



Topical Audio Teleconference Transcript

Welfare to Work: The Impact on Youth with Disabilities in School-to-Work Transition

presented by

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Mary Mack: I'm Mary Mack and I'm from the National Transition Alliance. And I'd like to welcome you to this month's teleconference call titled, "Welfare to Work: The impact on school-to-work transition-aged youth with disabilities."

This afternoon, our presenters are going to give you an overview of how welfare reform is being implemented from a national and a local perspective. And in preparing for this call, it became real clear to us the tremendous scope of the issues and the diversity in terms of impact on individuals with disabilities.

So, this is kind of our game plan. This call is our first step to give a general overview and understanding of welfare reform. Tom Corbett will give you an idea of the diversity of implementation nationwide of welfare reform within the various states. And then Deborah Schlick from Ramsey County will talk to you about how a specific county is implementing welfare-to-work, what kinds of issues are occurring at the local level, what are their concerns and problems, and the scope of the task counties are facing.

As both Tom and Debra are talking, you are invited to ask them questions during their presentations. We'd like this to be an interactive session. On the basis of your input, questions, and concerns, NTA will offer a follow-up call that will specifically address youth with disabilities. But we felt that we needed to begin with a general overview.

Our presenters today are Tom Corbett, Associate Professor with the Institute for Research on

Poverty at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Deborah Schlick, Planning Specialist for Ramsey County Human Services. So, with that, Tom, would you like to tell us a little bit about you and the Institute for Research on Poverty.

Thomas Corbett: Yes. Well, it's a pleasure being with you, I guess it is this afternoon. Very briefly, I'm actually the Associate Director of the Institute for Research on Poverty (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp>) and I'm on the faculty in the School of Social Work here at the University of Wisconsin. And the Institute is a national organization, a sort of think tank on the causes and cures of poverty. It's one of two poverty centers that are funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

It's always a little difficult to assess exactly what you want to say to an audience that you really don't know well. I think that there are probably two stories here in welfare reform. There is the more or less official story, that has a beginning with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which we all take as being a key point in the recent welfare reform base, starting point. And a lot of that discussion focuses on very important matters, such as time limits, enhanced work obligations, using the child support system, changes in how states deal with establishing paternity, and so on and so forth.

But there's an underlying story that has a somewhat broader perspective. I'm going to try to capture some of that underlying story, which starts in a more remote past, and I'll use that as a way to

try to figure out where we might be going. I think that that may be interesting from the point of view of the subsequent dialogue.

If we think about welfare, and here I'm talking about social provision for children or low-income families with children, it seems to me that we have gone through three or four major time periods. In the early days, the focus was explicitly on the child and youth. The idea was to find the best way to help those children develop in mainstream, in society. The great debate was between whether children ought to be taken away from disadvantaged homes or whether the mother, particularly a single mother, should be supported in that caretaking role. And the development of aid to dependent children by the 1930s and precursors to that, which were state run often called Mothers Pensions Program, was clearly on the side that we ought to support mothers in their caretaking role. It was an easy decision in the Depression when there were few jobs to go around.

The program in the early decades of the federal program, the focus was often on morality, on behavior, proper behaviors, and there's a lot of local discretion. The notion of entitlement, of welfare as we came to know it and as we have just gotten rid of it in some ways, was not there – I don't believe, I would argue – at the beginning of the program, but emerged largely in the late 1960s and early 1970s when a whole different set of insurance began to arise around issues of poverty. The issue was redefined less in terms of behavior, less in terms of how do we prepare kids for the next generation, but how do we provide a minimum sufficient amount of income to those families.

That entitlement period, where the emphasis was on getting checks out efficiently and so forth, lasted maybe ten or fifteen years. Then in the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s, we saw an accretion, an addition of goals that were attached to welfare and its reform. We began to argue among ourselves about whether or not welfare was under-

mining families, if it was somehow leading to more teen pregnancy, detaching fathers from their households, and reducing the labor supply of these mothers.

And then we went through a couple of periods of reform. The first I would call incremental, in which we used waivers to sort of tinker at the margin with the rules of welfare. These waivers were secured from the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. And if you looked at that history, you would see that the state initiatives started off slowly, but by the early 1990s something like ninety percent of all states had at least one waiver, many had several. And I spent a year at Health and Human Services in the first year of the Clinton administration. By that time, states were coming in with very bold plans. I think a national policy was beginning to disappear even before national welfare reform.

Structural reform came with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. It had two dimensions to it. The first being a whole series of specific provisions around work expectation, time limits, whether or not teen recipients ought to live with their own mother, not set up their own household, around establishing paternity, and so on and so forth. It was fairly prescriptive in that respect. It used a variety of incentives with the financial incentives, or procedural barriers. That is, saying that you could do X unless you specifically pass a law that allows you to do Y. Or certain state options were prescribed. Presumably, you could not use federal dollars to provide income support and other services to families beyond a five-year time limit unless they were specifically exempted. And there was a limit on how many you could exempt.

The other part of the Act was to devolve responsibility. So, on the one hand it was prescriptive. On the other hand, it tried to say, well, we're going to devolve responsibility over welfare to the states. And we'll do this in the form of a blocked grant, a

fixed amount of money. And the latter I think is the more fundamental change and the one with the greater implications over the long haul. In part, because block grants traditionally have been vulnerable to cuts, real or in terms of inflation-based deductions in value. They also have other dynamics associated with them that could be troublesome over time.

What I think is going on since the passage of welfare reform are three themes that I call the three R's: redirection, reinvention, and reallocation. Redirection essentially means that we are explicitly going from a system of income support to a system of behavioral change. And there are a lot of ramifications to that. A couple of which I'll touch upon in a minute.

Reinvention means that we are going from a system that used to focus on process – like were the checks accurate, did you get the check out the door quickly – to one that focuses on outcomes. The number of outcomes that we have attached to welfare reform and are attaching to welfare reform are multiplying. They had been multiplying over time, but they are multiplying even faster.

A group of welfare administrators in the upper Midwest that we facilitate meetings for, called the Welfare Peer Assistance Network (WELPAN), when they first got together, the first issue that they decided to focus on right at the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 was, how are they going to measure success. What were going to be the outcomes of welfare reform? And they come up with a rather lengthy list of things beyond getting people to work, that included things like: Adult well being, child well being, and there are a variety of factors in that; family formation and stability; measures of community involvement; and so forth.

The last R is something called reallocation, which means the devolution, that is where control of these programs will be located, I think is not going to stop at the state level. But there is a lot of evidence that it's going to actually devolve down to

the local level – to the county and the agency and even the worker. It's a much more discretion-laden program.

As I look around, I see a lot of innovation as these programs percolate down, as local agencies begin to experiment and feel their newfound authority. A lot of demonstrations and reforms going on, they're changing the basic culture and purpose of what used to be called welfare agencies. Aside from going from income support to focus on behavior, you're going from sort of autonomous workers who just followed rules to workers who are now problem solvers working in teams, sort of crossing disciplines and focusing on behavior challenges and challenges of hard-to-serve families.

And rather than having autonomous agencies as a welfare agency in many places, you have integrated holistic service centers – sometimes they are called job centers, hubs or something different – who are bringing a whole set of actors together to focus on these difficult to serve families. And there are many other changes besides just changing culture and this sort of increase in what we often call boundary spanning and boundary disillusion. Some of these trends are seen even whether they are state administered welfare programs or county administered state supervised welfare programs. And I note one of the state administrators in this WELPAN group said at a recent meeting, "Our new role is to get out of the way and let these local agencies experiment." And another one said, "You know, we're not talking about welfare reform anymore. We are talking about something much broader than welfare reform."

But it takes sort of those perspectives and couple it with a simple fact: In some places, the old welfare caseload has virtually collapsed. Wisconsin, of course, is the prime example. There used to be 100,000 AFDC cases in this state if you go back to January 1986. The last I saw, there were slightly over 10,000 cases of cash assistance. It's not atypical in a county near Minnesota that used to have 1,500

AFDC cases just six or seven years ago having something like 40 or so cash assistance cases today.

What this essentially means is that these agencies are beginning to really focus on the remaining cases, the hard-to-serve cases. And they are redefining their mission, what they are all about, so that they are beginning to identify domestic abuse, disability issues, retention in the workplace, and wage progression, and so forth as issues of the future that they are going to focus on at least for these families. They still have – in some cases – remaining responsibility for food stamps and Medicaid. Otherwise, they probably would be almost totally out of business. But with respect to families and with respect to children, families with children, they are now really dealing with the challenge of redefining what they are all about and beginning to form networks and associations with other systems in the community to in a sense take on more.

So, it's a true sort of period of experimentation organized around multiple endpoints and goals, with the old organizational forms and the old roles being thrown out the window. And people are truly searching for new ways of doing business and new rationale almost for staying in business.

I think to some extent the kind of populations that you are concerned about, if they aren't thinking about how they can partner in this welfare world of change or former welfare world of change, it's probably time to start thinking about that and to start forming those connections and relationships. Right now, there is money available. The block grants were based upon welfare caseloads in 1994. Fortunately for the states, 1994 was the peak year in welfare caseload and there were over 14 million people on AFDC. And since then, nationally the caseload has plummeted by well over a third. And in some states, like Wisconsin, it has fallen since 1994, I would say, well over fifty, sixty or seventy percent.

Mary Mack: Tom, as these caseloads plummet,

what's happening to child poverty rates?

Thomas Corbett: In fact, the poverty statistics just came out yesterday. And poverty has actually been falling slightly. Child poverty has been falling slightly, as well. We have not seen an apocalyptic sort of outcome where kids are living on the streets and falling and being – in a wholesale fashion – shunted off to foster care and so forth.

There are signs of stress, certainly the increased use of food pantries and clothing outlets that provide free clothing and so forth. The coping mechanisms of people have been engaged and are doubling up in terms of residences, and so forth. But we're very fortunate that all of this has been happening at a time when the economy is booming. There are also some flaws in the way in which we measure poverty, but that's probably too much to go into now.

Let me just stop there and just say that I think that the story of welfare reform has been only begun. As people whet their appetite for change and experimentation, it's likely to get bolder unless either the economy collapses – in which case all bets are off – or Congress goes back and begins to in a sense renegotiate the deal on the block grant and cut back the funds.

So, unless there are questions out there, I'm going to transition over to Debra at a point where she is going to give us samples of all this innovation I've been talking about.

Deborah Schlick: I invite anyone who is listening to interrupt if you do have questions.

I'm a planner at Ramsey County Human Services in Minnesota. We're one of the two largest urban counties in this state. So, that's the perspective I'll be speaking from. Our next door neighbor, Hennepin County, is the largest county in this state, but there is just a river and a few bridges between us, so we are really seen as one metro area.

I'd like to give you a brief context. Tom, I'm going to take your outline and apply it to some of the local stuff, because I think that will help make

sure that I can pull out stuff that might be universally interesting to people even though you are not familiar with or have little interest in Ramsey County in particular. To set some context, let me tell you four things about Minnesota and our community. First of all, the program that Minnesota has created in response to the federal welfare reform is called the Minnesota Family Investment Program. Recently, a magazine called Government Policy and Practice, charted the state programs. Minnesota's program ends up on a chart like that as a high benefit low sanctioned state. The intent of the Minnesota Family Investment Program is not only to get families off of welfare, but hopefully to move them out of poverty. Consequently, our program holds people on welfare longer once they start working than, for instance, programs like our neighbors in Wisconsin. Because it's intended to supplement people's earnings when they first start work for a longer period of time to increase wages. So, that's the program that we are given in Ramsey County to implement.

The other thing that it's important to know about Minnesota is that we are a state that's fairly late into the game compared to some other states. This program was introduced in January of this year. It's a little more than nine months old right now. So, we are very much at the beginning of our statewide process. And, therefore, the beginning of our local process in really absorbing and beginning those steps of innovation.

The other thing I think is important to understand about our community as we implement welfare reform is that, as Tom mentioned, nationwide it's a period of economic health. Minnesota and this metro area in particular have some of the nation's lowest unemployment. It gets down to close to two percent at times. So, we have employers who are actively experiencing a labor shortage. Therefore, much more interested in talking to us about welfare reform, much more interested in examining models about how do you adapt jobs to

make them accessible to people, how do employers do job retention. So, I think it changes the nature of the conversation we have with employers right now. Besides, this means there are more jobs available for the families we have to move off. And in our county, that's about eight thousand families that we have to help meet the work requirements.

And then, finally, our metropolitan area is also experiencing significant affordable housing crisis. It is very difficult for low-income families to find housing they can afford. And that impacts the welfare-to-work effort because it is not only families on welfare, but families earning low income have difficulty holding onto or initially finding housing. And that makes it hard for a family to create any stability in their lives. So, we've got both some good news trends and some bad news trends.

I think I'd like to pick up Tom's three R's – redirection, reinvention, and reallocation – and perhaps give an example of how each are playing out at a local level. The redirection from income support to behavioral change. Again, it's important in our situation to know we're nine months into the effort. And it's interesting to get the chance to sit back and listen to the history back to the beginning of the century how long this has been in the works and either how short or long term the programs are. And even at a more immediate level, someone in a job like mine who is a planner, the administrators I report to who have been going to meetings about this for two or three years now and have been thinking about welfare reform, it's a brand new thing happening to eight thousand families at once in our community. And we have pretty much just pulled the rug out from under them as they have known it. They are still struggling and pretty confused about exactly what is expected of them and what is going to be available to help them make that change. They clearly still see us as the welfare office, an income support place. We are just beginning to get enough information to understand the behavioral changes that we're going to ask of

people, and how we are going to be able to be helpful in making those behavioral changes. For many people on the program, they still experience it as their welfare check coming each month with now some extra meetings thrown in. So, that piece is brand new. But I think on the behavioral change, we have been meeting with our job counselors just the last couple of days to ask them nine months into it, what are they seeing. And we are seeing the gamut of – which will be reflected in any articles you read anywhere in the nation – culture change about understanding appointments, understanding the need for attendance, understanding how firm the expectations are. And down the continuum, the people with significant mental health problems, people with serious CD problems, most of which they are still pretty much hiding, they feel like the welfare office is still the welfare office. And a job counselor may not be their financial worker, but it's still not somebody they are going to take the risk of talking about CD or domestic violence with. So, those problems are still emerging slowly and most often after people have lost multiple jobs.

Reinvention from process to outcomes. What I am experiencing at the local level on that is just the struggle. You take a massive statewide information system like Minnesota uses. Although we deliver welfare services on the county level, we work off a computer system that is a statewide computer system. It's a computer system set up for the old AFDC program. It's a struggle at a policy or administrative level to know at any one point in time, how many people are actually working, how many are seeing a job counselor, what's happening out there, this newly into the program. And then be able to give that back to the front line worker, to give them some feedback, some evaluation, or some sense of how they're doing in the middle of all of this.

And reallocation, the devolution to the local level. The sorts of decisions that we have in a state like ours at the county level are certainly much

more broad than the old AFDC program ever allowed. How are we going to be in contact with families when we cut off their benefits? In Ramsey County we are asking public health nurses and extension nurses to go do home visits. Because many families who are having benefits cut are families that have never come into meetings, never made contact with a financial worker or a job counselor. And, Mary, this goes to the question you asked Tom about children's outcomes. We want to know, is that an informed choice or is that a choice out of confusion? Or is that a choice because mental illness, domestic violence, language barriers have prevented cooperation?

In Ramsey County, and I think this is true in many urban areas, it's less true in rural areas, we're working with contracts with sixteen different non-profit agencies, primarily nonprofit agencies in our community, who are actually delivering the employment services to families. In my view, the job counselor is becoming the more critical worker in this system. It isn't any longer the county financial worker, although that's who we still employ.

So, it's these contracted employees and these contracted agencies who are really at the forefront of doing the problem-solving, putting together the plans that say this is how we're going to make this work for you within five years.

The first way Minnesota experienced that devolution was that homeless shelters were paid for out of the subset of AFDC, the old Emergency Assistance Program. That's how Minnesota paid for time that families spent in shelters. When the states were given permission under the federal rules to start discriminating in benefits in terms of whether someone is recently in the state or just coming into the state, that cut off that funding stream. Local communities are now deciding in this state how much of the homeless shelter system they are going to pay for and how much are they going to start closing the door to families. It's – The states have said to each other, "Boy, your families aren't our

problem.” And now the counties and the state are having the argument about whose responsibility is this family newly arrived within our boundaries.

Those are some of the instances where you see devolution. I think the other place devolution is coming and has arrived in other communities and states further along than Minnesota is how much of those additional services are going to come out of local funds instead of state funds. If in addition to the employment services we are offering people how to look for a job, how to interview for a job, we are buying them bus tickets, helping pay for transportation, mental health counseling or CD counseling, or resolving a domestic violence problem, how much of that is going to come out of local dollars? And how much are we going to look at those services we have delivered and reorganize them in response to welfare reform?

So, those are some of the things I see along the three R's. Tom had also mentioned the changing culture of welfare agencies innovation, the issue that this is becoming much broader than welfare reform. I'd like to speak to that from a local level for a couple of minutes.

When you talk with someone involved in the local work of welfare reform on one day we could sit and talk full of pride of what we have done to an audience like you. We've made links to public health and the extension service. We are out there in partnerships with scores of community agencies in our community, trying to create – as Tom had referred to – work resource hubs, places where there are multiple disciplines of support where somebody trying to make the transition from welfare to work can get help and get some personalized service. We are changing the way we talk to people and give them information and engage them.

But on another day, or with a more internal audience, we might be less inclined to brag and more inclined to share our frustrations. Changes are coming fast and it's difficult to keep up.

As of July, we have a dozen more contracts for

employment services and three times as many job counselors as we did in January. And we don't have a good way yet to make sure all those job counselors and our two hundred financial workers know who to call when and how to be in touch and where the child care payment worker sits in that midst. And we told the financial workers their job is changing. It's now a job about problem solving. But the fact of the matter is that what the state and the federal government expects of us still means lots of reports. So, the financial worker still has expectations that keep that worker in front of a computer screen filling in data regularly, making sure the right report is turned in on the right day. And so, they are confused about their message. So, the phase of innovation feels really young to us. And it feels both hopeful and overwhelming.

Thomas Corbett: Can I ask a question about that? On the demands put upon the front line workers, do you find that the workers who had been hired and trained under the old welfare system – which required very often a data orientation, detailed, kind of following the rules, very linear view of the world and tunnel kind of vision in many cases – suddenly, they are being asked to be problem solvers and team players, do you find that those workers who were acculturated in the old world can make that transition or not?

Deborah Schlick: We're assuming it's more difficult. And even within our county, we've gone through different hiring phases. We went through a hiring phase ten or fifteen years ago, which was very much clerical. The job description was very clerical. And then, more recently, the college education was required for the job. And with that, some more ability to do problem solving. We have from even earlier eras some people who were around when social work and income maintenance were combined and they were used to that.

So, we've got people hired in different phases of this agency and we have incredible longevity. I just saw the numbers and I'm sorry I can't say it, but it's

not unusual to have employees who have been here twenty and twenty-five years. We have employees brought on in recent years specifically to help us deal with our refugee population, our growing non-English population. So, we've looked for bi-lingual, bi-cultural employees. They come with a whole different kind of background and understanding of what the purpose of their job is. So, we have employees – I think it's safe to say – in very different places about how excited they are about this change, how comfortable they feel they are able to make that change.

Thomas Corbett: In general, what proportion do you think can deal with truly problem cases where you have domestic violence or chemical dependency issues or disability issues, the really hard-to-serve special needs kinds of cases?

Deborah Schlick: First of all, I have no good sense of even a percentage I could offer you and feel like it was accurate. One of our managers might do a better job. But my other impression is that those issues really are more critical now at the job counselor's desk than at the financial worker's desk. The financial worker I think has to offer enough empathy, enough openness, enough sense that there is yet someone else on this person's side. But the job counselor is the one really confronted with, "How can I help this person through this in order to succeed at what welfare reform is expecting, work within five years?"

Mary Mack: Debra, have you changed the job description for what were called financial workers? To what extent is their performance evaluated on the old error rate concept? And to what extent are there performance indicators that fall along the more client empowerment model?

Deborah Schlick: We have not yet finalized new performance evaluations and new standards that match the new expectations.

Mary Mack: So, the workers are still evaluated on how well they are doing with paperwork, basically?

Deborah Schlick: Right.

Mary Mack: And to what extent is the county held accountable?

Deborah Schlick: All the way down the line, the system still has a divided message. Because the systems above the county still want the paperwork, they still want the accuracy. They still want the timeliness of information entered from a front line. So, I think what our financial workers are experiencing is not that they are giving up their old duties, but they need to take on new ones. And that we have not yet successfully transferred into performance standards. The management is working on that and looking at what are reasonable performance standards.

But that's what I meant when I said we're still young in innovation. We're nine months into it. The staff has learned a new program, trying to replace the old AFDC rules in their head and learn the new MFIP rules and procedures. But there is a whole lot more that has to continue to happen.

Participant: Debra, this is Ellie Emmanuel from the Institute on Community Integration at Minnesota. And I'm in charge of an SSI grant here we're looking at to increase the use of SSI if it's in work incentives, mostly for transitioning youth with disabilities. My question is, given all the new changes that your workers are dealing with, to what degree are they having time or even the energy to think about working with clients that have disabilities and kind of steering them towards SSI benefits?

Deborah Schlick: It's interesting because we have, as I mentioned, just been sitting down in some informal meetings. We had asked the job counselors from the various agencies to come talk to us about what they're seeing and what they're doing. SSI comes up frequently. They are identifying families where after they have done an evaluation, a capacity assessment for employment, that they come away thinking, "I think this is really a candidate for SSI." And they are getting involved and it's up to each job counselor. I know the State

of Utah has made a much more concerted effort to link application for welfare and SSI. But what I am sensing is each job counselor is on their own discretion deciding how much they want to help the applicant in pursuing SSI. Job counselors are also saying SSI can take two to three years to resolve and multiple applications, so those workers are pursuing a two-track course – MFIP (our Minnesota welfare program) and SSI simultaneously. “Let’s keep you moving toward employment goals, do what we can, because we don’t know the outcome of the SSI application. And let’s keep that SSI application moving forward.”

In particular, I have heard that we have a large population of – particularly for those of you not in Minnesota – Hmong families from Laos in our county. Per capita, it’s the second largest outside of a county in California. So, we have a few thousand families who have little or no education. Twelve percent of our adult caseload in Ramsey County has no formal education whatsoever. Most of those are Southeast Asian refugees, some are African. They have no English skills, they have the trauma that comes out of leaving a war-torn country and living with uncertainty and risking your life to get somewhere. And we don’t have behavioral health professionals who can really deliver those mental health services in their cultural context. The staff working with those families in particular seem to spend even more time looking at SSI applications. And, of course, they are even a little dicey-er because of the citizenship rules around SSI.

Mary Mack: I think the way in which welfare reform is being implemented – Tom, correct me if I’m wrong – in many places throughout the country is through subcontracts with nonprofit agencies. And I believe that that’s part of what you’re doing in Ramsey County; is that correct?

Deborah Schlick: Both subcontracts for employment services, but also through our Community Employment Partnership. It’s about three years old now and it’s community-wide planning

that began about a year before Congress took action on welfare reform to start getting us ready for welfare reform in this county. And it has continued since. So, besides the subcontracts – as Tom mentioned at the end of his remarks – we are trying to form networks and associations with others in the community. I think that what we see we can get out of that is flexibility – smaller more mission-driven agencies that can respond more quickly than we can, the personal relationship that in the end is going to determine the success or failure of welfare reform in any particular individual’s lives. We have job counselors now with caseloads of up to a hundred and twenty. We calculate that out to about an hour a month that allows them per family. We’ve got another sixteen hundred cases we’re sending at those job counselors already in the pipeline. So, then what we can get out of the nonprofit agencies are people who can have the time and the ability, and be separate enough from the welfare system to provide a relationship that’s welcome.

Mary Mack: Within that network of nonprofits that are providing employment services, are there opportunities for specialized agencies that could best deal with, you know, that might have some special skills? For example, those working with individuals with disabilities to be part of the system of service providers.

Deborah Schlick: The only way we have specialized in our current set of contracts is we have some contracts that are culturally specific. We have a collaborative of five Southeast Asian agencies working under one contract, we have a contract with an agency that works with Russian immigrants, and a contract with an agency that works with Spanish speaking families.

We have just gone through a summer of planning as a community, looking at how – and this mirrors what Tom said – we are going to focus on the hard-to-employ, and what we really need to succeed with the hard-to-employ. In the plan that we’ve drafted out of that process, we have said that

we have to investigate specialty contracts. Do we need, for instance, employment service contracts with mental health specialists? Or agencies who were used to working in domestic violence who could add employment services? And/or do we need to build up the specialties inside our general employment service agencies? Do they need specialists inside their agencies? We're going to explore the benefits and disadvantages and the costs of both those approaches.

Participant: I'm Karen Larson from the Social Security Administration in Kalamazoo, Michigan. And I was interested to hear the high profile, the SSI program. And I'm wondering if any of the states that are on the call have any initiatives to train the job counselors in SSI and SSVI work incentives, to utilize the PASS Programs [Plans for Achieving Self Support – an SSI work incentive], and so forth?

Deborah Schlick: Job counselors working with two-parent families sometimes try to get the SSI parent in those families into the work incentive programs so that they can approve child care or so that the other parent can feel safe leaving the home and pursuing their own work activities. So, that's how they found their way, the job counselors have found their way to the SSI work.

Participant (Karen Larson): I wanted to say that in Michigan we are partnering with Michigan Rehab Services and are actually going out and training their job counselors on work incentives. And then after that, doing workshops for them where we are training them to do a PASS [Plan for Achieving Self Support]. It seems to work out real well for them. They like that a lot.

Deborah Schlick: I think we'd be very interested in pursuing something here in Minnesota, as well.

Participant (Karen Larson): Your local Social Security office would be more than happy to work with you on that. We're all part of the same continuum.

Deborah Schlick: Okay. Well, thank you for that. That's a grand tip.

Thomas Corbett: I was just going to say, in Wisconsin – which has a different philosophy than Minnesota in the sense Minnesota feels much more comfortable in permitting the use of funds to supplement earnings. I mean, they don't mind staying on for a while longer. In Wisconsin the drive is to get people off the rolls. In fact, to move to almost a fully work-based system. And that's why the caseload has fallen so far. But they have done some other things. They have small, real small caseload and they have moved far along in this dimension of reinvention in the sense that in some cases, not only do nonprofit agencies actually run the program which is called Wisconsin Works, they are responsible for that. They have block grants and certain performance expectations that may not be fully articulated yet, but that are being articulated. And within that general framework, they have an awful lot of flexibility. So, you can go out and form partnerships with all kinds of people, including those who might be in a position to provide very specialized services to very specialized populations.

Deborah Schlick: And just a footnote to that, my understanding is that Minnesota's approach is not altogether intentional. Or at least the history is that Minnesota piloted the MFIP program in seven counties for three years and began those pilots in anticipation of federal welfare reform, clear that work was going to be a new ingredient, not as clear that time limits would be. And so, Minnesota is going to be watching and I think there is worry on some people's part that the anti-poverty aspect has hurt us in helping people reduce their time on assistance as much as possible. Will people be spending more time using up their TANIF clock to a greater degree in Minnesota than in other states?

Thomas Corbett: That is going to be a dilemma for you, right. Illinois has gotten around that by simply saying that if you're working twenty hours a week, your clock doesn't run. Now, eventu-

ally they will have to create – and they are creating – a state-only program because the feds will say at the end of five years, “Well, you can’t use our funds for those families.” But that’s a clear expression of the intent that you can combine work and welfare.

Mary Mack: Are there others who would like to share what’s going on within their state?

Participant: Hi, this is Dave Miller in Salt Lake City, Utah. I would be interested to get a feel for – as well as being able to help promote clients to find employment – what measures are being taken to help provide training? What training resources for clients are you utilizing or accessing?

Thomas Corbett: Well, it would be just too impossible to go through all the states. In Wisconsin, this has been an issue. There are a lot of things like short term basic skills motivation, some customized training, but all of very short duration because like a lot of states, they have a work first or a labor market attachment philosophy. That is, you get people into the labor market and that’s the best place to learn the necessary skills. So, it’s pretty much a short duration stuff that can be highly intense, though. Sometimes the expectations of thirty or forty hours a week to prep for work.

That is beginning to soften a bit because now a lot of the people who had some reasonable levels of human capital are gone now. They are really down to the people who have the most barriers. And so, now they are thinking, “Well, maybe we have to provide something more intense.” But they don’t see this – And, again, each state is different. Maine has a special program to allow people to continue in two and four year colleges. I don’t think Wisconsin is ever going to go that route. They have a different philosophy that’s not in the intermediate future. But they are now recognizing they have to provide perhaps more, somewhat longer term of training for some of their clients.

Deborah Schlick: And I think Minnesota may not be atypical in that we believe that’s the piece of the program that the legislature will continue to

tinker with and revisit pretty regularly. It started out as a work first program when it left the administration’s hands the year it was created. By the time the legislature was finished, they had introduced some training elements to it. But they didn’t clearly define is this a training program or is it a work first program. Or, is it a work first program with some opportunities for training unclearly defined. And we think this session they’ll go back and try and define that more.

They are also, in this state, going to be introducing Washington State’s screening tool for learning disabilities. And it’s the first screening tool that they are going to be asking us to use consistently statewide because they want to get a handle on how often are learning disabilities the key issue. And I’ve been hearing anecdotally from job counselors – again in our nine months of experience – that when they’re doing testing, they are identifying some pretty low learning levels and serious learning disabilities.

Thomas Corbett: I think the views on this will change as the economy changes and as the profile of the caseload changes. And those two are not unrelated.

Deborah Schlick: We certainly have employers who are saying, “Why did you create a welfare program with training? Because we are not going to hire the people you send out on the street untrained.” And so, I think it will be coming both from advocates and from the business sector.

Thomas Corbett: Right now, this economy is unbelievable. You mentioned two percent unemployment rate. In Dane County here in Madison, it has inched down to something like one point two percent. So, your biggest danger walking the streets in this town is not being mugged by a criminal, but being kidnapped by an employer who is looking for workers.

Deborah Schlick: In fact, I’ve heard that from job counselors. One unexpected piece that their frustrations with some of their hard-to-serve clients

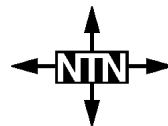
are that they can too easily get unreported cash jobs. And they are going to do that instead of hassle with the welfare system. And their worry is, right now they can get those cash jobs easily. And not in the sort of black market economy, but through temp agencies and day labor agencies. But when that dries up and their time on assistance is used up at the same time, that they'll be in crisis.

Mary Mack: I want to thank the presenters and those of you on the call. I think that this is very, very informative. And one of the things that I heard is that for those of us that are providing services and concerned about individuals with disabilities, there are opportunities to provide input to those people that are implementing these systems. And that people are really looking for help in resolving some of the challenges that they are facing as they implement welfare reform in terms of some additional training for workers. And also, opportunities possibly to provide special services to the special needs population. So, that's one of the things that I got out of the call. Hopefully, others got other things.

I would certainly like some input on where people on the call would like us to go with this conversation. And you can reach me at 612-624-7579 or through the National Transition Network web site at <http://www.ici.coled.umn.edu/ntn>. Thank you very much.

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