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Workfare plan stalls in Fresno

The Associated Press

FRESNO — Far fewer welfare recipients have gotten jobs than expected under the state's new workfare program in Fresno County which pioneered the GAIN concept in California a year ago.

When Greater Avenues for Independence Now was launched in Fresno last July, officials expected 817 people would move from the welfare rolls to payrolls during the first year.

However, only 278 actually got jobs, according to statistics from the Fresno County Department of Social Services.

That represented only 3 percent of the 8,550 people who registered for the program.

The Welfare Department had projected that 4,652 people would enroll in school, but only 3,148 actually have done so to date. And only 90 people have received on-the-job training compared to estimates that there would be 864 during the first year.

Despite those negative figures, Welfare Director Ben Kelley thinks workfare, which cost \$8 million in Fresno County during the first year, was "an incredible success."

He cited another statistic that shows 199 welfare recipients completed their high school education through the program.

But a critic of the state effort to make healthy welfare recipients get training and get jobs contends workfare isn't working because there aren't enough jobs available in Fresno and 13 other counties where the program has been started.

"The whole purpose of this program is to find people jobs, and the jobs aren't there, and the jobs they find aren't going to get people out of poverty," said Kevin Aslanian of the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations.

Aslanian criticizes Fresno County for hiring or transferring 80 employees to handle workfare. Kelley has asked for another 49 positions next year when he predicts that 2,500 people will find jobs.

Robert Whittaker, contracts and projects manager at the Welfare Department, admits county officials "were a little ambitious" with their initial projections.

"But there are some things in GAIN that really turn me on, and they have nothing to do with employment, as strange as that may seem," Whittaker said. "We're hooking people up with the system. That is major. People have to do that to get competitive."

Welfare officials in counties that have started workfare have found that many more welfare recipients needed basic education than expected.

Sixty per percent of the applicants failed a test of basic math and language, according to a state report.

The failure rate was 66 percent in Fresno County, twice the percentage officials had projected.

"The educational system needs to take a look at why so many people are so poorly educated," Kelley said. "A spinoff from GAIN is the solid documentation of that."

Another finding in the state report is that 40 percent of workfare applicants fail to show up for training.

Some recipients claim that is caused partly by slowness in providing reimbursement for child care and transportation.

"It's like we've got to be on top of the (welfare) workers all the time," said Cindy Gravitt, who is taking secretarial courses through GAIN at Fresno City College.

Workfare recipients who have completed the program and found jobs make an average of about \$4 an hour, and about half of them still receive some supplemental public assistance, officials say.

One workfare graduate, Adele Christiansen, has been hired as a Welfare Department eligibility worker. Ironically, she makes slightly less than she received on welfare through cash grants and food stamps for her two children.

"I got tired of getting my money from someone else, never having enough," said Christensen, 24. "I feel better, personally, and I look forward to coming to work."

Lupe Lewis, 38, has one of the highest-paid jobs obtained so far by a workfare recipient. She makes \$8.75 an hour as a correctional officer at Fresno County's new branch jail.

"This was my goal — to get out of the system," she said. "I bought myself a car ... and my bills are paid now."

"There's always food in the refrigerator."