

# **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR RURAL WELFARE TO WORK STRATEGIES**

**DRAFT II**

prepared for the Rural Welfare to Work Strategies Project  
Administration for Children and Families

Ellen L. Marks

Macro International Inc.  
11785 Beltsville Drive  
Calverton, MD 20705

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In 1998, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) initiated a project on rural welfare to work strategies. Competitive grants were awarded to ten states to:<sup>1</sup>

- increase knowledge about strategies currently used in rural areas,
- develop new strategies and approaches to be tested, and
- assist in designing appropriate research questions and methods to evaluate alternative strategies for welfare reform in low-income rural communities.

Matters that the states are addressing include:

1. Ways that the rural TANF population differs from the nonrural TANF population in terms of employability, access to affordable and quality child care, special circumstances, and service needs.
2. The best strategies, policies, and programs to overcome challenges that affect TANF participants and children in rural, low-income families.
3. The most effective approaches to implement and test programs that will produce useful information for rural welfare to work strategies.

This document presents the draft conceptual framework of rural welfare to work strategies. It is based on work Macro International has conducted for ACF's initiative, including a research synthesis,<sup>2</sup> site visits, and discussions with state personnel. The purpose of the conceptual framework is to help design and evaluate rural welfare to work programs. This is a working document that will be refined, based on input and comments from ACF, participants from the ten states in ACF's rural welfare to work strategies initiative, and other experts and interested parties.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The 10 states are Iowa, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Vermont, and Washington.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen L. Marks, Sarah Dewees, Tammy Ouellette, and Robin Koralek, *Rural Welfare to Work Strategies: Research Synthesis*, Macro International Inc., Calverton, MD, June 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Any comments on this document should be sent to marks@macroint.com or faxed to 301-572-0986.

The first section of this document works through the conceptual framework; the second addresses factors affecting the evaluation of rural welfare to work strategies. The paper concludes with a proposed approach for a demonstration program of rural welfare to work strategies.

## ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework depicted in Exhibit 1 includes some elements that apply in both rural and nonrural settings; they are presented in an attempt to develop a conceptual framework that comprehensively captures the features of rural welfare to work initiatives. Below, elements of the draft conceptual framework are outlined and briefly discussed.<sup>4</sup>

### THE ENVIRONMENT

The draft conceptual framework posits six environmental factors that are likely to affect program strategies and outcomes:

1. **Economic conditions** include labor market characteristics and unemployment rates. Poverty rates in nonmetropolitan areas are higher than in metropolitan areas: 15.9 percent and 13.2 percent, respectively, in 1996. Cash transfer payments are higher, accounting for 21 percent of personal income for rural residents in 1994, compared to 15 percent of personal income for urban residents.

Most rural areas must deal with the issue of job supply because they tend to have fewer jobs, less diversity in types of employment, and limited opportunities for job advancement. The extent of seasonal employment is a component of economic conditions, especially because seasonal employment may be more prevalent in rural areas.

2. The **rural setting** has two features that are likely to significantly affect the design and delivery of program services: dispersion and supply of services. *Dispersion* is the distance that separates recipients from educational and training opportunities, jobs, supportive services such as child care, human services offices, and the like. Rural TANF participants face far greater challenges than their urban and suburban counterparts to get to where they need to be.

The *supply of services* has two components: (1) whether a needed service is offered in a rural area; and (2) if offered, whether that service is available in sufficient supply to respond to needs. The barrier of learning disabilities provides a ready example. Front-line staff frequently comment that the harder-to-serve TANF recipients may have substantial learning disabilities. Service providers in a rural setting may not have access

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<sup>4</sup> The conceptual framework is meant to be used for most, but not all, rural settings. The framework may not be applicable to Indian tribes (which have a unique interaction with state and county authorities), areas that have experienced extensive, severe weather conditions, or other special circumstances.

# Conceptual Framework for Rural Welfare to Work Strategies

## Environment

**Economic Conditions**  
**labor market**  
 unemployment

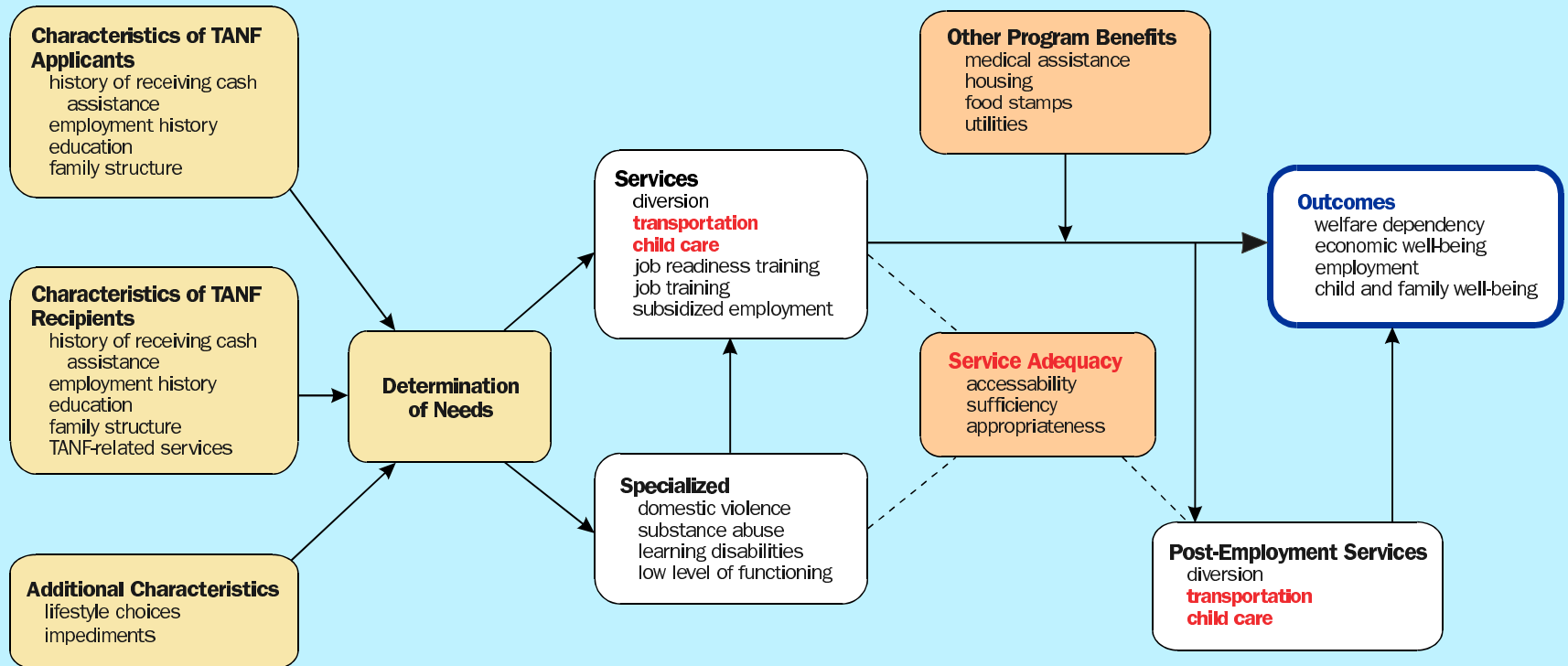
**Rural Setting**  
**dispersion**  
 supply of services

**TANF**  
 work requirements  
 disregards  
 time limits  
 sanctions  
 philosophy

**Structural Features of Related Programs**  
 medical assistance  
 housing  
 child support

**Community**  
 supportive networks  
 employer involvement

**Demographics**



Items in **red** signify critical factors in rural welfare to work strategies.



income may cause former TANF recipients to return to cash assistance; and states that retain substantial proportions of collected child support may have the unintended consequence of lengthy spells on TANF.

5. The **community** is an important environmental feature for rural welfare to work strategies. The extent of *supportive networks* can be measured in terms of organized initiatives (such as food banks, clothes closets, mentoring programs), but may also be reflected in attitudes toward the welfare population. The latter may be particularly evident in rural communities where, at one extreme, residents have seen a handful of families remain on public assistance through multiple generations; or, at the other extreme, residents demonstrate a generosity toward neighbors who are less fortunate.

*Employer involvement* in rural areas is likely to take forms that differ from those in urban areas. In many urban areas, large employers have made a public commitment to hire TANF participants; because rural areas have few large employers, if one or two choose to not make such a commitment, service providers rarely have others to approach. Also, because rural employers are smaller, they may be more disinclined to respond to incentives that they perceive as requiring too much paperwork in return for a small benefit (such as wage subsidies). On the other hand, a rural community with low unemployment levels may have employers competing to hire entry-level staff, and they may find that the TANF population is a ready resource.

6. The **demographics** of the rural population—compared to the urban population—show that the population is older, the percentage of female-headed households is growing, the birth rate among unmarried mothers has risen faster, educational levels are lower, and the rate of children living in poverty is higher.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TANF POPULATION

The conceptual framework breaks the TANF population into two distinct segments: applicants and recipients. In designing and evaluating rural welfare to work strategies, we suggest that four characteristics of the TANF population, both applicants and recipients, are important to consider, according to the following hypotheses:

- **history of cash assistance**—A consensus is emerging among front-line workers and local-level staff that longer-term recipients remaining on the welfare rolls have characteristics or barriers that make achieving economic self-sufficiency more difficult. The conceptual framework incorporates that perception by suggesting that the longer a household has received cash assistance and the higher the amount, the more services will be necessary for that household to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

- **employment history**—Applicants and recipients with a solid work history will be more successful at achieving economic self-sufficiency, and will do so sooner, than those with only scattered employment experience.
- **education**—Applicants and recipients with at least a high school diploma (or its equivalent) will be more successful at achieving economic self-sufficiency than those who have less education.
- **family structure**—Families with certain characteristics (such as very young children, children with special needs) will require a different set of services to achieve successful outcomes. Two-parent households are likely to differ from one-parent households as well.

Among people **already receiving TANF-related services**, the content, frequency, and relevance of those services are factored into the framework described in this paper.

The framework contains an element we call **additional considerations**. To date, we have identified two that should be considered in rural welfare to work strategies. *Lifestyle choices* incorporate attitudes and behaviors that characterize some rural TANF recipients. For many, there are strong reasons for choosing to live in a rural area. Those reasons may include a preference for agrarian- or small town-related ways of life, which may affect their attitudes toward work (e.g., people who prefer to work outdoors may accept seasonal employment as a mainstay and be reluctant to consider year-round employment in an office or factory). Another reason is that some rural TANF recipients who live in very isolated areas may have relatively little opportunity (or desire) to cultivate extensive relationships; those people, consequently, may face daunting interpersonal obstacles to achieving gainful employment.

These lifestyle choices may, on the other hand, positively affect rural welfare to work strategies. For example, those who choose to live in rural areas may find lengthy commutes acceptable because they have become accustomed to travelling longer distances to get just about anywhere. Although it is plausible that these personality traits might be beneficial for welfare reform-related matters, we have not yet discovered any research literature or information from our site visits to provide a more extended discussion of such benefits.

*Impediments* are other types of features that affect a TANF recipient's ability to secure and keep gainful employment, and the more obvious impediments are usually associated with the dispersion in rural areas. The relationship between the weather and roads is an example: in rural areas, when a severe storm causes a road to be shut down, residents do not always have an alternative route to use to get to where they need to be. Fewer roads exist, making driving distances longer and travel time less efficient. TANF recipients with more worn-out cars may face challenges in driving distances from home, to child care, to work, and back. Additionally, rural TANF participants with motor vehicle infractions (such as penalties for driving while

intoxicated or having a suspended license) may not have access to other forms of transportation, which they need to go to training and employment sites.

## **DETERMINATION OF NEEDS**

Once environmental considerations and characteristics of the TANF population have been taken into account, the conceptual framework suggests that the needs of the TANF population should be determined. On the face of it, this seems obvious, because it only makes sense that the services provided should match those that applicants or recipients need. But information from our research and fieldwork shows that this is not always the case:

- State policies affect the way that needs are determined. Usually, an applicant's first substantive contact with the welfare system is an income maintenance worker whose primary responsibility is to determine that individual's eligibility for assistance. Unless policies require applicants to meet with job counselors or similar personnel, or unless the income maintenance staff are charged with doing more than eligibility determination, services needed for the applicant to achieve self-sufficiency will probably not be addressed.
- Diversion programs (that is, support given to applicants so they do not go on the TANF rolls to receive cash assistance) may have the effect of deflecting individuals away from parts of the human services system that could more systematically assess their needs and identify appropriate services.
- The adequacy with which needs are determined depends, to some extent, on the luck of the draw as to which case worker is assigned to the TANF applicant or recipient. Some case workers demonstrate markedly more compassion for and interest in their clients than other case workers, and some have more skills and experience in assessing needs than other case workers.
- The extent to which TANF applicants and recipients are willing to stipulate their needs varies dramatically. Most have no trouble discussing matters such as getting a GED, locating child care, and having transportation problems. Whether they reveal more personal matters, such as substance abuse or domestic violence, depends on the nature of their personality, the interest of the case worker, fears about disclosure, and so forth. The lack of anonymity in rural communities may affect discussion of these matters, too: a recipient will probably not reveal deep personal troubles when she is concerned that she might run into her case worker at the grocery or in church.
- Assessment tools are often inadequate for getting much beyond the immediate needs that can be addressed through available services (e.g., transportation vouchers, medical assistance). To properly diagnose learning disabilities, a professional assessment is necessary, but resources to do so in rural areas may be scarce. To properly identify



Exhibit 2 (cont'd)	
job readiness training	requires adequate transportation and child care services (which are not always available) for participation; may also need to address psychosocial factors related to personality types that choose rural setting for residence
job training	requires adequate transportation and child care services (which are not always available) for participation; types of training, breadth of options, and number of providers likely to be far less in rural communities
subsidized employment	requires adequate transportation and child care services (which are not always available) for participation; lack of large employers may limit the number of slots that can be generated
<b>Specialized Services</b>	
domestic violence	lack of anonymity may inhibit disclosure and treatment, or may mean that TANF participants are more widely known to the human services system; shelters, safe houses, and mental health services not as prevalent or accessible as in nonrural areas
substance abuse	lack of anonymity may inhibit disclosure and treatment, or may mean that TANF participants are more widely known to the human services system; because rural areas are more conducive than urban to growing marijuana and producing methamphetamine, drugs of choice may differ from those in nonrural areas and consequently treatment needs may vary; treatment options not as prevalent or accessible as in nonrural areas
learning disabilities	fewer options for accurate diagnoses, fewer options for adequate services
low level of functioning	fewer options for accurate diagnoses, fewer options for appropriate services, fewer options for job placement
<b>Post-Employment Services</b>	
diversion	probably no different than for urban/suburban TANF population
transportation	a constant issue in virtually all rural settings due to dispersion; lack of public transit, taxi service; poorer road conditions and fewer route alternatives may affect participants' ability to get to where they need to be
child care	as with nonrural settings, prevalence of child care services and quality of those services are concerns; also, rural populations probably more affected by dispersion, lack of second-shift and graveyard-shift services, and reliance on relatives to provide care
support for job retention and advancement	differences between rural and nonrural areas are not clear

## SERVICE ADEQUACY



2. **economic well-being**—household income from wages, child support, and cash assistance; support from other programs, such as food stamps and medical assistance
3. **employment**—for those who are employed, the number of work hours, duration of employment, earnings, and employer-provided benefits
4. **child and family-well being**—the type of environment children are in, whether children are developing well physically and emotionally, the amount of economic and emotional stress the family experiences, and quality of interactions between parents and children

#### **SUMMARY OF CRITICAL FACTORS IN RURAL WELFARE TO WORK STRATEGIES**

The discussion of the conceptual framework has attempted to incorporate the key factors in welfare to work strategies. The following are the factors that appear to be critical in *rural* welfare to work strategies:

- **dispersion**—distances to be travelled between home, child care, training, work, and other supportive services
- **jobs**—fewer jobs, shortage of “good” jobs, lack of different types of jobs, limited opportunities for job advancement, and job retention issues
- **transportation**—few options other than private vehicle ownership
- **child care**—fewer options, limited availability to meet rural job requirements, potential concerns about quality of care
- **services**—less available, less accessible, less capacity to match participants’ needs with services to match those needs

## **EVALUATING RURAL WELFARE TO WORK STRATEGIES**

An evaluation of rural welfare to work strategies faces many design issues. Below, we address several issues that derive from our research and the first round of field assessments. We emphasize that these issues do not preclude systematic evaluation strategies that can determine effectiveness; rather, they require careful attention to design and measurement. As with the conceptual framework, some of the issues discussed below are not unique to rural areas, but we include them in an attempt to comprehensively set forth issues for deliberation and discussion.

### **DEFINITION OF “RURAL”**

Two dominant methods for classifying counties as rural or otherwise rely on designations from the Census Bureau (which distinguish between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties) and Beale Codes (which divide counties along a 10-category spectrum from urban to completely rural). Even within rural areas, counties show great variability in terms of access to services, employment opportunities, and available support.

In designing evaluation approaches, it would be important to take rural variability into consideration, especially in terms of proximity to job markets. Our site visits show the importance of this consideration: residents in communities of only 10,000 or 12,000 people consider themselves to live “in town,” and refer to those who live “way out there” as living in a rural setting.

### **THE COUNTERFACTUAL**

For an evaluation to determine the impact of a given intervention, it is imperative to establish the counterfactual: that is, what would have happened in the absence of the intervention? Without the counterfactual, researchers can only speculate whether the intervention did, in fact, cause the observed outcomes.

In scientific research, a controlled experiment is used to establish the counterfactual and measure the effects of the treatment. Because controlled experiments in human services programs may be difficult to achieve or unethical, most social science research relies on quasi-experimental designs.

### **EXPERIMENTAL AND QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN**

Small numbers, geographic dispersion, and other rural conditions make it challenging, but not impossible, to create and carry out an experimental or quasi-experimental research design to examine rural welfare to work strategies. The discussion below addresses some of these challenges and proposes solutions to consider.

Despite their value in producing meaningful findings, states and communities are becoming more resistant to using experimental designs, which entail treatment and control (or comparison) groups, in welfare reform evaluations. Concerns that policymakers and program planners have expressed include:

- They do not want to deny services to recipients who face lifetime limits.
- Some that participated in large evaluations (in which various groups of welfare participants received different types of services) are not inclined to impose administrative burdens on their staff again.
- Findings from some evaluations are not always as useful as they could be, because the treatment was not implemented as envisioned.
- Some point to dramatic decreases in caseloads and question why more research is necessary.

Still, it is only through experimental design that policymakers and program planners can learn about what works and does not work in welfare reform strategies. Regarding the concerns that states and communities have expressed, we note:

- An experimental design does not require programs to deny services to participants; instead, an experimental design could have the comparison group consist of participants who receive the current set of services, and the treatment group could receive that same set of services *plus* a service to address particular local needs. For example, if a rural area wanted to test the effect of additional transportation services and already had a program providing job search classes, the program could assign one set of participants to receive the services already in place and another set of participants to receive the same services plus arrange transportation during the job search and the first three months of employment.
- Evaluations do not have to be burdensome for staff. With proper planning, adequate resources, backing from key personnel, and an understanding of how findings will benefit their operations, front-line staff and supervisors can become strong supporters of evaluation efforts. During the site visits Macro has conducted for the ACF rural strategies initiative, staff often mentioned their interest in learning about “what works.”
- There are ways to ensure closer fidelity to the treatment design (as discussed in the section below on “the intervention”).
- Against the backdrop of decreased caseloads, state and local staff are raising two issues that argue strongly for evaluation-based information: (1) welfare reform has been aided by the nation’s strong economy, and observers and service providers alike wonder how













