

WOMEN'S ENEWS

August 6, 2004

Welfare Series: Law Drops Moms in Deeper Poverty

By Jennifer Friedlin, WeNews correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – In 2002, Carletta Connor lost her ride to her job as a medical technician several miles from her home in rural Mexico, Mo. A few days later, her babysitter announced she was moving.

With no available public transportation and no one to take care of her four children, all under the age of 13, Connor, 44, could not keep her job. With no reliable child support to rely on, Connor had cycled on and off welfare for years and now found herself again turning to the government for assistance. In the past, the local welfare office assisted her in collecting child support – as all welfare offices are required to do – while it provided her family a small monthly grant to pay rent and utilities.

This time, however, after a year, she hit the federally mandated five-year lifetime limit for receiving cash benefits. With the federally-subsidized child support no longer available, Connor and her kids now subsist on food stamps and sporadic child support payments.

Three years ago, Renee Ray, a single, 41-year-old mother of three from Milwaukee was working part-time and going to college full-time. After a fall left her wheelchair bound, she lost her job. Also unable to rely on support from her children's father, she went to the welfare office. A caseworker said she needed to work 30 hours a week to qualify for public assistance, as the law requires. When she applies, she must also agree to assist the agency in its efforts to collect child support from her children's father and, in effect, reimburse itself for the aid she received.

Ray decided that if it meant she would have to quit school, she would forego the federally subsidized child support. Today, she and her family scrape by with help from her mother and local charities.

Lives Transformed in 1996

Connor and Ray are just two women whose lives were transformed when Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, commonly known as “welfare reform.” This legislation dramatically changed the national program that had provided federally subsidized child support to families with only one

residential parent and, for whatever reason, no sufficient child support from the other parent.

Before 1996, welfare figuratively put the government in the shoes of the absentee parent and fulfilled the obligation to pay child support and then sought reimbursement from the absentee parent, if feasible.

Now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF Program, post-1996 welfare remains a system of helping single parents – 90 percent of whom are female – provide for their children.

But the once-federal program has been transformed into a decentralized, state-run system that requires adult recipients to work for their family's benefits.

The government, in other words, no longer fulfills the financial obligations of the nonresidential parent, who might accept a mother who chooses to stay home and care for her children.

Now, the local welfare centers emphasize job placement while states offer the mothers the services they need – such as child care and transportation – to leave their children and seek paid employment.

Since TANF took effect, the number of families receiving cash benefits has been cut in half to just over 2 million. The Bush administration has hailed the drop in the welfare rolls as evidence of the new system's unmitigated success in getting people off public assistance.

Complex Reality

But welfare recipients, policy analysts and advocates for the poor say the drop reflects a more complex reality. They say strict time limits, complex rules, stringent work requirements and diversionary tactics are used by state governments from Maine to Hawaii to drive the welfare rolls down. And, as a result, the system no longer provides a vital safety net for families in need, not to mention the resulting failure to collect child support on behalf of impoverished mothers. The most vulnerable people in the system are falling deeper into poverty, they say.

Who is right? According to the statistics, people on both sides of the debate may have valid arguments. The numbers make clear that the welfare rolls are down and that those who have found and retained jobs under the new welfare law have more cash in their pockets and pride in their outlook. But the statistics fail to take into account the effect of reform on people like Carletta Connor and Renee Ray, who are neither on the rolls nor working because their local governments failed to provide necessary services, such as daycare, transportation and flexibility in education.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Temporary Assistance to Needy Families report to Congress for 2002, the last year such a report was made, work-force participation rates among adult TANF recipients reached a high of 38.8 percent in 1999, during a period of strong economic growth. Two years later, during the recession of 2001, the proportion was down to 34.4 percent.

Yet, even through the recession of 2001, the welfare rolls continued to decline, and has remained almost flat since then.

In response, Wade F. Horn, assistant U.S. secretary of health and human services in charge of welfare policy, has described TANF as "recession-proof." He and other proponents of the new welfare system say that the system works to encourage people to look for work and stay off the rolls.

Ron Haskins, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution and the welfare staff director of the House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee when the 1996 welfare law was enacted, said that, while it is true some people are worse off under the new system, many former welfare recipients are faring much better.

He said that, on average, a family of one parent and two children that makes it off welfare and into work earns about \$15,000 to \$16,000 a year, including income from earnings, food stamps and the earned income tax credit that provides tax relief to low-income workers. That's nearly double the \$8,000 to \$9,000 a year a family on cash benefits and food stamps receives.

"Overall, it's been a very positive picture," Haskins said.

Worrisome Trends

But others say the trends are worrisome.

"I think the fact that the rolls declined during this recession is an indictment of welfare reform," said Wendell Primus, a welfare official who resigned from the Clinton administration in protest of the 1996 law. "The system is supposed to be a safety net."

Primus noted that while welfare rolls have dropped, other indicators of need, such as food stamp usage, have increased. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported a 29.7 percent increase in the number of households on food stamps to 10.1 million families in January 2004, up from 7.8 million in January 1999.

Both Carletta Connor and Renee Ray say they feel the system has let them down. Connor says she understands the need to promote work, but given the lack of transportation and child care options in her rural town she wonders how she would be able to hold a job even if she could find one.

“The politicians just put you in a spot I’m sure none of them would like to be in. There are no jobs, no transportation, all the plants are closing,” Connor said. “People can’t afford to move because they don’t have the money for it.”

Ray said she wished the system had recognized her commitment to education and allowed her to stay in school while providing assistance through a tough time.

“Welfare used to be a support you need to maintain you until you found other employment,” Ray said. “It’s not that I wasn’t motivated, I just needed some help.”

Low-Wage Job Cycle

Like 80 percent of the women on welfare, Connor and Ray have spent their adult lives cycling in and out of low-wage jobs and are unable to rely on the father of their children for regular and ample child support payments. For them, welfare provided a fall back position during the tough times, at least until the changes in 1996.

In order to keep their welfare numbers down, many states have instituted policies that make it more difficult to obtain cash assistance. In Illinois, for example, people have to demonstrate that they have looked for a job for four weeks before they are eligible to apply for benefits. Other states, such as Wisconsin, offer emergency money to help people pay their rent or fix their cars rather than put them on the welfare rolls.

Some analysts say one result of the new welfare regulations is that people who have the most difficulties navigating the system are landing deeper into poverty.

“You’ve got an increase in the number of families that don’t have welfare and don’t have work,” said Shawn Fremstad, deputy director of welfare policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C. “You’ve had an increase in the depth of poverty.”

In 2002, 34.6 million people were in poverty, up 1.7 million from 2001, according to the Census Bureau. The number of people living in severe poverty, or 50 percent of the poverty line, increased to 14.1 million in 2002, from 13.4 million in 2001, Fremstad said.

The poverty level in 2003 for a parent and two children under 18 equaled an annual income of \$14,824.

There’s also been a shift in the racial make up of the welfare caseload. In 2001, whites made up 30.1 percent of the caseload, down from 35.9 percent in 1996, while blacks and Hispanics posted increases. In 2001, blacks comprised 39 percent of the caseload, up from 36.9 percent in 1996, and Hispanics totaled 26 percent of the caseload, up from 20.8 percent.

Reauthorization Bill Pending

Looking ahead, the welfare system is likely to become more restrictive when the TANF reauthorization bill, pending in Congress since 2002, is finally passed. The bill passed in the House of Representatives this spring, but is now stuck in the Senate.

Under the pending bill, states would be required to increase the number of parents participating in work activities and the hours each parent participates. For example, the draft reauthorization bill requires Pennsylvania to increase by 370 percent the number of TANF recipients working outside the home, despite a 26 percent increase since 2000 in the number of unemployed single parents. The draft does not call for similar overhauls of the child support collection system.

Neither Carletta Connor nor Renee Ray is surprised that the system might become even more stringent. They say it only reinforces their beliefs that politicians are out of touch with the reality of poor people's lives. For Connor, this realization only adds to her bleak outlook.

"It's a struggle everyday," said Connor with a sigh. "When you get up you're looking forward to really nothing."

As for Ray, she is more hopeful, but no thanks to the system. Now on the cusp of getting her associates degree in human services, Rays says she made the right choice to stay in school rather than take the state's offer of a minimum-wage community service job.

"I'm glad I made that decision," Ray said. "I knew back then that if I continued to go to school I wouldn't have to rely on the system at all."

Jennifer Friedlin is a writer based in New York.

For more information:

National Welfare Engine – <http://www.welfareengine.org/>

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities – Welfare Reform and TANF – <http://www.cbpp.org/pubs/welfare.htm>

Welfare Made A Difference Campaign - <http://www.wmadcampaign.org>

For a Full Version of Today's graphic – <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1939>

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