

Work First New Jersey

Biennial Report

To The Governor and Legislature

October 2008 through June 2011



State of New Jersey
Department of Human Services
Jennifer Velez, Commissioner

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SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

The economy has had a significant impact on social services, resulting in more people turning to government programs for assistance. The Work First New Jersey (WFNJ) welfare program is among the social service programs that make up the safety net for New Jersey residents and accordingly, has been the support for many residents who lost jobs, exhausted unemployment or otherwise found themselves in need during the recession. The result: the number of families receiving WFNJ benefits has been rising steadily and the number of single people and childless couples receiving benefits has grown dramatically.

During the reporting period, the Department's major focus for the program was to keep up with the demand by supporting counties' efforts to provide timely and accurate benefits and services to this growing population of Work First New Jersey recipients.

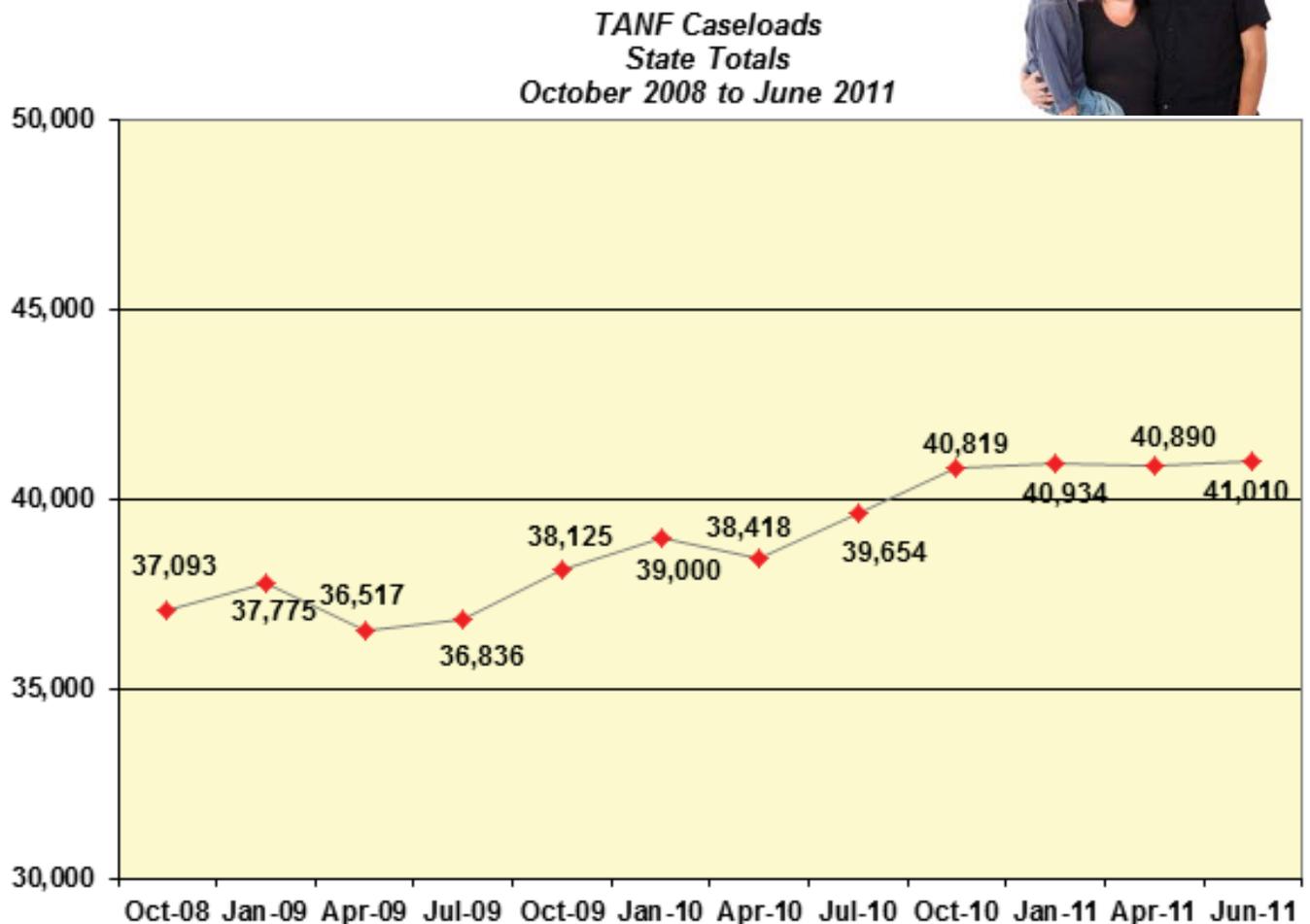
While implementing short-term solutions to address caseload growth, the Department of Human Services (DHS) was investing in a longer-term solution – improving technology to strengthen and streamline the administration of the program. In 2009, a contract was awarded to develop a state-of-the-art, comprehensive information system to support Work First New Jersey and numerous other social services programs.

These two priorities – managing the growing caseload during economically difficult times and the development of a new information system - were the primary focus of the Work First New Jersey program during the time period covered by this report.

SECTION 2. THE ECONOMY AND THE SAFETY NET

Since October 2008, the caseload of families receiving Work First New Jersey benefits has increased steadily, reversing the trend of declining caseloads in the 2006-2008 period.

The caseloads for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) had been fairly flat in calendar years 2006 and 2007. However, as the recession took hold, the caseloads began trending upward around the beginning of the reporting period, growing from 37,093 in October 2008 to 41,010 in June 2011, about an 11 percent increase.

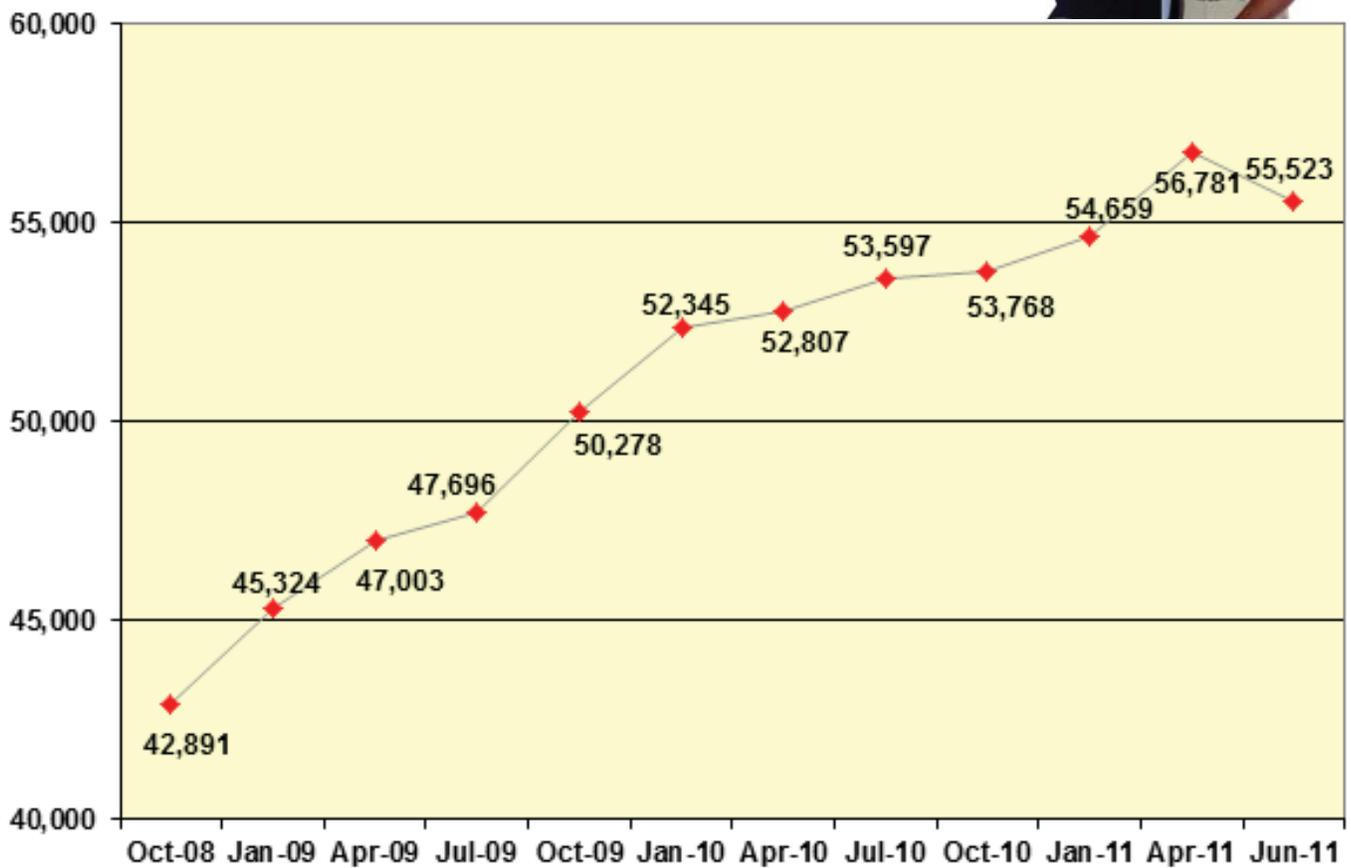


(See Appendix B for current caseload data)

The caseload for General Assistance - welfare for single people and childless couples – started increasing prior to the reporting period but growth increased significantly from 42,891 in October 2009 to 55,523 by June 2011 – a 29 percent increase.

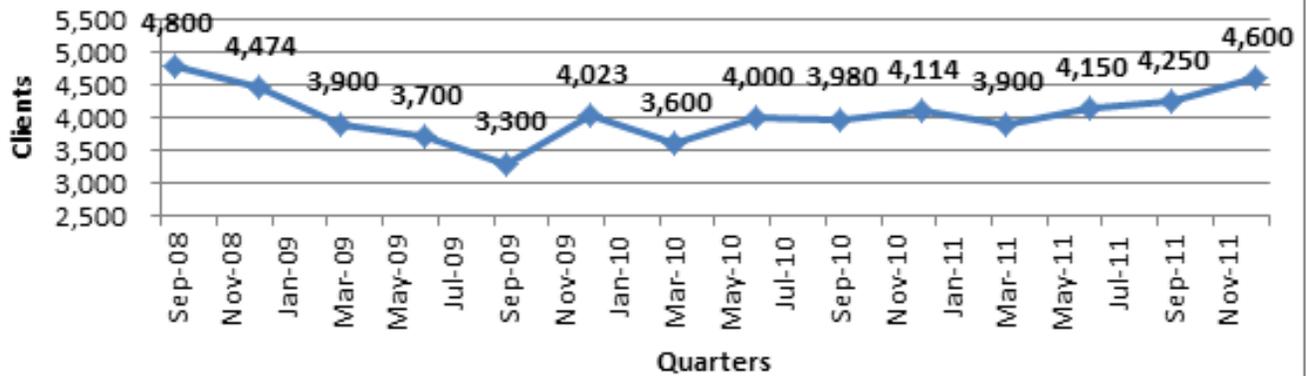


*State Totals
October 2008 to June 2011*

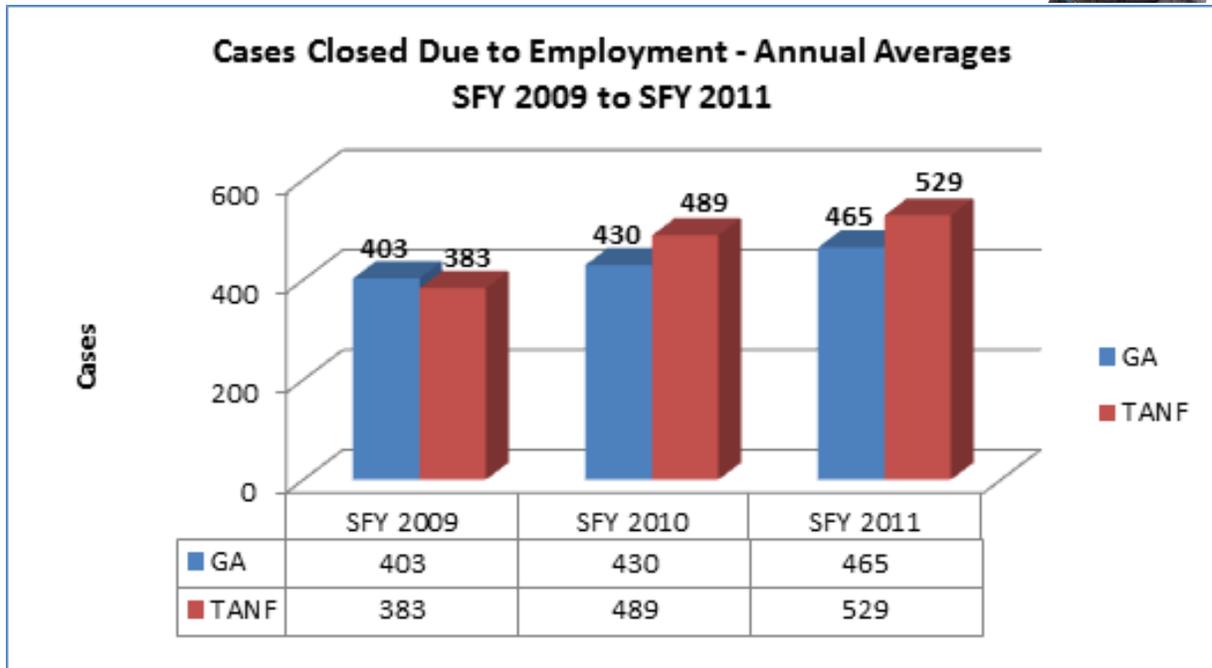




**Number of WFNJ TANF Clients in Employment Directed Activities
Quarterly - 2008 to 2011**



During the reporting period, the number of TANF clients engaged in employment/directed activities began at 4,800 clients in September 2008 and ended at 4,600 in November 2011, with the low being September 2009 at 3,300 clients.



The chart above represents the state fiscal yearly average of WFNJ TANF and GA clients who left welfare for employment during the reporting period. For General Assistance clients, the number of people whose cases closed due to employment was fairly constant in 2006, 2007 and through the reporting period with the number ranging from 400 to 500 people a month. At the same time, the GA caseload increased by 29 percent from October 2008 to June 2011.

For the TANF caseload, the number of families whose cases closed due to employment dropped significantly from 2006 when it was about 900 a month to the 400 to 500 range per month during the reporting period. This drop coincided with the caseload rising – 11 percent during the reporting period.

The reduction in the percentage of cases closing due to employment is not surprising, given the economy during most of the reporting period.

INCREASING CASELOAD/LIMITED RESOURCES



The increase in caseload coincided with limited resources at the county welfare agencies – the agencies that administer WFNJ. Most counties struggled with budget constraints during this time period, and as a result, were understaffed going into 2008. During the reporting period, county welfare agencies, which also administer the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) - formerly Food Stamps - and Medicaid program, reported that more clients than ever were coming into their offices, due in large part to a 35 percent increase in Food Stamps recipients.

EFFORTS IN RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMY



During these difficult economic times, DHS worked cooperatively with the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development to make information available to New Jersey's long-term unemployed, many of whom had never accessed the welfare system before. Through web postings and direct mail, New Jersey residents who were losing unemployment insurance benefits learned of other possible supports, including Work First New Jersey benefits.

SECTION 3. CASS (CONSOLIDATED ASSISTANCE SUPPORT SYSTEM)

Technology is a key tool in determining eligibility, establishing benefit levels and supporting the overall operation of WFNJ. To effectively administer the state's welfare programs, it has become critical to replace the numerous antiquated, obsolete information systems that support WFNJ.

In August, 2009, a contract was awarded to Electronic Data Systems (EDS), subsequently acquired by Hewlett-Packard, to develop a cutting edge social service information system that will improve client access, integrate information across five major social service programs – including Work First New Jersey -- and provide a more efficient and cost-effective operation.

CASS will replace the 16 obsolete data processing applications that are increasingly incapable of meeting today's program needs. The new system will modernize the way services are administered to the more than 1.5 million New Jersey residents in the following major programs: Work First New Jersey, NJ SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), child care, Medicaid health benefits and NJ FamilyCare health benefits.

Most of the programs to be supported by CASS are administered by the 21 county welfare agencies. The new computing and software technology will transform the way that business is conducted. For the first time, benefit and service delivery programs will be fully integrated. This will enable



county welfare agencies to provide more coordinated, streamlined services to clients using one information system.

Specifically, CASS will provide the following benefits:

- Information about clients will be shared across CASS-administered programs so New Jersey residents won't need to apply for each program individually. CASS can weigh eligibility across all programs supported by the information system.
- Staff from various programs will be able to view information about all services that a family is receiving, allowing for better case management.
- Programs will be administered more uniformly from county to county.

During this reporting period, hundreds of WFNJ program rules, as well as the rules for the other programs supported by CASS, were inventoried and then assembled as part of the "requirements validation" phase of this project. This process required over a thousand hours of state and CWA staff time. This effort was a top state priority from 2009 through 2010, and the development of the system will continue to be a major focus until the project launches in the fall of 2013. Upon its completion, CASS will be one of the most comprehensive social service information systems in the country.

SECTION 4. CONCLUSION



Much of the program activity during the reporting period focused on caseload growth resulting from economic conditions. Despite the significant stress the recession placed on the Work First Program, major strides were made in the procurement and initial stages of development of a new information system, CASS, that ultimately will strengthen the administration of the five major programs administered through the new system. This, in turn, should result in overall improved service delivery to New Jersey residents.

SECTION 5. APPENDICES

Appendix A: A summary of WFNJ Program Expenditures covering this report period.

Appendix B: In accordance with New Jersey P.L. 1997, c. 13, the Department submits a Quarterly Progress Update on Work First New Jersey to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee and the Assembly Appropriations Committee. Appended is a copy of the most recent report, covering the quarter ending December 2011.



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