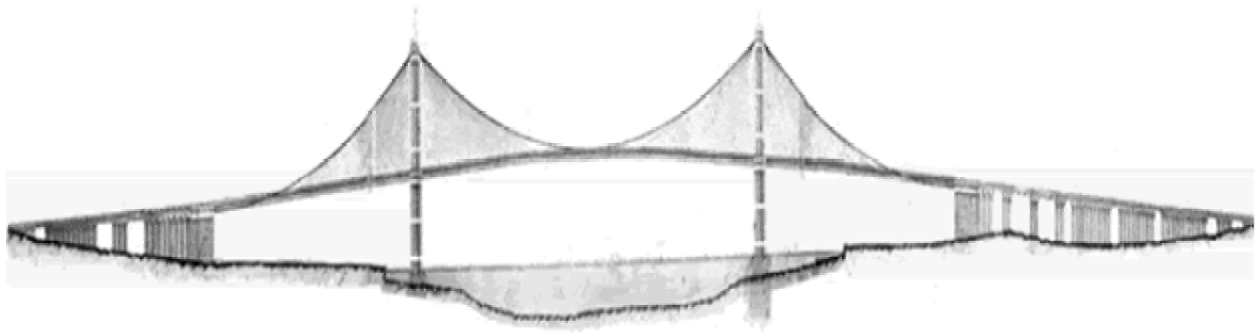


# Bridging the Gap

Transitional Benefits - what are they?  
An overview and survey of 15 Counties



Includes: Albany, Broome, Chemung, Dutchess, Erie, Greene, Monroe,  
Nassau, New York City, Oneida, Saratoga, Schenectady, Suffolk,  
Washington, and Westchester Counties.

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## Executive Summary

Since the dramatic changes in the welfare system that came about with welfare reform in 1996, states have primarily focused their energy on moving Welfare participants off of the Welfare rolls and into jobs. While this has resulted in a significant decrease in the number of welfare participants, many individuals and families face significant barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment such as lack of adequate childcare, health care, transportation, housing or income. The challenge has often been not how to find jobs for welfare participants but how to enable them to keep these jobs once they obtain them.

With health and childcare costs comprising significant portions of low-income family's incomes, growing numbers of working individuals and families are also finding it necessary to fall back on the assistance of our already overwhelmed emergency feeding programs and other service providers as they struggle to get by on too little, in an attempt to avoid having to go back on Welfare.

One way in which the state and federal social services system seeks to assist former welfare participants in maintaining employment is to provide people with transitional benefits as they transition from public assistance to full time employment. Transitional benefits provide families with benefits such as childcare, Medicaid, food stamps, transportation and housing assistance, so that these families will not be saddled with the high costs of living immediately after their public assistance case has closed. The benefits are available for 90 days to one year, depending on the particular benefit.

Transitional benefits play an interesting role in the public assistance system because they are available to people who are no longer receiving Welfare and do not count toward the federal five year time limit. These benefits place counties in a position to be able to assist their former welfare participants with filling in gaps while they work toward increasing their income and finding a job that provides health insurance and other benefits. Therefore, it is beneficial to both the county and the former welfare participant to take advantage of every opportunity to access transitional benefits and to try to get ahead before these benefits are no longer available.

Each county in New York State has a lot of discretion in what benefits they offer to transitioning families. Some counties simply state that they offer the federally mandated benefits - Transitional Childcare and Transitional Medicaid. Other counties provide a wide array of benefits from assistance with paying for car insurance payments to picking up the cost of uniforms and licenses that are required for a particular job.

With this broad degree of variation among counties, Hunger Action Network felt that it would be helpful to identify any trends that might exist in the provision of transitional benefits. We began by asking a few simple questions - were counties that offered more transitional benefits and services pleased with the results of their decisions, how well were transitioning welfare participants accessing transitional benefits, were there specific barriers to accessing those benefits, what seems to be working to help people build upon their successes at their workplace so that they would not have to access public assistance again and finally, what actions can be taken both locally and at the statewide level to increase awareness and utilization of transitional benefits.

Due to the importance of transitional benefits in helping former welfare participants maintain employment, we decided to survey a representative sample of 15 counties about their experiences with transitional benefits to gain insight into how transitioning welfare participants access transitional benefits and what individual counties are doing to address the provision of and enrollment in these programs. To this end, Hunger Action Network did a survey of human service advocates and local Departments of Social Services in 15 counties across the state. In choosing which counties to survey, we tried to bring together a representative sample of urban, rural, and geographical representation. Our goal was to be able to identify both areas that need improvement and practices that might inspire duplication in other counties.

## **Findings:**

- **Many individuals who are entitled to receive transitional benefits are failing to obtain them**, reducing the effectiveness of the efforts to move them from welfare to work. In one county, less than 2% of transitioning families were enrolled in Transitional Childcare. While often data was unavailable, advocates consistently expressed concern about their clients not getting the transitional benefits that they were entitled to.
- **DSS Caseworkers are often uninformed about the guidelines concerning transitional benefits**– across the state welfare participants, service providers, advocates and even caseworkers at the local Department of Social Services are uninformed or miseducated about the existence and parameters of transitional benefits, thereby reducing access to benefits.
- **There is a lack of public education about transitional benefits**– it is difficult for public assistance recipients to access the transitional benefits that they are entitled to if they don't know about them.
- **There is a lack of coordination between the various government agencies and the counties that provide transitional benefits, causing confusion.** Because the different transitional benefits are overseen by several different state agencies, including the Department of Labor, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the Department of Health and the Office of Child and Family Services - coordination at the local level is often confusing. Each agency generates guidelines for the specific transitional benefits that they are responsible for overseeing and collects any data that must be reported by the counties.
- **Coordination at the local level is key to providing people with the transitional benefits that are most appropriate for them.** The counties that provided the best transitional services to people had brought oversight into one office, sometimes utilizing one caseworker to provide coordination of services for all transitioning individuals.
- **Comprehensive post-employment case management greatly improves access to transitional benefits.**
  - In counties where post employment case management was available, advocates reported fewer problems and better access to transitional benefits.

- **Many counties have not taken advantage of Automatic Enrollment.** Automatic enrollment immediately increases the number of people who receive transitional benefits. In the counties that automatically enroll people into the federal transitional programs (Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Childcare and Food Stamps), advocates reported fewer problems. All counties are supposed to automatically enroll transitioning individuals and families into Transitional Medicaid. New York State encourages counties to take the initiative to automatically enroll people in Transitional Childcare and Food Stamps as well.
  - Of the 15 counties that Hunger Action Network surveyed, only 5, or 30%, reported that they have embraced the concept of automatic enrollment beyond transitional Medicaid. Counties participating in this approach include Chemung, Monroe, Saratoga, Greene, and Schenectady.
- **The transitional benefits that counties develop in addition to the federal benefits tend to be less accessible.** Counties can develop their own transitional benefits to help with the transition into employment. In every county Hunger Action Network surveyed, concerns were raised over both the lack of county initiated transitional benefits and the amount of information available concerning these benefits.
  - **Transitioning clients often are not made aware of county programs.** Most counties only discuss the availability of the federal benefits. People need to be aware of the county- specific programs as well.
- **Most Counties do not offer extended hours and accessible locations for the coordination of transitional benefits.**
  - **If people are expected to be successful at their jobs, they must not be expected to attend meetings and recertifications during business hours.** Employers rarely understand when new employees ask for time off on a regular basis. The local Department of Social Services must provide flexibility and understanding in these circumstances. Opening earlier, closing later, and being available on weekends would help to ease problems and avoid on the job frustrations between employers and employees.
- **Transportation is still an issue.** Many counties do not provide transportation as a **transitional benefit**, despite the fact that transportation is consistently identified as one of the top three barriers to maintaining employment.

## Hunger Action Network Recommends:

Hunger Action Network has developed the following recommendations to be utilized by advocates when they approach policy makers at both the state and the local level to discuss improving access to transitional benefits.

### STATE-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS -

- **The State and Counties should implement mandatory automatic enrollment in Transitional Childcare, Food Stamps, and transportation assistance**, following the precedent that has been set with Transitional Medicaid. Because the majority of welfare families transitioning into employment are eligible for Transitional Child Care and Food Stamps, the most

efficient and thorough way to ensure that families access these programs is to automatically enroll eligible families when they are transitioning off of welfare. For Transitional Child Care and Food Stamp enrollment, counties have the opportunity to utilize other county's processes as models, rather than having to develop their own. A similar process could also be utilized to enroll people in other transitional programs.

- **The state should require counties to keep track of the success or failure of individuals accessing transitional benefits and services so that the rate of success can be evaluated.** Data should be collected that reflects the number of individuals enrolled in each transitional program in each county, regardless of whether or not the federal government requires it. There should be follow-up interviews done with these individuals after one year to assess their level of success so that programs can be improved upon when necessary. At present, the state does not keep separate numbers for Transitional Child Care and Transitional Medicaid, making it difficult to ascertain how many people are being enrolled in these specific programs and how their enrollment is affecting their lives.
- **The Department of Labor should require counties to identify specific transitional benefits that are available rather than simply using the blanket term, “emergency assistance” when developing their transitional benefits policies.** Outlining these specific transitional benefits would provide policy guidelines to individuals and advocates, so that they would know what benefits a client could expect to receive during the transition process. “Emergency Assistance” could still be one of the benefits offered, but should not be the only guideline available.
- **The Department of Labor should expand county identified transitional benefits beyond 90 days.** The Department of Labor should make the three-month cut-off for these programs more flexible so that these benefits are still available to ward off crisis within the first year if needed.
- **The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance should make case-management services available beyond the one-year cut-off point for transitional Medicaid and Transitional Childcare.** At the one-year cut-off point, families reach a "second transition period" and will have to adjust their budgets to provide for the additional costs associated with healthcare and childcare. Due to the high cost of these services it is unlikely that a worker's income will have increased enough during their first year of employment to absorb these increased costs. Case managers can help families to plan ahead for this eventuality and assist in coordinating low-income childcare, and other aspects of their life that will be affected by this change in financial status. They can help to coordinate additional training, arrange to pay for licensing fees, tools, etc. and can provide assistance with navigating circumstances from asking for a raise, to starting a new job search. Case managers can provide on-going support and encouragement. After working with the same families for an extended period of time, and on a regular basis, case managers have the potential to truly get to know the needs of the family. There is a real opportunity for a team effort between case manager and their clients – these are the cases that will have the most success.

- **The Department of Labor should consider requiring all counties to provide transportation assistance to transitioning families.** Transportation is consistently identified as one of the top three barriers for welfare participants moving into employment (along with childcare and health care). Transportation assistance can take many forms – including car buying clubs, low interest loans, car insurance assistance and discounted fares for public transportation. Counties could continue to have the leeway to develop their own programs, but would simply be required to do so. Again, data on the number of people enrolled, what benefits they received and follow-up 12 months later to assess their level of success needs to be collected so that these various programs can be evaluated as to the level success different types of programs achieve.

## COUNTY RECOMMENDATIONS -

- **Counties should create Transitional Opportunities Program (TOP) units or similar programs.** Transitional Opportunities Program units focus on assisting working individuals so that they are able to successfully transition off of welfare into jobs. They offer extended hours and satellite locations to make it easier for people to meet with their caseworker and coordinate their benefits. Long-term post-employment/transitional caseworkers are available at that will help them to coordinate their benefits. If your county did not apply for Transitional Opportunities Program funding from the Office Of Temporary and Disability Assistance this year, they will most likely be able to apply for it in their TANF Services plan next year. In the meantime, counties should look into other innovative ways of coordinating their transitional services, particularly in the case of the federal benefits.
- **Counties must increase public education of welfare participants and advocates concerning transitional benefits.** Misinformation and lack of awareness of transitional benefits on the part of both welfare participants and advocates was a consistent trend in our survey. While transitional benefits have begun to emerge as an integral piece of the public assistance system, the general public is not particularly aware of their role, or even of their existence. All individuals involved with the public assistance system need to be educated concerning the availability of transitional benefits once people's PA cases close due to an increase in income. Welfare participants themselves need to know that there are still supports available to them to help them succeed in the job market, and caseworkers need to understand the importance of providing their clients with these benefits.
- **Counties should consider providing across the board re-training on transitional benefits provision for their caseworkers,** carefully educating them concerning the state and federal guidelines and encouraging them to enroll all eligible individuals in county identified transitional benefits as well.
- **Counties should periodically review closed cases to determine whether potentially eligible families have been overlooked.** These

families could then be enrolled in Transitional Medicaid, Transitional ChildCare, food stamps, and other county-identified transitional programs.

- **Counties need to follow state and federal guidelines and actively encourage caseworkers to enroll transitioning participants in all federal transitional programs.** They should be using the correct codes to close cases and automatically enrolling cases that are transitioning off of Public Assistance due to an increase in earnings. Caseworkers should also actively enroll people in county specific transitional benefits.

Hunger Action Network encourages both the state and counties to consider our recommendations. If New York State actively seeks to provide transitioning families with the benefits and services that they are entitled to; the number of welfare participants successfully maintaining employment will increase. New York State and the federal government have already taken steps in this direction by requiring automatic enrollment in Transitional Medicaid and encouraging it in other programs. We would like to see all counties in the state do the same, and to extend the spirit of the federal regulations to their own local transitional policies.

New York State has enough funds available in the federal welfare windfall (which this year, topped 1.5 billion dollars) to fund programs that have been shown to be effective in keeping people employed. We feel that this money should be used now to further increase the success of transitioning families, before the state experiences the inevitable cut in funding from the federal government either in 2002 when the TANF program is evaluated or at a later date when funding levels are based on more current, significantly lower caseloads.

## Introduction

The review and analysis of the County Employment Plans that are submitted biannually by each county for approval by the New York State Department of Labor (DOL) is an integral component of the Hunger Action Network's Welfare Accountability Project. These Employment plans identify the policies and guidelines that each individual county will use in their Welfare to Work programs for the next two years.

The Welfare Accountability project seeks first to have an impact on the development and implementation of these plans, and then to establish an ongoing dialogue with state and county officials, local Departments of Social Services and local advocates to improve welfare policy at the state and local level. Through the utilization of focused research, county monitoring coalitions, surveys and the dissemination of timely information, we have been able to consistently identify areas in need of improvement, as well as successful programs that warrant duplication in other counties.

In our ongoing search for programs and policies that meet the above-mentioned goals, Hunger Action Network identified transitional benefits as an emerging series of benefits that warranted further exploration and understanding.

The number of families on Welfare in New York State continues to drop (a 47.36% decrease from January of 1995 to December of 1999 (NYS OTADA 1999 Annual Report). Yet most individuals who leave Welfare for work are moving into low-wage jobs that keep them at or below the poverty level - transforming them from welfare participants into the working poor (Network, 1999, Institute for Public Affairs, 1999).

Transitional benefits are available to provide support to heads of families who have found a job in which they earn enough money to make them no longer eligible for Public Assistance. These benefits, which include childcare, Medicaid, and transportation assistance (to name a few), make it possible for families to stretch their earnings from their new job. Transitional benefits are necessary to avoid crisis. Without these benefits, many individuals would find themselves only marginally better off when they leave welfare. They provide additional time (that doesn't affect their federal five year time limit) to set up permanent support systems, to work toward finding a job that pays well, provides health benefits, daycare and a future.

Transitional benefits are necessary in the present Public Assistance environment in which true career development avenues that would serve to move people off of Welfare into higher paying, professional jobs with a future (such as education and serious job training) tend to be elusive to all but the most tenacious.

This report seeks to dispel any misunderstandings about what transitional benefits are and who is eligible to receive them. In Chapter one, we outline the role of transitional benefits – what are they, why they are necessary, and how they help families to transition off of Welfare. We then discuss how transitional benefits are coordinated in New York State. In Chapter two, specific state and federal guidelines for transitional benefits are outlined as well as how New York State's guidelines. This chapter also highlights the results of Hunger Action Network's survey of local

Departments of Social Services and social services advocates, and focus on specific benefits such as transitional Medicaid and Transitional Childcare at the end of this chapter, we will offer state and local recommendations based on our research and the results of the surveys conducted in the fifteen counties. The appendix includes the county policy for each of the fifteen counties, exerpts from the survey responses and specific recommendations for each county.

### Methodology

Fifteen counties were chosen in an effort to provide a sampling of the issues that arise in the fifty-eight social service districts across New York State. The individual counties were chosen from across the state to provide information from both urban and rural social service districts and to cover a large geographic region.

A series of thirteen questions were delivered to each Local Social Service District either verbally by phone, or, after an initial conversation, via fax. Thirteen of the Fifteen districts responded.

Hunger Action Network also spoke with human service advocates at Legal Services, Transitional Housing Shelters and other organizations in each county that work with individuals who are in the process of transitioning from Welfare to work. These individuals were asked a series of five questions either over the phone or via fax. We received responses from human services advocates in each county included in the survey.

The responses to both surveys were then compared for each county and recommendations were developed.

# Chapter 1 - The Foundation

## I. What Are Transitional Benefits?

It is important to note that there is a difference between “transitional benefits” and “post-employment services”(sometimes called transitional services). According to a contact at the NYS Department of Labor, the state has not yet issued an official definition of transitional benefits. This initial lack of clarification was originally intended to maintain flexibility for the Local Departments of Social Services so that counties could interpret the term as they saw fit. In theory this would allow counties to come up with innovative ideas that could potentially be used as models for other counties. Unfortunately, this lack of clarity has also resulted in some confusion, as it is sometimes difficult to discern the difference between transitional benefits and post-employment services. While the lack of a specific definition may encourage some counties to be more creative, it also allows others to avoid or limit the provision of services beyond those required by the Federal government.

According to the Department of Labor’s Employment Policy Manual, transitional benefits that go beyond those provided by the federal government’s mandatory benefits - Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Childcare and Food Stamps - can last for up to 90 days. While there is no specific definition of what these additional benefits are, they tend to be things like transportation assistance in the form of bus tokens or housing subsidies – things that are tangible and have a specific monetary value.

Post employment services can be offered on a more long term basis and are defined by The New York State Welfare-To-Work-Technical Assistance Team as a form of “follow-up services to help meet client-specific issues that arise in the transition to self-sufficiency” (NYSWTWTAT, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, p.1). Post-employment services are generally targeted toward job mentoring, educational opportunities and “on-call” assistance for job searches and the like – the “soft” services. Again, the differentiation is somewhat unclear, as some of these services are included in county employment plans as transitional benefits. This is an area that needs clarification, as county identified transitional benefits are generally limited to 90 days, while post-employment services can accessed for over a year.

A more comprehensive definition of transitional benefits is expected from DOL in the next several months. Hopefully this will provide clarity concerning what falls under the each category, and consequently which of the non-Federal benefits are expected to end after 90 days (Transitional benefits) and what services can be allowed to continue as needed (post-employment services).

For our purposes here, we will consider the working term “transitional benefits” to cover everything from transitional Medicaid to transportation assistance to covering costs for licensing fees and uniforms that are required for employment. We will exclude post-employment training, education, and mentoring from this definition, as we feel these “soft skills” would likely be ineffectual if limited to 90 days. Ultimately, we would like to see all transitional benefits offered for up to a year. This report focuses more upon the expansion and coordination of benefits,

enrollment procedures and public education. Expanding the time limit on county identified transitional benefits is an issue that certainly warrants further exploration and is among our recommendations.

## II. The Role of Transitional Benefits

Adults with children who are eligible to receive transitional benefits are no longer considered to be on welfare and their welfare case is closed. Yet they can still receive these specific benefits – without affecting their five-year federal time-limit to receive Public Assistance.

States (and counties) are required by law to provide families that are transitioning off of Welfare with Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Childcare and to determine whether or not they are eligible for Food Stamps. Federal law outlines the qualifying criteria for these programs. Again, other benefits, determined by each individual local Department of Social Services in their County Employment Plan, can be provided by local districts for up to 90 days (although this time limit is somewhat flexible).

Thus, in New York State, counties must offer the transitional benefits outlined by the federal government, but they also have the flexibility to provide additional supports and to initiate innovative programs that address the needs of their citizens. This includes things that are necessary to maintain and succeed in the individual's newfound employment – such as transportation, additional job training, housing assistance, emergency assistance, tools, licensing fees and other “necessities” related to employment. Therefore, counties can provide assistance with both foreseen and unforeseen costs that can push a struggling family beyond the boundaries of their budget and back onto welfare.

These basic “necessities” - medical coverage, childcare, food and shelter in addition to others mentioned above - are expensive in today's society. “Many single mothers who are employed are in fact impoverished by high child-care costs, for the money remaining after paying child care is insufficient to meet the family's other needs” (Pearce, p.25).“Welfare participants who leave welfare for low wage positions need the support of childcare assistance to retain their new jobs. A Government Accounting Office report on the impact of welfare reform on child care needs says that a former welfare participant may be unable to keep a job and earn enough to support her family without assistance, if her childcare subsidy ends before she's moved up the career ladder to self-sufficiency. Two earlier reports for state welfare departments found that at least twenty percent of mothers in transition from welfare to work who lost childcare assistance returned to welfare”(Waller, 997, p.3)

## III. Transitional Benefits in New York State

The nature of the 1996 federal “Welfare reform” legislation has provided states (and in New York State, counties) with much leeway in deciding what benefits and services to offer transitioning families, there is a great deal of variation between districts. This makes study, comparison and oversight of specific issues difficult – as the 57 counties and New York City develop and enforce their own policies beyond the federal guidelines.

The counties all have differing conceptualizations of what role transitional benefits ought to take. As a result the local policies outlined in each county's employment plan depend on the stance that particular county takes when it comes to Welfare. As a result, the amount and kind of transitional benefits available varies from county to county, as does the degree to which the county informs participants of the availability of benefits when their cases close.

Specific issues in the counties studied that will be highlighted in this report will include: how individuals are notified that certain benefits remain available to them once they have left welfare; potential barriers to access; successful strategies for linking former participants with transitional benefits and what discretionary benefits are provided by Local Departments of Social Services.

#### IV. State and Federal Regulations Concerning Transitional Benefits

Another difficulty encountered while doing research on transitional benefits is the extreme fragmentation of oversight and implementation, particularly at the state level. Federal law dictates requirements for the provision of Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Childcare and Food Stamps – all of which were “delinked” from the public assistance system following welfare reform. Yet because of the way New York State has set up the social services system, four different state agencies are responsible for the oversight of interrelated state and federal transitional benefits. For example, Transitional Medicaid falls under the umbrella of the Department of Health; Transitional Childcare falls under the supervision of the Office of Children and Family Services, and the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance oversees Food Stamps. Any additional transitional benefits are provided by the individual county Departments of Social Services, which is overseen by the Department of Labor's Welfare to Work Division. Local Departments of Social Services can also contract with private or non-profit agencies to provide additional services that they and the Department of Labor oversee.

Not only does this fragmentation of services result in confusion amongst administrators, researchers and advocates, “clients could be faced with a fragmented and confusing set of services characterized by gaps, inconsistencies, and incompatible procedures and expectations. Part of the challenge in developing a coordinated system within the social service community is addressing the fact that agencies often differ in their missions or objectives, assessment methods, intake and monitoring procedures, and the language they use in discussing mutual concerns.”(Department of Health and Human Services, HHS.gov p.1). Based on our research, this generally holds true.

In fact, it is very difficult to get a good view of what is going on statewide. One generally must contact each individual county or agency to gather information on the individual pieces that they administer to gain an understanding of the overall picture. In addition, it is virtually impossible to obtain data to identify how many people are enrolled in transitional programs. New York State collects no data on enrollment in these programs, so the only way to access it is if the individual county keeps track for their own records. The researcher or advocate must hope that the individual county keeps track of their own enrollment numbers, or it is unlikely that this information will be available.

There is some hope, however that this problem of fragmented oversight will be eventually addressed. Recently, a new division was established at the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance called the Office of Transitional Supports and Policy. It is our hope that the establishment of this new division will eventually aid in simplifying the oversight and coordination of transitional services at the state level and will help to clarify expectations and details concerning the implementation of transitional services at the county level. This would not only serve to increase the understanding of the role transitional benefits play in helping former welfare participants stay off of welfare, it would make it easier for advocates and policy makers to obtain valuable information to inform public policy. This is likely a long-term goal, as this new division is still in the process of carving out its niche, but we are hopeful that better coordination at the state level is not too far away.

One of the first actions taken by the Transitional Assistance Bureau (the branch of Office of Transitional Supports and Policy, that is responsible for transitional assistance) was to send out a Local Commissioners Memorandum in June 2000, notifying counties that they could apply for funds totaling 3 million dollars to set up a Transitional Opportunities Program in their county. The funding was made available to counties to offset the costs of restructuring their transitional benefits by bringing all of the caseworkers for each of the transitional components into the same office in an effort to increase communication and collaboration. These Transitional Opportunities Program offices/units have more flexible hours and should be easily accessible to those who are accessing for their services. The Transitional Opportunities Program offices will provide support and coordination of services for transitioning folks for up to a year after an individual's case has closed. The Transitional Assistance Bureau used Erie County's Transition Teams (discussed later) as a model for development of this program.

The opportunity for counties to provide coordination, extended hours and case management to folks is encouraging, but unfortunately, only 17 of the 58 social service districts applied for these funds. Sixteen of these counties have been approved for funds to set up Transitional Opportunities Program Units. Counties that have been approved for Transitional Opportunities Program money are: Broome, Cortland, Erie, Franklin, Jefferson, Monroe, NYC, Oneida, Onondaga, Rensselaer, St. Lawrence, Sullivan, Tioga, Tompkins, Ulster, and Wyoming. The Hunger Action Network encourages all counties in New York State to work toward using this model to provide coordination of transitional benefits, as it is the best model available at this time.

Another result of the present fragmentation of the federally mandated benefits is confusion over what the Local Department of Social Services is required to do for its clients. In speaking with administrators at DSS in 13 counties, Hunger Action Network received a broad range of responses concerning the county's requirements that go along with the provision of transitional benefits. In light of this confusion, Chapter two will provide an overview and discussion of the state and federal guidelines concerning transitional benefits.

## Chapter 2 - The Framework

This chapter will provide the reader with specific information concerning welfare participant's eligibility for specific transitional benefits as well as the responsibilities of the state and the county to provide access to these benefits. Section three of this chapter provides an overview of Hunger Action Network's findings and recommendations for each category.

### I. Federally Mandated Transitional Benefits

In April of 1999, The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the NYS Department of Health sent an informational letter to Child Assistance Program coordinators, Food Stamp Directors, Medical Assistance Directors and Staff Development Directors. This letter addressed the importance of making sure that everyone eligible for Medicaid, Transitional Medicaid and other services such as food stamps and childcare are enrolled in these programs. The letter states that:

“The responsibility of the Social Service District to provide appropriate Medicaid coverage is an important part of welfare reform. As Federal and State welfare reform set expectations that individuals and families will become self-sufficient within a time limited period, the role of the social services district in helping to remove barriers to self-sufficiency has become more vital. Concern about healthcare costs is often one of these barriers...we also want to stress the importance of food stamps...and childcare to the individual or family working toward self-sufficiency. Many of the following areas will apply not only to Medicaid but also to [these areas].”(OTADA, DOH, 1999)

The letter directs Social Service Districts and caseworkers to make separate determinations for Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Childcare when individuals are applying for public assistance have been diverted from applying, or when cases are closed. It also directs the caseworker to use the correct Welfare Monitoring System (WMS) codes to close cases so that Transitional Medicaid is automatically started. While the official policy calls for careful attention to enrollment into transitional benefits, what happens at the county level in each individual Department of Social Services has the potential to be much different, particularly if caseworkers are not wary of using improper codes to close cases.

#### 1. Transitional Medicaid

According to the “Guide to Expanding Health Coverage in the Post-Welfare Reform World” at the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) website:

“States are required to provide an initial six-month period of transitional Medicaid and, subject to certain reporting requirements...an additional six months of coverage. To be eligible for Transitional Medicaid, a family must have received Medicaid...in three out of the preceding six months before becoming eligible...no income limit applies to families for the initial six month period of

## Transitional Medicaid .”

The family is then eligible for an additional 6 months of Transitional Medicaid , but they must reapply and must have an income below 185% of the federal poverty level (\$26,178 for a family of three). Unfortunately, single individuals are not eligible for Transitional Medicaid .

The guide goes on to state:

“In no event should closure of a TANF case automatically result in the closure of a Medicaid case. [In addition] in many situations in which a TANF case is closed, the state will have all the information it needs to determine whether Medicaid eligibility for a family should continue; in these cases, the state must make the Medicaid redetermination without seeking additional information from the family” (HCFA.gov p.2-4).

Therefore, the majority of families leaving welfare due to an increase in income who have received Medicaid for 3 out of the previous six months should be automatically rolled over into Transitional Medicaid for six months without having to fill out any forms or initiate opening a Transitional Medicaid case.

At the federal level, the Health Care Financing Administration has issued directives to the states stating that ensuring that former welfare participants receive the health coverage they are entitled to is to be considered a priority. The federal government has set aside \$500 million for states to access to fund activities such as:

- “eligibility determinations and re-determinations that arise as a result of delinking [of public assistance, Medicaid and Food Stamps to ensure that people are being enrolled in these programs if they are eligible when they leave public assistance];
- beneficiary educational activities [public education];
- the production and airing of public service announcements;
- outstationing [going into the community to do enrollment and outreach];
- hiring and training of eligibility workers;
- designing, printing and distributing new eligibility forms;
- identification of TANF recipients and applicants who are at risk of either losing their Medicaid or not being enrolled in Medicaid; and,
- Assuring access to Medicaid for low-income families who are not eligible or applying for TANF but are eligible for Medicaid” (HCFA.gov, letter p.1-2).

## 2. Transitional Child Care (TCC)

Funding for Transitional Child Care comes from the federal government through the Childcare Block grant, making childcare available for up to a year to families who have closed their public assistance cases due to increased income and who received public assistance for at least three out of the previous six months.

- The family's income must be below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$28,300 for a family of three) to qualify;
- childcare must be necessary for the parent to work;
- In two family households, both parents must be legitimately unavailable to provide childcare;
- Families must provide pay stubs and recertify to continue receiving Transitional Child Care for the full year;

After the year of Transitional ChildCare runs out, the family can apply for low-income childcare, as long as they remain at or below 200% of poverty.

Families cannot be assured that they will be able to receive low-income childcare once their Transitional Child Care ends, such as when there are not enough childcare slots available for all applicants. Transitional Child Care cases tend to get precedence over low income childcare. In many parts of the state there are waiting lists for low-income childcare that are months long.

### 3. Food Stamps – Federal Guidelines

Food stamps are available to working families transitioning off of welfare who have an income below 135% of the Federal Poverty Line (\$19,103 for a family of three). Just as Medicaid determinations were “delinked” from Public Assistance and can be done independently of Family Assistance applications, so can determinations for food stamps. When public assistance cases close, caseworkers are expected to review the case to ascertain whether the individual is still eligible for food stamps. Counties have the option of automatically continuing food stamps for those who are eligible at this point, just as they can automatically continue Transitional Medicaid and Transitional Child Care.

### II. Additional Transitional Benefits – Non-Federally Mandated

Counties have the option of providing additional transitional benefits for up to 90 days. Examples of non-federally mandated transitional benefits include but are not limited to:

- transportation assistance – in the form of bus passes in areas that have public transportation;
- car buying programs;
- car repair assistance;
- car maintenance training;
- on the job training can be provided as well as other forms of education and training;
- Many counties provide help with the cost of fees and licenses as well as protective gear and clothing that might be required for a particular job;
- Housing assistance can be available in the form of paying security deposits and/or first month's rent to families.

### III. Findings

#### 1. Transitional Medicaid

Most of the county administrators Hunger Action Network spoke with claimed that Transitional Medicaid was “pretty much automatic”. Obviously the goal is for Transitional Medicaid enrollment to be automatic in every possible case.

Counties have chosen different tactics to address the issue of enrolling people in Transitional Medicaid and the various transitional services. Some counties have specific case workers that handle just Transitional Medicaid cases, while others such as Greene County have one caseworker handle both Food Stamp and Transitional Medicaid cases and station the caseworker who handles Transitional Child care in the same room so that there can be more coordination and communication. Other counties, such as Erie and Dutchess have contracted with organizations such as Legal Services or Community Action Programs to provide transitional caseworkers who help people to access benefits – aiding those who fall between the cracks at Department of Social Services and providing assistance at a less stigmatizing and less intimidating location.

Erie County’s Project Dandelion, located at Neighborhood Legal Services in Buffalo has had success in educating people about transitional benefits and helping to coordinate the benefits that are available to them. Other counties have also contracted with non-profit agencies to provide assistance with transitional benefits and have found this tactic to be helpful.

Both the New York State Welfare to Work Technical Assistance Team and the Transitional Assistance Bureau at the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance encourage local efforts at coordination of transitional benefits. Hunger Action agrees – locating transitional caseworkers in the same room, or ideally, having one caseworker be responsible for organizing all of the transitional benefits for each of their clients, is the best way to avoid gaps in the services families are enrolled in.

One example of the above mentioned model is Erie County’s “transition teams”. These teams, originally comprised of hand picked eligibility workers who are particularly sensitive to the needs of transitioning families, providing benefits counseling, job development and job training. Erie County’s transition teams have a good track record of helping families to successfully transition into employment. From January 1998 to October 1998, 90.2% of those who had been enrolled in a transition team and subsequently closed their case had not returned to welfare after 6 months. According to a contact at Erie County DSS, this number remained the same after a year.

Erie County plans to double the number of teams this year, so they can serve more individuals. In March, 2000, approximately 1700 of the 3800 eligible working welfare participants were enrolled in a transition team. If all goes as planned, in another year, virtually all working public assistance participants in Erie County will be able to enroll in transition teams if they want to.

In Erie county, most problems with transitional benefits seem to arise primarily when cases are not referred to the “transition teams” and individuals are “forced to do the usual bureaucratic

route” (Conversation with local contact). However, concerns have recently been raised over the level of sensitivity of the transition teams as they have expanded. This is certainly an area to keep an eye on in the future.

Another issue that came out of the surveys was the actual initiation of the Transitional Medicaid case. If the correct code is not used when a caseworker closes the case, a Transitional Medicaid case will not be automatically opened, even if the family is eligible. In a situation such as this, the family has 30 days to advocate for the Department of Social Services to open the case. Unfortunately, a family may not even be aware that they are eligible to receive Transitional Medicaid or any other benefits unless they are told by a caseworker.

It is not just welfare participants that are unaware of the availability of benefits such as Transitional Medicaid. We found that advocates, service providers and even caseworkers are unclear about the guidelines concerning transitional benefits. Public education concerning these benefits must be done at the local level, targeting welfare participants and advocates. Case workers must be trained so that they are not only aware of these benefits, they understand the importance of actively pursuing enrolling as many transitioning individuals as possible.

## 2. Transitional Child Care

In New York State, most counties require the family to fill out a form to receive transitional childcare, although some counties such as Monroe assert that they have achieved a “nearly seamless transition”. Methods of enrollment in Transitional Child Care vary. Some counties send client information to a caseworker, who subsequently initiates contact with the families either by phone call or by letter. Most require families to fill out and return a form or respond to a letter that has been automatically generated when the PA case was closed.

Concerns have been raised about the viability of relying on these computer-generated letters. As with Transitional Medicaid, the correct code must have been used to close the case for forms and letters to be generated and sent out to families.

In addition, various problems with the forms have been identified – such as letters being incomprehensible – “computer generated...messages are not customized and it is often unclear why the notice is being sent. And they are often only in English or sometimes in English and Spanish” (Center for Community Change, 2/00 p.2). It stands to reason that if families are confused by or unable to read the information that is sent to inform them of their eligibility, it is likely that they will lose the opportunity to access Transitional Childcare. While it is possible to apply for Transitional Childcare at any time during the 12 months after a family’s case has been closed, once again, families must be aware that it is available and that they are eligible to be able to apply for it.

Some counties report a 100% transition into Transitional Child Care – Saratoga County Department of Social Services reported that from January 1999 to December 1999, of the TANF 14 cases that were closed for employment, 14 families received Transitional Child Care, Transitional Medicaid and were enrolled in the Food Stamp program. Saratoga County DSS reports that during 1999 46 cases overall closed due to employment - 32 of these cases were

Safety Net cases - single adults, and were therefore not eligible for transitional childcare and Transitional Medicaid. No data was available for county specific transitional benefits. While we are missing some data here, Saratoga County shows that it is possible to connect all transitioning families with the federal transitional benefits, particularly in counties that have small caseloads.

Other counties such as Greene County report a significant increase in the number of families enrolled in Transitional Child Care after relocating Transitional Child Care workers to the same office as the Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamp examiners. Monroe County also reports that they automatically open Transitional Child Care cases for individuals who are leaving public assistance and have a simplified application form. This tactic seems to be the most encouraging effective in getting families enrolled and involved in the process.

Hunger Action Network would like to see all counties work toward automatic enrollment for eligible families. We would also like to see New York State consider requiring all counties to automatically enroll the children of transitioning families in Transitional Child Care.

### 3. Food Stamps

Unfortunately, many of the counties surveyed did not identify food stamps as a transitional benefit. It seems that awareness needs to be raised concerning the important role food stamps play as a transitional benefit.

“Studies show that 70% of the people in eligible households don’t know that they can get...food assistance...[and] studies of recent welfare recipients have found that 75% of those who stopped receiving public assistance still qualified for food stamps one year after they had left the welfare rolls” (Stashrenko, 4/3/00).

Obviously more needs to be done to ensure that people who are eligible to receive food stamps get them, particularly since those who are eligible represent a population that is usually struggling. One need only attempt to imagine how difficult it would be to be a single mother trying to raise a family of three on \$19,000 a year – the cut off point for receiving food stamps - to understand why it is so important to let people know that they have access to such programs.

Of the counties surveyed, Chemung, Greene, Saratoga and Schenectady Counties report that they automatically enroll transitioning families into food stamps. If all counties were to follow their lead, a significant dent could be made in the 70% of people in eligible households who do not know that they are eligible for public assistance (Stashrenko, above).

### 4. Non-Federally Mandated Transitional Benefits

Several counties offer welfare participants who are transitioning from Welfare to work no transitional benefits beyond the federally mandated benefits to transitioning individuals. Others, including Monroe and Erie counties do provide several additional benefits including transportation and housing assistance. It is up to the individual county to identify what additional transitional benefits they would like to offer transitioning individual, so counties are not required to offer these additional benefits. Hunger Action Network encourages all counties to

provide additional benefits to help stave off potential crisis with issues such as transportation, housing and other expenses that can not only add up, but can easily push a fragile budget over the edge.

In some counties, specific benefits or programs are not specified in the county employment plans. They simply list the category of “emergency assistance”. For example, in Washington County, DSS states that they will provide any of the above mentioned services as “emergency assistance” on a case by case basis. While emergency assistance allows the county flexibility in providing folks with aid in unforeseen circumstances, Hunger Action Network would like to see emergency assistance offered in addition to other county identified transitional benefits, rather than as a solitary solution. In counties where specific benefits are outlined, it is easier to conduct public education campaigns and it is easier for advocates, service providers and transitioning individuals to advocate for them.

### Final Thoughts

Supporting the ongoing successful employment of former welfare participants is the goal of advocates, local Departments of Social Services and the state and federal governments - we must also remember that it is the goal of the former welfare participant as well. Advocates are charged with the responsibility of encouraging those who develop social service policies to continue to initiate and implement policies that empower people by arming them with the knowledge that they can ask for assistance from their local Department of Social Services if they find themselves in crisis. Advocates must also continue to push for policies that encourage active enrollment in and use of transitional benefits as a preventative, supportive measure, so that families do not find themselves having to ask for assistance.

Implementing policies such as automatic enrollment, mandatory transportation assistance and retraining caseworkers to view transitional benefits in a positive, pro-active light (to name a few) will make it possible for all parties involved to claim that New York State has been successful at moving people from welfare to work as we approach the end of the first six year cycle of Welfare Reform.

## Appendix - Results from Survey of 15 Counties

\*\* For clearer copies of any of the included materials, please contact the organization or agency it originated from.

Hunger Action Network utilized a survey of Departments of Social Services and human service advocates to evaluate the success of the provision of transitional benefits in New York State. The goal was to identify both barriers to access and model programs that increase access to these benefits. For the sake of brevity, we limited our assessment to 15 counties. Hunger Action Network obtained responses from 13 of the 15 local departments of Social Services, and spoke with at least one social service advocate in each county we looked at. Responses varied with each county and the information provided here reflects these variations.

The areas we focused on in our survey were:

- How successful each of the highlighted counties has been at providing its citizens with transitional benefits.
- Identifying any variation between official policy and actual practice.
- Identifying specific barriers to access

This appendix was arranged so that it would be easy to make copies of each individual county's policies, responses and recommendations. It is organized alphabetically by county, and is split into four sections within each county.

In the first section we provide the Transitional Benefit guidelines submitted by the specific county to the NYS Department of Labor. This is the official transitional policy for that county. The guidelines specify what benefits each county has stipulated that they will provide to people who transition off of welfare.

The second section includes the information provided by the local Department of Social Services explains how the plans are actually being implemented. Contacts at the Department of Social Services responded to a series of questions concerning how welfare participants were notified of the availability of transitional benefits, how they are enrolled in the available programs, and the eligibility criteria for enrollment in each county. DSS contacts were also asked to evaluate their success at providing these services to their clients. Their responses to these questions are also provided in this section.

The third section provides information from local human service advocates who have experience with helping clients access transitional benefits. This information is significant because it helps us to ascertain what transitioning welfare participants actually experience when they go through this process in their county.

The final section includes Hunger Action Network's recommended "advocacy actions". These are simply preliminary suggestions that advocates and the Department of Social Services in each county may want to start addressing at the local level to improve access to transitional benefits right away.

## I. Albany County

### 1. Transitional benefits listed in Albany County's Employment Plan:

"The district will provide to individuals whose cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to 90 days after closing:

- **Transitional Childcare assistance.** - Continued services in support of job retention, to obtain safe and reliable alternative and/or back up day care arrangements will be provided by the Child Care Coordinating Council.
- **Transitional Medicaid.** Premium reimbursement for cost effective third party health insurance will continue for the length of Medicaid eligibility.
- **Transportation allowances requested will be provided,** at the public transportation rate or the district mileage rate, on a case by case as needed basis.
- **A continuum of job placement and advancement services will be supported and provided by agency staff to all individuals for up to one year after case closing as a result of employment.** Services offered may include by are not limited to; resume consultation, "Job Alert" postings, and information on pertinent workshops and services available through contracted providers and/or the community.
- **Case Management intervention services, through a contract provider, will be provided for up to one year after the case is closed as a result of employment.** Individuals will have access to assistance when problems arise that may interfere with their ability to maintain or advance in their employment situation. Examples of these types of occurrences include, but are not limited to, loss of a childcare provider, workplace conflicts, and attendance problems resulting from the application process for transitional benefits. Early intervention and support will greatly increase the likelihood of employment longevity.
- **A plan of self-support may be offered, on a selective basis, to recipients of safety net, in order to ease their transition from welfare to work.** This plan (agreement), developed between the recipient and the case manager, is utilized to assist the individual for a specified reasonable length of time and is tied to definite attainable self-sufficiency goals. The goals are achieved by the allowing of a portion (up to all) of the individuals earned income to be disregarded from the budget process, for the specified duration of the plan, which may be saved and/or used for the specified goals. Having this period of time will ensure stability in their transition to employment and will also impact the retention of that employment. The proposed intent and desired long-term outcome of the development of self-support is to reduce recidivism within the safety net population." (ACDSS Employment Plan January 2000-December 2001).

## Responses to survey:

### 2. County Responses:

#### A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Albany County DSS

- Transitional Childcare
- Transitional Medicaid
- One year Medicaid Guarantee for household members under age 19
- Extended food stamps for one month
- Transportation assistance if necessary
- Job retention assistance through contracted service providers
- Child Health Plus

Albany county DSS is working toward moving their workers into “teams” by 2001-2002 so that clients will not have to “shop” for services. At present, all of the departments have been moved onto the same floor to increase communication.

### **B. Responses to questions:**

How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Transitional Medicaid is automatically opened for 6 months. After this period is up, the eligibility worker will call people to let them know that they need to return to DSS to determine whether they are still eligible for TMA.
- Transitional Childcare cases are initiated when a day care caseworker receives a referral. They then send the individual a Transitional Day Care application to fill out. Once the form is completed, the Day Care Unit works with the individual to authorize childcare benefits.
- Agencies with performance based contracts (such as Cornell Cooperative Extension) for “job retention services” also provide benefit coordination and follow up activities.

How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- When cases are closed, closing notices are sent to the individuals explaining that they are still eligible for services. They are notified that their Medicaid has been extended and that a transitional child care application will be sent to them within the next few days.

What is the county’s perception of the success of the benefits they offer?

- “A great deal of additional work will need to be done to coordinate the delivery of transitional services and to engage the populations that will benefit themselves and the community by using those services. No matter how much effort presently goes into this area of the County’s work, more can and should be done. For those families and individuals who have taken advantage of the services and benefits that have been made available, the success is likely strong, for each person and family who doesn’t take similar advantage, there is a different approach that may effectively engage them”

### **3. Advocate’s Perspective:**

According to advocates in Albany County, while the provision of Medicaid and Food Stamps as transitional benefits appears to be going smoothly, access to Transitional Childcare tends to vary according to the caseworker and how busy that person is. The

concern here is that if the caseworker is hurried, they don't have the time to explain transitional benefits to their client and therefore must rely on the client to read through all of the information provided to them. This is often somewhat unrealistic, as the amount of information provided to the client is overwhelming. The result is a decrease in the likelihood that the individual will carefully peruse and understand all of the pamphlets and forms they receive; this will certainly affect their understanding of how to apply for transitional childcare and the other transitional programs.

The feeling is that more information concerning transitional benefits, particularly the county specific programs such as transportation assistance and job retention services should be more actively provided to people. While pamphlets are also available in the waiting area, they must to be picked up and read.

#### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- **Case Management and Job retention services should last for 18 months, rather than 12.** Albany County should consider providing “job retention services” to individuals beyond the initial 12 months when federal transitional benefits are cut off. When people reach this point, those who have not found a job that offers health insurance have lost eligibility for Transitional Medicaid , and Transitional Childcare eligibility ends, many individual’s incomes will be impacted by the additional financial burden of medical and childcare costs. Therefore, job retention and case management should be available for an additional 6 months to provide people with assistance should they become overwhelmed or lose their job due to the loss of these benefits.
- **Re-training caseworkers about the importance of transitional benefits** could help to address concerns about the variations between individual caseworkers and the availability of transitional benefits.
- **Public Education and Pro-Active, comprehensive information about all available transitional benefits should be provided both at orientation and in more detail at the time of case closure.** If people don't know that they are entitled to assistance with specific issues that arise during their transition, they are less likely to ask for help. Attempts should be made so that the information provided to people is easy to read and understand. The county and service providers can then help people stave off crisis situations by actively pursuing whatever assistance the family is eligible for.

## II. Broome County

❖ A Transitional Opportunities Program District see p. 13 for details.

### 1. Transitional Benefits listed in County Employment Plan:

“The district will provide to individuals whose cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to 90 days after closing:

To the extent local resources permit, the Broome County Department of Social Services will provide supportive services deemed necessary and reasonable to assist employed public assistance recipients improve their self-sufficiency opportunities. This will be accomplished by referral for separate determination of eligibility for transitional medical and childcare services.” (Broome County Employment Plan January 1 2000, through December 31, 2001).

## Responses to Survey

### 2. County Responses

#### A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Broome County Department of Social Services

- Transitional Medicaid
- Transitional Childcare
- Food Stamp eligibility determination is completed
- CAP and Welfare to Work unit caseworkers are available to clients who make inquiries of the department following case closings for an indefinite period.
- The Welfare to Work Block Grant provides job mentorship and job retention services for clients who are eligible.

#### B. Responses to Questions

How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Clients are advised of the opportunity to participate in Transitional Medicaid and Childcare.
- Applications are required to be completed and returned to the Department in order to assess ongoing eligibility for these services.
- A separate determination is completed for Food Stamps on all TA cases whose benefits are being terminated.
- Clients who inquire [about non-federally mandated transitional benefits] at our Welfare to Work and CAP division are assisted without application on a temporary basis.

How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Written notification is provided at the time of case closing. Clients are advised of benefits during a pre-employment orientation.

What is the county’s perception of the success of the benefits they offer?

- Very successful

### 3. Advocate's View

The report from advocates in Broome county is that Broome County DSS does hand out information about transitional benefits with each application for public assistance, and they notify people of the availability of these benefits when their cases close through mail correspondence.

One concern that was raised was the lack of specific information available in these materials. Advocates called for more detail in these publications so that welfare participants can be aware of what benefits they can apply for if needed. One contact responded to Hunger Action's survey, stating that people need to ask the right questions to find out about benefits available besides Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Childcare and Food Stamps.

Broome County Catholic Charities has conducted two Welfare Reform surveys of food pantry guests in Binghamton, one in 1997 and one in 1999. On the survey, guests identified specific barriers to self-sufficiency. Several of the identified barriers are items that can be offered as transitional benefits.

54.7% identified transportation,  
37.8% identified job training  
30.4% identified health care,  
16.2% identified child care

### 4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:

- **The primary barriers identified in the above survey - job training and transportation assistance - can both be provided by the county as transitional benefits or as post-employment services.** Hunger Action Network strongly urges Broome County to develop transitional programs that would continue to provide access to transportation and continued job training throughout the transition period.
- Healthcare and childcare were identified as barriers by a significant percentage of people surveyed. Increasing enrollment in Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Child Care, Child Health Plus and Low Income Childcare would immediately address this problem. Hopefully the formation of Transitional Opportunities Program Unit will help with the coordination of all of these programs.
- **Automatic enrollment into all of the federal transitional programs** would immediately begin to address the above mentioned hunger, medical and childcare issues for transitioning families in Broome County. While all counties should already be automatically enrolling people in Transitional Medicaid, Broome County Department of Social Services that they require people to fill out a form to apply. This is certainly an area for further investigation, as this should not be necessary except in special circumstances. If advocates in Broome county have

clients that are not receiving it automatically, this should be addressed immediately.

- **Both DSS and service providers should consider launching an extensive public education campaign** concerning the availability of specific transitional benefits to address the concern of local advocates, so that people no longer need to “ask the right questions”.
- **Broome County Department of Social Services should also clearly outline what their county identified policies are in their biannual employment plan** so that advocates and researchers are aware of what benefits the county offers to transitioning individuals.

### III. Chemung County

#### 1. Transitional Benefits listed in County Employment Plan:

“Chemung County department of social services will make available the same supportive services listed in section 4.1 (Supportive Services) if such service is deemed, by the agency as necessary for securing or maintaining employment.

#### Section 4.1 (Supportive Services for Applicants and Recipients in Work Activities)

- The social services district will provide to participants the following expenses, in addition to childcare which the district deems necessary for the individual to participate in assigned work activities (or to secure or maintain employment)
  - **Transportation**, when deemed necessary by the agency, for individuals enrolled in work activities or newly employed individuals prior to receiving their first pay, not to exceed the rate required for public transportation or reimbursement for private transportation that would be equivalent to the amount expended on public transportation.
    - An individual must be required to travel a distance of 2 miles or more to be eligible for transportation as a supportive service. An exception will be made in instances where it may be necessary to transport children to and from a daycare provider when participating in a work activity or employment.
  - Clothing necessary to obtain or retain employment or uniforms/special clothing required for approved training programs when no other options are available
  - Fees or licenses necessary for employment
  - Tools and equipment necessary for employment when no other options are available; not to exceed \$500.
  - Reasonable cost of necessary repairs to a recipient’s automobile, and payment of automobile insurance premiums to enable a recipient to obtain or retain employment. Such expenditures may be authorized only when they are the least costly means of meeting the needs of a recipient who is employed or has obtained an employment offer; not to exceed \$500.
  - Nonrecurring transportation costs
- And any other supportive needs deemed appropriate by the agency” (Chemung County Employment Plan January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2001).

### Responses to Survey:

#### 2. County responses:

- A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Chemung County DSS:

- Transitional Medicaid
- Transitional Childcare

As necessary –

- Transportation, auto repair, insurance assistance
- Clothing, Fees, tools

## **B. Responses to questions:**

How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Chemung County routinely continues Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps. A single caseworker coordinates Medicaid and Food Stamps, while a single person coordinates childcare for everyone.
- The county sends a letter out to notify people that they must apply for Transitional Childcare.
- After previously noticing a low response to the application packet they sent out, Chemung County Department of Social Services decided to contract out to local community service agencies for enrollment services. Now people go to a local community service agency to apply for Transitional Childcare after receiving a letter from the Department of Social Services rather than having to go directly there. Since the relocation of application office, the Department of Social Services reports that the number of applications has noticeably increased. According to Chemung County Department of Social Services , in 1999, 66% of all closed public assistance cases accessed transitional childcare.
- Chemung County anticipates that in the near future the state will mandate automatic enrollment in transitional childcare. They are ready to comply with this requirement.

How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- People are notified of their eligibility for Transitional Child Care and Transitional Medicaid at orientation
- They also receive a letter notifying them of their eligibility for Transitional ChildCare when their case closes.
- Chemung County Department of Social Services did not provide information regarding notification of availability of the other transitional benefits.

## **3. Advocate's View**

Reports from Chemung County advocates indicate that Department of Social Services does do a good job with enrolling people in Transitional Medicaid. But some contacts indicated that enrollment in Transitional Childcare is a bit more troublesome due to the need to fill out an application.

Other advocates indicated that Chemung County Department of Social Services does a good job with providing people with Transitional Medicaid, Transitional Child Care and Food Stamps, and does let folks know that they are eligible for transitional benefits when their cases close due to employment. However, these advocates specified that they do not notify people that there are

other county specific transitional benefits available such as transportation. In fact, during one conversation with a contact who was quite familiar with transitional benefits, the individual was completely unaware that transportation assistance was available in Chemung County.

#### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- **Outreach and Education**, concerning the county's transitional benefits would be beneficial so that advocates and their clients are aware that transportation, clothing and other forms of assistance are available.
- Chemung County Department of Social Services seems to be open to the idea of doing automatic determinations for Transitional Child Care in addition to Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps. Local advocates could take advantage of this and encourage Chemung County Department of Social Services to begin doing automatic enrollment in Transitional Child Care immediately, rather than waiting for a state mandate. Both the state and federal governments have indicated that they do support automatic enrollment in Transitional ChildCare and other counties have already begun doing it.
- **Hunger Action Network plans to follow up with Chemung County Department of Social Services to evaluate their Food Stamp automatic enrollment process as a potential model for other counties to replicate.** Advocates could assist Hunger Action Network by providing additional input into how they view the success of this process.

## **IV. Dutchess County**

### **1. Transitional Benefits listed in County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to 90 days after closing:

Upon submission of new application, Dutchess County Department of Social Services will first determine if the former recipient has available income or resources to meet the supportive service need. If the agency determines that there is not sufficient income or resources then the following transitional supportive services may be provided.

1. Transportation monies to take public transportation or \$.26/mile for clients utilizing cars that they own to travel to/from work.
2. Car repairs/insurance to client owned motor vehicle necessary to travel to work if no public transportation is available.
3. Fees for professional license renewal or certifications necessary to retain current employment.

The district will provide to individuals whose cases have closed due to employment, the following supportive services for up to one year after case closing:

1. Medicaid for those persons eligible under New York State and federal law.
2. Childcare for former recipients who are making the transition from Family Assistance
3. Non-TANF funded mentoring services. (Dutchess County Employment Plan, January 1, 2000 –December 31, 2001).

## **Responses to Survey**

### **2. County Responses:**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Dutchess County Department of Social Services:**

- Dutchess County Department of Social Services identified their mentoring program that is run in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce as a primary transitional benefit. This program works through barriers such as childcare and offers on the job training. The program is funded through a case management pilot program and at present has three mentors who each carry about fifteen cases per year. Mentors are available 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

#### **B. County responses:**

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Approximately 45 people per year are enrolled in the mentoring program and receive case management services.
- Approximately 30 individuals per year access Dutchess County’s Community Action Program, where they work with the family to maintain their self-sufficiency

How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- When people's cases close, they are informed that transitional benefits are available to them.

### **3. Advocate's View:**

According to the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill's (ERVK) Human Rights and Welfare Reform Monitoring Project, several problems have come to light as a result of their regular surveying of welfare participants. The project has collected quarterly surveys from as many as 17 human service agencies. One issue that has been identified by these surveys is the difficulty is maintaining a continuum when families transition from Transitional ChildCare to low-income childcare. According to ERVK's October 1999 press release, there was a waiting list for low-income childcare subsidies in Dutchess County for over 500 children. Transitional Child Care cases receive preferential treatment, so this is rarely a problem for them, but when families come to their one year "second transition period", if they are unable to obtain low-income childcare assistance, this can potentially be a significant barrier to maintaining their employment. Lack of affordable housing was also identified as an important issue in Dutchess County.

## **IV. Recommended Advocacy Actions**

- Dutchess County did not apply for Transitional Opportunities Program funds to expand their mentoring program. This is unfortunate, as ERVK's reports indicate that not only are Dutchess County Department of Social Services' waiting rooms crowded and impersonal, but that people have actually been sanctioned for missing appointments at the Department of Social Services when they are at job interviews. The Transitional Opportunities Program funds would have provided Dutchess County Department of Social Services with funding set up a Transitional Opportunities Program unit (see p. 13 for a description) that would be more comfortable and more accessible, with extended hours so that people would not have to miss work to meet with their caseworkers. Dutchess county can, however, still apply for Welfare to Work Funds to form a Transitional Opportunities Program through their TANF services plan. Advocates can press the county to apply for these funds, as by all indications, a Transitional Opportunities Program unit would be helpful in addressing the needs of transitioning families in Dutchess County.
- In light of the fact that affordable housing has been identified as an important issue, advocates should encourage the Dutchess County Department of Social Services to provide housing assistance as a transitional benefit.
- Dutchess County should also consider extending their housing security vouchers or payments beyond 6 months. This would help families make a successful transition off of assistance without being threatened with losing their housing.
- Extensive outreach and education is needed concerning the transitional benefits Dutchess County offers to ensure that both advocates and participants are aware of available services for transitioning families.
- Dutchess County should also address the gap in childcare provision when families are no longer eligible for Transitional Childcare. Transitional Caseworkers could assist with ensuring that families have a "seamless" transition into Low-income childcare.



## **V. Erie County**

- ❖ A Transitional Opportunities Program District – see description of the Transitional Opportunities Program on p. 13.

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to 90 days after closing:

Transitional childcare and Medicaid will be provided to these clients (whose cases have closed due to employment), as well as counseling to resolve any problems at home or on the job and to reinforce job retention. The transition worker also expedites food stamps, processing of HEAP contracts, and makes sure the income disregards are in place. The transition team will also make an effort to provide transportation to enable clients to keep their employment, as well as attempt to assist clients with payments for items such as car repairs and/or car insurance to divert clients from returning to the welfare rolls.

The transition team is much more than budgeting or closing cases. It involves giving emotional and moral support to those clients that are afraid to leave the security of welfare, thus enabling them to make a gradual transition into independence. The transition team must also be there for the client in the event that their job falls through. They can then help the client find other employment or if necessary, transfer the case back to Financial Assistance. The concept of transition worker is labor-intensive and emotionally-sensitive and requires workers who are very well-versed in customer service and can establish good rapport with clients” (Erie County Welfare to Work Plan January 1, 2000 –December 31, 2001)

## **Responses to Survey:**

### **2. County Responses:**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Erie County DSS:**

- Welfare to Work Transition Initiative - provides case management to transitioning individuals (see below). At present approximately 45% of transitioning working individuals are enrolled in this program. Erie County plans to double the number of transitional teams in the near future. For more information see insert.
- Get a Job Get a Ride Program - provides bus passes for three months to those who have obtained employment.
- Erie County also contracts out to Legal Services’ Project Dandelion to do benefits counseling. For more information, see below.

**Erie County Transition Teams** – Provide supportive and collaborative case management to folks receiving public assistance and working. Also seeks to ensure that individuals who are

transitioning off of PA receive transitional benefits. Child Support workers are included in this effort. Teams are available during flexible hours to make it easier for folks to access their caseworkers and maintain their employment commitments.

- Before this initiative began, Erie County found that 60% of clients who obtained employment lost their jobs within 4 months due to breakdown in childcare, medical insurance, or problems on the job. During the 8-month period between January and October 1998, 447 cases were closed in Erie County due to excess income. 63 percent of those cases were referred to the transition teams.
- According to the Erie County Department of Social Services, “prior to the implementation of the Welfare to Work Transition Initiative, 60% of clients who obtained employment lost their jobs within four months. Since the implementation of this initiative over 90% of graduates are still of welfare six months later” (ECDSS Welfare to Work Transition Initiative Presentation p.2) According to a contact at Erie County Department of Social Services, the success rate remains the same after twelve months as well.
- This program received an award from the National Association of Counties and was used as a model for the Transitional Opportunities Program request for proposals (rfp) that the Office of Transitional Supports & Policy at OTADA put out this summer.

**Project Dandelion \*\* See pages 39 and 40**

- Project Dandelion helps people to apply for and enroll specific transitional programs if they are having difficulty accessing them;
- They also have a Front Door Project, which places an advocate at the front door of social services to provide clients with help filling out forms, applications and answering questions.
- Project Dandelion provides a hotline for information specifically concerning transitional benefits as well as a comprehensive public benefits manual for both clients and advocates.

**B. Responses to Questions**

How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Eligibility workers in transition teams authorize Transitional Medicaid, start and follow up on Transitional Child Care, make separate determinations for Food Stamps and generally help to coordinate benefits.
- Referral to Transition teams gives priority to those who have the highest likelihood of succeeding, such as those who have completed Job Clubs, job readiness training and educational programs.

**3. Advocate’s Perspective:**

According to contacts in Erie County, the Department of Social Services is perceived as doing a good job in linking folks with transitional benefits through the utilization of the Welfare to Work Transition Teams. However, concerns have been raised recently that with

the expansion in the number of transition teams, the sensitivity and level of respect of the transition workers has decreased.

Still, the majority of problems seem to arise when people are not referred to the Transition Teams and the individual must access transitional benefits through regular eligibility workers. As Erie County moves toward serving all transitioning individuals through the Transition Team model – utilizing Transitional Opportunity Program funds to do so – it will be necessary to focus on ensuring that all case workers are respectful of and sensitive to the needs of their clients.

Another problem identified by advocates in Erie County is debt collection. Once an individual is officially off of Welfare, debt collectors, including the Department of Social Services, begin demanding repayment of debts that accrued before and during the time the individual was on Public Assistance. This is problematic because the individual or family is just getting back on their feet, and paying off this debt immediately could easily result in families needing to cycle back onto Welfare.

#### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- While Hunger Action Network supports the planned expansion of the Welfare to Work Transition Teams and the Get a job get a ride program, it is also important to address concerns about the treatment of transition team participants. Hopefully the Transitional Opportunities Program funds will help Erie County Department of Social Services address these issues.
- It may be possible to pursue statewide legislation concerning an expansion of debt collection protections to the transitional period. To this end advocates should continue to monitor this issue in Erie as well as other counties.
- We encourage advocates to approach Erie County Department of Social Services about doing automatic enrollment for food stamps and Transitional Childcare to increase the success of their client's transitions into employment.





## VI. Greene County

### 1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

Transitional Medicaid

Transitional Day Care” (Greene County Employment Plan, January 1, 2000 –December 31, 2001)

Responses to Survey:

### 2. County Responses:

#### A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by County Department of Social Services

- Transitional Medicaid
- Transitional Childcare
- Food Stamps if eligible
- The BILT program, collaboration between the Department of Social Services , Catholic Charities of Columbia-Greene Counties, Community Action of Greene County and the Mental Health Association of Columbia-Greene Counties. This 10-week program offers peer support for newly employed individuals. Provides workshops, lectures, and mentoring to help families with the transition from Public Assistance to employment.
  - Participants receive a one-time \$200. Clothing gift certificate for completing the program.
  - Meal and childcare are provided. Transportation is available.

#### B. Responses to questions:

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps are automatic enrollment. These benefits are coordinated by the same caseworker that is located in the same room as the childcare caseworker. This has increased communication and coordination of transitional benefits in Greene County.
- Transitional Childcare – individuals work with the childcare worker.
- BILT –Once an individual has obtained employment, a referral is sent to the BILT coordinator, who then contacts the client.

##### How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Individual receives a notice when their case closes informing them of their eligibility for transitional benefits.
- Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance “Self-Sufficiency Supports” pamphlet

is available in the Department of Social Services lobby and in caseworker's cubicles. See pages 43 and 44.

What is your county's perception of the success of the benefits you offer?

Greene County feels that they have been more successful at providing transitional benefits since they placed the transitional caseworkers in one unit together. They have seen more coordination and cooperation since this change was made.

\* See pages 43 - 46 for additional literature provided by Greene County

### **3. Advocate's View:**

According to advocates in Greene County, Greene County Department of Social Services does a good job with automatic enrollment in Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps **IF** the all of the information needed to do automatic enrollment is available. If this information is not already in the system, problems arise.

While Greene County Department of Social Services does talk about Transitional Medicaid during the presentations that they do for welfare participants, Transitional Child Care is a different story. Advocates indicate that in Greene County, service providers and welfare participants must know to ask about Transitional Child Care if they want to access it. This is a serious barrier to accessing childcare assistance. Also, because Greene County is a rural, sparsely populated county, the number of reliable childcare providers was identified as an issue.

The rural nature of Greene County means that welfare participants who find jobs generally need a car to get to them, as public transportation is scarce in rural areas. Unfortunately, Greene County Department of Social Services provides transportation assistance to workfare participants only. Advocates report that once a welfare participant finds a job, they are no longer eligible for transportation assistance. This is an immense barrier to successful employment.

The good news is, as of this fall, Green County Department of Social Services and Greene County Community Action are coordinating a new transportation program called Workers Auto Loan Club (WALC) - where individuals who are on welfare and working can get low interest loans for up to \$3000. Plans are also in the works to help people get their driver's licenses.

### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- It is important to continue to address the issue of providing transportation to welfare participants who have obtained employment. The WALC program is a good start, but Greene County Department of Social Services must address the anti-productive nature of cutting off transportation assistance to individuals who obtain jobs. This policy undermines the chances of success of all individuals who must get to their jobs, but do not own a car.
- It will also be imperative that both Greene County Department of Social Services and Community Action do extensive public education about the auto-loan program as well as all other transitional benefits that Greene County makes available.
- Hunger Action Network plans to research Green County's automatic enrollment in the Food Stamp Program for possible use as a model for other counties. Advocates can assist us in sharing any information or experiences they have had with the automatic enrollment process in their county.

- Advocates should encourage the county to consider utilizing automatic enrollment for Transitional ChildCare as well.
- Greene County Department of Social Services should be encouraged to expand and identify the benefits that they offer to transitioning individuals in their county employment plan. Possibilities include additional transportation assistance, additional job training and educational opportunities and additional case management services.

## **VII. Monroe County**

- ❖ A Transitional Opportunities Program District - see description of the Transitional Opportunities Program on p. 13.

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing when deemed necessary by the Monroe County Department of Social Services and allowed by regulation:

- Transportation
- Other miscellaneous items necessary for the individual to retain employment with the restriction that these services will not be provided if they are available through another source.
- Continued child support collection benefits” (Monroe County Employment Plan, January 1, 2000 –December 31, 2001)

## **Responses to Survey:**

### **2. County Responses:**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Monroe County Department of Social Services:**

- Transitional Medicaid
- Transitional Childcare
- Emergency Assistance (help with housing, gas and electric costs) - at the discretion of caseworker
- Transportation assistance is available in the form of
  - 6 month bus passes (which everyone gets)
  - Ways to Work - a car loan and repair program run by Catholic Charities . program offers 0% interest loans up to \$2,200 and car repair assistance up to \$750.
- Transitional HEAP provides assistance with energy bills

#### **B. Responses to Questions:**

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Transitional Daycare enrollment process is basically automatic and has been used as a model program for other counties. The application has been simplified to one page. Examiners do direct data entry and determinations are generally made within 48 hours so that families do not have a disruption in their childcare. Announcements are also sent to all cases that close due to earnings in an attempt to catch any families that may “fall through the cracks”. Each since year 1996 the number of transitional childcare cases has increased.

\*\* See page 50 for transitional childcare application form

How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Flyer produced by the Nutrition Committee of the Children’s Collaborative outlines various services and benefits available and how to get information on them.
- Flyer produced by Monroe County Department of Social Services in English and Spanish with type of benefit and phone numbers to call for information.

\*\* See pages 51-54 for copies of outreach materials

What is your county’s perception of the success of the benefits you offer?

Positive

### **3. Advocate’s View:**

According to advocates in Monroe County, the county does a good job with automatically enrolling transitioning families into Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps. They have also found that Transitional ChildCare enrollment has also been simplified.

There have been discussions with Monroe County Department of Social Services about how to increase enrollment in the various transitional benefits, such as having a Department of Social Services worker sit down with people when they get a job and thoroughly discussing what benefits will continue to be available to them when their cases close and putting all working individuals with the same caseworkers –(most likely using OTADA’s Transitional Opportunities Program unit model).

One concern identified by some advocates in Monroe county was that many people simply stop communicating with Department of Social Services when they get a job, primarily out of frustration with paperwork and with the welfare system in general. But if Department of Social Services does not know to close a case due to employment, the individual or family will not be eligible for transitional benefits. The hope is that by educating people about the importance of reporting their income and taking the time to close their case properly, more people will automatically be enrolled in Transitional Medicaid, Food Stamps and Transitional Childcare.

Recently Monroe County Department of Social Services applied for a waiver to provide two months worth of cash assistance to closing cases to help fill in gaps during the transition. The majority of these funds would go toward paying rent - the rest would be available for the costs associated with beginning a new job. Unfortunately, it does not look as if this waiver will be granted by the state. Still, it is encouraging to hear that Monroe County Department of Social Services is looking for additional ways to help their clients succeed.

### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- Encourage Monroe County Department of Social Services to continue to develop their automatic enrollment procedures for Transitional Medicaid, Transitional ChildCare and Food Stamps.
- Encourage Monroe County Department of Social Services to develop a strong, pro-active

educational campaign that explains the importance and availability of transitional benefits. This campaign should go beyond the usual reliance upon informational pamphlets - utilizing other means of providing information - such as integrating a workshop into training and education programs.

## **VIII. Nassau County**

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

Supportive services for transportation, uniforms and supplies may be issued to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment for up to ninety days after case closing. These monies will be issued upon reviewing the recipients needs, in order for the local district to justify issuing the additional supportive services.

Transitional day care will be provided to Family Assistance recipients whose cases have closed due to employment and may be available for up to one year after a case closes. Transitional day care will be provided as long as the case has been closed due to employment and transitional forms are on file. Transitional forms are available through Day Care and the Family Assistance Employment Unit. Transitional forms are required for verification of the need for day care.

Transitional Medicaid is available to those Family Assistance recipients whose cases have closed due to employment. Transitional Medicaid benefits are available for up to 6 months after the case is closed. Additional Medicaid benefits may be available after the initial 6 months. Individuals must apply for the benefits and meet eligibility requirements” (Nassau County Employment Plan, January 1, 2000 –December 31, 2001).

### **Responses to Survey:**

#### **2. County Responses:**

After repeated attempts to elicit a response over a period of four months, Hunger Action Network received no response to our survey from Nassau County Department of Social Services. We did, however learn that Nassau County did not choose to apply for funding to create a Transitional Opportunities Program unit.

#### **3. Advocate’s Perspective:**

The advocates in Nassau County indicate that concerns had been raised over access and information about transitional benefits in Nassau County. Their Welfare Reform Committee suggested to Nassau County Department of Social Services that putting up posters and generating flyers would help to increase welfare participant’s awareness of these benefits. They did report that Nassau County Department of Social Services followed through and did this, but it was unclear whether or not the information had an effect.

#### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- There are several steps that could help to increase enrollment in transitional benefits in Nassau County. Providing comprehensive post-employment case management services for transitional benefits and creating a Transitional Opportunities Program unit would immediately increase the level of enrollment in all transitional programs, as the focus of the case managers would be to provide the client with whatever assistance they are eligible for.
- Hunger Action Network recommends that Nassau County Department of Social Services and advocates work together to develop a public education campaign that goes beyond pamphlets and posters. By developing a strong and easy to understand message, the county could produce a series of public service announcements and do active outreach in the community to increase voluntary enrollment.
- Automatic enrollment into the federal transitional programs is another way to quickly catch those who previously would not have applied for transitional benefits, and to increase enrollment at little extra cost to the county.

## **IX. New York City –**

- ❖ A Transitional Opportunities Program District – see description of the Transitional Opportunities Program on p.13

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:**

The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services after case closing:

If a temporary assistance case is closed due to employment related reasons, family members will automatically receive 6 months of Medicaid coverage from the time the case is closed provided the family continues to have a dependent child and meets other eligibility requirements. The family may be eligible for an additional three or six months (up to a total of 12 months) if it meets the eligibility criteria.

The district is developing a proposed pilot project to provide transitional health care coverage/benefits to Safety Net participants with substance abuse disorders who become clean, sober and self-sufficient.

The district will provide transitional child care to families whose cases have closed for up to twelve months when child care is necessary to maintain employment as long as the family meets the income standards. Transitional childcare shall be provided to eligible families who were on assistance for the minimum required length of time.

If an individual's temporary assistance case closes because s/he is employed, the client may be eligible for reimbursement of child care expenses within allowable limits for up to 12 months from the date of the case closing. The client is eligible if s/he meets the income guidelines for family size and needs child care in order to work. Income eligibility is determined by taking gross household income (the sum of all income received, such as salary, social security payments and child support) and comparing it to income eligibility tables.

Individuals can also obtain assistance with respect to the processing of Medicaid and child care transitional services.” (New York City County Employment Plan January 1,2000 to December 31, 2002 \*\*\*DRAFT\*\*\*)

## **Responses to Surveys**

### **2. County Responses**

The Human Resources Administration did not respond to Hunger Action Network's survey on transitional benefits. They did, however respond to our letter encouraging them to apply for funds to set up Transitional Opportunities Program units in New York City, stating that they had applied to open a TOP unit in New York City. The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance accepted their application.

### **3. Advocate's View**

It appears that there are many problems with the provision of transitional benefits in the New York City area. According to Hunger Action Network's sources, HRA's policy on transitional benefits is understood to be rather simple. When cases are closed, so are the Medicaid, Food Stamp and Childcare cases. Individuals must know to request that Transitional Medicaid, Transitional ChildCare and Food Stamps be opened/continued.

Another problem that was identified was lack of information. Service providers at transitional shelters, and other programs that work with clients that might be eligible for transitional benefits are not necessarily aware that their clients are eligible for benefits after their cases close. If welfare participants don't know that they are eligible for transitional benefits and service providers don't know either, it will be virtually impossible for people in New York City to access transitional benefits.

### **4. Suggested Advocacy Actions:**

Based on information provided by our advocacy contacts in New York City and the fact that HRA did not respond to our survey, it is apparent that much work needs to be done to ensure that all who are eligible for transitional benefits receive them. Therefore, recommendations for this Social Services District are rather basic. Transitioning New York City residents appear to have more difficulty accessing these benefits than most other New York State residents. Information and Education are the first key to solving the problem of access to transitional benefits in New York City.

- Advocates must work to make sure that service providers and welfare participants know how and where and how to access transitional benefits as well as what specific benefits that they are entitled to, as it is likely that they will need to be armed with this information to access them.
- Under law, Transitional Medicaid must be automatically continued when cases close due to an increase in income. Whether this is not happening due to lack of awareness on the part of case workers, or due to categorizing case closures improperly, this issue must be addressed.
- Advocates should consider requesting a copy of HRA's Transitional Opportunities Program application from the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. This will provide advocates with information so that they will know exactly what HRA's plans for the program are and what structure they will have to work within.
- It's also important to document cases in which violations of state and federal laws occur and bring them to the attention of HRA, the appropriate state agencies OTADA and the media.

## **X. Oneida County**

\* A Transitional Opportunities Program District - see description of the Transitional Opportunities Program on p.13.

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

- Transitional Supportive Services-along with the mandated transitional services, OCDSS will provide post-employment case management for 90 days after Temporary Assistance case management for 90 days after Temporary Assistance case closes.” (Oneida County Employment Plan January 1, 2000 — December 31, 2001).

## **Responses to surveys**

### **2. County Responses**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Oneida County DSS**

- Oneida County sent a copy of their Employment Plan to identify the transitional benefits they offer. They were the only county to do so.
- OCDSS stated that they do not currently have the resources to fund any additional transitional services.

#### **B. Responses to questions:**

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Food Stamps – the caseworker determines eligibility. If eligible, a Non public assistance Food Stamp case is opened and the case is transferred to the Food Stamp Unit.
- Medicaid - The Welfare Management System (WMS) screens the case for Medicaid eligibility. If the household is eligible, the Medicaid authorization is extended and the case is transferred to the Medicaid unit.
- Childcare - if children are in the household, the family is sent an informational brochure about Transitional Childcare and how to apply for it. Oneida County Department of Social Services is developing a process to expedite the access of Transitional Childcare.

##### How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Individuals receive written information regarding transitional services when they apply for public assistance and when they recertify.

\*\* See pages 61 through 65 for a copy of this information.

- Post-employment specialists work closely with employed participants before their cases close and advise them of transitional benefits that they will be eligible for and how to access them when they go off public assistance.

### **3. Advocate's Perspective:**

The primary concern of the advocates that Hunger Action Network spoke with in Oneida County was the high number of individuals that they have been in contact with who have gone off of welfare recently but are not receiving Food Stamps. Almost every family that goes off of Public Assistance is income-eligible to receive Food Stamps, yet advocates are seeing more and more people visiting soup kitchens and food pantries in Oneida County (and across the state). This issue could be easily addressed by implementing automatic enrollment in Food Stamps.

### **4. Suggested Advocacy Actions:**

- Oneida County should look into utilizing the automatic enrollment process for both Food Stamps and Transitional Child Care. Automatic enrollment would serve to immediately address the concerns of local advocates and Emergency Food Providers.
- Encourage Oneida County Department of Social Services to expand their post-employment case-management services for at least a year beyond welfare participant's case closure. This will also help to increase enrollment in transitional benefits.
- Encourage Oneida County Department of Social Services to adopt additional county options, particularly transportation assistance.

## **XI. Saratoga County**

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in Saratoga County's Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

Saratoga County Department of Social Services will provide supportive services as set forth in Section 4.1 of this plan to individuals who have been participants in WTW and have lost eligibility for Temporary Assistance, if such services are necessary or appropriate to assist such individuals to remain self-sufficient.

Extended supportive services which may be provided include all the supportive services set forth in section 4.1 of this plan and post-employment support through case management as deemed necessary”.

Section 4.1 includes:

- Childcare – “Saratoga County will guarantee...child care services for... recipients who are making the transition from Family Assistance”

The Social Services district will provide to participants the following expenses, in addition to childcare, which the district deems necessary for the individual to participate in assigned work activities, including orientation:

The following training related expenses will be provided as deemed necessary by the agency to allow individuals to participate in an initial assessment to develop an employability plan and to enable participants to accept employment or participate in education, training and employment activities under the WTW program:

- Automobile transportation - not more than the cost of public transportation if available, or, if not, at a rate of \$.10/mile.
- Up to a maximum of \$50. For clothing, necessary for participation in a work activity.
- Up to \$100. For each license or for other work related fees necessary for participation in a work activity during any period of eligibility for TANF or Safety Net.
- Up to a maximum of \$50. During any period of eligibility for TANF or Safety Net, for tools and equipment necessary for work.
- Up to a maximum of \$500 for the retail value of the automobile, whichever is less, during any period of eligibility for TANF or Safety Net, for reasonable cost of necessary repairs to an automobile and up to a maximum of \$1,000, during any period of eligibility for TANF or Safety Net, for payment of necessary automobile insurance meeting minimum state requirements, during participation in work activities. Such expenditures may be authorized only when they are the least costly means of meeting transportation needs of the

worker”. (Saratoga County Employment Plan, January 1, 2000 - December 31, 2001)

## **Responses to Survey**

### **2. County Responses**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Saratoga County Department of Social Services:**

- Transitional Daycare
- Transitional Medicaid
- “Work Now Program” – post-employment services - post-employment monitoring (up to 90 days) and counseling.

#### **B. Responses to questions:**

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- At the time of case closing the Eligibility Worker will refer those eligible for Transitional Day Care to the Day Care Unit to activate a Transitional Day Care case.
- Transitional Medicaid enrollment is automatically generated by the system for up to six months depending on the reason for closing.
- A separate determination is made for Food Stamps and if eligible, a case is opened.
- Post-employment services may be accessed by calling Saratoga County Department of Social Services’ Job Developer.

##### How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- At the time of case closing the Eligibility worker discusses transitional benefits with the individual. At the time of closing a system generated notice is sent to the individual explaining transitional benefits.

\*\* See pages 69 and 70 for copy of this notice.

- These benefits include Transitional Childcare , Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps. At the time of closing a letter is also sent to the individual requesting that they contact our Job Developer to discuss their reasons for closing their case and advising them of the availability of further assistance should the need arise.

##### What is your county’s perception of the success of the benefits you offer?

- “Because transitional benefits play such a critical role in the success of our programs, coordination of these benefits is a high priority. Through staff training and our bi-weekly staff meeting, procedures are discussed to provide transitional benefits that are as “seamless” as possible”.

From January 1999 to December 1999 14 families closed their cases due to employment. During that time, 14 families were monitored for 90 days post-employment, 14 families were enrolled in Transitional Childcare and 14 families were enrolled in Transitional Medicaid

### **3. Advocate's Perspective:**

Advocates in Saratoga County vary on their perception of how good a job Saratoga County Department of Social Services does in providing people with transitional benefits. Some say that they do a very good job. This perception is certainly echoed by Saratoga County Department of Social Services 's report that they have enrolled 100% enrollment of transitioning families into all of the federal transitional programs. It would be fantastic if all counties could claim the same enrollment numbers.

However, others indicate that Saratoga County Department of Social Services could be more helpful to their clients, and that they have at times appeared to be slow in implementing policy changes. These folks also indicated that there was a lack of information available concerning transitional benefits. They identified several issues that the county could offer as options for transitional benefits - these included both transportation and housing assistance. In light of the fact that Saratoga County Department of Social Services does offer several forms of transportation assistance in their county employment plan. This information indicates that Saratoga County Department of Social Services could do a better job at making information about their county – specific programs available to participants, service providers and advocates.

### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- Advocates could encourage Saratoga County Department of Social Services to further develop and expand upon their transportation assistance package and to put more emphasis on outreach and education concerning the availability of these benefits.
- A public education campaign should also be developed to address concerns over lack of information about transitional benefits. The campaign should particularly focus on the county identified benefits such as transportation assistance.
- Encourage Saratoga County Department of Social Services to work with Hunger Action Network to develop an automatic enrollment model for Food Stamps and Transitional Childcare that other counties could use.
- Advocate for Saratoga County Department of Social Services to provide comprehensive and supportive case management services to transitioning families for at least a year to provide assistance with job issues, benefit and service management and to help families through the “second transition period” that occurs after their first year is up.
- To address concerns raised by advocates in the county, Saratoga County Department of Social Services should also consider periodically retraining in their case workers to ensure that they are all up-to-speed on current changes in policy and are encouraged to enroll transitioning families in all of the transitional benefit programs available.

## **XII. Schenectady County**

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in Schenectady County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

In addition to the mandated services (i.e. Medical and day care) we will offer:

- Transportation needs - Bus tokens are available to applicants and recipients as needed to assist with job
  - Job search efforts and work activities. Tokens are available to support employment in the initial stages.
  - If public transportation is not available for employment, services may be purchased from private transportation providers.
  - Mileage reimbursement at a standard mileage rate may be approved on an individual need basis.
  - Reasonable cost of necessary repairs to a Welfare To Work participant’s automobile (not to exceed \$500. during any period of eligibility of Temporary Assistance)
- Payments of necessary automobile insurance required to meet minimum state requirements in order to participate in Welfare To Work activities, not to exceed \$500. during any period of eligibility for Temporary Assistance.
  - Work related safety equipment, up to a maximum of \$200. for each entry to employment.
- Clothing
  - Business clothing for women is provided through a contract with a local nonprofit agency. Recipients are also referred to a variety of community agencies offering free clothing.
  - Clothing including but not limited to uniforms and footwear, up to a maximum of \$200. for each entry to employment.
- Tools and equipment necessary for participation in Welfare To Work activities (not to exceed \$100.)
- Licensing or other work related fees up to \$100.
- Childcare will continue to be funded by the New York State ChildCare Block Grant.

## **Responses to Survey**

### **2. County Responses**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Schenectady County DSS:**

- Transitional Childcare
- Transitional Medicaid
- Food Stamps
- Services through the services division

- HEAP
- Emergency Aid to Families
- WIC
- Jobs Etc.

## **B. Responses to questions –**

### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- For transitional daycare, an appointment needs to be made and an application filed.
- For transitional Medicaid and/or Food Stamps, it is calculated automatically at the time of the PA case closing.
- For most of the non-federally mandated programs it is the responsibility of the client to file an application and obtain the necessary paperwork. In some cases a case worker or some other service worker would help the person if they are physically or mentally incapable of following through with the required paperwork.

### How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Most often the worker notifies the client via a typed notice (CNS) and/or application for the transitional benefits.
- The automated Public Assistance closing letter outlines additional benefits the client may be entitled to. At recertification and at case closing, the client is notified of their rights and additional benefits they may be entitled to.

### What is your county's perception of the success of the benefits you offer?

Even though clients are aware of benefits available -many do not avail themselves of them beyond the automatic extensions that we grant.

## **3. Advocate's Perspective -**

Advocates in Schenectady County report that they have many concerns about the provision of transitional benefits in their county. One advocate reported that people are being “categorically denied benefits when they make too much money” to remain on public assistance.

The primary concern that was voiced is that an individual must either be very familiar with their rights, willing to be vocal and advocate strongly for themselves or must have an advocate with them if they are to access the benefits that they are entitled to once their public assistance case has closed. They also state that it is next to impossible to access the county identified benefits such as work clothing and transportation assistance. In some instances, eligible people are sent to human service agencies from the Department of Social Services to obtain bus tokens – which are included in Schenectady County Department of Social Services Transitional benefits policy. According to local advocates, most transitioning individuals in Schenectady County are unaware that they are entitled to continued services when they start work and leave public assistance. Obviously this should not be the case.

There also appears to be a great deal of variation between caseworkers and their level of knowledge concerning transitional benefits. In some circumstances advocates found it necessary to point out specific policies in the county employment plan that caseworkers were unaware of.

Another concern that has been raised is the fact that people who have been automatically enrolled in transitional programs often are unaware that this is the case. For example, a family that has been automatically enrolled in Transitional Medicaid may go the entire first six months without ever being aware that they had medical coverage – this may keep them from attending to their family’s health needs due to a perceived lack of resources, when in reality, they are enrolled in the Medicaid program and can seek health care at any time.

Advocates in Schenectady County have been in contact with both Schenectady County Department of Social Services and the Department of Labor about their concerns – offering input into the development of the existing county employment plan and continuing to advocate for better services for their clients.

It must be stated that there were a few bright spots in our survey of advocates in Schenectady County. Some of the advocates interviewed did report that Food Stamp and Transitional Childcare enrollment runs relatively smoothly in Schenectady County.

#### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- Schenectady County Department of Social Services should consider doing an across the board “retraining” of staff concerning transitional benefits and the importance of providing individuals with as much assistance as is possible.
- Schenectady County Department of Social Services must ensure that they not only provide and discuss information about all the transitional benefits they provide with their clients but also conduct a public education campaign that would educate advocates about the benefits as well.
- Schenectady County Department of Social Services should also be encouraged to automatically enroll people in Transitional Childcare in addition to Food Stamps and Transitional Medicaid.
- Advocates should encourage Schenectady County Department of Social Services to establish a Transitional Opportunities Program unit through OTADA to help coordinate benefits for transitioning families, to work with them to have continued success at their jobs and to help families through the “second transition period” when the federal transitional benefits end. The Transitional Opportunities Program also utilizes extended hours so that people can meet with their caseworkers during non-business hours.
- It is imperative that Schenectady County Department of Social Services develop a system to notify individuals that they have been enrolled in Transitional Medicaid and Food Stamps when their cases close due to employment – otherwise they will be unable to access these benefits. Notification could take the form of a letter that is automatically generated out of the WMS system or could take place at an exit interview.

## **XIII. Suffolk County**

### **1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:**

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

- All supportive services defined in Section 4 of this plan.
- In addition, income ineligible Family Assistance recipients are eligible to receive Transitional ChildCare, Low Income ChildCare and Transitional Medicaid.
- The children of these recipients can also participate in Child Health Plus.

Section 4—The social services district will provide to participants the following expenses, in addition to child care, which the district deems necessary for the individual to participate in assigned work activities including orientation [and work, in the case of transitional benefits]:

1. Transportation, but not more than the cost of public transportation if available or, if not, at a level up to 30 cents per mile, but not to exceed the reimbursement rate for private transportation regularly paid by the social services district to its employees; this includes the cost of transporting children of [work] participants to and from child daycare.
2. Up to a maximum of \$150 per work activity for clothing necessary for participation in [workfare] or employment.
3. Up to \$150 for each license or for other work-related fees necessary for participation in [workfare] activities or employment during any calendar year.
4. Up to a maximum of \$500 during any calendar year for tools and equipment necessary to participate in [workfare] activities or employment.
5. Up to a maximum of \$1,500 or the retail value of the automobile, whichever is less, during any calendar year for reasonable cost of necessary repairs to a [Workfare] participant’s automobile, and up to a maximum of \$1,500 during any calendar year for payment of necessary automobile insurance meeting minimum state requirements during participation in [workfare] activities or employment. Such expenditures may be authorized only when they are the least costly means of meeting the transportation needs of the [workfare] participant [or worker].
6. Child care registration fees, up to \$75 per child, for enrollment of children of [workfare] participants in child care when such child care is necessary for participation in [workfare or employment].
7. Up to \$2,100 per calendar year for tuition costs related to participation in an approved [workfare] activity when other resources such as financial aid or other government funding have been exhausted.
8. Books and school supplies as deemed necessary for participation in an approved [workfare] activity when other resources are unavailable, consistent with 97ADM-18 (Williams v. Dowling)
9. Other employment or training related expenses deemed necessary for obtaining or maintaining a work activity.

## Responses to Survey

### 2. County Responses

#### A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Suffolk County Department of Social Services:

- Transitional Medicaid - up to 14 months
- Child Health Plus
- Transitional Childcare/ Low Income Childcare payments
- EAF (Emergency Aid to Families) and/or diversion payments
- I-LEAP
- Food Stamps
- Child Support Enforcement Bureau Services

#### B. Responses to Questions –

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Transitional Medicaid is an automatic opening when the case closes for specific reasons.
- Clients are automatically notified through the mail of their eligibility for Transitional Child Care. They then must apply.
- Food Stamps must be applied for separately.

##### How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- OTADA's self-sufficiency pamphlet is distributed at eligibility and recertification.

\*\* See Pages 43 and 44 for a copy of this pamphlet

- The state operated Client Notification System generates letters that are sent to families eligible for Transitional Child Care.
- A CAP (Child Assistance Program) brochure is distributed at eligibility and recertification.
- Client handbooks are distributed at eligibility.

##### What is your county's perception of the success of the benefits you offer?

The benefits offered are very helpful to clients and the county strives to meet all federal and state mandates in providing benefits and notifying clients of the availability of transitional and optional services.

In 1999:

57.2% of case closings accessed Transitional Medicaid

12.6% of case closings accessed Food Stamps

1.9% of case closings accessed Transitional Childcare

### 3. Advocate's Perspective:

Housing is a particularly important issue in Suffolk County for families that are transitioning off of welfare. Advocates indicated that a new homelessness prevention program at Suffolk County Department of Social Services has been helpful in preventing people from losing their

housing when they get behind in payments. In these situations, the landlord calls Suffolk County Department of Social Services directly and they make arrangements so that the individuals don't end up without shelter in an area where housing is difficult to find.

While the people Hunger Action Network spoke with did indicate that there had been difficulties in getting information on Transitional ChildCare, once their clients knew to ask for it, they had no problems obtaining it. In light of the very low enrollment in Transitional ChildCare for 1999, Suffolk County Department of Social Services would do well to reassess their enrollment process for this program.

#### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- In light of the enrollment data provided by Suffolk County Department of Social Services, advocates should immediately request that Department of Social Services consider utilizing an automatic enrollment process for both Transitional ChildCare and Food Stamps. This would provide an immediate solution to the very small percentage of families that are enrolled in these programs.
- Having a transitional case management team that focuses on enrolling people in all the benefits available to them would be a positive step for Suffolk County. Advocates could call for the formation of a Transitional Opportunities Program unit in their county – this would provide case management, alternative hours and a supportive environment for transitioning families.
- Suffolk County Department of Social Services should also be encouraged to develop additional county option programs that would further address the housing and transportation needs of their working families.

## XIV. Washington County

### 1. Transitional Benefits included in Washington County Department of Social Services Employment Plan:

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

All supportive services listed in section 4.1 will be provided for up to 90 days as well as:

- Transitional childcare - available for families who were on assistance for at least **3 out of the 6 months preceding the month in which the case was closed. If the case** is closed for excess income, client request, or support and there is a need for childcare to be able to remain employed, the family is eligible, provide that they apply and are still within the income eligibility.
- Transitional Medical Assistance - available for up to 6 months if the recipient has been getting Medicaid for 3 out of the last 6 months, has a child residing with them under the age of 21 and they are working.
  - An addition 6 months of Medicaid may be available if the recipient’s income is below 185% of the federal poverty level and the fill out all necessary reports to determine this continued eligibility.

#### Section 4.1

The social services district will provide to participants the following expenses, in addition to childcare witch the district deems necessary for the individual to participate in assigned work activities.

1. Transportation- in the form of bus tokens for individuals with access to public transportation or reimbursement for those without public transportation.
  2. Work related Expenses - at the district’s discretion the following work related expenses may also be provided to allow individuals to participate in work activities or secure employment:
    - clothing, including but not limited to uniforms and footwear;
    - job related safety equipment and tools not provided by worksite or employer;
    - Automobile repairs and other auto-related expenses when this would enable an applicant or recipient to continue in or accept employment.
  3. **Case management** - for pregnant adolescents, parenting teens and at risk youth under 18 years of age.
  4. **Medical assistance** - The department may also provide any other supportive services that are determined necessary to allow individuals to participate in work activities and/or secure employment.
- Supportive services may be provided for up to 90 days to individuals who have lost eligibility for public assistance due to employment. Every attempt is made to provide supportive services to individuals at risk of needing

temporary assistance in order to keep them employed or to facilitate employment thus avoiding the need for temporary assistance. This is done in conjunction with the temporary assistance unit as a diversionary plan. All the services listed above are made available to this population.” (Washington County Employment Plan January 1, 2000- December 31, 2001).

## **Responses to Survey**

### **2. County Responses**

#### **A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Washington County Department of Social Services:**

- Medicaid
- Food Stamps
- Daycare
- HEAP
- Section 8 Housing
- WIC
- Transportation Assistance - help with car repair, insurance, down payment to purchase car
- “Over the Hump Money” - one time only payment to help with emergencies.

#### **B. Responses to Questions -**

##### How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Medicaid enrollment is more or less automatic.
- Food Stamps are almost as automatic 75% of closed cases transition into Food Stamps when their cases close.
- Childcare must be applied for.
- The individual must apply for other programs such as HEAP and WIC.
- Transportation cases must be applied for on a case by case basis, in which the individual outlines their needs and convinces caseworker that assistance is needed.
- To be eligible for down payment for purchasing a car, the individual must have a clean driver’s license and be “insurable”

##### How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Washington County Department of Social Services gives out packets of information and flyers to people concerning the transitional benefits available to them.
- Case managers stay with transitioning families to help them get benefits, setting up supports before cases close - ideally those arrangements would stay the same as they were when they were on public assistance.

##### What is your county’s perception of the success of the benefits you offer?

Positive

### **3. Advocate's Perspective:**

According to advocates in Washington County, while Transitional Medicaid enrollment is automatic, the other transitional benefits tend to be more difficult for people to access. Advocates report that present and former welfare participants are afraid to go to the Department of Social Services alone because they are not treated with respect.

In order to apply for childcare assistance, people must pick up childcare applications from the Department of Social Services - some individuals report that they have gone to the county building to pick up the application (having made transportation arrangements to get there when they don't have a car) and were told that they must come back another time because there was no one available to give him or her the application.

The individuals Hunger Action Network spoke with indicated that the county also should do more outreach concerning transitional benefits, as there is a perception that advocates provide this information to people, rather than the Department of Social Services, particularly the non-federal benefits such as transportation and emergency assistance.

### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- Washington County DSS should be encouraged to do a better job doing outreach to transitioning families, letting them know what benefits they are eligible to receive. Both the state and federal governments stress the need to actively connect families with the transitional programs that are available to them. While advocates and service providers can help fill in the gaps, local Departments of Social Services must take the lead, as it is primarily their responsibility.
- Advocates should strongly encourage Washington County Department of Social Services to consider retraining caseworkers about transitional benefits so that they are encouraged to enroll as many families as possible into the transitional programs. Casemanagers should be supportive, positive and sensitive to the needs of their clients.
- Ongoing case management is a must. Washington County Department of Social Services should consider the formation of a Transitional Opportunities Program Unit with comprehensive case management services for at least a year. Due to the rural nature of this county, the number of individuals on public assistance is relatively low. With very few transitioning families, the county has the opportunity to have a high percentage of successful transitions into the permanent job market, simply by working closely with each family to address their needs.
- Washington County should be strongly encouraged to begin doing automatic enrollment in the federal transitional programs. Given the rural nature of the county, people should at least be able to receive their childcare forms in the mail rather than having to go pick them up. It is unacceptable that people should be turned away without getting the application form. This issue should be addressed immediately.

## XV. Westchester County

### 1. Transitional Benefits included in County Employment Plan:

“The district will provide to individuals whose temporary assistance cases have closed due to employment the following supportive services for up to ninety days after case closing:

In accordance with NYS regulations the Department will provide the following transitional benefits.

1. Transitional Medical Assistance .

*(Westchester County requires that the household respond to quarterly reports mailed by the State to receive the 2nd 6 months of TM.4)*

2. Transitional Childcare *-(Westchester County requires that the family request transitional benefits and provide all documents necessary to determine eligibility)*
3. Individuals who lose their PA eligibility due to employment will be eligible to apply for one time assistance with employment related expenses in the event such circumstances arise.

Responses to survey

### 2. County Responses

#### A. Transitional Benefits Available as Identified by Westchester County Department of Social Services:

“Transitional Medicaid and Childcare.”

#### B. Responses to Questions –

How are people enrolled in transitional benefits when they are eligible?

- Medicaid enrollment is automatic.
- To access Transitional Childcare, the individual must respond to a letter sent by the Westchester Childcare Council. They must then fill out an application to apply.

How are people notified that they are eligible for transitional benefits?

- Individuals are given written information about their eligibility for transitional benefits when they apply. Westchester County Department of Social Services states that they continue to give out this information throughout the duration of the case.
- Westchester County Department of Social Services has received money through the NY Works Block Grant to fund 12 “Retention Specialists” that will help transitioning families coordinate their benefits and handle crisis. Each retention worker will handle up to 25 cases at a time. These workers will

be available 24 hours a day, will work out of their homes, using laptop computers, beepers and will each have an unmarked county car so that they can go to the client rather than making the client come to them. The workers will have a \$100,000 discretionary budget for crisis management.

### **3. Advocate's Perspective**

Some advocates in Westchester County report that in their opinion, Westchester County Department of Social Services does satisfactorily notify individuals of the availability of transitional benefits.

Others report that often materials that are supposed to be sent never arrive, and service providers end up providing this information instead of the Department of Social Services. While some people do receive notification of the benefits available to them, the provision of this information appears to be rather inconsistent.

The process of getting referrals to childcare workers also appears to be problematic.

Local advocates suggested having clients sign statements that would go in their file once transitional benefits have been discussed with a case worker at the Department of Social Services. This could be done when individuals report that they are employed and would be one way of being sure that clients have been made aware of the benefits they are eligible for when their cases close.

### **4. Recommended Advocacy Actions:**

- Westchester County Department of Social Services should consider an automatic enrollment process for both Transitional ChildCare and Food Stamps. This would immediately address the concerns of advocates and would also substantially increase the number of people who access these programs.
- The new “Retention Specialists” should be able to handle up to 300 transitioning families at a time, helping them to coordinate the services available to them and help to address any financial or employment problems that may arise. These services are only available for up to 6 months. Hunger Action Network recommends that they for up to 18 months so that they are available when families reach the “second transition period” and lose eligibility for Transitional Medicaid and Transitional Child Care.
- Advocates should also encourage Westchester County Department of Social Services to not only provide more “county option” transitional benefits to their clients, but also to publicize them.
- Westchester County Department of Social Services must do a better job doing outreach to their clients, letting them know what benefits they are still eligible for and making it as simple as possible to access them. Hopefully the new retention specialists will go a long way toward addressing this issue.

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