

Capitol Report

Workfare touted as money-saver

Plan would give jobs to thousands on welfare, backers say

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Thousands of able-bodied welfare recipients would be put to work for public agencies and non-profit organizations under a sweeping statewide welfare reform proposal that state officials said Wednesday also would save state and federal taxpayers as much as \$136 million a year.

At the same time, proponents of the measure said social workers will be able to help people instead of merely handing out checks and "looking under beds" for welfare cheats, while welfare clients themselves will be spared ending up in "dead ends," warehoused by the system.

Thus did a bipartisan group of workfare proponents from the Assembly, the Senate and the Deukmejian administration describe a welfare reform bill they plan to introduce this week.

They called the proposal "historic," unique to the nation and a major revamping of the present welfare system.

Even an opponent conceded the program apparently will pass the Legislature and become law, breaking a stalemate on workfare that has lasted for years.

The opponent, Assemblyman Tom Bates, D-Oakland, chairman of the Assembly Human Services Committee, called the proposal a "Cadillac plan" designed by liberals and conservatives. "But the problem is it only gets five miles per gallon," he said.

Bates predicted the Deukmejian administration would use workfare to replace full-time state workers who are being laid off because of the governor's staff cutbacks.

Spokesmen for the Coalition of California Wel-

fare Rights Organizations denounced the proposal, saying the plan offers nothing more than demeaning "make work."

On the contrary, Assemblyman Art Agnos, D-San Francisco, claimed that what used to be called "workfare" has been changed to "fair work."

Agnos, a principal architect of the bipartisan compromise, explained that welfare recipients would be working for the equivalent of \$5.07 an hour, well above the minimum wage and even more than the average starting wage in the state.

Agnos said the recipients will do "additional jobs that could be done if people were available but that do not displace existing jobs."

That means they would work in printing plants, the state-clerical force and water quality laboratories, or as police auxiliaries, nurse or library aides, playground monitors or crossing guards, among other tasks mentioned.

As many as 170,000 of the state's 600,000 adult welfare recipients would take part in the program the first year, with 60,000 or more getting jobs in the private sector, the administration predicted. On their way to getting jobs, they would be offered training programs, work experience opportunities and schooling to help them compete in the workplace.

If the jobs they get pay less than they were getting on welfare, single parents would be subsidized while their child care and Medi-Cal benefits continued. Two-parent families could only continue to be subsidized for about three months because of federal law.

Agnos was joined by Secretary of Health and Welfare David Swoap and Director of Social Services Linda McMahon in a two-hour press confer-

ence that included Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, D-San Francisco, Assembly Minority Leader Pat Nolan of Glendale and Senate Minority Leader Jim Nielsen of Woodland among those endorsing the plan.

Others on hand were Assemblyman Ernest Konnyu, R-Saratoga, who will be the lead author of the proposal, Assembly members Gloria Molina, D-Los Angeles; Lucy Killea, D-San Diego; Wally Herger, R-Yuba City; and Sens. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, and Bill Greene, D-Los Angeles, all of whom are expected to be co-authors of the proposal.

Now that Agnos and Swoap have put the proposal together, "I'll take full credit for it," Speaker Brown joked. His endorsement appeared to signal few problems for the plan in the Assembly.

Agnos, Swoap, Konnyu, Killea, Herger and Molina have worked for months with the blessing of Brown and Senate President Pro Tem David Roberti, D-Los Angeles, to draft the compromise plan. Roberti remains uncommitted to the proposal, however.

The plan is based on workfare programs in three other states plus an experimental program in San Diego.

The scheme would be unique in the nation in at least two respects, Agnos and Swoap said. Those are the higher rate of pay and the fact that welfare recipients would sign a performance contract with their counties.

The contract would set forth their rights, the services the counties would provide them and their responsibilities and goals.

Bates and other critics, though, predicted little impact on the welfare rolls unless more full-time jobs are created in the economy.