

Implementing the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996: A First Look



Richard P. Nathan and Thomas L. Gais

**Federalism Research Group
The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government
State University of New York**

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Abstract

This book examines the implementation of the 1996 national welfare reform act and summarizes field-research findings to date. The focus of this research is on what happens to national policies after they are made. The theme is that a lot is happening and that there are surprises in the implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act and its connections to other social agencies and programs. Bureaucracies typically don't change this much and this fast. Why did it happen this time around? The book highlights three S's to encapsulate the changes that are occurring — Signals, Services, Sanctions. Emphasis is placed on “second-order devolution,” the crucial role of front-line workers, the relationship between employment services and cash payment systems, varieties in goal clusters among the states and locally, the new role of “diversion” before welfare reciprocity, and the condition and importance of welfare information systems. Field researchers in 20 states (including 2 local sites in each) are conducting this ongoing study in conjunction with Rockefeller Institute central staff. Major funding has been provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation along with other funders. A component of the research program funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and headed by Irene Lurie is examining the ground-level operation of the welfare programs in 12 local sites. The first round of the state-local field research is completed. The second-round research consists of targeted studies on selected topics.

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Like many public laws, the 1996 Personal Responsibility (welfare reform) Act is about behavior modification.¹ It seeks to modify two kinds of behavior, the personal labor force and reproductive behavior of poor family heads and the bureaucratic behavior of the agencies that administer programs to aid the most controversial welfare population — non-disabled, working-aged, poor family heads and their children.

Because this law breaks significant new ground, social scientists with applied interests across many disciplines have come forward to study its effects. Although there has been criticism of the number of studies being conducted, we count it as a good thing that social scientists have focused on this subject and moment because such large changes are occurring. While there are many studies, they are of different types reflecting different points of view and purposes, for example, government oversight research, advocacy research, and independent academic research.

The field network evaluation study being conducted by the Rockefeller Institute of Government of the State University of New York in 20 states focuses on one of the two types of behavior modification above, the effort to change the behavior of the bureaucracy. A list of the states and research directors in the field research sample may be found at the end of this document.²

1. Methodology

Before turning to the bureaucratic effects of the new law, we comment on methodological challenges it presents. The 1996 Personal Responsibility Act did not occur in a vacuum. Federal laws, state laws, and state and local policies (including those carried out under federally granted waivers) have sought to change the purposes and operations of welfare programs practically since the original federal law was passed over 60 years ago in 1935 establishing what eventually became the Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program.³

In this setting of constant and varied policy initiatives, the independent variable (policy change) is very hard to specify. Both types of effects of the Personal Responsibility Act — personal and bureaucratic — are difficult to evaluate. Not only is the policy-change variable constantly in flux nationally and on the part of states and localities, there are exogenous variables that cause changes in behavior, both bureaucratic and personal. The economy is the biggest one of course. As a case manager told us recently on a field visit, anyone who is not in the hospital can find a job now in some areas of the country. Changes in social values, the weather, bus routes — all kinds of variables — can affect personal behavior in ways that on the surface may appear to have been caused by welfare

reform. Among the key questions often asked about changes in personal behavior caused by the Personal Responsibility Act are: Did the act reduce the rolls, decrease teenage pregnancy and the number of children born out of wedlock, result in people getting and keeping jobs, increase or decrease the availability and quality of child care and child well-being, force people out of housing or cause overcrowding in housing, improve or worsen family relations, health, and community conditions?

In the current setting, it is difficult (some would say impossible) to conduct social experiments to get at these kinds of impacts on personal behavior in a rigorous way. This may be one reason why so much of the public discussion now is adversarial, involving claims and counter-claims by people who bring different points of view to bear, using evidence (both statistical and qualitative) that may sound convincing to many people, but does not constitute proof or even represent a strong basis for inference.

We are often told that the kind of institutional studies we are conducting on changes in bureaucratic behavior are impressionistic because they are qualitative and even that they are unscientific, a characterization we emphatically reject. Certainly, implementation (or process) studies are hard to conduct.

However, an argument can be made that in the current setting the kinds of changes in bureaucratic behavior we are studying that are caused by the highly visible enactment of the 1996 welfare reform law are easier to isolate and assess than is the case of the more commonly studied effects of such new policies on personal behavior. This is not to gainsay the importance of efforts to study the effects of the 1996 welfare reform act on personal behavior. Indeed, the best wisdom that can be brought to bear by policy researchers and policy analysts is needed and valuable in both areas — the personal and bureaucratic effects of these policies — precisely because of the prominence and contentiousness of the issues involved.

Typically, research on the implementation of new national policies concentrates on what state and local governments do in their enabling legislation to carry out these policies. This is not what we are doing. The Rockefeller Institute implementation study focuses on key elements of state and local management systems to implement the policies they have adopted to reform welfare. This includes asking field researchers to find out:

What governmental agencies and nonprofit and for-profit organizations are supposed to carry out state and local policies and how are they structured?

How much money and staff are devoted to their missions and how are they deployed?

What management strategies were adopted to administer or contract for services and how are service deliverers held accountable, if at all?

What kinds of information is available to know what these programs are doing and to track applicants and participants in order to link services and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery?

To date, this research has resulted in a series of , Rockefeller Reports, statements, briefings, Congressional testimony, and conference presentations, as well as other dissemination efforts for the interested public, people in the media, government officials, and stakeholder groups. Plans are being made and steps taken to carry out the second round of field network studies on selected major implementation topics, as described in Part 11.

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1. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. 1996. Pub. L. No. 104-193.
 2. This book is based on 19 state reports. Missouri was added to the sample later than other states and was not available for this analysis. The Report Form for the Round-One field research is available by writing or calling or sending an e-mail message to the Rockefeller Institute.
 3. The Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 replaces the AFDC program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

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2. Three S's — Signals, Services, Sanctions

The central theme of this first look at the implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act is that a lot is happening now and that there are surprises. As researchers and participant-observers in this field for a long time, we have never seen, or expected to see, a period of so much and such pervasive institutional change in social programs.

Why all this change now, especially since it is customary, almost chic, to label bureaucracies as hidebound and stubbornly resistant to change? There were good reasons to be skeptical. Work requirements have been part of AFDC since 1972, and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program has been in effect since October of 1990.⁴ Yet these requirements in most cases and places did not transform the operation and administrative culture of AFDC from a cash assistance program that stressed compliance with complex, albeit standardized, eligibility criteria to one that emphasizes reducing dependency and getting people jobs.

Perhaps these problems were inevitable; until very recently, there has not been a lot of political interest in the implementation challenges of policy reform. After Congress passed the 1988 Family Support Act, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then chair of the Senate Finance Committee and a major architect of the Act, held hearings on its effects. In public and in private, Dick Nathan urged the Committee to focus on implementation, i.e., bureaucratic behavior: Are state and local agencies getting the message and passing it along? But Members had little interest in this suggestion. Perhaps they were right, but in an ironic way. One can argue that the signals of the 1988 Family Support Act were not big enough or bold enough to engage the bureaucracy.

Things are different now. Say what you like about the five-year time limit in the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act; it has gotten people's attention up and down the line. States are not simply layering on new responsibilities to public employees; in many places they are completely reorganizing how they operate welfare and related social programs. The face of welfare has changed for families as states have altered who is involved in the delivery of welfare benefits and services, what processes they rely on, and in what context the program is placed. Our field data show that the Work First philosophy has penetrated many state welfare bureaucracies.

The Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is especially interested (and rightfully so) in the depth of and degree of “culture change” at ground level in welfare and related bureaucracies. With a grant from HHS, the Rockefeller Institute is conducting a 12-site front-line worker study in 4-5 states, as a component of our implementation research, to observe closely interactions between case managers and applicants and recipients of TANF benefits.

Overall, our preliminary observations, and they should be treated as such, are that ground-level workers apparently were not as opposed to the behavior-change purposes of the 1996 Act as many people (us included) believed would be the case. A county welfare administrator in New York said, “We now have permission to be ‘be real’ with clients, to make them understand they have an obligation to work, to help themselves” (New York State Report, 1998). Front-line workers were often even stronger in the support of the new laws. As one case manager said, “This is what I was trained to do. Now I have some leverage. I love it.” After all, many ground-level workers themselves have a relatively low income and a strong work ethic, which is in many instances shared by welfare applicants and recipients.

There has been a deep change in the purposes and operations of state and local welfare agencies, which our field research reports indicate is a function of new political and economic signals and configurations of responsibility and power over welfare programs. New agency missions have been adopted for welfare programs; delivery systems have become more complicated and diverse; and there has been a redistribution of discretion downward to local welfare offices and sometimes to case managers. Local offices operating under these new institutional arrangements have access to a much wider range of tools and services for assisting families and they have much greater discretion in how they use them. One consequence is the emergence of a considerable amount of diversity in local systems, diversity that has an important effect on how people are treated, and that is influenced by a wide variety of factors, such as administrative resources, organizational styles, and community capacity. This local discretion and diversity pose large management challenges for states, challenges which states have not yet fully met, such as the creation of accountability systems that provide rapid, accurate information to serve local as well as state level needs for equity and uniformity in how families are treated. In sum, the new task — moving a large and heterogeneous population out of dependency on public aid and into the workforce — is one that shifts effective power downward and creates a host of new management challenges about

accountability, equity, and public control.

Most of all, signals have changed. This is especially and clearly the case in one of the two main policy areas emphasized in the 1996 law — the work area. In this area, the national consensus always has been loud and clear on the idea of work instead of welfare. But in the other area where literally the signaling of the 1996 Act is even stronger, this is not the case. We refer to the virtually hortatory purpose of the 1996 law to promote marriage and reduce teenage pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births. Herein lies a quandary of welfare reform. The essential reason for this quandary involves deep political divisions over the appropriateness of these ends as program objectives and of different means of achieving them. These disagreements even reach inside welfare agencies. As one New York City official commented, “Ninety percent of our workers are themselves single parents and identify on that point with their clients” (New York State Report, 1998). In the world of welfare, this subject tends to be off limits. Despite this finding that the pregnancy prevention objective of the Personal Responsibility Act has so far had little effect on bureaucratic behavior, there are grounds for expecting personal behavior in this area to change as a result of the Act, and indeed it may already be changing. TANF-aided family heads (most of them female, and many of them unmarried) face the new reality of time-limited cash assistance and requirements for work and participation in work-search and related activities. They have to participate in job-search and related work activities for fixed amounts of time under negotiated “Personal Responsibility Agreements” which states require be signed and agreed to before a TANF cash-assistance case is opened. If there is a noncustodial parent, usually a male, there is now a new social dynamic: “If he isn’t required to do anything, why should I be; why shouldn’t he be responsible too?” State officials we have talked to predict that this kind of attitude change and the resentment involved because of the reality of time-limited cash assistance ultimately will affect child-bearing behavior. Perhaps it already is.

For public administrators, the lesson is an obvious one. Changes in bureaucratic behavior are more likely to happen when there is a clear policy signal that is big enough to be widely noticed both within the pertinent political sub-system and in the larger community. But this may not be enough: Change, when it occurs, does so more easily and widely when it is in line with the dominant social values. In the case of the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act, which is a big and clear signal, bureaucratic behavior is changing in one area and not another in a way that reflects the political correctness of one signal (the work signal) and not the other signal about pregnancy prevention.

4. For further discussion, see Jan L. Hagen and Irene Lurie, *Implementing JOBS: Progress and Promise*. Albany, NY: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1994. 4. For further discussion, see Jan L. Hagen and Irene Lurie, *Implementing JOBS: Progress and Promise*. Albany, NY: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1994.

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3. The New Political Economy of Welfare

These changes have occurred in large part because strong signals have been sent by governors and state legislators that a work-based approach to welfare reform is no longer just one federal priority but is now a central objective in each state and one that commands support from a broad and probably enduring political coalition. One of the intriguing characteristics of the politics of welfare reform was how little debate it generated over the basic nature and purposes of the affected programs. Partisan fights erupted in some states and on some issues, but those divisions were more the exception than the rule. The broadest support was for imposing strict and extensive employment obligations on adult recipients of welfare benefits. As Thomas Kaplan noted in describing his Wisconsin field research for this study:

A striking feature of this abrupt change in approach toward AFDC has been the apparent breadth of acceptance of that change in the state. From the governor's first proposals to reduce AFDC benefits in families with teens not attending school (Learnfare), many (though by no means all) representatives of the inner city poor in Milwaukee have endorsed the changes. Wisconsin's Democrats were the initial proponents of 'ending welfare as we know it' in this state, and very little opposition has arisen to the requirement of W-2 that public assistance cash income must derive only from participation in work or work-like programs. . . . [W]ith the prominent exception of the Catholic archdiocese of Milwaukee, the central notion of Wisconsin's welfare reform — that 'welfare as we knew it' was bad for both its recipients and the broader society — has been little questioned in this state, despite the sharp difference of this new consensus from the apparent consensus of 15 years earlier (Wisconsin Field Research Report, 1998).

The story is similar in other study states. Although the states as a whole have enacted very different welfare laws, most are variants of the Work First model that stresses moving a large proportion of adult recipients into jobs as quickly as possible — or, in the now-popular administrative jargon, one that seeks to create an "immediate attachment to the workforce." Florida enacted its Work First program — entitled "WAGES," for "Work and Gain Economic Self Sufficiency" — with little controversy about the nature of benefits or their limits. The debate over

welfare reform was “moderate in both tone and content” and the final bill passed both legislative chambers with unanimous support (Florida Field Research Report, 1998). In Texas, the policy process was “highly inclusive, deliberative, factually based, and surprisingly bi-partisan” (Texas Field Research Report, 1998). In Kansas, policy-makers “generally agreed that the major objective of reform was employment and reform” (Kansas Field Research Report, 1998). The political debate in Ohio saw some dissension over family caps and a two-year time limit rather than the federally mandated five-year limit, but after these and a child-support tracking requirement were modified, the final reform legislation was enacted with only one dissenting vote in both legislative chambers (Ohio Field Research Report, 1998). Broad support was found for the Work First program philosophy in Michigan, Arizona, North Carolina, Washington, Utah, and West Virginia.

Not all states avoided conflict over the new welfare. But even where there were political divisions, the new focus on jobs commanded broad support. Urban Democrats in Georgia unsuccessfully opposed the stringency of time limits and the strength of the sanctions in Governor Zell Miller’s welfare bill and wanted the state to provide a more expansive safety net, but they did not repudiate its work requirements (Georgia Field Research Report, 1998). The debate in Rhode Island produced conflict over its reforms and in the end the state rejected time limits and retained the entitlement status of welfare benefits, but work requirements were generally accepted. Flush state treasuries may have helped in Rhode Island and other states where there was political concern about the employability of parents. Demands that parents work were made more acceptable by giving working parents more help, such as new entitlements in Rhode Island for unlimited child care and health care for children in families up to 250 percent above the poverty level.

It is hard to explain the broad support for such major departures in social policy in so many states, but the strong national economy was certainly key. Michigan’s recent history of welfare reform is instructive. Governor Engler’s initial plans for welfare reform, presented in the spring of 1992, focused on the goals of self-sufficiency and ensuring the well being of Michigan’s children and families. These were to be achieved through “job training, job readiness, keeping families together, and achieving independence,” not necessarily by getting jobs as quickly as possible. Training and education components were prominent, such as a program to train and educate AFDC recipients called EDGE (Education Designed for Gainful Employment). But by 1994, the administration’s emphasis was clearly on jobs. Governor Engler introduced Work First — a program that was clearly

intended to get people into the job market — and the program was to be housed in the newly formed Michigan Jobs Commission, not the Department of Social Services. As Michigan field researcher Carol Weissert observed:

Part of the explanation for the shift in emphasis was the strong state of the state's economy. As one Michigan Jobs Commission staffer put it, 'We moved to a point where there were jobs so it . . . makes sense in the current economy to have a program that focuses on immediate labor force attachment because jobs are available.' Gerald Miller [the secretary of DSS and architect of Work First] told audiences that one thing that drove his support for welfare reform was the fact that employers kept coming to him to try and get employees.

The strong economy enhanced support for the Work First approach in other states with strong progressive traditions. Thomas Luce, the field researcher in Minnesota, noted that

the strength of Minnesota's robust and diversified economy . . . played a significant role in shaping the conceptions of state policy makers. For the last several years the state has had an unemployment rate below 5 percent. In the Twin Cities . . . the unemployment rate has been as low as 2.5 percent. . . . [T]here is a labor shortage in many sectors of the state's economy. This strong economic climate motivated many legislators, who might not otherwise do so (i.e., liberal Democrats), to favor a TANF program that had a strong focus on work.

There were other factors behind the shift in political support to Work First. The 1994 elections were important in some states. In North Carolina, for example, Governor Hunt's approach to welfare reform changed from one that was centered on child well-being to one that emphasized work after the Republicans made large gains in the state legislature. In many states, administrators and policy staff may have been influenced by the growing number of studies by MDRC and other researchers of demonstration programs that suggested the weakness of job training and education-based programs in reducing dependency as compared to those that stressed immediate labor-force attachment. And elected officials were concerned about the swelling of welfare caseloads between the late 1980s and 1994, a growth that seemed out of proportion to the severity of the 1990 recession and that did not abate after the recession ended.

What really pushed these programs ahead in many states were the highly visible actions of governors in support of new welfare initiatives. Engler in

Michigan, Thompson in Wisconsin, Miller in Georgia, Hunt in North Carolina, Voinevich in Ohio, Chiles in Florida, Pataki in New York, and others championed work-based welfare reforms, in many cases before the Personal Responsibility Act was enacted in August 1996. The five-year time limit in the 1996 Act gave work-based reforms a fiscal rationale by signaling that income support would no longer be provided on a permanent basis by the federal government for able-bodied, non-elderly, non-disabled parents. If state and local governments were going to support such families beyond the time limits, they would have to assume the full financial burden of doing so. This signal was strengthened by requirements and financial incentives in the federal law, which imposed penalties on states for failing to achieve increasingly ambitious work-participation rates.

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4. New Players: The Growing Role of Employment Bureaucracies

These strong new political and economic signals demonstrated to state and local bureaucracies that the emphasis on work was not going away easily or soon. This encouraged many state agencies to line up behind reform proposals or even craft their own — a tendency reinforced by the fact that the real struggle in this round of reform was over *who* would administer and control the new programs. As John Hall, the field researcher in Arizona, observed, “no group plainly opposed restructuring Arizona’s welfare system; differences seemed to arise only in how the system was to be restructured.” Welfare reform has been marked by conscious attention to the way program responsibilities should be divvied up, and whether the responsible institutions have the motivations and capacity to change the ways in which welfare is managed. The result was political uncertainty and in many cases fundamental shifts in agency assignments, both of which focused the attention of welfare bureaucracies on the new tasks and objectives.

This debate varied from state to state, but much of the opposition to the old order targeted large social service agencies. In Arizona, the Senate was skeptical “about the abilities and incentives of the existing state bureaucracy to implement true welfare reform” and advanced a plan “to shrink the existing bureaucracy involved in the delivery of welfare service (most prominently the Department of Economic Security) and almost entirely privatize the new temporary assistance and job training programs” (Arizona Field Research Report, 1998). In Florida, Governor Lawton Chiles launched the state’s welfare reform effort after his election in 1992 by threatening to “blow up” the giant Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, an agency originally designed to integrate public assistance programs, but which was seen as too large to be effective and not sufficiently focused on reducing dependency. In New York, with the strong support of Governor Pataki, the Welfare Reform Act of 1997 eliminated the Department of Social Services and dispersed its functions among two new offices (the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the Office of Children and Family Services) and three old departments (Health, Labor, and Taxation and Finance). And in North Carolina, the legislature was not satisfied with the “organization, management, and effectiveness” of the state’s Department of Human Resources. This discontent increased support for devolving greater discretion and responsibility down to counties — as a way to

fashion a “human services delivery structure that meets local needs and conditions” (North Carolina Field Research Report, 1998). New program signals have been communicated by these and other major realignments of administrative power. One of the most widely used strategies for changing the purposes and signals of welfare has been to give employment bureaucracies greater control over program operations. Employment bureaucracies have the expertise, the data resources, and the institutional missions, or so it is argued, for getting people jobs, assessing skills, providing job readiness training, working with employers, setting up work experience opportunities, and finding and overseeing local job service contractors: In short, the functions needed to move people into the workforce. Close connections between employment bureaucracies and welfare agencies also change the institutional character of welfare. By locating welfare offices in job centers, states can signal that people can and should get a job and that welfare is part of a service system for job seekers, rather than a single program unto itself. Table 1 below summarizes new agency responsibilities, showing which agencies in each state are responsible for employment and training services and for cash assistance, such as determining eligibility, requiring recertifications, and changing benefits because of sanctions or time limits. The states fall into three categories according to the roles played by employment bureaucracies. Most of the states in the Rockefeller Institute implementation study — 10 out of 19 — rely more or less exclusively on employment departments or commissions to provide employment and training services. Five states (Kansas, Ohio, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas) have organized employment and training responsibilities so that employment bureaucracies share responsibility with social service agencies for employment and training under the state’s TANF program. Five states do not use separate employment agencies to implement their TANF programs and for the most part rely on large social service agencies to operate the bulk of their welfare programs. However, even in these cases, an employment or workforce development division (as in Arizona) typically has an upgraded role in operating the state’s welfare program.

Table 1		
Types of State Agencies With Primary Responsibility Over Employment and Cash Assistance Functions.		
<i>State</i>	<i>Employment and Training</i>	<i>Cash Assistance</i>
1. No or limited involvement by separate employment bureaucracy		
Arizona	Department of Economic Security	

California	Health and Welfare Agency	
Florida	Local WAGES Coalitions	Dept of Child and Family Services
Mississippi	Department of Human Services	
W. Virginia	Department of Health and Human Resources	
2. Employment bureaucracy share responsibilities for job services with social service agency		
Kansas	Department of Human Resources Social and Rehabilitation Services	Social and Rehabilitation Services
N. Carolina	Dept of Health and Human Services Department of Commerce	Dept of Health and Human Services
Ohio	Department of Human Services Department of Development Bureau of Employment Services	Department of Human Services
Rhode Island	Department of Labor and Training	Department of Human Services
Texas	Workforce Commission	Department of Human Services
3. Employment agencies have dominant responsibility for employment and training		
Georgia	Department of Labor	Department of Human Resources
Michigan	Michigan Jobs Commission	Family Independence Agency
Minnesota	Department of Economic Security	Department of Human Services
New Jersey	Department of Labor Employment & Training	Department of Human Services
New York	Department of Labor	Temporary and Disability Assistance
Tennessee	Department of Labor	Department of Human

	Dept of Employment Security	Services
Utah	Dept of Workforce Services	Office of Family Support
Washington	Employment Security Department	Dept of Social and Health Services
Wisconsin	Department of Workforce Development	
SOURCE: State Reports, based on State Capacity Study Field Research Report Form, Question 2A (State-Level Information).		

The overall situation now is one in which employment, labor, or workforce development agencies are deeply involved in the effort to find jobs for TANF-eligible families. Most of these arrangements are new, although some states have been developing connections between welfare and employment programs for some time.

Wisconsin was one of the first states to transform administrative structures to put welfare into an employment context. It began the process of creating closer connections between its public assistance agency and its department of labor — what used to be called the Department of Industry, Labor, and Human Relations (DILHR) — over a decade ago when it co-located county welfare offices with state Job Service offices in county job centers. Co-location gave way to consolidation when the state’s Wisconsin Works program was enacted in 1996 and all public assistance functions except Medicaid were transferred out of the Department of Health and Social Services into a renamed Department of Industry, Labor, and Human Relations: the Department of Workforce Development.

Welfare in Wisconsin, called W-2 for Wisconsin Works, thus has an employment “face.” TANF and MOE (maintenance of effort) funds are just two of many funding streams for job-support services in county job centers, which are operated by a contractor which answers to a workforce development bureaucracy. (Counties, non-profit, or for profit entities can compete for time-limited, usually 2-year contracts, to serve in this role.) Welfare recipients are, in effect, “mainstreamed” with other job seekers in the state. In the larger and better-funded centers, recipients or applicants may leave their children at a well-staffed on-site day care center. They can use the Wisconsin “JobNet” to look up employment opportunities or schedule appointments with employers who visit on-site. They can use telephones, fax machines, and word processors to contact employers as well as attend workshops on interviewing skills and career counseling. Throughout the process, they can get help from a large staff — a staff whose salaries and facilities may be paid for out of any of a number of

funding streams, including Wagner-Peyser or JTPA money. (Perhaps the only way one can tell that W-2 recipients are in the resource room is the time clock that they use to track their hours. This time at these job centers counts toward the minimum number of work participation hours required to receive benefits.) This blurring of the distinction between welfare and employment programs sends a clear signal: “Welfare” no longer exists; it has been replaced by a work program for poor parents.

Not only have labor and employment bureaucracies been given greater responsibilities for carrying out welfare programs, in many of the sample states their activities are more closely integrated with cash assistance and other program functions. Their local presence, in terms of staff and playing a central role in the program, is much greater than in the past, when such efforts were often half-hearted and ineffective. Georgia appears to be particularly successful in incorporating work activities and expertise in its TANF program. According to the Georgia field researcher, the AFDC/JOBS era (1990-1995) saw a “complete separation” of eligibility determination and employment services, that is prior to 1995, when Georgia enacted its “*workfirst!*” program. “AFDC and JOBS were located in separate offices, often several miles away from each other.” Workers were not cross-trained for AFDC and JOBS, and, as Michael Rich observed:

although there was no stated animosity between these two staffs, state officials acknowledged that the two programs seemed to exist in separate worlds. Eligibility workers appeared concerned only with the determination of benefit eligibility for individuals; employment services were only focused on securing a job for a client. In fact, it ran counter to the organizational interest of local AFDC offices to place clients in jobs — since diminished caseloads resulted in a need for fewer employees (Georgia Field Research Report, 1998).

The domination of eligibility reviews over employment services was evident in the distribution of staff. There were eight AFDC caseworkers for every employability specialist in the JOBS program, creating a situation, as one senior official characterized it, of “eight people loading the truck and only one person unloading it.” In 1997 this situation began to change after the Georgia Department of Human Resources contracted with the Department of Labor to place 18,000 TANF recipients in jobs and provide training and education services to an additional 40,000 clients. Under this contract, DOL staffers are now “physically located within welfare offices throughout Georgia, handling the job placement tasks formerly performed by the Department of Child and Family Services”

(Georgia Field Research Report, 1998). In some counties, front-line staff are organized into “teams;” in others, staff are cross-trained as “generic” workers with proficiency in work assessment and employment monitoring as well as case management and child care functions. Michael Rich also found a changed ratio of caseworkers and employability staff. In one local site, there are now nearly five workers who track work-related activities for every one who determines eligibility and benefits.

Most of the states in the sample have strengthened the linkages between employment agencies and services and other components of their welfare programs. The handoff between eligibility and employment workers has been largely eliminated in Utah, Kansas, West Virginia, and Tennessee by giving both functions to a single case manager. In Utah, Information/Employment Specialists now work alone or in teams to determine eligibility for TANF and employment-related programs and to monitor client participation and progress. These specialists perform a range of functions including employment services, such as faxing resumes for clients and administering testing. Specialists have a great deal of discretion in the development of self-sufficiency plans, emphasizing individual goal setting and responsibility for achieving those goals.

Under AFDC, workers with exclusively eligibility responsibilities typically dominated the client intake process. In fact, their focus on ensuring correct eligibility decisions may have worked against work-related goals, since earnings could complicate benefit determinations. But in states where eligibility specialists still exist, their administrative roles have often been diminished. In Michigan, AFDC-era assistance payment workers (who handled eligibility functions) and service workers (who handled services related to JOBS) have changed into Eligibility Specialists (ES) and Family Independence Specialists (FIS). On the surface, the change seems only label deep. However, the new FIS workers are case managers who determine eligibility as well as work closely with clients and provide a variety of services, while ES workers have been relegated to support status.⁵ The role of the eligibility technician is also shrinking in Rhode Island. Initial eligibility and determination is done by the eligibility technician while eligibility redetermination and all other functions are performed by the Family Independence Program Worker (welfare diversion, assessment for and referral to work activities, monitoring and tracking work activities, and case management). Once all the old AFDC cases have been shifted to the new system, eligibility technicians will work only on non-TANF programs.

In states where welfare is county administered and state supervised (such as New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Minnesota, California, and

Wisconsin) large urban offices tend to rely on specialists — sometimes working as teams — while offices with smaller caseloads consolidate eligibility and employment functions into one position. For example, in Wisconsin, even though the state directed the county W-2 agencies to consolidate the eligibility and employment services functions under a new Family Employment Planner, counties have done this in different ways that reflect their own traditions and sense of the work requirements. Kenosha County, Wisconsin, organized its front-line assistance workers into teams. Other counties, like Fond du Lac, kept eligibility and employment functions separate for the most part, but have organized teams for problem cases. In about half of Wisconsin counties with small caseloads, the Family Employment Planner performs both eligibility determination and employment assistance functions, and then some.

5. By law the actual determination of eligibility for Medicaid and Food Stamps must be made by public employees. There is no such requirement for TANF.

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5. Processes as Signals

The greater role of employment services and agencies in welfare represents a shift, not just in processes, but in the signals and capabilities of welfare systems. The processes used by front-line workers in dealing with poor families have changed in many other ways as well. Many states have used the intake process to signal that welfare is different now — that it entails new expectations and depends on the active participation of clients. In New Jersey, the state field researcher, Richard Roper, reported:

Before implementation of the [Work First New Jersey] program, eligibility for AFDC was based on an individual's ability to pass an income and asset test. An individual meeting this test who presented proper documentation, had at least one eligible child, and complied with certain federal requirements was entitled to receive AFDC. New Jersey's new welfare program requires applicants to pass several additional tests before income and assets are evaluated. An individual must first demonstrate a willingness to cooperate in establishing paternity and obtaining, modifying, and enforcing a child support order. In addition, the applicant must cooperate with work requirements and apply for other benefits for which the applicant may be eligible *before* an assessment of income eligibility is undertaken (New Jersey Field Research Report, 1998).

To see whether and how other states and local offices are arranging their procedures around the new signals, we asked researchers to collect information about processes used by local sites to handle families. We coded this information around major types of stages or steps, including whether a particular step was handled at this office and in what order the steps were arranged. Table 2 below shows the average order of these specific steps in the client-intake processes at 30 local sites. The table indicates the number of local sites that carry out each step — such as diversion — according to their process descriptions. The table is based on descriptions of what is *supposed* to happen. As one of our field researchers indicated, "System breakdowns can and do occur all along the line." Nonetheless, the field reports and our own site visits suggest that these plans are descriptive of much of the bureaucratic behavior taking place.

Table 2

Selected Procedural Stages in Handling Potential TANF Clients and Their Average Ordering		
<i>Stage of Process</i>	<i>Mean Order of Step</i>	<i>No. of Local Sites With Step</i>
General program orientation	1.6	26
Work search #1 — independent search for work	1.8	15
Eligibility review for entitlement programs	1.9	18
Diversion	2.0	20
Eligibility review for TANF	2.3	30
Child support/paternity determination	2.6	17
Personal responsibility plan	2.8	21
Support services assessment/referral	2.9	23
Employability assessment	3.0	26
Work search #2 — assisted job search	3.3	24
Job readiness/skill building	4.0	23
Assignment to work experience/community service	4.3	15
<p>SOURCE: State Reports, based on documents collected for State Capacity Study Field Research Report Form, Question 4 (Local Welfare Systems).</p> <p>NOTES: 1. Definitions of the client activities listed in this table include: (1) independent search for unsubsidized work — client seeks employment without services from a TANF-funded program; (2) assignment to community work experience — subsidized employment or workfare; (3) diversion — activities expressly intended to prevent entry into TANF program, such as one-time cash grants, loans, or services; (4) child support/parentage — securing child support from a noncustodial parent or activities in support of that effort; (5) general program orientation — mandatory orientation to TANF-funded program; (6) assisted job search — job search with support or services provided by a TANF-funded program, such as job clubs, counseling by TANF case manager, etc.; (7) support services assessment — assessment for child care needs, transportation needs, domestic violence problems, or alcohol or drug abuse; (8) individualized plan — a personalized plan established to attain a goal such as employment or economic self-</p>		

sufficiency; (9) eligibility for entitlement programs — determination for SSI, Medicaid, food stamps, etc.; (10) assessment of employability — employment or job readiness testing; (11) job readiness/skill building — job training, GED, English as a second language, literacy, other skill building activities.

2. In calculating “mean order of step,” activities not carried out at a local site were deleted from calculation. Ties were assigned when different families were routed to different steps. Thus, the ranges varied across local sites — some had as few as three “Steps,” some as many as eight — but the rankings did not change significantly when these ranges were standardized.

The table shows that New Jersey, as discussed earlier, is not unique in front-loading one or more steps before clients are reviewed for eligibility under TANF. Nearly all (i.e., 26 out of 30) of the local sites included here have a program orientation step, often a general meeting of applicants or potential applicants to hear about the program’s services and restrictions including the responsibilities of recipients. This step typically comes early. (Its average order of 1.6 means that for states that include this step in their process descriptions it is usually one of the first or second stages in the process.) At orientation meetings signals are often explicit. Time limits and work requirements are explained, and some offices introduce the metaphor of “savings accounts” (saving your eligibility time) to describe how a temporary assistance program differs from an AFDC entitlement.

Three other steps also occur early in the process, although they are less frequently used than orientation meetings. About half of the sites represented here require individuals to conduct some sort of initial and often independent search for work. In some states, potential applicants must contact a minimum number of employers or search for jobs for a minimum number of hours before they can qualify for benefits. Some sites also review eligibility for entitlement programs or other supportive services — such as food stamps and Medicaid — early in the process, in some cases to see whether families really need TANF cash assistance, or whether other benefits might suffice along with earnings from work. Two-thirds of the local sites review families for diversion assistance, which can be a lump-sum cash payment or loan in return in exchange for waiving eligibility for cash benefits for some period of time, such as six months. The structure of these initial steps suggests that Work First may be implemented in some locations as *Welfare Last*.

New signals are transmitted in other steps in the process. The preparation of mutually agreed-upon “personal responsibility plans” often comes right after the

eligibility review, giving case managers an opportunity to spell out in detail the expectations for clients, such as job search and child immunization as well as frequent meetings with case managers to report on progress in fulfilling the plan. A few states, for example New York, require drug screening early in the intake process. In contrast, job readiness and skill building — as well as assignment to work experience or community service programs — tend to come later in the process. As the Work First philosophy suggests, many local welfare offices are taking an essentially *experiential* approach to employability. Rather than relying on assessments of the employability of clients, they require applicant parents to seek jobs first. Only if people fail to find work after a certain number of weeks, job contacts, or other measure of effort do more formal assessment techniques come into play. In Michigan's Tireman/Detroit office, for example, if a parent does not find work after four weeks, she or he is referred by the job service contractor to the main office for a reassessment of problems that can be alleviated, such as child care and drug counseling (Michigan Field Research Report, 1998). This reactive, empirically based approach is also manifested by the lateness in the sequence of job-readiness or other training. Rather than assuming that people entering the TANF program are in need of assistance, these services are offered to that part of the caseload that fails to find work. The importance of work is thus signaled by using the labor market as a sorting mechanism to identify which cases are problematic and which are not.

The general tendencies described in Table 2 cover an enormous amount of variation — variation not just between states but also among local offices within a state. Such variation is not haphazard; much of it seems strategic. Administrators often use processes to influence program goals and emit particular signals. In West Virginia, for example, field researcher Christopher Plein observed that districts exercise substantial discretion in how they process clients. One of the districts he studied tried to impress upon individuals their options and the seriousness of the work component of the program by deviating from the flow chart developed in Charleston. In this district, case managers required applicants to go through an eligibility screen early in the process, but it was hardly a simple screening. During the screening, case managers explained that “this is a work program” and they showed the client the personal responsibility contract, which included

commitments and agreements ranging from parenting, to family budget management, to job search and workplace goals. Typically, the client is told that they must attend an orientation some week to ten days later. . . . During that

intervening time, the applicant is required to make 10 job contacts and document them before being eligible to attend the orientation meeting. . . . Another preorientation requirement is that applicants register with the state's local Job Services office in _____, a small town four miles north of _____ (West Virginia Field Research Report, 1998).

As the administrator noted, this process was "the primary diversion mechanism of the district." Thus, local administrators are not only able to rearrange activities and functions to express particular signals and advance certain program purposes, they can also take a fairly straightforward procedure such as eligibility screening and make it serve a rather unexpected, or at least not typical, function.

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6. The New Tools of Welfare

Variations in how program activities are arranged is facilitated — indeed encouraged — by the greater number of tools that welfare administrators and workers now have when handling different people and situations. Having access to a wide range of tools certainly makes sense in light of the basic task, helping a large and heterogeneous group of family heads find jobs and increase their financial independence. This expanded repertoire of services and treatments means greater discretion and potential for variation at the local level — and sometimes among individual caseworkers. Among the decisions made by front-line workers or their managers are what kinds of diversion package to offer. This can include cash grants in exchange for not applying for welfare, low-interest loans, referrals to private charities, or short-term services. Other key discretionary variables include what to incorporate into personal responsibility agreements, how and when to apply sanctions, who is employable and who should be exempted from work requirements, who should be assigned to community service and where, what services are needed and from whom, whether and how to discuss issues involving marriage and pregnancy prevention, and how to handle child support issues. The expanded range of services and sanctions, coupled with the emphasis on the goals of anti-dependency and work, is transforming some local offices from essentially regulatory agencies responsible for the proper distribution of benefits to relatively loose structures for complex and sometimes individualized problem-solving.

Diversion. Welfare diversion is one of the tools that distinguishes the new welfare as well as produces a great deal of discretion and variation at the local level. The term tends to be used to refer to cash payments or other one-time inducements that are given to families in exchange for limiting their eligibility for continuing cash assistance. But it can also refer to a number of program activities that are intended to have the effect of diverting families from receiving regular cash assistance. Our reports suggest that the function of diversion is a much more important part of the new welfare than lump-sum payments. As such it is not always easy to identify what is diversion and what is not, as the West Virginia example above implies. An activity like eligibility screening may be a form of diversion when it is carried out in certain ways, while sometimes it may simply be part of an eligibility review.

States and localities have developed diverse diversion programs. In Florida two

types of diversion are explicit — non-cash and cash. Non-cash diversion involves telling applicants of their responsibility to work if their application is approved and requiring them to look for work before their eligibility for assistance is determined. Cash diversion can provide two months worth of cash assistance “in exchange for which the client will forego on-going cash assistance for a specified length of time,” the length specified by the local office (Florida Field Research Report, 1998). However, there has been little or no cash diversion — perhaps because the state’s information system cannot keep track of who received cash grants and thus cannot prevent people from getting repeat payments. At the same time, non-cash diversion in one region of the state was reported to have diverted as much as 20 percent of the applicants. Arizona operates a “Short-Term Crisis Services Program” that provides individuals with financial assistance to stave off welfare. According to what case managers see as needed in particular cases to “secure or maintain employment,” the program can offer emergency shelter, rent or mortgage assistance, assistance with utility payments, and short-term crisis services provided by community-based organizations.

Overall, states also make greater use of non-cash forms of diversion — forms that increase the discretion exercised by local agencies and front-line workers. One of the most elaborate diversion programs is *Texas Works*, a 1997 administrative initiative of the state’s Department of Human Services. It is a program that aims to get people jobs or needed services *before* they apply for TANF benefits in order to make sure that “the only people coming onto TANF are those who need more in-depth help” (Texas Field Research Report, 1998). Clerical staff may route potential applicants to employment counseling with a *Texas Works* advisor, to a group intake interview, or to an employment resources area. Advisors may also make referrals to public or private agencies for family violence intervention, local women’s shelters, SSI benefits, drug and alcohol treatment, protective and regulatory services (for child abuse and neglect), and other services (Texas Field Research Report, 1998). The program is given a lot of emphasis; the commissioner of the Department of Human Services awards a “Commissioner’s Cup” to the region which has diverted the largest number of clients.

A large part of Wisconsin’s W-2 program can be interpreted as a diversion program. In some local sites, clients enter and have complete access to a full-service job center. If they need support, they can talk to a “resource specialist,” who may refer them to any number of potential services and benefits, such as unemployment compensation, veterans benefits, employment services, food stamps, medical assistance, child care, or any of the services provided by the

private and public agencies either located at the job center affairs or that have a collaborative relationship with the center. Even after determining eligibility for W-2 hourly payments, a parent may be judged by the case worker to be employable, which means that the family qualifies for support services (such as food stamps, medical assistance, and partial support for child care) but receives no cash assistance. If employable parents need cash, they may be offered loans to be repaid after the individual finds work.

In Ohio diversion is a central element of the program and is closely linked to the state's strategy of devolving greater responsibilities to counties. The "Prevention, Retention, and Contingency Program" gives counties "complete flexibility to design programs to help people avoid going on cash assistance, get work, and continue working" (Ohio Field Research Report, 1998). Counties develop their own eligibility standards, types of benefits, and limits of assistance. Benefits may even be provided in the form of services offered by a community-based organization.

Thus, diversion is not just a benefit; it is a function or principle that is expressed by state and local agencies generating a range of options for potential welfare applicants and occurs primarily where there is greatest pressure to minimize case loads. The content of this signal varies enormously depending on the activities included in diversion, their context, and how they are used in specific cases. Some states, such as Wisconsin, have substantial diversion programs combined with ready access to whatever services and benefits families are qualified to receive. Diversion may sometimes represent an expansion of options, an expansion that makes sense in light of the fact that most spells of welfare are short-term and require only brief assistance.⁶

But not all states and localities implement their programs this way. Some may use diversion to erect a fortress-like welfare system instead of expanding the options available to families. States may use diversion to minimize caseloads — to discourage applicants whatever their needs happen to be. Diversion may thus serve very different purposes, and actual practices will often depend on local interpretation and implementation. Because diversion options may be *ad hoc* and dependent on front-line workers' resources, judgments, and objectives, diversion has a devolutionary effect. Local offices and case managers have new decisions to make and greater leeway in making them. Diversion also produces considerable variation in how people are treated by the system, and, as we discuss below, it poses an enormous challenge for monitoring the ultimate effects of the programs on families, as families move across a wide variety of public and private institutions.

Personal Responsibility Agreements. In some states, the personal responsibility agreement is the central tool for structuring the relationships between families and welfare agencies. These agreements are sometimes little more than a standardized listing of program requirements and benefits with a vague commitment by the state to provide TANF benefits to eligible persons. Other agreements are specific and individualized. Promises may be made by the state that particular services will be provided, and the agreement is used to review progress and guide case management. The agreements are not only important signaling devices regarding client obligations, their individualized and sometimes open-ended characters give local offices and front-line workers discretion, and their use can contribute to the shift in local agencies from a rule-driven administrative culture to one that is structured around solving problems. In Ohio, for example, TANF participants must sign "Self-Sufficiency Contracts." Ohio contracts specify what kinds of work activities the head of household plans to perform, for how many hours per week, and when the activities will begin and end. Specific expectations may include paternity establishment, securing child support, reporting "everything known" about absent parents, and complying, where relevant, with a re-unification plan developed by the Ohio Children's Service Agency. The plans are *reciprocal*. They are viewed as "binding contracts" between county agencies and participants. They are taken seriously enough that counties are "strongly encouraged" to seek the advice and approval of county prosecutors if they choose to design their own contractual arrangements, which they may do (Ohio Field Research Report, 1998). Participants are advised of their rights, including the right to assistance in locating employment within the 36 month time limit, filing grievances about work assignments, appealing county actions to the state with the right to a state hearing, and maintaining eligibility for Medicaid, child care, and food stamps if no longer eligible for benefits under Ohio Work First.

West Virginia uses "Personal Responsibility Contracts." Here, as in other states, contracts are sometimes used as a diversion tool, as a device to signal the new expectations. The field researchers there found they are also used to guide case management. The contracts can be all encompassing, rather individualized, and include a variety of conditions. As the West Virginia researchers commented, "Job search and educational and training activities are common components of the Personal Responsibility Contract, but so too are agreements that parents will ensure that their children get vaccinations, that they will attend parenting classes, and that they will seek out training for soft skills, like business etiquette and family budgeting." Indeed, the importance of this instrument in West Virginia is

underlined by the fact that disagreements over the contents of contracts and compliance with their terms have given rise to a new organized program at one of the local sites in West Virginia, a program where attorneys serve as mediators when differences in contract interpretation arise between clients and family support specialists.

One of the important qualities of personal responsibility agreements is not just that they specify a range of expectations but also that they specifically indicate how a family should meet them. Signals are not vague, global injunctions like “adults must find work in two years,” or “one year,” or “three months.” They are concrete steps parents must perform *now*. Michigan’s “Family Independence Plans” list specific tasks with completion dates, including information regarding employment, education, client responsibilities, and counterpart agency responsibilities.

Personal responsibility agreements are another manifestation of the devolution of power down to local offices and case managers. In Utah, field researcher Gary Bryner observed that, “Employment specialists have a great deal of discretion in devising self-sufficiency plans for clients that are tailored to specific situations and needs” and must be followed and carefully monitored. The monitoring can be intense. With caseloads down, some case managers require frequent meetings with individuals to track compliance. And *home visits* are making a comeback. In Michigan these visits are part of a statewide initiative. In another state, however, a district initiated home visits to allow “case workers to better assess situations and determine client needs,” strengthen “the relationship between the case worker and customer,” and allow “for more open discussion.” Personal responsibility agreements and their monitoring may represent a new intensity — some might say, intrusiveness — in the relations between families and agencies.

Sanctions. Personal responsibility agreements and other program requirements are often enforced by the more frequent, albeit selective, use of sanctions, the third “S” in the trilogy of Signals, Services, and Sanctions. But in our observations there is an interesting disjunction regarding sanctions. In site visits and interviews with case workers, agency managers and employees often tell us that the sanctions are critical to the new message — that the threat of full-family sanctions in particular is important in getting clients to show up for orientation meetings, job interviews, and meet their minimum-hour requirements. Yet the evidence is still unclear whether sanctions that actually result in case closings are applied in large numbers or, if they are applied, whether they are used to enforce work requirements. Although a *Washington Post* article reported earlier

this year that based on federal data over a third of the AFDC/TANF case closings in 1997 were due to sanctions, in fact nearly all of those sanctions were ostensibly imposed because families failed to provide documentation or comply with enrollment requirements, presumably during recertifications, not because they did not satisfy work requirements.⁷ There are exceptions. Federal data indicate that Kansas closed 2,009 cases in 1997 for work-related violations, about 12 percent of all closings in the state for that year. But none of the other states in our sample reported that more than one percent of the case closings in 1997 were due to work requirements. It is possible that the federal data are inaccurate. Peter Germanis of the University of Maryland, in an ongoing study of sanctions, found discrepancies between the federal data and the data released by states. But even if we use state-provided information and recently collected data, work-related sanctions that result in case closings do not seem to be common in most states. Arizona, for example, had 4,770 case closings in April of 1998, with 1,423 (30 percent) of these said to be related to enrollment requirements and only 42 (one percent) due to violations of work requirements. Nonetheless, we should emphasize that interpreting the reasons behind the sanctions is, at best, an inexact science.

So far this discussion has dealt with sanctions resulting in case closings. States, however, seem less reluctant to impose less-than-full sanctions on families, perhaps because these sanctions are regarded as commensurate with the violations in question and thus more appropriate for bringing recipients into compliance. States are likely to impose graduated, calibrated, or even “vanishing” sanctions to get parents’ attention on program requirements without kicking them off the program. Graduated sanctions are increased if violations are repeated or ignored. In our sample, 14 out of 20 states have some form of graduated or part-time reduction of benefits. Minnesota, for example, reduces a participant’s grant by 10 percent for at least one month for the first sanction; the second sanction results in taking away whatever remains of the cash grant after rent (and in some cases utilities). Less common are time-calibrated participation-related sanctions — Wisconsin may be the only state with these — in which assistance, in effect, is reduced automatically by the number of hours “worked.” Robert Crew, the field researcher in Florida, is doing a special analysis on the use of vanishing sanctions, which are imposed on clients and then withdrawn on appeal, even before they go into effect.

The apparent infrequency of work-related sanctions may mean that nearly all families comply with work requirements, but our reports suggest that one cause is caseworker discretion. A local administrator told one of our field researchers

that even though case workers can apply sanctions to clients who fail to comply with work requirements and conditions of their personal responsibility contracts, they are reluctant to do so, knowing that the burden of sanctions falls upon children and others. Caseworkers can act very selectively, reflecting their particular values and attitudes or interpretations of the law or perhaps because of their limited time and capacity to track and monitor work activities.

The relatively high rate of sanctions related to enrollment requirements suggests another tool available to local offices, namely the use of recertification and enrollment requirements to manage and monitor cases. Recertification rates vary enormously. In 22 local sites where we were able to obtain such data, the median percentage of recertifications per month relative to the total active caseload was eight percent. However, a quarter of the sites recertified one out of five active cases or more each month. Recertifications, combined with enrollment-related sanctions, can be a powerful tool for local offices to control their caseloads.

Services. The Work First approach, combined with time limits, has affected not just what state and local welfare agencies say but what they *do*. *They do more*. States can do more because they have fewer TANF clients due to the declines in caseloads — 27 percent nationwide since 1996 — and bigger budgets because of a booming economy.⁸ States can also do more as a result of changes in the political climate. We observe a new politics of welfare, indeed a “detoxification” of welfare politics, because of the greater public acceptance of aid programs that help people go to work and limit their stays on welfare. The combination of changed signals, smaller caseloads, and new politics enables many social agencies to do more and to work together more effectively over a range of service programs involving employment assistance, child care, transportation, health, food stamps, and other social services.

Field researchers were asked to describe the mix of services and benefits offered at the local sites they studied. We found an extraordinary range of often highly specialized services. The most common, of course, were childcare, employment services, aid in child support enforcement, and transportation assistance. We also found a significant number of sites offering such services as:

- Educational services, the most common being remedial education, GED preparation, and English as Second Language;
- Substance abuse counseling, usually on contract with community based organizations;

Family support services, including a Teen Parent Center and Pediatric Care Center that a local state agency developed on its own (Bibb County, Georgia);

Emergency housing, ranging from state subsidized housing assistance to contracts with local churches to assist with recipients' housing needs;

Domestic violence and emergency intervention; and

Mental health services.

Some localities were quite inventive, forging special links with community groups. Chatham County, North Carolina, has strong ties to local churches that help with child care, especially for sick children, clothing for interviews, and the transportation of recipients. King County in Washington State offers special services to the refugee population.

One-stop job centers in Wisconsin offer a wide range of services. The welfare program (W-2) is fully integrated with other services at the more highly developed job centers, such as the one in Kenosha County. Participants in W-2 can draw on not only the employment and training, employment support, and other services and benefits specific to the program; they can also use the job center to access social services such as child care, child health checks, Children First (an employment and training program for noncustodial parents), a dislocated worker program, economic support programs (such as Medicaid and food stamps), Head Start, Job Corps, Job Training Partnership Act Programs (JTPA), paternity establishment, SSI advocacy, and WIC. Kenosha County's W-2 program brings these resources to W-2 participants by using Integrated Service Teams "containing staff formally employed by several of the collocated agencies" to manage the activities of participants (Wisconsin Field Research Report, 1998). States are not merely adding services and forming new alliances; they are also making new financial commitments. Minnesota, for example, is fully funding a universal sliding-fee child care program for the first time. The program has offered subsidies to welfare and low-income working families since 1986, but in the past waiting lists have been as long as three years. However, Minnesota field researcher Thomas Luce observed that the strong political coalition behind welfare reform, a large budget surplus, and the belief by the governor and the legislature that affordable child care was crucial for welfare recipients to find and maintain jobs led the state to spend an additional \$60 million on the program (Minnesota Field Research Report, 1998).

6. Mary Naifeh, Dynamics of Economic Well-Being, Poverty 1993-94: Trap Door? Revolving Door? Or Both? (Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, July 1998).

7. Vobejda, Barbara and Judith Havemann. "Sanctions: A Force Behind Falling Welfare Rolls," Washington Post, March 23, 1998. Case closings can be due to many other reasons, such as finding employment, increasing household income through marriage, or aging out.

8. United States General Accounting office (GAO). Welfare Reform: States Are Restructuring Programs to Reduce Welfare Dependence. Washington, D.C.: United States General Accounting Office, June 1998.

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7. New Distributions of Power: Reform and Second-Order Devolution

Although devolution to the states is widely discussed in describing the welfare reforms now underway, the real federalism story of welfare reform is *local*. Even in what are defined as state-administered welfare systems, there are major developments to devolve welfare and related social program responsibilities to local entities. This includes more than just counties: In many states, new or relatively new regional entities are now responsible for melding welfare and workforce responsibilities—responsibilities that are often privatized, or using a term that deserves more recognition, non-profitized. This movement is what we call “*second-order devolution*”; it has important ramifications and involves adjustments and sometimes strong tensions among agencies and stakeholders.

Historical perspective is useful here in discussing the federalism effect of contemporary welfare reforms. Prior to FDR’s New Deal, programs to aid the poor were primarily structured, funded, and administered by local governments and charities. In fact, going back to Colonial history, this role was carried out (to the extent it was carried out at all) by towns. Later, county governments took on this role in states in which counties were important units of local government, which included most states. The New Deal not only represented a turning point with the national government taking a more activist role in the planning and financing of social programs to aid the poor, it also brought a rise in the role of state governments in this field. Hence, one of the surprising developments now is this state-to-local devolution.

One might be skeptical about this finding. By law, states over the years have assumed increased responsibility for welfare. Thirty-eight states now have what are legally termed “state-administered” welfare systems. The remaining 12 states (including some very big ones— notably, California, New York, and Ohio) have so-called “state-supervised/county administered” systems. The latter arrangement is one in which states set policy goals, prescribe administrative arrangements, and provide funds, but the basic legal responsibility is lodged at the county level. The direction of change over the past forty years has been for states to shift from state-supervised to state-administered systems, resulting in greater policy and administrative centralization at the state level.

The new shift to local offices is only in part attributable to statutory changes. In fact, the most important driving force for the new decentralization of power is the nature of the new task. *The 1996 shift to a service and sanctioning strategy for*

welfare inexorably pushes decision-making downward. This is because so much of what needs to be done to get and keep a person off of welfare has to be decided, arranged, and carried out locally. As Thomas Kaplan, the field researcher in Wisconsin, observed:

Local agencies have substantial discretion and opportunity for innovation. This is in part a matter of necessity. The core of W-2 is a set of complex interactions between agency and participant that resists central control. W-2 requires complex decision-making and the application of much judgment. The program also requires extensive community participation. . . . Real decision-making, which fundamentally shapes the participants' experience in the program, ultimately must be made by the line worker or teams of workers and their immediate supervisors (Wisconsin Field Research Report, 1998).

The biggest increase in discretion under the new regime for welfare policy, capped as it is by the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, occurs at the *point of contact* between local workers in welfare systems and the individual applicant or recipient. In past periods, the idea that such discretion should be assigned to local workers was resisted. Reformers complained about the often-harsh treatment of local agencies in places where poor people were treated badly, sometimes simply given bus money. However, if the kind of behavioral fine tuning envisioned in the Personal Responsibility Act is to be achieved, it is hard to avoid assigning major responsibility to local administrators or on-the-ground case managers.

We have stressed heightened local discretion in much of the discussion so far — in the drafting and enforcement of personal responsibility agreements, decisions to impose sanctions only some times and on only some families when violations occur, in judgments about whether and how a potential applicant could be diverted, in deciding what services are needed and from whom, and in determining whether job search should continue or a person should be assigned to community service. The field research reports also suggest that some of this decision-making and problem-solving by local workers or managers may lead local agencies to be more active in developing and implementing proactive initiatives. Recurrent problems that come up as workers try to move a diverse groups of people into the workforce may eventually be viewed as generalized problems, and administrators may seek solutions and make changes whether or not they seem to have the legal authority to do so. In Bibb County, Georgia, the county office of the Department of Family and Children Services unilaterally took steps toward integrating and expanding client services, such as contracting

for transportation services or placing a pediatric care facility in a welfare office. "This assertiveness on the part of local operations," Michael Rich argued, "is a culture change on its own merits. County operations were more or less completely subservient to the state operations headquartered in Atlanta until recent years" (Georgia Field Research Report, 1998). As local agencies grapple with complicated problems, they not only exercised discretion, but also may face new incentives to push the envelope on their own. Evidence of this runs through many of our field reports, for example, in the discussion of how a West Virginia district office deviated from the state's intake procedure to give greater special emphasis to its own brand of diversion. In her report on Kansas, Jocelyn Johnston observed that:

Because local administrative offices in Kansas are free to offer services through contractual/provider arrangements, there are many instances of LAO-originated transportation, family preservation, pregnancy prevention, and child care initiatives which are neither arranged by the state, nor consistently available from all LAOs. It appears that when deviations from the state 'template' occur, LAOs offer more — not fewer — services (Kansas Field Research Report, 1998).

Much of the new decentralization is explicit. The big issues for welfare reform in Ohio were relationships between the state and county governments. Before welfare reform, counties administered welfare but the state "wrote extensive rules and policy guidelines to influence the programs offered to welfare recipients," and counties depended on state agencies and their agreements for services. Under the new law each of the 88 counties negotiates a "partnership agreement" with the state. These agreements allow extensive flexibility in the kinds of services offered to families — especially with respect to employment services, self-sufficiency plans, and diversion activities — and they permit the county to contract for services with whatever groups it wants (Ohio Field Research Report, 1998). Other already decentralized states — such as Minnesota, California, and North Carolina — show similar increases in express grants of local authority and autonomy in carrying out welfare reform. And some states with centralized systems in the past — such as Florida — have moved dramatically toward locally governed programs.

Recipients of New Power — Diverse, Complex, and Often Nonprofit.
Devolution to local service providers does not merely pass power down to local governments or local offices of state governments. To the degree that the new welfare provides greater discretion in the relationships between providers and

families, power may flow to large, diverse networks of public and private organizations.

To understand who is carrying out welfare reform, we asked field researchers to indicate which institutions were responsible for delivering services in the program areas of cash assistance, employment and training services, and pregnancy prevention. Table 3 below presents a simplified array of these data, showing the percentage of states that have given a role in delivering these three types of services or benefits to four kinds of institutions: (1) central state government offices, (2) local state government offices, (3) local governments, and (4) private organizations, whether profit or nonprofit. The table shows the percentage of states in our sample that have given each of these types of institutions a significant role in delivering services in the three areas.

Table 3			
Second-Order Devolution Varies by Program Function			
Percent of States Indicating That Public and Private Institutions Perform a Significant Role in Service Delivery, Administrative Design, and Policy Making			
<i>Institution</i>	<i>Cash Assistance</i>	<i>Employment & Training</i>	<i>Pregnancy Prevention</i>
Service Delivery			
State Government - Central	32	42	40
State Government - Local	53	73	40
Local Government	37	47	53
Private	21	79	73
Administrative Design			
State Government - Central	95	95	53
State Government - Local	32	42	21
Local Government	37	32	21
Private	11	32	21
Policy Making			
State Government - Central	100	100	73

State Government - Local	16	37	33
Local Government	21	26	27
Private	21	26	33
Number of States	19	19	15
SOURCE: State Reports, based on State Capacity Study Field Research Report Form, Question 2D (State Level Information).			

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8. Varieties of Welfare Cultures

We have traced three institutional factors that, when taken together, have had an important impact on the character and purposes of local welfare offices: (1) strong political forces in favor of programs that support work; (2) an expanded repertoire of services, sanctions, and administrative signaling devices that welfare offices may now use as they try to influence individual or family behavior; and (3) greater discretion exercised by local offices and front-line workers in dealing with clients. These and other factors have produced an important shift in the fundamental operational goals of local offices away from the AFDC emphasis on correct eligibility decisions and toward a greater emphasis on work-related and anti-dependency goals. In addition to this overall shift, however, there is also growing diversity in state and local systems — diversity in their basic purposes and in how they are trying to achieve those purposes.

To summarize the degree of change at the ground level, we asked field researchers to make overall assessments of the operational goals of local welfare offices, based on their observations of administrative processes, how staff resources were assigned across different functions, what workers and local administrators thought their “report cards” were,⁹ and other characteristics of local administrative systems. Although the field researchers were free to propose other purposes, we suggested six possible goal clusters, clusters which were not mutually exclusive but which captured the main emphasis of a program:

1. *Supporting Work and Work-related Activities.* A system high on this dimension places emphasis on moving applicants or participants into jobs or job-preparation activities. It makes employment and training services readily available to clients. It stresses work-related outcomes in its management philosophy through a system of requirements, program evaluations, and financial incentives. It builds a management information system that tracks people through assignments and histories. And it does not put special burdens on families with earnings, as did many AFDC offices, which viewed people with earnings as being more likely to cheat the system.

2. *Anti-dependency or Welfare Avoidance.* A system that stresses this orientation would do as much as possible to signal that welfare is a temporary and inadequate solution to personal economic problems. These signals may be indicated by a vigorous diversion program, an emphasis on telling recipients

about time limits, the use of social contracts to spell out recipients' responsibilities, procedures that make applications hard to complete, and an emphasis on minimizing caseload in agency reports and employee evaluations. Recertifications may be frequent and strictly enforced by enrollment-related sanctions.

3. *Ensuring Correct Eligibility Decisions.* A system high on this dimension places emphasis on determining and verifying eligibility for benefits and on minimizing fraud and error rates. Applicants may be asked to obtain and provide considerable and very specific documentation; employees may be evaluated primarily on the basis of error rates; and people with nonwelfare income may be treated as "error prone" and face greater suspicion (perhaps by being required to report back more frequently). Such systems need not always be harsh in their treatment of clients; they might also be designed to ensure due process and fair treatment to all applicants by specifying, in formal and detailed rules, what procedures front-line workers should follow in handling cases.

4. *Family Well-being.* A system high on this dimension may do as much as possible to assess and address problems affecting applicants and their families, including problems of physical or sexual abuse; drug or alcohol addiction; mental health; lack of adequate nutrition, housing, immunization, or other aspects of medical care; poor school attendance by children; as well as specific obstacles affecting adults' ability to get and stay in the workforce. Its information system may be specifically designed to allow case managers to find information about all persons within a household, not just the head of household.

5. *Influencing Family Structures and Relationships.* Systems that highlight these goals would invest significant resources in programs designed to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, preserve two-parent families, and reduce the number of children born to parents on welfare. Counseling and educational programs might be stressed; reports might track indicators of changing family structures; and welfare workers may emphasize family caps and family planning services in their interactions with recipients.

6. *Minimizing Program Costs to State or Local Governments.* There are many ways in which governments can minimize their costs, and most of those may involve one or more the goals already listed above. But if cost-minimization is the main goal, it may produce a certain "spin" on how other objectives are treated. Services may be minimal. Outside programs might be brought to bear on the

state's welfare to work effort, especially where nonwelfare federal dollars could be exploited to absorb the costs of achieving federally mandated goals for the welfare population. States might also use capitation arrangements in contracts with service providers, though with little concern about minimum standards for performance — or little ability to monitor those standards.

We will discuss these analyses of the researchers in greater detail in an upcoming Rockefeller Report, but we can summarize the basic findings. First, nearly all of the local systems could be classified into one of three basic types with respect to these goal clusters. About three-fourths of the local sites fell into two categories that emphasized work or work and anti-dependency, more or less evenly divided between the two:

(1) *Systems that stress welfare avoidance and work.* In these systems, work and welfare avoidance are emphasized by relying on diversion programs, up-front job search, orientation meetings that stress welfare as a last resort and jobs as a way of getting people off of welfare rolls, and (in some cases) frequent recertification. However, for the few who are on the welfare rolls, services are generally plentiful, case managers often try to identify special needs for families who fail to find work quickly, and the connections between eligibility, job services, and support services tend to be closer than before. Local officials and workers view state officials as wanting to see, above all else, lower caseloads. Still, the work participation rates of family heads remaining on the rolls are very important, especially the work participation rate of two-parent families, which many states emphasize regardless of their other goals.

(2) *Systems that stress work but not welfare avoidance.* These local offices — mostly in Northern states — stress work-related goals yet put little *independent* emphasis on reducing welfare roles. Diversion is typically not offered or a major program focus. The programs may erect few procedural obstacles to persons who want to claim welfare benefits, nor do they reward contractors and local officials for reducing cases. Employment bureaucracies and private contractors may be paid on the basis of the number of persons who are placed in jobs and who keep them. In Michigan, for example, Carol Weissert observed that the state's welfare system has shifted in recent years from an emphasis on welfare avoidance and anti-dependency toward one that focuses on work alone. Now, “[t]he output is not reunited families or even reductions in welfare rolls but the reduction in the number of recipients who do not have earned income” (Michigan Field Research Report, 1997). Kansas' local offices fit into this category too. Like Michigan, Kansas has no diversion program and child care and other support

services are well funded and available; and although Kansas requires *applicant* job search like many of the systems in the first category, our researcher found “no evidence that front line workers (or their supervisors) seek to exclude applicants from TANF” (Kansas Field Research Report, 1998). In brief, in these states the “packaging” of cash benefits and earnings is perfectly acceptable. In many of the states in this category, such as Minnesota, combining welfare and earnings is also encouraged by the eligibility laws, which tend to have high earnings disregards.

In about one-fifth of the sites in our study, researchers found a third category: (3) *systems that stress correct eligibility decisions and anti-fraud programs*. In these locations, emphasis is placed on ensuring that people are not getting benefits for which they do not qualify. This orientation may be expressed in how different clients are treated. All clients must be recertified every 12 months in one local site, while *employed* clients must go through recertification every six months, presumably because outside earnings are considered to be a major source of fraud. This culture is also manifest in the allocation of staff and their relationships: Most staff are eligibility specialists rather than case managers or other front-line workers with strong employment-related missions, and those with job-related functions are separated — either physically or procedurally — from intake workers. For example, even though one site was labeled a “multi-service center” and housed offices of state agencies that handled cash assistance, child care, and employment services, there was virtually no interaction among these offices. Employees from the different agencies never met, despite their proximity, and there were no procedures for moving families from one office to another. Administrators at this site, according to our researcher:

do not try to cooperate or coordinate cases and they are quite up-front about it. As one interviewee succinctly put it, ‘We don’t do case management’ — they neither have the staff or the money to do it. . . . [T]hey only spend about an hour to an hour-and-a-half with clients getting very basic information. For services, clients are sent elsewhere — much like shuffling them off down an assembly line.

As this testimony suggests, bringing a work orientation to bear on a welfare program demands resources, especially staff. In this site, the average number of TANF cases per front-line worker was 135, and these workers had other responsibilities in other programs, including food stamps. In systems with large caseloads, workers may have little opportunity to go beyond eligibility reviews and apply the whole panoply of services, sanctions, and signals that make up the

new welfare in other locations.

There are two other factors that reinforce this eligibility/compliance orientation where it still exists.¹⁰ First, several local sites indicated that their state was under a lot of pressure to reduce food stamp eligibility errors, and since many sites use the same employees to review families for TANF and food stamps, that pressure can carry over into pressures on front-line workers to focus on fraud and eligibility errors. Second, most of the states in our field research sample have not changed their “quality control” programs after AFDC was replaced by TANF. Many still retain the focus on eligibility error rates — sometimes because of the food stamp program, and sometimes because of an active concern by the state for welfare fraud — and this can translate into a belief by local administrators that most of their attention and resources should be devoted to keeping these errors down. It is also interesting to note what orientations (i.e., goal clusters; see above) were *not* apparent in most state and local management systems. Researchers found relatively little emphasis on “family well-being” and “influencing family structures” (such as encouraging two-parent families and discouraging out-of-wedlock births). Although personal responsibility agreements often included requirements that children be immunized, and although some local offices made services to children readily available to those who need them (such as the Georgia office with pediatric care facilities on-site), staff resources and information collection efforts still focused on adults and adult behavior. “Influencing family structures” might be stressed in the state’s overall welfare strategy without being a significant part of the operations of local welfare systems, but we have not found a lot of evidence of that. In interviews with caseworkers, we and our researchers have found that many are reluctant to raise family planning issues or make referrals to family planning clinics — though a few certainly are not resistant to this goal, indicating a limited but significant amount of variation on this score even *within* local welfare offices. Somewhat more surprisingly, only one local site was thought to organize itself to minimize public costs. This was in a county that shared a substantial proportion of the costs of AFDC/TANF with the state and that had historically stressed cost-avoidance by minimizing eligibility errors and fraud, keeping administrative costs low through high worker-caseload ratios (about one worker per 200 cases), and off-loading employment and support services to other (non-AFDC) agencies. However, even this local office has moved toward greater emphasis on work placement and services in the last two years; field researchers examining other sites have generally found little evidence of cost minimization.

In sum, while most welfare offices under the old order — AFDC/JOBS —

probably belonged to the third category and put little stress on work through the early 1990s, this type of office is now more the exception than the rule. This shift in program purposes represents an enormous change that has occurred with breathtaking speed. It may be the case that signals and program aspirations can change very quickly — even at the lowest administrative levels — if it becomes clear that there finally has been an enormous change in the political and economic environment, one that points toward work and anti-dependency as urgent and feasible aims. And these changes can be reinforced by major reorganizations of responsibility, as employment bureaucracies become a nearby presence rather than a distant source of referrals; as local offices have greater administrative discretion and a wider array of treatments and tools to draw on when dealing with their heterogeneous clientele; and as the national and state laws contain new imperatives, including time limits for benefits and financial penalties for program failure.

Yet the variations are also important. State and local systems are evolving along different paths. The distinction between those that stress work *and* welfare avoidance and those that stress work alone may be especially critical for clients and program assessments. Both approaches are perfectly compatible with the Personal Responsibility Act, but they can have very different consequences for families. By encouraging clients to combine earnings and benefits, the latter systems may enhance total family income and smooth fluctuations as household heads move in and out of jobs. At the same time, however, the five-year time clock is probably ticking away for these families even while they are deemed to be succeeding. The former systems — systems that try to minimize caseloads — may prevent people from drawing down their time clock quickly by giving them options other than regular benefits, and one-shot diversion payments or services may be the most timely and useful forms of support for the large number of families who suffer only brief spells of poverty. However, by making it hard for families to combine welfare and earnings, these systems are likely to reduce family income over time and increase its volatility, other things being equal. Certainly these two types of systems have to be evaluated in different ways. Those that stress welfare avoidance create selection biases in their programs: by skimming off those who can readily find jobs at the beginning of the administrative process, the remaining families who enter the welfare rolls will typically be harder to employ. Thus, comparative analyses of families who leave the rolls cannot be easily interpreted, since some of the families who are expected to be influenced by the new program never actually receive “regular” benefits. Indeed, these families may be the most employable and the most

affected by the new program signals. In contrast, studies of those who leave TANF programs may capture a greater proportion of program effects in places where work participation rates are of the greatest importance.

These distinctions hardly begin to capture the wide operational variations in the clusters of goals institutionalized in state and local systems for the new welfare. Systems that stress welfare avoidance range from those that are truly “hard shelled” — fortress-like programs that use referrals to private charities, federal entitlements, diversion payments, and extensive application requirements to discourage entry — to much more permeable (“soft-shelled”) systems that allow ready entry for those who want benefits but who present alternatives to regular welfare benefits throughout the administrative process. One interesting case is the W-2 program in Dane County, Wisconsin. Like other local sites in the state, it emphasizes immediate job search and many staff members work directly with county businesses to find and create opportunities for unsubsidized employment; and like other local contractors, its operational definition of success is caseload reduction. But the agency has approached this goal by creating an elaborate, aggressive approach for solving family problems. It brings in child welfare and other county service workers to deal with multi-problem cases, and its case managers work extensively with community-based service workers to provide preventive services to troubled families. Here, financial employment planners are in effect implementing a “Work First Plus” approach to W-2. They stress immediate job search and placement, but they continue to work with and counsel people placed in jobs about their next jobs — and about educational and training opportunities. In a sense, they are grafting a human capital approach onto W-2’s “Work First” core. This intensive approach to problem solving is made feasible by low caseloads, an economically prosperous state and a growing county, a politically liberal constituency, and an affordable educational system. The important point to take from this discussion is the proliferation of welfare tools and the opportunities for discretion are giving many local offices a *protean* quality, a capacity to vary depending on community resources and management decisions about how to structure work processes, how to use personal responsibility agreements and diversion options, what kinds of people to hire, how to work with other agencies, and where to aim case managers’ attention. It is not easy to predict, based on even an extensive knowledge of a state’s laws, what options and opportunities a particular family will face in a particular welfare office.

9. By “report card,” we mean their perception of what single measure of success, if any, top officials are looking for when reviewing the performance records of local offices.

10. For an excellent discussion of this administrative culture, see Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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9. The Special Challenge of Information Systems

The changes in signals, the expansion of services, the selective use of sanctions, and redistribution of administrative discretion and responsibility constitute an enormous and rapid shift in the basic purposes of and distribution of power in welfare programs. *Yet even as a large number of the institutions involved in welfare are changing their fundamental operations, many of the linkages among relevant institutions have not yet adapted to the new tasks.* This is not unexpected: the bigger the change in program signals, the greater the challenge of adapting institutional structures and relationships. Despite the fact that the federal government has eliminated its quality control "Q.C." oversight activities with respect to TANF, many states in our sample have not adapted their programs to the new federal performance orientation. Also, in some states, relations between different agencies — and between the state government and its local agents — are strained. Administrative resources are not distributed in ways that reach the largest dependent populations nor have states developed performance criteria or budgetary methods consistent with their welfare reforms that they can then apply to oversee and assist local agencies and providers.

The most important disjunction between the new welfare and its management involves state information systems. We found information systems to be critical to (and at the center of controversy in) this round of the field research. Indeed, the Personal Responsibility Act may be the first large-scale "information age" social policy in the United States. Both the opportunities and demands of this transition are daunting. Rather than relying on old-style procedural rules and regulations to control the administration of state and local programs, information systems offer the promise that both state and local agencies can develop new managerial policies and procedures, staffing, and agency structures — including privatization — while at the same time assuring accountability to central authorities by reporting accurate and interpretable information on the achievement of program objectives, the provision of services, and program expenditures.

But despite the fact and hope that this promise may be fulfilled someday, that day has not yet arrived. If there is any major weakness in the implementation of the new welfare, data systems are it. The new federal, state, and local welfare reforms demand a multiplicity of new or expanded functions for information systems — and most state and local governments, even during these relatively

flush times, are far from creating systems to perform these functions. Critical federalism struggles have developed over these functions, conflicts whose resolutions will shape welfare programs for many years to come.

Much of the attention to information systems has focused on generating the new quarterly reports states must submit to the federal government. These requirements have been highlighted because the federal government can impose financial penalties on states that fail to submit timely reports and because they in many areas call for data heretofore not captured by state information systems. Most of these systems were designed primarily to report aggregate income-eligibility information on families served and characteristics and current status of those families. The new reports call for disaggregated information on family members' citizenship and marital status, job participation tracking in seven work activities, reductions in assistance due to sanctions, and the presence of a disabled child or adult in the family — information that state systems did not always collect in the past. An even greater challenge for the states is the federal regulations requiring them to report on the activities states engage in with their maintenance of effort (MOE) funds. Federal officials are said to be concerned that states will divert hard-to-employ adults away from federal-supported TANF programs — under which they are subject to work participation rates — into separate, state-funded programs not covered by such requirements. To be sure that states are not inflating their TANF work and participation rates in this way, the federal government has proposed rules that require extensive reporting for MOE spending on people who would otherwise be eligible under TANF. These rules make sense from a federal perspective, but many states argue that they add new and difficult reporting burdens and constrain services to TANF eligibles and for post-TANF services for job retention and upgrading.

Federal accountability is certainly legitimate. The Congress and the Executive — and citizens — ought to know how federal funds are spent. They should be able to tell whether TANF money is spent on the purposes identified in the Personal Responsibility Act or whether states are instead using the block grant to reduce their welfare spending.

But it is also true that federal accountability is only one of the many functions that information systems need to perform. Our research indicates that state information systems are still a long way from solving basic operational problems for the new tasks of welfare reform and the new distribution of responsibilities among state and local offices. We have found an enormous and pressing need for information systems that give workers and administrators the ability to *manage* the new signals and purposes of welfare reform.

To gauge the capacity of state information systems for managing welfare programs, we asked the field researchers to assess those systems in light of a list of questions that welfare administrators and case managers might want to answer — both at the state and local levels — in order to carry out work-focused, time-limited welfare programs. Some of these questions are, in effect, traditional questions, the answers to which are needed to administer a cash-assistance program, including questions about the sources of support from other programs, the number and status of cases, and the kinds of benefits provided. The new law also requires hard-to-collect income data pertaining to lifetime aid limits, which entail collecting information about welfare spells in other states. Other information is needed to determine how well work-focused service systems are operating. For example, we asked field researchers whether state or local administrators could track how many parents were assigned to work activities, which work activities they were assigned to, how many parents were exempt from work requirements and why, how many persons working were satisfying minimum hour requirements, how many parents who found work subsequently lost their jobs (while still receiving benefits), and how many cases were approaching time limits. We also asked whether managers had access to information about specific factors that might help explain why parents are or are not finding employment, such as the number of parents with no prior labor experience, what their educational backgrounds are, the number of applicants waiting for child care, the number who do not have access to an automobile, the number who are waiting for community service assignments, and the number of parents or families who have been found to suffer from obstacles such as substance abuse, domestic abuse, or mental health problems.

Field researchers were asked to assign numerical scores based on their assessments of the availability and accessibility of the answers to these questions. Scores ranged from one — which was assigned if the information needed to answer the question was not collected — to five, a score indicating that the answer was accessible through the program's information system and was regularly reported. In several cases, field researchers were able to check the perceptions of state administrators with those of local administrators — a comparison that proved to be revealing. The mean scores across the 18 states for which we have data in this area are listed in Table 4, below, which divides the items shown into those that support the cash assistance functions of determining and monitoring the eligibility status of applications and those that are important in overseeing, enforcing, and assessing work-focused service systems.

Table 4		
Capacity Scores of Welfare Information Systems		
Scores Indicate Ease With Which State or Local Administrators May Obtain Answers to Selected Questions, With Higher Scores Meaning Greater Ease		
<i>Information</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Local</i>
<i>Case status, eligibility, and caseload information</i>		
How many recipients receive Medicaid or other medical assistance?	4.9	4.6
How many applications have been approved at each site during a month?	4.9	4.7
How many recipients are receiving SSI?	4.8	4.3
How many applications are currently active at a site?	4.8	4.7
How many applications have been made at each site during a month?	4.8	4.6
How many cases have been closed during the past month?	4.8	4.2
How many program participants are adults; how many are children?	4.7	4.6
Among cases closed in the past month, what were the reasons?	4.4	3.8
How many applications are currently under review?	4.3	4.5
How many applicants have received TANF benefits in the same county?	4.0	3.9
How many applications at a site are of unknown status?	3.8	4.0
How many applicants have received TANF benefits in the State?	3.6	3.4
How many participants are within one month of their life-time limit?	3.5	3.1
How many applicants received aid under a diversion program?	3.5	3.2
How many applications are missing documentation required for approval?	3.4	3.2
How many applicants have received benefits from another State?	2.1	2.1
<i>Average; caseload/eligibility information</i>	3.9	3.8
<i>Work status information and employment barriers</i>		

Of those not exempt from work, how many assigned to any work activity?	4.5	4.0
Of those assigned to a particular work activity, how many engaged in it?	4.5	3.8
Of those not exempt, how many assigned to a particular work activity?	4.4	3.9
How many adults have various levels of education?	4.3	3.8
Among active cases, how many are work exempt; how many are not?	4.2	3.8
Of those exempt from work, how many are due to care for an infant?	4.1	3.6
How many recipients are attending school or college?	4.0	3.5
Of adult recipients who had jobs, how many lost jobs in the past month?	3.9	3.4
Of those exempt from work, how many for reasons other than an infant?	3.9	3.6
If assigned work activity, how many met minimum hour requirements?	3.8	3.3
If assigned to vocational education, how many within 1 month of 12 month limit?	3.8	3.1
How many cases are nearing the work-requirement time limit?	3.6	3.3
What were the reasons for voluntary terminations of benefits?	3.6	3.0
How many adults changed from one type of work activity to another?	3.5	2.9
If assigned work activity, for how many are work hours not available?	3.5	3.1
How many recipients are exempt because they lack child care?	3.3	3.0
How many families have access to an automobile?	3.1	2.5
Of new entrants during a month, how many have no prior job experience?	2.9	2.2
Of children receiving benefits, how many implicated in abuse/neglect cases?	2.8	2.4
Of adults receiving benefits, how many with substance abuse diagnosis?	2.5	2.1
Of adults receiving benefits, how many with mental health	2.3	2.0

diagnosis?		
How many days have those assigned to community service been waiting?	2.2	1.8
How long have families assigned to child care been waiting for services?	2.1	1.9
Average; work-related information	3.6	3.1
<p>SOURCE: State Reports, based on State Capacity Study Field Research Report Form, Question 5C (State-Level Information) and Question 8 (Local Welfare Systems).</p> <p>NOTE: Based on interviews and observations, state researchers determined whether the information listed could be obtained from the current welfare information system (or systems) by state and local administrators. Researchers assigned codes indicating the accessibility of the information: 1 = information cannot be obtained under any circumstances; at least some of the data needed to produce answers are not collected or not entered into the information system; 2 = information cannot be obtained under any circumstances; although the component data are collected, these data are not and cannot be collated in such a way that answers the question; 3 = information can be obtained, but it requires costly, non-routine manipulation and analyses of existing databases; 4 = information can be obtained without much difficulty, though it usually is not; 5 = information can be obtained and usually is; it is generated as part of routine reports.</p>		

Based on these data, it is clear that existing welfare information systems are much more geared towards overseeing a cash assistance/eligibility process than complex service systems. The average accessibility score for items in the cash assistance/eligibility category is a little less than four, a score that means that the information is readily available from the system but not typically reported; the scores for work-related information are 3.6 for state level administrators and only 3.1 for local level managers. A score of three means that the data are theoretically obtainable (because the information is collected somewhere and entered into some data system) but to answer the question would require costly, non-routine manipulation and analyses of existing databases (such as collating data from completely separate cash assistance and employment data systems). Among these work-related items, the score for local level information is always lower than the score for the same information at the state level, showing that administrators in local welfare offices find information systems to be less effective

— less capable of answering their questions — than do administrators in central state offices. Our conclusion is that most welfare information systems are a long way from adapting to the new management needs of a work-based program, and they are particularly limited in providing information to local managers and workers who have been given the main responsibility and discretion for making these programs work.

Most state information systems are quite good at tracking the number of cases and their status — and they are particularly good at identifying other sources of governmental support to families on TANF. However, some of the newer activities — such as diversion (note that the mean for this activity is calculated only for states with diversion programs) — are not yet tracked well. Nor have most states worked out ways of incorporating previous spells of welfare into current records. The failure to do this across states is understandable since ways to achieve the aim of a national data bank (and other methods of tracking spells across states to enforce the federal 5-year lifetime limit) are still under development. But it is a little surprising that most states do not have information on previous spells in other counties within their own state.

The weaknesses in tracking people and families through work-based welfare services are, however, more glaring — and for these questions, we also found resistance to providing usable information from the state to local offices. Moreover, very few states can answer questions at the state or local level about how many families are waiting for child care or community service assignments. Nor do states have much information on how many people face various different barriers to employment, such as substance abuse, mental health problems, lack of access to a car, or the lack of any prior work experience. Enforcing work requirements is likely to be made more difficult in this information environment. Managers at the local levels in many states cannot determine whether clients are failing to submit information on the number of hours they have worked and cannot tell how many families are approaching their time limits before they need to find a job. In many cases, state administrators appear to be able to determine how many clients are assigned to work, engaged in particular types of work (e.g., unsubsidized jobs vs. community service), and how many families are exempt from work requirements (especially due to having a young infant). But, again, this information tends to be more accessible at the state level than to local managers and workers.

Thus, although current information systems are generally adept at determining program status and maintaining information on program eligibility, they are less helpful in giving local managers and front-line workers information on how

families are proceeding (or not proceeding) through the increasingly complicated *processes* of the new welfare, which includes job search, orientation, job readiness training, assessments of employability, child care, individual responsibility agreements, job placement, job loss, recertifications, sanctions, and loops back through one or more of these stages and requirements. As Sarah Liebschutz, our field research director in New York State, reported, "The New York State Welfare Management System was conceived and developed to standardize determinations of welfare eligibility and benefits throughout the state. It works in carrying out those functions. It was not designed to be an interactive, dynamic management system. The imbalance between what is actually collected and what is useful to managers to plan strategically is a source of frustration" (New York State Report, 1998).

That is to say, although many states have devolved responsibility for the administration of welfare programs down to local offices, they are still using centralized information systems designed to support statewide information collection and analysis, not local management or operational needs. Local managers and workers often have no access to the state's welfare information system. They provide data which are entered into mainframe systems but it may be weeks or months before they receive information about their own caseloads, work participation rates, and other measures. This means that local managers cannot use this information to respond quickly to changing conditions or new problems. Nor can they use it to pinpoint problems, since the reports are often summaries that do not allow managers to see whether problems are occurring at certain stages in the administrative process, among certain workers or work groups, or for certain types of clients or families. In sum, much of the data coming from topside offer little information managers can use to improve their local systems and work processes.

Another reason why it is hard to track families through the new processes of welfare is because information systems are highly fragmented. Most states are bringing several program areas and functions together in their administrative systems for welfare, such as child support, child care, employment programs, job readiness training, as well as income transfer programs (TANF, food stamps, Medicaid); this despite the fact that front-line welfare workers are often assigned broad inter-connected case management responsibilities with such titles as "family independence specialists." But although positions and offices are integrated, their information systems typically are not. Each program area and function typically has its own information system, and workers with new holistic titles and responsibilities may have to deal with three or more different systems

— for example, for child support, systems for determining and tracking eligibility for aid, and one for job placement and related service activities. In one state, the fact that workers must deal with separate data systems creates "huge adjustments," whereby "reports cannot be extracted from existing systems" creating "a constant source of frustration." Only the state can combine data from employment and income maintenance systems, meaning that local offices "are totally dependent on the central office for management reports (and it appears that they receive few)."

We found considerable confusion about what information systems can and cannot do between state and local officials. For example, this involved a lack of agreement between state and local officials about what questions could and could not be answered by current systems. In one local site in a state with a state-supervised, county-administered system, there was no correlation between the assessments of state-level administrators and county-level administrators. In this state,

the state respondent indicated that local administrators can determine, among adult recipients, who participated in different types of work activity at the end of the month. The local respondent, however, said the opposite, that the information cannot be obtained under any circumstances.

In another state, state administrators and local administrators in two sites disagreed on over 40 percent of the questions asked. Although the two local sites disagreed with each other on a few questions, our research director wrote, "More interesting are the questions that both sites disagreed with the state on. In each case they concerned information the central state office said was available and the two sites said it was not."

This disagreement over the capacities of the current system is as telling as, and probably more important than, the specific weaknesses of current information systems. Putting together information systems adapted to new and different state welfare programs is no easy task even in the best of circumstances — and these, unfortunately, are hardly the best, with scarce information technology expertise in state governments, and where much of the expertise that is available is absorbed by Year 2000 (Y2K) problems. This situation reflects a general problem — that state administrators do not know much about the needs and conditions of local offices, nor are they experienced in taking local offices' views into account when designing information systems. Under AFDC, this state-centralized treatment of information technology issues

might have made sense, since local agencies were essentially charged with minimizing error rates in providing benefits, a task that would not seem to require as much local voice. But the tasks of the new welfare are different, and using the same centralized development process is dysfunctional. Note, for example, one county's perspective, which we quote at length. The basic themes were found in many of our state reports:

The first major obstacle to good local use of information is that county welfare offices . . . do not maintain their own local data at the local level. The county does not maintain, on it's own, administrative or program data of any kind. Instead, local welfare workers key data on each case directly into the state database . . . or onto manual forms that are then keypunched for [database] entry. The state then sends summary, hard-copy reports to the county, usually with a one or two month lag. . . .

The fact that the state produces the data, and the county only consumes them, has several consequences. First, the county has no real-time access to data. It does not know, for example, what its participation rate is at any given time. . . . Second, the county welfare office does not believe that the state data reports are totally reliable or accurate. . . . Finally, the county has no ability to make additions or changes to the types of information gathered, the way they are correlated, the format or content of reports, etc. These are all tasks performed by the state. One area where the costs of this arrangement are particularly clear is worker evaluation: The state computer system is not set up to let local managers track the activities of particular workers. This has meant that welfare workers must be evaluated almost entirely under a subjective process that relies heavily on employees' self-reports and the reports of workers' immediate supervisors. As far as I can determine, there are no initiatives at the state level to share or turn over responsibility for database management to local officials in ways that would truly create a local capacity for the creative use of management information.

Although there are exceptions, most states have not changed their basic modus operandi with respect to local office system development. This may sound like a technical issue, but it is a hoary political problem — how to fashion a more cooperative form of federalism suited to the new purposes and tools of social policy.

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10. Conclusions and Implications

In 1995, the lead article in the Rockefeller Institute Bulletin referred to the “*devolution revolution*,” in describing what the Republican 104th Congress was trying to do in creating multiple block grants. When most of these block grant proposals failed at enactment (due to Clinton’s vetoes of all but the welfare block grant), people told us that it was if anything a “*devolution evolution*” and said our phrasing was too strong. But two years later, it can be argued that the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act has affected the organization, delivery, and even conception of welfare benefits and social services and the distribution of power over the operation of social programs in a comprehensive way. Social policy experts in the United States have talked about service integration for generations. It is happening now to a wide degree, even as state and local governments have increased the number and variety of services to integrate. Welfare bureaucracies were thought to have a nearly immutable culture that would frustrate any attempts at reform, yet we see major changes at the ground level in program signals, services, and sanctions. And though state AFDC programs and local delivery systems always varied more than was implied by the notion of a single eligibility/compliance culture, we are now seeing much greater variation in the purposes and operations of state and local welfare systems and social services.¹¹

The shift in welfare cultures toward a greater emphasis on work and welfare avoidance, combined with the growth of discretion and variation among local systems, raises many important issues for state implementation and also creates new challenges for program evaluation. To the extent that local welfare systems move from essentially regulatory agencies that distribute benefits according to complex yet standardized rules, to problem-solving structures in which case managers can use a wide variety of tools to move family heads into jobs or off of welfare, program success may be affected by which organization is running the local office, who the case managers are, what values and skills they bring to their job, how well staffed the local offices are, the relations between offices and personnel of different agencies, and a host of other factors. This in turn creates difficulties in attributing causes to differences in program effects across and within states. With greater local discretion, it is not at all easy to know how sanctions, personal responsibility agreements, or a large menu of services are being used. It is hard to assess what causes what without an extensive

understanding of how local offices are exercising their discretion and what combination of tools they emphasize in their relations with families.

There are also important issues of equity. Different families may receive very different treatments within a single state or even a single office. That is reasonable from a problem solving, case management perspective. But some differences in treatment are more justifiable than others — and some cannot be justified at all. To address these issues, states may have to decide exactly where some sort of rough equality is needed as well as where it is not. For example, we see significant differences in administrative resources between urban, suburban, small city, and nonurban sites within states — differences that could affect the quality and equity of signals and services provided to families. In seven states, for example, field researchers collected data from one urban site and one nonurban (suburban or rural) site, and all but one of those states the ratio of cases per front-line worker was higher in the urban offices, often much higher; and the qualitative descriptions of the administrative cultures often reflected differences in the treatment of families. Differences in administrative resources may not have been particularly important when local offices mostly reviewed families for eligibility and issued checks, but they are important now when offices are responsible for explaining the new program responsibilities, helping link people with jobs, and arranging support services, all the while with “clocks ticking” for families on the rolls.

These equity and evaluation questions are manifestations of the general issue of *accountability* in the new welfare. More decisions are being made locally and individually, but there is still not a lot of information being passed up (and down) about those decisions or their consequences. Many information systems are still only sharing at providing basic information about caseloads and eligibility information. Work participation rates are being calculated and reported, but there is not a lot of information that states can use in deciding why caseloads or work participation rates are higher or lower over time or across sites. As one top administrator in a large state said, she has no clear idea what packages of services or treatments people are getting. Medicaid, food stamps, child care, indeed, the functioning (or lack of functioning) of the social safety net, are now inextricably affected by the interpretations given to policy, not just by states and localities, but sometimes by individual case managers. You come in asking for help: You are told right off the bat; “Now the rules have changed, you have to go get a job.” Among the critical administrative questions raised are: Did the case manager offer or promote the idea that in the meantime (while you are looking for work), you can obtain food stamps, Medicaid, child care assistance, etc.? Now

that local systems do have more control over the actual provision of benefits and services, do some systems diminish access to social safety net programs? To deal with these and other accountability questions, reporting and information systems need to be improved and elaborated. Resources are needed and new priorities have to be established.

Accountability also requires that someone use this information, not in a sporadic and general way, but in routine, particularized ways for case management and program oversight. Some states and private organizations are beginning to address this institutional question by developing new independent entities for accountability. In Georgia, for example, a Welfare Reform Advisory Council was created to oversee the implementation and operations of the state's TANF plan, with a special focus on how sanctions were being applied. West Virginia requires each district to create a "local advisory team," composed of community stakeholders who "assist in program implementation and evaluation at the local level," and a number of lawyers in Charlestown have volunteered to review personal responsibility contracts on behalf of families to ensure compliance from the clients' perspective. Tennessee has set up Families First Councils at the county level — composed of employers, family advocates, clergy, recipients, and the state agency's area manager — to look at issues "relevant to the success of Families First customers," such as "developing employment and training opportunities" and "assessing child care and transportation issues." Florida's administrative structure is particularly interesting, since local oversight and administrative responsibilities are both assigned to 24 local WAGES Coalitions, which are composed of local business people, civic groups, volunteers, and state or local officials. Similar arrangements and structures exist in Michigan. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of these various devices, the basic point is clear: In a devolved and highly complex system, new and more localized instruments for accountability need to be developed, and these instruments need to reflect the will to assess and check the new exercise of power without undermining the basic purposes of reforms.

11. Although, as we say in the next paragraph, evaluating this new round of welfare reform presents some formidable challenges, it seems as if the overall shifts we've observed in program signals may have some impacts. In a recent working paper by John Bishop of Cornell University, he found that recent trends

in labor force participation rates are consistent with strong effects on behavior stemming from welfare reforms (including state waivers) and the Earned Income Tax Credit. He notes that between the first quarters of 1994 and 1998, "labor force participation rates rose 25.4 percent for never-married women caring for children, rose 15.5 percent for mothers separated from their spouse and rose 4.9 percent for divorced single mothers. By contrast, unmarried individuals and separated and divorced women who were not caring for children lowered their rates of participation in the labor force market. . . . Thus, single parents . . . were responsible for almost all of the increase in the overall labor force participation rate between 1994 and 1998" (Bishop, John H. *Is Welfare Reform Succeeding?* Paper presented at the Employability and Exclusion Conference, 6 May, at the London School of Economics, May 6, 1998).

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11. Next Steps, Targeted Research

In future reports, we will examine issues of accountability as well as program operations. Rockefeller Reports and other reports based on the first round of field data will also include analyses of:

Second-order devolution, a description of the new roles of local welfare offices and local governments;

Privatization and contracting, including reports by Richard W. Roper, Jocelyn M. Johnston, Steven R. Smith, John Hall, and others;

Financial incentives, including analyses of how states are allocating budgets among contractors and local offices;

Welfare reform in the Midwestern states, in a book edited by Carol S. Weissert with chapters by field researchers Charles F. Adams, Jr. (Ohio), Thomas J. Kaplan (Wisconsin), Jocelyn M. Johnston (Kansas), and Thomas F. Luce, Jr. (Minnesota);

Information systems for welfare, an analysis by Terrence A. Maxwell of the history of the FAMIS (Family Assistance Management Information System) for AFDC and how it and other social program information systems have influenced and relate to the current capacities of reporting systems;

Agency responsibilities and service integration in the new welfare, a more detailed analysis than in this report about how states are assigning responsibilities to different agencies, especially labor and employment bureaucracies and how they are (or are not) linking these efforts at the state and local levels.

Follow-up Research: Priority Areas

In phase one of the State Capacity study, we asked field researchers to take a comprehensive look at policy choices in relation to the management systems of the states for the implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act. This had two pay-offs. It familiarized field researchers and the central staff with the broad policy and managerial landscape so we know the territory. Second, it

enabled us to identify the most important and pervasive changes that have occurred in the behavior of social program bureaucracies. In the next phase of this research, we have used this baseline to select areas for targeted follow-up research. Five areas are of highest priority:

1. *Information systems.* It is our view that designing and operating information systems is one of the most critical implementation challenges of social policy in the U.S. currently. This challenge has three dimensions: (1) to enable federal and state officials to exercise oversight of state and local programs; (2) to support research on what happens to parents and children under and as a consequence of national and state social policies; and (3) to enable case managers — the essential front-line workers of social policy — to track client services in order to efficiently manage and interconnect them. We think the third area is the most important one: Efforts to empower case managers in this way will determine what social programs are and become. Most of the technology needed is available off the shelf. Financial resources are available in many states to take advantage of this opportunity. But there are barriers. Among the most important are the demands of preparations for the Year 2000, competing information technology needs, the high cost of programmers in relation to government salaries, and concerns about privacy and bureaucratic turf.

Despite our conclusion about the importance of information-system building at the bottom (that is, for case management), the problems tend to be at the top. Because data and data systems are ubiquitous, there is an abundance of players — political leaders, managers, and stakeholders — who want to get into the oversight game. The dilemma here is a federalism dilemma. The essential problem often is not that we have too few data systems and requirements, but that we have too many. Federal reporting requirements have produced strong protests from the states. Local governments and local agencies concentrate their fire on state requirements, which in some cases are derived from federal requirements. Other activities of the federal government relate to the requirement for a single state audit in each state of the expenditure of federal aid funds which includes auditing the expenditure of funds, both federal grant and aid-in-funds, TANF and maintenance of efforts (MOE) funds. Advocacy groups, too, have their priorities for studies and strategies for tweaking federal and state overseers in ways that get them to focus oversight data collection on what advocacy groups view as their areas of greatest concern. Researchers are in the act as well with multiple studies and perspectives. These various topside demands for information are played out in a political arena in which local agencies and organizations complain, often rightfully so, that their client tracking and service

integration needs are ignored or downgraded

As our ideas about this subject took shape in phase one of this research, we joined with officials of the U.S. General Accounting Office to bring together experts to examine this field. Our aim has been to establish an action program — not necessarily to expose problems, but to help lead and teach about what is needed. Where are there real-time information systems that case managers can use to track and connect social services? And where we find such capacity, do the data definitions used also suffice for purposes of state and federal oversight in a way that represents a federalism optimization? Over time, we hope to engage federal and state officials, experts, and stakeholders in helping to build and extend effective information systems. The essential federalism challenge here is to reconcile devolution and accountability. What is needed are “performance partnerships,” representing a middle-ground position for the federal and state governments that is both facilitative and catalytic in exercising oversight responsibilities. There should be as much comparability as possible, but not so much as to produce rigidity. For if that’s what the feds do (i.e., rigidly specify all reporting elements) this would constitute a centralizing role inconsistent with the devolutionary purposes of the Personal Responsibility 1996 Act.

One of the big problems of government management, not just for social programs, is that technical experts in the information field and substantive experts don’t know each other or talk to each other. The purpose of the GAO-Rockefeller Institute work is to help bring the two cultures together. The “Working Seminar on Information Systems for Social Programs,” convened by GAO, has made progress in bridging this divide. Experts from GAO and the Rockefeller Institute have visited states and local sites to learn about the types of questions to ask to chart the territory in which better systems can be built. The Rockefeller Institute 20-state study will use questions that emerge from these field visits to learn on a broader basis about conditions, barriers, and opportunities for systems’ building for the management of social programs. Terrence A. Maxwell, Director of the New York State Forum for Information Resource Management, is the lead person for the Rockefeller Institute in this study area.

2. *Front-Line Worker Study.* With a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Rockefeller Institute is extending the State Capacity Study to take an in-depth look at the implementation of the TANF program at the local level. The front-line management and practices study examines how TANF operates at the front lines of service delivery, in offices where caseworkers interact with program clients, and how the management of these offices

influences the nature of these interactions. The study's primary research question is: "How do state and local policies and management systems affect the front-line practices of TANF programs?" Although there is growing recognition of the importance of management systems for translating policy into practice, few studies compare these systems across states and sites using a uniform set of methodological constructs. Lacking cross-site comparisons, it is difficult to identify factors that are effective in promoting implementation by front-line caseworkers of the policies designed at the federal and state levels.

The front-line management and practices study will involve a sample of states, Georgia, Michigan, New York, viz. New York City, Texas, and possibly Wisconsin. Within each state, local sites will be selected. Each site will consist of the office or offices responsible for the central functions of the TANF program: provision of cash assistance, delivery of work-related programs, and authorization for child care assistance. Some states assign all three functions to a single organization; others divide these functions among specialized organizations. The front-line management and practices study has two main components: (1) profiles of front-line management; and (2) studies of front-line worker practices.

Profiles of management in each site will include: adaptations of state goals and policies to features of the local environment; management and leadership styles of local administrators; the organization of work within the office; the training, monitoring, and evaluation of workers; the exercise of worker discretion; the use of management information systems for program operations and client tracking; and mechanisms to ensure that clients receive fair and equitable treatment. To prepare these profiles, senior investigators and their research assistants will conduct unstructured and semi-structured interviews with a sample of managers, supervisors, and front-line workers at the local sites. They will also review site-level program and policy documents, contracts for services, data reporting systems, forms and notices given to clients, and other documents important to program operations. The research assistants will be graduate students from universities in the selected states who will be trained for the project.

Methods such as the following will be used to study front-line practices: (1) structured observations of front-line workers; (2) individual or group interviews with front-line workers and their supervisors; (3) surveys of front-line workers and their supervisors; (4) focus groups with clients; (5)

collection of routinely reported data; and (6) reviews of client records with client identification suppressed.

A report on the profiles of front-line management will be prepared for the Department of Health and Human Services in 1998. Detailed analysis of front-line worker practices will occur during 1999, resulting in several publications. Professor Irene Lurie of the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy heads the team for this research, which also includes Professor Marcia Meyers of Columbia University and Professor Norma Riccucci of the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy.

3. *Fiscal Effects*. The third topical area selected for targeted research on the implementation of the Personal Responsibility Act is fiscal. The law provides level federal funding to the states based on 1994 spending with maintenance of effort (MOE) requirements about the use of previous matching funds for AFDC. This is controversial because as caseloads decline pressures have mounted to claw back funds that some observers in Washington, especially in the Congress, now think may not be needed for TANF. The issue is subsumed under the heading of a TANF "windfall." The argument made by states and stakeholders is that they are spending more per case, and that this is needed to end dependency. It is also pointed out that some funds are being put in reserve for a time when the economy is less buoyant and family income-support needs presumably will rise. This is familiar territory for field network studies going back a long ways. All dollars are green. There are no tracers on TANF or MOE dollars. Moreover, budget officials are among the cagiest people on Earth. Where have the dollar really gone? As the third priority area for the next phase of the State Capacity Study, we are developing an analytical framework and research instruments for tracking the major fiscal effects of TANF and MOE funds. Are more services being provided? If so, which ones? Child care? Transportation? Drug treatment? Health and social services? Aid for job search? Are some of the new funds being used for systems building? Are funds being put in reserve for future needs, in which case how is this being done?

It is not possible to be definitive in this area. But our experience suggests that independent field analyses can get at these questions, and in fact may be the best way to do so. Donald J. Boyd, Director of the Center for the Study of the States at the Rockefeller Institute and Deborah Ellwood, assisted by Charles F. Adams, Jr., the Ohio field researcher for the State Capacity Study, have the lead in this area.

4. *Managing Medicaid Managed Care*. The fourth area for a targeted second-

phase study, now being piloted in five states, is a study of the management capacity of states to manage Medicaid managed care systems. James W. Fossett, Associate Professor of Public Administration and Public Health at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, is working with the field researchers for Arizona, Kansas, Michigan, New Jersey, and West Virginia. This pilot study will focus on state oversight of Medicaid managed care plans. Advocates have argued that managed care presents states with the opportunity to improve the access and quality of care to Medicaid clients in ways unobtainable under the old fee-for-service system, which paid bills one service at a time. By creating one organization, an HMO or something similar, that accepts payment for the full range of services to Medicaid clients, managed care creates a means of defining standards for the adequacy and quality of care for which the managed care organization can be held accountable and sanctioned if they fail. Managed care may provide the opportunity to influence quality and access, but it also requires that states develop the administrative capacity to exercise this influence. To hold plans accountable to standards of quality and access, states have to develop the standards and negotiate them into contracts, put information and other systems in place to measure whether plans are complying with these standards, and be able to apply the appropriate sanctions to plans which do not meet them. These are complex tasks that have little in common with the bill-paying functions that have been Medicaid agencies' stock in trade, and making the transition has been difficult for many states. Like TANF, managed care is a moving target — changes made by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 and the recent passage of the Child Health Insurance Program have altered the task of managed care agencies in potentially large ways and second generation issues are beginning to emerge in many states. Enough states are now over the initial transition period and its attendant problems, however, and have made basic organizational and resource allocation decisions, to make it possible to assess how well states have been able to realize managed care's potential advantages of improved oversight and accountability. We will focus on managed care programs for the TANF population, the portion of the Medicaid population for whom managed care programs are the longest running and best established. We are examining four major oversight areas: financial plan performance; quality assurance and improvement; network access and capacity; and customer relations. In each area, field researchers will examine the adequacy and specificity of performance standards in state contracts with plans, assess the information and other systems states have put in place to measure plan performance, and examine the consequences to plans of differences in

performance. Past studies of managed care have largely focused on the front-end of states' managed care oversight — what does the contract say and what information does the state intend to collect. Our focus is on the implementation of these decisions. If states cannot collect adequate information to measure performance, lack the staff to analyze what is collected and focus attention on the results of such analysis, or have been unable to penalize poor performance, then many of managed care's potential advantages may remain unrealized. In addition to examining the particulars of plan oversight, we will also examine the organizational and administrative structures states have put in place to oversee managed care. Implementing managed care has placed considerable additional demands on Medicaid agencies without reducing the administrative requirements associated with operating the traditional fee-for-service part of Medicaid, which continues for large numbers of Medicaid clients. In addition, many states operate more than one type of managed care program and seem likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. This sizeable increase in management responsibilities at a time when privatization and downsizing are popular political themes may have made it difficult for many states to assemble enough staff to manage managed care efficiently.

The question of staff experience and qualifications is perhaps more critical. Managed care oversight requires expertise in financial reporting, quality assurance, and management information systems not required to operate the fee-for-service system. These skills are frequently in short supply in most state Medicaid agencies. Many states are unable to pay the salaries required to attract personnel with the necessary training and experience and have assigned managed care responsibilities to staff with little training or experience in the area or have contracted with consultants or other private agencies to perform important functions. The ability of states to effectively oversee managed care programs under these conditions remains an open question.

5. Linking Workforce and Welfare Bureaucracies. As indicated, one of the areas where we found the greatest change and the greatest variation among the states involves the relationship between the bureaucracies that administer TANF benefits and those responsible for workforce development. In some cases the two activities are merged in the same workers. In others, they are merged just for the TANF population. In still others, there is a hybrid arrangement with a hand-off at various points in the process from TANF-administering bureaucracies to workforce development bureaucracies. Under the latter types of arrangements, there can be tensions and difficulties in program management stemming from

split responsibilities.

We intend to take a close look at these relationships and in doing so to factor in the Welfare-to-Work federal grants-in-aid enacted in 1997 and the new federal law, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which consolidates pre-existing federal programs and highlights the “one-stop” approach to workforce development. Field researchers who are experts in this subject area are working to design this part of the State Capacity Study — Christopher T. King in Texas, Betty Jane Narver in Washington State, and John E. Gnuschke in Tennessee.

There is no right answer for this organizational challenge. The idea of “one-stops” of consolidating services and populations under one agency is advanced with the argument that this can help avoid a stigma for welfare recipients and applicants. But this can have its downside, too, if it requires handing off cases where there are appreciable physical distances between offices and different administrative systems and cultures. Making such connections in application forms, data systems, case management, and information exchanges can cause people to drop between stools in a way that negates the idea of Work First. On the other hand, devising a miniature workforce development system within a welfare agency can result in having it be second rate and the clients served be stigmatized and treated by potential employers as second class.

Other Areas

In addition to these next-phase studies, we have identified five other candidate areas for topical studies.

1. *Special Focus on Cities*. One of the prominent findings from our research to date is that the biggest challenges for welfare change are in big cities. The caseloads are increasingly concentrated there, especially in neighborhoods of high distress. Many questions arise: Are the caseloads of individual case managers higher in these areas? Are these workers trained in the new culture of Work First or resistant to it? Overall, is the signaling weaker or different in these areas? Are neighborhood organizations — churches, community development corporations, and children’s centers — engaged in new ways, and funded in new ways, as a consequence of the service emphasis of TANF? Research underway in this area is being led by David J. Wright, Director of Urban and Metropolitan Studies at the Rockefeller Institute, in conjunction with the Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, New York University School of Law, headed by Michael H.

Schill.

2. *Child Care*. Another key area for TANF implementation research is the way child care is being provided, or not provided, to potential TANF applicants and recipients. There is little current research in this area. Past studies indicate that lack of child care is not a widespread problem for Work First. However, our focus, which is different from looking at the supply, or demand for care, would be on implementation. We would concentrate on the who of child care management in relation to TANF: What agency personnel ascertain the need for child care, consult with the family head about her preferences, assist in arranging care, and authorize and arrange for subsidies where they are provided? The relationship between the person handling these tasks and, if they are different people, the workers responsible for other aspects of a welfare case (cash payment, job assistance, other services) would be highlighted, along with variations among the states, which are considerable, in the way support is provided for child care. Some states provide vouchers, some provide cash, some pay providers directly. Such administrative arrangement and their consequences are the area of our comparative advantage and particular interest under this heading. The fiscal research (see above) by Donald J. Boyd and Deborah Ellwood will shed light on and examine some TANF program effects in this area and also in the next two areas listed.

3. *Transportation*. Similar points as in the case of child care apply to transportation services, which have emerged as a major service area under TANF. This includes vouchers for public transportation, helping to repair (or even providing) an automobile, and organizing van pools. The field research network is an effective instrument for systematically collecting information on the approaches used, where, how, and the relative priority of, and size of, this service component of TANF.

4. *Pregnancy Prevention*. A fourth area of potential special focus is one we have already examined preliminarily, which like child care warrants in-depth attention — the implementation of the provisions of the personal Responsibility Act to prevent teenage pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births. It can be argued that this is the most prominent objective in the law. Yet, bureaucratically, as we have noted, the effects of change in this area are much less — very much less — pronounced than in the case of the Work First orientation of the new welfare. Why is this so? Are there exceptions? Where and in what ways? How, if at all, do bureaucracies for the new welfare and case managers relate to, and work with, public health agencies and family planning clinics. This politically sensitive terrain is of special interest to us.

5. *Changing Management Systems for Children's Health*. Related to the study of Medicaid managed care described above being conducted by James W. Fossett and others, a plan is being developed to use the field research network to look at the implementation of the children's health law (Title 21) enacted in 1997. This would focus on the way in which Title 21, Medicaid, and related programs affect a particular population group of poor children. Professor Michael Sparer and Sherry Gleid of Columbia University are developing a plan in this area using the field research network for the State Capacity Study.

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This first look at the implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act is based on state and local field research conducted in 1997 and 1998. The study describes pervasive institutional changes taking place. It does not judge new programs being established or present data on their results. Reactions to this research, originally presented as a report at the 1998 Annual Conference of the Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM), follow.

“Good legislation is much less than half the battle in program reform. The real action takes place in the states, counties, and cities. What Nathan and Gais do in this book is show that welfare reform legislation has led to profound changes in the way welfare programs are run throughout the country. I can’t decide whether the change itself is more amazing than the timeliness, depth, and insight of this report.”

Ronald T. Haskins, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means with the U.S. House of Representatives.

“This report is a must-read for policymakers, and anyone who needs to track the complex series of changes the 1996 Act is bringing about. Dick Nathan, Tom Gais, and their associates have done a great service with their quick field work and timely reporting.”

Donna E. Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services

“This report is great. It really describes the complex mix of changes happening in states. More persuasively than anything else I’ve seen, it documents the real “revolution” that’s occurring. If I were teaching a Poverty and Public Policy course this year, this report would definitely be on the reading list.”

Rebecca M. Blank, Council of Economic Advisors

“The Rockefeller Institute is out front in studying the complex process through which laws passed in Washington affect real-world policies

across the country. For people interested in how the revolutionary 1996 welfare reform legislation is changing the way the system functions, this report should be required reading.”

Judith M. Gueron, President, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation

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APPENDIX A:
STATE FIELD RESEARCH TEAM LEADERS

Arizona	John S. Hall, Arizona State University
California	Cristy A. Jensen, California State University, Sacramento
Florida	Robert E. Crew, Jr., Florida State University, Tallahassee
Georgia	Michael J. Rich, Emory University
Kansas	Jocelyn M. Johnston, University of Kansas
Michigan	Carol S. Weissert, Michigan State University
Minnesota	Thomas F. Luce, Jr., University of Minnesota
Mississippi	David A. Breaux, Christopher M. Duncan, John C. Morris, Denise Keller, Mississippi State University
Missouri	Rockefeller Institute Central Staff
New Jersey	Richard W. Roper, The Roper Group
New York	Sarah F. Liebschutz, SUNY Brockport and University of Rochester
North Carolina	Deil S. Wright, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Ohio	Charles F. Adams, Jr., Ohio State University
Rhode Island	Thomas J. Anton, Brown University
Tennessee	John E. Gnuschke, The University of Memphis
Texas	Christopher T. King, The University of Texas at Austin
Utah	Gary C. Bryner, Brigham Young University
Washington	Betty Jane Narver, Janet Looney, University of Washington
West Virginia	L. Christopher Plein, David G. Williams, West Virginia University
Wisconsin	Thomas J. Corbett, Thomas J. Kaplan, University of Wisconsin at Madison

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APPENDIX B: FIRST-ROUND REPORT FORM

Following are excerpts from the Report Form for the first round of field research. The full text of the research instrument can be obtained from the Institute. The final version of the Report Form was written after field researchers attended a conference in Albany in May of 1997.

Overview and Instructions

The focus of our research is on governance, specifically, the capacity of state governments to create management systems and imbue them with purposes which they then fulfill. In this first round, we are examining management systems in the broad field of welfare; our later research will include analyses of Medicaid and workforce development. In all of our work, the basic questions are the same: Have states structured their management systems around discernible goals? What are those goals? And what institutional structures and management strategies have states used to accomplish these goals?

Our premise is simple: Before welfare laws can affect poverty, work, and family well-being, they must first influence and infuse the governance systems responsible for delivering welfare services and benefits — and this latter accomplishment is anything but certain. These systems are often vast and complex. They extend to multiple levels of government and span many agency jurisdictions. Powers are often dispersed in vague and shifting ways between the public and the private sectors. And within the private sector, there are important divisions between the profit and nonprofit sectors, religious and secular organizations, and large professionalized organizations and small voluntary community agencies.

When these governance systems are given the responsibility to administer new and complex laws to millions of families circulating through state welfare systems, we think it is critical to know whether states can determine and change bureaucratic cultures, monitor program activities, hold private and public agencies accountable for their performance, allocate staff and budgets in ways that reflect public purposes, secure the skills needed to administer welfare

programs, and create and maintain management information systems appropriate to program goals.

Taken together, these are the tasks of *implementation*. Many other studies use this term to describe their work on federal welfare reform, even though they do little more than analyze legal developments, i.e., changes in state and local laws to comply with new federal requirements. Our view is that the implementation process occurs (or fails to occur) *after* the enactment of the new laws, when state and local governments demonstrate their capacity, or incapacity, to put public laws into concrete effect. Our research is designed to understand whether states are solving one of the central challenges of devolution — *making big systems work*.

The emphasis in this round of research is on the operational goals of state welfare systems. What kinds of goals are these systems set up to achieve? Federal, state, and local welfare reforms seek to bring new objectives into this program area. The new federal program — Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) — not only provides support, as did AFDC, to allow children in poor families to be cared for by their parents. It also brings to bear other purposes, such as moving people into the workforce, minimizing dependency on welfare benefits, preventing teenage pregnancy, and preserving two-parent families.

Our interest, however, is not limited to statutory statements. These formal statements are important, but our fundamental aim is to discern the goals — or more precisely, the clusters of goals that reflect what states are really trying to do. Although our understanding of the kinds of goals institutionalized in state management systems will no doubt change over time, we are working with a tentative typology. These different goal clusters need not be mutually exclusive. Each cluster, however, has different implications for families and individuals and imposes different demands on management systems. Our provisional list of goal clusters includes:

1. *Supporting work and work-related activities.*
2. *Anti-dependency or welfare avoidance.*
3. *Ensuring correct eligibility decisions.*
4. *Family well-being.*
5. *Influencing family structures and relationships.*
6. *Minimizing program costs to state (or local) governments.*

We will examine many aspects of state laws and the ensuing policies, rules, and regulations to understand how they emphasize these or other goal clusters. To do that, the central staff will rely on materials you send us (see Section 1 of the Report Form). We will also obtain materials and work closely with other projects being conducted by national organizations tracking the effects of changes in federal and state welfare laws.

However, laws are only the beginning. They may be an important factor in accounting for differences in how state welfare systems are managed, but, then again they may not. We treat laws as one of several indicators showing what a particular welfare system is oriented to accomplish. Other indicators — such as the tasks workers are trained to do, the allocation of dollars and staff, and the kinds of questions that the state's information system is able to answer — may or may not be supportive of a state's welfare laws. Moreover, these other indicators may be more revealing than the laws as to what welfare systems states are actually doing.

The Elements of Management

This first round of research will examine whether and how different goals and goal clusters have penetrated state welfare management systems. The Report Form assesses this penetration effect from several perspectives, each representing an important element of an operating management system. These elements in essence should reveal a mobilization of bias. Depending on how states handle the accompanying management issues, some goals will be encouraged, others will be hard to achieve, and some will be ignored or blocked.

Another way of saying this is that the real policy is what gets implemented. We are mindful of the subtlety of the point just made. *In effect, studying the capacity of state management systems to implement social policies is also and intrinsically a way to get at what these policies really are.*

The six elements of management systems listed below roughly correspond to different sections of the Report Form. Each is a lense through which we can discern what a state is really trying to achieve:

1. The explicit policies or programs of the state and the local governments.
2. The assignment of institutional roles and responsibilities.
3. The distribution of budgets and staff.

4. Control, oversight, and accountability.
5. Management information systems (MIS).
6. The operations of local welfare systems.

By examining these six elements of management systems, at both the state and local levels, we can learn what purposes these systems are organized to accomplish, not just on paper but also in a way that reflects intent. In some states we will no doubt find some goals dominant at the state level, while local offices emphasize something else. Or we may just find a mixed-up “soup” of different and competing objectives.

State-Level Field Analysis

In round one, we concentrate on understanding the management systems states have created to implement their welfare programs. We have divided the questions into seven sections. Six sections in part A-1 may draw on a variety of sources and examine the state as a whole. They include:

1. Program status and description
2. Institutional roles and structures
3. Budgeting and staffing
4. Management strategies and mechanisms
5. Management information systems
6. Overview

Local-Level Field Analysis

The seventh section in Part A-2 asks you to answer questions based on data gathered from at least two local welfare systems. By systems, we mean not just a local office that handles eligibility questions for cash assistance, though we certainly want you to visit such sites. We also ask you to collect information from the main office — which may oversee branch offices — as well as offices that

have responsibilities for making job assignments and overseeing work activities and other related services. We hope that you can visit agencies in one urban community and one suburban or rural community. We will work with each state research team to select the location for local site studies.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard P. Nathan, Principal Investigator of the State Capacity Study, is Director of the Rockefeller Institute of Government. In 1968 he was chair of the Transition Planning Committee on welfare for the then-incoming Nixon Administration. As a budget official during Nixon's first term, he worked on the Family Assistance Plan for welfare reform, which failed of enactment. Before coming to the Rockefeller Institute, Nathan was a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University.

Thomas L. Gais is Director of the Federalism Research Group at the Rockefeller Institute, and is Project Director of the State Capacity Study. He has been at the Rockefeller Institute since 1994. Gais is the author of a recent Rockefeller Institute Press book, *The Day After Reform: Sobering Campaign Finance Lessons from the American States* (1998) and of *Improper Influence: Campaign Finance Law, Political Interest Groups, and the Problem of Equality* (University of Michigan Press, 1996). He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor.

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