Welfare reform has brought us back to the mission to advocate for the rights of the client we are serving."

Advocacy took place at three levels: *case advocacy*, or work on behalf of individual clients; *self-advocacy*, encouraging clients to take more control of their own destiny; and *cause advocacy*, directed to policy change. Agencies reported a variety of advocacy activities. They disseminated information about welfare reform, encouraged attendance at community meetings, and held informational and educational meetings. Many, but fewer, also encouraged participation at rallies and demonstrations, worked with advocacy groups, and educated legislators or policymakers. More than 50 percent of the agencies engaged in all six activities. However, for each type of activity, most agencies targeted their staff, more than their clients or the community.

In the final analysis, more than a few agency-based human services workers became partisans in the social conflict generated by welfare reform. The director of a settlement house explained:

I think that we would go crazy if we weren't doing advocacy. We see things as sort of macro

and micro at the same time. We know we have a perspective and a lot of the information because we see many families rather than just one family. We believe that there are some serious social problems and that we are not just service providers. We really see that part of our job; part of our mission is to put ourselves out of business. **SW**

REFERENCES

- Acs, G., & Loprest, P. (2001, November). *Final synthesis report of findings from ASPE "Leavers" grants*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Bischoff, U., & Reisch, M. (2000). Welfare reform and community-based organizations: Implications for policy, practice and education. *Journal of Community Practice, 8*(4), 69-91.
- Delgado, G., & Gordon, R. (2002). From social contract to social control: Welfare policy and race. In G. Delgado (Ed.), *From poverty to punishment: How welfare reform punished the poor* (pp. 25-52). Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center.
- De Vita, C. H. (1998). Non-profits and devolution: What do we know. In E. Boris & C. E. Steuerle (Eds.), *Nonprofits and government: Collaboration and conflict* (pp. 213-233). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Fabricant, M., & Burghardt, S. (1992). *The welfare state crisis and the transformation of social service work*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Fabricant, M., & Fisher, R. (2002). *Settlement houses under siege: Corporatized social services and the struggle for community*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fink, B., & Widom, R. (2001, February). *Social service organizations and welfare reform. The Project on Devolution and Urban Change*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.
- Hasenfeld, Y., & Evans, L. (2000, November 16-18). *The role of nonprofit agencies in the provisions of welfare-to-work services*. Paper presented at the 29th annual conference of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, New Orleans.
- Iversen, R. (2000). TANF policy implementation: The invisible barrier. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 27*, 139-159.
- Latting, J. K. (1991). Eight myths on motivating social service workers: Theory-based perspectives. *Administration in Social Work, 15*, 49-66.
- Leonard, M. A., (1999). *We need to stand together: The impact of welfare reform on the Dudley Street neighborhood and the community's response to the challenge*. Boston: Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.
- Lloyd, C., King, R., & Chenoweth, L. (2002). Social work, stress and burnout: A review. *Journal of Mental Health, 11*, 255-265.
- Loprest, P. (1999). *Families who left welfare: How are they doing?* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2000). *Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Neubeck, K., & Cazenave, N. (2001). *Welfare racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Orfield, G. (1991). Cutback policies, declining opportunities and the role of social service providers. *Social Service Review, 65*, 517-530.
- Padgett, J. D. (2000). *The impact of welfare reform on Louisiana families: A key informant study of agency responses* (Welfare Reform Research Project). New Orleans: Southern University at New Orleans, School of Social Work.
- Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105.
- Pirog, M., Byers, K., & Reingold, D. (2001). *Impact of Indiana's welfare reforms on community social services*. Bloomington: Indiana University, Institute for Family and Social Responsibility.
- Rafferty, Y., Friend, R., & Landsbergis, P. A. (2001). The association between job skill discretion, decision authority and burnout. *Work and Stress, 15*, 72-85.
- Reisch, M., & Sommerfield, D. (2000, November 16-18). *Welfare reform and the transformation of nonprofit organizations*. Paper presented at the 29th annual conference of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organization and Voluntary Action, New Orleans.
- Rosado, D. (2000, September). *The impact of welfare reform on the delivery of chemical abuse services in New York State* (Report on the public hearing, New York State Senate Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, Albany).
- Sanger, M. B. (2001, October). *When the private sector competes* (Reform Watch, No. 3). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Seeley, J. E., & Wolpert, J. (2002, May). *New York City's nonprofits*. New York: Nonprofit Coordinating Committee.
- Soderfeldt, M., Soderfeldt, B., & Wang, L. W. (1995). Burnout in social work. *Social Work, 40*, 638-647.
- Vinokur-Kaplan, D., Jayaratne, S., & Cheses, W. A. (1994). Job satisfaction and retention of social workers in public agencies, non-profit agencies, and private practice: The impact of workplace conditions and motivators. *Administration in Social Work, 18*, 193-212.
- Withorn, A., & Jons, P. (1999). *Worrying about welfare reform: Community-based agencies respond*. Boston: Boston Area Academics Working Group on Poverty.

Mimi Abramovitz, DSW, is professor, School of Social Work, Hunter College, 129 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10025; e-mail: iabramov@hunter.cuny.edu.

Original manuscript received September 12, 2002
 Final revision received June 12, 2003
 Accepted July 31, 2003

Copyright of *Social Work* is the property of National Association of Social Workers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.