



Workfare facing growing pains

By Jon Matthews
Bee Capitol Bureau

The state's bold workfare program has sputtered to life across California, moving thousands of welfare parents into schooling and jobs but also generating intense political controversy.

Key lawmakers and administration officials say the start-up is going as well as can be expected, considering the effort's massive size and revolutionary mandate that requires many welfare recipients to go to work or receive education and training.

But budget cuts are casting a cloud over workfare, and some legislators are furious over Los Angeles County's recent and controversial decision to contract out its local program to a private company.

"What they are doing in Los Angeles County could destroy the whole program. And if this fails, then what is there left for us to try?" asked Sen. Bill Greene, a Democrat who represents some of the impoverished areas of Los Angeles.

Greater Avenues for Independence, or GAIN, was born in 1985 as a trend-setting, bipartisan attempt at welfare reform. After many delays, as of last week all of California's counties had their GAIN programs at least

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partially operating, according to reports received by state and county officials.

The last county — Calaveras — started operations Tuesday, according to social service officials there.

Dennis Boyle, a deputy state social services director overseeing GAIN, estimated that the program has enrolled about 127,000 welfare recipients and seen about 38,000 receive jobs. The numbers will grow as counties bring their programs up to full speed, he said.

While the statistics appear impressive, Boyle cautioned that some of those GAIN clients would have received jobs anyway, and officials are still developing a system to track the GAIN success rate.

And faced with budget cuts and a higher than expected need for remedial education, the state also has scaled back the scope of the program from what originally was intended. For the 1989-90 fiscal year, Gov. Deukmejian has proposed to cut the GAIN budget by \$15 million, to a total of \$353 million.

as an estimated 40 percent of the state's welfare population lives in the county.

Eastin and other legislators believe the law prohibits the county from turning over supervision of welfare programs to private business and that government employees must make key judgments on individual clients. They charge that Deukmejian's office intervened — after intense political lobbying — to overturn a long-held state Department of Social Services stand against the contract.

Eastin also charged in her March 31 letter that Maximus executives were being paid as much as \$260,000 for less than full-time GAIN work — a charge flatly denied by David Mastran, Maximus' chief executive officer.

"That's absolutely not true," said Mastran, who also denied that the firm used any improper means to get the job.

Mastran said the contract figures cited by lawmakers included such costs as overhead, clerical help and fringe benefits in addition to salaries.

Ray Garcia, director of government relations for the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services, said the contract is legal and is working well so far.

That proposal is \$65 million short of what would be needed to serve all potential GAIN participants, according to legislative staff members.

GAIN would continue to expand under the proposed budget, but not as quickly as originally planned, Boyle said.

Still, Assemblywoman Delaine Eastin, D-Union City, who heads the Legislature's GAIN oversight committee, believes GAIN is off to a good start despite the budget crunch and is generally receiving cooperation from the Republican administration.

"There are a lot of career bureaucrats out there who really care and see this as an opportunity," said Eastin, adding that she "can't quantify what I have seen in the eyes" of GAIN clients who have improved their lives under the program.

On the other hand, Eastin recently fired off a blistering letter to federal officials complaining about Los Angeles County's decision to contract administration of its GAIN program out to a private firm, Maximus Inc. Unions also are upset.

Los Angeles is considered crucial to the success of the GAIN program

"We felt that contracting would be the only feasible way to serve this large a population," he said.

But Greene, fuming over the contract, promised to hold up the county's GAIN budget money in the Senate until the issue is resolved.

"We are talking about people's lives," he said.

Meanwhile, debate still lingers over whether GAIN is a cost-effective and humane way to reform welfare.

Kevin Aslanian of the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations said he believes welfare families have suffered under GAIN mandates, with children moved wholesale from the home to child care.

"And a lot of jobs the parents get don't pay enough to support a family," he said, arguing that the state could better target its money on very long-term welfare recipients.

Some also have voiced fears that budget cuts will cripple the county programs, pulling the rug out from under GAIN clients.

In Yolo County, controversy recently arose when some GAIN recipients said cutbacks were threatening their continued participation in the program.

For counties statewide in the next fiscal year, "the GAIN money situation is going to be tougher, but I wouldn't use the word crisis," said Lee Kemper, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association.

"But if there are further reductions, then we are facing some serious questions," he added.

In Sacramento County, GAIN coordinator Jane Rasmussen said implementation of the program "is going fairly smoothly" with more than 3,000 clients signed up as of the end of 1988.

Rasmussen cautioned those looking for quick results that GAIN "is a long-term program. A very large percentage of our clients are going through remedial education before starting to look for jobs."

Lawmakers this year also are considering changes to the GAIN program required under new federal welfare reform legislation. The federal law was partially patterned after GAIN but requires that welfare parents be provided child care and medical care for a longer transitional period after they find work.