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Testimony Provided Before the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee, Human Resources Committee, House of Representatives, Oregon State Legislature

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February 17, 1981

Testimony Presented Before

Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee
House Human Resources Committee
Oregon State Legislature
Salem, Oregon

Norman L. Wyers
School of Social Work
Portland State University

My name is Norman Wyers. I am an Associate Professor, with a specialty in income maintenance from Columbia University, at the School of Social Work, Portland State University. I would like to talk with you today about the formulation of well-articulated welfare policy, in this case policy which would more effectively link social services with income maintenance. I am using this particular piece of welfare policy for illustrative reasons but also because it is badly needed.

As you know, the Adult and Family Services Division administers several income maintenance programs, including AFDC, General Assistance, and OSIP. It also administers selected social services. The Children's Services Division administers and monitors most of the non-AFS social services to children and families throughout the state. The linkage between the social and income maintenance services is not always optimal.

The separation of social services from income maintenance was mandated by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1972, capping intense activity during the previous several years. States were to submit plans for separation by October of that year and to implement their plans by January 1, 1973. The mandate was rescinded three years later, effective December 7, 1976. During that three-year time period, the majority of states (Oregon included) formally separated social services from the receipt of financial aid. While most of those states remain in the posture of separation, many are considering a return to the earlier merged model. The effects of separation are not known, however. Thus, if Oregon were to revert to the merged model, it would be doing so without empirical evidence about which aspects or features of separation might be continued and which eliminated. Only two known studies

have been conducted in this critical area, one in Virginia and the other in Hennepin County, Minnesota. Both of those studies revealed that both recipients and workers were more favorably disposed to the merged model and that the utilization of social services was positively correlated with the merged model as well. This possibility was not considered before separation was mandated.

My point in reviewing this bit of history with you is to encourage you to know as much as you possibly can about the programs directly related to public welfare before you formulate welfare policy. The effects of welfare policy must be anticipated during the formulation phase and evaluated during the implementation phase. Any approach which falls short of these two standards is apt to be ineffective for users and costly for government to finance.

Let me cite a few examples related to the separation of social services from income maintenance:

1) What would be the affect on utilization on public welfare if social services and income maintenance were to once again be merged? On social services? What is the policy of the State of Oregon concerning utilization? Under-utilization?

2) What is the definition of income maintenance practice in this state? Does it contain a service component?

3) What is the affect of training on error rates of income maintenance eligibility workers? At what point is the reduction in training programs no longer a savings strategy but one which is cost-inefficient? What are the skills necessary for proper implementation of federal and state guidelines? What are those guidelines?

4) What is the appropriate relationship between income maintenance practice and social work? Are owners of BSW's preferable to non-specified degree holders? To high school graduates?

5) What is the appropriate relationship between income maintenance and social service provision? How sound is the Information and Referral process? What are the antagonisms between the two services?

6) What will be the effect of any change in policy on staff morale? Staff turnover? Career possibilities? The ability of staff to meet goals and objectives?

7) What will be the effect of any change in policy on recipient morale? Will help be offered, or will recipients develop negative, self-deprecating attitudes about themselves? Will the fear of stigma turn many away from asking for assistance?

These are literally but a few of the questions which must be addressed during the welfare policy formulation process. I have used income maintenance and social services as an example only. They are tough questions; the answers are tough as well. But answers must be found, choices must be made. Choices of this nature lead to deliberate policy positions. If there is no hard-fought policy on which to build welfare programs, those programs will not be accountable to you, to users, to staff, or to the citizens.

In conclusion, let me reiterate my awareness of how difficult the welfare policy formulation task is. It is value laden, it is political, it is compromise. But it must be done. We of the School of Social Work would gladly work with you in those areas where we have expertise and opinions.

Thank you for your attention.