

S U M M A R Y

The issues behind the outcomes for Hmong welfare participants

Minnesota state records show that American Indian, African American, Hmong, and Somali participants in MFIP (Minnesota's welfare program) are less likely than others to have jobs or leave welfare after two to three years. For example, looking at all the people who were receiving MFIP assistance in January 1998, the following percentages were still receiving assistance two years later, in May 2000:

- 35% of White participants
- 61% of Asian participants
- 55% of American Indian participants
- 53% of Blacks (including African Americans and African immigrants)

Clearly these are big differences, but the numbers cannot tell us why this is happening, or how the welfare system could better serve those who are having the most difficulty becoming self-supporting. To learn more about this, Wilder Research Center talked with 40 groups of current and former welfare recipients in the spring and summer of 2002. Led by facilitators from the same cultural background, these groups talked about their experiences with welfare and employment.

Like welfare recipients of any cultural group, many in these groups are successfully started on a path to self-sufficiency. However, they also described many ways in which they face different obstacles that limit their ability to get and keep jobs and leave welfare. Besides barriers related to the welfare system itself, they also talked about other difficulties such as discrimination, availability of child support, housing, and access to transportation.

People's general views of MFIP

Most participants in the focus groups accept the basic idea of welfare as a two-way agreement, where MFIP provides the help they need to become self-sufficient, while they follow its rules and work to become self-supporting. However, many find that MFIP in its actual operation is demeaning or even hostile rather than supportive. Some feel the system deliberately hides rules and benefits, and is designed to discourage true independence. The quality of their relationship with the MFIP job counselor is crucial to their opinions about MFIP and their success in meeting its expectations.

Work requirements of MFIP

Most participants in the focus groups expect and want to work. However, many have been discouraged by their experiences trying to get and keep jobs. They consider it fair to expect people to work, but they also tend to add that MFIP should make more exceptions for those who are old, disabled, or caring for sick or disabled family members. They also report that MFIP does not give enough help to people who can work but need help getting ready. These people may lack work experience, English language skills, or basic skills such as reading or writing, or they may have other personal barriers such as mental illness or learning deficits. In addition, many described job-related discrimination based on religion, language, family size, welfare status, and race.

Help from MFIP for getting and keeping a job

Participants in the focus groups report extensive need for supports that will help them get and keep jobs. These include help with transportation and child care, training costs, and job counselors' help looking for or

keeping work. When they receive these supports they generally find them helpful. However, many report that they need more help with these things than MFIP has provided.

The rewards of work

Participants are grateful that MFIP has helped them to survive when they were unable to support themselves. They recognize that the idea of MFIP is to make work more rewarding than welfare. Almost all prefer working to not working, especially because it means freedom from the demands of MFIP, as well as an increased sense of worth and dignity.

On the other side, a great many people said that MFIP cuts off benefits too soon and too suddenly when people start working. They report that the loss of benefits offsets the gain from wages, especially counting their new work expenses (such as transportation costs and medical insurance) against the loss of non-cash benefits, including help with the costs for child care and rent.

What could be done to help more participants succeed?

Participants' readiness for work

This research suggests that smaller caseloads would make a big difference, allowing job counselors to more quickly identify those who need more help, and start helping them. It would also encourage more familiarity and trust so participants would be more willing to reveal valid reasons for exemptions and thus start addressing them and avoid long, futile job searches. In addition, immigrants need more translation and interpreter support to help them understand the rules and benefits. English-speaking participants may also need more help with reading and comprehending the rules and paperwork.

The job market's readiness for welfare participants

Participants could be helped to access work if their job counselors worked with employers to address discrimination and communication issues on the job. Also, the job market may not be able to provide jobs for all welfare recipients who have work barriers. For

these participants, instead of continuing to require work searches that are unlikely to result in employment, the government could: exempt more recipients from work requirements; revise work requirements to allow more education and other activities to reduce work barriers; or develop and fund more non-market (supported work) jobs.

Availability of supports that help people work

The welfare system could better support participants' work if it studied what the actual needs are and identified gaps where supports are insufficient. Information about the supports that are available should also be better communicated to recipients, not only to counter the perception that the system hides benefits, but also to help participants understand the limits of welfare funding, and how resources are distributed within those limits.

The helpfulness of job counselors could be greatly increased not only by reducing their caseloads but also by better preparing them for the challenges of their role. Study results suggest the need for several types of training including cross-cultural understanding, communicating with people with limited English, and working with participants who may be initially hostile or suspicious.

The rewards of working

This research shows that the combination of work and welfare is not as financially rewarding as assumed. Working brings many new costs to a family, and these costs are not adequately addressed under MFIP. It may be important to examine the actual financial returns of working, including the real costs of housing, transportation, child care, and medical insurance.

Advancing to self-sufficiency from an entry-level job

For many focus group participants, unskilled jobs appear unlikely to lead to eventual self-sufficiency. Five years may not be a realistic time frame for a new, unskilled worker to advance to self-supporting work without further training. This study suggests that members of these cultural populations may be even less likely to receive job advancement opportunities. It seems likely that recipients would welcome and benefit from a policy that would allow new workers, after some time in a low-skill or low-wage job, to have access to further training.

Perceptions of welfare's intentions

While job counselors are told that their first goal is to support recipients' progress toward employment, the second goal is to enforce the rules of welfare policy. To the extent that job counselors emphasize the rules more than the support for success in the job market, some participants believe that the system actually discourages self-sufficiency, especially when the rules and benefits are not clear to them.

For welfare policies and services to be more successful, it is important to change these perceptions and experiences. Solutions include more diverse MFIP workers, better training for MFIP workers, smaller caseloads, and more balanced accountability from case workers as well as participants.

Conclusions

Results of this study suggest that the greatest opportunity for improving the chances of success for American Indian, African American, Hmong, and Somali welfare participants lies in strengthening the individualized support. This begins with well-prepared job counselors whose caseloads are small enough to allow them to understand the recipient's situation and what kind of help they need to be ready to work. It also means that job counselors need to have access to suitable ways of meeting those needs.

What we learned from the Hmong discussion groups

In addition to the general themes that were common to all four cultural groups, we heard these experiences from 57 Hmong people who participated in eight discussion groups held in Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and Winona:

Hmong participants agree with the welfare system's expectation that people should work:

- They are very aware of the importance of work for material success, dignity, and social status.
- They asked again and again for Americans to be reminded that the Hmong are "not lazy" and "never beggars."

- However, many have problems with poor health or disabilities, or are caring for family members with health problems or disabilities, limiting their ability to work.

MFIP provides enough help to survive, but not to make progress:

- Many participants need more English skills and formal education for better-paying jobs.
- Parents with large families cannot be self-sufficient with low-paying jobs, especially considering the costs of child care and health insurance.

Some Hmong people have been told by MFIP to stop their education or English language programs to get a job, but told by employers to go away and get an education:

- Many said they feel depressed, afraid, and helpless.
- Many fear they are "too old to learn."

Many Hmong participants told of experiences of discrimination:

- They were not hired although they were capable of doing the job, because their English or was not good enough to explain that they can do the job.
- Their language barrier makes it harder to protect their rights.

Language barriers make it difficult for Hmong welfare participants to read MFIP forms and notices, with the result that:

- They may miss meetings.
- They may misunderstand rules and requirements.
- They may not know about possible benefits and help.

Hmong participants' concerns about child care include:

- Larger families and language barriers make it difficult to find suitable child care.
- Parents want to instill their own culture and values in their children.

Hmong participants have major concerns about transportation for work:

- Language barriers make it more difficult to use the bus.
- Many Hmong participants said it is essential for them to get a working car.

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