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First workfare program to start in Fresno

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FRESNO — A Fresno County man spent the morning in a job-hunting workshop, landed a job that afternoon as a welder-trainee and returned to tell everyone to pay attention because it worked.

The workshop wasn't a high-priced come-on.

It was part of "workfare," a social experiment that will replace the bedrock welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, for able-bodied adults.

Gov. Deukmejian plans to launch the program, Greater Avenues for Independence, or GAIN, tomorrow in Fresno, the first county ready to start under bipartisan reform legislation signed last Sep-

tember.

County agencies that have been criticized as clearinghouses for welfare checks will be much more immersed in social work under workfare.

Eligible recipients will be provided, to some extent, remedial and higher education, job-hunting skills, job training, child care, transportation and job placement under a comprehensive plan to land them jobs.

If all else fails, they will be assigned public and private workfare jobs for which they have been trained, "not raking leaves," said Fresno County welfare Director Ben Kelley.

In Fresno County, about 30,000 adults receive AFDC, and at least 8,000 will enroll in the workfare

program in the first year, Kelley estimated.

Automatic exemptions are granted to the mentally or physically disabled, single parents of children under 6 and people in remote areas where transportation is unavailable.

The state expects to push \$149 million into the program but save \$360 million through grant reductions and lower social spending.

By state estimates, 194,000 recipients will participate statewide, about 45 percent will obtain jobs, about one-fifth will receive education that can last up to two years, and one-fourth will be assigned to workfare jobs by mid-1991.

Fresno County estimates 35 percent of its participants will get jobs: 15 percent will get off welfare en-

tirely, and 20 percent will receive lower benefits.

"The real emphasis is to create an opportunity for recipients to be realistic competitors in the job market," said Patrick Hendrix, the county's workfare operations supervisor, "to teach them how to go out and access the job market."

But Kevin Aslanian of the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations said, "Workfare is basically punishment. People are being punished because they're poor."

He was particularly critical of sanctions that county agencies can take against recipients who fail to participate in the program. Welfare workers can transfer payments to a trusted relative or friend for three months for a first offense.