Work Support Strategies:
Streamlining Access, Strengthening Families

New Perspectives on Transforming States' Health and Human Services

Practical Commentaries on the First Year of the Work Support Strategies Initiative

Edited by Olivia Golden

June 2013

Acknowledgments

Contents

Work Support Strategies: Improving the Lives of Low-Income Working Families

Pamela Loprest

Millions of low-income working families in America today are struggling to make ends meet. While working hard, often in low-wage jobs, many of these families are living close to the edge of hardship and have little or no resources to fall back on in case of emergencies. Public benefit programs can make a huge difference in the well-being of these working families, providing help with food, child care, and health insurance expenses. These programs help families address immediate needs and weather short-term crises, such as repairing a car needed to get to work or dealing with an unexpected health problem. They can make it possible for families to hold onto their jobs in these emergencies, stabilizing employment and keeping families from falling further into poverty.

Yet many families that are eligible for public benefit programs do not participate. Although the recession and its aftermath led to unprecedented increases in receipt of nutrition assistance through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the latest data (from 2010) show that only 65 percent of the eligible working poor are participating. Similarly, of all children eligible for public health insurance coverage through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, only 86 percent are participating. The participation rate for public health insurance for parents is only 66 percent. And, these participation rates vary widely across states.

The Work Support Strategies, or WSS, Initiative is motivated by the value public benefit programs can provide to working families and the belief that the states and localities administering these programs can improve how eligible families access and retain these benefits. In the first year of the demonstration, nine states took on the challenge of streamlining, integrating, and improving the provision of work support benefits through their SNAP, Medicaid, and child care programs (and, in some states, additional programs such as heating assistance and cash welfare). While most states hope their efforts will also reduce burden on caseworkers and administrative costs in these systems, all are motivated to improve the lives of the families they serve.

From the beginning, states recognized the difficulties low-income families can face navigating complex, duplicative, and bureaucratic public benefit systems. Several states described their own systems as "dysfunctional" or "broken." In some places, the process for accessing benefits is itself a barrier—long and confusing applications and notices, multiple visits and calls to program offices to complete applications, resubmission of the same documents for different programs, and inconvenient office hours or locations requiring applicants to travel long distances and/or take time off from work. In addition, many of these families eligible for multiple benefits do not end up receiving the full package because of problems in benefit eligibility systems. Families applying for SNAP are not always aware that they may also be eligible for Medicaid, and vice versa, and benefit systems do not always provide this information. Parents applying for child care may not know that they are eligible for Medicaid and SNAP as well. As a result, applicants go to multiple offices or fill out multiple applications that often request the same or similar information and supporting documentation, leading to more time off work and in program offices.

Throughout the first year of WSS, states recognized that retaining benefits can also be problematic for low-income families. Analysis of their own administrative data showed that many families lose benefits when they need to recertify eligibility, only to reapply a month or two later. This cycling, or "churning," leads to additional costs and burden for families and the benefit system.

Many states made important strides in the first planning year toward reducing burdens on eligible families. Some examples:

- Rhode Island implemented same-day service for SNAP applicants. With the traditional process, applicants came in to the office to fill out paperwork and schedule a time to return for an interview before receiving benefits. In the pilot, at least one SNAP worker was dedicated to processing cases right away so applicants could enroll and leave with a benefit card on their first visit. One SNAP line manager said, "People tell clients you have to wait weeks for benefits, and [one client] walked out the same day with [his] card."

- Idaho aimed to make as many eligibility decisions as possible the first time applicants contact the department. During the WSS planning year, the state began developing a system to support "automated verifications"—technology that would help self-reliance specialists (frontline workers) quickly verify client circumstances affecting eligibility.
- South Carolina launched its Express Lane initiative, which uses data from SNAP and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to automatically redetermine Medicaid eligibility for children without requiring any action by the families.

The three-year implementation stage of WSS holds promise for many innovations and system changes that will benefit low-income working families. Implementing new technologies, ensuring ongoing integration of human services programs with the rollout of health reform changes, and streamlining work processes within benefit systems are all part of states' ongoing efforts.

One question that remains: whether the overhaul of state benefit systems will increase access and stability. Will there be "no wrong door" for accessing benefits, reduction in the time it takes from applying to receiving benefits, less need to make in-person visits and potentially miss valuable work time, and generally more "user-friendly" systems? The WSS evaluation continues to track and analyze states' progress to assess whether the changes they are making improve access to and retention of benefits for interested eligible families—and, in the end, improve the lives of low-income working families.

Pamela Loprest is a senior fellow with the Urban Institute's Income and Benefits Policy Center and is directing the evaluation of the Work Support Strategies Initiative.

A Hand Up, Not a Handout

C.L. "Butch" Otter

Like many states, Idaho has spent much of the past five years weathering the Great Recession and its challenges, from job losses to home foreclosures to budget shortfalls. Often such dire challenges can bring change, and these recent changes in our economic landscape have opened the door to a great opportunity.

In 2010, Idaho became one of nine states partnering with the Urban Institute and the Ford Foundation in the Work Support Strategies Initiative, a focused effort to transform the landscape of health and human services—and specifically the delivery of those services to low-income working families—by sharing innovative ideas, identifying best practices, and collaborating on solutions. Idaho's goal has been to approach welfare from a new perspective: not as a handout, but rather as a strategic hand up.

There is broad consensus in our state that government services should be aimed not at growing entitlement programs, but rather at helping families enter and succeed in the workforce. This isn't a new idea. Thomas Jefferson once said, "If we can but prevent the government from wasting the labors of the people under the pretense of taking care of them, they must become happy."

Through the Work Support Strategies grant, our Department of Health and Welfare has joined with community partners, policymakers, officials in other states, and the Urban Institute to identify gaps in the services available to low-income working Idahoans and reduce the impediments to receiving those services for which they are eligible. Specifically, we have focused on improving delivery of SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, child care subsidies, and our Temporary Cash Program to the working poor, while streamlining administration and reducing our own operating costs.

For instance, we have introduced technological innovations such as a cloud-based phone system for statewide "universal case management." Now when someone calls to apply or recertify for benefits, any eligibility decisionmaker anywhere in Idaho can take the phone call and complete the interview. In addition, our new case management system auto-loads verified

information, triggering eligibility immediately. We also have enhanced our verification process by aggregating multiple electronic interfaces and verification sources into one easy-to-use, on-demand tool for eligibility decisionmakers. That increases the accuracy of decisionmaking, while decreasing the need for multiple, unnecessary, time-consuming, and costly interactions with applicants.

Idaho also is on the cutting edge of what we call "business process re-engineering" to simplify cumbersome agency processes and reduce red tape. One example is our integrated application and interview process, which puts the person in direct and immediate contact with an eligibility decisionmaker, eliminating the need to fill out our typical eight-page paper applications. We are also reducing application processing time by using telephonic signatures, eliminating the delay caused by moving forms through the mail. One result of all this: Idaho now consistently approves SNAP applications in an average of less than two days.

A big focus of our WSS project has involved integrating the various programs for low-income families. States have to deal with multiple federal programs administered through multiple federal agencies, each with competing policies, budgets, and reporting requirements. Idaho has spent the past two years integrating our SNAP, Medicaid, TANF (cash assistance), and Child Care programs as much as possible. To do this, our state rules on poverty levels, income calculations, verification standards, and reporting requirements have been changed across all programs.

Now with federal waiver requests, integrated application and recertification processes, and new case management disciplines, Idaho has created a holistic, family-centric approach to the design and delivery of services.

Improving our Child Care Program has been another goal. For breadwinners in families living near or below the poverty level—particularly single-parent families—finding and paying for child care is very often a big roadblock to finding and maintaining stable employment. We have redesigned our subsidy calculations to provide a flat rate per child, creating stable, reliable subsidies for both parents and child care providers. We also have changed policies to ensure access for students receiving child care assistance while in school, but not at the expense of low-income working families.

Idaho's commitment to enabling low-income families to enter and stay in the workforce has meant investing in innovative solutions like these. Yes, acquiring the right technology is critical. But technology is not the driver for innovation; it is only a facilitator. Real change and effective governance come from policy and eligibility innovation, simplified business redesigns with reduced paperwork, integrated verification systems, and improved communication. Now our Welfare Division, which serves one in three Idahoans over the course of a year, operates with one of the lowest-cost and most effective program administrations in the country. Outcomes like these are proof that government can operate effectively at lower costs, and with better results.

We believe that providing cost-effective administration is a responsibility of government. So too, is providing the key supports such as health coverage, food and nutrition assistance, and child care. We also believe that the path to self-sufficiency cannot be found in welfare programs alone, but must include integrated and supportive services that help families get into and stay in the workforce, take advantage of new opportunities unfolding as the economy improves, and pave their own path out of poverty and into the mainstream of Idaho's economy. That's good not just for families, but for our state.

A hand up, not a handout. Idaho's spirit of self-determination and independence is based on this principle, and we value the partnerships we've gained with the Ford Foundation, the Urban Institute, and community and state leaders who are helping us put this spirit into practice.

C.L. "Butch" Otter, a former three-term member of Congress,
is serving his second term as governor of Idaho.

Creating a Culture of Caring as a Foundation for Change

Michelle R. B. Saddler

In early 2009, when I was director of policy for Governor Pat Quinn, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) secretary called me to express grave concern about the physical condition of the local offices that administer cash, SNAP, and medical assistance. When I toured the offices a short time later, I saw carpet so old it would disintegrate if cleaned, holes in the walls, computer servers in the wash rooms, and a workplace so filthy that staff avoided wearing nice clothes to work. At this time, the number of customers relying on our local offices for assistance was increasing dramatically due to the ongoing economic recession. Yet, our number of caseworkers was declining due to budget cuts, retirements, and other attrition. Workloads had increased tremendously with no corresponding investment in technology. Caseloads in some offices exceeded 2,600 per worker, allowing our staff to spend less than 45 minutes per family a year. Our local offices on which millions of Illinois residents rely to meet their basic needs were crumbling, both physically and functionally.

In October 2009, I found myself the new secretary of IDHS, sitting around a table with my management team. We were strategizing about how to demonstrate to our employees how invaluable they are and how important their work is, despite the challenging times in which we find ourselves. We recognized that if we want to improve treatment and outcomes for our customers, we needed first to treat our own workers with respect and care. From this idea, IDHS "PRIDE" was born. It serves as the agency's guiding principles: striving to be a values-driven agency that creates a culture of caring for one another and our customers.

- **Partnership.** DHS is one of Illinois's largest agencies, but we cannot accomplish our mission of service alone.

- **Rebalancing.** People should be served in the setting most appropriate for their needs.

- **Integrated delivery of human services.** Someone in need should be able to enter any IDHS office and learn about all state services that might help him/her. We strive to be more person-centric, rather than program-focused.

- **Data-driven program evaluation.** We continually ask, "Do all of our programs make a difference?"

- **Effective core human services.** As state financial resources become limited, we must ensure that essential services for our citizens are protected.

We had a vision, but our resources were consumed handling the many crises that arose each day. How could we revolutionize the way we deliver services in our spare time, which was at best about three minutes a week?

Around this time, the Ford Foundation invited states to participate in the Work Support Strategies Initiative. Within a week, nearly 20 community partners e-mailed us, saying: "You have to apply! This looks exactly like the kind of work you are trying to do. It's like it was written expressly for Illinois DHS!"

It was true. WSS fit perfectly with our vision, and it provided the framework, funding, and technical assistance to help us reach our goals.

Illinois was fortunate to be one of nine states selected for a planning grant, and we got right to work. We hired a few talented individuals who could dedicate themselves fully to this project. They gathered the many ideas that staff had and helped us prioritize and schedule our actions. They brought together participants from operations, policy, and training, and they included our Child Care Assistance Program so we could coordinate better with our shared customers. Together, we developed a multipronged strategy to improve the office environments, change processes to increase efficiency, simplify policies, and take full advantage of ongoing technology improvements.

We first sought out quick wins to show staff and customers that we were going to be "doers" instead of "talkers." Refreshing paint, replacing carpet, and rebidding leases tremendously impacted the local office environment. We also changed procedures to improve the office experience for customers and workers. It was amazing how establishing queues, posting signage, and creating different lines for different services improved customer traffic—and customer satisfaction.

While the project staff facilitated the changes in the offices, our actions were driven by the clerical staff, caseworkers, and managers facing these challenges every day. Eager to try out new processes, they also developed such innovative strategies as "case-banking" or "task-based" offices, which helped distribute work across teams.

We quickly saw the importance of action-oriented planning. It was essential to test our strategies while developing longer-term plans. Measuring outcomes and making adjustments helped us ensure that we were on the right track while also demonstrating some early results. WSS provided the space and support to plan, organize, and be strategic in our improvement efforts.

The WSS project gave us the framework to look broadly at the challenges and opportunities we faced, and to invite other participants into our vision. We joined with our communications and technology bureaus, as well as the state entity over our facilities, to continue our transformation. This larger unified effort, known as Local Office Pride, strives to improve our local office environment while better serving our customers and helping our caseworkers. This increased coordination helped us achieve major successes; for example, by leveraging an existing IBM contract to move toward a paperless system, we have already eliminated more than 7 million documents a year.

Today, many challenges remain and are in some cases growing. There are ongoing fiscal constraints, continued staffing decreases, and the opportunities and challenges that come with developing and deploying a new Integrated Eligibility System to replace our 30+ year-old legacy system. But thanks to WSS, we can strategically approach and overcome these obstacles. We handle the day-to-day crises but still take time each week to look forward and progress toward our vision of a truly caseworker- and customer-friendly service delivery system.

The test we face is to avoid becoming complacent. It is not enough to simply survive another day—though sometimes that can feel like quite an accomplishment! We have felt the difference that can be made when we dedicate precious energy and resources to look at the big picture and carve a path to improved service delivery. Each day we must recommit ourselves to doing everything we can to more effectively assist the millions of families who rely on us to become healthy and self-sufficient.

Michelle R. B. Saddler is secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Forging a New Path in South Carolina

Anthony (Tony) Keck

When staff from the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) submitted the grant application for the Work Support Strategies Initiative, they expected agency leadership changes as a result of our November 2010 gubernatorial elections. Still, with limited knowledge of the future leadership in both departments, the staff understood the importance of streamlining and improving the application process for South Carolinians eligible for government benefits and services—particularly the SNAP (food stamps), TANF, and Medicaid programs.

In visiting our county offices, the reality was that lines were often out the door and our citizens were required to wait in one line for each department to access and apply for benefits. This alone provided enough reason to participate in the WSS Initiative.

For South Carolina, the WSS program provided a strong and compelling vision for a unified, process-driven approach that could focus on the needs of South Carolina's families. Although nothing had technically prohibited staff and leaders at DSS and SCDHHS from collaborating in the past, a long and difficult history had discouraged a broader client-centric perspective. The WSS Initiative's ability to simply foster, facilitate, and enhance communication between DSS and SCDHHS was a critical first step. As one team member noted, "We approached this in a nonpolitical way with a focus on the client and the best interest of citizens."

The WSS program provided a framework to consider various process improvements, from seemingly small to very large changes in how the state operated. WSS supported the state team by

- establishing a forum for open and frank discussion about how to improve services;
- providing tools and approaches for process innovation;
- delivering opportunities to engage, collaborate and learn from other states in a structured way, including site visits to see application, eligibility, and enrollment activities in action; and
- conveying a perspective and culture that drives and supports change.

The difficult path toward collaboration and process improvement was cut when SCDHHS and DSS committed to participating in WSS. At both the state and project level, one question was if modest but material investments would have a measurable effect on the participating states. For South Carolina, WSS's framework of engaging a small number of states in meaningful dialogue and supporting structures within and across the state proved the most critical and beneficial aspect of the initiative.

One highlight for South Carolina during the planning year was the implementation of Express Lane Eligibility (ELE) redeterminations and new applications for Medicaid using data available from the SNAP and TANF programs. The WSS program spurred on the collaboration needed to identify shared goals and existing relationships. As of March 2013, South Carolina has been able to automate the redeterminations for nearly 250,000 children and enrollment for over 81,000 children in the state's Medicaid program. There is no doubt that the connections between the DSS and SCDHHS staff that were made as part of their WSS work facilitated the communication and collaboration needed to make ELE successful, while also providing a model for future data-sharing and innovation.

The WSS planning year also provided the state's leadership perspective on the challenges our current processes and systems pose to our citizens and our staff. WSS enabled open and honest communication at all levels of the organizations. As a frontline caseworker remarked about the process: "It's afforded opportunities from our clerks, caseworkers, supervisors, to get into one room. Everyone has pretty much an equal voice. They're not intimidated by title, and everyone's opinion counts."

Although the planning year brought DSS and SCDHHS together to work toward shared goals, this effort requires significant and ongoing effort to see long-term outcomes. DSS is now working on its regionalized, specialized worker process while SCDHHS is focused on the federal requirements of health reform. The challenge ahead is to maintain the perspective and momentum of the planning effort and keep both departments and their stakeholders engaged in continual process improvement.

The goals of the WSS program align with South Carolina's broader efforts to improve citizens' outcomes and engagement in their own well-being. On the health care side, it is critical

to remember that becoming eligible for health services is not enough. Citizens need to get access to the right services at the right time in the right setting. As we improve the eligibility process, we need to be able to further understand our beneficiaries' needs, which may include collecting basic information on health status to help connect them to the most appropriate programs for assistance. We also need to learn how our members use the health system and educate them about the opportunities available.

Research based on the social determinants of health shows that the health of an individual, family, or community depends greatly on factors other than health care services. We know that food and housing insecurity contribute to physical and mental health, and that those struggling in poverty face unique challenges that compound upon each other. That is why we believe that fostering and facilitating connections among various programs is a powerful way for states to improve overall health. By identifying and supporting the spectrum of needs and ensuring individuals and families are able to take advantage of the benefits for which they are eligible, we increase the likelihood that our investment will truly improve the lives of our citizens.

We strongly believe that process improvement will also free our staff from paperwork and administrative tasks to both handle the larger caseloads we are seeing and to better focus on understanding the comprehensive and complex needs of South Carolina's citizens. Through this understanding, we will ultimately be able to improve the health and well-being of our state and ensure that families are engaged in meaningful and productive work when possible and that children are in school as we educate our next generation.

As we look toward the implementation of the WSS program in South Carolina, we understand that we have a long path ahead of us. Although many challenges remain, the WSS Initiative has enabled us to see how other states have been able to unify their eligibility and enrollment processes, successfully driving better outcomes for their citizens. To support the economic growth of the state and to manage the long-term costs of health care, it is imperative we succeed in delivering a better experience to South Carolinians in a way that recognizes the challenges of those in the greatest need and effectively connects them with the benefits to help meet these needs.

Anthony (Tony) Keck is director of health and human services for South Carolina.

Time Well Spent: Enhancing Collaboration through the Work Support Strategies Initiative

Reggie Bicha

While strong partnerships and collaboration with stakeholders are critical features of any effective system, Colorado's state-supervised, county-administered human services system further accentuates the need for teamwork and communication among many agencies. The Work Support Strategies Initiative came to Colorado at a crucial time, and it was instrumental in helping us engage our partners in making important, systemic changes. It was an important boost to a number of separate efforts under way.

During the first few months of the WSS planning period, the Colorado work team met with county partners, community-based advocate agencies, and other stakeholders to share the broad goals of the WSS Initiative, gather input into where we should focus our efforts, and solicit partners to join our WSS steering committee. We were expecting to hear mostly system and operational-based ideas for change: document imaging, system interfaces, and training for county workers. Although we did hear about those needs, the feedback was strongest around improving communication and trust between and among state agencies and counties.

WSS connected our broader goals for providing more efficient services to struggling families to the issues that counties were already concerned about, like timeliness, staff capacity, and technology issues. Our partners are noticing the difference. A county human services director described the striking change: "I thought the state's role across programs was to throw policies out and then audit us to death…. That's really changed, and I feel like they listen. They don't always have the answers we want, but the conversations are happening…the door is open."

In WSS, we decided to cast a wide net of invitation to counties and community-based organizations as we started our planning year. Previously, we would make initial plans at the state level; then, we would identify a few county partners to join the review. WSS allowed us to open up involvement and governance to all who were interested. The result was a much more diverse set of county and community partners than previous efforts. This has helped as we move from planning to implementation. While this open-ended approach is not appropriate for all

planning projects, it helped us in two ways: we got a better product because the discussion included multiple points of view, and it built trust and credibility between and among partners. As a county leader stated, "We're in this together because that's how we get to a better model."

One of the most striking examples of this new collaboration was the joint effort to garner support to improve the Colorado Benefit Management System (CBMS). CBMS is Colorado's integrated benefits management system for Food Assistance, Medicaid, TANF, and Adult Financial programs. The impetus for change came from Governor John Hickenlooper and was executed through a cross-agency and county executive steering committee, and an array of key workgroups and committees.

Although CBMS's shortcomings had been evident for years, the state, counties, and benefit recipients had not been able to jointly identify the issues or to develop, design, and articulate a comprehensive, collaborative plan for reform. Each stakeholder group had developed one-off system workarounds to address their own program areas, resulting in piecemeal solutions with no coordination between agencies. There was enormous skepticism from clients, advocates, and the general public that CBMS could be improved.

A preexisting court settlement to improve the timeliness of access to benefits created immense pressure to move quickly and highlighted the need for county input. WSS brought resources and technical assistance that provided structure to try new ways of working together.

With the governor's call to action, we embraced a new strategy. It was an important, high-profile turning point to a new way of doing business. The work was arduous but the leadership directive was powerful, and our collaborative work evolved into a tangible work plan that was supported by all partners as well as the majority of the state's legislature. Together, we are achieving results that have eluded us for many years. We are not where we need to be, but the progress is tangible. As a county director stated: "Both the state and counties have improved. We talk about how to improve the system to get benefits to folks in the most useful way."

WSS did not originate the CBMS work, but it has provided critical support, technical assistance and resources when we might otherwise have fallen short.

As a state, we are seeing positive outcomes from the Work Support Strategies Initiative. However, significant challenges lie ahead—particularly our goal to successfully implement the Affordable Care Act without losing ground on timely processing of other program benefits.

The past few years have shown us that we can work together more effectively, and serve those who need our benefits and work supports better, if we take the time to engage each other, our clients, and external partners.

We remain united in our efforts to ensure that all Coloradans have the supports they need to be safe, healthy, and thriving.

Reggie Bicha is the executive director of the Colorado Department of Human Services.

100 Sources of Innovation: Implementing the Work Support Strategies Initiative in a County-Administered State

Nancy Coston and John Eller

North Carolina had the honor of participating in the two largest statewide reform efforts of social services in the past 25 years: the Work Support Strategies Initiative and North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology (NCFAST). As we began these initiatives, county budgets were contracted, caseloads were high, unemployment and poverty rates were high, staffing was lean, our technology was antiquated, and data were sparse. We had no clear vision articulated at all levels to help guide our social programs. We were at a crossroads, and we wanted to pick the right path going forward.

WSS was the springboard that helped us test and implement more effective and integrated approaches to delivering key work supports, including health coverage, TANF, SNAP, Special Assistance, and child care subsidies. We wanted to help the more than 2.1 million individuals in North Carolina who receive a work support benefit each year get and keep the full package of work support benefits for which they are eligible.

To start, we obtained feedback from county directors, supervisors, and workers; consumers; and state staff; then, we summarized the results. State and local leaders came together to develop our guiding principle: that **families will tell their story once, receive the services they need, and there will be no wrong door to accessing benefits.** We decided that customer service, efficiency, and data would drive the development of service delivery models and staffing roles. Our group aimed to strengthen state-county partnerships while also identifying statewide policy and technology changes. We wanted to begin thinking about our programs and services in the context of each other, rather than in isolation.

Since this time, North Carolina has made excellent progress and has many accomplishments that can be replicated. The WSS Initiative allowed us to breathe, step back, rethink future directions, reboot stuck relationships, and build the human and intellectual capacity to handle the challenges and opportunities ahead. Although we still have much work to do, our hope for the

future is that within our guiding principles, North Carolina has 100 county laboratories that manufacture innovation.

For other county and state leaders considering large-scale initiatives like WSS, North Carolina would like to offer these words of wisdom and key lessons learned:

Harness the power of engagement. Never underestimate asking peers and agencies to step up to a challenge. County interest was greater than we anticipated. County staff felt that the state often overlooked ideas. No one had ever taken the time to engage counties, listen, follow through on requests, and show results. State divisions were in programmatic and policy silos; their processes trapped workers between federal and state policies, yielding duplicative work and unnecessary administrative churning. The state partners challenged each other, the county directors challenged each other, and we began asking for each side's feedback and input.

Have a clear, simple vision that is easy to articulate. We had always valued customer service but had never had a focused approach to address it, and we had never come together to make a commitment regarding how to improve our service. A document was developed by counties and for counties that illustrates the WSS vision for service delivery statewide. It sets common expectations, goals, and indicators of success for our customer experience, data-driven decisionmaking, and use of community partners. Setting common expectations across programs throughout the state is crucial to changing the organizational culture in local Department of Social Services offices.

Identify a "state champion." Find someone who has the power and authority to make things happen and is delegated by a higher authority to do so. This is a critical first step; otherwise it may be impossible to get past turf issues and programmatic silos. A state champion gave North Carolina the structure to test policy and procedural changes against our stated philosophy, making sure that all things rolled up to our stated mission and purpose.

Identify a "local champion." The same model proves effective at the county or local level. This person should have the same authority locally as the state champion, to get things done internally, hold staff accountable, work across program areas, and keep the momentum going.

Develop a leadership team. Mandate that various state programs and divisions, along with county staff, meet to continue aligning policy and keep the WSS project moving forward.

Identify project manager(s). In North Carolina, one consultant and one state staff member work alongside state and local champions and the leadership team to prevent us getting bogged down in day-to-day activities. Project managers keep focus, hold parties accountable for engagement, and ensure some continuity among the leadership team.

Shamelessly steal ideas from others, and take calculated risks and small tests of change. The "no cheating rule" that we learned in grade school should be reframed. States and counties should always be looking for best practices to replicate as part of the continuous improvement process; the goal is to learn from others.

Use technology to support your vision, but don't be a prisoner to it. NCFAST, our integrated eligibility system, is now being rolled out statewide. The North Carolina team believed that technology had to be aligned with changes in business processes, policy, and culture in state and local offices.

Focus on data. The leadership team realized we had to begin intentional conversations about data. What can it tell or show leadership? How can counties compare their performance with others around the state? How can we ensure staff have the data for strategic and day-to-day decisionmaking and for launching experiments? In response to these questions, we developed a data toolkit to summarize easily accessible and user-friendly data that could identify outcomes and measures. We also created training to interpret and use those reports.

Assess policy alignment. Our team reviewed program policies and mapped out the differences among them. The various state divisions operated in silos, often making policy changes that conflicted with other policies in other divisions. We assessed policy alignment, such as income (countable or not?), various definitions, and different requirements for verification and reporting. We wished to create more consistency across programs, streamline redeterminations, and reduce churn. A policy review system and team were created to enable two-way communication between counties and the state, and to assist with special projects. This team, made up of state and local subject matter experts, provides feedback to state partners on policy development for

---

Work Support Strategies

SNAP, Medicaid, Child Care, TANF, and Special Assistance. No policy is implemented within the state's means-tested programs until this group discusses and reviews it. This is not another layer of bureaucracy, rather, it saves time and confusion among staff, reduces duplicative work, and limits conflicting policy.

Have a strong communication plan. Our team developed a communication toolkit to articulate our vision for North Carolina's new service delivery system. We knew that the success of WSS and NCFAST would be driven by how well and how often we communicated about this initiative and vision at all levels (to elected officials, state staff, county staff, and county directors).We also were intentional about staff readiness and provided many forums to educate staff via our statewide WSS website, webinars, project updates, town hall meetings, and training summits. This helped explain the "why" to staff as we moved from program specialists to a universal worker model.

Be resilient, even when it seems impossible. We know that other states have different challenges. North Carolina is a county-administered state, and each of our 100 counties has its own unique identity. If we can strive for system reform, then anyone can do it!

For more information, please visit http://www.ncwss.com.

Nancy Coston is the director of Orange County Social Services in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. John Eller is the director of Catawba County Social Services in Hickory, North Carolina.

Increasing Effectiveness and Transparency Helps Program Recipients and Taxpayers

Tom Reed

In the digital age, we have come to expect everything around us to be *faster* and *more efficient.* Government has not kept up with that notion. It's time to change that. Innovative, common-sense, and bipartisan policy proposals are available now that would make government work *faster* and *more efficiently*. As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources, I have made the improvement of administrative efficiency and program integrity an ongoing priority in the programs we oversee, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, child care, child support enforcement, foster care and adoption, Supplemental Security Income, and Unemployment Insurance (UI). In the 113th Congress, I continue these efforts with Subcommittee Chairman Dave Reichert, Ranking Democrat Lloyd Doggett, and other Members on both sides of the aisle.

One key bipartisan initiative focuses on increasing the exchange of information among means-tested and other human services programs. Essentially this means implementing a more consistent data-driven approach to program administration. With these changes, we can improve the delivery of programs for both recipients and front-line workers while speeding up the decisionmaking process. This will also benefit taxpayers through making correct eligibility and benefit determinations sooner, improving program integrity and reducing improper payments. Such conforming data standards have been confirmed by the Work Support Strategies project. We know it works.

Bipartisan legislation I have introduced with Reps. Reichert and Doggett, The Standard DATA Act (H.R. 948), incorporates these objectives and reflects the WSS project's initial findings. The bill requires relevant agency secretaries or program administrators to establish consistent rules for the electronic content and format of data used in the administration of human service programs. The use of consistent data and electronic formatting methods will allow for the timelier flow of data that could then be easily searched, accessed, used, and analyzed. The legislation also requires these standards to be coordinated through an interagency workgroup so programs and agencies do not continue to operate in their independent silos. Coordination is

necessary because we want to ensure the federal government does not complicate matters more as states do the difficult work described in the WSS project.

Through this legislation, we also intend to address some of the challenges raised by the WSS project. For example, North Carolina state officials realized that families had different identifiers in each program, requiring the state to consult with specialists in each program before developing credible cross-program data. H.R. 948 encourages programs to coordinate identifiers so information for inter- and intrastate exchanges of program data will be structurally ready.

Progress is being made. In the last Congress, lawmakers included language similar to H.R. 948 in the bipartisan Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act, which applied these provisions to child welfare services, and again in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012, which applied the provisions to UI and TANF.

As the WSS project made clear, the difficulties states encounter do not always need a legislative fix, which many are quick to assume. While program requirements, both in law and in regulation, could be more conducive to breaking down silos across programs, they are not always the sole or even primary barriers. Idaho discovered it could prefill redetermination forms with information already known from other programs, and Colorado reduced its joint application for food assistance, Medicaid, Colorado Works (TANF), and adult financial programs from 26 pages to 8, without any legislative changes. States have the power to make a lot of these changes themselves, and we encourage them to undertake that initiative.

To break through the nonstatutory barriers requires considerable effort and leadership within states, a strong theme of the WSS project and a February 2013 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report I joined Rep. Reichert and Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Chairman Tom Carper in releasing. This report was designed to identify specific statutory impediments that we can act on legislatively to remove barriers to data standardization. However, what GAO found in its survey of stakeholders is that the perceived barriers were not statutory. Rather, they stemmed from privacy protection concerns. GAO found "confusion and misconceptions around what data agencies are allowed to share, as well as a tendency to be risk averse and overly cautious in the interpretation of federal privacy requirements." In every locality, privacy was one of the most important concerns, and "strong leadership" was the most

important factor behind the successful implementation of systematic and automated data-sharing while protecting personal privacy.

The WSS evaluation found similar results: the greatest driver of change was leadership and a commitment to improving government operations. Leadership is certainly not something we can legislate from Washington, D.C., but we do need to support and encourage state-level innovation and leadership.

The progress made by the WSS project, just in its planning year, will spill over into other programs like TANF and child welfare that serve similar populations. It will also help achieve other objectives, such as improved program evaluations to enable state agencies and federal policymakers to make data-driven decisions to better target program funds.

Ultimately, efforts to increase the exchange of information among means-tested and other human services programs will help improve government efficiency, a win for everyone involved. Increasing the effectiveness and transparency of these programs is a positive step forward for program recipients and taxpayers alike. I am honored to be part of this effort in the U.S. Congress, and I am eager to see state-level leadership and coordination continue to move this issue forward while we await more results from the WSS project.

Congressman Tom Reed represents New York's 23rd District
and sits on the House Ways and Means Committee.

Grasping the Opportunity to Streamline Health Programs and Other Work Supports

Alan Weil

Health programs have a special role to play in any effort to coordinate work supports for low-income families. Starting from humble origins with the addition of the Medicaid program as Title XIX of the Social Security Act in 1965, spending on health programs now greatly exceeds spending on income support, housing, and other social supports. With poor health and low incomes highly correlated, any comprehensive effort to meet the needs of working families must include a focus on health.

How Did We Get Here?

The relationship between health and other social service programs has evolved over the past half-century. Medicaid eligibility was originally tied to eligibility for cash assistance—then called Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Gradual expansions in Medicaid eligibility occurred over the program's first three decades, but it was welfare reform in 1996 and the creation of the State Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997 that fundamentally broke the link between eligibility for health and income maintenance programs. These two programs also ushered in a change in the political characterization of Medicaid—helping it shift out of the stigmatized family of welfare programs into the more politically acceptable family of work support programs.

Eligibility standards were delinked, but eligibility processes were not. That is, in the large majority of states, health program eligibility continued to be determined in the same county welfare offices by the same county eligibility workers as before; they were just applying different eligibility standards to the various programs.

Fast forward to President Obama's signing of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, and the world changed again. States have new resources and an operational imperative to vastly simplify their health program eligibility systems. States also have expanded opportunities to more easily enroll

people in health programs based on the information they have provided to establish their eligibility for other programs.

Which confronts states with a choice: upgrade health program eligibility systems by themselves, expanding the gap between health and other work supports, or use this unique opportunity to build an integrated work support system. The Work Support Strategies Initiative is helping states that chose the latter option, building an integrated work support system that includes Medicaid, children's health insurance, and new subsidies available to working families purchasing coverage through health insurance exchanges.

Building On What Works

Many findings of the first WSS report are consistent with lessons we learned at the National Academy for State Health Policy. Since 2008, we have been conducting the Maximizing Enrollment project, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Originally focused entirely on children's eligibility and enrollment, the project now promotes the broader system improvement requirements of the Affordable Care Act. Drawing from the WSS report and our own work, I would point states and those who wish to help states achieve a more integrated work support system to the following elements:

- It is important to begin by <u>assessing where the state's systems are</u>, because integration is an incremental process, not necessarily a dramatic, one-time shift.
- Technology is only a tool; automating inefficient or fragmented processes will do little to achieve system improvement goals.
- The staff conducting outreach and eligibility determinations are likely to need retraining and reengineering of their jobs to succeed in a new environment.
- Retention is as important as enrollment; churning in and out of systems is wasteful and harmful.
- Efforts to improve operational efficiency and support families appeal to political leaders regardless of party and can be sustained through elections and transitions.

What Is at Stake?

States that have chosen to develop an integrated eligibility system are taking a risk. The demands on states associated solely with implementing the Affordable Care Act are so profound that you can forgive them for not taking on an additional task. Yet, today's federal funding and Medicaid eligibility simplification create a unique opportunity for work support integration that may not occur again for decades. For my time and money, I'd rather take this opportunity and do the best we can with it, even if the results are imperfect. Many state officials seem to agree.

Although creating a "no wrong door" approach to eligibility sounds appealing, it can also be burdensome to the families it is designed to support. Just as we don't want someone eligible for a benefit to be denied assistance he or she needs, we don't want to burden someone seeking one type of assistance with myriad intrusive questions that apply only to programs he or she doesn't want. States are struggling to find the right balance of integration in the midst of very tight deadlines for reforming their health care program eligibility systems.

Ultimately, alignment of eligibility standards will be needed if we want an integrated and simple eligibility platform. But we are not yet there, so states are working with what they have. In that context, the WSS Initiative provides much-needed support.

NASHP is pleased to have been part of the WSS effort thus far, with Catherine Hess serving on the national advisory committee for the project. The early WSS lessons are very useful for those attempting to design a more integrated work support strategies, and I have no doubt we will learn even more as the project proceeds.

Alan Weil is executive director of the National Academy for State Health Policy (NASHP) and directed the Assessing the New Federalism project at the Urban Institute from 1997 to 2004.

Paving the Way to Reform: Past Performance and a Vision for the Future

Stacy Dean

Two years ago, Work Support Strategies states began reforming their health and human services delivery systems for efficiency in providing a comprehensive package of support to eligible working-poor families. State leaders are seizing this important moment to improve how they provide government services to their most vulnerable citizens. This new vision intends to improve upon past performance and provide a framework for implementing the new changes required by the Affordable Care Act.

Lessons of the Past: Families Fell between Cracks of an Inefficient System

While many states have worked for decades to improve access to and efficiency within individual programs, coordination *across* programs was limited. Lack of cross-program coordination can undermine program impact and decrease agency efficiency, and also reduces support for families. Families navigating an inefficient web of systems are often unable to secure the full package of benefits for which they are eligible.

In many states, despite the fact that children's health coverage, SNAP, and child care programs often require similar enrollment information, eligible families must often apply for and renew benefits via three separate processes. Many single parents, burdened by both low wages and child-rearing responsibilities, cannot take time off to apply for benefits and consequently lose benefits that could help them and their children stay healthy.

Few states have had the ability to assess for the level of coverage for working families across programs such as SNAP and health coverage. Traditionally they have monitored and reported on individual programs' performance—often at the direction of the federal government—rather than evaluating how effectively and efficiently they were providing comprehensive services to eligible families. This lack of information and perspective has limited the ability of state agencies to set comprehensive service delivery performance metrics for themselves and their

capacity to diagnose where problems exist and what improvements could be made to their overall approach to supporting working families.

Time to Make a Change: Interest and Events Spur Reform

The Great Recession fueled the desire of the WSS leaders to increase coordination across programs and thereby provide higher-quality, comprehensive services to struggling working families. As in all states, the increased demand for services caused by the economic downturn overwhelmed WSS states. Meanwhile, state budget deficits led to cuts in human services agencies' budgets. With the extreme budgetary pressure, WSS state leaders considered how they could do more with fewer resources.

The key to developing more effective and efficient application, enrollment, and renewal processes is to examine current practices, find the duplications and the bottlenecks, cut policies and procedures that are neither required nor adding value, and then reassess the results and make refinements. Through building more capacity to gather data and assess their systems, WSS states realized that many clients were not successfully completing the benefit application, the renewal processes, or both, on their first attempt, and unnecessary processes were creating barriers to eligibility. For example, different programs within the same agency—despite sharing common eligibility standards—were asking families to verify their circumstances in inconsistent and redundant ways. This was confusing. Families found themselves providing detailed proof of their income to meet one program's rules, but this proof might not be accepted by another program—despite being eligible for both.

A key component to addressing these issues was the process by which state WSS teams identified them. WSS state leaders focused on creating a safe space to identify and evaluate problems—making sure that the goal was to identify and solve the problem, not to point blame. Leaders supported piloting possible solutions to the problems they found. One state with a history of difficulty delivering benefits within federal timeframes piloted "same-day service," giving eligible SNAP applicants a decision the same day they applied. The pilot was successful, illustrating that faster service is possible, and thereby generating a model for how to test new ideas on a small scale.

Looking Ahead: The Opportunity of Health Reform

The WSS states wanted to do more than just improve upon the past and combat the recession's effects on struggling workers and families. These states are looking ahead to the challenges and opportunities presented by the implementation of the health reform in 2014. Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), states must transform their eligibility and enrollment systems for health coverage in a tight time frame. These changes involve launching major new computer systems, offering health coverage applicants (including existing Medicaid clients) new options such as web and phone services, and overhauling the basic rules for measuring applicants' eligibility for coverage. In light of this major undertaking, some have argued that states should focus only on the changes to the health programs and delay efforts to coordinate these required changes with improvements to the delivery of human service programs, such as SNAP.

WSS states have taken a different approach. They believe that health reform makes their work of integrating service delivery even more important, as the share of people eligible for both Medicaid and SNAP will grow substantially. The enormous overlap in people who will be eligible for both Medicaid and SNAP, and the fact that over 40 states coadminister these programs at the local level, have motivated states to create this framework. (In states that elect the ACA Medicaid expansion, nearly all non-senior SNAP enrollees will also be eligible for Medicaid.) How states structure their new health coverage eligibility and enrollment system will affect the ability of working poor families and individuals to receive the package of services for which they qualify.

Health reform raises a lot of questions, and WSS states are seeking to answer them.

- How will people who apply for human services programs be informed about and given the opportunity to apply for Medicaid? In most states, families applying for benefits at a local human services office are routinely screened for and (if eligible) enrolled in health coverage. Will that still be the norm in 2014? Or will the poorest families face added difficulty in accessing health coverage because they can only seek health benefits through some other process?
- How will low-income people applying for health coverage through the state's online application be connected to other human services programs and benefits? When low-

income individuals apply for health coverage and qualify for Medicaid, will they be connected to the other benefits and services for which they might be eligible?

Most guidance from the federal government on the ACA so far has been focused on changes to health programs. While this information is crucial, it neglects the overwhelming majority of states administering Medicaid and human services jointly. WSS states play a crucial leadership role in discovering how to blend new Medicaid eligibility rules and customer service standards with delivery of other human services programs. They're using lessons of the past and assessing how they can achieve new efficiencies to test creative solutions to provide *all* the necessary benefits to their most vulnerable people. They will be innovators on the path to creating modern, efficient systems that serve the poorest families comprehensively while delivering first-class customer service at a low cost to the taxpayer.

Stacy Dean is vice president for food assistance policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and leads technical assistance for the Work Support Strategies Initiative.

Untapped Potential: Connecting Child Care to Other Work Supports

Gina Adams and Hannah Matthews

Like federal nutrition and health benefits, child care subsidies are a crucial work support for low-income working families and their children. Subsidies help defray the costs of a key service for parents, and they help support stable child care for children. This stability in turn supports children's development and low-income parent's ability to work. As a result, child care joins nutrition and health benefits in being critical for both parents and children's well-being.

At the same time, the Child Care and Development Fund, or CCDF (the federal-state child care assistance program that provides child care subsidies), differs markedly from SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) and Medicaid. First, it is not an entitlement; states receive a finite amount of money for child care subsidies for low-income families, and for quality improvements regardless of need. Second, CCDF is a significantly smaller program in the number of families it serves (although the benefits families receive can be sizeable). Given these differences, CCDF is not always considered a major social safety net program. So the decision to make child care a core component of the Work Support Strategies Initiative was a bit of a gamble—one that paid off with surprising and exciting benefits for state child care systems, other work support systems, and, ultimately, families and children.

As the leaders of the child care technical assistance team, we worked closely with the WSS states to support their child care efforts. In the process, we discovered enormous untapped potential in child care systems that every state could use to improve services and outcomes for families and for state governments. The lessons learned in WSS are relevant for states interested in better supporting work, child development, and sound program management and integrity; as well as for states that see helping CCDF families get nutrition and health care as core to their overarching mission to support work and child development.

Our approach to helping WSS states had three steps—**assess, simplify,** and **link child care subsidies to other benefits**—and we found untapped potential at each level:

- **Assess.** As part of WSS, each state had to take a hard look at its child care eligibility and enrollment policies and implementation practices. During this assessment, each state found policies and practices that didn't conform with common goals of being family-friendly, child-focused, fair to providers, efficient, and fiscally responsible. CCDF's federal guidelines give states broad discretion to set most policies, so every state's approach is unique; as a result, each assessment was highly individualized and reached different conclusions. Some states identified problems with eligibility and verification policies, or with what families had to do to keep their benefits at the end of their eligibility period or when they experienced changes that affected their eligibility. Some states found that their administrative approaches created inefficiencies, backlogs, and bottlenecks that frustrated staff and clients. And some states found that examining data on case closings and churning gave them insights into problematic areas. Many states found problems in all these areas and more.

- **Simplify.** The enormous flexibility of the CCDF block grant structure meant states could take what they learned from their assessments and rethink their approaches, to realign them with their core vision for families and children. States used this flexibility to eliminate extraneous policies and practices that had accumulated over time and had created both unnecessary barriers for families and administrative burdens and costs for agencies. Some policies were relatively easy to change, while others required more intensive work and reform and have a longer timeline. However, in every state, simplification has supported improvements in the child care system. Coupled with what we have all learned about business processes, data diagnostics, and program design, this simplification can help states create simpler child care delivery systems that better serve clients, support continuity of care for children, improve efficiency for workers, and support stronger program integrity … all within state's own vision.

- **Link child care subsidies with other benefits.** Simplification was particularly effective when done while considering links and alignment with other systems. For example, in most states, much of the CCDF clientele was also on SNAP. Coordinating the eligibility processes of these two systems is thus a highly attractive way to reduce administrative duplication and client burden; it also supports program integrity by relying upon the SNAP system in key areas. Such links have many benefits: to parents, because they are

able to get and keep multiple benefits while jumping through fewer hoops; to children, who have more stable access to key child care, nutrition, and health services; to agency staff, who minimize duplication of effort across systems; and to the system, which maximizes the use of scarce resources.

This three-part approach helped states prioritize actions that would reshape their child care services to reflect their vision and goals for families and children:

- Idaho revamped many parts of its approach, including aligning recertification dates across programs; simplifying rules about activity hours, change reporting, and eligible work activities; using information provided for SNAP eligibility for child care eligibility; and raising and indexing CCDF's eligibility levels to SNAP's (an increase for the state, given Idaho's historically low income cutoffs for CCDF).
- Rhode Island significantly improved the timeliness of its application processing by reducing verification efforts and moving to a task-based approach.
- Illinois uncovered significant levels of complexity through its self-assessment, and identified a number of large and small steps to simplify and link child care benefits, including policy changes and an in-depth review of business processes.

Including child care in the WSS Initiative has provided all of us with exciting lessons about what state child care agencies can accomplish. By carefully assessing their policies and practices, simplifying their approach to conform with their goals, and linking with other benefits, states have more effectively supported children and families and have improved service delivery. The potential is enormous. Now other states have the opportunity to build on these lessons to help realize their own visions for helping children thrive and families succeed.

Gina Adams is a senior fellow with the Urban Institute's Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. Hannah Matthews is the director of the Child Care and Early Education team at the Center for Law and Social Policy. Together they lead the child care technical assistance group of the Work Support Strategies Initiative.

Working Together, Foundations and State Governments Can Make a Difference for Struggling Families

Luis A. Ubiñas

Over the past half-decade, as the country has suffered through a deep, persistent economic downturn, America's work support programs have become an essential tool for millions of families as they struggle to keep a toehold in the labor market. Everything from child care subsidies to health insurance, unemployment assistance, and food stamps has made the difference between families staying together and families dissolving.

Yet, in dozens of states, tight budgets and antiquated, under-resourced work support systems are failing to meet the needs of America's working poor. Problems that were already evident in better times have become more intractable, as caseloads have expanded in the midst of the economic crisis. How can states improve the health and well-being of low-income families, stabilize their work lives, and make it possible for them to get and keep jobs if states are unable to get the proper work support to those who are eligible?

Solving such a challenge goes to the heart of what all of us in the philanthropic community do daily: tackling major problems at a scale that results in real and enduring change—in this case, creating opportunity for low-income populations and keeping them stably in our workforce.

That's why the Ford Foundation is proud to play a lead role in funding and developing the Work Support Strategies Initiative, a partnership with nine states—led by governors from across the political spectrum—to design, test, and implement easy-to-navigate, quick-to-deliver operating changes to public work support systems that keep employees in the workforce and keep families together. Many of these operating changes have the further benefit of reducing the cost of running the programs.

More than a year after we started the initiative, the progress in fixing what was described in one state as a "completely dysfunctional, broken system" has been greater than any of us could have imagined. In some cases, the changes spurred by WSS had an impact on pilot offices or counties; in others, statewide changes affected tens of thousands of families. For example, in Colorado, state and county staff trimmed their work support application from 26 pages to 8; in

Rhode Island, the state's Providence office implemented same-day service to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applicants, enabling clients to obtain work support after just one visit; and in South Carolina, the state's Express Lane program sustained health coverage for tens of thousands of children—and is projected to save the state $1 million a year in operating costs—by using data in families' SNAP records to certify eligibility.

Taking advantage of technological advances, a streamlined bureaucracy, and newly adopted operating processes, many states borrowed from the private sector and are now modernizing procedures, strengthening the customer experience, and reducing the burdens on state workers. Beyond our nine partners, these efforts are already serving as models for other states.

For those of us in the philanthropic community, the work of WSS offers three important lessons for future partnerships between foundations and state governments.

First, as any philanthropic funder will tell you, the idea of working directly with the public sector often meets with reluctance. Foundations fear being placed in the middle of ideological disputes or paying for services that are the government's responsibility. But such trepidation, though hardly unjustified, shouldn't be an excuse for inaction—the opportunity for lasting impact is too great.

After all, where else can funders meet their primary goals of supporting initiatives with scale, impact, and sustainability? Federal and state governments remain the largest sources of resources directed at the issues that drive our work. As the progress of WSS so far demonstrates, when a project has clear goals and strategies, funders can successfully partner with public agencies.

Second, one by-product of the budget crisis is the elimination of state resources and attention to "research and development." Despite the fact that many agencies running work support programs have budgets of hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars at their disposal, the flexible funding to promote ongoing innovation, to modernize operating processes, and to use data to improve operational effectiveness has all but vanished. It shouldn't be surprising that state leaders are compelled to devote dwindling resources to direct benefits rather than innovation, but the result can be greater inefficiency and poorer distribution of services. That's exactly where foundations can contribute, by providing the kind of technical assistance and peer learning that

leaders and staff of public systems need as they embark on modernizing large bureaucracies. Quite simply, without foundation engagement these work support systems will continue to underserve their recipients and burden taxpayers with unnecessary operating costs.

Finally, tough budget times are a reason to engage, not disengage. With work support offices stretched thin and the current squeeze on state budgets, one might imagine that helping those in need, rather than making investments in improving state government operations, would take priority. But if you look at the response from 27 states to the initial request for proposal and the dedicated work of the 9 states chosen over the first year of the WSS project, the desire for ideas and resources to modernize the safety net—in both red states and blue states—is overwhelming. With states aspiring to do better and improve their operations, this is a great opportunity for foundations to step in and ensure that this current crisis becomes an opportunity to transform how we deliver work support benefits across the country.

As a strategic funder, the Ford Foundation has found that by convening disparate groups and seeking common ground based on practical solutions, we can implement the kind of programs that make a difference in the lives of individual Americans—and actually bring people together. The WSS Initiative is a perfect example of such a program, and it offers other foundations valuable lessons about partnering with state governments for the betterment of the most vulnerable in our society.

Luis A. Ubiñas is president of the Ford Foundation.

The Other 41 States

Olivia Golden

The 11 commentaries you've just read vividly convey participating states' and counties' exhilaration and national experts' enthusiasm about the Work Support Strategies Initiative. You might conclude that the 41 states and multitude of counties that have not participated should immediately get on board.

But between the lines, the authors are not solely celebrating success. They are lauding the "resilience" (as North Carolina county directors Nancy Coston and John Eller put it) that has enabled them to weather trade-offs, challenges, and struggles on the way to important early wins. And almost all see more struggles ahead.

To others who want to emulate their accomplishments, our authors' common conclusion is clear: reforming work support systems requires acknowledging failure while believing in success. Failure is a fount of learning and an opportunity to improve. Early wins—crucial for initiating and maintaining momentum—come from pinpointing what doesn't work and is therefore ripe for change. Long-term success comes from building upon these early victories a vision of how health insurance, food assistance, and child care subsidies can improve families' lives.

Each theme yields specific, practical next steps for other states and counties.

Learning from Failure

Change begins with an honest assessment of where today's delivery of work support programs breaks down. Illinois's path to reform, according to Secretary Michelle Saddler, started with crumbling and filthy offices, overwhelmed workers, and inadequate technology. Idaho's path, according to Governor Butch Otter, began when the "dire challenges" posed by the Great Recession "opened the door to a great opportunity."

Good questions are critical to a useful assessment. It's not enough to know that a system is failing; reformers also have to figure out what exactly is broken to come up with fixes. So the

questions and assessments that WSS states used to diagnose their starting points are one of the most valuable takeaways for other states, as Gina Adams, senior fellow at the Urban Institute, and Hannah Matthews, director of child care and early education at the Center for Law and Social Policy, illustrate in their essay on child care.

Tracking performance through data, rather than guesswork or assumptions, is the only way to get objective answers to those questions. Yet the WSS states mostly started with little accessible data for managing programs worth hundreds of millions—or even billions—of dollars. Few states could answer simple questions suggested by the WSS national team, such as the share of families receiving one benefit that also received others. One reason for these knowledge gaps, according to Ford Foundation President Luis Ubiñas, is that budget cuts have eroded state research and development budgets. Another is the difficulty of connecting data across programs, highlighted by Congressman Tom Reed, who notes the gap between the public's expectation that technology has made every sphere of life "faster and more efficient" and the reality of government operations.

As Coston and Eller report from North Carolina, the first step forward is to excite leaders about the questions they can answer with the right data—like "How can counties compare their performance with others around the state?" After that moment of insight, North Carolina (and other states) created data toolkits or dashboards for local and state managers, trained staff, and started using data regularly to solve problems and recognize success.

Once accurate information was available, it can galvanize action. Urban Institute senior fellow Pamela Loprest, who is directing the evaluation of WSS, points out that states discovered from administrative data that many eligible families lost access to benefits through bureaucratic glitches during eligibility recertification. Typically, these families reapplied for benefits a month or two later, creating considerable burden for state workers. To solve this problem, Idaho and South Carolina used data that families had already filed with other programs to help them keep benefits.

But using information requires more than just technical fixes. Avoiding a culture of blame also matters. Successful states create a safe space for staff to move from understanding to solutions, as Stacy Dean of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities points out from her

perspective leading WSS's national technical assistance program. In states with county-run programs, according to Director Reggie Bicha of Colorado's Department of Human Services, building trust requires involving counties in policy decisions and responding to their urgent concerns, so they can move beyond their worry that the state just wants to "audit us to death." Once the culture changes, problems don't have to be hidden away for fear of finger-pointing but instead can reveal "untapped potential" (in the words of Adams and Matthews) for better results in the future.

Reaching for Success

Understanding past failure motivates improvement, but it isn't enough to keep reform on track. The future vision needs to be vivid as well. It's what keeps Saddler's team from "becoming complacent" just because they have survived the day's crises. Coston and Eller think that North Carolina's crisp vision—"Families will tell their story once, receive the services they need, and there will be no wrong door to receiving benefits"—has helped counties and the state move forward.

All the states envision a future where work support programs are administered with fewer burdens on families and caseworkers, and most also see benefits to state budgets and taxpayers. Director Tony Keck sees South Carolina families' health outcomes improving once they get the full package of work support benefits for which family members are eligible. Most state leaders, like Idaho's Otter, envision families who are more likely to find, keep, and move up at their jobs. For that to happen, government must (in Otter's words) "reduce the impediments" that bureaucratic, paper-heavy, and fragmented processes put in the way of families' access to benefits.

As federal and state governments implement the Affordable Care Act, the WSS states' vision of knitting together health and human services programs into a single integrated work support system has taken on new national significance. As Alan Weil, executive director of the National Academy for State Health Policy, points out, the ACA presents states with a choice: to take advantage of new federal resources and simplified policies to "upgrade health eligibility systems

by themselves…or use this unique opportunity to build an integrated work support system." The WSS states have chosen the second, more ambitious goal.

To get there, they draw on ideas from other states and national experts, following Coston and Eller's recommendation that states and counties "shamelessly steal" solutions from others. The WSS states get intensive help finding relevant ideas, from national technical assistance providers and in-depth peer-to-peer meetings. For this kind of help to support equally rapid change in other states, federal and foundation funders may need to step up their support.

States also need to blend good ideas from outside with homegrown expertise. Going to internal staff for solutions helps adapt ideas to the local context and creates internal advocates for change. Saddler points out while state WSS staff facilitated change in Illinois, "our actions were driven by the clerical staff, caseworkers, and managers facing these challenges every day."

Dramatic improvements in technology are also part of the future—and in some cases, the present—in the WSS states. With large federal investments in state computer system improvements associated with the ACA—and available whether or not states choose the optional Medicaid expansion—states that never thought they could redesign aging state systems from scratch now can to do so. The lesson these states offer: technology is exciting, but it is a support for vision, not a substitute. Coston and Eller urge counties and states to "Use technology to support your vision, but don't be a prisoner to it." Otter, whose state leads in cutting-edge technological solutions, drives home that "technology is not the driver for innovation; it is only a facilitator."

The Federal Role in State Innovation

When discussing state innovation, the federal role is too often reduced to a caricature: either micromanaging or keeping its hands off. But the commentaries suggest many other roles. For one thing, federal resources can fill crucial gaps in state capacity, such as fixing antiquated eligibility systems. These problems are beyond the financial reach of individual states or philanthropy.

Besides money, federal agencies can make a big difference when they act together—especially when, as Dean suggests, they learn from the WSS states and other innovators. Just this May, the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services provided a practical example, issuing new policy to make it easier for states to quickly enroll SNAP recipients in Medicaid, since states have already carefully assessed SNAP households' financial circumstances.

The three agencies that oversee WSS programs—the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services, the Food and Nutrition Service, and the Administration for Children and Families—could take this approach to cross-program work even further. They could create ongoing forums to hear from states about policy questions and develop solutions, jointly fund technical assistance to help states streamline service delivery across programs, improve their own staffs' expertise in other agencies' programs, and update their approach to assessing the success of work support programs nationally and in individual states by including a look at whether families get and keep their whole package of benefits.

A final lesson for national leaders in Congress and the executive branch is that the WSS states, both blue and red, believe in the value of work support programs, the harm done by antiquated and burdensome eligibility processes, and the gains when eligible families get and keep their full package of benefits. The more clearly national leaders articulate that same vision, the easier states will find it to stay on this new, more streamlined course.

Olivia Golden is an Institute fellow at the Urban Institute and the principal investigator for the WSS Initiative. She will become the executive director of the Center for Law and Social Policy in August 2013.