

Workfare proposes to put welfare out of a job

By Mireya Navarro
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

With a job counselor, she maps out her future, choosing from among an array of educational and training options.

She is offered free child care while she learns. Even transportation expenses are covered. Eventually, she lands a well-paying job and her name is dropped from the welfare rolls.

That is the bright side. In another scenario, she is forced to sign a state contract that offers her school and on-the-job training, but dooms her to a year of menial work without pay. She ends up picking up trash in a public park to get her welfare check.

Sometime in the next five years, thousands of single mothers on welfare in California may face one of these situations. The contrasting pictures are forecast by opposing sides of a major overhaul of the welfare system scheduled to be in operation by 1990.

At a projected annual cost of \$400 million, the plan is predicted to save the state a net \$272 million a year.

Signed by Gov. Deukmejian last September, the law will require able-bodied recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to go back to school, get job training or work off their welfare grants for up to a year. People with children under 6 are exempt.

An October 1982 survey by the state Department of Social Services found most AFDC recipients are mothers with an average of 11 years of schooling. Only 8 percent had been to college, and the average age of respondents was 29.

Assemblyman Art Agnos, D-San Francisco, who co-sponsored the legislation, calls it "the most progressive, innovative war on poverty ever devised in the country."

But despite the unusual bipartisan effort to pass it, a number of welfare-rights groups, labor unions and liberal Democrats vehemently oppose the plan, objecting mainly to a provision called workfare — mandatory work in a public or non-profit agency for people who don't find jobs at the end of training.

"This is shoving government down poor people's throats," complained Kevin Aslanian, legislative advocate for the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations. "In America you do things voluntarily. You provide incentives. You don't force people to do things."

Workfare is not new to California.

In the early 1970s, President Reagan came up with a "work-for-welfare" program that was deemed unsuccessful. Currently, a handful of counties implement a form of workfare for general assistance recipients. In San Francisco, for ex-

ample, about 1,500 recipients sweep streets two days a month in a \$1 million program managed by the Public Works Department.

But the new plan would affect an estimated 171,000 people, requiring them to sign a contract binding until they find a job. Recipients would face sanctions, including cutoff of aid, for failure to participate.

The contract calls for the state to provide free child care and other benefits while the recipient searches for a job, receives training and goes on workfare if no job is forthcoming. Recipients would work off monthly welfare checks at \$5.07 an hour, for a maximum of 32 hours a week, while looking for jobs. Limited to a year on workfare, any recipient who still has no job could be bounced back to training in another discipline to test another job market.

"They'll constantly be recycled until they score," said Agnos. "The whole system is aimed at one thing: getting a job."

The law applies only to AFDC recipients, whose grants include food stamps and Medi-Cal and who represent 70 percent of the state's \$12.3 billion welfare costs. Under the current system, those recipients are required only to attend a three-day job hunting workshop and then spend three weeks looking for work.

Agnos says only 20 percent of the proposed program's participants are expected to reach the workfare stage. Most, he says, will find work sooner because trainers will be hired under performance-based contracts that require them to find jobs for recipients.

Critics argue that the plan does nothing to create jobs, so most participants will end up on workfare. And, despite language in the law that says workfare jobs must relate to the person's field of training, critics say the jobs would be useless because the law says workfare workers can't displace regular employees.

"If you can't have people performing the regular job, then they'll perform the menial, less valuable jobs that will only require the kind of skills these people already have," said Casey McKeever, an attorney with the Western Center on Law and Poverty. He said he also fears that the best features of the reform plan, such as vocational training, will be restricted.

"What will the state do once the counties submit their plans?" he asked. "Is the state going to say no to expensive plans and say you have to emphasize workfare because it's cheaper?"

Mehi Simmons, of the County Welfare Directors Association of California, says the plan could be underfunded by as much as 50 percent in the second year of operation, and that his organization intends to work with the state to make budget estimates "more realistic." Counties have five years to plan and implement the welfare reform, but some may start their programs as early as next year.

"If the state doesn't fund it they're going to lose a lot of credibility," he says.

John Vera, assistant general manager of the San Francisco Social Services Department, said The City would need to hire job counselors and other personnel while contracting out for the educational services. He said the plan will affect up to 5,000 AFDC families out of about 12,000 in The City.

"We have a lot of planning to do," he said. "The big concern is the hope that there are employment opportunities out there for people who are getting their hopes up and are looking forward to participating in this program."

But those who favor voluntary participation say employment would be scarce because the program sets no money aside for job development. They also wonder if the performance-based contracts will have any takers.

"My question is, where are the jobs?" Assemblyman Tom Bates, D-Oakland, asked. "They don't exist. If there are jobs, they'd (recipients) find them."

Bates said that when a secretarial position opened in his office recently, he received more than 100 applications from people with Ph.D.s and master's degrees. The job went to a woman with a master's degree in psychology.

"We're beating these (welfare) women up for the fact that the economy is not working," he said.

But plan supporters point to successes elsewhere.

In Massachusetts, which provided the model for California, an employment-training program that works with performance-based contracts but has no mandatory work provision has put 20,000 recipients into full- and part-time jobs since October 1983, according to Lee Chomeniak, spokeswoman for the state's Department of Public Welfare.

She said the program has saved the state \$60 million in welfare grants.

Massachusetts has 85,000 AFDC families, its lowest caseload in 12 years and 3,500 fewer families than when the program began, Chomeniak said. There's a waiting list of 18,000 people for the program; 12,000 may participate at any given time. Among those placed in jobs, 86 percent are still off welfare one year after they were hired, she said.

"We don't have a problem with people not wanting to participate," said Barbara Burke Tatum, who runs the program. "Thirty-five percent of the people participating in the program are women with children under 6, and by law they don't have to participate."

The California plan also borrows from a program in San Diego that consists of three weeks of job search and 13 weeks of workfare for AFDC recipients. Up to three months of training are offered, but only after recipients have gone through the first two stages.

Ray Koenig, the program's manager, said 47 percent of participants find jobs at an average wage of more than \$5 an hour, mostly during job search. The placement rate among those who train is 89 percent, said Stan Schroeder, who oversees the training part of the program.

The program works with performance-based contracts. Most recipients find jobs as office clerks, laborers, technicians and in hotel and food service.

"We have a pretty good choice of proposals (for contracts)," Schroeder said. "It's a highly competitive arena."

Koenig said that those who don't find jobs go through more supervised job search but are not required to do workfare a second time.

"We think we've turned around thousands of people's lives," he said. "We've gotten jobs for people that would have been on welfare for a long time had we not intervened."

Supporters of the statewide plan say that foes are simply ideologically opposed to workfare, regardless of how different the plan is from past proposals. They say benefits such as the \$115.5 million increase in state funding for child care far outweighs the mandatory-work provision.

Bolstering the pro argument is the New York-based Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., which has been conducting field studies of workfare and other employment programs in 11 states.

"While we're not about to say anything definitive right now, we have been very interested in the surveys we conducted at work sites," Sheila Mandel, the research organization's spokeswoman, said.

"Interviews showed that most of them (recipients on workfare) thought it was fair to do something in exchange for getting welfare."

"We've found that they share the work ethics of the rest of America," she added.

Recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children would go through the following sequence under the new welfare plan:

Registration — Mandatory for all able-bodied recipients except those with children under 6 years of age. Deferrals are allowed if the recipient is in an educational program or going through a family crisis. Those not required to register can participate voluntarily.

Contract — Signed at the time of registration, the contract is binding on both the participant and the state. It outlines the recipient's responsibilities and the services to be provided by the state. The contract also specifies the course of action for each participant as determined by a skills and job-history evaluation.

Remedial education — Available for those who need English as a Second Language instruction or

high school equivalency training.

Job club — A one-week workshop on how to look for a job for recipients who haven't worked within the previous two years. Optional for recipients who held a job in the previous two years.

Job search — Two to three weeks of supervised job hunting.

Assessment — An in-depth review by a trained employment counselor, including aptitude testing, of participants who were employed more than once in the previous three years and for those who have not found work up to this stage. An employment plan stating the education services to be provided is incorporated in the contract.

Options — On-the-job training with a private employer; vocational training; and up to two years of community college or work-related college education. Also available are employment counseling for the person who hasn't worked in years, and short-term pre-employment preparation, which consists of a three-month job assignment with the state for recipients who can't decide what training program to pursue.

Three-month job search — Supervised job hunting for those who still have no job after completing training.

Workfare — Work for up to 12 months with a public or non-profit agency. Participants work off their grants at a rate of \$5.07 for a maximum of 32 hours a week while still searching for a job. The work must relate to the recipient's field of training.

Workfare is also required for recipients who fail to complete training and are unemployed. In these cases, however, the state won't necessarily provide a job that relates to the participant's skills.

Reassessment — Recipients unable to find jobs at the end of the workfare stage will undergo another assessment. They may then pursue training in a different area.

Grievances — Recipients can protest any program requirement or assignment they believe violates their contract. Outside arbitration will be provided when needed to mediate problems. The arbitrator's decision is binding.

Sanctions — For recipients who don't abide by the arbitrator's decision or otherwise refuse to meet the terms of the contract, sanctions range from having the state manage their grants for up to three months to a cutoff of aid.

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