

County Not Discouraged By Pain In GAIN

By Jack Magee
Staff Writer

SAN LUIS OBISPO — No pain, no GAIN.

Right now, in this county and over the state, GAIN appears to be in pain.

But Suzanne Heitzman isn't discouraged.

Heitzman is coordinator of the county's GAIN program to train and find jobs for welfare parents. But state red tape has stalled the ambitious — and expensive — local program for six months to a year.

Undaunted, she is doggedly tackling the computer to compile answers to all the complex questions that the state money-minders have put to her.

GAIN officially stands for Greater Avenues to Independence, but a representative of the California Coalition for Welfare Rights was quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle Monday as calling it PAIN — for "Painful Avenues to Nowhere."

Heitzman isn't ready to call it that; quite the contrary, she expects it to help people, although she concedes it's too early to tell.

"It's much too premature to make any evaluation of the program," she said.

Heitzman said that the state extended the program's planning budget to Jan. 1, 1988, and allowed her to hire an accounting technician next month to set up the bookkeeping and internal auditing that will be required for what will be a complex system using vouchers and financial checks and balances.

She said that the number of "clients" — welfare recipients — expected to be enrolled has been scaled down to 477 for what would now be a six-month-long program in 1988.

Originally, 1,700 or 38 percent of the 4,500 county recipients on Aid to Families with Dependent Children had been expected for the one-year program.

The \$4 million first-year budget included \$3.5 million in contracts for services. That included \$1.2 million for adult basic remedial education to attain literacy, \$1 million for child care, \$120,000 to contract for shuttle buses, and \$400,000 for voca-

tional training.

"A very high number of people on AFDC are functionally illiterate" and would wind up in remedial education for months, until they can read and write she said. There's an average of two children per family; so child care is essential, Heitzman said.

In Ventura County, she said, 50 percent of the GAIN participants are in remedial education.

"We're projecting 40 percent. We're budgeting for six to nine months (of literacy training)," she said.

Wherever possible, Heitzman said, the program would use existing services, such as adult classes, vocational and on-the-job training by contract with the Private Industry Council, workshops by the state Employment Development Department and child care at Cuesta.

But she said public transportation in the county wasn't practical because of time schedules to transport program enrollees and their children from around the county to the facilities at the college.

So rather than trying to operate the program in three areas of the county, with the staff and facilities that would entail, Heitzman said GAIN will go to bid in a month for a shuttle bus system.

She said that would mean four small vans — one each for the South County, San Luis Obispo, the coast and the North County — traveling 528 miles a day at an estimated contract cost of \$9,000 a month.

"The majority of our welfare clients have very small children," Heitzman said. "Seventy percent of the children are under the age of six," she said, noting that parents with children under 6 are exempt from mandatory participation. "But we're not going to turn away anyone who wants to participate."

Most AFDC recipients are single mothers, especially the teenage mothers, who will be encouraged to join the program because for some the wait until the kids enter kindergarten or first grade would be a long time without working, she said.

"There's been a lot of fear that we're going to put people to work as motel maids," said Heitzman. She said the program would not train people to be motel maids; but if they could afford to live on the low wages paid for that work, they would be encouraged to take such jobs.

"A lot of our clients have never worked," she said. "They need to learn work schedules, work routine and working behavior."

Heitzman said that unlike other programs that trained people as welders or word processors regardless of the job market for those skills, "We can't train people for jobs that don't exist."

She said the final 30 percent payment for on-the-job training is withheld until a client is hired.

This county's GAIN program has a small staff.

Heitzman came to the job from the Health Agency and has worked for the county for seven years, has a bachelor's degree in social sciences from Cal Poly and a master's in public health administration from UC Berkeley. She is assisted by Donna Foster, clerical supervisor; Colleen Kramer, a child care specialist; and Jan Wishnia, supervising social worker who spends 10 hours a week helping on technical issues. One or two analysts may be added later.

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GAIN COORDINATOR — Suzanne Heitzman, coordinator for the county's GAIN program to train welfare recipients for jobs, enjoys a light moment while trying to figure out answers to questions the state is asking about the program.