



# Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

## *“The Client vs. the Student”: An Analysis of the Refugee Social Service System from the Perspective of an Adult Educator*

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### **Background:**

I am one of two teachers for the Families Transitioning to Work program in Fairfax County, Virginia. Families Transitioning to Work was jointly developed by Fairfax County Public Schools and the Department of Family Services to provide welfare-to-work clients with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, employment readiness training, and authentic work experience. The Families Transitioning to Work students are limited English proficient refugees or immigrants. The majority are also clients of the Virginia Initiative for Employment Not Welfare (VIEW) program and are, therefore, receiving welfare benefits and employment training for two years. In return for this assistance they must be involved in a work activity. The Families Transitioning to Work program fulfills the work activity requirement.

Since its inception, the Families Transitioning to Work class enrollment has been relatively small; between five and 20 people attend on a given day. We meet every weekday for two hours after the students' three-hour intensive morning ESL class. Daily interaction and the small class size have allowed me to devote attention to many of the students' questions and concerns regarding literacy, language, access to resources,

and management of their obligations to various social service agencies. I embarked on this research project in order to learn more about the social service system in which my students were involved.

As an educator, why undertake such a study of social services? First, there is already much research and understanding in the adult education field that participation in learning activities may be hampered until other problems or stresses in learners' lives are resolved. Social service agencies play a key role in helping learners overcome stresses related to employment, child care, housing, transportation, and health care, to name just a few. At the same time they are trying to help, however, social service agencies contribute to the stress that refugees and immigrants experience. For instance, the Families Transitioning to Work class is only one of many programs in which these students participate; some are involved in programs at three or more agencies. However, the students' obligations to these agencies are sometimes unrealistic, and mandatory attendance at trainings and meetings often conflicts in terms of scheduling. I estimate that I have sometimes spent 3-5 hours per week making phone calls to various organizations in order to help students access services and resolve scheduling conflicts. I have become a

de facto advocate at some time for many of these clients. A second reason for undertaking this study is that literacy scholars and practitioners have called for adult educators to understand how they fit into the larger social service system, and to decide the degree to which they want to support, enforce, or enhance that system. In order to make such a decision we need to understand the system more fully.

I hope that a systematic analysis of this system will help me and the Families Transitioning to Work program better serve our clients in terms of defining our employment preparation objectives to meet needs and fill gaps in services, and by reinforcing and complimenting other existing programs. In addition, I hope to gain a better understanding of this system so that I can help students understand what services are available to them and help them understand how to manage their responsibilities to each of these organizations. I also hope that the process and final products of this research will increase the understanding of colleagues at the various social service agencies regarding the extent of conflicting program requirements, the implications these have for the success of our mutual clients, and the potential for improved collaboration and coordination of programs.

**Inquiry:**

*What are the various social services available to Families Transitioning to Work clients? What are the clients' obligations to these agencies? Where do these different obligations conflict? Which program has priority?*

**Data collection:**

I conducted 2-hour interviews with representatives of four social service agencies in Fairfax County:

- 1) The Department of Family Services;
- 2) Maximus, Inc.;
- 3) Lutheran Social Services; and
- 4) Homestretch, Inc.

In addition, I collected documentation regarding welfare-to-work and VIEW policy, as well as training curriculum materials from the different organizations. From the Families Transitioning to Work students I collected documents such as notices from various agencies informing them of trainings, meetings and other obligations. I also documented conversations with the students and organization representatives in the process of helping clients resolve problems or

access resources at these various agencies.

**Findings:**

**Different Funding and Policy Streams**

Clients receive services from many different agencies at the local level. The funding and policy these local agencies must interpret is channeled through different federal agencies. The following chart depicts a sampling of agencies and the social services they provide in Fairfax County, Virginia. Those interviewed for this study are indicated in bold type.

Among these programs, unfortunately, policies surrounding service delivery and client responsibility often conflict. This places some clients between a rock and hard place when they participate, as most do, in more than one program.

**Similar Training Curricula within Dissimilar Time Frames**

Each of the four organizations provides and requires employment and/or life skills training. Curriculum content is similar and/or

complimentary across programs. Employment preparation topics include: job search strategies; interviewing and resume writing; job retention strategies; appropriate dress; sexual harassment; safety; computer training; and public transportation. Life skill training topics include: personal finance; tax filing; banking; parenting; nutrition; shopping; stress and anger management; drug and alcohol abuse. However, the length of training varies from one program to another. VIEW/Maximus, Inc., offered new clients an intensive, week-long job search/life skills training, and additional two-hour workshops once or twice a month. Lutheran Social Services provides initial pre-employment trainings of 4-5 days and a four-day computer training program. Homestretch, Inc., requires clients to attend its life skills program every Wednesday night from September until June, with monthly mandatory meetings in the summer.

Each organization either provides or refers clients to ESL programs. Again, the most significant difference in ESL seems to be the length of the program offered or required. VIEW encourages clients to take ESL and

<b>Federal Agency</b>	<b>State or Local Entity</b>	<b>Program/Services</b>
Department of Health and Human Services	Fairfax County Department of Family Services (DFS)	<b>Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides financial assistance - formerly AFDC.</b>
Department of Health and Human Services	DFS	<b>Virginia Initiative for Employment Not Welfare (VIEW) is the work component of TANF and provides employment training and job search support. Until 1/99, VIEW training and management subcontracted to Maximus, Inc.</b>
Department of Agriculture	DFS	Food Stamps Program
Department of Labor	DFS	Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and the Welfare-to-Work Program provide pre-employment training.
Department of Housing and Urban Development	Falls Church Municipality	<b>Homestretch, Inc. provides two-year transitional housing until clients are self-sufficient or get into public housing</b>
Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement	Commonwealth of Virginia	<b>Lutheran Social Services (LSS): Virginia Refugee Resettlement Program (VRRP) and the Targeted Assistance Program (TAP) provide training and job search support. Matching Grant Program provides shorter-term start-up financial assistance.</b>

covers this cost for the two years that they are eligible for VIEW services. Lutheran Social Services offers ESL on-site and requires 15 hours of ESL instruction for new arrivals. They also refer some clients to intensive ESL classes until they get a job. Homestretch, Inc. encourages clients to work full-time and has stricter limits than the other organizations interviewed regarding the time that ESL and employment training can satisfy initial work requirements. Yet, it will soon start ESL classes in-house and will require all clients to attend ESL at Homestretch, Inc. and not at other schools.

### **Conflicting Inter-Agency Scheduling**

This research was born from the realization that many of the Families Transitioning to Work students were asking their teachers to help them resolve scheduling conflicts they were having with regard to the trainings and appointments that various social service agencies required them to attend. Early in the Families Transitioning to Work program some clients received notices to attend mandatory trainings at Maximus, Inc., Lutheran Social Services, and Homestretch, Inc. between 12:30 and 2:30 — the time they were required to be in Families Transitioning to Work class. For most clients, these scheduling conflicts were easily resolved. Once Lutheran Social Services, Homestretch, Inc., and Maximus/VIEW workers became aware of our program, they excused the clients from their respective trainings.

However, scheduling conflicts between Homestretch, Inc., Maximus, Inc., and the Fairfax County Public School Adult Evening ESL program continue. Some of our students have been required to be in three places at once on Wednesday nights! Homestretch, Inc. holds its mandatory life skills training Wednesday evening, and VIEW/Maximus, Inc. also schedules

mandatory workshops at that time. Homestretch, Inc. clients who attend intensive evening ESL classes Monday through Thursday, because they work during the day, are forced to miss 25% of the ESL class each term.

### **Differing Client Requirements and Obligations to Agencies**

Different organizations have different work activity and training requirements. Some clients have been required to attend training by one of the organizations while another agency required the client to work full-time. There is currently little coordination among agencies to address this conflict.

Recently, one FTW student was required to attend full time English and the FTW program by her DFS/VIEW case manager, while her housing sponsoring organization, Homestretch, Inc., required her to go to work full-time. The involvement of FTW teachers precipitated the first meeting between Homestretch and DFS/VIEW managers, and stayed the eviction of this student and her family from the housing program. However, this policy conflict has not yet been resolved at the program level.

### **Conclusions:**

The largest gap in refugee social services in Fairfax County, Virginia is the lack of coordination and communication among agencies. This results in inefficiency and even conflict instead of complimentary and reinforcing programs. Furthermore, non-English speaking clients face great challenges in understanding, maximizing their benefits from, and meeting their responsibilities to this social service system.

The organizations interviewed for this paper differ on the amount of ESL they require for their limited English proficient clients. At the same time, the organizations that

focus less on the importance of ESL are also developing their own in-house ESL programs. I see this as a trend toward “one-stop shopping” which parallels the consolidation of public assistance services. This may not be contradictory, however. In-house ESL programs offer the organizations more control over how much ESL is provided, offer more control over the content of ESL instruction, and keep the referral funding in-house.

Legally mandated welfare reform has swung the pendulum from a focus on education and training to a culture of work first. The most interesting part of this analysis for me is that the government, in this case the Department of Family Services, has developed a flexible interpretation of VIEW policy for ESL clients, while the semi-private organizations interviewed for this paper have a more narrow interpretation. The Department of Family Services/VIEW offers the most support in terms of time and funding for English and other training for the two years the clients are eligible for VIEW services. Also, the Department of Family Services collaborated with Fairfax County Public Schools Adult Education to develop the Families Transitioning to Work Program giving ESL clients additional classroom and on-the-job training, which at the same time fulfills the work activity requirement for these students. The semi-private organizations interviewed for this paper, encourage or mandate clients to get a job as soon as possible. Although initial job placement may be successful, I wonder about the long-term job retention of these individuals and their ability to function and succeed in this country without more investment in English literacy skills.

This paper calls for welfare to work practitioners to recognize that the support needs and obstacles to employment of foreign-born clients may be very different than those of

	<i>VIEW</i>	<i>Lutheran Social Services</i>	<i>Homestretch, Inc.</i>
<b>Job Search Criteria</b>	All clients have to conduct an initial job search of 40 documented contacts in one month.	The client must attend all appointments with caseworkers and interviews.	Must fill out five applications per week.
<b>Work Activity Requirements</b>	The date TANF is approved, the client must be employed or in a work activity within 90 days for 30 hours per week.	The client must accept a job offer.	Each adult must be working for a minimum of 30 hours per week. ESL or job training is allowed to fulfill this requirement for an unspecified time that is determined on an individual basis and is subject to change at the discretion of the executive director.
<b>Recognition/Role of Families Transitioning to Work</b>	Fulfills the work activity requirement.	Some clients are referred to the FTW program until they gain employment.	Does not fulfill the work activity requirement.
<b>Training Requirements</b>	Must attend initial and periodic employment and life-skills workshops.	Must attend an initial one-week employment training course.	All adults and teenagers must attend weekly Wednesday-night life skills trainings. The only excuse for absence is a doctor's excuse. If a client has three unexcused absences they are evicted from the program.
<b>Other requirements</b>	*Not in scope of this paper.		Families must pay 30% of their gross income to Homestretch, Inc. for rent. Within one month, the family must get credit counseling to re-establish or clean up their credit history. Within three months, the family must sign up for project-based Section 8 housing.

American-born participants. In order to better understand these differences, continued analysis of welfare programs and post-welfare follow-up studies should be disaggregated by the variable of English literacy. Further research should also compare the accountability systems and indicators of success of the various agencies in an effort to make their working assumptions and program philosophies more overt, and ultimately improve the coordination of services at the client level.

I plan to share the finalized documents from this research with the agencies and individuals interviewed and solicit feedback from them. I would like to then research other states' collaboration between adult ESL programs and public and private social service agencies. Finally, I would like to review the Families Transitioning to Work program objectives in light of this analysis. What role should Families Transitioning to Work and other adult education programs play as social service advocates for our students? □

## **Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series**

*The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research, groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems, arising from their own practice. Practitioner research is a long-term learning process that occurs, over the course of months, within a supportive group and continues as researchers carry out projects in their classrooms and programs. Through brief reports that they write practitioner researchers contribute their knowledge to others in the literacy education field. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999, is available on the Internet at <http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html>*

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