From Work Support to Work Motivator: Child Care Subsidies and Caseworker Discretion in the Post-Welfare Reform Era

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The 1996 legislative reform of welfare shifted provision away from cash assistance and toward a litany of work-support services, central among which are child care subsidies (Allard 2009). As part of a larger study of welfare reform in Florida, we conducted semistructured field interviews with more than 50 welfare transition caseworkers in four purposively selected regions. Consistent with Lipsky’s emphasis on worker decisions as concrete manifestations of policy intentions, we find that caseworkers’ interpretations of the priorities of TANF have substantial influence over decision making regarding the use and withdrawal of child care subsidies.

KEYWORDS child care subsidies, TANF casework, welfare reform, work requirement

INTRODUCTION

The 1996 legislative reform of welfare shifted provision away from cash assistance and toward a litany of work-support services, central among which are...
child care subsidies (Allard 2009). In 2009, 17 percent of all state and federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars went toward child care, almost twice that spent on other “work-related activities and supports” (Pavetti 2011). Still, the effects of such policy and funding shifts can be fully understood only by examining how child care services are delivered to clients, in this case by TANF caseworkers.

Particularly because stability in child care arrangements is associated with stability in employment (Hofferth and Collins 2000) and with favorable outcomes for child development (Loeb et al. 2004), further understanding of conditions associated with the presentation, use, and withdrawal of child care subsidies is needed. The purposes of this study are (1) to describe the role in child care subsidy distribution played by welfare caseworkers, who have both direct client contact and the authority to award and withdraw vouchers, and (2) in a broader sense, to examine subsidies as part of a devolved system of welfare provision.

As part of a larger mixed-methods study of welfare policy in particular and policy responses to poverty in general, we conducted semistructured field interviews with 50 welfare transition caseworkers in four purposively selected regions of the state of Florida. Although we did not set out to study child care subsidies in particular, they emerged as an integral part of the narratives caseworkers constructed about their day-to-day work with welfare clients. Consistent with Michael Lipsky’s (1980) emphasis on worker decisions as critical factors affecting how public policy is experienced by clients, we find that caseworkers’ interpretations of the goals and priorities of TANF have substantial influence over the availability and use of child care subsidies. Interview evidence suggests that caseworkers use TANF benefits in a variety of ways, including to secure clients’ attention and compliance by the threat of cash and other benefit withdrawals and to cushion the effects of transitioning from welfare receipt to paid employment. Our research uncovers the ways that caseworkers perceive and use care-related benefits as tools in the pursuit of both client and policy goals.

BACKGROUND

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the landmark Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The act established the TANF program, which combines an expectation that recipients work or engage in an approved, work-related activity, with the provision of a litany of supports including—depending on the needs of the individuals and the resources of their regions—training and education programs, counseling and mental health services, transportation supports, clothing allowances, and child care subsidies. While the federal government determines the broad boundaries of TANF policy, states and localities—assumed
to be best positioned to understand and respond to the distinct needs of their residents—are given discretion over the particulars of implementation. As a result, state, and even within-state, TANF programs vary in a number of important ways, including benefit levels, eligibility criteria, timing of the work requirement, conditions warranting exemption from work or other requirements, penalties for noncompliance, and both the quality and availability of services and supports (Office of Family Assistance 2009).

Despite these areas of variation, each state documents its performance for the federal government in the same ways: through both caseload reduction and the federally established work participation rate (WPR), defined as “the degree to which TANF families are engaged in work activities that lead to self-sufficiency” (Office of Family Assistance 2009, III-2). A family “counts” toward the WPR if an adult or minor head of household engages in a qualified work activity for a minimum of 30 hours per week, or 20 hours per week if the family also includes a child under age six. Through 2004, those states that performed well according to these measures were eligible for high-performance funding bonuses, while states that underperform continue to be subject to funding penalties, although this latter instance appears to be both rare and frequently remediable (Office of Family Assistance 2009).

Indeed, looking solely at the goal of caseload reduction, it is difficult to argue with TANF’s success: Between 1996 and 2010, the number of recipients declined by 63 percent and the number of recipient households declined by 57 percent (Office of Family Assistance 2011). There is substantial evidence, however, that reductions in the numbers of those receiving cash and other forms of TANF-based assistance are not attributable to declines in either poverty or income eligibility. Nationally, fewer than half of all TANF-eligible families receive the benefit, and the percentage of children in poverty who also receive TANF declined from over half in 1997 to fewer than one-quarter in 2007 (i.e., from 55 percent to 24 percent over 10 years) (Office of Family Assistance 2011). Moreover, caseload declines have shown themselves to be remarkably resistant to broader economic trends. From December 2007 to December 2009—in the midst of what has come to be known as the Great Recession—six states saw decreases in their TANF caseloads, with an additional 16 states reporting increases of between 0 and 10 percent (Pavetti, Trisi, and Schott 2011).

Why Florida?

One of the many attributes that differentiates TANF from its predecessor programs is the extent to which it has delegated policymaking authority to states, encouraging states, in turn, to delegate authority to localities (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2007). Because such diversity in programming at state and local levels complicates attempts to study and make recommendations at
a broad scale or from a single data source, we examine the policies and processes pursued by one state: Florida. Often cited as a national model for its success in caseload reduction (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), Florida stands out among states for the extent to which it has (1) delegated decision-making authority to regional workforce boards; (2) encouraged the entrée of private and for-profit companies into the provision of TANF services; and (3) instituted an aggressive system of rewards and penalties applied to the performance of both clients and service providers. Together, these elements make Florida a “most likely case” for observing how localized discretion and caseworker autonomy may interact with performance pressures in the implementation of public policy.

As in all states, participants in Florida’s Welfare Transition Program sign individual responsibility plans, documenting what behaviors are required of them as conditions for the continued receipt of cash and other forms of assistance (Florida Department of Children and Families [F-DCF] 2009). Individual compliance with behavioral requirements is important to caseworkers, agencies, and the state, as compliant individuals “help” the WPR. Compliance can be reinforced or rewarded with benefits, such as transportation vouchers, clothing allowances, or child care subsidies; conversely, instances of non-compliance lead to sanctioning, including reduction or termination of the cash and other benefits paid to families. In Florida, sanctions are applied in the most stringent form available to states: They are immediate (i.e., applied after a first offense), total (i.e., a 100 percent reduction), and full family (i.e., applied to the entire family benefit rather than to the adult portion only) [Office of Family Assistance 2009; for a full description of Florida’s sanction policies and procedures, see Schram, Soss, et al. 2009].

Child Care Subsidies in Policy

As both the real value and relative certainty of cash benefit receipt have declined, attention has shifted to understanding the effects of a TANF “package,” a collection of services and supports that, while not all tied exclusively or directly to TANF enrollment, has come to be viewed by recipients and caseworkers alike as an important cushion for families transitioning from welfare to work. Subsidies, generally delivered in the form of vouchers, are funded by a combination of federal and state dollars (Adams et al. 2006). In the wake of extensive caseload decline, maintenance of effort (MOE) rules at the federal level, requiring that total state transfer payments to low-income families do not fall below a certain level, have widely led to a diversion of funds, previously used for cash assistance, to child care subsidies (Looney 2005). For a period of one year, a state can transfer up to 30 percent of its TANF grant to the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and up to 10 percent to the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), as long as the total amount transferred does not exceed 30 percent of the current year’s
allocation. States are also permitted to spend TANF funds directly on child care (Matthews 2011b). As a result, state and federal TANF spending on child care increased by 10 percent from 2001 to 2009, while spending on cash assistance and work-related activities and supports declined by 8 percent and 13 percent, respectively (Pavetti 2011). It is, however, important to note that while TANF spending on child care may have increased, many states have cut their overall child care subsidy spending in response to budgetary pressures (Matthews 2011b).

Child care subsidies are a key component of the typical TANF package in Florida, where mothers must comply with work requirements after a child reaches three months old (Office of Family Assistance 2009). In 2009, the most recent year for which data are available, Florida led all states but one (Vermont) in the proportion of its TANF grant transferred to the CCDBG and the SSBG: 27 percent (Matthews 2011a). Current Welfare Transition Program policy explicitly allows caseworkers to grant child care assistance to families as (1) part of a diversion process where, in exchange for an immediate, one-time service package, a family agrees not to apply for TANF assistance for three months; (2) part of a TANF package which includes cash assistance and work requirements; and (3) part of a transitional service package which families can retain for up to two years after TANF exit, as long as they continue to submit documentation of work effort (F-DCF 2009).

Child Care Subsidies in Practice

Despite increases in the proportion of TANF funds used for child care subsidies, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) estimates that only 17 percent of all subsidy-eligible families received child care assistance in 2006 (HHS 2010). As of early 2009, 19 states reported waiting lists, reaching 220,069 children in California and 57,671 children in Florida. Moreover, these figures provide a snapshot of need for income-eligible families only; in 2010, in 35 US states, families with incomes at twice the poverty level (or $36,620 for a family of three) did not qualify for child care assistance, while families with incomes at 150 percent of the federal poverty level did not qualify for assistance in 13 states (Schulman and Blank 2010).

Of all families who receive assistance from the CCDBG, only 16 percent of US families and 7 percent of Florida families are simultaneously enrolled in TANF (Matthews 2011b). Of particular relevance in the face of child care funding spending cuts and waiting lists is the role of TANF in granting recipients “priority status” for access to child care subsidies either through the CCDBG or directly via TANF funds. As a recent New York Times article quipped, “[O]nly two kinds of families are reliably securing [child care] aid: those under the supervision of child protective services . . . and those receiving cash assistance” (Goodman 2010, A1). Thus, in addition to communicating eligibility for child care assistance, welfare transition
caseworkers represent an important bypass around waiting lists and service cuts.

However, despite the connection between TANF and child care assistance policy, studies have documented a number of gaps in service to TANF recipients, particularly after an initial period of receipt or soon after program exit. Among single mothers exiting TANF, half remain eligible for subsidies, but the take-up rate is consistently at 35 percent or less (Lee et al. 2004). Some individual-level differences in the retention of child care assistance may be attributable to the diversity in local programming that is characteristic of TANF more generally. An Urban Institute report finds substantial differences across states and locales in multiple key areas, including who determines eligibility for child care assistance; the amount of paperwork and number of interviews needed to secure benefits; the degree to which assistance is available in locating suitable care providers; the duration of initial eligibility periods; the processes for recertification of eligibility; and communication of eligibility criteria for transitional benefits (Adams et al. 2006).

Each of these points of discretion may represent substantial differences in burden for both caseworkers and parent-recipients, with increased burden widely associated with difficulty obtaining and retaining subsidies (Adams and Rohacek 2002; Shlay et al. 2004; Wilkins 2002). For example, states may grant initial subsidy certification periods that range from one month to one year to the length of a work assignment. Particularly in the latter instance, having a series of brief work or work activity assignments will mean that the child care subsidy ends each time the work assignment ends. This may make the maintenance of a subsidy arrangement prohibitively difficult, particularly because most states make parents responsible for initiating recertification of subsidy eligibility (Adams et al. 2006).

Policy Actors

Our examination of TANF and child care assistance policies, both nationally and in the state of Florida, has established a context for our analysis of the role of child care subsidies in a delegated welfare-to-work system. In this system, performance, understood as participation in work or work-related activities, is essential for securing favorable treatment for recipients, caseworkers, agencies, and states. Although work-support services can be both expensive and scarce, they are generally seen as worthwhile investments if they secure recipient participation and, ultimately, caseload reduction ideally through lasting employment. While TANF and child care policies are set largely at federal and state levels, local workforce regions must decide how resources can best be allocated and rules applied to secure the highest possible rates of work participation and program exits. As such, it is the local welfare-to-work agency—in particular, the caseworker—that is the site of subsidy information, subsidy referral, and, ultimately, subsidy
receipt. Indeed, as we describe next, differences in policy interpretation and application may be more substantive among caseworkers than among regions.

Sixteen years before the passage of PRWORA, Jeffrey Pratts (1979) and Michael Lipsky (1980) described those responsible for distributing public benefits and services as “street-level bureaucrats,” arguing that “[a]lthough they are normally regarded as low-level employees, the actions of most public service workers actually constitute the services ‘delivered’ by the government” (Lipsky 1980, 3). As such, public policy, as experienced by its targets, consists not so much of what is written about those targets but what is done to and for them. In a delegated system of welfare provision, the decisions made by TANF caseworkers are policy in action.

Several studies exploring the composition of the post–welfare reform caseworker workforce have highlighted a distinct staffing trend: the replacement of civil servants, social workers, and other professionals with a less-skilled workforce that includes former welfare recipients (Ridzi 2009; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Although these former recipients may be considered “success stories” (Schram and Soss 2001; Cherry 2007), their stories are seeded with a degree of vulnerability that is not unlike that of their clients. They are paid very little, are subject to tremendous pressure to meet performance management benchmarks, and must balance mentoring large numbers of clients toward success with enforcing welfare-to-work contract compliance (Hanbey 2003; Anderson, Halter, and Gryzlak 2004; Watkins-Hayes 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

A number of post–welfare reform studies have examined caseworker performance through the eyes of TANF recipients or through administrative records. A 1999 US Department of Health and Human Services review of 26 welfare-to-work offices in eight states concluded that caseworkers actively used sanctions to motivate clients to comply with specific program requirements or to take a general degree of “personal responsibility.” The report also found that while sanctioning was less effective with clients facing problems in areas such as substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, child care, and transportation, caseworkers can and will turn to sanctioning when they perceive themselves as having inadequate resources to identify and address clients’ work participation barriers (Office of Inspector General 1999). Moreover, evidence from one state suggests that there may be substantial discrepancies between the extent and severity of problems perceived by clients and problems documented by caseworkers (Ovwigho, Saunders, and Born 2008). Such discrepancies have been found to extend beyond barriers to employment to services offered for the remediation of such barriers. A 1999 Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare study found discrepancies between caseworkers’ claims of work support services offered to clients and clients’ reports of services they had been offered, specifically in the areas of child care, transportation, and clothing allowances.
The role of policy enactor may be further complicated by race. Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2009; 2011) notes that minority caseworkers are at times particularly demanding of clients from the same ethnic or racial group, using their position to promote the respectability of the group in the eyes of the broader majority mass public. These same caseworkers, at other times, use their local knowledge, community background, and personal experiences to sensitively and empathically work with clients of a similar background. Watkins-Hayes (2009) concludes, “[W]e must not assume that a singular racial agenda characterizes the views and actions of these bureaucrats, as they clearly make choices about whether and how to inject their social group memberships into the bureaucratic context” (212).

Our field research in Florida supports a portrait of caseworker decision making that blends elements of the “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1989; 2004) with elements of the “social construction of target populations” (Schneider and Ingram 1997). The caseworkers we interviewed try to make fitting decisions in particular cases “based on mutual, and often tacit, understandings of what is true, reasonable, natural, right, and good” (March and Olsen 2004, 4). They work to do what is “right” in a context in which norms, cues, and incentives frequently point in different directions. When assessing the case and deciding how to secure compliance, caseworkers report that they are also sizing up the person, asking themselves what to believe and whether this week’s problem represents an aberration or a larger pattern.

The underlying assumption is that, treated correctly, with the right combination of information, services, incentives, and consequences, any individual can constitute a program success, participating in work and documenting his or her work efforts while receiving TANF assistance and exiting the rolls permanently thereafter. At the same time, caseworkers can save time and resources if they identify individuals early on who have no intention of complying. One caseworker told us that she begins the assessment process at the first appointment:

The first time when I meet with a client, the first thing I’ll do is that I’ll look on the . . . screen that we utilize for sanctions. So I’ll do research and see how many sanctions they have had in the past or any, and that will give you a feeling if the client is going to participate. That is the first clue there. [. . . And] clients that are routinely starting [i.e., returning to] the program from the start, you know they will be unwilling to participate and will be someone that will always push the limits of the program.

The problem for caseworkers, however, is that they have few tools at their disposal for securing compliance, particularly after a recipient has secured employment. Even the promise of transitional benefits may not be enough
to keep employed individuals regularly reporting to their caseworkers and submitting required documentation of work efforts. It is this tension that prompted us to look more closely at the role of child care subsidies in caseworker and recipient interactions.

RESEARCH METHODS

The data used to examine the role that child care subsidies play in the reformed welfare-to-work system were collected as part of a five-year, mixed-methods study in Florida, which included analyses of administrative data, an online caseworker survey, and interviews with administrators and caseworkers. We focus here on findings from semistructured interviews conducted with 50 welfare transition caseworkers and supervisors from four purposively selected regions in the state. Interviews were conducted between March 2005 and February 2008. All interviews took place in person. Although the majority of individuals were interviewed only once and in a one-to-one setting, some were interviewed twice, and some interviews occurred with small groups. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the interviewers. We collaboratively reviewed, discussed, and coded the interview data.

We wish to clarify here that the primary purpose of this multiyear, multimethod study was to explore caseworker decision making and discretion, particularly in the area of sanction policy. Because we did not set out to study child care subsidies per se, the fact that they emerge with such persistence and prominence in the interviews, both as caseworkers discuss their daily activities and as they describe their efforts to secure compliance, is particularly noteworthy. While the semistructured nature of our interviewing process allowed us to pursue lines of questioning related to child care subsidies, it is important to note that specific subsidy questions were not included in the original interview protocol.

RESULTS

As noted, caseworkers were interviewed in four Florida regions. The vast majority (90 percent) of those interviewed were women. Nearly 9 of every 10 of those interviewed were nonwhite. Consistent with prior studies, about one-third of the caseworkers we interviewed were single mothers who formerly received welfare benefits (Ridzi 2009; Watkins-Hayes 2009). An even larger group reported a history with poverty or financial hardship, either in childhood or adulthood.
Doing Casework in Florida

One of the first things we asked caseworkers to do at each interview was to describe a “typical” morning. In response, nearly every caseworker in each of the four workforce regions where interviews took place indicated that she begins by checking her computerized client database to monitor compliance with welfare-to-work contracts. If we stop to unpack this image of compliance monitoring, we uncover a process that subsumes a large portion of the “typical” caseworker’s day: gathering documentation. It is not enough that recipients are working or participating in a work-related activity; they must be able to document their participation or, barring that, to document “good cause” reasons for failing to participate. While this may seem like a minor distinction, caseworkers emphasize that what they need from clients is not a qualitative assessment of how their job search, training program, or new position is going, but concrete evidence that they have completed their requisite participation hours. The required documentation necessary to avoid a sanction did vary across regions. For instance, some regions required a doctor’s note if a child was sick, but others did not. Some regions required 40 hours of work-related activities per week while others required 30 or 35. Yet the process was basically the same everywhere: If clients did not demonstrate compliance, the sanction process would be initiated by the caseworker. One administrator summed up the work of front-line caseworkers as follows:

If you talk to any case manager here, they will tell you they’re not a case manager; they’re a technician. They spend about ten percent of their time on their clients. Their time is about being a technician, and that’s the way the program is written. They’re doing what they have to do under this system.

During an interview with three caseworkers from one workforce region, group members discussed the “high stakes” nature of documenting work participation, with failures being clearly attached to consequences both for themselves and for their clients:

Caseworker 1: So [work participation is] important because it’s very visible and you see it as a failure if you don’t see the numbers, and that’s the whole point, is to get people to participate.

Caseworker 2: Right, yeah. We can’t make them self-sufficient if they don’t participate.

Thus, “the numbers” are a benchmark for both recipient and caseworker success: an indicator that the system is working as it should. While the aim is formally and rhetorically focused on securing the slippery concept
of “self-sufficiency,” in practice, just about any job at any wage is viewed as preferable to no job, particularly in a context in which participation is linked to benefits. Indeed, the frame of self-sufficiency permeated our interviews in all four workforce regions, particularly with those caseworkers who generally endorsed the more disciplinary attributes of the program. In interviews, however, caseworkers expressed concern and frustration about the limited tools at their disposal for ensuring that recipients fulfill their TANF obligations. The majority of those interviewed held favorable opinions of the state’s sanctioning policy; if they hazarded a critique at all, it was generally that the sanctions were too lenient or easily circumvented. At the same time, however, caseworkers worried about their sanctioned clients, especially those whose cases terminated with a sanction, effectively cutting the family off from the entire TANF package including child care assistance and other work supports. As one caseworker said, “Some of them [my clients] still get sanctioned though. I am assuming that it’s their choice. I don’t like to sanction.”

In a very real sense, recipient compliance is good for everyone: the client, the caseworker, the agency, and the state. While caseworkers viewed their clients as ultimately responsible for providing documentation of work efforts or of “good cause” reasons for failing in these efforts, the problem of how best to engage, educate, and motivate these clients was ever-present.

Even when you sanction them, they still don’t—I don’t wanna say they don’t get it. I think sometimes they elect not to get it, you know, because I think it’s this idea that this will always be here: “They’re never going to cut me off. I have kids!” You know, it’s that whole accountability thing, because we have to be accountable, so I think when you get a customer that doesn’t feel that they have to be as accountable, you can get frustrated.

The Value of Child Care Subsidies to Recipients

Caseworkers introduced the topic of child care assistance in two primary contexts during our interviews: first, as something TANF recipients value, sometimes more than cash assistance; and second, as a key component of the sanctioning process. These two thematic “homes” are tightly linked; indeed, if recipients did not value their subsidies, the threat of withdrawal would have little use in motivating those behaviors that are so essential to the system as a whole. The value that recipients attach to their TANF compliance is accentuated by the fact that TANF policy gives TANF enrollees priority over other low-income families for the receipt of child care subsidies.

Those we interviewed occasionally referenced firsthand, experiential knowledge of the value of child care assistance. As we document in detail elsewhere (Schram, Houser, et al. 2009; Schram, Soss, et al. 2009), Florida
caseworkers are disproportionately women of color, with one-third of those interviewed reporting previous welfare receipt and still others noting a history of economic hardship. Thus, as one caseworker noted, her personal experience with the value of child care leads her to emphasize to clients that a sanction means the loss of the entire package of TANF benefits, including child care.

I feel that we . . . stress the [fact], “Please don’t let your case close due to a sanction because of the child care.” And we know that child care is so crucial to them. I mean, I’m a single parent; child care’s crucial to me.

One caseworker shared that she spends a substantial portion of her day dealing with not work experience assignments or job searches but child care referrals, documentation, and related problems. Several others expanded on this theme by describing clients who at least appear to be participating for the child care alone, including one who sees her job search as “payment” for her subsidy rather than as something that might actually lead to a job, and another who needs child care so that she can address her problems with addiction. Caseworkers differed markedly in the degree to which they censured such short-term uses of a “work first” program. There was widespread agreement, however, that the value attached to child care assistance made it an important tool for getting clients’ attention and securing their compliance. Thus, while TANF policy on paper addresses the child care subsidy as a work support, the policy in practice allows for its use as a work motivator.

Subsidies as a Disciplinary Tool

Although the term discipline is often used synonymously with punishment, its meaning may subsume any form of training that promotes desirable behaviors and extinguishes undesirable ones. Thus, a disciplinary tool may work as a reward (incentive) or punishment (consequence) but always as a tool for training. Our interviews with Florida caseworkers revealed two disciplinary uses of child care subsidies: first, as a deterrent for behavior that might lead to a sanction; and second, as an attention-securing measure when a sanction is imminent. We address each of these instances in turn.

First, because recipients value child care, it can prompt them to engage in activities that they may not find inherently useful, such as work readiness courses or volunteer experiences. Even when caseworkers know that what they are offering their clients in the form of a short-term activity has no direct relationship with an opportunity for paid employment, they also know that failure to participate in such activities will ultimately lead to a sanction and to the withdrawal of all TANF benefits.
Knowing all of this, caseworkers actively seek short-term motivators:

Sometimes you might have to come in here and volunteer for free, but that’s what you have to do if you want the child care. If you don’t have child care, then you can’t look for a job, so I use that and my personal background [a single parent] to try and help, and I think it helps sometimes.

In this first instance, child care assistance functions as a sort of reward: If clients do what is asked of them they will, at a minimum, receive a valued benefit that others in the state may wait months to receive. Moreover, should they get a job, they will have the necessary child care supports and structures in place to allow them to succeed.

The second way in which child care assistance functions as a disciplinary tool—as an attention-securing measure when a sanction is imminent—emerged in the interviews with greater frequency than the first. As previously noted, while closing a case due to sanction reduces the size of the total caseload, it does not necessarily improve an agency’s or a state’s WPR. Thus, caseworkers secure positive outcomes for both recipient-families and the system as a whole when they use the tools available to them to keep clients participating and documenting that participation. Caseworkers told us that an effective way of gaining clients’ attention even before a sanction is levied is cutting off the child care subsidy:

Caseworker (CW): I know what it’s like to not have child care. and that is the first thing that I cut off. . . .
Interviewer (I): Now, are you required to cancel the child care right away at the beginning?
CW: Um, you don’t have to, but that will get them to bring in the hours faster.
I: So you use it like a warning?
CW: Exactly.
I: Do all the case managers do that?
CW: Yes, all of the ones I’ve talked to. I’ve talked to other managers about their cases, and they say that’s the first thing they do is to cancel the child care. . . . That will get them to come in so you can avoid actually sanctioning them. . . . That works for a majority of [clients] [laughs] if you cancel the child care.
CW: Yeah, you have to sanction them and cancel their child care. . . . First thing we do when we send out the prepenalty, as soon as they fall out of compliance, we cancel the child care right away.
As soon as you send out the 2290 you are supposed to cancel the child care, but some people don't.
I: Some case managers wait to cancel the child care?
 CW: Yes, that's what I'm saying.
I: So folks lose their child care even if they eventually come into compliance before the prepenalty has ended?
 CW: Yes.
I: And how long does it take to be reinstated once they come into compliance?
 CW: Oh, right away. It's nothing, you know.

Because sanctions build on one another, with minimum periods for the removal of benefits growing longer with each additional infraction, garnering participants' attention and compliance prior to levying a sanction can be viewed as a service—a “wake-up call” preferable to a lengthy break in service or even case closure. But, as one caseworker told us, this action is also tinged with frustration and even desperation: “[I]f they don’t turn [their time sheets] in, then I will automatically cut their day care... The child care is really the only thing I can use against them.”

In addition to being used to secure compliance while an individual is actively participating in TANF, the promise of two years’ eligibility for transitional child care and transportation assistance can be used to motivate clients to remain in contact with their caseworkers even after they have secured satisfactory employment. A source of substantial frustration for those we interviewed was recipients’ tendency to stop submitting documentation of participation hours after successfully securing employment. To such clients, it may appear to make little sense to continue with the burdensome process of hand-delivering or faxing time sheets or pay stubs to caseworkers when their earnings make them ineligible for continued receipt of cash assistance. However, from the perspective of the Welfare Transition Program as administered across all the workforce regions, such documentation is important at a minimum because the case cannot be closed “successfully” (i.e., as entered employment) if there is no evidence documenting employment. So, once again, child care functions as the “hook”: the reminder that the client is still tied to TANF and must comply with the totality of its requirements to continue receiving benefits that support her work efforts.

Indeed, as testimony both to the value of child care subsidies and their utility as tools for securing compliance, several caseworkers shared the lengths to which participants have gone to regain a subsidy once it has been lost to sanction. In an inversion of the goals of a “work first” program, former recipients “sanctioned off” TANF at times quit jobs so they could reestablish eligibility for the full package of supportive services:
I tell 'em, “Do not.” I say, “Do not get your case closed with a sanction. Get it closed out in good standing. Because you never know if you’re going to need child care, and if you need child care, and you get sanctioned,” I say, “you’re not going to be able to just come back.” I say, “Even if you don’t want to go on the system again and you get a job, you’re not going to be able to just come back and get child care, because you closed out due to a sanction. . . . You’re gonna have to start the whole process over.” So I try to tell them that. And there are a few people who get their case closed out due to a sanction, and then they call me, and I say, “Didn’t I tell you? [laughs] You don’t want to do this!”

I: So how do you handle that with all these people who don’t get to have child care anymore?

CW: Well, we just reiterate to them that if they have a sanction on their record, they will lose child care.

I: So what do they do?

CW: They try and get by. Maybe rely on family or maybe even reapply.

I: But they can’t get child care for how long after they’ve had a sanction?

CW: If you are sanctioned, and let’s say two months down the road you get a job. And they bring us documentation showing they are working, and they ask for child care, I’ll look and see that they have a sanction and tell them they are not eligible for child care. . . . Unless they reapply. The only way to get child care is to reapply for cash assistance.

I: So, well, that’s kind of tough because they’re working, but they have to reapply to “cure” their sanction?

CW: Correct.

I: Do some people then say that they won’t take the job because they need the child care, so they’ll go back on welfare, cure the sanction to be eligible for child care, then they’ll take the job?

CW: Some people do that, yes. Some people quit [their jobs].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With a shift in funding and public policy attention away from cash assistance and toward employment services and supports, we need improved understanding of how a cadre of benefits—from clothing allowances to work readiness trainings to child care subsidies—is being used to cushion transitions from welfare to work. We explore this issue in Florida, a state distinguished both by sharp caseload reductions through the mid-2000s and by substantial delegation of administrative and service delivery authority to regional levels and individual caseworkers. This effort to place decision-making authority in the hands of those with in-depth knowledge of
local economic and social conditions highlights the importance of bringing the study of child care subsidies down to the level at which they are realized for TANF participants: the level of caseworker–client interaction. We find that it is at this level that pressures to produce client outcomes turn child care subsidies from one work support among many into a disciplinary tool.

We draw on the work of Lipsky (1980) and Prottas (1979) to consider caseworkers as the front-line expressions of TANF policy. We find that caseworkers hold shifting and sometimes conflicting views of Florida’s Welfare Transition Program, at times valuing the rules that keep recipients from “taking advantage” of the system and at other times worrying about clients, such as one young woman “who didn’t know she was supposed to take her child care referral to the place, and didn’t do it for an entire month, and she was eventually sanctioned because she didn’t have quality child care.” Those we interviewed desired positive outcomes for their clients, as well as positive performance numbers—in both increased work participation rates and decreased caseload size—that would signal success for themselves and their employers. Thus, even the desire to help fell within a socially constructed frame of self-sufficiency achieved through documented work effort.

Caseworker decisions about benefit provision and discipline are motivated both by desire to help clients and by performance pressures. Importantly, child care subsidies can serve both motivations, even simultaneously. Caseworkers can use the threat of subsidy removal to motivate behaviors which may hold no intrinsic value for clients but which are essential to documenting work participation; this works whether the caseworkers themselves believe these tasks to be part of some larger scheme of essential training in responsibility or appropriate workplace behavior or simply tasks that will allow clients to remain connected until a genuinely worthwhile opportunity arises.

We find that caseworkers also use child care subsidies in overtly disciplinary ways, at times withdrawing them in a first instance of noncompliance, even if the noncompliant behavior has no direct bearing on actual work performance (e.g., failure to submit a pay stub or time sheet). On the one hand, this may act as a proactive, protective, and easily remedied signal: a way of drawing clients back into compliance before a sanction can bring longer-term harm and disruption. Withdrawal of a child care subsidy, which involves minimal paperwork and is readily restored with a return to compliance, may be viewed as a way to avoid the more substantial emotional, time, and financial burdens associated with formal sanctions. On the other hand, however, subsidy withdrawal is a potentially risky tool. As one caseworker noted, “Without the child care, they can’t work.” This reality makes the abrupt withdrawal of a subsidy an effective tool but one that may easily endanger the very accomplishment—a successful job placement—that is purported to be the raison d’être of the reformed welfare system.
Our interviews reveal that there may be unanticipated, and even per-
verse, consequences to the use of child care subsidies as disciplinary tools. 
Even as caseworkers talked about the multiple challenges facing their clients, 
they were very clear that the quality of a caseworker’s performance is linked 
not to success in helping clients overcome specific problems with addiction, 
violence, or illiteracy but to securing work participation even in jobs that 
appear to have few prospects for retention, advancement, or a living wage. 
Caseworkers from one region reported that they work in teams and that the 
teams are in competition:

I think some of us brag. Like go, “Oh, I got my one hour [of work 
participation from a client].” . . . There’s definitely competition, because 
we’re all teams . . . And we’re graded as a team as well, so . . .

Certainly, having a parent quit a job so that she can reestablish eligibility for 
TANF and secure child care assistance seems a far from desirable develop-
ment, but one to which caseworkers seem surprisingly resigned. According 
to TANF policy, if a case closes in good standing, parents retain subsidies 
for up to two years, ensuring continuity of care. In practice, however, any 
one of a number of factors—breaks between work activities, job instability, 
or sanctioning—can lead to abrupt gaps in child care assistance lasting from 
days to months.

While the ways in which young children may be affected by disrup-
tions in child care assistance did not emerge as a theme in our interviews, 
we raise it here in light of research evidence linking stability in child 
care arrangements with positive child outcomes, including lower levels of 
hyperactivity-inattention (Romano, Kohen, and Findlay 2010), higher levels 
of cognitive proficiency (Loeb et al. 2004), and better language development 
(Tran and Weinraub 2006). The cutting off of the child care subsidy can affect 
stability in a number of ways depending on a variety of factors: how quickly 
the care provider finds out, how quickly the parent finds out, whether the 
parent can pay independently for care, and the amount of debt the parent 
has accrued for time the child spent in care after subsidy withdrawal. At a 
minimum, this suggests that the optimistic assessment of one caseworker 
concerning the quick “on again, off again” nature of subsidy extension and 
withdrawal—“It’s nothing, you know”—may hide a much more complex 
reality.

Our research uncovers important ways that caseworkers perceive and 
use care-related benefits as tools in the pursuit of both client and policy 
goals. In a heavily delegated workforce system characterized by rigorous 
enforcement of compliance at multiple levels, caseworkers’ efforts to inter-
pret and apply policy priorities pertaining to the use and withdrawal of 
child care subsidies work at times to the disadvantage of clients. Overall, 
we uncovered greater variation in policy interpretation and application at
the level of the caseworker than at the regional level. Interestingly, however, it is this very process of regional delegation that allows for the entrée of a variety of organizations, as well as a variety of individual actors, into the TANF implementation arena. Our findings suggest a need both for greater policy oversight and for enhanced training and professional development opportunities for caseworkers. On a broader scale, there may be grounds for questioning the narrow focus on workforce participation as the primary, if not the only, goal of TANF.

REFERENCES


