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editorial

Compromise on welfare reform shows promise

THE Deukmejian administration has authored some sound proposals aimed at putting welfare recipients to work. But the governor's welfare reform plans have had one seemingly insurmountable problem. They've lacked enough support from Democrats who dominate the Legislature to become law.

Now the administration and Democratic lawmakers have joined forces to fashion what they call an "historic compromise" on the issue of work for welfare recipients. Whether the plan merits such accolades won't be clear until it's discussed in hearings, but it contains some essential ingredients of genuine welfare reform.

Negotiated by Assemblyman Art Agnos, D-San Francisco, and Gov. Deukmejian's Health and Welfare Secretary David Swoap, the Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) plan would require able-bodied welfare recipients without children under 6 to go to school, receive job training or work in exchange for their grants.

Recipients unable to parlay the program's remedial education, vocational training and job-search assistance into jobs would be expected to perform public service work for government agencies or non-profit organizations at a minimum of \$5.07 an hour, the average starting wage in California.

The jobs could be with such agencies as senior centers and libraries and would leave time for recipients to continue their job search. If no job were found after a year, the individual would be retrained for a different job skill. Those who

didn't cooperate with the program would be subject to sanctions, including loss of benefits.

The focus of the plan is correct: boosting welfare recipients out of dependency on government handouts and into the competitive job market. Welfare shouldn't be viewed or used as a permanent crutch, but as temporary support to help tide people over until they're able to obtain gainful employment.

Another virtue of the plan is its recognition that many welfare recipients lack the job skills or means to become self-sufficient. As well as education, training and employment assistance, the program will offer child care to parents who need it in order to participate.

We also support the public service portion of the program. This "workfare" provision can give taxpayers useful labor in return for their financial help to the needy and those on public assistance work experience helpful in preparing them for private employment.

Assemblyman Tom Bates, D-Berkeley, the Legislature's leading foe of welfare reform, could think of no better criticism of this plan than to call it an "administrative nightmare." The Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations objected its sanctions for non-cooperators as "cruel and unusual punishment."

We think, however, that it would be better for both welfare recipients and taxpayers to put recipients on an employment track (at an eventual savings in state welfare costs) than to settle for what Assemblyman Agnos calls "a pure grant system that merely gives people a check and forgets about them."