

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEW REPORT ON WELFARE AND WORK BY LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY POVERTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE TO BE RELEASED AT CONFERENCE IN EDISON

EDISON – A new report on a study by the Legal Services of New Jersey Poverty Research Institute (LSNJPRI) will be released at a half-day conference at the Middlesex County College Technical Services Center in Edison, from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, December 1, 2010. The report, entitled “**‘I Want to Make It on My Own’: A Qualitative Assessment of How New Jersey’s Welfare and Workforce Development Programs Can Better Perform their Core Mission of Moving People from Welfare to Sustainable Work,**” will be presented by its principal researchers, Zane Kratzer, senior researcher and policy analyst for LSNJPRI, and Melissa Quaal, LSNJPRI co-director. Following a video presentation of the report, two panels of experts will offer responses to its findings and recommendations. (Panel members are listed below.)

According to Melville D. Miller, Jr., LSNJ president, “Recognizing the critical importance of Work First New Jersey, we undertook this study to try to identify ways that it can be strengthened. For many years, growing anecdotal accounts have suggested that

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Work First New Jersey leaves many behind; too many are unable to find or keep work, protect their families and themselves, and keep their heads above water. As qualitative research,” he continued, “our data provides a unique window into the lives and needs of those trying to escape poverty and leave welfare.”

Describing the research approach, Kratzer said, “The study involved 125 in-person interviews, comprising 59 clients, 61 caseworkers, and five senior staff members. A procedure was used to target the client sample towards work-mandated clients. The sample was drawn from five counties – Monmouth, Cumberland, Camden, Essex and Hudson – that include the majority of the welfare population in New Jersey, and cover rural, urban and suburban areas as well as the three geographical regions of the state.”

“Although there were many individual examples of success,” Quaal noted, “our study found that the goal for the work participation rate set by law creates pressures that actually interfere with meeting clients’ needs.” Kratzer added, “The overriding sentiment of those interviewed expressed three main themes: the people eligible for and receiving assistance truly need it; their individual needs and situations must be addressed if they are to leave welfare and poverty behind; and Work First New Jersey has not always been able to respond in a way that would have helped move clients toward long-term, self-sufficient work, in part because the needs can overwhelm the system.”

The two panels of experts who will respond to the new report are expected to include Bruce Nigro, former director of the Essex County Division of Welfare, New Jersey Department of Human Services; Allison Spinelli, division director, One-Stop

Administration and Operations, Cumberland County, New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development; Anne Christensen, director, Project Home for Women Rising in Jersey City; Jeanette Page-Hawkins, director, Division of Family Development, New Jersey Department of Human Services; Mary Ann Conners, dean, Corporate and Community Education, Middlesex County College; Judy Formalarie, senior policy analyst, State Employment and Training Commission; and Andrea Hetling, assistant professor, Rutgers University, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Policy.

Regarding the report's recommendations, Kratzer said, "While preserving and expanding upon effective existing practices, programs and resources, an improved Work First New Jersey model would provide up-front assessment of client needs; adequate cash assistance and services to respond to those needs; critical information throughout a client's time on welfare; ongoing relationships with helpful staff; alternative program models and flexibility with regard to clients' training and educational needs; and transitional benefits substantial enough to support workers entering the labor market."

Quaal noted that, "The upcoming federal reauthorization of the TANF block grant has some potential to bring about change that will impact New Jersey's Work First program. At the same time," she added, "policy change at the state level is not dependent on action at the federal level. In fact, careful attention must be paid to actions the State can take to address current Work First New Jersey challenges in case the federal reauthorization is delayed." The full text of the report will be available on the day of its release, December 1, on the LSNJ Web site, www.lsnj.org.

Legal Services of New Jersey, located in Edison, is the coordinating office for the state’s system of Legal Services programs, which provide essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people in all twenty-one counties in New Jersey. To help reduce the legal needs of those in poverty, the Poverty Research Institute conducts systemic research on the incidence, effects and other aspects of poverty in the state, and the relationships among poverty, work and public policy—and makes its findings available to the public.

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