

# Cracks in the System: Conversations with People Surviving Welfare Reform

Howard Area Community Center  
Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning  
Organization of the NorthEast

## Preface

*Cracks in the System* is an effort to understand the lives of the people most affected by the latest wave of changes in welfare policy: families who are currently receiving welfare benefits or who have recently left the welfare system. This study is a bridge between the state's representation of the success of welfare reform and the reality of the daily lives of current and former welfare recipients. *Cracks in the System* is a collaboration between the Howard Area Community Center (HACC), Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), and the Organization of the NorthEast (ONE). It is the third report on welfare reform from this project.

The first report, *Unraveling the Safety Net: 1997 and Welfare Reform* (CURL, 1997), focused on cuts in the benefits of legal immigrants. The second study, *From Welfare to Worse? Children, Welfare Reform, and Local Realities* (CURL, 1998), examined some of the early effects of welfare reform and provided some compelling revelations as to the future of those under the umbrella of welfare. The current report highlights how people are managing to live in light of a succession of policy changes. The specific population under consideration is families who are TANF recipients (Temporary Assistance

to Needy Families, formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC). *Cracks in the System* examines the barriers to employment which hamper the attempts of TANF recipients to become self-sufficient and explores how TANF recipients are negotiating the transition from welfare-to-work.

Howard Area Community Center is a multi-service community-based organization located in Rogers Park.

Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning engages in university/community collaborative research on policy issues of importance to local communities. It is supported by a grant and endowment from the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation and a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Organization of the NorthEast is a community-based organization that engages in organizing and advocacy for the Uptown and Edgewater communities.

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## Executive Summary

The findings of this report are based upon data gathered from interviews and focus groups with 41 participants. Interviewees were asked how welfare reform is affecting their lives. Particular attention was paid to the areas of education, employment, child care, housing, transportation and recipients' experience with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). Interviewees were also given the opportunity to make suggestions as to how they would make improvements to the current system.

Our study shows that in the current "Work First" environment, many welfare recipients perceive the existing TANF system as primarily working to cut them off the welfare rolls as soon as possible. The focus is on immediate job placement rather than on job training or education. Many participants expressed that they felt pressured by the system into taking the first job available, regardless of the nature or prospects of the employment. This solution is shortsighted and doomed to long-term failure for individuals in the system.

The current study illustrates that media reports which identify decreasing welfare rolls as the primary measure of welfare reform success are somewhat misleading. Many people are disappearing from the welfare rolls, not because they have found work and have successfully transitioned into the workplace, but because they have had their cases canceled and are awaiting reinstatement. Furthermore, of the former welfare recipients who are now employed, a significant number are earning much less than the federal poverty threshold.

The second report in this series focused on the lack of affordable quality child care for low-income families. The findings of this current study once again confirm that child care poses a major hurdle for women who are trying to make a successful transition from welfare-to-work. In particular, the current lack of child care during non-traditional hours is a huge barrier for women who are seeking to find and maintain employment.

The need for affordable housing and improved public transportation services were also identified by many of the study participants as areas requiring attention. Only with the strong foundation of safe and affordable housing and the necessary transportation connection to jobs can welfare-to-work truly succeed.

Although TANF recipients may be sanctioned for a whole array of reasons, many participants in our study reported that their benefits had been cut due to bureaucratic errors on the part of the IDHS. Interviews with TANF recipients and caseworkers alike reveal that the number of TANF cases is routinely being manipulated to meet monthly statistical quotas. Caseworkers' accounts concur with recipients' anecdotes of how cases are not being reinstated until the statistics for that month have been reported.

Specific recommendations resulting from our research findings include the need for:

- More opportunities for effective on-going education and/or training and work experience for those who are not job ready.
- More links to the business sector with a focus on long-term employment opportunities that provide prospects for career advancement and financial stability.
- The creation of jobs that pay a living wage and an income that can provide sufficient support for families.
- An increase in the minimum wage to provide sufficient support for families.
- Expansion of affordable quality child care, especially at non-traditional hours.
- Improvement in IDHS' support services to those who are trying to leave welfare.
- An increase in the availability of affordable housing.
- Improvement in the quality and availability of public transportation.

## Welfare Reform: Where are We Now?

In 1996, President Clinton pledged to alter the current state of the welfare system in this country and to “end welfare as we know it.”<sup>1</sup> The piece of legislation responsible for this monumental shift was known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. This legislation brought to an end the public welfare system known as AFDC, and heralded the beginning of a new block grant program, TANF.

In sharp contrast with AFDC, TANF introduced a whole array of new policies that limit the period during which one can receive welfare benefits to a lifetime total of five years. One of the more salient features of these changing requirements is the number of hours a person is required to be employed in order to receive benefits. Before welfare reform, recipients were not necessarily required to work. Now welfare recipients are required to work 25 hours per week in order to receive benefits. This requirement will increase to

The majority of TANF recipients are women and children. After three years, many are asking the question, “How effective are the new policies in allowing women with children to make the transition from “welfare-to-work?”

## Methodology

The data used in this study were gathered primarily through two related methodologies: focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. Twenty individual interviews and four focus groups were conducted between September 1998 and May 1999 for a total of 41 individuals. The interviews and focus groups were carried out in social service agencies, participants’ homes and in local churches in Rogers Park, Edgewater, and Uptown. All of the participants in the study were women with one or more children who currently receive TANF or who had received TANF in the recent past. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour in length and most of the interviews and focus groups were recorded on audio cassettes. Each of the participants in the study were given a small grocery

### Clarification of Terms

**TANF** – Temporary Aid for Needy Families replaced AFDC. As part of this program, most people will only be able to receive cash assistance as an adult for a total of 5 years (60 months) in their lifetime.

**Sanctions** – TANF recipients’ benefits are lowered if recipients fail to cooperate with TANF policies.

30 hours in October, 1999.<sup>2</sup> While the TANF termination clock ticks away, welfare reform continues to emphasize job placement rather than job training.

Recent reports in the media focus on the decreasing welfare caseloads as the primary measure of welfare reform success. This has obscured the toll on low-income families, particularly those with children, who have not gained access to jobs, housing, child care and other economic opportunities in the current robust economy.

voucher of \$5.00, upon completion of the interview or focus group. The research instrument was designed to elicit the experiences of TANF recipients regarding welfare and their suggestions for improving the system.

Two community-based organizations, Howard Area Community Center and Asian Human Services, assisted us in identifying and inviting participants to the four focus groups. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for use in the focus groups, along with a brief questionnaire

that collected household demographic information. The focus groups lasted one to two hours in duration and included three to seven participants. Many of the participants were taking part in welfare-to-work classes. One focus group was conducted primarily in Vietnamese with the help of a translator.

Additional information was gathered through interviews with several service providers and caseworkers who work with TANF recipients. The researchers also attended several public hearings at which caseworkers aired their views on current welfare policies and provided an insider's view into DHS' and TANF procedures.

## Demographic Profile

According to the Illinois Department of Public Aid's annual statistics, the average time spent by an Illinois family on welfare is about two years. The average number of children in a family is 2.08. In terms of the racial breakdown of TANF families in Cook County, about seventy-five percent of families are African-American; thirteen percent are Hispanic and ten percent are white. This differs from the rest of the state in which recipients are fifty-five percent white, forty percent African-American and three percent Hispanic. More than half of the TANF recipients (fifty-one percent) have not finished high school; thirty-six percent have a high school diploma or G.E.D., and eleven percent have one year or more of college. Almost thirty-four percent have no job experience.<sup>3</sup> According to the Educational Testing Service, "the average literacy level of welfare recipients is below that of unskilled laborers and assemblers."<sup>4</sup>

Rogers Park, Edgewater, and Uptown are among the most diverse communities in the nation in terms of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious background. According to the 1990 census, out of the total population of 60,378 in Rogers Park, 19.5 percent live below the federal poverty threshold; of the 63,839 people in Uptown, 31.3 percent live below the federal poverty threshold, and in Edgewater, 16.9 percent of the 60,703 residents

exist below the federal poverty threshold.<sup>5</sup>

Sixty-one percent of the interviewees in our study were single mothers. In terms of racial diversity, our sample reflects the rich racial makeup of the neighborhoods under study with African-American, European-American, Asian, European, African, Hispanic and Middle Eastern participants.

## Poverty Grows Under Welfare Reform

A common complaint of the women whom we interviewed was that if they are to become self sufficient, more jobs need to be made available to them which pay a living wage. The irony is that jobs which offer good prospects for advancement and pay a living wage are almost impossible for people coming off welfare to find.

According to the National Priorities Project and Jobs with Justice, seventy-six percent of the jobs with the most growth in Illinois pay less than a livable wage and fifty-one percent of these jobs pay below half a livable wage.<sup>6</sup> A full-time minimum wage job in Illinois currently pays \$5.15 per hour or an annual salary of \$10,712. The current poverty threshold for a family of three, with one adult and two children is \$13,133.<sup>7</sup> Based upon these figures, a parent

would have to earn \$6.31 per hour (\$1.16 more than the current minimum

wage) and work in full-time employment just to reach the poverty threshold. The current minimum wage is clearly falling far short of the poverty threshold. If the goal of welfare reform is to help people transition off welfare and become self-sufficient, the minimum wage should be significantly raised.

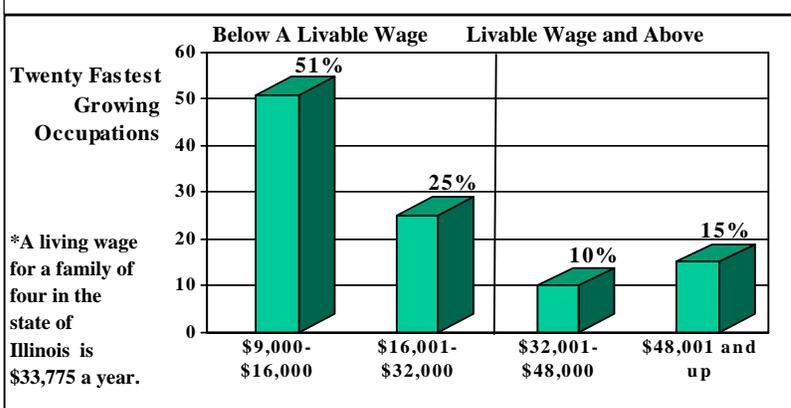
76 percent of the fastest growing jobs in Illinois pay less than a livable wage and 51 percent of these jobs pay below half a livable wage.

## CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

According to the findings of a 1998 survey by the Children's Defense Fund and the National Coalition for the Homeless, in March 1998, only eight percent of the previous year's TANF recipients had secured employment with weekly wages that paid above the three-person poverty threshold (one parent and two children) – barely up from 6 percent in March of 1990. Furthermore, the percentage of those with weekly wages below three-quarters of the poverty line increased during the same period from 6 percent to 14.5 percent.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1**

**The Fastest Growing Jobs in Illinois Pay Below a Livable**



Source: National Priorities Project analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics

Many women emphasize that while job-readiness programs may help teach TANF recipients how to fill out a job application and prepare a resume, they do not offer actual job training. Almost everyone we interviewed recognized a need for more job training to be incorporated into welfare-to-work and job-readiness programs.

In recognizing that a lack of education prevents many women from securing jobs with good prospects, several of the participants in our study were critical of the fact that the current "Work First" environment allows them little opportunity to pursue their education. As one woman reported:

"If welfare wants us off, then they need to find us jobs to keep us off."

"They just want you to get a job. That's all Public Aid cares about, but these companies want someone

with a diploma on their resume. Public Aid doesn't send you to school; they send you to welfare-to-work classes to get job skills."

TANF policy now recognizes full time attendance in post-secondary education as satisfying the TANF requirement that every recipient engage in work activities.<sup>9</sup> Despite this fact, *not one* of the people that we interviewed

knew anything about this new TANF initiative. Our findings imply that very few TANF recipients are aware of the support services available to them. This is consistent with a view among welfare reform critics that an overwhelming amount of confusion exists for recipients and caseworkers alike. When it comes to trying to understand the rules and regulations of the TANF system, how does one comply with a system, if the policies and rules and regulations are so unclear?

With most of the new jobs paying below the poverty threshold, it still remains to be seen how those who have actually found jobs are faring. In interviewing the Vietnamese population, our study reveals that many Vietnamese people have never had the opportunity for schooling or job training. Typically, in their homeland, they have only worked at home or on farms, and their English skills are often limited. A service provider reported that many of the Vietnamese clients who have left TANF are now working in Vietnamese restaurants where the jobs are part-time, pay minimum wage, and do not offer benefits. Often these jobs are also temporary.

According to the 1990 census, more than one out of four Vietnamese people lives below the poverty level and about eighteen percent of the Vietnamese receive some form of assistance.

Approximately, forty-eight percent of Vietnamese people are considered “linguistically isolated.” In

The reality that the media seldom reports is that many TANF clients are moving off the welfare rolls into jobs with pay below the federal poverty line.

other words, forty-eight percent are living in households in which no persons of fourteen years of age or older speak English only, or speak English “very well.”<sup>10</sup> In terms of poverty rates

today, the Vietnamese now represent one of the most impoverished immigrant groups in the United States even though they came here at the invitation of the U.S. While such clients may have come off the welfare rolls, they are being employed in jobs that pay much less than the federal poverty threshold.

## Child Care: Not Meeting New Demands

Despite the fact that \$380.6 million (an addition of \$50 million) has been allocated by the State of Illinois for child care in the fiscal year of 1999, access to quality, affordable child care continues to be a problem for welfare recipients.<sup>11</sup> This was continuously cited as a major barrier by the majority of the women whom we interviewed. The concerns identified were too few locations, waiting lists, a lack of child care for children with special needs, and a need for extended hours at child care facilities.

The lack of child care centers in Rogers Park, Edgewater, and Uptown is the primary problem. These three communities have a total of 44 child care centers; 15 in Rogers Park, 21 in Uptown, and 8 in Edgewater.<sup>12</sup> One of the Uptown area facilities,

Christopher House, serves 350 children, but currently has a waiting list of approximately 1,000 children. A former TANF recipient who is now working as a service care provider reported:

“Day care centers are full. Even our day care here is completely full. They fill up so quickly and children are there for 2 or 3 years so the waiting list can last up until that long. It would be nice to have more child care centers open, but it takes a long time to get them approved because they have to go through so much, but this is one of the biggest problems and barriers. People are having a problem finding some place for their kids.”

The availability of child care services during non-traditional working hours is also extremely limited. According to a March 1999 report in the *Chicago Sun Times*, the Chicago Department of Human Services will extend hours at four child care facilities. None of these centers is in Rogers Park, Edgewater, or Uptown. With the passage of a recent city ordinance, child care centers can stay open for extended hours as long as they meet additional health, safety and staffing requirements.<sup>13</sup> However, it is not clear to what extent this change will create new center child care slots as the approval process is

quite lengthy. In 1997, the Chicago Day Care Action Council reported that almost three quarters of women leaving welfare were working nights,

weekends or rotating shifts.<sup>14</sup> Considering that so many women coming off welfare need to work at non-traditional hours, securing child care is clearly problematic. One solution has come in the form of the expansion

Nearly three quarters of women leaving welfare are working nights, weekends or rotating shifts.

## CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

of home-based child care which can provide more flexible hours. Based upon their referral database, the Day Care Action Council indicates that the number of homes with extended child care hours in Rogers Park, Edgewater, and Uptown is 10, 5, and 16 homes, respectively. Although the provision of day care in private homes is helping to alleviate the shortage of extended hour day care, these homes simply do not have the capacity to meet the needs of the whole community.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that on a nationwide basis, only one in ten low-income families who are potentially eligible for help with child care, actually receives the child care assistance that it needs.<sup>15</sup> Using 1998 population projections, based on the 1990 Census, the Illinois Facilities Fund estimates that there are approximately 68,508 infant to five year olds in subsidy-eligible working families in Chicago and only 12,300 licensed slots - a gap of more than 56,000 licensed slots.<sup>16</sup>

Table 2 indicates the difference between supply and demand for child care in Rogers Park, Uptown and Edgewater.

The psychological toll on single parents who are trying to raise a young family, maintain

employment and sustain child care arrangements at the same time, proved to be a common theme in the focus groups. Many of the women reported that

they are looking for third shift jobs so their older children can take care of the younger children while they are at work. These women stated that they find it almost impossible to work during the day because they have to take their children to school and pick them up after school is over. As one woman reported, "I went to third shift so my fifteen

year old can watch the two younger ones." Another woman explained the difficulties of juggling child care to find a job:

"Well I'm looking for a third shift job and that's hard to find, because of my kids. I'd prefer to work in the daytime but I can't. My son just turned five, and he's worse than the baby. My case-worker sent me to Glenview

for an interview. I went there like I was supposed to at two o'clock, and the guy said he was going to call me back. He never did and then the caseworker got all upset with me,

**Table 2**

<b>Regional Service Level Table: Subsidy-eligible Preschool Children</b>			
Community area	Subsidy-eligible children in target families	Subsidized slots available	Percent of children served
Rogers Park	3217	383	12%
Uptown	4445	830	19%
Edgewater	5670	954	17%

Source: Illinois Facilities Fund, April 1999. *Chicago Early Childhood Care and Educational Needs Assessment.*

"(Welfare reform) should give people the child care and the health care they need to move from welfare to work without hurting their children."  
 Bill Clinton, July 1996

and I said, it's not my fault, I went and did what you wanted me to do."

them, while they are trying to find housing!"

Several participants talked of the extreme stress involved in trying to work at night and on weekends while raising a family alone. Others spoke of their lack of success in securing employment and told of their despair and frustration as they go from interview to interview trying to find work, often with a low level of education and poor job skills. They cautioned that economic insecurity is continuing to damage the well-being of their families and stated that they are struggling under the weight of increased hardships and poverty.

## **Housing and Transportation: Roadblocks on the Way to Self-sufficiency**

While the road to self-sufficiency is still not clear, certain stumbling blocks are glaringly evident. Housing and transportation difficulties were all identified by the participants in our study as hurdles to long-term employment.

Housing acts as the primary source of stability for many families regardless of their income. A nationwide study carried out in 1997 reports that twenty percent of the homeless people surveyed attributed the fact that they were homeless to the loss of their government benefits during the previous year.<sup>17</sup> Several people in our study claimed that they are getting behind with their rent payments due to the fact that they had been sanctioned, or their benefits had been canceled. Some mentioned having to go into a shelter as a result.

"People go to shelters. At the same time, they're trying to find houses, but Public Aid is on their back about finding a job. How do you find a job if you have no place to live? Their caseworkers are sanctioning

Transportation also plays a major role. In order to participate in welfare-to-work programs, transportation is obviously needed to provide access to jobs. The challenges facing women who are trying to successfully transition from welfare-to-work are increased by the fact that many entry-level jobs involve working non-traditional hours. This means that when commuting to and from work, the frequency of public transportation is significantly reduced than it would be at busier times of the day. Several members of our study commented that much of their day is spent on long commutes, traveling to and from the suburbs where they had recently found employment. Finally, in making the transition from welfare-to-work, the women also shared their concerns about the added expense of transportation while trying to get on their feet.

...they're trying to find houses, but Public Aid is on their back about finding a job. How do you find a job if you have no place to live?

## **Negotiating the Bureaucracy of the TANF system**

Many of those interviewed spoke of the difficulties they have encountered in trying to successfully negotiate the TANF system. In particular, the women stated that while IDHS is supposed to be there to help them make the transition out of welfare, often the services they receive at IDHS make their lives more of a burden. One of the most common complaints was the amount of time that clients have to wait in the public aid office. Many talked of two to four hour waiting periods before they even get to see their caseworker. This inconvenience causes disruptions with the normal activities of one's day, including

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## CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

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creating problems with collecting children from school, keeping appointments, and attending interviews with potential employers:

“What I think is that the caseworkers have so much work to do, they need more people there to help them. It’s not really the caseworkers’ fault, I understand that, but after you’ve been going two, three, four times every week, there should be something they can do. You stand in line for a while, then you wait an hour and a half for someone to call you, and if they don’t call you they say, we called your name and you weren’t there, and I say, I was sitting right here, I didn’t go anywhere. Three and a half hours I sat there one day and they told me they called me during the first five minutes after I walked in the door. They want you to get organized and they’re not organized.”

Concerns about the high turnover of caseworkers also proved to be a common theme with the TANF recipients whom we interviewed. Many women talked of having to furnish the same information time and time again, due to the frequent changeover of their caseworkers. New caseworkers cannot remain up-to-date with the details of individual cases. As one woman explained:

“Sometimes after five or six months, the caseworkers change. Each time they change they have to start their paper work all over again. It sounds like the caseworkers don’t pass on the files.”

“I wait for two or three hours in public aid, but I have to pick up my children; the school does not wait, they are young children.”

The caseworkers we interviewed also admitted that files are often lost or mismanaged. The end result of this high turnover of caseworkers and poor record-keeping is that recipients’ benefits sometimes

get cut in error. One woman spoke of the effects of having been assigned four caseworkers in the space of three months:

“My first caseworker quit. So they sent me a letter saying I had to come in and I went

there, filled out their forms and took the rent receipts they wanted. Then that caseworker quit, so they called me up to bring all that stuff in again, because I had a new caseworker. Wasn’t it in the records anyway? Then they sent me to another caseworker. They have all my documents.

I’m doing all I’m supposed to do. I had a letter saying my benefits are going to be cut. I called up my new caseworker

“If you’re cut off and want to get back on, they want you to show all the information which is already in the files. They could look in the files, but they don’t.”

and told her what was going on. She said “We’ll fix that.” I asked her am I going to get a reimbursement? She said no. I can’t fight with her.”

Talking of her struggle to make up for delayed income, another woman reported:

“They changed my caseworker again. So here I am doing the same

thing all over again. I got a letter this week stating that they're cutting me off again. That's three times now and never a reason. Every time I call to complain, they say somebody must have made a mistake, but they don't give me money for the times their people make a mistake."

Constantly changing TANF policies and inconsistent policy implementation are adding to the confusion of an already convoluted welfare system. Many recipients do not have a clear understanding of TANF policies. There was general agreement that it is almost impossible to keep up with all of the policy changes surrounding welfare reform. Evidence of this confusion can be found in the widespread lack of knowledge which exists regarding different support services to which TANF clients may be entitled, such as help with child care and post secondary education. As a service provider explained:

"Some of them (the recipients) don't realize that Public Aid sometimes helps them a bit with child care. No one explained to them that it might be a possibility to get this help once they find a job. This is a big worry for them."

Non-English speaking welfare recipients are at a distinct disadvantage in trying to negotiate the system and transition from welfare-to-work. Even though translation services have been mandated by legislation for patients in hospitals and clients in other service areas, no such provisions exist for TANF recipients and their families. While some caseworkers may speak Spanish and be able to help Spanish-speaking clients, the Vietnamese clients we

"When I came (to the Public Aid Office) with the translator, the caseworker complained that we were both trying to tell her too much and she was getting a headache and she sent us home."

interviewed explained that no provision is made to help them with translation services. Translators are not available and clients are expected to bring their own translator with them. As \$1.6 million has now been allocated by IDHS to pay for translators to

work with TANF clients, hopefully, translation services will become more readily available to non-English speaking recipients.

When non-English speaking clients receive letters that they cannot understand, this can cause undue stress and

anxiety. As one service provider explained:

"Every time they (the Vietnamese clients) get a letter, it causes such a great deal of anxiety. They have no idea what it is going to say. They have to wait until the next morning to bring it to a friend or a social service agency to translate it for them."

## The Unanswered Questions Behind the Falling Numbers

According to a recent report in the *Chicago Tribune*, between the months of June 1997 and March 1999, there was a 30.5% decrease in the number of welfare cases in Cook County.<sup>18</sup> The number of TANF cases in Rogers Park, Edgewater and Uptown has also dropped drastically over the past few years as new policies have moved people off welfare. These decreases are comparable with the decreases in the number of TANF cases in Cook County and the State of Illinois as a whole.

What is unclear, however, is how many TANF recipients are being dropped from the welfare rolls not because they have found work, but for disciplinary reasons such as missing an appointment

"They want you to get organized and they're not organized."

## CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

at the public aid office or failing to fill out their paperwork correctly. In this regard, many of the TANF recipients we interviewed reported that their cases had been temporarily canceled and were waiting for reinstatement. Thus, even though they were not currently being included in the statistics of those receiving TANF, upon reinstatement, they would once again appear on the welfare rolls. While some of these clients' benefits had been cut due to non-compliance with TANF policy requirements, several participants attributed their cancellations to bureaucratic error on the part of IDHS.

A former TANF recipient, who now works as a service provider, believes that often the real reason why many recipients' cases are being canceled is to meet deadlines and make the quotas:

“A lot of the ones (recipients) who are doing what they're supposed to are being sanctioned or cut off for no reason. I believe it's to meet report deadlines, to make the report look good...like all these people found jobs.”

A caseworker we interviewed believes that “DHS management's overwhelming interest is in cutting down the welfare rolls, by any means they consider necessary. They want those quotas filled.” In this regard, several caseworkers reported that certain policy changes have been made regarding the reinstatement of TANF cases in order to make

welfare reform appear as though it is working. In particular, one caseworker talked of a new policy change that, he believes, hurts clients. In the past, a caseworker had the authority to reinstate a client.

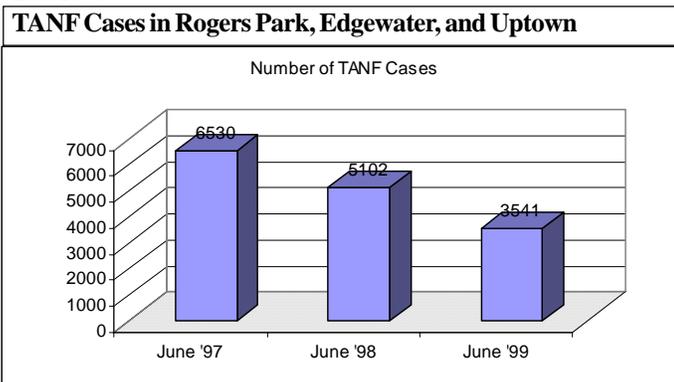
Now the system involves going through a supervisor and then an administrator who has to give final approval. The reinstatement process can currently take up to two weeks. The result of these procedures is that clients are being kept

off the welfare rolls for longer periods of time. Therefore, according to clients, service providers and caseworkers alike, the statistics of those coming off welfare are being manipulated in order to make the system appear more successful than it is. Possible proof of this lies in the disturbing figures of the “percentage of closings that were quick reinstatements.” From July 1997 to February 1999, the percentage of quick reinstatements in Illinois for any given month ranged from twenty-five to forty-seven percent of the closed TANF cases.<sup>19</sup>

### **From the Perspective of a TANF Recipient: A More Humane Service?**

There seemed to be a general consensus among the women we interviewed that caseworkers should be more understanding towards the individual circumstances of a case. For example, some women reported having medical conditions that preclude them from certain kinds of employment, and stated that

**Table 3**



“The statistics of those who are no longer on welfare are being manipulated in order to make the system appear as though it is working.”

their caseworkers would not take the details of their individual situations into account. One woman recounted that even though she had all the paperwork to show that she was sick, when she presented herself to her caseworker, her caseworker exclaimed: “I look at you and I don’t see you are sick. How can you be sick?” It seems like sometimes the caseworker gets very personal trying to make comparisons by saying I can do this, why can’t you do this?”

## From a Caseworker’s Perspective: Job Confusion

It is not merely TANF recipients who are expressing frustration with the TANF system. The caseworkers themselves also point to “cracks in the system.”

One of the main complaints of caseworkers is the conflicting expectations of what their role is supposed to be. Several caseworkers reported being told by administrators that, in addition to continuing to oversee maintenance of clients’ incomes, their role as caseworkers was to assume more of a social work nature. All of the caseworkers we interviewed maintained that such expectations are untenable. One caseworker pointed out that there used to be a separation between “income-maintenance” and “social service” caseloads. It was considered to be too difficult for the same person to determine a client’s eligibility for a means-tested program such as TANF, while at the same time acting in the role of a social worker and advocate for the client. Due to recent changes in the welfare reform system, the position of caseworker now involves “administrative” and “social worker” activities. Many caseworkers agree that this is causing job confusion.

A further criticism of this changing role of caseworkers is the limited amount of training that is being provided for this. As one TANF caseworker reported, “They are trying to train us to be instant social workers in two days, when average social

work training takes at least two years.” Due to the minimal training which is being provided, some workers go as far as to claim that IDHS’ real interest is not in broadening the role of its workers, but in reducing the number of cases on welfare and meeting quotas.

When it comes to reinstatement, one caseworker even talked of a common practice of “fudging figures.” He noted that there is a certain time each month, known as the “Group 9 cutoff date,” when workers are encouraged by their administrators not to reinstate clients until the statistics have been registered for that month.

The majority of the caseworkers whom we interviewed also noted that even they cannot keep up with constantly changing TANF policies. Several reported that while caseworkers and clients have been trying to adjust to some of the more recent changes, newer policies have been introduced. As most of these policy changes are conveyed through memorandums, there is very little, or no, training to advise the caseworkers how these changes should be implemented. The situation is further complicated because the supervisors and administrators remain similarly unsure of how the new procedures should be carried out.

“Administrators are talking out of both sides of their mouths. On the one hand, we are being told to explore issues with clients and be a social worker, and on the other, they are telling us to get them off the welfare rolls, whatever it takes.”

## Conclusion & Recommendations

In July 1996, President Clinton announced that the welfare reform act would:

“transform a broken system that traps too many people in a cycle of dependence to one that emphasizes work and independence, to give people on welfare the chance to draw a paycheck, not a welfare check. It gives us a better chance to give those on welfare what we want for all families in America, the opportunity to succeed at home and at work.”<sup>20</sup>

Many of the service providers whom we interviewed expressed the opinion that if welfare reform is going to be successful anywhere, it is going to be successful in communities such as Rogers Park, Edgewater and Uptown, which benefit from strong economic diversity and a location adjacent to areas experiencing job growth. Despite the booming economy and the favorable conditions of the three communities in our study, the women we interviewed cited a wide array of barriers which prevent them from succeeding, either at home or at work. Virtually all of the participants in our study stated that they would like to leave welfare and gain long-term employment. However, it is our belief that without improved and comprehensive support from the government in areas such as child care and job training and education, families coming off welfare will not be able to escape the cycle of poverty, even in these communities.

Current reports that focus on the declining welfare rolls as being the primary measure of success mislead the public and mask the lived experience of those on the economic margins. With so much attention being placed on the decline in TANF caseloads and the booming economy, the

day-to-day struggles of low-income families must not be ignored. The TANF recipients who participated in this study articulated that policy-makers need to do more to remove the barriers which hinder them in their attempts to make a successful transition from welfare-to-work. Such hurdles must be dismantled if recipients leaving welfare are to stand any real chance of forging a stable future. Real welfare reform success is not a mere numbers game.

Based upon our findings, we make the following recommendations:

### **1. Create more opportunities for effective on-going education and/or training and work experience for those who are not job ready.**

In the current “work first” environment, the focus is on encouraging parents to find jobs immediately, rather than on helping them further their educational needs or assisting them with job training. We are recommending that more emphasis be placed on job training and education to increase the job skills of TANF recipients. Investment in these areas would create opportunities for people transitioning from welfare to find more stable, higher paying jobs with better long-term prospects.

### **2. Produce more links to the business sector with a focus on long-term employment opportunities that provide prospects for career advancement and financial security.**

Solutions that are driven by short-term goals mark one of the reasons that the welfare system has been unsuccessful in moving people from welfare-to-work. IDHS and the people whom it serves would benefit from true partnerships with businesses beyond those found in the “Work First” initiative. Tax breaks could be given to companies that hire former welfare recipients into full-time positions that offer benefits. Companies that currently hire welfare recipients often seem to do so because of the financial advantages which come from having to pay such workers either no wages at all or at a rate below minimum wage that is commensurate with TANF payment levels. With a more client-centered

perspective, we can begin to look out for the best interests of everyone involved and not only those of business and government.

**3. Create more jobs that pay a living wage.**

Because of the “Work First” approach, many TANF recipients are being forced to accept low-paying jobs without prospects for advancement. Many of these jobs pay below the federal poverty threshold. This means that low-income parents are often employed in unstable and inadequately paid positions. Such families remain in desperate need of basic help to enable them to maintain employment and care for their children on very low wages. In order to ensure the well-being of children and families, the state and private sector must invest in the creation of more jobs that pay a living wage.

**4. Increase the minimum wage to an income that can provide sufficient support for families.**

Minimum wage legislation has for a long time been one of the most contested issues in the political arena. Currently, a person who works full-time and earns minimum wage while trying to raise two children lives below the federal poverty threshold. This reality undermines the rhetoric of those who claim that people who are on welfare should simply get a job and they would have better lives. An increase in the minimum wage would not only be a step in the right direction, but would help eliminate the need for support from other sources in moving people toward self-sufficiency.

**5. Expand availability of affordable quality child care, especially at non-traditional hours.**

The proliferation of single parent families, along with dual income families where both parents must work in order to provide for the family, has created an increased need for child care. Some of the solutions to this dilemma can be solved through government intervention and changes in employer practices. State or federal governments could provide more subsidies for child care, which would

allow more families to be free to pursue employment that may otherwise be prohibitive because of location or time of day. Employers could benefit greatly if they were to create their own child care facilities. This would help to increase employee loyalty, lead to higher levels of productivity and lower levels of absenteeism.

**6. Improve IDHS’ support services to those who are trying to leave welfare.**

Participants in our study identified a whole range of services provided by IDHS that need to be improved in order to facilitate a successful transition from welfare-to-work. We identify six recommendations to improve current services:

a) A greater effort needs to be made on the part of IDHS to inform families of the basic help that might be available to them;

b) Statistics of those who have come off welfare and have made a successful transition from welfare-to-work should be more honestly recorded and reported;

c) Increased care should be taken by IDHS’ workers responsible for the maintenance of files of TANF clients;

d) Translation services should be available to those in public aid offices whose first language is not English;

e) TANF recipients cases ought to be assessed on an individual basis, taking into account the barriers and limitations that confront each person, before a client is penalized for non-compliance with TANF policies;

f) More comprehensive training for caseworkers.

**7. Increase the availability of affordable housing.**

Housing acts as a foundation of stability for many families regardless of their income. Affordable housing is necessary not only for those families who receive TANF, but for all low-income families. The

problem with many previous attempts at affordable housing is that they have been concentrated in neighborhoods without a vast economic base. Current policy on housing should mandate that affordable housing be made available in all new housing construction in mixed-income communities. For example, twenty percent of all new housing should be designed as “affordable housing” or eligible for a rental subsidy through a program such as Section 8. It is through this type of model of mixed-income neighborhoods like Rogers Park, Edgewater and Uptown, that greater opportunities can be provided for those who need them the most. Through such strategies we can move away from situations that come about because of depressed neighborhoods.

### **8. Improve the quality and availability of public transportation.**

Transportation networks are important in any major city to provide mobility to its citizens. Although we acknowledge that the mass transit system in Chicago is one of the most comprehensive in the nation, a mismatch exists between areas of job growth and low-income residential areas needing access to new jobs. More money needs to be invested in new and improved transportation systems linking low-income city communities to job-rich suburban communities. However, to avoid the creation of an American “apartheid” system of low-wage workers returning to disinvested communities after work in more prosperous areas, these improvements in public transportation need to be made in concert with the other recommendations in this report.

### **9. Need for further study.**

Clearly, while we have had success discussing a variety of issues, still much has to be done. All of the aforementioned policy recommendations are potential research projects and we look forward to others taking up where we have left off. We need to better understand the lives and experiences of those directly affected by welfare reform. This is crucial for the good of all people in our communities.

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## CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

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