

Legal services group attacks Kern workfare plan

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SACRAMENTO — A statewide legal services group representing welfare recipients has blasted Kern County's work-for-welfare plan, the first workfare proposal submitted by any county to the state for approval.

A spokesman for the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations claims Kern's workfare proposal violates state guidelines by not offering enough opportunities for remedial education to welfare clients who do not have high school diplomas.

The coalition is funded by the State Bar Association. The program, according to coalition spokesman

Kevin Aslanian, would train workfare participants for jobs that offer no future and not enough money to support a family.

"It's a waste of taxpayers' dollars," Aslanian said. "These are families we're talking about, and \$3.35 an hour does not support a family."

Aslanian also said that according to the workfare plan, it "appears that the county does not want to provide child care" to participating welfare clients, even though funds for child-care services are provided by the state.

Janis Adams, an assistant program manager in charge of Kern's workfare plan, said all but one of the criticisms are invalid.

Adams conceded that Kern's workfare proposal does not contain sufficient remedial education slots. State regulations require that those participating in the workfare program who do not have high school diplomas shall be referred to remedial education.

Kern officials estimate that more than half of the 3,276 welfare parents who might participate in the county's workfare program have not finished high school. Yet the plan includes remedial education slots for just 189 people.

"Our plan is not set in concrete," Adams said. "We're going to have to look at possible modifications."

Adams said criticism that Kern's welfare recipients

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will be channeled into low-paying, dead-end jobs is not accurate.

"Some of the jobs, it is true, are entry-level," Adams said. "We need to be realistic in our expectations. ... With experience, the wages will increase."

She said, for example, that sales cashiers may start at \$3.50 per hour, but hourly wages climb to \$7 an hour.

Aslanian said it makes no sense to spend tax money to train someone to become a sales cashier, short-order cook or janitor because "anybody can do those jobs. You don't need training for that."

But Adams said Aslanian misses the point.

"We're not only teaching skills to get a job, we're teaching how to keep a job, how to meet employer expectations, how to move up," Adams said. "We're certainly not trying to keep people in minimum-wage jobs."

Adams said a survey of welfare parents shows only 11 percent of those who will be involved in workfare need child-care services.

Aslanian called that figure "a joke." He said his welfare-rights organization is going to monitor Kern's commitment to child-care

services very carefully.

Adams said that if experience determines more child-care services are needed, welfare clients would be accommodated.

In December, Kern became the first county to submit its workfare proposal to the state Social Services Department for approval.

The county hopes to obtain state approval to begin the workfare program Feb. 1, but it appears doubtful approval will come that quickly.

Adams said the Kern program will serve only welfare parents receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children, 3,276 in all.

The landmark program, signed into law last year by Gov. Deukmejian, is viewed as an innovative way to make the workfare program more effective.

Workfare will force able-bodied welfare recipients between the ages of 18 and 65 to work, seek job training or take education classes in exchange for the benefits check. It will exempt single parents with children under 6.

The plan will begin with a job-search segment. Those unable to get work then would go through one of several programs, including on-the-job training, education, short-term work or subsidized work.