

Wilson plans ballot assault on welfare

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Poor get poorer under initiative

By Gary Webb
and Mitchel Benson
Mercury News Staff Writers

GLENDALE — In his strongest attack yet on the state's welfare system, Gov. Pete Wilson on Monday unveiled a proposed ballot initiative that would dramatically slash welfare payments for millions of poor Californians.

Setting the stage for next year's budget negotiations with lawmakers, Wilson repeatedly portrayed his proposal as an alternative to drastic cuts in school spending.

"In simple terms," Wilson said, "let's choose education and prevention — at a cost of providing less generously for mandated assistance programs."

If it qualifies for the November 1992 ballot and is approved by voters, Wilson's proposal — which the governor dubbed the Taxpayers' Protection Act — would:

- ✓ Slice the basic welfare grant by 10 percent immediately — then cut it another percent in six years.

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months if the family contains an "able-bodied individual" who could be working. That definition includes women with young children, Wilson aides said.

Currently, a welfare family of three receives \$663 a month. That would be reduced immediately to \$597 under Wilson's proposal.

✓ Put a cap on the monthly payment so that no matter how many children are later born into the family, the payment would not increase.

✓ Force pregnant teens to stay home with their parents or guardians in order to qualify for welfare payments.

✓ Adjust the monthly welfare payment year to year based on the state's financial condition. Currently, the amount of the payment is set by law.

✓ Limit payments to poor families from other states to what they were getting in their home state, for the first year they live in California. Wilson said that would "decrease the magnet effect of California's welfare system."

Wilson's ballot proposal, which was greeted with applause and cheers from an audience of local businessmen, also would suspend the pay of legislators and the governor if they fail to adopt a budget on time each year. It also would give the governor broad emergency budget-cutting authority, including power to reduce the salaries and benefits of non-union state workers by up to 5 percent.

Wilson would offset a portion of the new cuts by providing an additional \$20 a month in food stamps, and would pay teen-age welfare recipients an extra \$50 a month if they stay in high school. They would lose \$50 a month if they drop out, however.

Backed by GOP

The Wilson initiative immediately attracted support from Republican legislators — and fire from Democrats and those who work with the poor.

Kevin Aslanian, spokesman for the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, said that "like (Louisiana gubernatorial candidate and former Ku Klux Klan member) David Duke, Pete Wilson as attacked defenseless welfare mothers and children."

"This initiative is the most vicious, barbaric, mean-spirited initiative devised by any person to date."

Assemblyman Richard Polanco, D-Los Angeles, said Wilson's plan "smells like a David Duke scenario. This is crazy. He's crazy."

Anticipating such criticism, Wilson predicted that he would be labeled "a David Duke ... elitist, racist, callous and uncaring." But, he said, "it would be an act of cowardice to avoid the debate."

'Assault on poor families'

Casey McKeever, directing attorney for the Western Center on Law and Poverty, a statewide support center for legal services programs, called the Wilson proposal "a profound and extreme assault on poor families and their children in California. There's no other way to describe it. ... It's just an enormous cut unlike anything we've actually seen since 1984."

It was in November 1984, McKeever said, that Assemblyman Ross Johnson, R-Fullerton, sponsored Proposition 41, designed to seriously cut social service spending in the state. That provision lost 63 percent to 37 percent.

The specific details of the two proposals differ. Johnson's was in comparison more severe, and the economy was in better shape then than it is now.

"But in terms of a vision, in terms of a proposal driven by mythology, the two are strikingly similar," McKeever said.

Willie Brown critical

Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, D-San Francisco, called Wilson's proposal "the biggest political cop-out since Chamberlain gave up Czechoslovakia to Hitler."

In effect, Brown said, the governor "has sought to blame the Bush-Wilson 'economic depression' on the state Constitution and poor families . . ."

But Assembly Republican Leader Bill Jones of Fresno lavished the governor with praise, calling the proposed initiative "a dynamic, far-sighted proposal that will help return California to fiscal stability."

Jones said "the big beneficiaries will be California's taxpayers, who are footing the bill for budget delays and for a welfare system that is unfair to both the taxpayers and the recipients."

Qualifying the proposal for the ballot is by no means a sure thing, however.

A \$1 million campaign

Joel Fox, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, which is co-sponsoring the initiative with Wilson, predicted it would cost about \$1 million to gather enough signatures. Fox said nearly 1 million signatures would be needed.

Neither Wilson nor Fox would say who would finance such a campaign, but Fox said Wilson staffers have unofficially pledged the governor's campaign funds and fundraising support.

Even if the initiative never reaches the ballot, however, its mere existence may be enough to pressure some lawmakers into seeing things Wilson's way during the upcoming budget session, which is sure to be contentious.