

# **PRWORA and Social Work Changes in the Social Worker/Client Relationship**

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## **PRWORA and Social Work: Changes in the Social Worker/Client Relationship**

The 1996 welfare reform law, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), alters the nature of welfare and in turn, the nature of service provision. The general attitude of service provision changes dramatically from an aid-based program, requiring little of those who receive, to a temporary assistance program, requiring much of social workers and clients alike. Furthermore, this alteration in the attitude of welfare dramatically alters the way in which service providers and their clients relate with one another. It also changes the manner in which the social worker morally views his/her client. Although not all changes in the relationship are positive, the new attitude has the potential to greatly improve the relationship. Examining the changes in the client/social worker relationship, as well as the manners in which services are provided, is a necessary component in determining the successes of PRWORA.

### **AFDC and TANF Comparative Case Studies**

Because the nature of TANF service provision is strikingly different from that of AFDC, an example best demonstrates some of the main changes. Both the AFDC and TANF case studies are true, and thus, have not been designed to systematically compare and contrast with one another. Still, these examples of service provision orient readers to the social worker/client relationship and the range of relations this idea covers.

#### ***AFDC Case Study-LaJoe's Story***

LaJoe Rivers receives \$931 a month through a combination of welfare and food stamps to support her, her two sons Pharaoh and Lafeyette, and her four-year-old triplets.

Welfare assistance pays for food, clothing, and rent. LaJoe does not work, and has not worked in seven years.

The Department of Public Aid launched an investigation into LaJoe's eligibility for assistance because it had reason to believe Paul, LaJoe's husband, lived in her home. LaJoe's experience with the welfare office began in the waiting room. After a long wait, LaJoe was called and escorted to the back of the building into the "interrogation" room. She was met first by four metal chairs and an empty desk and then by four rather unfriendly interrogators who filled the seats facing her. The interrogators then informed LaJoe that the goal of this meeting was to voice the charges against her and hear her response. Evidence for Paul's residence in LaJoe's home was given: he had filed joint income taxes with her; his mail was delivered to her address; the address on his driver's license was her address; and he had been served papers at her address.

LaJoe did not respond in protest to these charges, but instead, walked out after all charges were read. LaJoe was reminded by one of her interrogators that "We're doing everything by policy" (Kotlowitz, 96). In the end, it did not matter that Paul was not living in her home permanently. She was ineligible for public assistance.

#### ***TANF Case Study-Toni Anderson***

Toni Anderson is a 33-year-old single mother of two living in New Brighton, Pennsylvania. Toni moved to New Brighton three years ago when her second child was born. She applied for AFDC and received it continually until 1997 when she was forced to apply for TANF because of PRWORA guidelines.

Anderson's previous experience working at a \$20,000 position in food and beverage management had been unnoticed by her AFDC caseworker. However, her

TANF social worker quickly realized that she could be assisted relatively easily. Anderson expressed the desire to open a catering business with her sister. The social worker assisted Anderson in obtaining a business license and also directed her toward accounting and bookkeeping classes offered at the local community college.

Within a period of three months, Anderson received the necessary skills to open her own catering business. Reflecting back on her experience, Anderson stated that “Even without knowing me, she [her social worker] was willing to come to a very fast solution that would work for me and satisfy her guidelines, too” (Levin, 2).

### **PRWORA and Changes in Welfare**

PRWORA repeals AFDC, JOBS, and the Emergency Assistance Program replacing them with a block grant giving states increased responsibility for the administration of welfare programs. States are given a predetermined grant for the administration of these programs based on the 1994 caseload. The capped block grant gives discretion to states in how the money is to be used.

Although PRWORA greatly increases state discretion, there are federal conditions states must meet in order to receive the full block grant. These conditions greatly determine how social workers are to work with their clients. 1) States must spend 80% of their “historic state expenditures” (Hasenfeld, 4) on eligible families. This provision does not require states to provide assistance to all eligible families. In effect, the entitlement to assistance was repealed with the enactment of PRWORA. For example, Virginia does not provide assistance to mothers or fathers whose children do not attend school regularly. These same individuals would be provided with benefits under a “federal”

TANF program if funds were sufficient. Although some individuals may now be denied eligibility, two parent families are now eligible for TANF and other services they were not eligible for under AFDC. So, although the entitlement is removed, the eligible population has expanded. 2) PRWORA creates a life time five year limit on receipt of aid. However, states are allowed to exempt up to 20% of their caseload for TANF benefits due to “hardship or if the family includes an individual who has been battered or subjected to extreme cruelty” (U. S. 2, 42 USC 608 [a] [7] [C] [I]). 3) PRWORA requires parents with children over age one to participate in work activities for 30 hours a week following two consecutive years of aid (U.S. 2, 42 USC 602 [a] [ii]). By 2001, States must also meet an overall participation rate of 45% in work activities. The high participation rate encourages states to mandate participation in work activities prior to the two-year maximum. If states did not mandate employment early, there would not be enough clients working to meet the required participation rate. Toni Anderson’s abilities, however, make her an easy client to assist by TANF standards because she “participated” in work activities early. For most clients, though, the federal government considers “unsubsidized employment, subsidized private or public employment, work experience, on the job training, job search and job readiness” (Hagen, 80) work participation. These forms of work participation differ greatly from the education-focused activities allowed under JOBS. 4) Federal PRWORA guidelines dictate two family value provisions. First, federal money is not to be used to support teen parents who are not attending school or living in an adult-supervised setting. The second provision dictates that families who do not provide or cooperate in determining the paternity of children are sanctioned a minimum of 25% of their grant. 5) Clients must sign the Agreement of Personal

Responsibility if they are to participate in TANF. The agreement includes all of the above restrictions informing clients of their responsibilities under PRWORA.

Although the federal stipulations for social services alter the manner in which states provide services, federal restrictions have not prevented state innovation. On the contrary, state welfare laws are diverse and creative. States have numerous opportunities for creating programs to fit their many needs. Although this discretion may be viewed positively, “the unprecedented discretion given to states to implement and administer TANF is potentially troublesome” (Hasenfeld, 5). As Hasenfeld argues, “the historical record of many states in caring for their poor is quite dismal” (Hasenfeld, 5). Moreover, states are allowed to use up to 20% of their block grant on non-welfare related programs if they have excess funds. The actual effect of these potential problems cannot be generalized. Many states use the additional funds to expand social programs beyond federal mandates, others are choosing to reduce programs to the bare minimum.

I have interviewed social workers in Virginia; therefore, it is necessary to understand some of Virginia’s Initiative for Employment not Welfare’s (VIEW) restrictions. The Virginia program was enacted in 1995 and then altered slightly in 1997 in response to PRWORA. When clients apply for TANF, they are automatically applying for VIEW as well. VIEW is generally more restrictive than PRWORA in work related requirements. It assigns work activities for the “entire 24 month eligibility period” (Commonwealth of VA 1, 2). For the first 90 days of eligibility, clients are scheduled in work related activities such as job skills training, education, job search, and job readiness. After the first 90 days, clients must work in either a private, public or community service employment position. Clients continue to receive TANF benefits if their income remains

under the poverty line. If clients' income is brought above the TANF eligibility level, he/she remains eligible for "12 months of child day care, transportation, and medical assistance" (Commonwealth of VA 1, 1). Clients are terminated from TANF for refusing a job offer or quitting a job without good cause.

VIEW also offers numerous benefits to motivate work by "1) making employment more financially attractive to recipients and 2) removing barriers to employment by adequately funding supportive services" (Pavetti and Wemmerus, 6). These benefits are designed to promote Virginia's message that independence through work is desired. Mary Anne Isabelle, Supervisor of Staunton-Augusta's VIEW program, reiterated this point, stating that the many benefits she provides show clients that "good things happen to those who work" (Isabelle, 3/16/01).

VIEW guarantees childcare both while the client is eligible for TANF and 12 months after the eligibility period ends. PRWORA does not guarantee this service. Clients are also assisted with transportation expenses up to 12 months following leave of TANF. Transportation services, however, are not consistent throughout the state. Allegheny County Social Services pays for gas expenses to and from work, down payments on cars, car repairs, and taxi services to and from work. Rockbridge Area Social Services will purchase a car for clients in addition to assisting with the same benefits provided by Allegheny Social Services. Medicaid provides medical services up to 12 months after participation in VIEW ends; many clients' children remain eligible for Medicaid even when their parents are not. In addition to typical medical problems, VIEW social workers have the discretion to assist clients with dental and vision problems

that impede a client's ability to obtain a job. Clients may also be given a stipend for clothing, makeup, and hair care when necessary.

In addition to benefits, the VIEW program offers more generous "disregards" for working clients than AFDC. Under AFDC, income beyond \$50 was subtracted from the grant at an almost 100% rate. Suffice it to say, a family of three received the same or less income working as on welfare. All income while on TANF, as long as it does not exceed the poverty line, is disregarded. The client is then able to receive his/her TANF grant of \$265, food stamps of \$321, and his/her earnings of \$774 (35 hours of work/week at \$5.15 per hour). This increased income acts as a large incentive to work.

### **Guidelines for a Beneficial Social Worker/Client Relationship**

Although TANF services are important, the manner in which services are provided is equally important in affecting clients' potential outcomes. Unlike LaJoe's experience, the social worker/client relationship can be positive and essential to the client's success as Toni's case illustrates. The social worker may be the only accessible link an individual has to the "working" world. If the welfare client is able to reduce dependency and gain self-respect, his/her accomplishment will in part be due to his/her relationship with a social worker.

The term "social worker" is itself controversial when used to refer to an individual working in a welfare office.<sup>1</sup> My use of the term is based on the general

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<sup>1</sup> The National Association of Social Workers defines a social worker as an individual educated in a "defined body of knowledge, educational requirements, and a code of ethics to guide practices" (Social Work Connections, 1). This definition separates individuals working in "social work professions" from social workers who have obtained the required educational degree in social work.



values required of a social worker rather than the degree necessary for professional practice. Hasenfeld purposefully avoids describing all welfare employees as “social workers” by using two different terms to refer to the nature of the welfare office: “social service orientation” and “routine bureaucratic practices” (Hasenfeld, 3-4). According to this view, an individual operating in a welfare office is not necessarily a social worker. The distinction is based on the goal orientation of the employee and his or her welfare office. Bureaucratic goals stress completion of routine paper work, determining eligibility, or other welfare office functions. Social work goals emphasize that the “social workers’ primary goal is to serve” (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8) the client. The distinction is not always as clear as the above description indicates. However, in many situations/offices a social-work orientation may be underrepresented or even nonexistent.

The goals of social work should be present in institutions assisting welfare clients. As follows are my four criteria for measuring the quality of this relationship.

**1) *The social worker must view the client as a moral agent.*** Much disagreement exists as to the moral character of welfare clients. Lawrence Mead argues that paternalistic policies must be enforced because the public expects individuals to do “something for society in return for aid” (Mead, 2). He assumes that paternalistic policies are necessary because some welfare clients will not work voluntarily. It is now normal for women to work, and so, the consensus is that “welfare moms” should work as well. Changes in the demographics of welfare roles since the 1960’s when the roles changed from mostly “white widows to divorced or never married . . . non-whites” (Handler and Hasenfeld, 31) also caused animosity. Society does not view these women as the “deserving poor,” (Handler and Hasenfeld, 31) but associates them with violence,

drug addiction, disease, teenage pregnancy, immorality, and other stigmatized traits.

Handler and Hasenfeld argue that this stigma is “more accurately the consequences of poverty” (38) than the nature of welfare clients.

I agree with Handler and Hasenfeld’s conclusion that it is not the welfare recipients themselves but the nature of poverty that causes these undesirable traits. They argue that welfare policies must be created to combat this stigma. With improved policies, the welfare client may be viewed as an impoverished individual who deserves assistance. This moral view of the client is quite different from that of Lawrence Mead and others who assume the client to be the problem.

Because there are many reasons for a client’s inability to act as society demands, this realization must be incorporated into the social worker/client relationship. The social worker must at the very least view his/her client as an individual needing assistance. Eugene Bardach argues that a positive attitude on the part of the social worker is evidence to the client that “the outside world believes in one’s abilities (Bardach, 259). With the social worker being a link into the “world” the client is expected to join, the psychological affect is an identity affirmation. This affirmation depends on the nature of the social worker’s expectations. Bardach argues that these expectations must be “sympathetic” (Bardach, 258). A sympathetic expectation is one where the social worker respects the client’s decisions by not condemning them. This respect given to clients “enhance[s] their independence and self determination” (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8). With one of PRWORA’s goals being to reduce dependence on welfare, including the client in the decision making process is essential. The “current emphasis” on

“empowerment” is done so that “clients can improve their life situation” (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8).

Although it is important for social workers to hold high expectations of their clients, these expectations must be reasonable. Because there are numerous reasons welfare clients are not acting as society dictates, these barriers must be considered when establishing expectations for a client. Whether the client can become fully independent, overcome his/her barriers to work, work 20,30, or 40 hours a week, must be considered if appropriate goals are to be established. Some clients may not be able to accomplish goals mandated by TANF. The inability to establish reasonable goals can cause social workers to perform poorly. The social worker may not assist clients he or she knows cannot meet the given requirements because success is improbable. This results in what is called “creaming,” where only the most capable individuals are assisted. Clients most in need of services become “problem” clients. These clients may be discouraged and stop utilizing services. To counteract these problems, the social worker must have fair expectations in which the social worker and client are able to work toward an obtainable goal.

Finally, the social worker must hold a “moral conception of the client as a subject, rather than an object, as a person who is worthy of trust and support” (Handler and Hasenfeld, 146). If a client is “worthy of trust and support,” he/she will easily be viewed as a “subject.” Because welfare clients are typically the first to admit that they abhor the welfare system, most are willing, if not desiring, to be independent of welfare (Ellwood, 1999). It would certainly be incorrect to state that welfare clients do not have a work ethic. What they lack is typically the skills necessary to earn a living wage or to keep a

job once employed. With a common goal, it is inevitable that the client and the social worker will enjoy a mutually positive conception of one another.

**2) Trust and/or the ability to create a trusting relationship is necessary between social worker and client.** One of a social workers' most pressing goals is to "respect the individual's right to make independent decisions and to participate actively in the helping process" (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8). If the client does not trust his/her social worker, he/she will not participate effectively. LaJoe's inability to explain Paul's presence in her apartment is a perfect example of the consequences of a social worker/client relationship without trust. LaJoe believes her relationship with the investigators so confrontational that she is unable to participate in the discussion. She believes there is nothing she can say or do that the interrogators will understand. Due to such relationships, clients' barriers to employment and improved independence are not discovered and dealt with, and clients do not gain the empowerment that derives from "enhanced independence and self-determination" (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8).

Before social workers can assist their clients with barriers to employment, "staff must first be able to detect and identify clients' problems" (Anderson and Seefeldt, 7). Some information is obtained when clients disclose information to their social worker; however, "a self-disclosure approach has limitations because clients may hold back or give incomplete information" (Anderson and Seefeldt 7). The self-disclosure method relies heavily on the presumption that the client trusts his or her social worker. Problems with self-disclosure lead to two conclusions: 1) The social worker must present himself/herself to the client as a trust worthy individual; and 2) Other tools must be available for detecting problems when clients do not self-disclose.

The structure of welfare is responsible, in part, for the creation or disintegration of trust between social worker and client. The eligibility worker concerned with the more bureaucratic aspects of his/her job may not form trusting relationships with clients. It is not entirely the eligibility worker's fault. Determining eligibility involves a service technology in which "the decision rules are explicit and highly standardized, interaction with clients is brief and limited to eliciting information needed to determine eligibility, and worker's interest is limited to only those client attributes that affect eligibility" (Hasenfeld, 11). The emphasis on rules and prevention of fraud creates a poor environment for achieving trust. The client is wary of revealing potentially incrimination information. LaJoe's choice not to defend herself during her hearing is an example.

The structure of service provision must promote a trusting relationship. The focus of welfare legislation must be shifted away from "a focus on fiscal accuracy in benefit determination to a focus on services" (Hagen, 86). With a focus on services, social workers are able to assist clients first and foremost. It is questionable whether PRWORA encourages a service focus. The increase in mandates and sanctions are not viewed by many as trust fostering policies (Hasenfeld, 11).

***3) The social worker must have the ability to assist the client in all aspects of his or her life.*** Because of the extreme reduction in welfare roles, clients remaining in the welfare system are more likely to be "multi-barrier" clients. A "multi-barrier" client faces more than one barrier to "making the transition from welfare to work" (U.S. 1, 1). The individual may face domestic abuse, drug dependency, poor education, childcare difficulties, no transportation, or a host of other problems. These individuals are the most

difficult to assist. This difficulty is more pervasive for social workers now because PROWRA seeks to reduce dependence on welfare.

Because of the persistence of multi-barrier clients, adequate training in the detection and diagnosis of possible barriers to employment is necessary. Social workers should at the very least have a strong understanding of the most frequent problems clients face. The Assistant Secretary for planning and Evaluation concludes that “Experienced, knowledgeable, and sensitive staff are key to gaining clients’ trust, identifying barriers, and helping clients obtain services” (U.S. 1, 7).

It would be irrational to believe one social worker could provide all information and services necessary to assist clients. Sometimes the most important knowledge a social worker can possess is simply the knowledge of available services. This statement seems obvious and simple. However, few welfare agencies “have developed well-integrated systems of service delivery that engage a broad range of organizations in the community” (U.S. 1, 8). Many service providers are also inadequately informed about the services and administration of programs within their own organization. Collaboration is essential in assisting the client. Numerous services are needed, but, if these services do not work together to provide clients with “consistent messages,” (Seefeldt, 6) the client is not assisted properly. Proper referrals are made by social workers that take the time to inform themselves of the options available prior to making referrals.

Hepworth argues that “attaining and maintaining competence in practice is an ethical requirement of social workers” because “much is at stake for consumers of social work services” (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 15). Clients like LaJoe are vulnerable to the inadequacies of welfare staff. If the investigators had been trained intimately to

recognize problems like Paul's reliance on LaJoe, the problem could have been dealt with before LaJoe was considered "fraudulent." Paul could have been contacted and assisted. The poor training of social services workers played a role in LaJoe's termination.

4) *The social worker's goal is to assist the client toward improved life conditions.* Although this condition may seem obvious, the client's welfare is not always the social worker's most pressing goal. It is difficult to measure clients' success by means other than a removal of their name from the welfare role. A client may leave welfare due to sanctions, time limit termination, domestic violence or any number of other reasons not consistent with experiencing improved life conditions. Removal of clients from welfare roles is therefore an inappropriate measure of success. The urge to measure the worth of a social worker's performance by "how well eligibility criteria are enforced and cheating purged, by how quickly recipients are moved off the welfare roles and into work, and by how much welfare costs are reduced" (Hasenfeld, 10), incorrectly measures success. If the social worker's greatest responsibility is to the welfare bureaucracy, clients most in need of assistance become "problem clients" (Hasenfeld, 10). They are begrudged for utilizing too much of a case manager's time and energy.

Although some PRWORA supporters might view the goal of the 1996 legislation as a means to reduce welfare roles, this goal is not representative of the goals of social work. The social worker's goal is to "serve" clients "such that clients can improve their life situation" (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8). This goal is purposefully flexible. A social worker and his/her client's goal depend on the abilities and potential of the client. In a more beneficial relationship, LaJoe and her social worker's goal might have been to help LaJoe obtain education so that she could help her children in school, and possibly

obtain a decent paying job. It is important to notice that this goal does not require LaJoe to work; it simply attempts to improve LaJoe and her children's "life situation." Toni Anderson's goal, on the other hand, encourages her to open her own catering business. Goals are appropriately based on the individual client's needs and abilities.

Although goals should be individual, they should not be unrestrained. Social work guidelines require not only that the social worker assist the client to improve his/her "life situation," but that his/her goals "do not infringe on the rights of others" (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 8). Impoverished individuals do not always deserve assistance, but I would argue that they have a right to basic assistance such as food, shelter, and medical treatment. These rights should not be denied. Infringement on the rights of others, though, occurs when the impoverished do not reciprocate for the assistance they receive. An example of this would be an individual who received temporary assistance because she has medical difficulties and is unable to work for a month long period. When the woman feels better she chooses not to go back to work. She infringes on the rights of others. Reciprocity requires the impoverished to respond to assistance by assisting society when possible. This reciprocity may be in the form of raising children, working, paying taxes, performing community service, or any number of services.

Because a social worker's goal is not necessarily to assist welfare clients from welfare to work, assistance does not end at the achievement of a job. Obtaining a job may be a small portion of the social worker/client's goal. It may not be a goal at all. Moreover, a true social worker's goal is to assist clients to "improve their life situation." This means that the role of social workers is to assist clients until the goal agreed upon is met. This achievement should not be based on time requirements.



## **PRWORA's Affect on Social Work**

This section compares the current social worker/client relationship with my guidelines for a beneficial social worker/client relationship. I conclude that the structure of PRWORA mostly improves the relationship. However, remaining structural problems continue to foster negative social work practices.

*Social workers must view their clients as moral agents.* PRWORA's message to social workers and clients is strikingly different than AFDC's message. The message in essence is that TANF is short-term assistance utilized to increase employment and reduce dependence on welfare. Welfare has "gone from being a welfare check to a helping hand" where social workers are now expected to "temporarily assist clients as they work toward self-sufficiency" (Seefeldt, 2). The term "helping hand" implies that both the participant and the social worker have responsibilities. The relationship is now characterized by reciprocity rather than by charity.

Important psychological components are addressed through the collaboration between social worker and client. Mary Anne Isabelle, Staunton-Augusta VIEW Supervisor, claims that clients entering her office typically express that "the only reason I am here is for my children" (Isabelle, 3/16/01). The logical conclusion to this admission is that clients do not like utilizing social services. They feel embarrassed. This embarrassment likely derives from the belief that one should work to support his/her family. Because AFDC did not require anything substantial of its clients, clients such as LaJoe Rivers felt inferior. TANF circumvents this effect by denoting responsibilities for all parties. The client does not feel stigmatized because he/she is contributing to society.

Clients like LaJoe who typically feel powerless in the welfare office are elevated to a more equal status. They have responsibilities, but so does their social worker.

Although the relationship is more egalitarian, remaining paternalistic policies prevent clients from making decisions for which they have the capacity to make. Obviously there is a fine line that divides correct mandates from unfair ones. However, there are current examples due to the employment focus of TANF that prevent clients from making these choices. For example, clients are sanctioned if they do not accept job offers or remain in current employment position unless there is good cause for quitting or being fired (Commonwealth of VA 1, 1). In most cases, clients should be expected to find employment and remain employed. However, the client should also have choice in where and for whom they work. When asked whether clients have choice in this matter, Ray Blouin emphatically stated that clients are only expected to apply for positions where they are willing to work. Meredith Downey added that “if clients don’t want to work at McDonald’s, they should not apply” (Downey, 3/6/01). Because clients are mandated to contact employers for 40 positions in the first thirty days of receipt of aid, they may be forced to apply for jobs they would not consider. Clients are then sanctioned if they do not have good cause for not accepting one of these jobs.<sup>2</sup>

***Social workers must form/be able to form a trusting relationship with their clients.*** All three social workers interviewed believed that the level of trust between themselves and their client increased due to the changing nature of welfare.

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Blouin agreed that 40 contacts were many times too many for a client to make. However, he did state that the term “good cause” is flexible. Also, a contact does not require the client to apply for a position. They just need to approach a business about employment opportunities.

It is the social worker's responsibility to provide the client with the opportunity to discuss his/her barriers to employment. Unlike the eligibility worker's meeting with the client where it was the client's responsibility to disclose, the social worker seeks out information from the client. Social workers must make a concerted effort to obtain information from the client "because clients may hold back or give incomplete information, particularly early in the relationship with the social worker," (Nathaniel, Anderson, and Seefeldt, 7). This requires not only persistence, but also trust.

Trust development is encouraged through the VIEW Activity and Service Plan. This form must be completed by the client and social worker. It requires clients' employment obstacles be documented and incorporated into an action plan (Commonwealth of VA 2, 1-2). The social worker and client establish expectations for each assignment component; i.e., full or part time employment, job search, job readiness, job development, on-the-job training, community work experience, education, and job skills training. If the client is unable to participate in a component, "reasons for assignment to Pending or Inactive and the steps necessary to resolve the problem" (Commonwealth of VA 1, 1) must be provided. Requiring barriers be documented encourages the client and social worker to 1) discuss the given problem, 2) begin an intimate relationship, and 3) work toward improvement. Although this form is a simple tool for information collection, "rapport is fostered by not employing certain types of responses that block communication" (Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 47). The form design elicits provocative answers through open-ended questions requiring more than just "yes" and "no" answers. Conversations are also directed away from subjects such as eligibility that may put the client on the defense. The focus is on what the client needs to

improve his/her life. This initial conversation develops the role of the social worker into a confidant. This is helpful because inevitably the most serious issues like domestic violence and drug dependency will not emerge until later.

As the relationship between client and social worker develops, the likelihood for trust and disclosure increase. Because social workers are required to assist clients to employment, increased contact is necessary. The initial meeting between eligibility work and client is no longer the only contact. Dean Hepworth suggests that a “warm-up” period such as this is helpful in fostering rapport because “such openings are the cultural norm”(Hepworth, Pooney, and Larson, 45) for many people of varying backgrounds. A social workers ‘and clients’ ability to work long term allows a relatively slow introduction period for trust development.

Although social workers seek to develop trusting relationships, they are also responsible for utilizing sanctions. Handler and Hasenfeld suggest that trust and sanctions cannot coexist because the client cannot be viewed as an equal participant (Handler and Hasenfeld, 85). Ray Blouin stated that he does not like applying sanctions, but that he believes they are sometimes necessary to assist clients (Blouin, 3/16/01). I agree with Blouin’s assessment. The circumstances in which sanctions are applied under PRWORA do not appear to produce distrust between client and social worker. The increased reciprocity of the social worker/client relationship diminishes negative aspects of paternalism. Although the client is mandated to act in certain ways, he or she is also encouraged to participate in decision-making. Handler and Hasenfeld’s disagreement with mandatory programs is mostly due to the fact that they treat clients as objects without desire to better themselves. However, in a relationship where the social worker

acknowledges that his/her goal is to assist the client to increased independence, the social worker and client are able to work together. Obviously not all clients will desire change, but I am confident that a social worker is able to hold the power of sanctions and still acknowledge the client as a participant.

**Social workers must have the ability to assist their clients in all aspects of their lives.** Social workers are now assisting clients who are fundamentally different in nature from clients receiving AFDC. Since 1996, welfare roles have been reduced by half. In the first few years of PRWORA, the most able clients left welfare for employment. Prior to PRWORA, only 5% of short term clients, those utilizing welfare for six months or less, experienced barriers to employment (U.S. 1, 2). Clients such as these are likely the first clients who gained “self-sufficiency” under PRWORA. Now, six years following the transformation, the most unemployable clients, those typically receiving welfare for one and a half years or longer, are being assisted. Under AFDC, where screening was not even a typical component of an eligibility worker’s job, 50% of these clients experienced multiple barriers (U.S. 1, 2). Under TANF, the same types of clients are required to work. Clients suffering from drug dependency, mental illness, criminal records, and poor education are common (Blouin, 3/6/01). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services finds that 34% of current clients experience more than one barrier to employment (U.S. 1, 1). It is three times as likely that they will not be employed continuously during a given year compared to TANF recipients without these same barriers to employment (U.S. 1, 2).

Because barriers to employment reduce the likelihood of employment, these issues must be dealt with in a timely manner. Although all issues may not be exposed

early in the relationship, the disclosure of some issues allows the social worker and client to establish responsibilities. The VIEW Activity and Service Plan includes a section entitled “Supportive Services” (Commonwealth of VA 2, 2), in which the social worker must respond to the clients’ need for day care and transportation services. These are the two most pressing concerns for most clients moving from welfare to work (Isabelle, 3/16/01). Two additional sections, “Participant Responsibilities” and “Agency Responsibilities” (Commonwealth of VA 2, 2), require each individual’s responsibilities to be documented. Both the social worker and client must then sign this document acknowledging their responsibilities to one another.

Increased responsibilities require more of the social worker than in the past. Social workers must be able to identify clients with potential barriers to employment. They can then refer clients to professionals who can accurately assess barriers and “which aspects of a clients’ life are affected” (U.S. 1, 3). Isabelle noted that “If clients can’t work now, the problem preventing work needs to be fixed” (Isabelle, 3/16/01). The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation concludes that “welfare agencies should develop and use comprehensive and holistic screening and assessment tools and train their staff” if barriers are to be identified appropriately in the “context of time-limited welfare” (U.S. 1, 7). It is also necessary that social workers be “aware of a broad array of service providers and establish closer connections to these agencies” (Nathaniel, Anderson, and Seefeldt, 6).

National results show that TANF providers are not being trained effectively in these areas. Isabelle’s idealistic view of social workers’ abilities to assist clients does not consider the fact that not all welfare staff is as competent as she is. Interviews with

Michigan social workers show that these specialists “commonly refer clients to agencies that provide ‘basic’ needs” but few staff “mentioned making referrals to (or even show an awareness of) providers such as mental health Work among TANF recipients,” (Seefeldt, 6). This results in too few services provided. Although these results are troubling, Isabelle and the two Lexington social workers proved competent in these areas. At Staunton-Augusta Social Services, new clients are automatically referred to a Family Assessment Specialist who is trained exclusively in the identification of mental health issues, educational issues, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol dependency. Isabelle found that barriers are so common now amongst clients that it proves necessary to have experts work with each and every client (Isabelle, 3/16/01).

The increased number of clients experiencing barriers to employment requires an increased time commitment. Welfare employees’ jobs under AFDC were to discover whether a client was eligible. Intimate contact with clients was unnecessary. Social workers in Staunton-Augusta carried approximately 100 clients per social worker in 1996 while Lexington Social Service providers each worked with 200 clients (Isabelle, 3/16/01, Blouin and Downey, 3/6/01). Now, with the goal of welfare requiring more of social workers, social workers have reason to spend more time with clients. Reduction in welfare roles reduced the number of clients each social worker assists. Since 1996, Staunton-Augusta welfare roles have decreased from 100 to 40 and Lexington’s from 200 to 30 clients per social worker. Because the block grant given to states is calculated from 1994 welfare figures, social service agencies have maintained the same number of social workers to work with a reduced clientele. The social worker has gained significant amounts of time to work with his/her clients.

Client assessment is crucial to the success of current TANF clients. Since clients in the VIEW program only have three months before they must be employed, barriers to employment must be assessed early on in the relationship. Referrals are necessary. Making referrals is a complicated and highly active endeavor if done correctly. First, the social worker must have knowledge of the organization he/she is referring a client to. Because the two functions of TANF—temporary assistance and job preparation for employment—are not always administratively linked, communication is necessary if the two functions are to support one another. Collaboration does not always occur. In Michigan “front-line communication between FIA [case managers] and Work First occurred in fewer than half of FIA offices” (Seefeldt, 8). Clients are then personally responsible for updating their social worker. The VIEW program, however, emphasizes the need for collaboration more than Michigan. At intake, the client signs a form called the Consent to Exchange Information. If the client signs this form, information from employers, the Family Outreach Program, and the VIEW program are linked through the computer system. The client is not required to update all parties. Isabelle claims that this program allows her to know exactly what is going on with a client’s case. However, Isabelle did not know the intimate knowledge of a client’s experiences to the extent that Blouin or Downey did. Although not nearly as technical as the Staunton-Augusta system, Lexington Social Services relies on weekly phone contact with referral agencies about their clients. In recent years, Michigan has also moved to a system similar to that of Lexington where Work First staff and FIA workers go on case management visits to clients’ homes and meet regularly to discuss particular cases (Seefeldt, 6).



***Social workers' goals are to assist their clients to increased independence.***

Although self-sufficiency is an unreasonable goal, high expectations of clients have resulted in positive changes. First, social workers are forced to work harder to assist the most needy clients to reduce dependence on services. Second, clients who may not have been assisted previously are receiving assistance. Social workers such as Blouin find it positive that they are now able to assist the most needy clients. Even if expectations are too high, most of these clients are receiving invaluable attention.

Although social workers “agree with the new philosophy of the welfare system,” they are concerned by the fact that they “cannot perform their jobs more effectively” (Seefeldt, 2). This concern stems from the high responsibility of assisting the client to self-sufficiency. The term “self-sufficiency” pervades every aspect of TANF from the social workers themselves to the forms the client and case manager must sign. Isabelle utilized the term “self-sufficiency” numerous times during our interview. I finally questioned her on the use of this term. She responded that “she did not even realize she was using it” (Isabelle, 3/16/01). The client is practically assaulted by the term by unknowing case managers like Isabelle and from the responsibilities listed to them such as: “I am responsible for: Working to support my family and to become self-sufficient” found on the VIEW Agreement of Personal Responsibility (Commonwealth of VA 1, 1).

Self-sufficiency is often too high a goal for clients to reach. Similarly, it may not be the right goal for social workers and their clients to work toward. Blouin admitted that many of his clients “are not capable of becoming self-sufficient” (Blouin, 3/6/01). He personally believes that clients’ need responsibilities, but that these responsibilities need to be flexible, allowing “clients to improve their life” through reasonable expectations

(Blouin, 3/6/01). Isabelle, when asked whether she believed all her clients could become self-sufficient, was less direct. Although she would not admit that her clients could not become self-sufficient, she chose to define the term differently than its actual meaning. Her definition of self-sufficiency was actually a definition for what could be called “reduced dependence” where the client is expected to provide for himself/herself some of the services provided to him or her. Self-sufficiency requires more of the client than either of the social workers expects of them.

Clients’ inability to become self-sufficient causes social workers to look for reasons why their clients are not able to reach this goal. Isabelle claimed that clients unable to become self-sufficient are those who should “apply for SSI” and not TANF (Isabelle, 3/16/01). Although Isabelle may be correct in arguing that many clients who cannot become self-sufficient are dealing with mental health issues and physical difficulties, this assessment is too simple. For individuals ineligible for SSI, the Hardship Exception, which allows 20% of clients to be exempt from the 24-month eligibility period, is the only means to continue services. Congress “recognized that for some adult recipients, achieving economic self-sufficiency may not be a realistic expectation” (Hagen, 82). The Hardship Exception, however, is not available as it was intended. Because states reserve the right to strengthen PRWORA laws, states like Virginia have attached further conditions to the exception requirement. In Virginia, clients must meet the following conditions to even be considered for the Hardship Exception: they must participate in all activities assigned, not receive more than one sanction during the 24 months of VIEW program Participation, and not leave employment without good cause (Commonwealth of VA 1, 2). Because the least able are the most likely to perform

poorly under TANF, they are the most likely to not be eligible for this exception. None of the social workers interviewed, had utilized the exception even though Meredith Downey admitted she has a client who should be exempt. The client's two children are Autistic and prevent her from working. Meredith believes that encouraging this woman to participate in employment is not the best goal for her family or society (Downey, 3/6/01). The under-use of this exception is striking. Ladonna Pavetti "estimates that at least 25% of the caseload is likely to experience difficulties entering the labor force" (Pavetti and Wemmerus, 22).

Although assisting clients to self-sufficiency is unreasonable, Dean Hepworth acknowledges that reducing a client's dependence results in increases self-esteem (8-9). For individuals in a crisis situation, which includes most individuals applying for social services, obtaining power by making one's own decisions is crucial to gaining control over one's life. Eugene Bardach argues that providing clients with high expectations is evidence to the client that "the outside world believes in one's abilities"(Bardach, 259). This high goal is many times encouragement for a client. Isabelle argues that she has had many clients who had never been told they could achieve self-sufficiency. When she tells her clients what is expected of them, they typically are unsure of their abilities to meet this goal but also pleased that she believes they can (Isabelle, 3/16/01). Success stories like Margaret Thomas, a mother of three now making \$28,000 a year as Assistant Dining Hall Manager at University of Virginia, are evidence for the power of high expectations.<sup>3</sup> Although this woman may have more marketable skills than most TANF

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<sup>3</sup>This client's story is real. Her name, however, has been changed to provide the client with privacy.

clients, Margaret argues that her social worker's encouragement is the reason she now has this position.

Although the attainment of a job appears to be the social worker's goal, clients require further assistance. The structure of VIEW and the generous benefits it provides clients for one year following termination is positive. However, clients may be punished by policies such as these in the long run. Because the entire period of time a client participates in VIEW they are participating in TANF, many clients use up their TANF eligibility unnecessarily. Although Isabelle beams with pride when talking about VIEW policies that make work more attractive than welfare, she is also concerned that these policies are not best for the client. First, the client may be unable to receive services when they really need them because they are no longer eligible. Second, past services like free work attire, transportation, childcare, etc. deceive the client into believing they are more independent than they actually are. When the services end, the client is faced with providing these services in addition to remaining employed. Isabelle, like many social workers, is concerned that the client is actually harmed because they do not realize their fate until after they can no longer be assisted. Blouin admits that services are not provided to past clients. He did say that "many clients who have tough times return for services and are assisted" (Blouin, 3/6/01). However, if these clients are not longer eligible, they cannot be helped.

## **Conclusion**

Changes in PRWORA and the current structure of welfare alter the social worker/client relationship. Social workers increasingly view clients more positively than

under AFDC. Reciprocity encourages the client and social worker to work collaboratively toward a common goal. The reduced welfare roles, increased responsibilities of client and social worker, and the time spent with one another encourage social workers to assist client in ways not possible under AFDC.

Although the social worker/client relationship is improved, social workers must be worthy of trust. Social workers should possess the ability to assist clients in all aspects of their lives. It is evident that some social workers are unable to do so because of inadequate training in client barriers, identifying these barriers, making referrals, and developing detailed knowledge of a client's case. If a client is to reciprocate for services rendered, the social worker must provide services that encourage goal attainment.

Finally, the current goal of PRWORA is unreasonable. Social workers should assist clients to improved independence rather than expect self-sufficiency. Strict time limits and reduced educational opportunities also reduce the effectiveness of social work. Social workers are limited in their ability to assist clients most in need. Clients instead receive less potent forms of assistance like job search rather than education. The short duration of assistance also reduces success.

Although PRWORA's goals reduce success, most clients are actively receiving assistance. These clients' lives are improved. Like Toni Anderson who benefited from the relationship with her social worker, La Joe River's experience with social services would have been dramatically improved if she had received the same attention.

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