

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:¹

- 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,² 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.³

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

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

³ 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.⁴

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

⁴ 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

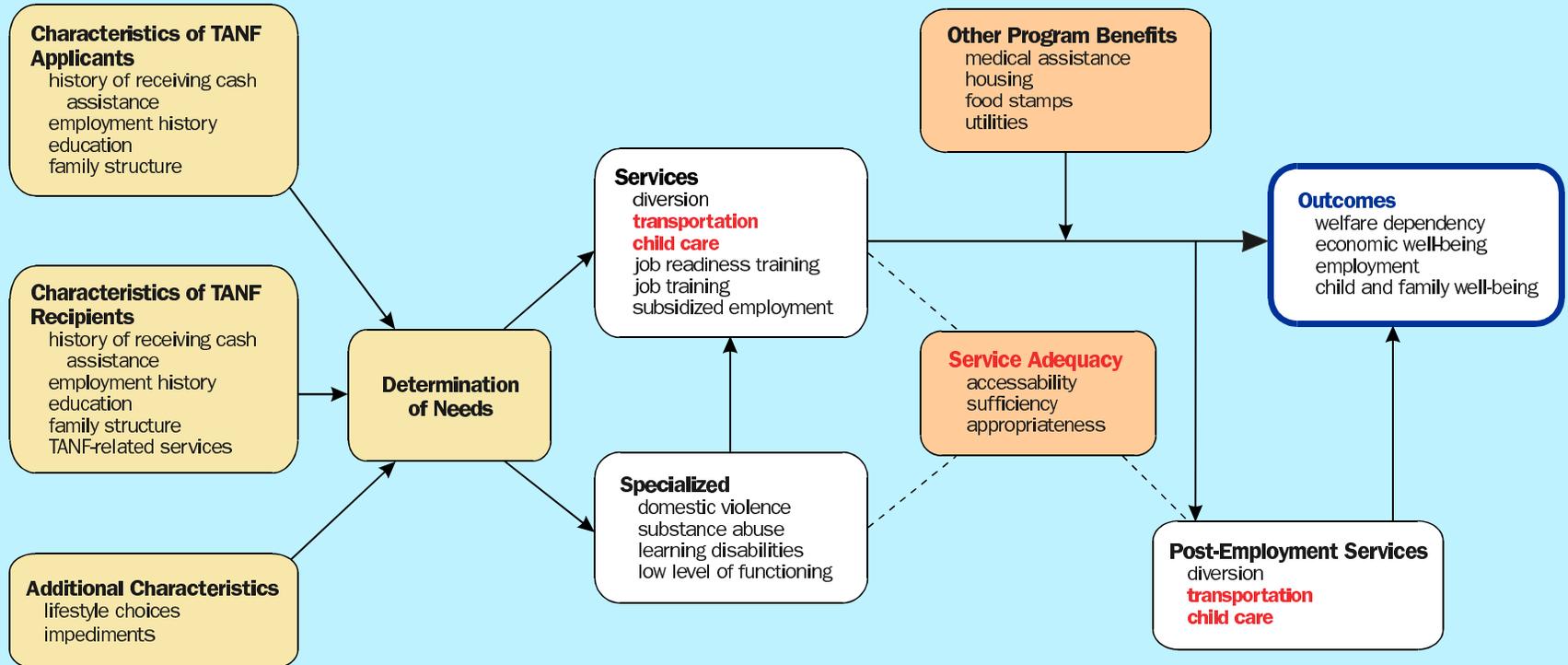
Rural Setting
dispersion
 supply of services

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.

to professionals who can properly diagnose learning disabilities; even if these disabilities can be professionally diagnosed, service providers in a rural setting may not have the skills and resources to accommodate recipients who have special needs.

3. **TANF** features incorporate state-level determinations:

- *Work requirements* indicate who is required to work (or engage in work-related activities), within what period of time.
- Recent research is showing that the level of *earned income disregards* is an important factor in the ability of TANF participants to become economically self-sufficient and raise their income levels above the poverty level.
- *Time limits* reflect the length of time that TANF recipients have before they reach their lifetime limit on receiving cash assistance.
- *Sanctions* are the penalties states impose for failure to comply with required activities. States exhibit wide variability regarding sanctions as to the types of behaviors that are subject to sanctions, who is affected by a sanction (e.g., the noncompliant member or the entire household), and the amount of a sanction (e.g., partially reducing the grant or eliminating it entirely).⁵
- A state's *philosophy* refers to the approach that the state has taken toward its welfare programs. Some are more rigorous, while others are more lenient. States evidence their philosophies in many ways. One example is exemptions for mothers with very young children—some jurisdictions require mothers to be engaged in work-related activities once an infant has reached the age of three months, while others impose the requirement once a child has reached the age of 18 months.

4. Certain **structural features of related programs**—such as medical assistance, housing, and child support—are environmental considerations. The way that these programs operate can advance or hinder recipients' movement toward self-sufficiency. States that do not provide subsidized or low-cost health insurance may inadvertently encourage adults to remain on cash assistance; housing subsidies that precipitously drop with earned

⁵ Within a given state, who is affected by a sanction and the amount of a sanction is, in effect, the same. Across states, however, these can be considered separately. For example: (1) one state may impose a sanction that reduces the noncompliant recipient's share of cash assistance by 30 percent, (2) a second state may impose a sanction that reduces the entire assistance group's share of cash assistance by 50 percent, and (3) a third state may impose a sanction that reduces the noncompliant recipient's share by 70 percent.

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

substance abuse also requires an assessment (unless the applicant or recipient chooses to disclose) that is often beyond the skills (and perhaps interest) of income maintenance staff or job counselors—and resources to do so are often lacking in rural areas.

- If services are in short supply (such as second-shift child care), staff conducting assessments may factor that into their considerations. One possible result is that if an applicant or recipient needs such a service, addressing the need will be left to the individual rather than the human services system.

SERVICES

We divide the types of services that TANF applicants and recipients may receive into three categories: (1) the more standard array of services to support the transition from welfare to work; (2) specialized services that may be required to help the harder-to-serve TANF population (which is represented in growing proportions on remaining caseloads); and (3) post-employment services. These services and associated issues for the rural TANF population are presented in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2

Services for TANF Applicants and Recipients

Type of Service	Issues for the Rural TANF Population
Standard Services	
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

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
Specialized Services	
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
Post-Employment Services	
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

As mentioned throughout the preceding discussion, the **adequacy of services** in rural settings is likely to be of critical importance in achieving successful outcomes from welfare to work strategies. The conceptual framework suggests that three measures of service adequacy should be considered:

- *accessibility*—the dispersion of the rural TANF population in conjunction with the lack of transportation alternatives means that it is not enough to have human services systems provide resources for job training, child care, placement, and so forth; rather, if services are to be adequate, the target population must be able to access those services.
- *sufficiency*—although some services are in short supply in rural areas (particularly transportation and child care), it seems that many rural areas have a broad array of services to meet many client needs, including women’s shelters, food pantries, and job training classes. The problem is that a rural area may have only one or two service providers, which may not be sufficient to meet the population’s needs.
- *appropriateness*—because service providers are fewer in rural than in urban areas, rural TANF participants may not be able to have their needs addressed in a fashion appropriate to their circumstances. For example, post-employment services may not be particularly geared toward low-functioning individuals; similarly, job training classes may not be offered during extended hours.

OTHER PROGRAM BENEFITS

TANF recipients making the transition from welfare to work are likely to be affected by the structure and content of benefits from other assistance programs, such as medical insurance, housing subsidies, food stamps, and utility payments. Policymakers and program planners are beginning to fully understand the ramifications of these programs for welfare to work success. Although studies that systematically assess the impacts of these programs are not yet completed, anecdotes are providing information. For example, some unknown number of TANF recipients are remaining on the TANF rolls to get Medicaid coverage; similarly, some unknown proportion of the newly employed experience financial hardship when their housing subsidies decrease or cease.

OUTCOMES

The conceptual framework proposes four types of outcomes for determining the success of welfare to work strategies:

1. **welfare dependency**—whether recipients are on or off cash assistance (and whether this is due to sanctions, time limits, or earnings)

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

welfare reform would have succeeded in a less optimal economic situation; and (2) as noted previously, there is a growing consensus that those remaining on cash assistance represent the harder-to-serve population—and people are interested in determining the set of services most likely to produce successful outcomes for this group of welfare recipients.

SAMPLE SIZE

Because rural areas have relatively small numbers of TANF applicants and participants, an evaluation of rural welfare to work strategies would require careful design to ensure sufficient sample sizes. In many cases, it would be necessary to establish a multi-county, coordinated effort to achieve sample sizes sufficient to detect significant program effects between treatment and comparison groups.

It is also important to have a sufficient sample size because the effect size is expected to be relatively small (that is, the difference that is achieved when comparing outcomes for treatment and control groups). To detect these small effect sizes with sufficient power requires relatively large samples.

RANDOM ASSIGNMENT

To ensure that evaluation findings are meaningful, experimental designs usually call for random assignment. By taking a group of people and randomly assigning them to the treatment and control (or comparison) groups, researchers can reasonably infer that any observed differences can be attributed to the intervention, rather than to other factors such as differences in characteristics of the two groups, external events that one segment of the population is subject to, and the like.

Random assignment also overcomes the research design challenges of accommodating selection bias, which occurs when some individuals choose to receive a set of services. With selection bias, those who choose to receive services may differ systematically from those who decline services—and those systematic differences can affect outcomes. For example, if a service provider were to offer a training program for TANF recipients to become computer technicians, an follow-up evaluation comparing people who chose to enroll in the program against those who declined would probably find sizable differences in earnings. In this case, the differences in earnings could not be legitimately attributed only to the intervention (i.e., the training program) because it is possible that people signed up had greater motivation and higher levels of basic skills than the people who did not.

THE INTERVENTION

Evaluations are sometimes affected by wide variation in the ways that interventions are implemented. Studies have shown two types of adverse consequences that arise when the actual intervention varies substantially from the designed intervention.

First, if successful outcomes are achieved but the intervention is actually an assortment of treatment strategies, outcomes cannot be attributed to a particular treatment model. An example comes from providing “case management” to a set of participants. Studies that have attempted to examine the effects of case management are hampered by the lack of cross-site (and even within-site) comparability because they are unable to “control” the content and nature of the case management services provided. For example, a case manager who is trained as a social worker, has a reasonably-sized caseload, and thoughtfully develops service plans will probably have client outcomes that differ from those of a case manager whose former position was to determine eligibility, has a rather large caseload, and develops service plans by reviewing a checklist with clients.

Second, if the intervention is substantially weakened during the implementation process, an experiment can become, in effect, a nonevent. A current evaluation of the home visiting program for teenage parents demonstrates the problem: at the outset, staff were expected to conduct a weekly home visit with their clients, but this soon tapered off so that number of visits averaged only one every two months. With such a low level of intervention, it is unlikely that positive outcomes will be achieved and measured.

A related challenge comes as the intervention evolves over time. In these cases, staff make adjustments (consciously or not) as they fine-tune the program, react to environmental changes, or adapt to changes among clients.

To address these issues, some initiatives use coordinating mechanisms. Through a central entity (which can be a governmental or nongovernmental organization), attention to comparability is handled through operations manuals, site visits, conferences, and other procedures. Process or implementation evaluations are invaluable for tracking “real-world” changes, and information from those evaluations can be factored into outcome or impact analyses. Another approach would be to design the intervention in such a way that the front-line worker has very little latitude to depart from program design. Although this approach may benefit the evaluation, it may be of limited benefit to TANF clients.

ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS

Most current welfare reform evaluations rely heavily on administrative data. As long as records are geo-coded and rural counties can be identified, administrative records can be used to address many research questions about the rural welfare population. The challenges in using administrative records (and they are not unique to rural studies) include problems related to:

- Knowledge of extant databases. Staff in state agencies are sometimes isolated from each other, so they are not fully aware of information that resides in their own agency's records or other agencies' records.
- Access. Whether because of confidentiality considerations, bureaucratic procedures, turf issues, or other constraints, some relevant administrative records may not be available for use.
- Relevance of data elements. Several of the dominant data sources being used for welfare reform evaluations were created for purposes other than research, with unemployment insurance records and eligibility files being foremost examples. The extent to which it is reasonable to use these data sources for research has not been fully resolved. Researchers readily acknowledge the limitations of unemployment insurance records for determining wages; similarly, they are well aware that items used to determine eligibility may not be the most pertinent ones for understanding the welfare population.
- System considerations. Although state computer systems are adequate for the purpose of producing benefits, conducting research off state systems may tax available resources excessively. Furthermore, system improvements in many states are on hold, pending resolution of Y2K problems. When that matter has been resolved, system improvements related to welfare reform may have to compete for attention with system improvements for other programs.
- Resources. State agencies are not always fully staffed, especially in regard to computer personnel, whose first responsibility is to ensure that computer systems generate the output they must (e.g., checks for cash assistance). In several states, staff have said that there would be a long wait to modify systems to produce evaluative information or generate data runs for research purposes—unless key high-level staff or state legislators made such requests.
- Absence of cross-state data sharing. At present, studies that rely on administrative records focus on within-state behaviors. This focus is potentially troublesome because those studies tend to miss information about recipients who cross state borders. Since most counties along state borders are rural, cross-state mobility may be high among the rural population.⁶ If so, reliance on administrative records would result in disproportionately high amounts of missing data about the rural TANF population.

RELIABILITY OF ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

⁶ Cross-jurisdictional mobility also affects the usefulness of administrative data for some urban areas (e.g., the New York City/northern New Jersey area, and the suburban Maryland/northern Virginia/Washington, DC metropolitan area).

The quality of data in administrative records must be examined in light of the purposes to which they would be used for evaluating rural welfare to work strategies. Data in some systems—such as records indicating eligibility for and amounts of TANF cash assistance and food stamps, plus records of earnings reported for unemployment insurance—are probably of relatively high quality and reliability.

Additional data elements that front-line workers and service providers are being asked to collect and enter—and the volume of these additional data elements can be substantial—could be of insufficient quality to be used with confidence in evaluating the effectiveness of service strategies. Information about program services may be missing; even when program information is available, it is not always revealing. For example, a variable that indicates whether a TANF recipient received transportation services as a yes/no option sheds no light on the *type* of service received, so evaluators cannot link various types of transportation services (e.g., bus tokens, taxi vouchers, car repair, loans) to different types of outcomes.

An evaluation design that involves administrative records should consider the likelihood of measurement error. Researchers who have used administrative records for indicators of services do caution that the data may not be suitable for evaluation purposes. Many times these data are supplementary to the primary purposes of the administrative data set, so information is, to an unknown extent, possibly missing or erroneously coded.

Another problem is that administrative records often lack dosage information, so very few studies have attempted to measure the amount of services that participants receive. An individual enrolled in GED preparation who attends class five days a week probably progresses toward self-sufficiency in a manner quite different from the individual who attends only once a week. For TANF participants with emotional problems that are barriers to employment, records usually note (if anything at all) that a referral was made to a mental health service, but information is not obtained about whether the service was accessed and, if so, the type, frequency, and duration of counseling that was provided.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Two methods currently in use for welfare to work evaluations should be carefully considered in designing an evaluation against the conceptual framework presented earlier. First, in several studies, many states are using their own human services staff to collect information from current and former TANF recipients. The candor and comprehensiveness of recipients' responses should be examined because their responses are likely to be affected by the type of person asking the question.

Second, in the current rural welfare to work strategies initiative, several states are conducting research by examining administrative records, supplemented with information from focus groups; but the way that the focus groups are organized and conducted needs careful consideration. Focus groups can provide very useful information when research questions are developed systematically, the questions are thoughtfully translated into a moderator's guide, focus group participants are appropriately recruited, and the way that information will be used has been conscientiously designed.

PRELIMINARY INTERVENTION APPROACH AND STRATEGY

After considering the variables and factors identified in the conceptual framework and reviewing evaluation issues, we suggest the following approach for a rural welfare to work strategies demonstration. This proposal is predicated on the critical rural factors identified earlier, namely dispersion, jobs, transportation, child care, and services. Our proposal centers on developing, improving, and expanding *transportation* and *child care* services, which in turn should affect the challenges of dispersion, gainful employment, and supply of services.

Funds could be earmarked for states, counties, or other jurisdictions to develop, expand, and improve the transportation and child care services they provide to TANF applicants and recipients. A set of models could be established that grantees would implement, or grantees could design and implement transportation and child care services appropriate for their particular situations.

Groups of counties could be matched according to important characteristics (e.g., density, proximity to labor markets, poverty levels). We suggest that the scale of the demonstration program should be considered, and that geographic areas should be chosen that are neither too large nor too small.⁷ Demonstration projects could be implemented in those counties, and participants could be randomly assigned to treatment and comparison groups. The evaluation design could compare long-term outcomes (perhaps over a two- or three-year period) for individuals who did and those who did not receive enhanced transportation and child care services.

Research could examine which approaches produce more positive outcomes. For example, is there a measurable difference between TANF participants who do and do not receive additional transportation services? Which treatment model results in higher levels of self-sufficiency: car ownership programs or dial-a-ride programs? Does providing additional child care services make a difference in recipients' ability to achieve self-sufficiency? Is child care more effective in helping TANF participants retain jobs when provided by relatives or by day care centers? A process study should accompany the outcomes study to identify planning and implementation procedures, plus site-to-site variation in program design and delivery.

This proposal addresses two of the most pressing needs in rural welfare to work strategies and can assess outcomes. The data collection responsibilities of service providers and front-line staff would be relatively minimal (although careful attention should be given to ensure that treatment

⁷ Within a given state or across states, the geographic areas should be large enough to enroll a sufficient sample size, but not too large (which could increase the likelihood of lumping together highly variable environmental conditions, highly variable implementation practices, and the like).

services are recorded accurately and completely); surveys of TANF participants who receive services could augment information available from existing databases.

Other topics and designs should be considered as well. For example, demonstration programs that link clients with training opportunities or provide clients with access to supportive networks may have merit. We believe, however, that these kinds of demonstration programs would still encounter problems about transportation and child care in rural settings, so we suggest that they remain as a focus.

We hope that the framework and proposed strategy produce discussion about the merits and shortcomings of the ideas discussed in this paper, which will subsequently be incorporated into subsequent versions of the conceptual framework for program design and evaluation.