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Making TANF Work: Organizational Restructuring, Staff Buy-In, and Performance Monitoring in Local Implementation

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While research suggests that staff resistance to change and intentional subversion have hampered prior welfare reform efforts, this does not appear to be the case for the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This paper draws on data from a study of East County, New York to explicate the mechanisms that have enabled the unprecedented transformation in local implementation practice in this case. Interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis of legislative and program documents identify new program creation, staff buy-in, and the environment created by stern performance measures as instrumental in bringing about the PRWORA's successful implementation of policy changes. Revealing workplace dynamics that mutually reinforce and compel attention to institutional interests, these findings suggest that further research is needed to examine how these implementation dynamics impact staff responsiveness to clients and clients' experiences.

Key words: *Welfare Reform, TANF, Implementation, Institutional Ethnography (IE), Performance Measures, Participation Rates, Implementation Success, PRWORA, Welfare-to-Work, Ideological Buy-In, New York State, Family Support Act*

Introduction

In 1992, Presidential Candidate William Jefferson Clinton pledged to "end welfare as we know it." With the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA P.L. 104-193) he accomplished this goal. This legislation replaced Aid to Families with Dependent

Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), ended welfare's entitlement status, required work (or participation in work-related activities) in exchange for benefits, and placed a five-year lifetime limit on federal aid to individuals. It also mandated a devolution, or delegation, of responsibility for designing and implementing the reformed welfare system to states.

The 1996 Welfare Reform and New York State

In passing the 1997 Welfare Reform Act (Chapter 436B of the laws of 1997, McCall 1999), New York closely adhered to the model set by the PRWORA's guidelines (McKenna 1998). The state delegated implementation responsibility to counties and installed mechanisms to police the performance measures to which the PRWORA had made each state accountable. The work participation rate is the most prominent of these performance measures. This is the ratio of TANF recipients participating in approved work activities to the total number of TANF recipients (US DHHS 2002). States are required to meet a higher benchmark in each year leading up to the PRWORA's scheduled reauthorization in 2002. States that fail to meet these rates face heavy financial penalties from the federal government (Pataki 2000).

The transition to a block grant funding structure has emphasized a second performance indicator—caseload declines. Prior to the reform, states, counties and the federal government shared the costs of welfare according to a fixed formula in which the federal government paid fifty percent of all costs. Since the reform, block grants to states are in fixed amounts based roughly on the size of the caseload in 1994, regardless of current caseload size. Thus, it is in a state's best interest to facilitate a decline in local caseloads and retain the excess grant money for other programming (McCall 1999).¹

The federal five-year time limit provides a third performance-related focus to implementers in New York. Unlike other states, New York's constitutionally-determined obligation to assist the poor places heightened pressure on county welfare administrators to move individuals off welfare before they reach sixty

months and are transferred to the state- and locally-funded Safety Net program (Silver and Farrell 1998, McCall 1999).

While presenting significant obstacles to state and local administrators, New York State has met these challenges with success as defined by participation rates and caseload decline. As the Governor has reported, New York State has consistently exceeded the federally mandated participation rates (Pataki 2000). In addition, experiencing a decline of 52% in welfare caseloads since 1995—which is similar to the 53% decline nationwide (Statistical Abstracts 2000)—the state has managed to avert the potential pitfalls of overextending block grant monies and having excessive numbers of clients exceed the five-year time limit (Pataki 2000). East County² (the location of the present study) has consistently met or exceeded its participation rates and has reported an estimated caseload decline of over 42% (according to county budget caseload figures) between 1995 and 2000.

Welfare Reform and Historical Implementation Difficulties

This article uses a case study of East County in Northern New York to analyze the implementation practices and processes that have contributed to these declining caseloads and high participation rates. It is important to study such cases of implementation success because research suggests that staff resistance to change and intentional subversion have hampered prior welfare reform efforts.

Literature on the implementation of new or changed federal policies on the local level helps to explain why previous attempts at welfare reform have had limited success (King 1997, Morgan and Kickham 1999, Nathan and Gais 2000, Beckerman and Fontana 2001). For example, lessons learned from implementation of the 1988 Family Support Act (P.L. 100-485), the most recent forerunner of PRWORA, offer insight into potential pitfalls. First, the FSA instituted new work and caseload reduction requirements without significantly changing the original program. In doing so, it added new responsibilities for front-line workers without providing relief from old ones, without providing an adequate increase in funding, and without effectively transforming the

administrative culture of AFDC (Hagen and Lurie 1995, Nathan and Gais 2000, Lin 1997).

Second, efforts to cultivate change among front-line workers were inadequate. As Burton (1991) argues, organizational restructuring and task assignment are crucial factors in changing welfare staff behavior. Many of the social workers assigned to implement the FSA had weathered numerous preceding reform attempts that were largely symbolic, relatively transient, and quickly supplanted by new efforts (Seccombe 1999, Schram 1992, Lin 1997, Handler and Hasenfeld 1997). Framed in this context, and lacking significant re-organization or compelling oversight to motivate the multiple layers of actors involved in implementation, the FSA was ill-positioned to catalyze significant change in workplace behavior among welfare employees (Lurie 1996, Nathan and Gais 2000, Burton 1991).

Third, career social work staff were well aware of client resistance to welfare rearrangements and were furthermore likely to sympathize with them (Walkowitz 1999, Nathan and Gais 2000). Forcing clients to change their behavior to comply with reform activities potentially disrupts and even undermines clients' survival strategies (London, Scott, and Hunter 2002, Coffield 2000, Edin and Lein 1996, Lin 1997). Working against resistance to such changes places staff in potential conflict with clientele and furthermore forces welfare employees to make difficult decisions between their traditional concern for the poor and buying into the policy changes (Walkowitz 1999).

In addition to the barriers to implementation created by these front-line issues, staffs assigned to carry out the FSA on the street level were not beholden to rigorous accountability standards. As a result, front-line workers routinely engaged in policy subversion by making their work appear to conform on paper, though at the same time failing to comply with the policy's intents (Lin 1997). As Lin (1997:27) argues, the FSA failed at the front lines, despite the fact that it represented the culmination of ten years of reform efforts, because it placed implementation staff in a predicament:

Faced with a choice to significantly change established work routines in order to meet standards, or to reinterpret the standards so that they would be easier to meet, staff selected the latter.

While the dynamics that allow for such an implementation outcome at local sites of service delivery are well documented in social work literatures on street-level discretion (Lipsky 1980, Harris 1998, DeMontigny 1995, Handler 1973, Sandfort 1999), little has been written with respect to how and why the 1996 PRWORA has achieved significant transformation at the front lines of welfare service delivery. Addressing this accomplishment Nathan and Gais (2000) assert the importance of strong political forces, an expanded repertoire of services, and greater local discretion. Beckerman and Fontana (2001) further point to front-line staff cooperation and an organizational culture that reinforces policy aims. Though these and other sources suggest that the 1996 reform has met the challenge that faces all reform initiatives—ensuring cooperation and clarity of purpose on the front lines (Stoker 1991)—the dynamics that have enabled this accomplishment are not well-documented.

This article examines how New York has succeeded in bringing about local structures capable of successfully implementing this radical change in social policy. The data presented in this case study of East County suggest that a combination of new program creation, factors promoting staff buy-in, and the environment created by stern performance measures have all contributed to successful implementation in East County.

Methods

This paper blends analysis of ethnographic data with in-depth study of legislative and policy documents in order to elucidate the links that exist between day-to-day workplace experiences of welfare staff and larger policy structures. The data collection for this paper involved interviews and/or observations of daily work processes with over 35 administrative and front-line staff involved in welfare to work (wtw) implementation in East County, New York. In addition to more-formal taped and transcribed interviews, I collected data by means of informal interviews as described by Institutional Ethnographic researchers as a continuous “talking to people” about their work and about texts and work processes (DeVault and McCoy 2000:9). In this fashion, I was concurrently able to combine numerous intermittent

questions about the intricacies of daily work actions with participant observation.

I have intended for this research to contribute to the work done by others, such as Smith (1987, 1990), McCoy (1998), and Pence (1997) who explore how text-mediated and other social relations of knowledge serve to order various aspects of social life. I adapt this approach to fieldwork that is designed to interrogate common, mundane, or seemingly natural work processes as they relate to larger systems of rules and ways of thinking in order to outline three interrelated findings that I argue enabled the successful implementation of PRWORA-inspired reforms in East County.

Findings

Welfare Reorganizations Sets Clear Expectations

Implementing TANF required welfare administrators and front-line workers to shift focus from the old AFDC eligibility and compliance determination to stressing self-sufficiency and work. In order to avoid the inertial tendency for staff to resist organizational change (Nathan and Gais 2000, Lurie 1996), East County implemented PRWORA's requirements by creating a new agency. Providing administrators the ability to hire for mission and recruit motivated staff from pre-existing local agencies with the promise of generous benefits, East County's managerial staff surrounded itself with a small cadre of committed first hires. As the agency began to expand, it then slowly added to its ranks. As a result, this new structure allowed administrators to train and socialize for mission, and to set the tone for staff behavior and interaction with clients.

With the passage of the 1996 PRWORA and the subsequent 1997 NYS Welfare Reform act, every county in New York State was required to designate a local commissioner charged with administering the reform's welfare-to-work (wtw) requirements. In East County, the commissioner delegated this task to a new agency created by a partnership between the local community college and a social services agency. Unlike previous reforms that attached new responsibilities to old job descriptions, wtw in East County began from the ground up, recruiting staff that

were often not trained as professional social workers and were thus not likely to act on enduring sympathies developed through past work relationships with welfare clients (See Burton 1991). As a brand new agency, East County's wtw office was able to express its purpose definitively in terms of discouraging welfare "dependence" and emphasizing a "reality" in which paid work is mandatory.³ Building on this sense of shared mission and a core of initial hires, the agency drew upon the resources of the local community as it matured. One wtw staffer explains:

Many of us came from other social services departments and [we] were hired on little by little, as wtw grew. I was one of the first ones hired. Back when we started, there were only five of us.

Another acquired his job through networks:

Interviewer: How did you get the job here?

WTW Staff Member: Political connections! If you ask, I'll bet that 90% of the people here knew someone . . . This was just a job in the wanted ads for me. I saw it and called for more information and found out I knew the guy in charge. He said, 'Bring in your resume.' . . . I still went through two interviews like everyone else. I'm not sure [he admits] if knowing him helped.

While this staffer retreats from his insinuation that the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) is solely responsible for his employment situation, he does convey the idea that these were desirable positions, perhaps only attainable through political connections. This sentiment was shared amongst his colleagues. As two other employees explain, being recruited by this new agency had its benefits:

WTW Staff Member: They pay us well and give us crazy [generous] vacation and days off! There aren't many weeks where we don't discuss which day one of us is taking off that week, and then there's personal days and sick days as well!

WTW Co-worker: Yeah, we get paid pretty well, much better than many others in this field in other cities or in other agencies in this city.

In creating a program from scratch, the higher level administrators could set the tone for new wtw employees and stress the

importance of organizational vision. Reflecting on the agency's early days, one of the original staff shares his awareness of this directive:

We, my co-worker and I, were two of the first hired . . . We were going to give people reality.

As another employee explains, managerial example-setting has had a lasting influence:

WTW Staff Member: Do you know Tabbatha [*the administrator in charge*]? . . . She has always instilled upon us that the people who come through here are our customers . . . I think [*staff*] who have been here can understand that mandate.

As people involved in shaping a new agency, rather than reformers of an old one, administrators took on a charismatic leadership role in addition to their bureaucratic authority. Resulting in part from these dynamics, and from widespread public and political support for the reform's goals, the wtw structure in East County has been able to rely on a considerable amount of buy-in among staff with regard to its overarching ideology and objectives.

Ideological Buy-In: Staff Commitment to Reform Goals

Capitalizing on the consensus forged in the years preceding the passage of the PRWORA in 1996 (Naples 1997, Hagen and Lurie 1995, Walkowitz 1999, Nathan and Gais 2000), local administrators could work to enhance staff buy-in by aligning the message of the reform with widely-held ideological perspectives. As a result, they averted potential staff resistance to increased demand for professional task proficiency and shifting processing priorities (Beckerman and Fontana 2001). Staff workplace norms—espousing personal values consistent with reform ideology, believing that they are helping clients, relating client experiences to their own lives, and utilizing new resources earmarked for innovative efforts—have all contributed to and reinforced the buy-in among staff that welfare reorganization and public sentiment have fostered.

In East County, wtw staffs' agreement with PRWORA ideology, overall, is clear from responses to simple questions. Clarifying one of the main aspects to the 1996 welfare reform, I asked:

Interviewer: So they do work for their benefits?

WTW Staff Member: Yeah, what they should have been doing all along.

Corresponding with such endorsement of the policy's major goals, staff have a clear idea of who the program is targeted at:

WTW Staff Member: *[With]* most clients, you're asking them to step outside of the box, go beyond where they are comfortable—and they are not used to work. We're asking them to be responsible for themselves, we're asking them to be more than responsible, we're asking them to take the jump from point A, unemployed and on welfare, to point B, employed and on welfare, to point C, employed and on reduced welfare assistance, to point D, employed and off welfare, or self sufficient.

Staff understanding and enforcement of this policy aim manifests itself in interactions with clients. Voicing frustration with certain members of wtw's client population, a wtw employee expresses disdain for those who have not acclimated to the reform's termination of welfare's entitlement status:

People still come through thinking that they're owed something . . . I'm supposed to be able to get food stamps and you're supposed to take care of my kids and you're supposed to pay my rent and you're supposed to, you're supposed to, you're supposed to! You know? And if I die and go to hell, it's your fault! And I think, if anything, I would change that whole attitude about that, and try to help people be more responsible for their own well-being than they are now.

In accord with this shared understanding that some welfare clients need to have their attitudes changed, staff routinely exercise discretion so as to re-orient such client "misunderstandings." As one staff member explains to a colleague:

That lady who came in here, she lost her job search sheets and had used up her bus pass to fill out the first one. She wanted another bus pass to do them again! . . . I said to her, 'It's our fault that you lost it? We should pay?' I mean where is the responsibility?

Far from attempting to exercise discretion in an arbitrary or cruel manner, staff readily share that the underlying rationale for their actions stems from their belief that they are ultimately

helping the clients they confront. As one staff member explains, he sees his efforts as being in accord with clients' own interests. This becomes evident in his description of how he admonishes young clients:

For those seventeen and eighteen year olds, because typically they're going to be coming back here again, I tell them, 'You ought to be in school. Why are you coming through here? We have nothing for you. And it's going to be more of nothing for you, alright.'

Here, pursuing the reform goal of discouraging clients from returning to wtw is cast as steering youth away from imprudent life choices. Another staffer similarly frames her work as being in the best interest of clients.

It can be very confrontational, very stressful. Particularly when you're really trying to help the person and they're giving you grief.

In this way, staff rationalize what they are doing as, ultimately, in the best interest of clients themselves, whether clients agree with this assessment or not.

Due to an established pattern of hiring exemplary wtw clients onto staff, wtw employee perceptions in East County are often reinforced by their own or their colleagues' personal experiences. One staff member explains:

It is tough. But, as I tell them in my orientation, 'I was sitting in your seat a few years ago. I know what it is like, and if I, a single father with three kids, can make it, so can you with one or two kids or a partner and three kids. It isn't easy. It sure isn't easy, but you can do it.'

Even if not privy to personal experience on the welfare rolls, staff do not hesitate to make connections between the public work they do as part of this agency and their private lives:

WTW Staff Member: When the federal time limit hits, the federal government gives less money to the state and so the state must make up the difference. That's our taxes.

Such rationalizations, while clearly simplifying a complex reality, nevertheless serve to align overarching policy goals with personal concerns.

This alignment of personal interests with the program of wtw is further seen in the excitement that new programming resources generate among staff. Such resources help staff to feel they are accomplishing things and being successful. In the following example, a wtw staffer expresses her enthusiasm over the arrival of supplementary grant monies to help in the achievement of agency goals:

We have new programs coming this year from the state money . . . to help with housing and childcare etcetera, for iceberg issues! You know, you solve one problem and then there is another and another, like the tip of a big iceberg. Because the hard core unemployed now have so many problems, so these new grant monies will help because we're going to sister agencies like BOCES [*Educational Training Agency*], Catholic Charities, Salvation Army . . . So it will be great if we can all work together!"

In this staff member's excitement, concern is clearly attached to the well-being of clients, but it is also consistent with overarching institutional goals of pushing the poor toward participation and self-sufficiency through work and ultimately lowering welfare caseloads and costs. Additionally, as seen in the following comment, success at these tasks translates into a sense of achievement among staff and reinvigorated pride in their workplace:

WTW Staff Member: They won't stop this program though, they're saving too much money. Instead of just paying money to those who apply, people come through here and have to do all this stuff. See all those people on the wall? They got jobs so that's less they have to get paid by the state and the county. I don't think they'll get rid of our program unless they get rid of welfare altogether.

In addition to focusing on client success and the agency's perceived usefulness, comments such as these reflect buy-in to the larger fiscally attentive performance measures that structure wtw's local goals.

Performance Measures: A Carrot and Stick for WTW Employees

Ensuring that the emphases of the PRWORA do not get lost in translation from the federal to state and local levels, as observed in previous reform implementation (Lurie 1996, Nathan and Gais 2000, Beckerman and Fontana 2001), the 1996 reform provided

clear and compelling directives in the form of rigorously monitored performance measures. Through these mechanisms, the legislation's requirements reinforced externally imposed reform priorities within local organizational culture.

In New York, wtw agencies and the counties that support them are held accountable to three main measures of performance. First, there is a requirement that all welfare recipients undergo an appraisal of their ability to work (NYS DOL 1300.6:6-2). Second, all recipients must be working by their second year of assistance (NYS DOL 1300.2:2-13). Third, and most complicated, welfare recipients who are not working full time (at least 35 hours per week) are required to participate in a certain number of weekly hours of supervised work-related activities in return for receiving their benefits.

While the first two measures are important, and are monitored via a state-wide database, it is the third of these measures, the participation rate, which most concerns local administrators and their staff. The first requirement can be completed during intake processing and the second can be addressed over a two-year horizon. The third, however, signifies a formidable escalation in workplace demands on staff as compared to previous programs, such as the JOBS program that was initiated by the 1988 FSA. In terms of the participation ratio (participating clients divided by total county welfare clients), the denominator has expanded to include almost all adult TANF recipients. PRWORA redefined the numerator as well. As a manual designed to provide technical assistance to state and local implementers indicates: "The range of allowable activities is much narrower, the number of hours a person must spend in activities each week is higher, and the percentage of the caseload that must participate is greater" (Hamilton and Scrivener 1999:15).

Federal participation benchmarks issued with the 1996 legislation were designed to gradually elevate the performance demanded of states. In 1997, 25 percent of all families in each state were required to meet the definition of "participating." In 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002 this rate increased to 30, 35, 40, 45 and 50 percent, respectively. While rates of twenty five to fifty percent may appear low, national implementation research suggests

that they are in fact high standards to meet. One study, conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, reported that “only about 9 percent of those required to participate in welfare-to-work activities actually met the definition of a participant” (Hamilton and Scrivener 1999:19). Other studies underscore the challenge of achieving high participation rates (Hasenfeld and Weaver 1996), reporting county rates of client compliance as low as 27% in a given year (Sandfort 1999).

Far from undermining local implementation, the specter of this demanding participation benchmark is instrumental to the East County wtw agency’s avowed unity of purpose. Pressure imposed on East County’s wtw staff by such performance demands enhances the already present staff buy-in and commitment to their jobs by encouraging staff to bond in response to these mandated challenges. It further allows public managers to stress a bottom line. A wtw administrator explains:

Everything is now outcome based as opposed to how it used to be. In the social services we, *[aside]*, me and the other administrators that work here that were in various programs and agencies before being hired at wtw, used to just apply for grants and then do what we said we would do with them but never be checked. Now everything is being outcome based and our participation rates are very important or else the government will take away the money.

Another corroborates:

WTW Administrator: We are *[very much]* focused on participation rates since that is how we are funded.

The connection between performance measures and funding that these public managers speak of is evident in the 1997 New York State Welfare Reform Act:

In the event that the federal government imposes fiscal sanctions on the state because of non-compliance with federal law, regulation, or policy relating to the temporary assistance for needy families block grant, . . . the commissioner shall reduce federal reimbursement to each social services district in an amount equal to the proportion of such fiscal sanction that the commissioner determines is attributable to such district . . . (1997 New York State Welfare Reform Act 153 2. A.:107)

In this excerpt and the lines that follow it in the legislation, several dynamics of the participation performance measure accountability system become visible. First, it is the federal government that imposes sanctions on states. Second, the state will pass any sanctions it incurs for failing to meet federal benchmarks on to the counties responsible for diminishing the state average. Third, the state, via the commissioner, provides fair warning that it will use performance data to assess fiscal penalties. An administrator shares her familiar understanding of these dynamics:

The county only gets penalized if the state does. The state then passes penalties on to counties that are pulling the state *[average]* down.

Reinforcing the need for counties to cooperate in collecting and reporting participation data, the legislation goes on to explain that, if the state is unable to identify which counties caused the state to miss its federally imposed benchmarks, the Commissioner "shall assign the reduction in federal reimbursement to all districts" (New York State Welfare Reform Act: 1997, 153 2. A. p. 107). This funding and penalty structure thus creates a layered hierarchy of worker accountability. The federal government polices the states, New York State polices its counties, and East County, in turn, polices its own staff. A wtw staff member describes how this structure translates into local practice:

Harold, *[one of the in-house data management staff]* goes through on a monthly basis. He figures out the participation rate for each team and each individual team member. The team leader then makes sure everyone pulls their weight.

While this hierarchy of oversight effectively ensures certain minimal standards of implementation, it is not until the additional legislative mechanisms for inter-district comparison are considered that the full impact of the reform performance structure becomes visible. Coinciding with and amplifying the participation rate measure of the reform is the comparative dimension to performance measures that gains visibility in the following excerpt from state law.

2. Annually, the department shall rank each district based upon the percentage of its nonexempt public assistance caseload that

leave assistance in the previous calendar year for unsubsidized employment without reapplying for public assistance within six months. (New York State Welfare Reform Act: 1997:S 153-k:110)

As this passage goes on to explain, the ten highest ranked counties receive a financial bonus that is funded by a penalty that is levied on the twenty lowest ranked counties. Adding to the pressure that is already salient to staff and administrators through participation benchmarks, these and similar legislative provisions serve to diffuse the locus of outside pressure via the incorporation of inter-district comparisons. Performance demands are thus not just exerted by federal and state government, but also by a need to compete with other districts.

Reporting mechanisms amplify such inter-county comparisons. While penalties and final evaluation between districts are assessed on an annual basis, the actual tallying of TANF participation rates and other figures, such as the number of hires, are recorded more frequently. Their high visibility in a quarterly statewide publication, complete with maps depicting county success by color shading, ensures them a high priority among local administrators. Asked if this reporting protocol makes much of a difference to her management of wtwt, an East County administrator exclaimed:

Well sure, it gets competitive!

Such an emphasis on local management and measurable success in comparison to others fosters a disposition toward striving for more than the minimal requirements among both administrators and front-line staff. Going beyond the call of duty is crucial if an administrator wishes to demonstrate her or his individual and team competence in PRWORA implementation. An administrator describes one example of this:

To give ourselves leeway we shoot for a higher level, 35 hours a week participation *[even though the legal mandates don't require such a high rate until later on]* just so when we fall short, across the board we are still above the minimum standards.

Such comments reveal attention to managerial accountability. Managers cultivate appreciation of these administrative concerns

with their front-line staff as well. Emphasis on following legislative directives meticulously and on paying attention to the aspects of work that become visible extra-locally through performance reports are evident in both staff training and daily interactions. An administrator reminds staff, while explaining to me:

The money is federal, state, and local and we have to follow their standards very closely because we get audited quite often.

These concerns have a clear impact on the attitudes of front-line staff. This becomes evident in discussion with such staff:

Interviewer: How are Job Coaches evaluated? How are you promoted or fired?

WTW Staff Member: Well . . . Participation rates, that's what really matters.

I later ask:

Interviewer: Well what about being fired?

WTW Staff Member: Well that hardly happens, but if you fall below with participation rates . . . they will call you into their office and "counsel" you.

Such a clear bottom line serves to both orient wtw staff to the priorities of the agency and to send signals to staff about what aspects of their work are most valued.

Sections of state law also detail mechanisms for additional funding that are attached to optional performance measures of job placement, reduction of out of wedlock pregnancies, housing placement, child support enforcement, and increasing administrative efficiency (New York State Welfare Reform Act: 1997, 153 2. A. p. 109). Within these mechanisms, each district interested in securing additional grant monies through meeting optional performance standards negotiates performance goals individually. This arrangement spotlights managerial effectiveness and efficiency by grounding evaluation, via local cost savings,⁴ in improvement over the past and inter-district comparison with similar counties in the state. It also allows managers to take a role in goal setting, thus reinforcing their buy-in. While pursuing these grant monies is above and beyond the minimum requirement of PRWORA, and thus failure to achieve will not incur any penalty other than

a missed opportunity for extra grant money, this structure is an indication of the emphasis placed on innovative caseload management within the wtw system.

As a front-line employee attests, however, optional status with the state does not make these measures any less important within the local workspace. Commenting on the automated system enhancement that has created a considerable amount of extra work for her and her colleagues, she explains:

We are a leader in this stuff. The director sees this as something that can put our county on the map. We have tours all the time. We get e-mails saying: 'There is a tour on such and such a day, please dress up.' The director wants to keep us in the lead, so this computer upgrade is a way to do this.

Enveloped in the ambitions of such newly appointed local managers to distinguish East County, staff find themselves in a workplace where achievement is identifiable, policy goals appear legitimate to staff, the agency avoids the distraction of previously existing bureaucratic structures, and inter-county competition asserts a continuing challenge to ensure that efficiency and innovation do not fall victim to complacency. In this way, local administrators and staff become complicit with and accountable to the institutional interests of the PRWORA. Through the dynamics detailed in this article—restructuring, buy-in, and performance measures—the subversion that previous reform efforts have suffered at the hands of local staffs has been avoided.

Conclusion: A Bottom Line For Social Services?

While PRWORA's initial high participation rates and caseload decline continue to be heralded (Besharov 2003), its long-term outcomes remain to be seen. The economic boom that has accompanied and facilitated the first five years of this re-structuring is now in recession. Additionally, the often invoked "halo effect" that infuses new programs with excitement and motivated workers may not last forever.

Nevertheless, this research suggests that the combined effects of massive re-structuring, widespread ideological buy-in among staff, and the installation of demanding and competitive performance measures as defining components of daily work practice

have created a strong foundation for continued implementation integrity. As Edgar Schein (1985) suggests, organizational culture is a crucial aspect of workplace practice. Basic assumptions enmeshed in such work sites "tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things . . . tend[ing] to be non-confrontable and nondebatable" (Schein 1985:437).⁵ The factors described in this research have successfully forged a workplace culture that not only reinforces agency/institutional interests, but also compellingly polices them through a demanding and competitive information-reporting infrastructure.

As we move into the twenty-first century, we would do well to consider the organizational ripples that such restructuring creates, as well as the ramifications of reducing complex public service actions to one-dimensional outcome measures. While greater local discretion (such as advertised in PRWORA' decentralization of authority) provides the space for front-line staff to address the immediate needs of their clientele, performance measures and extra-local surveillance may constrain this client-centered ideal by compelling staff to remain within the visibility and the knowledge confines established for them in the mechanisms that monitor their work. Numerous scholars have pointed to the need to investigate policy and implementation for points of interaction, re-inscription and disruption of the power dynamics that exist within larger relations of society (Haney 1996, Naples 1997, Smith 1987, 1990, 1999). Working toward these ends, it is not enough to know that a program "works," one must know the intricacies of how it works and the intended and unintended consequences for various actors involved. Future research is needed to explore these dynamics with respect to how they occur in locations other than East County, how various economic situations effect implementation and what these restructuring dynamics mean for clients.

Notes

1. A maintenance of effort requirement is also in place. This stipulation is designed to ensure that states do not funnel all of their grant money away from welfare programs.
2. East County and all personal names used in this text are pseudonyms.

3. For a critical analysis of terms such as "dependence" and "reality" with respect to welfare reform, see Fraser and Gordon (1994), who argue that the meanings of these words are set within a historical context of race and gender.
4. It should be noted that the Governmental Accounting Office and others have asserted that work support costs may actually exceed the cost of welfare (General Accounting Office 2002).
5. Sandfort (1999) similarly suggest that front-line beliefs forge norms that staff rely upon in order to justify both action and inaction.

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