

State of North Carolina
Department of Health and Human Services

WORK SUPPORT STRATEGIES COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT



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Welcome

Welcome to the Work Support Strategies (WSS) Communication Toolkit. This document is designed to help counties begin the discussion about WSS on the local level. What is it? How can it help your county? What does it have to do with NC FAST? These are all important questions that counties are asking. This practical guide will help you unpack what WSS is all about.

About Work Support Strategies

What is Work Support Strategies (WSS)?

North Carolina is pursuing a new vision for service delivery through the WSS project. WSS is an initiative, made up of many smaller projects and concepts, that seeks to streamline the customer experience across economic services programs. This new service delivery system is customer-centric, data-driven, and strategically utilizes technology and automation to enhance application processes.

A consortium of county and state staff, community stakeholders, and customers helped to identify the following tenets of our vision for service delivery in North Carolina:

- **Families will tell their story once and receive the services they need.**
- There will be no wrong door to accessing benefits. Customers will have a choice in when, where and how they access benefits.
- Community partners will provide new avenues for accessing services.
- The state and counties will work together to make operational improvements, maximize the use of technology, and make the service delivery system as efficient as possible.
- Customer service, efficiency, and data will drive the development of service delivery models and the development of staffing roles.
- Counties will retain flexibility in how they implement, but outcomes, performance, and a positive customer experience will provide the ultimate measure of success.
- Accessing benefits will not be a hindrance to working families. Service delivery will be designed in a way that supports working families and their ability to maintain employment.

This project seeks to support counties as they explore new ideas, concepts, and innovations that will help staff better serve families in their communities. This project will provide counties with the tools and information to tailor local and national best practices to fit their local agency and keep up with our ever changing business needs.

What is the history of WSS?

In 2011, North Carolina was one of nine states selected from across the country to receive funding for a planning year grant to develop and test our ideas for a new holistic service delivery system. North Carolina spent the planning year talking to counties, community stakeholders, and customers to better

understand the strengths and opportunities of the way we currently do business. There are three main goals of WSS driving our work on the ground:

- Increase the share of low-income working families that receive and keep the full package of work support benefits for which they are eligible.
- Reduce state administrative burdens and burden on customers through improvements in government effectiveness/efficiency.
- Glean lessons learned from the demonstration states to inform broader state and federal policies through a rigorous evaluation.

This planning year culminated in the development of an Action Plan, outlining the specific steps we plan to take to make this vision a reality in North Carolina. This Action Plan – developed by counties (including staff at all levels), community stakeholders, and customers – identifies the necessary steps we must take in order to achieve the seven tenets of North Carolina’s vision for service delivery (see previous page).

Our plan was one of six selected to receive an additional three year implementation grant to bring these ideas to life. DHHS, NC FAST, and our county partners are continuously joining together to implement this vision.

NC FAST

What is the connection between WSS and NC FAST?

North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology (NC FAST) is our state’s integrated eligibility system, which is currently being rolled out statewide. Local DSS agencies are undergoing a monumental shift with NC FAST, moving concretely toward a world of integrated case management. This system brings us the technology and infrastructure to be able to manage our workload around families, rather than a collection of cases scattered across various state information systems.

In addition to the benefits it will have on our customers, integrated technology forces us to move beyond our program silos. We must begin to think about our programs and services in the context of each other, rather than in isolation.

Now, what does this have to do with WSS? **WSS and NC FAST are fundamentally interconnected.** We cannot implement one without the other. WSS is a change in our understanding of how we do business, manage care, and help families achieve security and self-sufficiency. NC FAST is one of the tools to help us achieve that transformation. Here are

“Work Support Strategies and NC FAST complement each other very nicely. One, Work Support Strategies being a strategic way of doing business. NC FAST being one of the tools that enables us to put that strategy into play.”

- Melvia Batts, Nash County
Director of Social Services

some reasons why we must begin to talk about both WSS and NC FAST together:

- ❑ *Counties can't effectively do one without the other. New technology must come with new process for either to be effective, and vice versa.*
- ❑ *WSS is a conceptual model of how we will need to conduct business in the future. NC FAST is one of the tools that will help us get there.*
- ❑ *Implementing WSS concepts and ideas early will better prepare counties for launching NC FAST, and will make the process much easier on staff and customers. As we begin rolling out the Medicaid module, integration and more effective business processes will become critically important.*
- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST are both about breaking down the silos between our programs and services to benefit staff and clients. Customer needs are such that programs can no longer function in isolation. Agency staff should be able to consider the customers' needs as a whole, and provide service accordingly. NC FAST will bring about additional ways for clients to do business with our agencies and tools for all staff to manage services by family, rather than by case.*
- ❑ *NC FAST will help counties more effectively manage churn. With all customer information located in one system, county staff are better equipped to avoid a missing verification or other administrative issue causing an unnecessary lapse in benefits. This can mean less confusion on the part of the client, as well as the potential decrease in churn and resulting re-application workload for the worker.*
- ❑ *ACA implementation is on our doorstep. Our current processes leave us unequipped to service the new 600,000 Medicaid applicants that will be flooding our local agencies in 2014. By looking at WSS ideas and concepts now, counties can enable all staff to help with this influx of applications, not just Medicaid-specific staff.*
- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST together will help counties increase efficiency and provide better service to clients. Consolidating redundancies and administrative requirements will enable county staff to spend more time working with families to better understand their needs, rather than bogged down with extensive paperwork. If that extra time enables a staff member to learn about a case of potential abuse or another community service that could help that family, it will all be worth it.*
- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST will better equip staff to identify and address program integrity issues up front. By collecting the same information for all programs, staff will be able to identify potential program integrity issues and make appropriate referrals early.*

The role of all county staff is more critical than ever. This transition is about holistically addressing family needs and aligning programmatic services. By managing the workload, rather than caseload, counties will be able to provide more effective and efficient service to the entire family. Talented and

“With work support strategies, what we hope to accomplish, and what we are already accomplishing is simplifying our policies, simplifying our procedures, which will lead us to better practice in North Carolina.”

- Sherry Bradsher, DSS Director

experienced staff on the state and local levels are essential to achieving this vision and implementing the necessary technology.

Audiences & Messaging

Who should be hearing about WSS activities on a regular basis, and what should they be hearing?

The WSS initiative impacts every person and group involved in service delivery in our state. This includes state county staff at all levels (both programmatic and fiscal), community partners, government officials, stakeholders, customers, peer states, and the general public. The success of WSS and NC FAST will be driven by how well and how often we communicate about this initiative with each of these groups.

GENERAL

There are several foundational messages about WSS that apply to many audiences. This section captures the universal aspects of this initiative that should be shared with all staff, stakeholders, and government officials on a regular basis.

- ❑ *This is our opportunity to do things differently.* WSS is about providing ideas, information, and implementation tools that counties can adapt to address local business needs. A key function of WSS will be opening the lines of communication to share local and national best practices to support counties in this endeavor.
- ❑ *This project is not about change for the sake of change.* Counties have experienced a major increase in caseload over the past five years. Our traditional processes are no longer sufficient to manage a much larger caseload, and counties cannot rely on additional staff to solve the issue. WSS will ultimately help counties pursue a continuous improvement process to manage growing caseloads more efficiently, provide the type of service customers need, and meet state and federal performance measures.
- ❑ *WSS is data-centric.* A core tenet of WSS is data-driven decision making. With up to date and real-time data, counties can make operational adjustments and management decisions to meet the changing needs of their agency. The WSS team is working closely with DHHS and NC FAST to achieve this goal.
- ❑ *WSS is the process component of NC FAST.* We will need to supplement NC FAST with updated business processes in order to realize all of the positive effects of an integrated system. WSS is that process component, and will help counties implement the new system.

COUNTY STAFF

As a state supervised-county administered state, our 100 counties are the laboratories where innovative new practices are developed, tested, and implemented. This means that county staff are a crucial, perhaps the most important group that should hear about WSS on a regular basis. WSS is a “front-line” initiative, which means that it cannot materialize without support from county management and buy in from front line staff. All agency staff should know about this project and stay abreast of the latest news, activities, and opportunities to get involved.

- ❑ *There is a lot in WSS for county staff.* The best ideas come from those on the front lines, working with families every day. WSS seeks to give front line staff a stronger voice in proposing and testing new ideas (both policy and process) that will help better manage their workload and better help families in the community.
- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST will enable front line staff to focus less on administrative requirements, and spend more time connecting with families.* The emphasis on paperwork, compliance, and meeting administrative requirements too often has to take precedence over completing a thorough assessment of a family’s needs. If staff could spend less time fulfilling administrative requirements and more time working with families, the results will be better all around.
- ❑ *WSS seeks to help counties make better use of data.* This will mean that local agencies can identify and respond to changing business needs as they happen, helping front-line county staff to adapt to changing circumstances faster. A data toolkit is currently being produced, which will help counties run relevant reports and develop their data analysis expertise.
- ❑ *The integrated eligibility environment brought about by WSS and NC FAST will help all county staff take a larger part in the program integrity process.* With one family all existing within one case, the staff member managing that family will be able to get ahead of potential program integrity and fraud issues, rather than having to address them only on the back end.

“The front line worker has an awesome responsibility in Work Support Strategies because that’s where the rubber meets the road. Who’s not doing a job and thinking it could be better if we did it like this. You have to share that.”
- Family & Children’s Medicaid Supervisor

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS

Service delivery is no longer concentrated solely within county DSS agencies. Counties across the state have a well-developed network of community partners helping to serve at risk families in their community. The many organizations that interact with our customers should be educated on this initiative and incorporated into the discussion about how we can better serve our common customers.

- ❑ *WSS is focused on building the community network for families needing our services.* Local DSS agencies and community groups often work with the same families, providing very similar services. This initiative provides ideas and strategies to help counties ensure they have engaged the right community partners and build capacity in those partners to help them be as effective as possible.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Federal funders, state leadership, County Commissioners, and local Boards of Social Services have a vested interest in pursuing innovative techniques to serve families more effectively and efficiently.

- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST seek to make better use of resources in our efforts to connect low-income families with social services and help them reach security and self-sufficiency.* The philosophy of this initiative underscores DHHS’ ongoing effort to use public funds efficiently to help move families out of crisis mode and into security, with the ultimate goal of helping able individuals to find and keep long-term employment.
- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST seeks to a positively affect program integrity efforts in North Carolina.* With an integrated process, families will submit their information to the agency one time for all programs they are applying for. By sharing that information with the entire agency and making better use of third party matches, counties will be able to more proactively get ahead of potential program integrity and fraud issues and address them up front.
- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST highlight North Carolina as an innovative leader in the health and human services field.* This initiative provides a national stage to showcase the innovative and creative ways that we are serving families here in North Carolina. We have already been nationally recognized for the new strategies we are implementing.

STATE STAFF

State staff – including leadership, policy and program representatives, budget staff, county liaisons and administrative support staff – are key resources in spreading the message of WSS, and will be an immediate resource for many counties.

- ❑ *Policy and process simplification efforts hold equal benefits for DHHS staff and counties agencies.* In an integrated environment, policy development and management will be conducted through open communications between programs, with more specific advice on implementation consideration. This will reduce post-implementation challenges and revision for state staff.
- ❑ *Integrating eligibility processes will likely have a positive impact on program integrity and will simplify the review process.* A family

“It’s about getting the worker outside of their box, county level outside of their box, and the state level outside of their box. Once you think outside your box, everything comes together. It’s always for the betterment of the client, because that’s why we’re here.”

- Family y& Children’s Medicaid and Adult Medicaid Income Maintenance Caseworker

telling their story once has several inherent benefits – it redirects family time commitments from DSS offices to reaching stability, but also means one source of information is being shared across programs. The transition to case management by family, rather than by program, will make it easier to conduct program integrity reviews, identify errors, and address inconsistencies.

- ❑ *All state staff, regardless of their division, will need to know about WSS and advocate for appropriate application of the concepts behind it.* Counties, stakeholders, and the public need to know that all state staff are aware of WSS activities, are a reliable source of information, and can direct others to more detailed project sources.
- ❑ *Many state staff has unique contact with counties that is shared by no other group.* Policy experts, program representatives and county liaisons, and state implementation teams have day-to-day contact with counties, and will be a valuable resource in WSS implementation. These state staff should bear WSS tenets and concepts in mind in all interactions with counties.
- ❑ *WSS goals should play a role in decision making processes regarding budget, IT, organization, program administration and other core activities of state staffs.* Ideally, state staff will incorporate the spirit of WSS into their work, whether they are conducting quality control and program integrity activities, developing policy, making budget decisions, or making staffing decisions. We should empower staff to relook at how they go about their daily activities, and evaluate how those activities fit into the bigger picture of WSS.
- ❑ *The state's many workgroups and implementation teams should incorporate WSS tenets, NC FAST capabilities, and ACA implementation into their own projects.* At any given time, there are a multitude of workgroups, initiative, and special projects being conducted by DHHS staff. DHHS staff must remain mindful of three of the largest initiatives in North Carolina – WSS, NC FAST, and ACA. All relevant workgroups should intentionally align their efforts with these three initiatives, embracing the tenets of WSS, the technological capabilities of NC FAST, and the change in service delivery that will likely come with ACA.

CUSTOMERS

As counties are trying new processes and new methods to manage work, customers should be aware of the WSS initiative and understand that all county efforts are intended to result in a better experience for them.

- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST are all about enhancing the customer experience.* The focus of our efforts is on families. WSS and NC FAST make it simpler for families to get and keep all of the services for which they are eligible.
- ❑ *With the implementation of WSS and NC FAST, customers will have more effective and efficient experiences with their local DSS.* For example, customers will no longer have to submit application materials and verifications for each individual program they are receiving. In the

future, when customers submit information to the agency, all programs will receive it simultaneously.

- ❑ *There will be more avenues for customers to conduct business with the agency.* In the past, walking into a local DSS may have been the only way to apply for benefits or address case management issues. The WSS vision is about allowing customers to choose the level of personal service they want, whether that is the traditional experience, a fully automated process, or something in between.

PEER STATES

North Carolina is one of six states to receive implementation funding. The consortium of WSS states routinely collaborates to share best practices, implementation strategies, and lessons learned. DHHS should regularly share the following messages with our peer states.

- ❑ *As a state-supervised and county administered state, North Carolina has 100 laboratories to experiment with new policies, processes, and innovations.* We are uniquely situated to try new things, even if that means not succeeding with every new idea.
- ❑ *North Carolina's door is open to our peer states.* We are happy to share any of our best practices, innovations, and lessons learned with our fellow WSS states and funders. We are also eager to hear about the new strategies that have been implemented in other states.

GENERAL PUBLIC

WSS is an effort to provide services more effectively and efficiently to low-income families. Counties are implementing best practices and innovations to care for the whole family, which results in families needing public assistance for a shorter period of time and becoming more successful. The public should be aware of the following features of WSS.

- ❑ *WSS and NC FAST are a good use of public resources.* By treating the whole family, it is likely that families will need public assistance for a shorter period of time. This will strengthen not only that individual family, but the community and the local economy.
- ❑ *WSS will help strengthen the community by enhancing the social safety net for low-income families.* Communities thrive when all families succeed. Helping families move out of crisis mode and into security means more stability for their children, an increased likelihood that parents can find and retain employment, and families can become fully engaged members of the community.