

METRO

★ ★ ★ ★ Sunday, January 21, 1990 B-1

Welfare outlays to double in decade

By Steven A. Capps
EXAMINER SACRAMENTO BUREAU

SACRAMENTO — California generally offers welfare recipients the highest benefits of any populous state in the country and, according to a new report, the cost of providing those benefits is going to double by the end of this decade.

Aid to Families With Dependent Children — the largest welfare program — will increase in cost from the current \$2.5 billion a year to about \$5.2 billion by the turn of the century, according to the report by the Commission on State Finance.

It is not that the number of welfare recipients is growing dramatically in California, the report said. By the year 2000, the report said, the number of California recipients of AFDC will grow from the current 1.8 million to about 2 million people, an increase of about 11 percent.

What's driving the cost up are automatic increases in monthly benefits that are tied to the cost of housing, food and other necessities in the state, the commission said.

According to the latest state-by-state report on welfare benefits, issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, only Alaska offers higher monthly benefits than California under the Aid

to Families With Dependent Children program.

State welfare rankings

That report, issued in 1988, said Alaska paid a family of four \$833, compared with \$753 in California. Vermont offered the same family \$676; Minnesota, \$621; Wisconsin, \$617; Connecticut, \$604; New York, \$596; and Massachusetts, \$595.

During his last year in office, Gov. Deukmejian is asking the Legislature to help balance the new state budget by freezing welfare benefits at current levels.

Deukmejian argues that because of a tight budget the state should cancel automatic cost-of-living increases for various health and welfare programs, saving about \$268 million during the 1990-91 fiscal year. Included is the automatic raise in monthly welfare benefits.

"If you've got a number of programs that have these automatic escalators in them, then why isn't there a law that requires an automatic increase in taxes every year?" Deukmejian asked recently. "In 27 years, I've never seen anybody go out and say, 'OK, we're going to build in all these increases and we're also going to have an automatic tax increase every year to fund it.'"

The welfare cost-of-living increase was suspended in 1982, when former Gov. Jerry Brown faced a huge budget deficit, and Deukmejian limited the increase the first year he took office, when he was dealing with the same deficit.

Cost to welfare family

While such a move this year would save the state millions, it

would cancel a \$30-a-month raise for the average welfare family, an increase critics say is sorely needed to help poor families keep up with the ever-rising cost of food and shelter in the state.

True, they say, California's welfare benefits may be among the highest in the nation, but try supporting a family in California — with its high housing costs — on what those benefits provide.

"Most of what we're talking about is not at the cost-of-living now," said Assemblyman Bruce Bronzan, D-Fresno, chairman of the Assembly Health Committee. "It's not enough for people to get by on now."

Kenneth Aslanian, who lobbies on behalf of a coalition of welfare rights organizations, said comparisons with other states are immaterial.

"Because other people are in deeper poverty, that doesn't mean we should do the same thing," he said. "In California, people cannot eat the last week of the month because of the levels of the grants. A family of two in San Francisco gets \$560 a month. I challenge anybody in San Francisco to live on \$560 a month. To me, welfare mothers are heroes by being able to sustain a family on that amount."