



**TRAINING WORKERS  
FOR WELFARE REFORM:  
AN AGENDA FOR  
SOCIAL WORK**

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## Training Workers for Welfare Reform: An Agenda for Social Work.

Abstract: Social work has an opportunity to lead and guide the development of new, broader worker-client interactions under the state by state implementations of welfare reform. The findings of a qualitative study of welfare worker training in four California counties, and a review of the literature, are used to support a training model that combines didactic-experiential workshops and ongoing peer supervision support. An intervention and research strategy is outlined.

Key Words: Welfare Reform, Training, Social Work, Eligibility Workers.

### Introduction

The implementation of Welfare Reform in the fifty states offers an opportunity for Social Work to influence and lead the creation of broader worker-client interactions in public welfare settings. It is unlikely that the virtual absence of professional social work from the front line income maintenance work will change; however, social work could make an important contribution in training front line paraprofessional workers. If welfare recipients are to make a transition from welfare to work, as the reforms mandate, then welfare workers will have to provide some supportive casework type services to help facilitate this change. Social work has nearly a century of experience in casework services, and is the natural discipline to lead the training of welfare workers.

This article reports on the findings regarding the training of welfare workers of the California Work Pays Demonstration Project (CWDP) Process Evaluation Study. This qualitative study is then interpreted in light of the few published articles that focus on the training of welfare workers. The conclusions of these diverse sources are synthesized to

argue for a training model that integrates didactic-experiential workshops with ongoing peer supervision support.

Influential theories of the welfare worker's role, such as Lipsky's (1981) "street level bureaucrat" suggest that the worker is constrained by organizational demands and cannot provide a more interactive relationship with clients. The observations of worker-client interactions in the CWPDP research suggest that it is possible to change the way workers interact with clients. There are significant impediments to change including routinization of interactions, caseload and regulation loads, and worker burnout. Many workers interviewed felt it was possible to change the way they interacted with clients, and were positive about making this change. What was less clear was what this change entailed. The model of training developed in this paper is a research-based attempt to address the transformation of the welfare worker's role.

Social work's role in the income maintenance end of public welfare services has declined since the separation of eligibility and social services in 1972. In many states social work has moved into the child welfare services, and professional social work has ceased to exist within the income maintenance sector. In child welfare, social work has developed a central role in the provision of services as well as training and research. Welfare reform provides an opportunity for social work to replicate this effort in the income maintenance services.

### The CWPDP Research

Work Pays was a federally approved welfare demonstration project in California begun in the early 1990s. The Work Pays modifications of AFDC provided a set of work incentives--income disregards, and child care reimbursement--in the context of steady grant reductions to induce clients to seek work. Several stages of public relations efforts aimed to make information about Work Pays available to recipients and to workers. This was through the production of brochures, posters and a video. The Demonstration Project

research studied four counties: Alameda, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and San Joaquin. In addition to the quantitative study of the income and assistance fortunes of a sample of recipients, a process evaluation team was created to qualitatively study the implementation of the Work Pays provisions, and to study the research process. This article focuses on only a fragment of the study's findings-- those having to do with worker-client interactions, and the efforts to influence these interactions through training.

The process evaluation team conducted interviews with welfare administrators and staff, from mid and upper level managers to the frontline eligibility workers. Observations of worker-client interactions were also conducted in offices in each county. In the first three years of the study, the research team found that workers were generally not informing clients of the Work Pays incentives and provisions.

In their analysis of CWPDP data, Meyers, Glaser and Mac Donald (1998) found that specific information about the Work Pays incentives was communicated in only 10% of the interviews observed (n=61). It was only in the fourth year that some worker-client communication about Work Pays was observed to take place, and the fifth year before one county offered a training program specifically focused on Work Pays. This training was offered just five months before the Work Pays provisions were superseded by the state implementation of TANF. The reader is referred to Meyers, et al (1998) for a more in depth report of the CWPDP research.

In the fifth year, the research team devoted attention to the issue of training. As the slow front line implementation of Work Pays became clear, training came to be viewed as one possible channel of communication of policy changes from upper levels to the front line staff. In the example of Work Pays changes, there was an implicit shift in worker role from simple eligibility determination to encouraging or motivating clients to engage in work seeking and work sustaining efforts. This implied change in worker role is even more present in the rhetoric surrounding the 1996 welfare reform legislation--"from dependency to self sufficiency" is the task assigned to the welfare system, and therefore to welfare

workers. Effective training and means of monitoring and shaping welfare worker behavior are necessary if policy statements are to be realized on the frontline of welfare practice.

Training efforts observed in the four research counties consisted of several types. There was the traditional multiple week regulation training, and two types of non-traditional training: one-half to one day training in interpersonal skills, with the addition of some employment counseling content; and one day training in the philosophy of welfare reform. One county provided training aimed to aid workers to handle the organizational changes foreseen with welfare reform, which the team was not able to observe.

Traditional welfare worker training consists of several weeks of review and practice with regulations for eligibility determination. The team observed at one traditional training where workers were given a six-inch stack of regulations that they were to go through over several weeks. A study in Michigan found that workers were expected to use over 2000 pages of regulations, and in the course of a year received more than 1100 pages of new information or directives (Bernard, et al., 1979).

Partially because of the difficulties in the street level administration of these extensive regulations, error rate and subsequent overpayments became a focus of federal monitoring of state welfare performance. Given this federal focus, the emphasis of training and staff supervision systems since the 1980s has been to reduce error rates (Lindsey, 1993). The tasks that have been emphasized in the welfare worker's repertoire, then, are the application of regulations regarding eligibility. Job titles reflect this instrumental orientation, with workers called "eligibility technicians", or "eligibility workers".

Although the 1996 welfare reforms are cast as a transformation, the changes can be seen as an extension of the Family Support Act of 1988. In response to the 1988 reforms, Lindsey (1993) wrote that the Family Support Act suggests a broader role for eligibility workers, one that included casework type functions rather than simply determining eligibility. This same inference could be drawn about the 1996 legislation. The

new types of training developed in the four research counties reflect this effort to reconceive the eligibility worker's role, and to prepare the workers for this change.

Several of the counties purchased training from an outside human services training center. Training offered by this center included: one specifically on the Work Pays regulation changes and the implicit change in worker role, training on interview effectiveness, and the most recent welfare to work oriented training. From observation of trainings, and review of course descriptions and training materials, these courses have several common elements: instruction in discrete interview techniques (intentional listening, empathic statements, etc.), training in some limited components of vocational counseling, and a philosophical framework which attempts to bridge the training material and the worker's day to day jobs. Several of the trainers are former public welfare employees themselves, and this commonality is used for credibility with the trainees.

The format of these non-regulation focused courses offered in the research counties are significantly similar to training described in the literature. The handful of studies has found that this type of isolated training does have a positive, but limited, effect. We turn next to the studies on the training of eligibility workers.

### The Literature on Training

Since the separation of social and eligibility services, there has been a consistent voice within social work stating that eligibility workers perform complex interpersonal tasks and that they need training for these tasks. Hagen (1987) found that eligibility workers rated casework tasks such as referral and advocacy as important parts of their jobs. In a separate report on the same study, Hagen (1990) argues that income maintenance workers need to be trained for the service dimension of their jobs, both to improve this area of practice, and to increase the worker's sense of self worth and competence. Hagen's study was a questionnaire format with responses from frontline eligibility workers used for the results (n=120).

The most prominent researcher in the study of welfare worker training is Elizabeth Lindsey. Lindsey constructed an interpersonal skills training program for welfare workers in Georgia, and published several articles reporting the results and implications of these studies. Morton and Lindsey (1986) describe the model of training that was used in the subsequent studies. They start from empirically tested counseling and interview training models, such as Ivey's "Microcounseling". Morton and Lindsey suggest that these techniques and their therapeutic aims will be viewed as irrelevant by public welfare staff, and they propose a model that teaches these skills within the context of the non-therapeutic goals of welfare services. A similar approach was observed in some of the training offered in the four research counties.

Lindsey, Yarborough, & Morton (1987) report on the evaluation of a training program developed in the format described above. This was a 30-hour in-service training program on interpersonal skills for income maintenance and social services welfare workers in Georgia. The effects of the training on 116 participants were assessed via rating of pre and post videotaped simulations for empathy, and specific interview skills such as attending, use of reflections and questions. Significant changes were found in the use of reflections and attending behavior. Less significant changes were found in the empathy scale, with average pretest scores as "slightly hurtful" and posttest scores as "neither helpful nor hurtful". In conclusion, the authors' question if interview skills can be taught in the short time span allotted to in-service training.

Two subsequent articles report on a further refinement of this training model. In this later development, training in interview skills was framed as "Casework Skills Training" (CST), and this training was paired with traditional regulation training. These two later studies relied on participants' self reports for results, in contrast to the independent rating of videotaped simulation interviews in the 1987 study (Lindsey, 1993; Lindsey, Kropf, N. & S. Carse-McLocklin, 1995).



Lindsey, et al. (1995) focused on participants' and supervisors' self-reports of the perceived importance of casework skills for eligibility workers. The results reflected the supervisors' tendency to focus on the goal of correctly processing clients and paperwork--71% thought the time spent on training casework skills should be reduced. Greater than 90% of the frontline workers thought casework skills were relevant, though approximately one-half reported they did not have enough time with clients to use casework skills.

Weinbach and Kuehner (1986) studied a different dimension of training efforts: peer reinforcement and co-training in specific skills. One group of income maintenance workers took turns in observing one another conducting interviews on a weekly basis, and giving feedback to one another. Another group of trainees did not have this peer observation and feedback component. The group who participated in peer observation and feedback demonstrated superior knowledge retention and skill use.

In the next section the results of the reviewed studies and of the CWPDP observations are used to suggest a potential model of welfare worker training.

### A Model for Training

The non-traditional training that was observed by the CWPDP research team was consistent with the model that was developed by Lindsey and her co-authors. However, they were of shorter duration--mostly one-day sessions, approximately six hours of training time. Lindsey, et al (1987) comment, "One or two day communication skills workshops may be a waste of time and money", citing the research on the time needed to teach interviewing skills. As noted above, however, a weeklong training (30 hours) did show significant--if modest—effects (Lindsey, et al., 1987).

The question facing the states is how to design effective, affordable training of welfare workers for the new tasks under welfare reform. I suggest a potential model of training that would start with one to two days of interpersonal skills training and vocational counseling training for all eligibility workers and their supervisors. The work of

Lindsey and her co-investigators provide a training model and some empirical support for its effectiveness. It is also a relatively inexpensive intervention in terms of staff time and expense. The research suggests that this model in itself is unlikely to be effective, so an additional component is needed.

To increase learning and consolidation of new more complex interview techniques, the second component is a means of reinforcing the material taught in the one or two day workshops. Most welfare offices are structured around a team system, with a group of four to eight caseworkers overseen by a supervisor. Weekly or biweekly staff meetings are commonly held to discuss issues, and instruct on regulation changes. This existing team structure could be utilized to implement peer support and mutual training of desired casework and vocational counseling skills.

Peer training and supervision would be a cost-effective way of maintaining exposure to curricular content over the crucial time needed for effective learning. Supervisors or volunteer team members could receive additional training to function as a trainer/facilitator for their team to maintain attention to the goals of the original training. For this to be effective, some continued presence of the original trainers would be desirable--perhaps for monthly or bimonthly follow up with the teams. The training should ideally touch every level in the hierarchy to provide leverage against institutional inertia and resistance. Weinbach and Kuehner (1986) provide empirical support for the effectiveness of this peer support and supervision model.

The peer support and mutual training component, with guidance by supervisors and trainer-consultants, would begin to address the problem of guiding welfare workers in the complex tasks of aiding clients to move from welfare to work. Without this component, workers would be left to either routine eligibility processing, or to interact with clients at their discretion (Brodkin, 1997). Morton and Lindsey (1986) write:

Lacking training in human development, human behavior, and interventive paradigms, workers tend to rely on their own experience as the most accessible set of action responses to client problems (p. 21).

It is unfair to both welfare workers and recipients to leave workers unprepared for the transformative task that welfare reform demands.

The empirical basis from which I argue for this model of training is in an early stage of development. For this reason, it is important that training for eligibility workers be created, implemented, and studied. The CWPDP research included one component for which there seems to be no precedent in the literature on training: the direct observation of worker-client interactions in offices in each research county, repeated each year. This is essential to assess the effects of any training efforts in the most direct and realistic way, and to understand up close both the difficulties and the potential of worker-client interactions. It is my hope that social work can actively engage in filling this need for professional training and research.

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