

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: July 17, 2016

CONTACT: Margaret Allen, Catawba County Social Services Public Information Officer, mallen@catawbacountync.gov, 828-695-6583

‘CHAMPION OF WELFARE REFORM’ RECEIVES ORDER OF THE LONG LEAF PINE AT HER RETIREMENT

HICKORY – Karen Heffner received the Order of the Long Leaf Pine at her recent retirement from Catawba County Social Services following 31 years of service. Recognized in 1998 as the “Champion of Welfare Reform” in the county, she has continued to work with county residents to help them become self-sufficient.

Among the most prestigious awards conferred by the Governor of North Carolina, the Order of the Long Leaf Pine is awarded to persons for exemplary service to the State of North Carolina and their communities that is above and beyond the call of duty and which has made a significant impact and strengthened North Carolina.

“Karen cares about making a difference in her community,” said John Eller, director of Catawba County Social Services. “She will forever be known for being a competent leader who was sought out across the state, and a champion for those in need. She will be greatly missed. Many of us are fortunate to have known and worked with her.”

Heffner, a social work supervisor for many years, was named Catawba County Employee of the Year in 1998 for spearheading the county’s Welfare Reform program. At the time, all counties were required to develop a plan for moving recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children into work placements following the passage of federal legislation in 1996. AFDC was established in the 1930s to help single mothers remain at home and raise their children. However, as more women entered the workforce, many people felt the program should be changed or abolished. Catawba County’s effort involved months of planning with area businesses people and other community leaders. The plan, which was designed to remove barriers to employment, was judged the best in the state by the North Carolina Division of Social Services.



Karen Heffner, retiring social work supervisor, receives the Order of the Long Leaf Pine from John Eller, director of Catawba County Social Services. Heffner was instrumental in developing the county’s Work First plan in the late 1990s, and continued to work with residents to help them find jobs and become self-sufficient.

“Every revolution has a champion,” wrote Jo Sloan, a Social Services program administrator at the time, in her letter nominating Heffner for the 1998 award. “This champion will work tirelessly for the cause, will develop a vision of how things could or should be, and will inspire others to become involved and vested in ‘the vision.’ Karen Heffner was the champion of welfare reform in Catawba County.”

Heffner was raised in Lenoir, N.C., and graduated from Appalachian State University with a degree in social science. She began her professional career with the Burke County Department of Social Services in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Treatment Unit and joined Catawba County Social Services in 1986 as an income maintenance caseworker in the Food Stamp unit.

Heffner transferred to the employment program area as a social worker with the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) program in 1990 and was named supervisor of both the JOBS and Day Care units shortly thereafter. She earned a master’s degree in social work from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1995. With the advent of Gov. Jim Hunt’s Smart Start program, Heffner led the way in the creation of a separate Day Care Unit for Catawba County Social Services. Once Congress began looking at welfare reform, she merged her JOBS program with Hunt’s Work First program.

In a recent interview, she said she viewed Work First as a successful program. When the program began, 1,224 county residents were receiving AFDC. By 1998, the caseload had dropped to 811. Today, there are typically fewer than 200 county residents participating in Work First at any given time. Work First is a time-limited program that pays persons a small amount while they are searching for a job or training for one. Most Work First participants wanted to work and appreciated the help in finding a job, Heffner said.

In the following years, she led innovative efforts to help Catawba County residents obtain and keep employment. She assisted in writing the grant for a housing initiative that helped many low-income families purchase their own homes. Heffner also developed and supervised the Work and Ride program through which 125 vehicles were donated and awarded to families struggling with transportation barriers to employment.

In collaboration with the faith community, she helped lead the Faces of Poverty Tour and worked with the Hickory YMCA on a youth poverty event to raise awareness of critical issues in the community. She also was a key collaborator with Catawba Valley Community College for employment initiatives. Heffner assisted the region with the non-custodial parent employment and helped connect low-income citizens with free tax preparation.

She was an early implementer of NCFAST, the statewide computer system designed to streamline the application process for Social Services benefits. She is a policy expert who assisted Social Services staff with state policy changes and advocated for changes that would benefit the families of Catawba County. In 2010, she developed a strong subsidized employment program for low-income persons, which proved to be very successful in linking citizens with work during the recession. She partnered with NC Works (formerly the Employment Security Commission) regarding job search, training, and job fairs. Heffner also serves on a number of community boards.

###