

## S U M M A R Y

## The issues behind the outcomes for Somali, Hmong, American Indian, and African American welfare participants

This study describes the experiences and perceptions of American Indian, African American, Hmong, and Somali participants in Minnesota's welfare program. The study was undertaken to learn more about why members of these four populations were significantly less likely, on average, to be employed or off welfare than the average Minnesota welfare participant. Using focus group methods, the study sought in-depth information from participants themselves about their experiences with welfare and with employment to better understand the issues affecting their outcomes.

### Methods

Wilder Research Center held discussions with 191 current or recent welfare recipients in 40 focus groups across the state of Minnesota during May, June, and July 2002. The Minnesota Department of Human Services, a partner in this

investigation, provided access to administrative records which allowed researchers to identify potential focus group participants based on cultural group and their participation in MFIP. Recruitment was done by mail and telephone, and participation incentives in the form of gift certificates were offered to all participants.

The focus groups were culturally specific and led by facilitators of the same cultural group as the participants. Hmong and Somali groups were conducted in the participants' own language. Within each of the four cultural groups, participants were invited to different discussion groups based on their recent work and welfare status (off welfare, on welfare and working, or on welfare and not working). Most groups were with women only; one group within each cultural group was with men only. The table shows the distribution of focus groups by cultural population and location.

### Focus group participation, by location and cultural population

Cultural population	Metro groups	Non-metro groups	Total number of groups	Total number of participants
American Indian	4 Minneapolis 3 Duluth	3 Leech Lake Reservation 2 Red Lake Reservation	12	51
African American	4 Minneapolis 3 St. Paul	2 Duluth 2 Rochester	11	41
Hmong	3 Minneapolis 4 St. Paul	1 Winona	8	57
Somali	4 Minneapolis 3 St. Paul	2 Rochester	9	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>28 groups</b>	<b>12 groups</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>191</b>

### **Benefits of this method**

In contrast to survey research, focus groups seek to answer more open-ended questions about how various people experience and respond to programs and services. They are a good way to explore the diversity of experiences (rather than the most typical or common experiences) and to give voice to stakeholders. Focus groups generate in-depth information with details that are meaningful to participants and help to minimize the bias imposed when researchers predefine the questions and response options. Individual responses in focus groups are often augmented by the exchange of ideas among participants, in which it is often possible to learn not only the participants' experiences and opinions but also the reasons for their views.

### **Limitations of this method**

As with surveys and any other self-report method, it is difficult or impossible to verify specific information provided by each respondent. Experiences reported by participants cannot be directly compared to those of other groups or with the perspective of the person's welfare case worker, employer, or others who know them well. Second, since the populations included in this study were those with the lowest success rates, including a deliberate overrepresentation of those who were not doing as well as others, the findings cannot be fully generalized to Minnesota's current MFIP caseload. This is especially true for Somali participants, where more recent immigrants may be more predominantly from rural areas in Somalia, less literate in their own language, and may have spent longer in refugee camps than the Somalis in this study. In addition, recipients who were exempt from work requirements were excluded from this sample. These factors make the sample less than fully representative of the total current MFIP caseload.

### **Key findings**

Many of the experiences described by these participants could easily have happened to a welfare recipient from any cultural group. Previous research indicates that many White and Hispanic welfare recipients face some of the same difficulties, while other studies show that many American Indian, African American, Hmong, and Somali welfare recipients are successfully launched on a path to self-sufficiency. However, this study provides many examples of ways in which members of these cultural groups face different obstacles that affect their ability to get and keep jobs and exit welfare, which can shed light on the lower success rates documented for these populations in Minnesota.

It is clear from the focus group responses that many within these cultural groups, rather than needing welfare help to respond to a temporary crisis or setback, have entered from a lifetime of instability and inadequate preparation for paid employment. As a result, a large proportion report that they lack one or more of the skills usually needed for even entry level work, including basic reading and math skills, familiarity with the expectations and norms of the workplace, and (for the two immigrant groups) the ability to speak and understand English.

### **Participants' overall perceptions of the Minnesota Family Investment Program**

Most participants in the focus groups accept the basic premise of welfare as a social contract, under which MFIP provides the help they need to become self-sufficient, while they comply with its rules and reporting requirements and work to become self-supporting. However, many participants 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.

Discussions indicate that for many participants, the relationship they establish with an individual job counselor plays a significant role. It shapes their attitude toward MFIP, the amount of effort they invest in cooperating with its expectations, their perception of its fairness, and, for some, their success in meeting MFIP's goals of employment and exit. Where the job counselor relationship was positive, participants gave glowing testimonials. Across all cultural groups, participants cite as helpful those job counselors who encourage them, show they care, and are easy to talk to, and those who help them look for and get jobs, or help them learn how to do so. Less often encountered, but even more frequently wished for, are job counselors who understand the participant's life experience and background. Also important across all four cultural groups is having a worker who explains the system and its rules and benefits, gives options, and includes the participant in decisions instead of dictating.

My worker is a nice lady. She does what she can to help you get a job, tells you what you have to report to her, and she tells me what to do. She's bossy. She called me twice a month about getting a job. ... She wrote a letter to me, asking what I needed for my last six months. It's been a great experience. – *African American participant*

I think my job counselor does difficult work and my worker makes a difference for me. – *Hmong participant*

The difference that most commonly separates positive experiences from the more numerous negative experiences is the participants' perception of whether the worker is on their side; that is, whether the worker sees their job as helping the participant more than controlling him or her.

The Employment Services Manual makes clear that the state expects job counselors to perform both of these functions; the focus group results suggests that there is a wide range in how job counselors balance the two roles. Through participants' eyes, the evidence suggests that the workers are under more pressure to be diligent on the monitoring than on the supporting role.

Problems described by participants include rude and demeaning treatment; requiring face to face meetings at times or locations that impose burdens on participants; being nearly impossible to reach by phone; frequent turnover in workers, undermining the potential for trust or familiarity; paperwork that is lost, processed late, or processed incorrectly, with the penalty being borne by the participant; and decisions about work supports that appear arbitrary or excessively controlling.

### **Culture-specific issues**

Many American Indian and African American participants appear to put more trust in information about MFIP that they hear from fellow recipients than they do in information given through official sources. From some examples in the group discussions where facilitators, advisors, or researchers have relevant knowledge, it is evident that the information shared among recipients may often be incomplete or misleading. However, on other occasions it is of great value, such as when a participant learned at the focus group that gas vouchers might be provided to help with the cost of driving to interviews or work.

Hmong advisors for the study have pointed out that in Hmong culture it is felt that in case of a conflict or misunderstanding, it is better not to confront it directly and risk making it worse. Instead, one would approach a third party who could discuss it informally and try to identify a resolution that would not cause either party to feel

that they had been put in the wrong. According to advisors, Hmong recipients would also tend not to ask a job counselor (or employer) to repeat or clarify an instruction or piece of information, because that would rudely imply poor communication on the part of the speaker. Instead, they would wait and hope to figure it out from observation.

In American Indian groups, the facilitators were not surprised to find that participants were slow to share their personal experiences and opinions even with other American Indians whom they did not already know, and in a relatively low-risk setting where confidentiality was guaranteed. There were suggestions from a few of the participants, in the ways they described their interactions with job counselors, that many of them would not readily share with their workers the kind of personal information that MFIP routinely expects and requires.

Among Somali participants as among the Hmong, the greatest culture-related barrier was the language difference. Also of importance were some of the practices of their Muslim faith of which many employers and MFIP workers are unaware, and which may lead job counselors to recommend unsuitable work environments. Somali participants, compared to members of other populations, tend to describe their relationship with MFIP employment services in a business-like manner, stressing the uneven implementation of the “social contract.” From their perspective, MFIP emphasizes the responsibilities of recipients unduly while neglecting to uphold the government’s responsibility to provide the necessary work supports to help recipients progress toward self-sufficiency.

Discussion among African American groups emphasized the importance of hiring more

welfare workers of the same cultural background as the clients. The U.S.-born participants had different perspectives on this than the immigrant groups. In groups where the topic came up, the majority of African American and American Indian participants reported wanting someone of their own race in the MFIP offices. African American participants also stated that it would be better if MFIP workers were former welfare recipients, because they felt just as out of place trying to deal with the middle class, college-educated African American MFIP workers as they did with White MFIP workers.

Focus group results also show that program complexity is a barrier for many participants as they attempt to negotiate the welfare system. Since many of these participants appear to have difficulty comprehending complicated information, it is understandable that a worker would try to avoid confusion by presenting only a limited amount of information at one time. However, the practice of introducing information a bit at a time appears to have led some participants to feel that the system deliberately puts new hurdles in their path, just when they think they have accomplished what was expected of them.

Comments from study advisors suggest that job counselors’ current workloads make it unrealistic to expect a more comprehensive presentation of rules and process, or more thorough coverage of the first orientation topics. Recognizing the difficulties caused in the early years of MFIP by large caseloads, in 2000 Minnesota Legislature increased employment services funding by 33 percent, mainly to reduce caseload size. After a slight reduction in funding in 2002, the average caseload for a job counselor at the time of this study is between 80 and 100 participants. Job counselors who served on the advisory committee for this study estimate that between two-thirds and

three-quarters of a job counselor's time is spent processing the required paperwork, leaving approximately 45 minutes of direct service time per month, per participant.

While some participants recognize that the MFIP workers are overworked, and are themselves under pressure from their supervisors and the requirements of the overall welfare system, many also perceive a system that holds them to the letter of every obligation, under threat of sanction, while often failing to live up to its own side of the deal. They perceive these systematic failings in three main kinds of ways: excessive paperwork demands; inaccessibility of workers to provide information and answer questions; inconsistency in information about rules and supports; and consequently, evidence that the system must be intended to hide benefits and protections from participants.

If you don't know what's available // they won't tell you // they're not going to just volunteer to tell you [all agree]. // They won't volunteer any information. – *African American participants*

In addition to barriers related to the welfare system itself, participants also reported other factors that had a significant effect on their success including discrimination, availability of child support, housing, and access to transportation.

Finally, the basic definition of nuclear family which forms the basis for MFIP's distribution of support and benefits is not shared across these cultural groups. Participants find they are penalized for offering or accepting help outside the nuclear family. Nonetheless, the experience of participants emphasized the importance of extended family and the importance of sharing financial resources with them.

### **How do participants view the expectation of work under the new welfare rules?**

Most participants in the focus groups expect and want to work. However, many have been frustrated and discouraged by their experiences trying to get and keep jobs. As a result, they report that MFIP fails to recognize and deal with the ways in which: a) participants are not ready for the available entry level work, and b) the entry level labor market is not ready for willing participants.

Across all groups, the vast majority of participants agree with MFIP that most people should be expected to work. Many of the participants' comments provided examples of the intrinsic as well as the extrinsic values that are seen in work, as well as evidence of successful and satisfying work experiences.

I think everyone should be working, no one should be on welfare. // I feel better when I'm not on welfare. – *American Indian participant*

If you're able, you should work. – *African American participant*

Yes, everyone has to get a job. ... In my opinion, it does not matter where we are or live, we still have to work to survive. – *Hmong participant*

I love my job and working is good. I want to work and show my kids I work and be a good role model. – *Somali participant*

On the other hand, participants tend to add that there should be exceptions to the work expectation, particularly with regard to age, disability, the need to attend to the illness or disability of

family members, or inadequate preparation for work. Although policy currently provides for such exceptions, the way participants discuss these difficulties suggests that they do not see the welfare system adequately recognizing valid exceptions.

Many participants said that they, or people they knew, were expected to find a job without having the knowledge and skills for an effective job search. Not only immigrants but also U.S.-born participants with no prior work experience reported needing help to know how to fill out a job application or what to expect at an interview and how to present themselves. Many reported that their job counselor had made no effort to find out whether they needed this kind of help but just told them to get a job.

Participants described a wide variety of ways in which some people in their populations are not able to work or cannot find jobs that are compatible with their care-giving obligations, or are not prepared for the kinds of jobs on which they could support themselves without welfare within the 60-month time limit. Barriers include lack of work experience, lack of English language skills, lack of basic skills including reading, writing and math, and other personal barriers like mental illness, learning deficits, domestic violence, and chemical dependency.

It's fair [to be expected to work] but we don't even know ABC, or where to drive to, and MFIP doesn't understand our frustration. It's not like we're lazy and don't want to work. We never ever have seen any alphabets in our country. ... I think it is fair for young people but it is not fair for old people who are not educated. –

*Hmong participant*

Participants in some discussions indicated that many members of the populations who have been in the United States for many generations have become accustomed to the old welfare system, and that a few of these do not particularly care to change their ways. These attitudes, however, were not particularly supported by other participants in the groups and most indicated that the new welfare policies have made them more likely to work, even if it was hard to take the first step.

Some African American and American Indian participants reported that a change in program rules from AFDC to MFIP affected many who were on welfare as children. They reported that they had learned, and needed to overcome, generationally transmitted patterns of dependency and expectations of support. All of their previous experiences with the welfare system were challenged when AFDC ended and MFIP began.

When you grow up, when your parents grow up on welfare, and then you do, you don't take education seriously. And you will need it, to get a good job out there and support your family. – *American Indian participant*

Nearly all participants who compared the new welfare policies to the old AFDC policies felt that the change to a work-based system was a good one, provided it recognized the difficulty that long-term recipients faced in making the change. Generally, it was felt that five years did not provide enough time to reverse the effects of a lifetime, and in particular not enough to acquire the needed education.

The economic boom during the first few years of the new welfare system began to slow in early 2001, reducing the availability of jobs for unskilled workers. Most welfare research, which was carried out in the growth economy of the late 1980s and 1990s, showed success using the work-first model.



But many employers, especially since the economy began to contract in 2001, are understandably reluctant to hire applicants who do not speak English, are unable to read, have no prior work experience, or have prior criminal convictions, especially if more qualified applicants are available.

In all populations some participants report that they are usually able to find temporary jobs, but less often stable or permanent employment. For some, temporary work proved to be a good way to enter the job market and resulted in permanent employment as a next step, but more often it became a dead end.

We all went through temp. After three months, English speakers were accepted for permanent positions but we were not. –  
*Hmong participant*

The labor market, unlike the state's welfare system, is not governed by a single statewide policy, and the scope for local variation is considerable. Participants' experiences in seeking employment and on-the-job training are therefore likely to reveal an even wider range of variation than their experiences with the MFIP system. Despite having no control over the labor market, welfare reform depends heavily on that market to absorb workers coming off welfare, and holds participants accountable to enter that market. Not surprisingly, African American, American Indian, Hmong, and Somali focus group participants described job-related discrimination based on language, dress, religious practice, family size (especially for immigrants), welfare status, or simply race.

### **MFIP's support of work**

Participants in the focus groups report extensive need for the menu of work supports offered by MFIP to help them seek, secure, and retain jobs.

These supports include assistance with child care and transportation, training costs, and job counselors' help looking for or retaining a job. To the extent that they receive these supports they generally find them helpful. However, many participants report that the supports available do not provide as much help as they need to get and retain stable employment.

I would say [that MFIP should] give more time for adequate training of some sort. ... Nothing against the job counselors that they give us, but you are basically told to go to a center where there are tons of computers and you look for a job. That's not helping in getting a job. That's showing you that there are jobs out there, but that's not showing you how to get that job. – *African American participant*

Relatively few participants mention receiving help with their job search. In general, a substantial proportion of participants in the focus groups felt that to be ready for unsubsidized work, they need more help than MFIP is offering and that MFIP has little recognition of the extent or depth of their need.

African Americans tend to emphasize a need for help with job-seeking and self-presentation skills, preferably from someone who would not be judgmental about their need for help. Along with American Indians, they also refer to the help they need to develop specific job skills (both soft and hard skills). Somali and Hmong participants stress their need for help with both job skills and English language skills. American Indian participants report inconsistent help with finding jobs or with developing their job-seeking skills.

Some participants mentioned that they wanted MFIP to do more initial assessment to determine which participants need what types of help. The use of the initial eight-week job search period is favored by program planners and administrators as an efficient strategy for sorting those who need help from those who are work-ready. It saves money by not using scarce resources to assess everybody, when many need minimal help. However, for these participants from populations that start from a point of relative disadvantage, it is evident that the additional discouragement from eight weeks of frustration and failure has helped to convince many of them that MFIP is not interested in understanding what kinds of help they need and providing that help.

It was hard for me because I can only read but I don't understand what I was reading. They told me to find work but they didn't provide any leads or help on how to find work. – *Hmong participant*

In addition to the issues and barriers described above, focus group participants also noted significant problems in negotiating the child care assistance program and accessing adequate transportation or transportation assistance. They spoke of the gaps between the full costs of both child care and transportation and the assistance they received to meet these costs.

Another major concern expressed by participants was the need for support related to job retention. Some of the need was clearly with soft skills (knowing the expected and acceptable behaviors of the workplace). Help was also needed for non-English speakers to adjust to new settings with co-workers and supervisors as well as for help dealing with discrimination on the job.

I used to work at place I was working and I got laid off. Then they re-start hiring again. I went for an interview and they say I have to have a high school diploma, we changed the old rules. I said I know the job. [They] said we don't care, we need high school diploma. I always exceeded their expectation and later they refused me. I used to work very hard. – *Somali participant*

### **The rewards of work**

Participants are grateful for the safety net features of MFIP that have helped them to survive when they were unable to help themselves. They recognize that the intent of MFIP is to make work more rewarding than welfare. However, when added social and economic costs of work are factored in, many participants find that MFIP's benefit structure does not promote the stability and security needed for self-sufficiency.

While participants cite the cash grant, food benefit, and medical coverage as important ways that MFIP has helped them, the costs of housing poses a serious concern among all four cultural groups. Members of all four populations also express serious concern about the loss of medical coverage, either upon getting a job or upon exiting assistance. Many report that the jobs available to them either do not offer medical benefits, or offer them with premiums and co-pays that are unaffordable, especially for parents with many children.

The MFIP program is structured to provide participants with a two-month cushion to protect their increased earnings before the cash grant begins to be reduced. However, it is clear from comments of participants that this is seen as an immediate reduction in their grant. One of the most common themes emerging from the groups is that MFIP cuts people off both too soon and too suddenly. Similarly common is the report



that the loss of benefits outweighs the gain from wages, especially when additional work expenses (such as added transportation costs and medical premiums) are balanced against the loss of non-cash supports including sliding-fee child care subsidies and rent assistance.

The reduction in benefits appears to be particularly hard on the largest families. Hmong participants, who had the most children per family of the four populations, were also the group that most commonly reports being no better off working than not working, and seeing little chance of earning enough money to do without any cash benefits, food benefits, and medical coverage.

Work supports are tightly linked to work status, in that both cash benefit levels and child care assistance are tied closely to a participants' work hours. Because these participants' work status and hours are not always stable, work supports become unstable as well. The instability may be magnified by the system of retrospective budgeting in which adjustments in the cash grant are not seen until two months after the change occurs. Participants pointed out that this works as a penalty for those who lose jobs or lose work hours for factors beyond their control. At the same time they are dealing with a reduced or lost paycheck, they have two months to wait for higher benefits. Emergency adjustments can be made in case of large reductions in earnings, but participants are reluctant to use them because of the paperwork involved and the restriction on how often they can request these adjustments.

The most important positive consequence of work, across the board, is freedom from the demands of MFIP. Another positive feature mentioned almost as often and almost as broadly across all groups is self-esteem and a sense of worth and dignity associated with work. Some participants also

mention being better able to take care of their children or families and a few mention having more structure in their lives or making better decisions, meeting new people and learning new things and making a positive contribution to society.

Many participants, however, find it is not easy to say whether they are better off when they are working, because strong considerations on both sides tend to offset each other. The most common negative consequence of working is a reduced ability to care for their children and other family members. These concerns are similar across all groups.

My kid was at the day care where they set him up to go; they're supposed to get him off the bus – nope – the cops had to bring him home, and it looked bad on me. –

*American Indian participant*

Several Hmong participants who had succeeded in finding employment reported serious worries about job security. This is due in part to concerns caused by the unfamiliar experience of debt, which was unknown in Laos. It also reflects a sense of vulnerability in the workplace, due to uncertain economic conditions, placement in more marginal jobs, and the language barrier that interferes with resolving workplace difficulties.

## Discussion

This section suggests a range of options for adjusting policy or service delivery to increase the likelihood that the welfare system will lead to work and self-sufficiency for all those who are able, and will lead to more suitable arrangements for those who are not able to work at a self-supporting level, whether temporarily or permanently.

## **Readiness for work**

Findings suggest that smaller caseloads would make a big difference. Allowing job counselors to spend more time with recipients would make it possible for them to more quickly identify those who need more help to prepare for self-supporting employment, and to get that support underway. More time with recipients would also allow for the development of more familiarity and trust to reveal valid reasons for exemptions from work requirements. In addition, more translation and interpretation support to address communication problems would help many immigrants to better grasp the rules and benefits. English-speaking participants may need more help to overcome limitations related to reading and comprehension skills.

The unintended effect of work participation quotas (which may discourage appropriate individual exemptions) could be countered by establishing additional federal, state and county performance measures that might include:

- The number of non-working recipients who have received comprehensive assessments
- The number of recipients with identified work barriers who have plans that address the barriers
- The number of recipients with such plans who show progress in addressing their barriers within a given period of time

## **Labor market's readiness for participants**

It is likely that working with both recipients and employers could facilitate recipients' entry into the labor market; adjusting work expectations for the labor market in a given time and place would make policies more realistic and successful.

With regard to recipients' work-related barriers, the competitive employment market may not be able to provide jobs for all those on the caseload.

In this case the policy options would include continuing to enforce work searches that are unlikely to result in employment; or exempting more recipients from the work requirements; or revising the work requirements to allow more education, training and other activities to reduce work barriers; or developing and funding more non-market jobs (also called supported employment).

## **Availability of work supports**

Study results suggest that many participants who have been less successful in getting off welfare may need more work supports than are provided. The welfare system would likely benefit from a systematic assessment of the need for the main kinds of work supports, with particular attention to identifying gaps. Resources for identifying and providing work supports should better match the amount of help actually needed to get and keep jobs. Information about work supports should be better communicated to recipients, not only to counter the perception that supports are hidden, but also to make more transparent the limits dictated by funding, and the basis for allocating resources within those limits.

The value of the job counselor to participants could be significantly enhanced 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, effective communication strategies for those with limited English, and skills for building rapport with clients who are initially hostile and suspicious.

## **Effectiveness of work incentives**

The study shows that the combination of work and welfare is not as financially rewarding as assumed and that many of the costs associated with work are not adequately addressed under MFIP. It may be important to systematically

examine the actual financial returns of working, factoring in the costs of housing, transportation, and medical coverage. While any adjustments to restore the work incentives in the benefit structure should best be based on a detailed fiscal analysis, one other aspect of financial incentives could be considered without additional research. This is to address participants' perception that benefits based on net pay (rather than gross pay) would show greater consideration for what families actually have available to live on. Even if average grant sizes stayed the same, focus group discussion suggest that the different basis for calculating them might be perceived as more fair and realistic.

### **Likelihood of advancing to self-sufficiency from an entry-level job**

For many focus group participants, unskilled jobs appear unlikely to lead to eventual self-sufficiency. This raises the question whether or not 60 months is a realistic time frame for a new unskilled worker to advance to self-supporting employment without further training. This study suggests that members of these cultural populations may be even less likely to receive advancement opportunities.

Given the strong and nearly universal support among participants for the work expectation in policy, and comments from several participants who had asked for but been denied permission to combine work and education, it seems likely that recipients would welcome and benefit from a modified policy that would preserve the work first approach but balance it with an advancement next component. To accomplish this, policymakers might consider increasing the rewards for immediate entry level work by developing a training option that allows labor force participants, after some period in a low skill or low wage job, to have access to some type of training opportunity.

### **Perceptions of welfare's good-faith intent**

While job counselors are told that their first objective is to support recipients' progress toward becoming employed, remaining employed, and transitioning to a job that will take them off assistance, the second is to ensure compliance with welfare policy. The MFIP policy manual acknowledges the implicit tension between these two functions by stating that the two "are not mutually exclusive." To the extent that the system emphasizes the recipient's procedural compliance more than the case worker's support for their genuine progress, some participants have concluded that the system actually discourages self-sufficiency.

In order for welfare policies to be as successful as possible, it is important to change these perceptions and experiences. Possible solutions could include hiring more diverse case workers, providing better training, reducing caseloads, and having more balanced accountability from case workers as well as participants.

Case workers in the welfare system, including financial workers, job counselors, child care workers, and child support workers tend to have large caseloads and little opportunity to check into individual circumstances. Case workers should not suffer individually for unintentional errors or unrealistic job expectations. Rather, the welfare system should make a more systematic effort to reduce errors, and to identify and remedy those that occur. It is important to emphasize the avoidance of error rather than the appeals process to correct errors. While some participants have received relief through the appeals process, more appear to be unaware of it or unwilling to use it. Additionally, some of the negative consequences described by the participants from what they perceived as erroneous sanctions cannot be easily reversed or remediated after the fact.

Another measure that could help reverse the cycle of mistrust is the inclusion of more positive encouragements and rewards for participants as they comply with MFIP procedures, instead of the emphasis on punitive measures.

## 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 provisions for individualized support for their progress toward self sufficiency. This begins with well-prepared job counselors with caseloads that allow them to gain an accurate understanding of the recipient's situation and need for help with work readiness. It also means that job counselors need to have at their disposal suitable ways of meeting those needs. Such a change would also help to address some of the potential for fraud among those not inclined to cooperate, both by reducing the temptation to "work the system" to obtain needed supports as well as by allowing the case worker to more accurately identify non-cooperation and distinguish it from non-compliance due to just cause.

Welfare reform is a train built to run on two parallel tracks: work requirements on one side and work supports on the other. If one track is consistently emphasized and maintained while the second is allowed to grow weak, the system breaks down. Participants in these focus groups have provided examples of effective work supports but many more examples of ways in which supports have not been adequate or effective for their circumstances. Many are at the point of believing that the initial promise of the reform – to help them become self-supporting – was never really meant. Revisions to the policy at the federal and state levels, as well as local implementation decisions, could have either trivial or profound consequences for how effectively case workers can understand and meet the needs of their clients. Federal, state, and county decisions could also affect how much support is available to help individual participants to meet the work requirements and how many of those who are unable to work may be exempted; and whether those who do work find they are truly better off and closer to self-sufficiency. The results of the next round of policy changes, and the way in which they are put into practice, will be interpreted by many in these four populations as a signal to rekindle either their hopes or their cynicism.

**For more information** about the findings in this summary, or to obtain a copy of the full version of the report *The issues behind the outcomes* contact:

Wilder Research Center  
1295 Bandana Boulevard North  
Suite #210  
Saint Paul, MN 55108  
651-647-4600 or [www.wilder.org/research](http://www.wilder.org/research)

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