

State lawmakers, officials offer workfare proposal

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SACRAMENTO — Lawmakers and top Deukmejian administration officials yesterday presented a bipartisan plan to drastically overhaul California's welfare system by putting recipients to work.

At the heart of the plan is a requirement that able-bodied welfare recipients, excluding mothers with children under the age of 6, enlist in job search and training programs aimed at placing them in private industry.

Public service work also would be performed, in some cases, but for more than minimum wage. Welfare recipients would continue to receive cash grants, medical care, food stamps and other present benefits while in the program.

The compromise, hailed as the most far-reaching welfare plan in 15 years, was formed in the past five months by an administration-legislative team that observed similar programs in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

One of the California plan's chief architects, Assemblyman Art Agnos, D-San Francisco, said he would formally introduce the welfare reform bill today or tomorrow. Its first legislative hearing is expected in late August.

The bill is expected to receive the two-thirds vote from each house of the Legislature and be sent to the

desk of Gov. Deukmejian, who also supports it.

Once enacted, counties would have three years to prepare plans to implement the reform, subject to state approval. They would be allowed two more years to implement it for an expected annual savings to government of \$272 million within the next five years.

San Diego County already has a workfare program in place.

Proponents estimate that more than 170,000 welfare recipients will take part the first year. Failure to participate could mean loss of welfare benefits, although Agnos said few dropouts are anticipated.

"It's a major overhaul of a system long overdue," he said at a news conference. "It ends the adversarial relationship between welfare departments and people they're supposed to serve."

Senate Republican leader Jim Nielsen of Woodland added: "You're seeing a commitment from all quarters to doing something about welfare reform. All of us want to break the welfare dependency cycle, to make sure welfare recipients are put on an employment track."

David Swoap, secretary of the Health and Welfare Agency, said the job training emphasis — including college work, vocational training and state-sponsored work in private industry — will give welfare recipients

clearly defined goals.

And Linda McMahon, director of the Department of Social Services, added, "In most instances we expect these opportunities to lead directly to unsubsidized permanent jobs in the private sector."

Besides regular welfare benefits, participants would receive child care, transportation and even clothing. If they cannot find a job, they would choose college and vocational training programs or work for private employers who receive part of their expense from the state.

Work hours would be calculated by dividing the welfare recipient's monthly allocation by the average statewide starting pay, currently \$5.07 an hour. A welfare grant of \$507 a month, for example, would require 100 hours of work.

Critics of the program said, however, that it would force welfare mothers to accept low-paying dead-end jobs rather than pursue those they really wanted.

Kevin Aslanian of the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations also charged that it would result in as many as 300,000 additional latchkey children — youngsters who do not have a mother at home when they return from school.

Agnos said there will be some fine tuning but no major changes in the welfare plan.

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