

County launches program to get poor off welfare

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MARTINEZ — A workfare program, designed to help poor people get off welfare rolls for good, will begin Monday in Contra Costa County.

After nearly two years of planning, caseworkers in the Social Services Department will test a small number of people in Martinez, Antioch and Richmond. The tests should determine whether participants need more education or can begin a job search — the two main components of Greater Avenues for Independence or GAIN.

County officials admit they still don't have answers to some pressing questions about GAIN.

Will Contra Costa have enough jobs? The right kind of jobs? Will the state provide enough money to educate and to provide child care and transportation for the poorest people in Contra Costa?

"We believe the county is moving in good faith, but we have some real concerns," said Phil Bertenthal of Contra Costa Legal Services. "They don't have nearly enough money to do the job. And even if they did, there's a terrible shortage of jobs and child-care openings."

Social Service workers say they have enough of a framework to work with some of the 11,000 people who will eventually be GAIN participants.

"We'll be phasing in slowly," said Shirley Kalinowski, the program manager. "We'll serve the people we have the money to serve."

Last year, the county asked the state for \$22.6 million to run its workfare program. It got \$4.1 million.

GAIN can only handle 2,700 people the first year. The pioneers will be welfare recipients who volunteer, are already attending classes or are unemployed couples receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Single mothers — the largest group of county welfare recipients — will not be required to participate the first year.

Despite the problems, Kalinowski calls herself "a believer."

"We're very excited about the whole program. GAIN won't be a quick fix, but it will be a tremendous opportunity for people to get help in using the resources the system has to offer."

Research shows that while jobs are scarce in East and West County, they are ample in Central County, said Elena Hopkins, an assistant director of Social Service programs and policy.

She said one job they hope to train people for is providing child care, which would eventually increase day-care availability.

Under a 1985 law, every county in California must replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children with a plan to train poor people for jobs. The state must approve each program and pick up the full cost.

AFDC recipients must participate unless they have children younger than 6, are mentally or physically unable to work or meet other exemptions.

While participants are in school or training for a job, the county will pay \$2 an hour for child care and 22 cents a mile for transportation. Participants must stay enrolled in training or job search programs until they find permanent employment.

The carrot, supporters say, is a way out of the welfare cycle. Critics criticize the stick — withholding welfare payments if participants fail.

"Every county is having problems with it," said Kevin Aslanian of the Sacramento-based Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations. Aslanian's group — which monitors complaints from GAIN participants — has renamed the program PAIN or Painful Avenues into Nowhere.

Aslanian said GAIN participants in San Jose are complaining about a lack of well-paying jobs. They also say social workers are forcing them into jobs or training programs against their will.

"What kind of power does the welfare person have?" said Aslanian. "Choices are being made for them. They are put through all these loops and hoops, and this devastates their self-esteem."

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Also, Aslanian said, state officials have predicted that about 15 percent of GAIN participants will never find a job. They will spend the rest of their lives in the final workfare stage, working for a non-profit organization in exchange for welfare.

Kalinowski countered that appeals are built into the process for people unhappy with their treatment.

"At every step, the client and the caseworker sign a contract that they mutually agree upon," she said. This relationship is important, she added, because caseworkers can ensure participants are training for jobs with futures and that pay enough to support them.

Ideally, Kalinowski added, very few people in Contra Costa will get to the final stage. Most people here will find permanent jobs before that, she said.

The county hopes to bring 212 people into the program each month. They will start with a crew of seven social and vocational workers. More workers will be added every three months until the goal of 27 full-time caseworkers is reached by this time next year.

All workers will come from the county ranks; no new people will be hired. This worries some union officials who are afraid workers in other programs will have more work than they can handle.

"We know we're losing some clerical people to GAIN," said Jim Hicks, business representative of Local 2700 of the United Clerical Employees. "We're meeting with the county now to work on these things, but it's the old problem of more work being heaped on fewer people."

Hopkins said areas losing people to GAIN will be redesigned so less people can do the work. The county has no intention of cutting services, she said.

"And if, after organization, we find we have to hire people for GAIN, then we'll hire people," she said.