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Study: Welfare Clock Should Stop for College Moms

By Juliette Terzieff, WeNews Correspondent

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WOMENSENEWS) – For Suzette Nicosia picking a degree program was the easy part of her dream to attain higher education.

When the single mother of two young girls registered as a student at Buffalo State College last year she was only interested in the four-year program for a bachelor's degree in social services.

“I just knew that no matter how hard I tried, there would never be a decent job with good benefits out there for someone with my level of education,” says the 32-year-old high school graduate. Nicosia depends on welfare and is emphatic her children won't be in the same position when they grow up.

“You wouldn't believe the looks, the way peoples' eyes start rolling in the grocery line when you start pulling out food coupons and benefits cards, and I don't want my girls to grow up with that stigma,” Nicosia says of her determination to get a degree.

But for Nicosia, almost every day is a race against the clock.

She must finish her degree before a five-year limit imposed by a 1996 welfare reform law cuts off her financial assistance.

While that law requires most mothers on welfare to work 30 hours a week on top of attending class, Nicosia was able to get an exception because one of her daughters has eye cancer and requires frequent treatment. But she does participate in a college work-study program 15 hours a week that allows her to earn some extra money; \$101.25 a week.

The 1996 law also stipulates that vocational education count as work activity for no more than 12 months for recipients and that no more than 30 percent of those on a state's welfare roll can be enrolled in vocational schools at any given time.

Previously, under the Family Support Act of 1988, states could offer higher education to welfare recipients as job training. Every state took advantage of the provision with two-thirds qualifying for four-year programs and many states actively recruiting recipients to take advantage of the possibility.

Immediate Enrollment Toll

The new demands of the 1996 law – on top of the perennial problems of indifferent case workers and insufficient child care and transportation – took an immediate toll on the number of welfare recipients in college, driving the number down from 172,176 in 1996 to 58,055 in 1998.

Single mothers represent a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population, increasing from 7.7 million in 1994 to 13.6 million in 2003.

A solid majority live in poverty, with 62 percent of single mothers earning less than \$20,000 a year and working in low-wage service and administrative support jobs, according to a study by Women Work!, an advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

Advocates argue a few simple tweaks to the existing system would allow single mothers greater opportunities to escape poverty and achieve self-sufficiency. These include temporarily stopping the five-year clock on welfare payments for college-bound recipients and allowing university coursework to count as work activity.

“Given the five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance, it becomes critically important for welfare participants to engage in activities that will ultimately afford them the opportunity to escape poverty,” a report issued Tuesday by the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Women’s Policy Research concludes. “A college education, and particularly the completion of a four-year degree, provides the best opportunity – especially for women – to acquire good jobs, with good wages and good benefits.”

The institute’s report, “Resilient and Reaching for More: The Challenges and Benefits of Higher Education for Welfare Participants and their Children,” finds that single mothers who complete a degree program earn 75 percent more than those without a degree.

Few Single Mothers Go to College

Yet only 10 percent of all single mothers currently hold a degree; 62 percent have only a high school education or never graduated.

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2015 over 57 percent of jobs in the U.S. marketplace will require a minimum of a bachelor’s degree.

In 2005 over 17 million families, including 9.2 million headed by single parents, were enrolled in state-administered programs under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Over 85 percent of the single-parent families were headed by single mothers.

The report’s authors worry the current welfare system’s “work first” emphasis will squeeze millions of Americans into unemployment and abject poverty after they exhaust the system’s five-year lifetime cap on cash assistance for the needy.

Nicosia has scrambled to find local social groups and New York state programs that would help her cover expenses related to child care, books and transportation. Her rent, gas and electric utilities are covered by welfare benefits. She receives \$200 for other necessities and \$399 per month in food stamps. The Women, Infants and Children nutrition program provides her with three gallons of milk, three pounds of cheese, two dozen eggs and six cans of juice for each daughter monthly.

But the juggling leaves precious little time to spend with her two daughters, aged 5 and 3, and even less time for study, Nicosia said.

Hindered by Resistance

The Institute for Women's Policy Research report found that the majority of single mothers on welfare who are attempting a degree program enrolled in school before notifying their case workers because they feared resistance, bureaucratic hurdles and curtailed benefits; 54.3 percent of the women indicated that case workers became more of an impediment to their success than a help.

Over 70 percent of the women reported problems finding sufficient study time, while 69.6 percent indicated increased difficulties meeting financial obligations. Balancing the needs of family with the demands and expense of degree programs were cited as the main obstacle.

It's a problem Nicosia knows all too well.

"Case workers said I was more than welcome to go and get a degree but there was nothing they could do to help me, and the full-time degree program would not qualify me for a work exemption," she says.

Many participants in the institute's report said they believed pursuing a degree would improve their financial situation, set a good example for their children and increase their self-esteem.

"From a policy standpoint, officialdom is looking at the short-term benefits of decreasing the number of people on the welfare rolls," says Jill Miller, CEO of Women Work!

"There's a shortage looming and yet nobody's really looking at single mothers, who represent a rather large untapped resource," Miller added. "There are also issues of sex, racial and social discrimination at work. Single mothers largely are not seen as deserving of help."

Juliette Terzieff is a freelance journalist currently based in Buffalo, N.Y., who has worked for the San Francisco Chronicle, Newsweek, CNN International and the London Sunday Times during time spent in the Balkans, the Middle East and South Asia.

For More Information

Institute for Women's Policy Research – “Resilient and Reaching for More: The Challenges and Benefits of Higher Education for Welfare Participants and their Children” [Adobe PDF format]: <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/D466.pdf>

Women Work! – “Chutes and Ladders: The Search for Solid Ground for Women in the Workforce” [Adobe PDF format]: http://www.womenwork.org/pdfresources/chutes_ladders_2005rpt.pdf

Center for Women Policy Studies: “From Poverty to Self-Sufficiency: Role of Post-Secondary Education in Welfare Reform” <http://216.146.235.184/report.cfm?ReportID=77>

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