

No pain, no GAIN

Coalition doubts workfare program

By KELLY MAYER
Leader Staff Writer

No pain, no GAIN.

That's what the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organization is saying about the state's new workfare program, titled Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN). The 67 chapters from Redding to San Diego are objecting to the idea of the program so much that they have renamed it.

They call it PAIN -- Painful Avenues Into Nowhere. That's where they think the program in Stanislaus County will lead by the time it's fully implemented, which is scheduled for June, 1988. The program, mandated by the Legislature, is to begin in September.

"With the unemployment rate at 17.6 percent here, forget about people being able to get jobs," said welfare rights activist Elisa James. "Most people on welfare want to work, they want the self-respect. But with workfare the way it is now, they will become a slave."

Stanislaus County Social Services Director Marsena Buck doesn't agree. She feels the GAIN program is beneficial.

The program became law in September and requires all counties to start a program to provide education and training to able-bodied clients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children within three years.

About 5,000 people in Stanislaus County will be eligible for the program, which will cost about \$7 million in the first year.

"I feel the program can be successful," said Buck, who has the job of implementing GAIN in this county. "It won't work in the same way it might in San Diego where the unemployment rate is only four percent, but anytime you offer someone the chance to read and learn, it benefits."

Buck reported that 60-70 percent of mandated GAIN clients lack a high school diploma. She says this program will change that and could change the opportunity for many people in the county who previously

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never had the chance in the job world to get that chance.

"It will allow GAIN participants to be competitive," Buck said. "The goal of the GAIN program is to reduce and eliminate dependency on public assistance. Given the economic situation in Stanislaus County, that goal may be unrealistic."

"But the program will provide critical skills needed in getting and keeping a job."

AFDC recipients who are not exempt must take part in the GAIN program or face loss of AFDC benefits through the sanction process. For many welfare recipients, it is a hard rock to swallow.

"The program is just sort of a game," said Catherine Elias-Germany, president of the statewide coalition. "The majority of people are going to be playing a job-search game for jobs that don't exist."

Buck doesn't totally agree. She cited the plans for an industrial plant on the west side of the county as one possible means for many of these GAIN clients to receive employment.

"In two years it (the plant) is to

become fully operational. Eighty percent of the people hired are to be local -- that's 1,500-1,800 people," Buck conceded. "The GAIN program represents a significant shift in social policy."

Although Buck acknowledged people's "natural" worry about the program, she said GAIN carries a strong message.

"It is a statement that re-emphasizes the value of work, regardless of where you start. If I were on public assistance, I'd have normal apprehension because there's a lot we don't know," she said. "If you enjoy good sausage and good laws, you'll never see them made together. There won't be 1,000 jobs available, but people who didn't have the chance to compete will get that chance."

According to the plan, welfare officials will funnel about 500 clients each month through GAIN. Most will be sent back to school for a high school education. Buck said no client will be required to get a job at a salary lower than the rate of assistance the family is receiving.

"The labor marketplace won't change," said Buck. "As I understand the job world, employers will pick the most qualified person. That isn't going to change."

"But now these people can have that competitive edge."

When the program is fully operable, the county social services department expects to serve 4,500 mandated and 1,000 volunteer recipients. The program will be phased-in over a two-year period.

"We will implement the program sequentially to insure everyone mandated and volunteers will be involved by June of 1988," said Buck. "We are not going to try and speed up the time tables on this."

"And in terms of the philosophical idea of whether they passed it or not, they passed it. Now it is our job to implement it in the most effective and humane way possible."

By June 30, 1987, the social services department expects to have a caseload of 3,260 clients.

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