

**ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS IN WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS:
PROGRAMMATIC AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

By

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Executive Summary

The Center for Impact Research undertook an analysis of eight welfare-to-work programs between 1998 and 2000 in Chicago to identify successful program elements, isolate barriers to employment presented by participants, and make recommendations for welfare reform policy. The programs were both large and small, of both long and short duration, and provided a variety of services, from vocational training to shorter job placement-focused activities. By reviewing quantitative findings within the context of qualitative data gathered through staff and participant interviews, we have identified elements of successful programming and welfare policy recommendations that flow from them.

Sample Demographics

Our sample consisted of 843 participants in these eight programs over the two-year period.

- The mean number of children across the sample was 2.57.
- 46.7% had earned a high school diploma or GED.
- Average reading levels were 7.70 and 6.46 for math.
- 81.5% of the sample had been employed at some point prior to entering the program.
- The average length of time on welfare was 6.97 years.

Employment Rates and Drop Rates

Analyzing all those participants who showed up at the programs after intake, the employment rate was 56.1% and the drop rate was 43.9%. Those who found employment were younger, had a slightly lower average number of children, and slightly more had been ever employed prior to entering the program.

Reasons for Program Drop Outs

The four most commonly cited reasons for drop were child care, health, substance abuse, and low literacy.

Child care drop outs were on average older, more poorly educated, and less likely to have been employed in the past. Almost half the child care drop outs had school age children in addition to younger children, giving rise to the hypothesis that they had difficulty in finding child care for so many different age groups.

Nearly 80% of the **health problems** involved the health of the participant rather than other family members. Women who dropped out due to health problems had higher literacy and numeracy levels than the overall sample, as well as a much longer average time on welfare (11.95 years versus 6.97 years). Fewer participants with health problems had ever been employed (75.6%) compared to the overall sample (81.7%), indicating that these health problems have and continue to be employment barriers.

Substance abusers dropped out later in the program than other drop outs. They too have been on welfare for a longer time than the overall sample- 8.67 years versus 6.97 years. Since their average employment history was about the same as the overall sample, it is likely that substance abuse causes participants to lose successive jobs, a factor that is associated with longer stays on welfare.

Participants who dropped out due to **low literacy** had average reading scores of 4.54 and math scores of 3.96, considerably lower than the overall sample, and had longer years on welfare (8.34 compared to 6.46 for the entire sample). In addition, they had been employed far less than the sample (55% compared to 81.7%), indicating that their low literacy presented a significant barrier to employment.

Programmatic Recommendations

Across all program models, the research identified three program components essential for success:

- Creative front-end intake procedures that served to engage and bind participants to the program;

- Strong case management providing individualized attention to participants and their problems; and
- Job development, defined as the ability to establish strong relationships with employers.

Welfare Reform Policy Recommendations

From our data flow four welfare policy recommendations:

- Since having children of different ages complicates the task of finding child care, there is a need to develop child care options that include the ability to accept children of different ages.
- Because health problems served as an absolute barrier to employment for some participants who otherwise appeared to have none or few other barriers, participants with health problems or substance abuse problems should be screened in welfare department offices and referred for treatment before referral for job placement or training. Some participants with health problems could be assisted with obtaining disability assistance (SSI benefits).
- Literacy levels at 4.5 and below appear to be a benchmark for determining the ability of participants to cope in welfare-to-work programs. We recommend that literacy testing be undertaken in IDHS offices to screen out those reading below the 5th grade level and refer them to literacy programs and provide them with enough time to raise their basic skills before seeking employment. It is also likely that many of these low-level readers have learning disabilities that might properly be diagnosed by professional literacy experts.
- Our data show that all the programs spent untold hours in marketing and recruitment activities as well as further screening the recruits for program suitability. Better city-wide screening mechanisms would alleviate the burdens on welfare-to-work programs to recruit and screen participants.

I. Introduction

In March 1998 the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation provided a grant to CIIR, the Center for Impact Research (formerly Taylor Institute) to discern and detail the programmatic and policy lessons that emerged over the course of Fry's Welfare-to-Work Initiative. The Initiative funded eight welfare-to-work programs in the Chicago metropolitan area for a two-year period ending January 2000. Through a comprehensive data collection process, the Center for Impact Research (CIR) identified key program elements that resulted in participant employment.

By reviewing quantitative findings within the context of qualitative data gathered through staff and participant interviews, we have identified "elements of success" in the welfare-to-work programs and welfare policy recommendations that flow from them. This report describes our methodology and statistical findings, discusses elements of programmatic success that the aggregate data brought to light, and ends with a set of programmatic and policy conclusions drawn from the data.

II. Methods

CIR utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct this study. Qualitative data comprised interviews and focus group activities. We conducted in-person and telephone interviews with program staff to document the evolution of each of the eight program models. CIR also facilitated focus groups with both staff and participants to gather information on barriers impacting participants' welfare-to-work transitions.

Quantitative data were collected through the use of a brief survey instrument. We created a one-page tracking form (see Appendix I) to collect anonymous demographic and outcome data on each Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participant served through the Initiative. Program staff completed the tracking forms for TANF participants they served through September 1, 1999, a total of 843 individuals.

The tracking form contained questions about participants' age, race, marital status, educational attainment, welfare history, ages and numbers of children, and work history prior to entering the Fry-funded program. In addition, a section on participant outcomes listed seven choices, only one of which could be selected to describe a participant's status as of September 1, 1999. The outcome choices covered participants who were active in education, job readiness, skill training or job search; participants who had dropped out either after intake, while in the program, or after completing program activities; and participants who were employed, or who had found work while in the program but lost it and returned to job search. For participants who had dropped out or lost work, program staff also completed a section on reasons for the outcome, selecting as many of the 15 problem categories that applied, as well as citing the main reason the participant had dropped out or lost a job. The problem categories included child care, health problems, domestic violence, low literacy, substance abuse, transportation problems, housing problems, and felony conviction.

Program staff were instructed to fill out tracking forms on all TANF participants who completed intake. As each program site had a different intake process, there was some variance across the sites in the criteria or those included as having completed intake. However, given our thorough training of staff on how to complete the forms, and careful data cleaning procedures, we are confident that there is no systematic bias in the sample.

Some of the sites did not collect data on two variables: the results of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and participants' welfare histories. The TABE measures reading and math skills on a continuum of grade levels. Calculations on TABE information were performed only for sites that had provided information on TABE scores. In order to supplement missing welfare history data, we collected information from a sample of comparable TANF participants at the non-collecting sites, and calculated means on the data in order to compare participants' average length of time on welfare.

III. Findings: Characteristics of Program Participants

A. Participant Demographics

Table I shows the aggregate characteristics of the entire group of 843 cases. The sample was overwhelmingly female (96.7%), and African American (89.0%). Forty-three percent of the sample was between the ages of 25 and 34. The mean number of children across the sample was 2.57. When broken down by age, most of the children (72%) fell in the “five years and older” category, and 23.9% were between the ages of one and four.

The average grade level attained by participants was 11.11, with 46.7% of the sample having earned a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED). This percentage corresponds with statewide data collected in March 1998 showing that 47.6% of TANF grantees had less than a high school education (Voices for Illinois Children 1998). However, grade level was not indicative of the average participant’s educational skill level. Average TABE scores for reading and math were far below the 11th grade, at slightly less than eighth grade equivalency for reading, and midway through sixth grade for math.

Over four-fifths of the sample (81.7%) had been employed at some point prior to entering their Fry-funded program. The average length of time on assistance at the four sites that gathered a complete history was 6.97 years. Across the six programs for which we had welfare history data, the average length of time on assistance ranged from a minimum of 1.2 years (in a youth-serving program) to 10.12 years.

TABLE I CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE (N=843)

GENDER	Female	96.7%
	Male	3.3%
RACE	African-American	89.0%
	Latino/Hispanic	6.2%
	Caucasian	3.1%
	Other	1.1%
	Asian	0.6%
AGE	18-24	24.4%
	25-34	43.3%
	35-44	27.6%
	45-54	4.6%
	55+	0.1%
MEAN NUMBER OF CHILDREN		2.57
AGES OF CHILDREN (n=2108 children)	Under 1 year	4.2%
	1-4 years	23.9%
	5+ years	72.0%
MEAN GRADE LEVEL		11.11
HAS HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA		46.7%
MEAN TABE SCORES	Reading	7.70
	Mathematics	6.46
EVER EMPLOYED (prior to program)		81.7%
MEAN YEARS ON WELFARE (By outcome status)		6.97
	Program drops-c,d,e	7.15
	Employed-f,g	6.93
	Dropped early-c	3.36
	Dropped in program-d,e	8.94

TABLE I (cont.) CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

OUTCOME STATUS*	In program-a,b	13.4%
	Dropped from program-c,d,e	50.4%
	Returned to job search-f/employed-g	36.2%
COMPLETE EMPLOYMENT RATE**	$(f+g)/(c+d+e+f+g)$	41.8%
COMPLETE DROP RATE	$(c+d+e)/(c+d+e+f+g)$	58.2%
FILTERED EMPLOYMENT RATE, (LESS EARLY DROPS***)	$(f+g)/(d+e+f+g)$	56.1%
FILTERED DROP RATE, (LESS EARLY DROPS)	$(d+e)/(d+e+f+g)$	43.9%
DROP OUTS BY TIME IN PROGRAM (n=425)	Post-intake, before program-c	43.8%
	During program-d	44.5%
	Post-program-e	11.8%
MAIN REASONS FOR DROP	Unknown	35.0%
	Child care	14.9%
	Health problems	10.3%
	Client conduct	10.1%
	Substance abuse	6.2%
	Low literacy	5.9%

*Outcome statuses range from a through g on the attached tracking form (Appendix I).

** Means for the Complete Employment Rate and Drop Rate are based on n=730 cases in which participants had completed or dropped from their program.

** Means for the Filtered Employment and Drop Rates (less early drops) are based on n=544 cases, which comprise those who had completed or dropped from their program, minus those who dropped after intake but before beginning program activities.

B. Participant Outcome Data

The seven outcome statuses found on our tracking form are combined into three categories in Table I. At the time the data were collected, 13.4% of the entire sample was involved in program activities including education, job readiness, and skill training (outcome choices a and b from the tracking form). Half (50.4%) of the participants had dropped from the program, either after intake, during the program, or after completing the program but without finding work (outcome choices c, d, and e on the tracking form).

Within the 50.4% of the sample comprising the drop outs, participants dropped out in almost equal proportions following intake (43.8%) and during the program (44.5%). Participants who dropped out after completing the program but without finding employment accounted for the remaining 11.8% of all drop outs.

Those participants who were either employed, or in job search after having found and lost employment while in their Fry-funded program (outcome choices f and g on the tracking form), accounted for 36.2% of the entire sample.

C. Employment Rates and Drop Rates

As the aggregate data showed that a significant number of participants dropped out after intake, but before starting program activities, we calculated two sets of employment rates and drop rates. One set of rates, the “Complete” set, was calculated on the entire data set, and the second set, the “Filtered” set, was calculated using all drop outs except those that dropped after intake, before starting employment activities. We calculated the rates as follows, where **Xe** represents all participants who found employment, **d** represents all drop outs, and **fd** represents all drop outs less the post-intake drops.

Complete Employment Rate (CER) = $Xe/d + Xe$

Complete Drop Rate (CDR) = $d/d + Xe$

Filtered Employment Rate (FER) = $X_e / (f_d + X_e)$

Filtered Drop Rate (FDR) = $f_d / (f_d + X_e)$

By separating out participants who were not firmly attached to the program and calculating rates on a smaller sample, a slightly different picture of the programs' employment success is presented. The first method of calculation, the Complete Employment and Drop Rates, yielded an employment rate of 41.8%, and a drop rate of 58.2%. With the second method of calculation, the Filtered Employment and Drop Rate, the employment rate was 56.1%, and the drop rate was 43.9%.

D. Comparison of Outcome Statuses

Tables II and III compare characteristics of participants across the different outcome groups.

Table II shows that those participants who found employment differed from the drop outs in a few important ways. Those who found employment were younger, had a slightly lower average number of children than the drop outs, and slightly more had been employed prior to entering their Fry-funded program.

TABLE II
 Characteristics of “Drop outs” vs. “Found Employment”

	Drop outs* (N=425)	Found Employment** (N=305)	Entire Sample (N=843)
AGE			
18-24	20.2%	28.4%	24.4%
25-34	42.1%	46.5%	43.3%
35-44	32.2%	21.8%	27.6%
45-54	5.5%	3.0%	4.6%
55+	0%	0.3%	.1%
MEAN NUMBER OF CHILDREN	2.68	2.49	2.57
MEAN EDUCATION LEVEL	10.80	11.29	11.11
HAS H.S.DIPLOMA OR GED	44.2%	45.6%	46.7%
MEAN TABE SCORES (GRADE LEVEL)			
Reading	7.59	7.55	7.70
Math	6.50	6.11	6.46
EMPLOYED PRIOR TO PROGRAM	79.7%	84.2%	81.7%
MEAN YEARS ON AFDC/TANF	7.15 (N=103)	6.93 (N=116)	6.97 (N=240)

* ‘Drops outs’ are program participants who either dropped after intake, before starting program activities, or dropped out during the program; or completed program activities but dropped out of the program without finding employment.

** “Found Employment” describes participants who were either employed as of 9/1/99; or who had found work while in the program, but lost it and returned to job search.

Table III shows that participants who had found employment but lost or left it while in the Fry-funded program (a group referred to here as “cyclers”) differ from those participants who were employed on September 1, 1999 in some interesting ways. The cyclers were slightly younger, had fewer children, and were better educated than those participants who found employment and the sample as a whole, and more of them had been employed prior to entering their Fry-funded program. The cyclers had also been on welfare for a slightly longer period of time, possibly indicating that they faced some additional barriers. Because the cyclers represent just 9% of all participants who found employment while in a Fry-funded program, we can tentatively conclude that those participants who found employment tended to keep it.

TABLE III
Characteristics of Program Participants Who Found Employment

	Employed 9/1/99 (N=287)	“Cyclers”** (N=27)	Entire Sample (N=843)
AGE			
18-24	27.9%	33.3%	24.4%
25-34	46.7%	44.4%	43.3%
35-44	21.7%	22.2%	27.6%
45-54	3.3%	0%	4.6%
55+	.4%	0%	.1%
MEAN NUMBER OF CHILDREN	2.49	2.41	2.57
MEAN EDUCATION LEVEL	11.26	11.67	11.11
HAVE ATTAINED H.S.DIPLOMA OR GED	44.2%	59.3%	46.7%
MEAN TABE SCORES (GRADE LEVEL)			
Reading	7.48	11.25	7.70
Math	6.07	8.75	6.46
EMPLOYED PRIOR TO PROGRAM	83.3%	92.6%	81.7%
MEAN YEARS ON AFDC/TANF	6.86 (N=100)	7.32 (N=16)	6.97 (N=240)

* “Cyclers” are participants who found employment while in the program, but lost that job(s) and were in job search as of 9/1/99.

E. Main Reasons for Program Drop Out

Table IV compares the characteristics of program drop outs across four of the most commonly cited main reasons for drop out, child care, health, substance abuse, and low literacy. ¹

The main reasons for drop out listed in both Table 1 and Table 4 apply to all drop outs as well as the participants who cycled out of work while in a Fry-funded program. Most participants dropped out or lost work for the following reasons: child care, health problems of the participant or a family member, client conduct (such as fighting with program staff), substance abuse, and educational deficits. As one can see

from Table 1, the largest “main reason” category for participant drop out was “unknown. This was due to a large proportion of the drop outs leaving before staff could really get to know them, as well as program design issues which are discussed in the section on participating organizations below.

TABLE IV
MAIN REASONS FOR DROP OUT (Entire Sample)

	CHILD CARE N=65**	HEALTH N=45*	SUBSTANCE ABUSE N=27	LOW LITERACY N=26	OVERALL SAMPLE N=843
	%	%	%	%	%
AGE					
18-24	18.5	22.2	8.3	3.8	24.4
25-34	40.0	28.9	50.0	57.7	43.3
35-44	38.5	33.3	37.5	26.9	27.6
45-54	3.1	15.6	4.2	11.5	4.6
55+	0	0	0	0	.1
Diploma	35.4	37.8	29.6	7.7	46.7
Dropped out:					
• Post-intake	56.3	51.2	29.6	44.0	22.1
• In-program	37.5	41.5	37.0	56.0	22.4
• Post-program	6.3	7.3	33.3	0	5.9
Employed Prior to Program?	66.1	75.6	83.3	55.0	81.7
Ages of Children					
• Under 1 year	5.3	1.6	1.2	16.25	4.2
• 1 through 4	21.5	21.3	19.8	5.0	23.9
• 5 and older	73.2	77.0	79.0	78.8	72.0
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Number of Children	3.18	2.79	3.12	2.69	2.57
Education Level	10.68	10.67	9.74	10.42	11.11
TABE Reading	8.25	9.74	7.12	4.54	7.70
TABE Math	7.15	8.12	6.46	3.96	6.46
Years on AFDC/TANF	3.61	11.95	8.67	8.34	6.97

*78% of these cases involved the health of the participant, and 22% involved the health of a child or other family member.

**Of the cases that had child care as the main reason for drop out, 44% had school age children (5 and older), plus younger children (0-4). Thirty-five percent (35%) had school age children only, and 21% had infants/toddlers (0-4) only.

¹ The figures in Table IV were calculated on program drop outs only, and did not include the very small number of cyclers who lost employment due to child care and other problems.

We will now discuss each of the main reasons for drop out seen in Table IV.

1. Child care

Child care was the main reason for program drop out, at 15% of all drops (about 7.5% of the overall sample). This concurs with the results of other recent studies (Armato et al. 1999) that also found that child care is a problem for welfare participants seeking to become self-sufficient.

Those participants who dropped due to child care are on average older, more poorly educated, and less likely to have been employed prior to entering their Fry-funded program than the sample as a whole. Thirty-eight point five percent (38.5%) of these participants were in the 35 to 44 age bracket, versus 27.6% in the overall sample. Only 35.4% had a high school diploma or its equivalent, compared to 46.7% in the entire sample, and only 66.1% had been employed prior to entering the Fry Welfare-to-Work Initiative, as opposed to 81.7% of the overall sample. Surprisingly, the average length of time on welfare was much shorter for the child care drop outs: 3.61 years compared to 6.97 for the overall sample. More information is needed to explain why this group of drop outs had such a short welfare history.

In addition, our data revealed a new dimension to the child care issue: these parents need child care arrangements that accommodate children of different ages. Almost half of the child care drop outs had school age children (five and older) in addition to younger children (0-4). In our qualitative interviews we learned of cases in which participants had completed intake, but ended up not using the center because they had children of different ages whom they wanted to keep together.

Most child care centers serve either infants and toddlers, or children ages two to six, or school age children six to 12 years of age. Due to different staffing and programmatic requirements for each age group, most child care centers focus on one age range. However, our data show that parents need access to facilities and providers that will accommodate children of widely different ages, a finding that has policy as well as program implications.

2. Health Problems

Health is the second most frequently cited reason for drop out from a welfare-to-work program, accounting for 10.3% of all drops in the overall sample. We defined health barriers to include the health of the program participant as well as members of her family. Nearly eighty percent (N=35) of the health problems, however, involved the health of the participant, and of these, pregnancy was the most frequent reason (51.4%), followed by physical health (42.9%), and then mental health (5.7%). Although pregnancy is a temporary condition, we learned from qualitative interviews that participants' other physical health problems are a combination of chronic and critical conditions, including respiratory problems such as asthma, lupus, HIV, and cancer.

Table IV demonstrates that participants who dropped out of their programs due to health problems had higher literacy and numeracy levels than the overall sample, as well as a much longer average time on welfare (11.95 years versus 6.97 years). Fewer participants with health problems had ever been employed (75.6%) compared to the overall sample (81.7%).

Given the high literacy scores combined with the below-average employment history of these participants, it would appear that these health problems have and continue to be a primary employment barrier for this group. Participants with health problems need to be assessed and assisted on a case by case basis. In some instances, participants' problems may be solvable with adequate health care. In other cases, participants with permanent physical and mental disabilities might better be assisted by Supplemental Security Income (disability assistance).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is the third most frequent reason cited for program drop out, accounting for 6.2% of all drop outs. Participants who dropped out due to substance abuse dropped later in the program than other "main reason" groups, after completing program activities but before finding employment. The longer

matriculation in the program is probably due at least in part to drug tests required by employers. For example, one site described how a participant had secured a job and was ready to start work. To celebrate getting the job, the participant smoked marijuana and then failed the employer's drug test.

In addition, we found that substance abusers had been on welfare for a longer average time than the overall sample—8.67 years versus 6.97 years. This finding suggests that although this group was employed at about the same rate as the overall sample, substance abuse might have caused these participants to lose successive jobs, a factor that has been associated with longer stays on welfare.

In order to facilitate job attainment and retention, it appears from the data that substance abuse treatment must be readily available to participants in welfare-to-work programs, and should be offered prior to job placement.

4. Low Literacy

Low literacy was the fourth most cited reason for program drop out, accounting for 5.9% of all drop outs in the overall sample. Their very low TABE scores illustrate a large educational deficit. With an average reading TABE score of 4.54, and an average math TABE score of 3.96, this group of drop-outs lagged far below the overall sample. A higher percentage of this group dropped out during the program due to an inability to participate because of illiteracy, as opposed to other points of drop out, such as post-intake, or after program completion. Participants who dropped out due to low literacy had longer years on welfare (8.34 compared to 6.46 for the entire sample) and had been employed far less than the sample (55% compared to 81.7%), indicating that their low literacy presented a significant barrier to employment.

Over the course of the Fry Initiative, some sites altered their programming to address the needs of low-level learners. For example, one program restructured its instructional program into “sectors” based on participants' educational abilities. Two others significantly increased the amount of basic skill instruction that they provided.

In sum, participants with very low education skills—in the third and fourth grade range—are likely to drop out, and welfare-to-work programs must address their literacy needs to keep them engaged. These participants will need programs of longer duration, as it will take time to raise their literacy levels. Our data indicate that TANF participants reading at 5th grade and below are not good candidates for welfare-to-work programs and would benefit from intensive literacy programming prior to being sent to a welfare-to-work program. This would require the Illinois Department of Human Services to screen participants for reading ability.

IV. Elements of Success in Program Models

Our data show that there were no appreciable differences in successful employment outcomes based on the size or length of program, or type of training offered. Vocational programs did, however, have more difficulty in attracting women on welfare to participate in their non-traditional employment offerings.

Of the eight Fry-funded programs, three focused on vocational education, while others prepared participants for a broader range of jobs. Three of the Initiative programs provided vocational training that ranged in length from eight to 14 weeks. The four other job readiness programs varied in their formal instruction phase, from three to six weeks. One program was completely open-ended, with no routinized program, providing individualized employment counseling, case management, and other activities. The programs fall evenly into categories of large, mid-size and small.

All of the sites provided job readiness and life skills training. This type of instruction includes how to interview for a job, what to wear to work, keeping a schedule, budgeting earned income, and dealing with family and friends' reactions to the participant becoming employed. Along with job readiness and/or vocational skill instruction, the programs all provided some level of case management, job placement, and job retention services. Depending on the size of its staff, a program might have separate persons for each of these functions, or staff members might perform a variety of roles in the program.

Given the differences between the eight programs, we used employment rates as the primary measure for program success. After filtering out participants who dropped out after intake but before starting the program, most programs had employment rates ranging from 50 to 70%. Two programs had employment rates below 50%. In comparing the programs' success in employment, we focused on identifying programmatic elements in successful programs that were not present in those with lower employment rates.

Three characteristics were observed either separately, or in combination, at each of the programs that had employment successes. These elements are: 1) good front end, or intake, procedures; 2) strong case management; and 3) thorough job development. Together, these elements make up an equation for success, and the successful programs all exhibited one or more of them.

A. Front End Attachment: Marketing, Intake and Engagement Practices

In calculating employment rates, we saw that some programs lost a large number of participants early on, just after intake. This problem of participant retention at an early stage of involvement caused us to look closely at the outreach, intake and engagement practices each program used.

The intake process differed from site to site. The nature of the intake process appears to have an effect not only on who enters the program, but also who stays, as it is during the intake process that participants first connect with the program's staff and learn about the program's format. The results of our examination of the programs' marketing, intake and engagement practices follow.

1. Marketing/Outreach

All of the sites instituted some type of marketing or outreach function to attract welfare participants to their programs. Outreach or recruitment is the first step in the intake and engagement process, and recruitment efforts grew at some sites to the point that a set portion of staff time was dedicated to making in-person, and telephone contact with welfare office personnel on a regular basis. One program was able to have a

staff person make presentations about its programs on-site at local welfare offices. Another hosted some large group meetings with staff from area welfare offices. The coordinator of another program was so consistent in her outreach to welfare office staff that she was asked if she was employed by the welfare office. In general, these efforts paid off in referrals, but a key factor was the consistency of the outreach effort, particularly with welfare offices, where staff turnover or reassignment can be high.

Some programs found that even when they had a contract with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to serve TANF participants, obtaining a sufficient number of referrals was a problem. One program had an IDHS contract, and along with having to frequently request referrals, program staff reported that some TANF participants were pulled out from the program by IDHS. Other sites reported that IDHS was reluctant to refer participants to their programs, because the state was pushing its workers to place participants in jobs, not training. Participants were entitled to pursue training, but only if their case worker agreed to it and it was incorporated into their written employment plan. This could require negotiation and often extensive advocacy with the case worker at the local welfare department. This state of affairs means that welfare-to-work programs have to possess enough resources to accomplish this task. Marketing program services during a “work first” policy atmosphere proved and will prove to be a resource-depleting activity for programs.

2. Intake Procedures/Engagement

Some programs employed a very stringent set of criteria for acceptance into their vocational training, and experienced a large proportion of early drop outs. These projects took only a select group of participants, who were well suited for the program and therefore tended to stay, graduate, and obtain employment.

Another program took anyone, either through an orientation session that lasted a few hours, or by seeing a case manager at any time. The case managers usually conducted the orientation sessions, and participants made an immediate connection with the people who worked with them individually over the course of their involvement with the program. Using very different intake approaches, both programs successfully engaged participants who fit into their particular program models.

Highly individualized intake processes, with a focus on participants' skills and interests, resulted in low drop out rates after intake. One program had a high rate of dropping out after intake (25%), although it experienced high employment success for those who came back to the program after intake. This project had a complex, "test heavy" intake process that lasted one to two full days, and included a 14-page IDHS document that participants had to complete. Spending too much time on intake activities might lead to a lot of early drops because participants may be intimidated, have failed to connect personally, or failed to have engaged psychologically with the program or its staff. In this program, extensive staff resources were going to intake activities that did not pay off in program participants.

In sum, our data indicate that successful participant engagement can result from program criteria that selects interested and qualified candidates, or in programs that accept a broader range of people when staff make an effort to get to know participants as individuals early on. As testing and assessment are labor-intensive activities for staff, programs must ask if such tasks are a good use of resources, and if so, when is the best time to administer them within the course of the program.

B. Strong Case Management

A critical element of any social service program is the strength of the relationships staff build with participants. Case management—the process of assessing and helping to meet the concrete, emotional, or other needs of a participant—is the primary way staff can establish ongoing relationships with program participants. Four of the programs that experienced successful employment outcomes all had strong, though varied, case management components, and as a result of case management, knew with some detail why participants had dropped from the program. These case managers assisted participants with a range of issues that cropped up after they began work. For example, the case manager drove one participant to an appointment for subsidized housing during her lunch hour, so that she wouldn't miss work. In another program, a participant who had been placed at a nearby bank came to the program on her lunch hour to check in with program staff on a regular basis to obtain assistance with job-related issues.

In contrast, programs without a strong case management approach, or those in which different staff took care of participant needs depending on what phase of the program she was in, had lower success rates. Our data strongly suggest that when an individual staff person, whether a designated case manager or a generalist, provides consistent support to participants, programs have a much better sense of what the participants' needs are.

C. Thorough Job Development

Job development is the process of establishing relationships with employers, connecting program participants with available jobs, and then following up to help ensure that participants can retain employment. Welfare-to-work programs that had thorough job development components were successful in finding their participants jobs and in helping them retain employment.

Despite the extremely low literacy and numeracy levels seen in one program, (average TABE scores around the fifth grade level), staff were able to find jobs for a large percentage of participants. Toward the end of its first year of operation, the program realized that it needed to change its format and job development strategy, because few of the program participants were opting to go into the jobs for which the program was training them. The program created a second "track" for people who were not interested in vocational work, and who would instead pursue service industry jobs such as security work or food service/hospitality positions.

Along with tracking participants differently, the program also hired a full-time job developer, who developed relationships with employers in both the vocational and service sectors. The developer found out that a certain employer would test applicants on their measuring skills, so he practiced measuring with the participants before sending them to the employer. For participants who were unfamiliar with public transportation, the developer would explain which routes to take, sometimes even accompanying groups of participants to interviews.

Another program had a job development team that grew from two persons to four over the two years of the Fry initiative. As a well-established social service agency, it had many good connections with employers in its community, but now performed aggressive outreach to broaden its network by creating a special board composed of corporate representatives. Several other programs had developed strong employer networks, which enabled them to go beyond merely referring participants to job openings. Ongoing relationships with employers, identifying appropriate jobs for persons with limited skills, and maintaining contact with participants in their early days on the job all are part of thorough job development.

V. Summary of Key Findings

A. Programmatic Practices

This analysis shows that particular program elements result in successful employment outcomes. Because these elements were found across a set of very different programs, we conclude that it is not a particular program model that makes a difference in employment outcomes; rather, it is the strength of specific components that any one program model can incorporate. These components are summarized below.

- **Designating staff time to regularly market a program is essential to recruiting sufficient numbers of program participants.** The assumption that large numbers of welfare participants would flock to welfare-to-work programs due to time limits and more stringent work policies was not borne out in the Initiative. It appears that both IDHS, and the participants themselves, must be won over by individual programs and what they offer. As the hardest to serve population remains on welfare, outreach efforts and the funding to support them may need to increase to get participants into programs that can benefit them.
- **Front-end activities, including intake, make a difference.** How a program processes someone into it has an impact on program outcomes. Programs with stringent criteria lose more people upfront, but

keep those that stay. Programs that provide individualized attention early on also appear to have success in retaining participants, as do those that can flexibly change their activities to meet the needs of participants. Intensive front-end intake efforts (with extensive paperwork) appear to cause programs to lose participants as early drop outs. Programs need to actively engage participants as soon as possible in substantive activities in order to retain them.

- **Solid case management practices establish relationships with participants that endure throughout the course of program activities.** If programs can develop a close rapport with participants they stand a better chance of keeping their clients and of understanding the barriers they face.
- **Thorough job development goes beyond referring participants to jobs; it entails developing relationships with employers, adequately preparing participants for job openings, and following up to resolve any job-related problems.**
- **Vocational education for TANF participants is an option that can lead to self-sufficiency, but it is not the solution for everyone.** The programs that provided only vocational education were not able to serve large numbers of TANF participants. Because of the lack of screening systems that can help identify women on welfare who are interested in these types of jobs and have the skills to do them, these programs must spend an inordinate amount of time in recruitment and screening on their own. However, for those few participants with the interest and qualifications required, vocational training did lead to employment in fields where higher wages and opportunities for advancement exist.

B. Policy Recommendations

Based on our analysis of program success and failure, measured by employment outcomes, we make the following welfare reform policy recommendations.

- **Having children of different ages complicates the task of finding child care and results in significant program drops.** If parents must choose among separate child care providers for all their children, our data show they are likely to drop out. The data lead us to conclude that the age-spread makes finding affordable child care arrangements difficult and often impossible. Child care options that include more facilities that can accept children of different ages would be helpful.
- **Health is a significant barrier for a number of welfare participants.** For some participants health problems are an absolute barrier to employment, as shown by lower prior employment rates and longer time on welfare. For this reason, programs need to help participants get treatment to address health conditions or assist them in obtaining disability assistance. Better in-depth screening for health issues in IDHS welfare department offices could also help. Participants with chronic health problems are not ready for employment and should not be consuming the scarce resources of welfare-to-work programs. The data on substance abuse illustrate the same problem. Most of those substance abusers drop out after completing the program but before employment, illustrating that they too are not ready to obtain or maintain employment. A wiser use of program resources would dictate screening for alcohol and drugs in IDHS offices before participants seek employment.
- **Literacy and numeracy levels are low among many welfare participants.** Although the Fry-funded programs were set up to work with low-level learners, some of them discovered that they still had to make adjustments throughout the course of the Initiative. However, our data show participants with literacy and numeracy levels below 4.5 still dropped out, indicating that this level is a benchmark for determining the ability of participants to perform adequately in welfare-to-work programs. For this reason, we recommend that literacy testing be undertaken in IDHS offices to screen out those reading below the 5th grade level and refer them to more intensive literacy programs and provide them with enough time to raise their basic skills. It is also likely that many of these low-level readers have learning disabilities that might properly be diagnosed by professional literacy experts. Although some of these disabilities can be remedied through skilled and properly trained instructors, others will prohibit employment altogether. Failure to screen for low literacy sets up participants for further

failure in welfare-to-work programs (lowering their self-esteem and self-confidence), but also consumes scarce welfare-to-work resources.

● **Better citywide screening mechanisms would alleviate the burdens on welfare-to-work programs to recruit and screen participants.** Our data show that all the programs in the Fry Initiative spent untold hours in marketing and recruitment activities, and then had, in some instances, to screen the recruits for program suitability. Regionalized recruitment and screening centers would make it easier for both program participants as well as welfare-to-work programs. The one-stop employment centers that have been developed in Chicago over the past several years could fulfill this function, but Fry Initiative programs state that they rarely receive referrals from these entities.

At the same time, IDHS should recognize that this hard-to-serve population, as demonstrated by our data, could benefit from upfront remediation of serious employment barriers, such as substance abuse and extremely low literacy skills. For these participants, a “work first” approach may be doomed to failure. IDHS should take steps to screen and identify those participants with multiple problems, refer them to specialized programs, and provide them with enough time to succeed in them.