

**Assessment:
An Overview**

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Introduction

This study originated in response to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' solicitation for research projects that would provide early information on TANF program implementation. Among other goals, the study proposed to document customer pathways and assessment practices in Maryland's 24 local jurisdictions.¹ In order to inform our understanding of assessment issues in the human services in general, we reviewed the current literature on this topic. During this review, we paid particular attention to discussions of assessment within the welfare-to-work context. The purpose of this monograph is to share the information we gained through this literature review.

In this monograph, we describe definitions and functions of assessment in general as well as assessment issues specific to the welfare context. We focus on issues of particular relevance to assessment in the welfare-to-work environment and decisions that must be made by those designing and implementing assessment approaches. Also, because several agency characteristics are closely linked to assessment practices, brief discussion of such characteristics is also included. Finally, we conclude by considering current assessment challenges facing localities.

Assessment: An Overview

Under the old AFDC system, customer assessment was typically synonymous with eligibility determination. Intake or eligibility workers interviewed each applicant in order to determine whether or not the applicant met income and asset requirements necessary to receive assistance. Applicants who were deemed ineligible for one program might have been referred to other programs, such as Food Stamps or Medical Assistance. However, today's post-TANF system warrants a much more thorough assessment process. In particular, time limits heighten the need to channel TANF recipients to the most appropriate and efficient route to self-sufficiency.

In Maryland, the state requires each applicant for Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) to participate in an assessment. This assessment should, among other things, consider the individual's reasons for applying for, or continued reliance on, assistance as well as educational level, job skills and readiness, and interests. The intended purpose of the assessment is to inform

¹ For additional information on the year one study, see Born & Charlesworth (1999).

selection of appropriate program activities and to investigate any available personal and family resources to facilitate independence. The State also requires each applicant to sign a family responsibility plan, the specific contents of which may vary somewhat by locality.

Apart from general state guidelines, localities have been given considerable freedom to design their own welfare-to-work programs. As a result, local offices vary greatly in their program strategies. This is advantageous in that local offices may tailor their strategies to their particular areas and customer populations; on the other hand, local offices face the challenge of limited empirical evidence on which to base their policy and programming decisions. Many localities are thus designing their approach to customer assessment from the "ground up." In order to fully appreciate the issues involved in such design decisions, the meaning and functions of assessment in general must first be considered.

Assessment: Definitions and Functions

Because the choice of services and service method will ideally be determined directly from an analysis of data collected from the customer, the customer assessment process is critical in the helping professions. Consider the following definitions of assessment:

- " "The process and product of individualizing. A method of investigation." (Meyer, 1992)
- " Assessment is "used to examine and evaluate the client problem or situation.. .to identify and explain the nature of the problem or situation, to appraise it within a framework of specific elements, and to use that appraisal as a guide to action." (Perlman, 1957)
- " The process of gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing salient data into a multidimensional formulation that provides the basis for action decisions." (Rauch, 1993)

As described by Meyer (1992), assessment is both a process and a product. As a process, assessment occurs continually over the course of the helping relationship. As new information is revealed it is incorporated into intervention planning. In the human services professions, it is generally believed that assessment should be an ongoing process from initial contact through relationship termination (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larson, 1997). In welfare-to-work offices,

however, many factors prevent this approach. Continuous assessment requires an emphasis on ongoing contact, an ideal which for various reasons is difficult to achieve. Assessments also typically culminate in the production of a written document, a report that details initial assessment conclusions and outlines a suggested course of action. Assessment documents vary greatly according to organizational specifications; they may be formal or informal, following strict guidelines or none at all.

Rigorous assessment is both scientific and subjective in nature. Although based on empirical evidence, assessment is influenced by the practitioner's intuition, experience, and biases, as well as the customer's cooperation and capacity to participate (Meyer, 1992). It should be noted, however, that evidence suggests that even trained clinicians make judgment errors in assessment (Lustig, 1996). In addition, criteria regarding assessment content and quality may differ by agency or by worker and may be influenced by theoretical approach (for example, psychoanalytic versus behavioral, etc.) (Gingerich, Feldman, & Wodarski, 1976). In this respect, a certain approach may influence worker emphasis or the type of information that is collected during the assessment process.

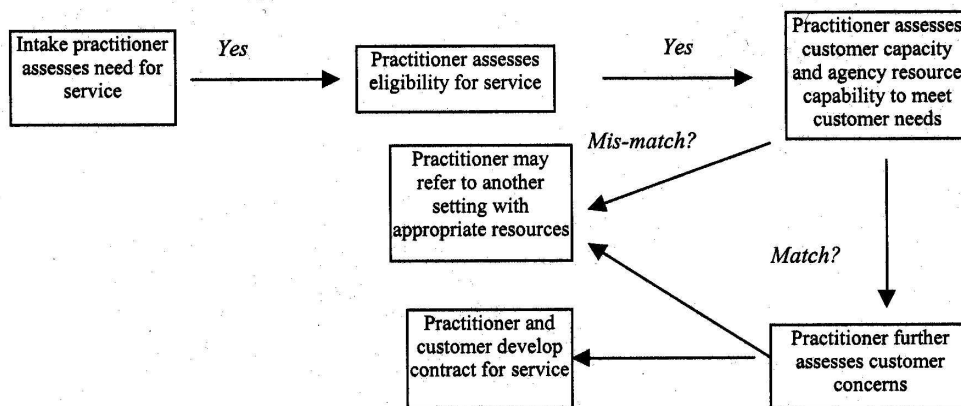
In all disciplines, assessment is generally considered a multi-step process, with each step requiring the collection and integration of a different type of information. Hepworth, Rooney, and Larson (1997) indicate that, in the social work environment, assessment often consists of four steps including: (1) determination of the need for service, (2) exploration of eligibility, (3) exploration of customer resources and (4) development of a contract. During the first three steps the worker is primarily concerned with collecting, evaluating, and making judgments about data. In the welfare-to-work environment, determination of a need for service may include questions related to the applicant's income and ability to meet basic needs. Questions also may be asked regarding family characteristics or special needs that may qualify the applicant for other programs. Recently, with the new welfare reform time limits in effect, the eligibility determination process may have begun to include more detailed questions regarding public assistance history. Customer personal resources may also be explored via questions related to skills, education, work history, and interests.

According to Brown (1997), as the final step, contract development is typically equivalent to the development of an employability plan. Such employability plans are described as containing many, if not all, of the following elements:

- " Participant's employment goals
- " Clear objectives that lead to goals
- " Specific activities for participants to complete in order to achieve objectives .
- " Time periods for completion of objectives
- " Support services to help participants achieve objectives

Using Hepworth, Rooney and Larson's framework, Figure 1 represents a typical assessment process.

Figure 1
Assessment Process



Comparison of assessment practices within other professions reveals similar practices. From the vocational assessment literature, Beauchesne and Belzile (1995) view employment counseling as a problem-solving process with four phases. The first three phases are similar to those described in social work assessment. The first two phases are identification and clarification of the employment difficulty, respectively. The third phase involves development of an action plan. The fourth phase includes implementation of the plan and evaluation. Employment rehabilitation assessment packages typically use a combination of objective, standardized, and observation-based assessment tools. These authors note that key factors impacting employment assessment are client change, motivation, and resistance.

In the child welfare arena, assessment is used primarily to determine risk to the child and to predict future dangerousness. Murphy-Berman (1994) suggests a framework for thinking about assessment in Child Protective Services. This framework includes general assessment of risk and dangerousness, assessment of origin and degree of the problem, selection of outcome goals and implementation strategies, and treatment monitoring and case closure decisions. Clearly, in this context, assessment is an ongoing process that is a necessary component of the risk management process.

Oxley (1992) suggests that, across disciplines, assessment serves several functions. First, it is used to establish a baseline against which to measure progress. Second, assessment is used to help establish realistic goals. Absence of assessment or assessment errors may potentially lead to customer placement in an environment in which she may not fulfill her maximum potential or, conversely, may set her up for failure in a setting in which she is asked to perform beyond her current capabilities. Third, assessment maximizes the effectiveness of organizations by allowing practitioners to allocate scarce resources in an efficient and appropriate manner. Finally, assessment provides other organizations or practitioners with the information they need to work with a customer upon referral or case transfer, thereby reducing interagency or interworker redundancy and saving valuable time and resources.

Assessment in Welfare to Work

Sequencing and Staging

Assessment practices in welfare-to-work programs differ on several dimensions. Some suggest that assessment features tend to occur in constellations associated with a few basic program designs (Auspos & Sherwood, 1992). In fact, this variance is thought to be closely related to the program philosophy, model, and rhythm adopted by individual organizations.

Program Philosophy

In the welfare-to-work environment, program philosophy most often refers to the degree to which a program emphasizes quick entry into the labor market over education and training. PRWORA essentially mandated the work first approach; however, some level of diversity at the local level remains. Some states and localities require job search as the first step in their welfare-to-work programs, whereas others are more likely to defer their customers to education or employment preparation programs before sending them into the work force. Such employment

preparation programs may include basic education, GED preparation, job skills training, life skills training, work supplementation, unpaid community work experience, and on-the-job training, to name a few.

The work first approach is based on the idea that any job is a good job and that the best way to succeed in the labor market is through experiential learning (Brown, 1997). Those who are not able to find jobs within a specified amount of time are often then referred to other activities designed to make them more employable, such as vocational education or work activities. Advocates of the work first model argue that the importance of moving customers immediately into the labor force is based on the need to motivate customers to prepare for regular, structured activity outside the home (Mead, 1988). According to this perspective, the type of activities in which these customers participate is less important than socialization to concepts such as timeliness, commitment, and responsibility.

Work first models typically cost less to administer than human capital development programs, although costs may differ depending on other factors, such as child care services provided and the extent of monitoring used to track customers. However, opponents of the work first model argue that quick job search often results in employment offering low pay, no benefits, and little opportunity for advancement. Gueron and Pauly (1991) reviewed findings from several JOBS programs that illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of work first models. They suggest that job search almost always leads to an increase in employment rates, although not necessarily to higher earnings for those working. Up-front job search has also been shown to produce greater welfare savings. These investigators also found that unsupervised independent job search was less effective than group job search or individual job search with extensive monitoring and support services. It should be noted, however, that Riccio and Orenstein (1998) found no relationship between level of participation in job search and increased earnings or welfare savings.

As an alternative to the work first approach, the human capital development model focuses on long-term change through education and training. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) (1996) examined six successful job training programs that differed on several dimensions and identified key features shared by each. These include ensuring that participants are committed to training and getting a job, linking occupational skills training with the local

labor market, improving participants' employability skills, and removing barriers that limit customers' ability to complete training. Most of the programs also followed up with clients after they completed training to ensure that barriers did not reappear.

Evidence is mixed regarding the efficacy of job training, unpaid work experience, and basic education programs in achieving TANF goals. Gueron and Pauly (1991) found no evidence that unpaid work experience has an independent effect on program impacts. In a study of the long-term effects of welfare-to work programs, Friedlander and Burtless (1995) report that lower-cost, work first programs result in lower AFDC expenditures; however, moderate cost initiatives that emphasize education and training have produced larger earnings gains, on average.

The role of education in increasing employment and earnings is unclear. Basic education has been linked to long-term employment outcomes, including the ability to advance on the job (D' Amico, 1997). Recent studies, however, have begun to point out the limitations of basic education in the welfare-to-work environment. Program coordinators at Chicago's Project Match² assert that basic education programs may be a mismatch for many welfare recipients, particularly those with low literacy scores. Citing the Manpower Demonstration and Research Corporation's evaluation of the GAIN program, these program coordinators point out that many customers do not attend their basic education/GED classes regularly (Herr, Wagner, & Halpern, 1996). In the GAIN program evaluation, those who attended class tended to have higher literacy scores and were already close to passing the GED. Project Match thus sends to basic education programs only those customers who are truly interested and demonstrate adequate progress in the course within a certain amount of time. In fact, participants in Project Match expressed their preference for short-term vocational education programs over basic education and longer-term programs (Herr, Wagner, & Halpern, 1996).

Evaluations of JOBS programs that combined work first and human capital development demonstrated such combinations can be effective (Gueron & Pauly, 1991). A report issued by the U.S. GAO (1995) which integrated results from nine JOBS program evaluations notes that the most successful programs seem to be those that combine a broad range of employment-

²Project Match is a contemporary welfare-to-work program in Chicago with extensive experience in the welfare-to-work environment.

related activities and support services. A mixed strategy approach offers low-cost services to certain groups and higher-cost services to others. Evidence suggests that this strategy may help move some people into higher paying jobs and, subsequently, produce higher earnings (Gueron & Pauly, 1991).

As an example, the welfare-to-work program in Portland, Oregon offered a mixed-strategy approach that included short-term education, vocational training, life-skills training, and work experience (Scrivener, Hamilton, Farrell, Freedman, Friedlander, Mitchell, Nudelman, & Schwatz, 1998). The program also encouraged participants to take "good jobs"-jobs that were full time, paid higher than minimum wage, and offered benefits and potential for advancement. At the end of two years, the program resulted in substantially increased earnings and employment gains as well as increased job quality and reduced welfare expenditures. The impacts were widespread, reaching both easy and hard-to-serve customers. As would be expected, the approach cost less per person than skill building programs, but more than strict work first programs. The difficulty inherent in this mixed strategy approach is in deciding whom to target. Assessment is very important in such programs in that it serves to separate those who are job ready from those who would benefit from work preparation experiences.

Program Model

Program model refers to the sequence and staging of program activities. According to Auspos and Sherwood (1992), under JOBS, the most popular program models were up-front assessment, up-front education, and up-front job search. Some states and localities conducted comprehensive assessments upon application for assistance, while others deferred assessment until after customers had failed to complete or make progress in job search or educational activities. In many programs, an initial (but cursory) assessment was used to identify customers who should be exempt from participation in activities altogether. As would be expected, upfront job search, and, sometimes, up-front assessment, are typically used in programs that emphasize a work first philosophy, whereas up front education is traditionally consistent with the human capital development approach.

Advocates of up- front assessment suggest that it can be used effectively with strategies that target specific subgroups of the customer population. The practice of targeting families with certain characteristics and directing them toward more thorough assessments requires less staff

time while acknowledging the need for some families to progress more slowly through the process (Brown, 1997). Another popular approach is use of the labor market as a screening tool. Participants in such programs are required to first conduct an up-front job search. Those who fail to find a job during the allocated time period then undergo assessment and are directed towards an alternative work activity or educational program.

Pavetti, Olson, Pindus, Pernas, and Isaacs (1996) contend that up-front assessments alone are limited in their ability to predict which customers may need additional support in making the transition from welfare to work. This is particularly the case for families facing significant personal or family challenges that make it difficult for them to seek and sustain employment. Such challenges might include substance abuse, mental illness, histories of abuse or domestic violence, lack of social support, and inadequate parenting skills, to name a few. In the presence of such barriers, these authors suggest the need for strong worker-customer relationships, a flexible program model, the ability and resources to refer customers for appropriate counseling or treatment, and clear expectations reinforced with financial penalties.

Program Rhythm

The final distinction, program rhythm, refers to the placement of assessment within the overall context of the welfare-to-work program (Auspos & Sherwood, 1992). Herr and Wagner (1995) have identified two different sequencing patterns, the single point-in-time approach and the over-time, or ongoing, approach. The point-in-time approach provides a one-time '~snapshot' of the customer system, whereas the over-time approach allows for multiple appraisals and reappraisals over the course of the customer's involvement in the welfare-to-work program.

The implication is that an ongoing assessment approach is most useful over time (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1992). Herr and Wagner (1995), advocates of the ongoing approach, present three difficulties that are inherent in the point-in-time approach. First, point-in time assessment assumes that participants will share all problems with the caseworker during the initial assessment, including such difficult issues as drug dependency and health concerns. Second, this approach assumes that such personal issues, when identified, can be resolved within a relatively short period of time (weeks or months). Finally, it assumes that such problems need to be resolved before a customer can begin the process of leaving welfare.

On the other hand, point-in-time assessment requires fewer resources and may be more feasible with large caseloads. Ongoing assessment requires continuous contact and thereby more manpower and smaller caseloads. Ongoing assessment also assumes a certain amount of program flexibility that will allow caseworkers to change a course of action depending on the results of ongoing assessment. Point-in-time assessment thus seems more compatible with more rigid program structures or resource poor systems.

Several program administrators have emphasized the compatibility between program flexibility and an ongoing assessment process (Department of Labor, 1998; Herr, Wagner, & Halpern, 1996; Pavetti, Olson, Pindus, Pernas, & Isaacs, 1996; Pessoa, 1978). A flexible program recognizes that assessment, particularly point in time assessment, may not always be entirely accurate. Thus when a participant demonstrates that she is struggling in one activity, rapid movement into another activity is possible. Those who argue that a flexible program is an effective program believe that services must be customer-driven and tailored to specific needs. The Department of Labor's Employment and Training Division (1998) suggests that the diversity of needs customers bring to the table cannot be met through a "one-size-fits-all" package of services. In essence, if participants react poorly to one stage of the process, they should be quickly moved into another. For example, if a participant is placed in job search mode and does not have some level of success within a reasonable amount of time, program flexibility allows the individual to transition into another phase, so as not to increase feelings of failure. Likewise, individuals who do not perform well in basic education classes should be moved to another type of activity, including job search.

Project Match advocates system flexibility and employs a concept referred to as the incremental ladder to economic independence (Herr & Wagner, 1998). Workers emphasize flexibility and increasing levels of independence as participants move up the rungs of the ladder. The bottom levels of the ladder are characterized by a low risk of failure and a variety of learning options as well as an experiential learning approach. Several welfare-to-work experts support this approach, advocating the need for lower rung activities that allow participants to learn basic skills such as responsibility and time management (Bane & Ellwood, 1994).

America Works, based in New York City, adheres to a somewhat different philosophy but also provides a "safety net" for its participants. Single mothers are trained on the job, which provides an arena for them to work on behavioral issues such as tardiness and interpersonal

conflicts before moving into the less forgiving workplace (Opulente & Mattaini, 1997). They receive small salary checks and health benefits while still being allowed to receive welfare benefits. Participants are gradually weaned from their welfare benefits as they master the skills needed in the work environment.

Several factors may influence the determination of which philosophy, model, and rhythm a department selects. Foremost among these is the existence of legislation mandating a particular choice in anyone of these areas. In addition, other agency resources and characteristics may influence such choices. Ongoing assessments, as mentioned, require continuous customer contact as well as a large degree of program flexibility. In this respect, an inflexible program precludes the use of ongoing assessment strategies. In addition, resource availability may determine the use of a particular program strategy. For example, geographic areas in which there are few opportunities for education and training are more likely to emphasize a work first approach, whereas departments in areas in which there is a shortage of low-skill jobs may emphasize education and training.

Staff

Local departments may also vary to a great extent on staff structure and function (Hagen, 1994). The staff responsible for assessment may also be determined by the characteristics of a particular department, including the program model and philosophy, sequencing, and availability of resources. In the welfare-to-work environment, assessments are often conducted by the eligibility worker at intake. In other offices, social workers or job counselors may complete the assessment. In addition, some offices have contracted with outside organizations to perform the assessment function. Thus the workers conducting assessments may differ not only in job title and responsibilities, but also in education and training.

Education and Experience

As noted, decisions made as a result of the assessment process may have an important impact on customer outcomes. The ability to make educated assessment decisions is influenced by, among other things, the worker's education and experience (Corbett, 1997). There is a great deal of variation among the educational levels of front line workers (Riccio & Friedlander, 1992; Hagen, 1987; U.S. GAG, 1988). In Maryland, the increased flexibility recently awarded to local departments means that front-line staff responsible for completing assessments may differ in a variety of ways. The staff responsible for customer assessment may differ in job title, education,

and experience, and departments may use different staff to inquire about different assessment areas. Assessment might be conducted by an eligibility worker, social worker, job counselor, or a team of workers. These titles may refer to individuals with similar education and experience levels or may refer to individuals with entirely unique education and training.

Skills needed in each position may also depend on program strategy. Across states and localities, a program with a goal of long-term skill development might require assessment to be conducted by a case manager with vocational or other counseling experience, whereas one that focuses on immediate employment may employ a more eligibility-oriented intake worker who can simply convey this requirement. Thus while some local departments use eligibility workers as assessors, others rely on staff with clinical training.

In order to develop front-line workers capable of not only gathering eligibility information but also encouraging and motivating customers to move toward self-sufficiency, Brown (1997) recommends several hiring practices. Recruiting staff committed to program goals and supportive of customers and their abilities is a key hiring principle. Hiring staff whose attitudes are consistent with program philosophy is also critical (Riccio, Goldman, Hamilton, Martinson, & Orenstein, 1989). In addition, Frazier (1989) argues that the most important characteristics of a successful case manager are a problem-solving attitude, a clear orientation to the goal of self-sufficiency, communication skills, and a willingness to use the system in the interests of the customer. Developing a staff that reflects the diversity of customer needs in terms of gender, age, race, and culture is also advisable. Brown (1997) also suggests hiring staff that have training and experience in handling a caseload, perhaps with an employment, human resources, or social work background. Finally, hiring workers with specialized backgrounds, including former welfare recipients, may aid in the establishment of positive worker-customer relationships.

Specialized Training

In addition to new agency responsibilities, many workers have been forced to adopt new roles and thus face new challenges. In some cases the transition from intake or eligibility worker to employment counselor requires a complete reversal in strategy. Once required to follow strict rules and procedures, case managers often must now employ creativity and discretion. Mixed feelings exist regarding the facility with which eligibility workers and caseworkers trained under the old AFDC system can (or wish to) adopt and practice new job

responsibilities, such as in-depth customer assessments. Doolittle and Riccio (1992) cite evidence from three studies (program evaluations of GAIN, Massachusetts ET Choices, and New Jersey's REACH) and argue that many eligibility workers can make a successful transition from old job duties to the new role as case manager. Citing evidence that some workers have trouble making adjustments to the new expectations (U.S. GAO, 1996), others are not as optimistic about the ability of workers to make this transition. Sandfort (1997) reports that many workers making the transition from strict eligibility work to a broader role question their ability to carry out "social work" functions. In addition, many front-line workers may focus their thinking on negative policy issues and implications. Training is a common response to transition difficulties in some localities, although problems in other agencies result in staff turnover. An alternative approach is to maintain specialized eligibility positions while creating new positions to address the need for capable assessors and case managers.

Suggestions for training staff on vocational assessment can be found in the vocational assessment literature. Lustig (1996) recommends strategies that help the individual making the assessment form a complete picture of the customer's life. For example, use of computerized case-simulation in the training environment may help improve clinical problem-solving skills. Another suggestion is to require case conceptualization in a manner that encourages workers to think more broadly.

Structure

States and localities may also differ in their assessment structure. For example, there are several different approaches to distributing assessment responsibilities among staff. In local offices in which case management is used to serve and track customers, either one-on-one or team approaches may be used for assessment (Hagen, 1994). In essence, assessment might be conducted by one or a number of people at once or at various times throughout the customer's pathway. Often, generalist case managers are responsible for determining eligibility, conducting an assessment, developing an employability plan, linking the customer with resources, counseling, monitoring progress, and advocating on behalf of the customer. The team approach, on the other hand, requires that specialized workers cooperate in providing services, either concurrently or sequentially. For example, the intake worker, ongoing worker, jobs counselor, and trainer may each have separate functions. In addition, staff from other disciplines or departmental units (child support or family service workers) may be involved. Primary

responsibility for assessment may be dispersed among team members, or it may fall primarily on one staff person. In the sequential model (Doolittle & Riccio, 1992), different case managers serve as specialists and assume responsibility at different stages in the assessment process. One worker might be responsible for orientation, another for eligibility, and another for assessment. Team members also may be from different agencies, or contractors may be fully responsible for assessment.

Brown (1997) discusses the pros and cons of using generalist versus specialized case managers and suggests that specialist models are advantageous because constraints on time and resources, as well as limited personal experience, may inhibit the ability of a generalist case manager to give all program elements their deserving attention. The elements of eligibility determination and assessment, for example, require very different sets of skills. Another advantage of specialization is that one person might be responsible for all administrative paperwork, thereby allowing other members of the team extra time to work on their specialized components. Specialization may also be valuable in departments that wish to target certain groups for certain services, such as teen parents or non-English speaking customers. On the other hand, generalist staff decrease the occurrence of lapses in communication among staff using the specialist, or team, approach. Generalist case managers may also be able to develop stronger relationships with customers since they are responsible for all aspects of working with the customer, including employment, day care, and other benefits.

Data Collection

A complete and thorough assessment in the welfare-to-work environment requires gathering information on public assistance history, work history, psychosocial issues, and social or community system elements, to name a few. States and localities differ in terms of their approaches to data collection and types of assessment data collected. In a broad sense, agencies may use customer verbal input, external verification, and standardized or agency-developed instruments or forms as part of their assessment process.

Customer interviews form the basis for most assessments. Interviews may be of three basic types: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Of the three types, unstructured interviews may provide richer data, although structured interviews may be easier to utilize. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. Some agencies prefer primarily qualitative open-ended information, while others use a great deal of discrete, objective data. The

type of information preference will influence the choice of interview type. For example, structured interviews composed primarily of closed-ended questions may be more objective than semi-structured or unstructured interviews in which the worker has a greater amount of discretion to decide which points to emphasize. The choice of whether to collect information by structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interview may also depend on the skill of the staff conducting the assessment. Unstructured instruments require a greater amount of worker skill to guide the interview. Excessively structured interviews, however, may prevent individualized attention and the development of worker-customer rapport.

States and local departments also vary in their use of standardized and unstandardized assessment instruments. Standardized instruments have been empirically tested and have established norms against which to evaluate each customer. They offer several advantages in that they are easy to score and are generally reliable and valid. Use of standardized testing procedures also allows categorization of customer responses in a clear and unambiguous manner. However, there may be some disadvantages to standardized assessment tools. For example, in their investigation of California's GAIN program, Riccio, Goldman, Hamilton, Martinson, and Orenstein (1989) found that standardized career assessments provided little information about customers' interests and capabilities beyond what workers had discovered in the personal interview. In particular, the full career assessment appeared particularly unhelpful in jurisdictions where the range of jobs and opportunities was narrow.

Other popular assessment tools include self-report measures, behavioral observation techniques, performance tests, performance-based assessments (tests of what the recipient can do), tests of knowledge (tests of what the recipient knows), career guidance instruments, goal-oriented assessment tools, and occupational assessment tools. Some States are also moving towards the use of computerized assessment measures. A few, such as North Dakota, are beginning to fine-tune computerized assessment measures for use as screening tools to identify customers' barriers to self-sufficiency (Hougen, 1998). The instrument used by North Dakota's welfare offices includes questions regarding issues ranging from basic income and assets to sensitive issues such as domestic violence and substance abuse.

Kraus and Pillsbury (1994) suggest that computer technology may enable extensive streamlining in welfare agencies and may also ease work for staff and reduce worker error. In addition, computerized assessment is appealing because the data may be stored in relational

database systems that allow for easier communication between workers and facilitate retrieval of reports. Yet there are some drawbacks to automation. For example, such procedures may be intimidating for customers and workers who are not computer savvy. Computerized procedures may also depersonalize the process and inhibit the development of customer rapport. Thus Franklin, Nowicki, Trapp, Schwab and Petersen (1993) emphasize the importance of participatory decision making and group planning in the process of developing these systems.

Assessment Challenges

A number of significant challenges face state and local departments in their efforts to design and implement successful assessment approaches. Administrators must weigh the importance of a thorough assessment against the realities of available time and resources. Administrators must also design assessment strategies that are both clinically appropriate and consistent with the overall goals of the program. Building an approach to assessment that is consistent with program objectives is challenging. Pre- T ANF implementation, Auspos and Sherwood (1992) pointed out that an unintended program model could result from assessment practices that did not have as their basis the objectives and service focus of a particular JOBS program. These authors suggest that "state and local administrators should be aware that if immediate employment is the goal, comprehensive and intensive up-front assessment procedures, unless carefully designed and targeted, may work against this short-term goal (p.65)." This reality continues to exist in the post- T ANF environment.

Program success does not depend solely on the choices of state and local administrators. Such choices are translated into practice at the local level by workers and other front-line personnel. It is important to be cognizant of the extent to which the transactions between front-line workers and their customers reflect stated legislative and administrative goals and directives. This is particularly important in light of the fact that the new tasks thought to be involved in assessment are fundamentally different from those required of eligibility workers under the old AFDC system. Workers accustomed to relying on standard rules and regulations are now required to use professional judgment; mistakes in their decisions may be costly both to the customer and the agency.

Institutional forces have been cited as playing a major role preventing front-line workers from enacting policy ideals (Brodkin, 1997; Meyers, Glaser, Dillon, & MacDonald, 1996; Sandfort, 1997). As stated by Brodtkin (1997), the manner in which workers use their discretion

is shaped by a variety of complex factors. These factors include personal and professional capacities as well as a wide variety of agency characteristics. In an examination of five local public and private offices in Michigan's welfare system, Sandfort (1997) examined the factors that shape front-line practices, including program rules, evaluations of work, and limited resources. Sandfort concluded that given the structure of their jobs and the importance placed on eligibility verification, workers logically viewed paperwork completion and prompt turnaround requirements as disincentives for taking too much time with customers.

Several additional investigators have found that front-line practices are often in conflict with stated public goals (Hagen, Lurie, & Wang, 1993; Meyers, Glaser, Dillon, & MacDonald, 1996). In an investigation of the impact of welfare reform policy on the local delivery of services in California, Meyers, Glaser and MacDonald (1998) observed a failure of front-line workers to change the message delivered to customers after welfare reform. Little positive discretion or information delivery regarding welfare reform, programs, incentives, services, or expectations regarding self-sufficiency was observed in worker-client interactions. Instead, emphasis continued to be placed on eligibility and on gathering a large amount of required eligibility-related information. Often, reform-related information was only supplied to selected groups. The authors again assert that this limited use of positive discretion may have been related to time and resource constraints.

Several authors suggest that many workers cope with resource constraints and the difficulties of being faced with complex and overwhelming amounts of information by routinizing their contacts with customers and focusing on maintaining instrumental transactions in which limited information about new programs, incentives, services or expectations regarding work and self-sufficiency is provided (Meyers, Glaser, & MacDonald, 1998; Hagen, 1987; Pessó, 1978). An alternative strategy is to use particularistic transactions, in which workers selectively emphasize certain program components and limit the range of information covered (Goodsell, 1981; Pessó, 1978). In either case ideal policy implementation is often detrimentally impacted.

In an investigation of TANF's precursor, the federal JOBS program, Hagen and Wang (1994) observed that front line workers were more likely to emphasize opportunities available to customers rather than customers' obligations to participate. This perceptual twist, whether primarily caused by personal or organizational interpretations and emphases, could have marked

impacts on customer participation. These authors also noted the tendency of many workers to emphasize certain content areas, such as educational and child care needs, while de-emphasizing others, such as health concerns and other needs of children. These tendencies seemed to be related to workers' ideas about which topics were most relevant but may also have been influenced by other factors such as standard agency practices and resource availability.

For years, the extent to which localities have allowed worker discretion in the use of time, knowledge, and attention in interactions with customers has varied (Lipsky, 1981). However, as Meyers (1997) suggests, a considerable amount of worker discretion has always existed, even within the most rigidly structured eligibility determination process. Thus worker personal characteristics, ideals, and perceptions invariably contribute to the policy implementation process. Ensuring that workers consistently utilize their discretion in a manner consistent with policy objectives and local program philosophy continues to be a formidable challenge.

Conclusion

In summary, assessment is used in a variety of disciplines as the first step in gathering information, developing a service plan, and linking individuals with appropriate resources. Assessment is a critical component of virtually all human service organizations and thus must be carefully designed and monitored. In the welfare-to-work environment, local departments have a great deal of flexibility in conducting front-line customer assessments. In addition to structural diversity at the departmental level, individual worker discretion further influences assessment practices. In designing and refining the assessment component of welfare- to-work programs, these multiple influences on assessment practices, and their potential impact on customer outcomes, must be carefully considered.

Ultimately, however, there is no one "right" way to carry out the individual assessments that Maryland's welfare reform plan requires. As this literature review has demonstrated, there are many models and methods, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Hopefully this monograph provides Maryland welfare program managers with background information that is of some help in the ongoing process of refining assessment approaches and practices at the local level.

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