

New welfare plan drawing mixed reaction

By Jeff Cohan
Staff writer

Greater Avenues for Independence, the state's revolutionary new welfare program, debuted in Yolo County today amid uncertainty that it will work.

Known as GAIN, the system combines job training, counseling and placement with remedial education and child care in a program designed to get people off the welfare rolls.

According to county GAIN Coordinator Kim Thomas, 40 Aid to Families With Dependent Children recipients will undergo an orientation and basic math and English test this week.

"Everybody here is just really excited about getting started on the GAIN program and seeing bona fide clients," she said. "We're ready for them."

Thomas expects 1,700 Yoloans to participate in GAIN during the first eight months of its operation. Whether the program can ultimately help these people find jobs that will get them off welfare is debated.

Woodland lawyer Casey McKeever, the directing attorney in the Sacramento office of the Western Center on Law and Poverty, believes there are simply not enough good jobs available.

"GAIN deals with the supply of labor and not the demand," he said. "GAIN attempts to deal with part of the equation and doesn't help with the other."

"The job market has to be added."

"He is right. We're only dealing with half the equation," Thomas said when informed of McKeever's comments. The coordinator, though, thinks GAIN's job-training component offers a means to close the gap between employers' needs and welfare recipients' skills.

"Our task is to look at where the jobs are and get people the skills they need to compete for those jobs," she said. "We're going to try

match GAIN clients with what the labor market needs."

Kevin Aslanian, a spokesman for Welfare Rights, holds that what the labor market needs is low-paid workers.

"...most of the jobs that would be available would be jobs like waiters, hotel maids, menial jobs," he said. "You cannot live in this country on those jobs."

A labor market needs assessment, which is included in the Yolo County GAIN Plan, predicts: "The majority of jobs (80-90 percent) will be in the services and information industries. Many of these jobs will be entry-level and low-paying..."

"I think the direction of the program is going to be toward an external economy that has jobs that, one, pay relatively little, and two, just don't pay enough to be sufficient to support AFDC families," McKeever said.

Thomas, however, has high hopes.

"Service sector jobs don't necessarily mean low-paying jobs," she said. "In general, we're shooting for the 5-6-7-8-9-dollar-an-hour jobs at entry-level, and some even higher than that depending on the person's background and skills."

"We are dealing with heads of households, so we are concerned that the entering salary would be sufficiently high to reasonably lead to self-sufficiency for those families."

Aslanian directed his strongest criticism at the sanctions imposed on AFDC recipients who refuse to participate in GAIN.

The program is mandatory, although parents of children under the age of 6 can be exempted. Welfare officials can terminate AFDC aid to those who fail to take part.

"We punish children by subjecting them to total starvation because their parents didn't obey the welfare directors. That is barbarism at its height," Aslanian said.

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Thomas, though, feels Aslanian's concerns are exaggerated.

"What we did is vastly improve the federally mandated sanctions process," she said. "What we've done is try to make the process fairer, slow it down, make sure there are no misunderstandings, and do everything possible to make sure (an aid cutoff) doesn't happen under GAIN."

McKeever believes time will judge GAIN's benefits and drawbacks.

"I think it's going to take a year or two, maybe even longer than that, to get a good handle on it," he said.

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