

A Management  
Information  
Model for  
New-Style  
Public Assistance

Michael Wiseman

99-10

August 1999



Assessing  
the New  
Federalism

An Urban Institute  
Program to Assess  
Changing Social Policies

Discussion  
Papers

# **A Management Information Model for New-Style Public Assistance**

ANF Discussion Paper  
99-10

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July 1999

This draft circulated for comment and discussion. The views expressed are the author's and not those of the Urban Institute, its board of directors, or its sponsors.

## Assessing the New Federalism

*Assessing the New Federalism* is a multiyear Urban Institute project designed to analyze the devolution of responsibility for social programs from the federal government to the states. It focuses primarily on health care, income security, employment and training programs, and social services. Researchers monitor program changes and fiscal developments. Alan Weil is the project director. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies changes in family well-being. The project provides timely, nonpartisan information to inform public debate and to help state and local decisionmakers carry out their new responsibilities more effectively.

Key components of the project include a household survey, studies of policies in 13 states, and a database with information on all states and the District of Columbia. Publications and the database are available free of charge on the Urban Institute's Web site: <http://www.urban.org>. This paper is one in a series of discussion papers analyzing information from these and other sources.

The project has received funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, The Commonwealth Fund, the Stuart Foundation, the Weingart Foundation, The Fund for New Jersey, The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

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The author is a senior fellow at the Urban Institute. The assistance of Eve Shapiro and Melissa Nass and comments and suggestions from members of the Wisconsin Works Management and Evaluation Project Steering Committee, Henry Brady, Tom Corbett, Lawrence Mead, Ingrid Rothe, and Paul Saeman are gratefully acknowledged. An earlier version of this paper appears in the Institute for Research on Poverty (1997). Support for this revision was provided by the Income and Benefits Policy Center of the Urban Institute and the Institute's *Assessing the New Federalism* project.

## Abstract

This paper considers an important building block for management of new-style public assistance systems: the management information system, or MIS. The MIS for a public assistance program encompasses procedures for collection, storage, retrieval, and presentation of information essential for operating and improving the program. The paper develops a model of the management information required to operate the new, change-oriented welfare reform schemes developed by states during the 1990s. The discussion highlights strategic problems that must be addressed in MIS development and implementation for all such programs, with the most ambitious of these initiatives, Wisconsin Works, used as the point of departure.

Key words: Management information systems, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Wisconsin Works, public assistance, MIS, TANF, W-2

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## **A Management Information Model for New-Style Public Assistance**

Public assistance programs are constructed from a variety of building blocks. Some relate to the help provided and the terms of the exchange between clients and agencies. Others have to do with the ways public agencies go about meeting their obligations, both to those seeking assistance and to the taxpayers on whose behalf it is provided—that is, with management. Much of the political debate on welfare reform focuses on the terms of exchange. But welfare reform is about management as well.

This paper considers an important building block for management: the management information system, or MIS. The MIS for a public assistance program encompasses procedures for collection, storage, retrieval, and presentation of information essential for program operation and improvement. Management information systems are themselves constructed from components, and it is easy, in discussing them, to become entangled in detail. This hazard is avoided here by concentrating on modeling the key information needs of what will be termed “active intervention” programs. These are the new, change-oriented welfare reform schemes developed by states over the past 10 years and encouraged by Congress in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA).

MIS issues are national concerns. A recent review of New Federalism developments reported 10 early findings from a field evaluation in 21 states of the implementation of welfare reform. Here is finding #8:

Increasingly the key to implementing these and related welfare reforms is developing and operating information systems that can provide on-line, linked data for case tracking and case management. . . . Although many tasks and responsibilities are being passed down to local governments, local state offices, and private service organizations, their welfare information systems remain more accessible and responsive to state and federal reporting requirements than to local administrative and case management needs (Nathan and Gais 1998, 9).

In response to these concerns, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government have established a Working Seminar on information systems

for social programs that is intended to assist the agency in assessing the federal role in promoting MIS development.

Administrative data are also drawing increasing attention from researchers interested in poverty policy. In fall 1996, an Advisory Panel on Research Uses of Administrative Data was established by the Northwestern University/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research. Its objective was “to assess the development of research-ready data from state administrative sources in the areas of public assistance, public health and welfare and for use in policy and academic research” (Advisory Panel 1998, ix). The panel, funded by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, concludes that “administrative data can provide a cost-effective yet extremely useful source of information with which to monitor and evaluate the impacts of changes in social policy at the state and local levels. At the same time, much work is needed to develop administrative data systems that can routinely provide information for this research on an on-going basis” (Advisory Panel 1998, 80). Much of the panel’s report is devoted to detailing successful attempts at linking administrative data across programs to provide information in “research-ready” form. But its analysis fails to consider the relationship between improvements in the quality of data available for program management and the quality of data that administrative systems might generate for research purposes.

This paper, in contrast, looks at the problem of generating data to meet management needs. My argument is that the ends of getting data appropriate to research in social policy will also be served at least as much by addressing the problems that impede generation of useful data within such agencies in the first place. Since these problems are management issues, researchers who want data cannot avoid thinking about the management of the organizations challenged to deliver welfare as we haven’t known it.

I assume in writing this paper that states are committed to delivering, for those who are in need and for the citizens who will pay, the employment-based system of public assistance that Congress sought and governors promised before and during the PRWORA debate. Such a commitment creates a need to know the things that a good MIS will provide. Every seasoned administrator has learned from experience that simply needing numbers does not guarantee that

they will be available. Nevertheless, wanting the numbers is surely in this case a necessary condition for getting them.<sup>1</sup>

I begin with a discussion of the relationship between the design of information systems and the ideology or mission of public assistance policy. Then, since my point of departure is Wisconsin Works (called W-2), the most ambitious of the post-PRWORA programs, I summarize the W-2 program and model its management in terms of a hierarchy of responsible entities. Each level has particular information needs, which I describe in general terms. I next look at five major problems for MIS engineers and review an example of Wisconsin's MIS output. I follow this with a brief discussion of the PRWORA mandate and how to meet it. I close by posing certain important research questions in the domain of public management.

## **Management Information and Public Assistance Ideology**

Public assistance, by my definition, consists of government-sponsored programs of aid for people in need. Such programs require methods of determining need and for calibrating and delivering aid. Since how all three things are accomplished is much influenced by the program's ideology or mission, it is important to begin with that ideology. The information required for program management follows from it, and when it changes, so should the MIS. Many management problems arise from a disjunction between mission requirements and information available.

The evolution of public assistance ideology can be thought of in terms of two models: passive versus active public assistance. By *passive* public assistance, I refer to systems in which need is a circumstance that aid in and of itself alleviates. (Think, for example, of hunger as a circumstance and food as the obvious prescription for relief.) By *active* public assistance, I refer to systems in which need is treated as a situation that aid alters. The difference between

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson's statement to the heads of various foundations is encouraging: "There are many issues concerning [W-2] design, management, and potential effects that can only be resolved as we do the job," he wrote. "With these issues in mind, I have encouraged those working on the W-2 project to consider evaluation, feedback, and improvement as essential elements of W-2 strategy" (letter to Deborah Leff, Joyce Foundation President, August 21, 1996).



circumstance (used in the definition of a passive system) and situation (used in regard to an active one) is significant. Circumstance is the set of external factors that leads to a person’s condition. Situation is action oriented. The nuance is apparent in application: I have never heard anyone refer to the *circumstances* of an army, or of a team, or of an athlete—only the *situation*. One doesn’t get into a circumstance.

The two models translate into different styles of delivering help. The approaches to determining need and calibrating and delivering the program’s response are presented in table 1. The idea here is that passive assistance systems respond to circumstances with alleviation. If circumstances can be readily assessed, program operation is a matter of delivering the goods (or the checks). In contrast, active systems intend to alter the situation of recipients and imply some movement or action by those seeking aid.

Table 1 <b>Passive versus Active Public Assistance</b>		
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Passive Model</b>	<b>Active Model</b>
Eligibility Determination		
Standard of Need	Circumstance	Situation
Reporting	Fill out form; interview confirms information	Fill out form; interview establishes action
Basis for Claim	Entitlement	Warrant
Program Response		
Conditional upon	Circumstances	Response
Variation	Small	Large
Operation	Centralized	Decentralized
Objective	Alter circumstances	Alter situation

The differences between passive and active systems translate into differences in the management information systems required to implement them successfully. A passive public assistance system emphasizes current transactions. Most of what needs to be recorded occurs at a point in time (even though the point may be extended to cover an accounting period). Thus, in AFDC as we knew it, eligibility assessments were implicitly conducted on a monthly basis, and any month's assessment was in principle independent of what had gone on before. In contrast, active systems are history oriented and emphasize case management: Situations are diagnosed, treatments are prescribed, and outcomes (that is, changes in situation) are observed in real time. What happens next is very much a function of what came before. The implication is that management information must include transactions history, providing access not only to the current action but also to those that preceded.

These differences have concrete, or at least electromagnetic, implications for computer-based management information support. A passive, current-transaction system has no memory. At each point that eligibility is reassessed or payments are redetermined, the necessary data fields may be overwritten. The file for each case can have a fixed format. In contrast, an action-oriented MIS must store history. Since one life differs from another, the dimensions of information associated with each case will vary. The file will be event oriented, and the more events that have occurred over the history of the case, the bigger will be the file.

Researchers have long been interested in such event histories, and event-history data are occasionally cobbled together from a series of point-in-time snapshots drawn from administrative records.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, use of administrative data to support investigation into poverty dynamics has been frustrated by the myopic focus of administrative data systems. Policy has now caught up with analysis. The new generation of active strategies may require data for management that is also more consistent with the interests of social scientists and policy analysts.

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Cancian and Meyer (1995). The nation's most ambitious effort at creating longitudinal histories of public assistance receipt is going on in California under sponsorship of the California Department of Social Services (Brady and Snow 1996).

## Management Information for Active Intervention: Wisconsin Works

What do managers need? In addressing this question, we must first choose our methodology. One approach is to investigate what managers do and develop theories of the factors that work to produce this outcome. From this perspective, information obtained is an outcome: It is determined by management decisions and affects the decisions management makes. An alternative is to begin with what managers ideally would do, work backward to the information needed to do an ideal job, and then ask whether such information is or is not on the manager's desk. Since the larger context of this paper is state welfare *reform*, I adopt the latter strategy. I discuss the issues with reference to a particular program, Wisconsin Works. My approach to the specifics would be the same for any other state.

W-2 is a strategy realized in a program.<sup>3</sup> The strategy has five major features (Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services 1995; page references that follow are to this source). First, the program is work oriented to its core. Virtually all cash assistance is linked to some form of employment. Second, the variety of situations and capabilities of persons seeking public assistance is addressed by an ambitious program of tracking and case management. Third, the plan is designed to reduce the connection between benefits and dependence by decoupling cash assistance from provision of health insurance and child care assistance. Fourth, W-2 takes the end of welfare seriously: The Thompson administration was committed from the beginning to rapid and complete implementation of a truly welfare-to-work strategy. Finally, the critical importance of administration is dramatized by a shift in responsibility for W-2's operation from what was the Department of Health and Social Services to the state's employment service agency, now reorganized as the Department of Workforce Development (DWD). DWD, in turn, is responsible for competitive subcontracting for W-2 operation with various public and private organizations.

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<sup>3</sup>W-2 is outlined in detail in various state publications (see, for example, Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services 1995; the program is also briefly summarized in Folk 1996 and in Wiseman 1999).

### *The W-2 Program Hierarchy*

The W-2 program has four tiers of support for adults with children plus four off-tier classifications for persons in special circumstances (summarized in table 2). Persons seeking assistance first meet with a Financial and Employment Planner (FEP). It is the job of the FEP to help needy applicants “think through their best options to provide for the economic security of their families” (p. 34). Those meeting eligibility standards are directed to one of the tiers in the self-sufficiency ladder. Some applicants move into unsubsidized employment—the highest ladder rung. Applicants initially unable to find unsubsidized employment are either accommodated in “trial” subsidized jobs in private or public organizations or placed in community service jobs (CSJs). The bottom rung, W-2 Transition, is “for those legitimately unable to perform independent self-sustaining work even in a community service job” (p. 9). The tiers of the program are structured so that movement upward on the ladder raises income, and duration of tenure in each category save W-2 Transition is strictly limited. The overall lifetime limit on cumulative participation in any W-2 activity is five years, although the plan includes some options for extension.

The four off-tier classifications listed at the bottom of the table identify situations in which people are receiving W-2 services but are not part of the W-2 ladder. All these statuses are transitional except that of noncustodial parent. The noncustodial classification identifies an area certain to be an object for future program development.

Persons in each tier are eligible for subsidized health and child care, with copayments dependent upon income. More generally, Wisconsin Works commits the state to providing child care and health care subsidies to working parents with children on the basis of income and assets only. Eligibility for some subsidies is extended to families with incomes as high as 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Child care costs are constrained by some relaxation of standards for caretaker eligibility. Health care costs are constrained by use of managed care, benefit reductions, monthly premiums, and restrictions on the ability of persons previously participating in employer-paid health insurance plans to transfer to the W-2 health program. The state’s intent is that public assistance either be cash earned through work or delivered as services needed to

support work. For some families, assistance may involve only subsidization of health insurance and child care.

The core of W-2, thus, is a service progression intended to lead in a fixed amount of time to unsubsidized employment. Both implementation of the program itself and development of an appropriate supporting MIS offer an exceptional management challenge. I turn next to further consideration of W-2 MIS requirements and the state's accomplishments.

### ***The W-2 Management Hierarchy***

W-2 MIS requirements, or the requirements of any program, may be derived from a review of what the responsible entity at each level of the organization hierarchy is expected to do. W-2 presents four levels of information demand: (1) the case manager, (2) the site manager, (3) the system manager or state agency, and (4) the federal agency.

The *Case Manager*—in the case of W-2, the FEP<sup>4</sup>—is the front line of an active system. The FEP is the person ultimately responsible for the allocation of persons to services and, implicitly, to program tiers. This allocation must be based on an assessment, which in turn will call for information on an individual's situation. The assessment will be followed by prescription and an outcome.

The *Site Manager* is responsible for allocating cases among FEPs, coordinating resources for FEP use, contracting with providing agencies, coordinating activities with community agencies, and reporting to the state. The site manager may play a role in disseminating information among FEPs. The emphasis placed in W-2 literature on the use of nongovernmental organizations for site management is an important feature of the program, although site managers in virtually all counties were initially employees of the same agencies that managed welfare operation under AFDC.

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<sup>4</sup>The original Business Flow plan for W-2 divided the case management function into four jobs: Reception, Resource Specialist, Financial and Employment Planner, and Supportive Services Planner (Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development 1996, 4). An FEP can perform all these roles, and it is unnecessary to make the distinction for this paper.

Table 2  
**W-2 Placements**

Placement	CARES <sup>a</sup> Code	Employment Ladder	Payment Level	Time Limit	Required Activities
<b>Unsubsidized Employment:</b> Placement is for individuals who —are working when they apply for assistance and have no barriers to full-time employment. —are assessed as capable of obtaining immediate full-time unsubsidized employment and request only job search assistance. —find employment after successfully participating in a W-2 employment position.	CMU				None, but may volunteer for job search/retention and other case management services provided by the FEP (Financial and Employment Planner). Need not cooperate with child support or Learnfare requirements.
	CMS	Yes	None	None	
	CMF				
<b>Trial Job:</b> Placement is for individuals who have basic job skills but are not ready for unsubsidized employment. Under this subsidized placement, an employer, in exchange for up to \$300 per month, provides training and supervision for 3 to 6 months, after which a permanent position may be offered.	TJB	Yes	At least minimum wage	24 months <sup>b</sup>	Work in a subsidized job (40 hours per week expected).
<b>Community Service Job:</b> Placement is for individuals who are not ready for immediate unsubsidized employment or a trial job. CSJs provide an opportunity to practice work habits and skills necessary to succeed in any regular job environment, including punctuality, reliability, work social skills, and the application of sustained and productive effort.	CSJ	Yes	\$673	24 months <sup>b</sup>	Up to 30 hours of work experience. Up to 10 hours of education and training (may be aggregated to accommodate a training program).
<b>W-2 Transition:</b> Placement is for individuals who are not ready for immediate unsubsidized employment and are not suitable for one of the other employment positions for reasons such as an individual's incapacitation or the need to care for another W-2 group member who is severely incapacitated or disabled. W-2T activities can include treatment for alcohol or drug abuse, community rehabilitation programs, counseling, and obtaining shelter or safety in a domestic abuse situation.	W2T	Yes	\$628	24 months <sup>b</sup>	Up to 28 hours of W-2T activities. Up to 12 hours of education and training (may be aggregated to accommodate a training program).

Table 2, continued

Placement	CARES <sup>a</sup> Code	Employment Ladder	Payment Level	Time Limit	Required Activities
<b>Other, “Off-Ladder” Placements</b>					
<b>Caretaker of an Infant:</b> Placement is for a custodial parent (with no other eligible parent in the W-2 group) of a child who is 12 weeks old or less and who meets the financial and nonfinancial eligibility requirements for W-2 employment positions.	CMC	No	\$673	None	None.
<b>Minor Parent:</b> Placement is for all minor parents (regardless of income or assets) who volunteer for case management services provided by the FEP. (Must be 18 years old to qualify for a W-2 employment position; minor parent’s custodian may apply for W-2 if a parent or Kinship Care if not.)	CMM	No	None	None	None, but all minor parents are eligible to receive services from the FEP.
<b>Pregnant Woman:</b> Placement is for pregnant women with no other born children who meet financial and nonfinancial eligibility criteria and volunteer for case management services provided by the FEP. (Must be a custodial parent to be eligible for W-2. After birth of the child, parent may be placed in Caretaker of an Infant for first 12 weeks.)	CMP	No	None	None	None, but eligible pregnant women may volunteer for services from the FEP.
<b>Noncustodial Parent:</b> Placement is for noncustodial parents who meet financial and nonfinancial eligibility criteria, including cooperating with efforts to establish paternity and having the custodial parent be a W-2 participant.	CMN	No	None	None	None, but eligible NCPs may volunteer for case management services from the FEP and for placement in a CSJ-like position (with no payment).

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Wisconsin Works Management and Evaluation Project. This table was prepared at the Madison office of the Hudson Institute by Rebecca Swartz.

<sup>a</sup> CARES is the case data system for Wisconsin Works.

<sup>b</sup> Individuals are limited to a total of 60 months of participation in W-2 employment positions (TJ, CSJ, W-2T) over their lifetime.

The *State Manager* or *State Agency* is responsible for designating agencies for site operation, evaluating agency performance, and financial management. The state may play a role in disseminating information on methods. Under W-2, state oversight is exercised through the DWD.

The *Federal Agency* is responsible for ensuring that federal funds are used in a manner consistent with the enabling legislation. In addition, the federal government may play a role in disseminating information on methods. Under current law, responsibility for public assistance remains distributed across a number of agencies; for this paper, it can be treated as unified.

Although these four levels have been described in relation to Wisconsin Works, the fundamental structures are common to most state programs. First, any active system must involve a casework function that includes direct interaction with participants and a serial process of assessment, prescription, and evaluation. Second, since recommendations (prescriptions) related to strategies for movement to self-support are conditioned by features of local labor markets and services available, the casework function must be managed locally at the site. Third, resources for public assistance are generally collected from statewide sources and are used with state administrative and legislative oversight. This requires a state agency. Finally, over half of all public assistance costs are borne by federal taxpayers. Stewardship over the funds that pay these costs requires federal agency oversight as well.

## **Information Requirements: Case Manager and Beyond**

Now, consider the information required for each of these four jobs. I pay the greatest attention (and give the most program-specific detail) to requirements at the front line, the case manager level. If the information is not collected here, nothing worthwhile will rise to the upper reaches of the administrative hierarchy. At each level, I highlight information elements most important to sustaining a genuinely active system.

The discussion emphasizes movement to and from categories that include cash payments, either as wages (in subsidized employment) or as grants conditioned on activities (community service jobs and W-2 Transitions). As is indicated in table 2, the W-2 program integrates these



activities with statuses that involve only receipt of employment-related services such as job search assistance, child care and health insurance subsidies, and a special loan program for employment-related expenses. A general MIS would probably create a separate status for persons receiving only employment-related services.

### ***The Case Manager***

At the front line, the case manager needs an information system that provides five reports—a core report that is essential to individual case management and four summary reports on the manager’s entire case portfolio.

***Case File.*** The core report is a transactions history for each case for which the case manager is responsible. This is the electronic version of the standard welfare case file. It is here that assessment results and program prescriptions are recorded. Given that in W-2 the clocks measuring elapsed time toward time limits relate to the individual experience of adults, the case record must be *relational*, linking all transactions for a family to action histories for the adults.

The case file required by W-2 should allow aggregation to four summary FEP portfolio reports. The first covers allocation by activity, the second follows case flows, and the third and fourth provide two measures of time in status.

***The Participant Activity Report (PAR).*** The W-2 operations plan envisions a progression of cases from intake upward through the hierarchy to unsubsidized placement. Thus, at least in abstract, cases could be tabulated by status and progression. A *Participant Activity Report* for a caseload would thus present cases cross-classified by status and stage.

A sample activity report is sketched in figure 1. The columns show steps in the system process. The first step is intake, and thereafter come various assignments. Theoretically, these could be continued in the sequence assignment-transition-assignment indefinitely, but in practice the number of assignments is limited. For example, the earliest welfare-to-work programs sometimes included only two—administered job search followed by community work experience

Figure 1  
**Participant Activity Report**

Participant Status	Activity						Status Totals
	Intake	Assignment One	Assignment Two	Assignment Three	Assignment Four	Assignment Unknown	
Unsubsidized Employment with Case Management							
Subsidized Placement (Trial Job)			A				B
Community Service Job							
W-2 Transition							
Hold							C
Intake, in Process	D						
Exemption							
Status Unknown						E	F
Totals						G	H
<b>Totals by Point in Process</b>							

*Note:* Blacked-out blocks identify impossible participant status/activity combinations. Letters identify cells discussed in the text. The transition/assignment process need not be limited to the four episodes shown here.

(Greenberg and Wiseman 1992). The rows identify the various statuses created by the program plus a few additional classifications common to most welfare-to-work programs and likely to show up sooner or later in W-2 case counts. I also include categories for missing information, with regard to both status and point in process. (For simplicity, I ignore the off-tier placements and the variety of case management statuses associated with unsubsidized employment.)

The first four rows in the PAR cover the four W-2 statuses that involve active oversight: Unsubsidized Employment with Case Management, Subsidized Placement, Community Service Employment, and W-2 Transition. When operational, the chart is full of numbers. For example, cell A shows how many people in this FEP's case portfolio began the current month in a second W-2 assignment to a subsidized job placement. Cell B shows how many of the caseworker's entire portfolio of clients began the month in the subsidized employment status. Cell D shows how many persons begin the month after filing their initial application but before completion of the registration process and assignment to an activity. Cell C shows how many persons are in a transition category (Hold)—having passed through intake but, at the beginning of the month, being unassigned or between assignments.

The PAR yields many other useful numbers. Cell H shows the total number of persons for whom the case manager has responsibility. The ratio E/H is the proportion of these people for whom the case manager knows neither status nor assignment—one indicator of relative loss of control. The complement of the ratio F/H is the ratio of unassigned participants to total participants—a type of participation rate. The larger the share of the caseload in the most work-ready categories, the greater the likely turnover in the subsequent month, since these people are actively involved in welfare-to-work activity.

Readers with experience in public assistance administration will at this point be begging for a reality check. The PAR calls for a great deal of information that may be cumbersome to collect and time consuming to record. Looking even at the empty chart performs a useful function, however, in helping to identify minimum information requirements. It would be difficult to claim that cases were really being managed if the number in cell F (cases for which status is unknown) is large, for example, or if nothing like the counts in the Status Totals column is available to the case manager. I draw an analogy to parenting. You can't be a good parent if

you don't know where your 14-year-old is at 10 p.m. You can't be a good case manager if you don't know what your clients are doing at the beginning of the month.

The PAR also helps in thinking about an information expansion path, that is, the order of importance of the numbers. The choice here is in part a matter of policy, and stakeholders will differ about what counts. My own assessment is that it is most important to know the number of cases in the intake process (cell D), since processing intake is essential to delivering aid to people in need. Beyond this information, my choices, in descending order of importance, are (2) total case count (cell H), since knowing this signals an environment of well-defined case management responsibility; (3) count of cases for which status is unknown (cell F), since this is a measure of oversight detail; and (4) count of cases for which information on stage is unknown (cell G). In W-2, it may suffice simply to establish a low incidence of status unknown, for once we know current status we know what is supposed to come next. Note that full information does not an active program make. Our MIS may record the number of persons in Hold with remarkable precision; but if this number is large relative to the total number of cases the worker is managing, the program fails a key test of active policy.

***The Participant Transitions Report (PTR).*** The PAR just discussed covers states and must be defined at a point in time. The *Participant Transitions Report* covers an interval and summarizes movement of individuals through the W-2 case management progression. A prototype PTR appears in figure 2. The rows of the PTR identify case status at the beginning of the month. The columns identify case status at the end of the month. Letters carried over from figure 1 reflect the same numbers; for example, D is the number of cases involved in the intake process at the beginning of the month, B the number in subsidized placement, and H the total beginning-of-month caseload. New intakes during the month are included here as J; of this group, K are still unassigned at the end of the month. L, M, and N represent various possible dispositions of the B participants who began the month in subsidized placement.

Once again, we can identify various matters of interest. The sum  $T = P + Q + R$  is terminations, and  $T/(H+J)$  is the termination rate. Comparison of new intake (J) with terminations (T) reveals the relative importance of accessions and terminations as sources of

Figure 2  
**Participant Transitions Report**  
 (Monthly Case Flow)

Beginning of Month (BOM) Participant Status	(BOM) Partici- pant Count <sup>a</sup>	End of Month (EOM) Participant Status													
		Voluntary Termina- tion	Admin- istrative Termina- tion	Unsubsidized Placement, No Case Management	Intake, in Process	Unsubsidized Placement with Case Management	Subsi- dized Place- ment	Comm- unity Service Job	W-2 Prepara- tion	Hold	Exemp- tion	EOM Status Unknown			
New Intake <sup>a</sup>	J				K										
Intake, in Process	D														
Unsubsidized Employment with Case Management															
Subsidized Placement	B	L	M							N					
Community Service Job															
W-2 Transition															
Hold	C														
Exemption															
BOM Status Unknown	F														
<b>Total, BOM</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Q</b>	<b>R</b>											
<b>Terminations (T)</b>										<b>Total, EOM Participant Count by Status Category</b>					

<sup>a</sup> New intake count for the month (J) is not included in beginning-of-month participant totals. Letters identify cells discussed in the text.

caseload change. The details of the chart can be manipulated to reveal the extent to which individuals change status. As was true for the PAR, the share of the caseload for which beginning-of-month (BOM) or end-of-month (EOM) status is unknown is one indicator of the efficiency of program oversight.

Here, as in the PAR, the appropriate information expansion path is in significant part a matter of program objective. Beyond the importance of getting BOM and EOM status straight, it seems likely that an activist policy would focus first and foremost on the disposition of recipients upon intake and on the nature of terminations. Wisconsin's emphasis on diversion would show up in this table as a sizable incidence of terminations for persons listed in the left-hand columns as either new intakes or intake in process. Success in placement would be identified by a high R/T ratio.

***The Time in Status Report (TSR).*** Participants in activist transfer programs carry two clocks. The first covers elapsed time for which the participant has been receiving assistance. In W-2, this clock is set for each adult on first entry. The second clock records hours required for assistance-to-work activities. The *Time in Status* report covers the first clock; it summarizes the duration of participants in each status and in the program overall. Time in status is assessed at a point in time (presumably the same reference date as is used for the activity report). A sample *Time in Status Report* (TSR) is presented in figure 3.

The output includes distribution of participants by time in status plus information on the number of participants at risk of reaching a within-status time limit. The time limit for each status (indexed by  $i$ ) is  $T^*(i)$ . (In practice, time limits differ by status.) Risk is signaled when duration—that is, elapsed time in status, or  $ET(i)$ —crosses a trigger denoted  $t^*(i)$ . These action triggers look algebraically the same for most of the activities. But the actual values,  $t^*$ , will vary. For example, the action trigger for intake could be a single month, for subsidized placement 10 months, and for community service jobs 4 months.

In addition to the distribution of participants individually by time in each status, the TSR should include a summary of the caseload by time in program overall. This is the All Clocked Activities item. Cell U shows the number of persons two months away from maximum duration

in community service jobs; cell V reveals the number two months away from the overall program time limit. In the figure, it is assumed for simplicity that the action trigger for all clocked activities is 54 months; this means that once a case begins the last six months of the five-year duration maximum, it is flagged.<sup>5</sup>

After the information already cited as most important from the participant activity and transitions reports, first in importance in my judgment in the TSR is the bottom line—the overall clock. Second in importance might be the At Risk column. However, construction of the At Risk column requires the information in the remainder of the table; so it may be difficult to sustain any time awareness without maintaining the data needed for the entire chart.

***The Hours in Activity Report (HAR).*** The TSR records participant situations at a point in time. But many programs also devote attention to the hours of activity that each status involves. Assistance-to-work programs often try to raise this activity level so that time spent in activities approximates full-time work. In Wisconsin's Pay for Performance initiative, for example, the sanction applied for nonparticipation was proportional to the scheduled hours of activity that participants failed to achieve without just cause. Effective application of such a sanction requires that hours missed be deducted from full time or from hours scheduled, whichever is less. Once again, if this sort of sanction is to be applied, actual hours of participation must be recorded.

A sample *Hours in Activity Report* appears in figure 4. The left-hand side of this chart is by now familiar. The report is established at a point in time (again assumed to be beginning of the month), but the chart refers to activity over some reference interval. This could be, for example, the preceding week. But for each person enumerated, the count must be limited to the days for which the client was actually eligible for assignment. This feature of the chart is retrospective, since W-2 makes payments (and imposes sanctions) on the basis of previous activity.

Whatever the reference time interval, persons can be scheduled for an average of from 0 to 8 hours per day. A zero-hour schedule might be applied to a person in W-2 preparation and

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<sup>5</sup>Both triggers and time limits could vary by individual. In Iowa's Family Investment Plan, the end dates are joint decisions made after assessments by the recipients and their caseworkers.





awaiting the initiation of some particular service. Subsidized placements, on the other hand, are generally intended to be full-time. Since persons still in intake are unlikely to have been eligible for scheduling during any prior reference period, most such persons will be counted under Not Applicable. Scheduling is also inappropriate for persons (cell AG) receiving only case management services. As usual, we acknowledge that the system may lose people in Schedule Status Unknown.

The right-hand side of the HAR summarizes the incidence of sanctions. As in the earlier Pay for Performance initiative, sanctions in W-2 take the form of reduction of grants or earnings in proportion to the scheduled hours missed. Note that this figure simply counts sanction occurrences, not the amount of hours missed that caused the sanction. The logic of including scheduled activity hours but excluding an hourly breakdown of sanctions is that for activity levels the principal concern is with the quantity of hours, but for sanctions the primary concern is with their incidence.

The order of importance here in my judgment is (1) the number of persons for which scheduling was appropriate but did not occur,  $(Y + AA)/(H - Z)$ ; (2) the incidence of sanctions among persons eligible for scheduling,  $AB/(H - AD)$ ; (3) mean scheduled hours by status; and (4) the index of ignorance,  $(Y + AA)/H$  and  $AE/H$ .

### ***And Beyond: Moving up the Ladder***

The ideas developed for thinking about the ground level can be summarized in two major points. First, an activist program requires case managers to keep track of participants. Keeping track involves four dimensions: retaining history, knowing current activity, following changes, and watching the clock. Second, since the number of things that might be recorded is very large, and information is far from costless to assemble, it is important to develop an information expansion path to focus effort on the information of greatest value in assessing performance. These ideas carry upward in the administrative hierarchy. The question to be asked before developing each part of the information system is “What does this person need?”

*Site Managers* are responsible for supervising caseworkers, contracting for services, managing funds, responding to the community, and relations with the *State Agency*. The key is

knowing what is going on. For sure, part of this information comes from the fabled managerial activity of “walking around,” but numbers count as well. The place to begin is sitewide aggregations of the Activity, Case Flow, Time in Status, and Hours in Activity Reports, at least in their minimalist versions. Possession of such data allows comparison of the achievements of individual case managers to agency norms. This comparison is meaningful at the agency level, however, only if participants are assigned to case managers at random. Otherwise, there needs to be some way to differentiate among program participants, such as by whether they have prior work experience or not, so that case managers are not penalized in comparison to their peers just because they have a more disadvantaged caseload. The choice of categories for such differentiation is a management problem for which state assistance and coordination are useful.

As well as comparing caseworkers’ performance, the site manager must monitor the performance of contractors or contributing agencies that provide program components, such as training or community service employment. The site manager has the best vantage point for assembling information on service providers and evaluating their productivity. This information must then be shared with line staff. The site manager is also responsible for the budget. Each activity has an associated cost, so at the site level the various case reports are complemented with corresponding data on outlays. Finally, the site manager may be responsible for some review of postprogram experience, including the duration of placements and the extent of recidivism.

Under W-2, the *State Manager* or *State Agency* is responsible for site oversight. In principle, the state agency is unconcerned about the performance of the contractors used by each site in operating W-2.<sup>6</sup> Ultimate agency achievement is the state’s concern, but just as caseworkers’ achievements must be adjusted to correct for differences in participants’ characteristics, so must comparisons of agency performance be adjusted to reflect differences in caseload and environment. Moreover, the site aggregations of the Participant Activity, Participant Transitions, Time in Status, and Hours in Status Reports are by definition of interest to the state if they are of interest to the site manager. Here again, some adjustment to take account of differing characteristics is needed for meaningful intersite comparisons.

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<sup>6</sup>Auditor concerns are another matter.

The *Federal Agency* is responsible for ensuring that federal funds are used in a manner consistent with the enabling legislation. In addition to fiscal audits, the required reports will feature whatever performance measures are consistent with the legislative mandate. The federal government may also play a role in disseminating information on methods. In general, methods-related studies are not likely to involve data aggregated over multiple sites to the state or regional level, but rather to consist of evaluations of programs conducted in a collection of sites. The design of information systems for such evaluations is beyond the scope of this paper.

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In this section, I have presented a model of a management information system that is consistent with the ideology of active public assistance. The model is formulated in a new way: Rather than the traditional approach of discussing file structure, interface, and platforms, I emphasize what the system must do. The model provides a useful instrument for the many field studies of state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs. *If data covering at least the most rudimentary elements of the various model reports are not available, any claim the state's system is really active is a sham.*

Recall the reality check. Getting supporting systems that can do these things must be difficult—otherwise the attention of scholars and the GAO would neither be attracted nor warranted. If TANF agencies can't manage to provide information appropriate to support the objectives ostensibly central to the new welfare reform, what chance is there for attaining the Joint Center panel's goal of creating "administrative data systems that can routinely provide information for . . . research on an on-going basis"? The point is that *management* may be the problem that must be addressed before much can be accomplished on the *research* front.

MIS management for active social assistance presents thorny problems of both design and implementation. The next section, after looking at a sample of Wisconsin's MIS accomplishments, turns to an exceptional challenge: meeting federal mandates.

## Wisconsin's Transition and Accomplishments, and the New Federal Challenge

### *The Transition*

Wisconsin's current management information system is named Client Assistance for Reemployment and Economic Support, or CARES. Like systems sold by contractors to most other states, before W-2 CARES was primarily oriented to supporting transactions linked to check writing and federal reimbursement. The system was not by any standard up to the W-2 task. As a result, major effort has been devoted to modifying the CARES system to support the new program. As is true for many other features of W-2, designing and implementing the W-2 management information system presents substantial challenges. Among them are what I term gradual change, graceful degradation, policy feedback, planned flexibility, and system linkage.

***Gradual Change.*** As the state's struggle with implementing W-2 demonstrates, an operation as complex as public assistance does not change from one system to another overnight. Rather, a path of adjustment must be planned and carried out. The logic of W-2 suggests that the transition should involve gradually closing the AFDC payments system while simultaneously expanding JOBS to include all recipients as mandatory, reclassifying JOBS participants by W-2 status, and paying for JOBS participation. This is what the state's precursor Pay for Performance initiative was about, and it is, broadly speaking, the strategy followed in transforming CARES for AFDC to CARES for W-2.

***Graceful Degradation.*** This paper has emphasized the importance of setting priorities and establishing a data quality expansion path. Just as it is important to decide the path to be followed in enhancing the accumulation of and access to information, so too is it important to ensure that all is not lost should it prove impossible to sustain the MIS at the levels intended. Over the long run, the capacity for orderly retreat may be as important as the capacity for innovation.

***Policy Feedback.*** Developing information relevant to management decisions from Wisconsin's CARES case data system almost always takes major programming effort; staff time in the Bureau of Welfare Initiatives is consumed by data extraction and programming issues at

the expense of analysis. In its pre-W-2 incarnation, CARES produced nothing like the Participant Activity, Transitions, Time in Status, or Hours in Activity Reports for either case workers or site managers, even in high-profile demonstration sites such as the Work Not Welfare operations in Pierce and Fond du Lac Counties (Boehnen and Corbett 1996). The immediate consequence for management is that these demonstrations failed to provide as much information for W-2 planning as they might have done if a more capable information system had been in place. These failings also diminish the usefulness and accessibility of the state's administrative data for scholarly research.

The reports portfolio developed in this paper is intended to provide templates for consideration in ongoing negotiations between the state and its information systems contractor. Since the reports are founded on an event history for individual participants, it should be possible to create a recipient-oriented analysis file as a system by-product. Such information provides the basis for more detailed study of a variety of poverty-related issues by the state's analysts and interested scholars.

***Planned Flexibility.*** The state's initial implementation of the CARES system occurred in the context of operating a well-established transfer system. Neither AFDC nor JOBS were changing significantly at the time; it was the operating system that was being modified. Nevertheless, the change from the old record-keeping system proved disruptive and has yet to be fully accomplished.

In contrast, the W-2 MIS is being implemented simultaneously with a new program. Past experience makes it highly likely that W-2 will change significantly over time as a result of problems encountered or opportunities discovered in the context of operation. Thus, the MIS must be planned with the expectation that the underlying program will change. The system of reports described in this paper is deliberately generic, in order to allow for variation in the underlying scheme.

***System Linkage.*** In the present system, both Medicaid and certain types of child care assistance are closely linked to AFDC, and service utilization is recorded within CARES. This connection should in principle end with W-2—when access to child care, health insurance, and child support assistance is planned to be disconnected from participation in direct employment

assistance. In practice, however, the systems have to be linked in order to meet other program needs. For example, the original W-2 plan called for paying the copayment for health insurance for persons in W-2 Transition and community service jobs by direct deduction from grants. Analysis of many policy questions will require linking data both across the services network and to other systems, including social security and tax withholding systems.

### ***Accomplishments***

These problems are substantial, and they cannot be solved quickly. As a result, W-2 was implemented in September 1997 without a MIS that met management requirements for the system at any level. Nevertheless, progress has been made in modifying the old CARES program to conform to the W-2 structure and in developing report templates consistent with management objectives.

An example of one of these reports appears in table 3, modeled in part on the PTR presented in figure 2. The numbers shown cover the entire state, but similar reports can be generated by the system for any subjurisdiction. This example is taken from work in progress, so the numbers should be treated as illustrative rather than definitive.

As is to be expected from a PTR, each row of table 3 identifies a particular prior month status and each column identifies a current disposition. The current month placement statuses correspond to the list in table 2. Compared to what is commonly available, this report is a gold mine of information and could alone be the subject of a paper. As a sampler, consider the following:

- ! This report goes beyond the template by telling readers the mix of new entries between old and new cases. Of the 1,024 new openings in November, 397 (39 percent) were people known to the system before.
  
- ! Diversion from cash assistance—the Wisconsin Works “light touch”—is evident in the number of entries that wind up by the end of the month in noncash placements. Of the 1,024 new entries, 362 (36 percent) ended the month in case management, job search, or

other placement without cash payment. Fully 26 percent of all cases in the system during the month ended still enrolled but not receiving a cash grant. Here resources are clearly being used for organizing and providing supporting services but not income. Focusing on the three cash grant categories, W-2T, CSJ, and CMC (as is common in discussion of state caseload trends), clearly misses something important about W-2.

- ! Rates of movement from subsidized positions to noncash assistance and system termination are high. Overall, 8,957 persons began the month in a status with payment; of these, 1,163 (13 percent) had moved to noncash status by the beginning of December. Among the groups receiving cash, the transition rate was highest (29 percent) for those in trial job. Twenty percent of participants caring for infants (category CMC) ceased receiving cash. If results here are common to all months, it would seem important to pursue why these women with infants are leaving.
- ! Trial jobs are rarely used (only 46 such placements were active at the end of November), and only one noncustodial parent was receiving case management assistance through the W-2 network (services for this group are available from other sources, so this is not a measure of the state's efforts to involve noncustodial parents in training).
- ! W-2 placements are typically treated as a "ladder," and the tiers are called rungs. However, table 3 reveals that in this one month for both the W-2 Transitions and Community Service Job categories, more people jump off (that is, exit W-2) than go up.

I emphasize that these numbers are taken from a report prototype, refer only to a single month, and must not be treated as definitive. Nevertheless, few state management information systems can produce anything like table 3, and Wisconsin's W-2 agency should be applauded for the effort. But as promising as the report is, it falls short of the template. For example, unlike the template, table 3 has no Hold category. What appears to be happening is that in order to receive cash assistance, a case not moved to a trial job must be placed in one of the cash grant

categories: W-2 Transition, Community Service Jobs, or Infant Caretaker. Table 3 indicates that of the 1,024 cases newly enrolled in W-2 in November, 657 (or 65 percent) fell into one of these groups. CSJ alone accounted for over half of new placements. The suggestion is that, indeed, all persons counted by category are doing what the description in table 2 implies.

What we are missing here is the actual level of activity. The state does not yet have the equivalent of the HAR (figure 4). What appears likely is that the always-present Hold residual is subsumed in the activity classes. Development of better participation data is clearly a matter of high priority, as is improved information on time in program.

A second substantial shortcoming is the absence of information on the numbers and disposition of cash assistance cases that do not involve W-2-eligible adults. At the time of transition to W-2, some 12,000 of these “child-only” cases were moved from the jurisdiction of the Department of Workforce Development to the Department of Health and Family Services, or DHFS (Burke 1999, 4). As of mid-1999, DHFS had not developed systems for monthly accounting for the state’s child-only caseload. This move may have made some ideological sense, since W-2 is about adult employment, and the child-only cases seem like traditional welfare. However, some concern exists that some parents transfer children to relatives in order to avoid stringent W-2 work requirements. Assessment of the significance of this problem is hampered by the separation. Moreover, loss of these cases leads to misunderstanding of the state’s caseload accomplishments, since the caseload data for other states typically include all assisted families, including child-only cases.

Perhaps the most significant observation to be made about table 3 is that it was prepared in Madison, at the top of the W-2 management hierarchy (although similar reports can be generated by the system down to the worker level). In contrast, this paper began not at the state level, but with a discussion of information needs on the ground—for the FEPs and for the delivering agencies. Like their counterparts in other states, W-2 operators are quick to complain about the shortcomings of the state system as a source of information for locally useful



Table 3  
**Sample Wisconsin CARES System W-2 Report**  
 November 1998

Program/Service	Current Month Placement											Not in W-2	Prior Month Totals	
	Unsubsidized Placements				Trial, Community Service, and Transition Jobs				Other "Off Ladder" Placements					
	CMU	CMS	CMF	TJB	CSJ	W2T	CMC	CMM	CMP	CMN				
<b>Prior Month Placement</b>														
Never in W-2	120	56	53	3	169	80	119	0	2	0	25	627		
Not in W-2 <sup>a</sup>	19	23	40	2	202	61	26	0	1	0	23	397		
CMU	552	7	3	0	17	4	1	0	0	0	297	881		
CMS	6	171	30	1	36	5	6	0	0	0	63	318		
CMF	7	21	1,864	1	115	13	3	0	0	0	601	2,625		
TJB	0	0	11	31	4	1	1	0	0	0	4	52		
CSJ	17	9	369	8	4,935	124	63	0	0	0	412	5,937		
W2T	6	4	46	0	65	1,890	50	0	1	0	128	2,190		
CMC	8	17	75	0	114	13	494	0	0	0	57	778		
CMM	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1		
CMP	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	4	0	0	11		
CMN	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1		
<b>Current Month Totals</b>	<b>735</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>2,491</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>5,657</b>	<b>2,191</b>	<b>770</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1,611</b>	<b>13,818</b>		

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

Key:

- W2T = W-2 Transition Job
- CSJ = Community Service Job
- CMC = Case Management–Caretaker of a Newborn Trial Job
- CMU = Case Management–Unsubsidized Employment
- CMF = Case Management Follow-up
- CMS = Case Management Services
- CMP = Case Management–Pregnant Woman
- CMM = Case Management–Minor Parent
- CMN = Case Management–Noncustodial Parent

<sup>a</sup>Was in W-2 at some point before the prior month.

Note: Numbers are preliminary and should be considered illustrative, not definitive. For definitions of placement categories, see table 2.

management reports.<sup>7</sup> As elsewhere, in Wisconsin information devolution is part of the unfinished agenda of welfare reform.

### ***The New Federal Mandate***

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 is schizophrenic in its treatment of states. On the one hand, the legislation establishes block grants for “temporary assistance for needy families” to “increase the flexibility of states.” On the other, the law creates remarkably rigid requirements for information collection—requirements that could not be met in 1996 by the management information systems available in any state. Then, as something of a midtext afterthought, Congress instructs the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services to report on the status of state data processing systems and to find out “what would be required to establish a system capable . . . of tracking participants in public programs over time.”<sup>8</sup>

While PRWORA may increase flexibility, the object is to make temporary assistance to needy families conditional on work. The TANF work requirement is summarized in table 4.<sup>9</sup> To make sure states are meeting the requirements, PRWORA also requires quarterly reports. As indicated by table 5, the quarterly reports cover the information needed to assess the participation rates cited in table 4 as well as other data. One set of information must be drawn from the experience of closed cases. The reports must be delivered quickly, and penalties are specified for laggards. The information may be derived from “the use of scientifically acceptable sampling methods approved by the Secretary.”

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<sup>7</sup>In a personal communication in 1998, one frustrated local W-2 administrator reported “people see the CARES system as a hindrance to effective service system functioning, except for the basics of client registration, eligibility determination and basic regulatory record keeping.” A recent report in the newsletter *Welfare to Work* reported that local managers in Florida felt that state’s TANF MIS, called WAGES, “did not collect information for good case management.” In New York, “case managers . . . have had problems with the [MIS] system because it only crunches general information that is needed for reporting.” See “Two States Upgrade Systems to Help Local Case Managers,” *Welfare to Work*, 8 (4), February 22, 1999, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup>Public Law 104-193, Title I, Section 106(a).

<sup>9</sup>In fact, for most states these requirements have been substantially eased because PRWORA reduces required participation rates when state TANF caseloads decline. The final regulations for implementing TANF requirements were issued in April 1999. See “TANF Regulations Rework Assistance and Offer Options,” *Welfare to Work*, 8 (8), p. 1.

How should states respond? History suggests respectful skepticism. The PRWORA reporting requirements are yet another example of a long congressional history of dealing with nagging concerns by requiring data that nominally address the problem. Little, if any, consideration seems to be given to analysis strategies or the consistency of data requirements with other administrative or legislative goals. The participation rate requirements imposed by the Family Support Act of 1988 are a case in point (Wiseman 1991). The object of that law was to raise the incidence of participation in welfare-to-work activities under the JOBS program. The measure of participation adopted by Congress could not be calculated using data from any available management information system and was useless for any administrative purpose other than satisfying the congressional requirement. Nevertheless, many meetings were held, many teeth were gnashed, and a great deal of money was passed to data management firms before it became clear that everyone would report something called participation rates and all sides would agree to “don’t ask, don’t tell” as a *modus vivendi*.

That was welfare reform as we knew it, not reform as we would like it to be. The point here is that one step in the direction of ending welfare reform as we knew it is to return to the ground level. Looking back at table 4 and table 5, we note that a major part of the information required by the new law could be derived from the case management system used to develop the four basic case manager reports and the site manager outcomes report. The implication is clear: If employment is the objective of the state’s own system, and if development of an effective management information system for support of that system is part of the state plan, federal requirements may, for the most part, take care of themselves. If it is useful, the additional information required can be added through “scientifically acceptable” surveys. If it is not, it might be more appropriate to seek changes at the federal level.

## **Research Concerns**

The Wisconsin Works Management and Evaluation Project (W-2 MEP) was established by Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson in 1996 as the umbrella organization for the state’s

Table 4

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families:  
Required Levels of Involvement in “Work Activities”**

Fiscal Year	Two-Parent Families			Others		
	Participation Rate	Hours per Week in Work Activities	Hours per Week in Specific Activities	Participation Rate	Hours per Week in Work Activities	Hours per Week in Specific Activities
1997	75	35	30	25	20	20
1998	75	35	30	30	20	20
1999	90	35	30	35	25	20
2000	90	35	30	40	30	20
2001	90	35	30	45	30	20
2002	90	35	30	50	30	20

Source: Public Law 104-193, Section 407; format from Brady and Snow (1996).

Rate of Participation: Fraction of families of indicated type receiving TANF assistance with adult in “work activities” for the required number of hours.

“Work Activities” include:

- \*1. Unsubsidized employment.
- \*2. Subsidized private-sector employment.
- \*3. Subsidized public-sector employment.
- \*4. Work experience if sufficient private-sector employment is not available.
- \*5. On-the-job training.
- \*6. Job search and job readiness assistance.
- \*7. Community service programs.
- \*8. Vocational educational training (for no more than 12 months).
- 9. Job skills training directly related to employment.
- 10. Education directly related to employment for those without a high school diploma or equivalency.
- 11. Satisfactory attendance at secondary school or its equivalent.
- \*12. The provision of child care services to an individual who is participating in a community service program.

“Specific Work Activities” are those work activities marked with an asterisk.

Table 5

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families:  
Required Quarterly Reports Data**

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**For Active Cases**

Demographic Information:

- C County of residence of family
- C Number of individuals in the family and relationship of each family member to youngest child in the family
- C Ages of family members
- C Marital status of the adults in the family
- C Race of each adult and child in the family
- C Educational status of each adult and child in the family
- C Citizenship

Employment Status:

- C Employment status and earnings of the employed adult in the family, including information to calculate participation rates
- C Participation of adults in education, subsidized private-sector employment, unsubsidized employment, public-sector employment, job search, job skills training or on-the-job training, vocational education
- C Unearned income received by any member of the family

Social Program Use and Status:

- C Type and amount of assistance received under TANF
- C Whether family received subsidized housing, Medicaid, food stamps, subsidized child care, and amount received for latter two and number of months receiving assistance under each program
- C Disability of child or adult

**For Closed Cases**

- C Whether the family left the program
  - C If the family left the program, whether the family left due to employment, marriage, five-year time limit, sanction, or state policy
- 

*Source:* Public Law 104-193, Section 411; format from Brady and Snow (1996).

W-2 evaluation efforts. He charged the project's steering committee with responsibility for "making evaluation, feedback, and improvement essential elements of the W-2 strategy." The steering committee has identified MIS development as a research priority, and the W-2 MEP National Technical Advisory Committee includes experts in program management and management information systems in addition to persons who have traditionally specialized in program evaluation. This combination of expertise and the title of the umbrella project reflect the governor's belief that the W-2 evaluation strategy must include feedback to management as well as impact assessment.

Development of the W-2 MIS is the focus of an information systems working group within the Wisconsin DWD. Apart from the fundamental issues of system design, a number of problems related to MIS use need attention, since understanding the problems may help ensure that the MIS provides appropriate information. Sample problems include calibrating the triggers, building the incentives, and managing intake.

### ***Calibrating the Triggers***

Costs vary substantially across the various W-2 service tiers. Initial forecasts of W-2 costs were based on estimates of the characteristics of incoming clients and transition flows from tier to tier that had little empirical support. Now that W-2 is under way, experience will accumulate. But to date, resources have not been available to permit study of the possible triggers for directing management concern. At some point, some number will be pleasing. At some point, some number will be alarming. What are the numbers? What are the alarms?

### ***Building the Incentives***

An information system is of no use if no incentives exist for data entry. The system outlined in this paper is dependent upon appropriate incentives for data collection at intake (see below) and at each transaction. The system developed here is based very much on what is believed to be the essential information required to do certain jobs, in particular the job of FEP and the job of site manager. Consideration needs to be given to the actual operations of these agents and the extent to which incentives are adequate to ensure that the information is properly

recorded. A big step in this direction is to ensure that the information is made available promptly to those who need it. Currently, many of the data elements entered by eligibility technicians and case managers in CARES are never returned in usable form. This is not conducive to quality assurance.

### ***Managing Intake***

A common theme in both state and federal welfare reform is the “end of entitlement.” At first consideration, it is not clear why entitlement should be an issue for MIS design. But it becomes clear in contemplation what loss of entitlement might mean to different people. The state views it as a way to avoid legal entanglements; critics see it as a sure indicator that many in need will fall through the cracks.

Much of the concern about the meaning of loss of entitlement involves intake. Under AFDC as operated in Wisconsin, families in need had the right to receive benefits within 30 days of application, and failure to deliver gave grounds for legal action. This recourse diminished the importance of collecting administrative data on time-to-assistance, since the system was to a significant extent self-policing. Without entitlement, the opportunity for legal recourse is diminished, and it is possible that contractors will be tempted to discourage entry, especially by problem cases. The state’s commitment to timely aid would be confirmed by appropriate steps to measure the elapsed time of persons in intake for W-2 (see figure 2). If such data are to be used to evaluate performance, they must be collected and included in the MIS.

Given the state’s general interest in ensuring access and initiating the accumulation of information, a case can be made for the separate operation of intake on-site by persons who are not employees of the site contractor. Such people could be responsible for initiating the case record and for dealing with child care and health insurance services that are operated independently of the employment track. How might such a system work?

In sum, within every state as well as across all states, the MIS developed for TANF is important as an indicator of the nature of the program being implemented, a source of information on operations and consequences for families, and an object for study. Design of the W-2 MIS is an excellent example of the intersecting concerns of public management, policy

analysis, and social science research in the study of welfare reform. Errors in design and failures of implementation will complicate program management, impede policy analysis, and diminish the utility of the administrative data for social science research. Thus, there exists a common interest in design and in creating the necessary incentives both to ensure implementation and to sustain faithful operation.



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