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'A new concept of welfare'

UNDER THE HEADING "It sounds too good to be true," you can put the latest plan for reforming California's welfare system.

We're told that it would put 170,000 able-bodied welfare recipients to work, and that by 1990, when it's fully operational, it would be saving the state \$136 million.

"It's a whole new concept of welfare," according to Assemblyman Art Agnos of San Francisco. "It's going from a pure grant system that merely gives people a check and forgets about them to a system that is aimed at employing them."

Apparently, there has been a widespread misimpression about the old concept of welfare. Some of us had the notion that was its aim — trying to help and encourage the needy to find jobs.

THE "NEW" CONCEPT goes beyond that, to requiring welfare recipients to perform public service jobs if nothing else is available to them after they've completed job training. But Carl Williams, a state welfare official, concedes, "It's possible there are some people no matter what services we offer who are functionally unable to find a job. They would end up doing community service work for a long period of time."

That facet of the plan has drawn fire from welfare rights organizations, but the new proposal does have an impressive array of support. When you get Gov. George Deukmejian agreeing with Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, and Agnos (a liberal, Northern California Democrat) agreeing with Assemblyman Pat Nolan (a conservative Southern California Republican), you have something historic on hand.

That's why it sounds too good to be true: Liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, all united behind a proposal that will put welfare recipients to work doing something useful, and also will save the state millions of dollars each year. It prompts the same doubts you'd experience if you were

offered a "solid gold" watch for \$5, and there are some dissenters, but not many.

Tom Bates of Oakland, who as chairman of the Assembly Human Services Committee has a reputation for burying welfare reforms, predicts this plan will cost the state \$136 million its first year. The plan's proponents say it would cost only \$6.2 million the first year, and would be showing a net gain of \$20.6 million by the third year.

No way, says Mr. Bates. "This is a Cadillac plan," he said, "but the problem is, it only gets five miles per gallon. It's an administrative nightmare and it doesn't create any new jobs."

THAT MIGHT NOT be true, if some imagination were used in putting the separate parts of the plan together. The major cost to the state is an estimated \$60 million to provide child care so welfare recipients can go to work. But if some of the child-care jobs that are created are filled by welfare recipients, that minus can become a plus.

Kevin Aslanian, a lobbyist for welfare rights organizations, objected to the new plan, saying that welfare recipients shouldn't be required to work, because they're performing a more valuable role in society by staying home to raise their children.

"The biggest obligation they have is to raise a child to be of benefit to society," he said. "They are doing a better job than most middle-class or high-class families."

If that's so, they should be happy to share their expertise in raising youngsters by helping to provide child care for fellow welfare recipients. But don't bet on it.

And don't bet on this latest reform making any more lasting improvement in the welfare system than previous reforms have. But with the impressive support it has, it seems likely to become law — leaving us to remember that things which sound too good to be true do, occasionally, turn out to be true.