

Yuba able to put some aid recipients to work

Welfare

By Michael Milstein
Bee Staff Writer

MARYSVILLE — Thirty-three Yuba County welfare recipients cautiously crossed their fingers after hearing a social worker's recent presentation on Greater Avenues toward Independence.

"So far it looks like a pretty good program," said Dana Clark, 33, an unemployed tire store mechanic. "If it will help get a job that pays good wages, it'll probably be worth it."

Created by the Legislature in 1985, GAIN aims to provide education, child care, job training and job search skills to welfare recipients. If the recipients refuse to participate, social workers cut off their aid.

All 58 California counties are required to set up a GAIN program by late 1988. Eventually, GAIN is supposed to serve 200,000 Californians. By 1990, the program is expected to save \$114 million by moving people off welfare rolls.

Next year alone, California plans to spend \$250 million on GAIN.

Seven months ago, Yuba became the ninth county to begin a GAIN program. Four more counties have started programs since then.

In May, Julie Kadel, 31, grudgingly attended her first mandatory session of Job Club, a GAIN component designed to motivate people and teach them the basics of finding work.

"I thought it was just another keep-you-busy trip," she said last week.

Instead, she said GAIN has turned her from a depressed, unemployed mother into a positive, marketable worker. "If I can get an interview, I can get a job," she said.

Though Yuba County has an unemployment rate of 11 percent, 95 of 605 people in GAIN have found work so far. Their pay ranges from minimum wage up to \$11.65 an hour — averaging \$4.85 an hour — said administrative analyst Barbara Kelsey.

While Yuba welfare officials admit the county's high unemployment rate may hinder their efforts, they say GAIN's limited success shows that the program can be a first step away from public welfare.

"For years, there have been no strings attached to welfare checks," said Linda White, a Yuba County social worker assigned to GAIN. "This is a program that's at last attempting to break the cycle by improvement."

"There aren't going to be jobs for every single person out there obviously," said Jenny Tuscano, Yuba GAIN's program manager. "But if we can help even a few people, it will

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be better than nothing. I think it can happen. I've seen it happen."

Those still without jobs after going through the initial training and education phase will enter "pre-employment training," where they will earn their aid money by working in government offices for up to 32 hours a week.

Tuscano said this aspect of the program is designed to give previously unemployable people basic office skills and experience.

"I can rake leaves and so can they," she said. "But that's not the point of this. The point is for them to do something worthwhile that will benefit them."

If people still haven't found jobs after the pre-employment phase, Tuscano said, they will be assigned to another training field.

"Some of them will never get a job because of the way they come off. That's just the way they want to be," she said. "We have to keep motivating them and keep them from getting discouraged."

Critics have charged that GAIN's element of coercion borders on "cruel and unusual punishment," but such pressure has not yet been necessary in the small, mostly rural county just north of Sacramento, said Tuscano.

Kevin Aslanian, who represents the California Coalition for Welfare Rights, said the only complaint he has received from welfare recipients about Yuba County's GAIN concerned the cleanliness of bathrooms at Job Club offices.

But Aslanian charged that the program has provided more work for bureaucrats than for needy welfare families.

"Where are the jobs?" he asked.

Aslanian said GAIN is training people with no regard for the labor market, which he said is simply not large enough to accommodate them. The program prepares people for jobs that don't exist, wrongly puts welfare departments in charge of education and devalues parenting, he said.

"A lot of women will be taken away from their kids and not be able to give guidance to them," Aslanian said. "And their kids will become juvenile delinquents. ... If that's not cruel and unusual punishment, I don't know what you call it."

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