

Challenges remain in moving people from welfare to work

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By Brenda Payton

The early reports of the reduction of the welfare rolls seemed to suggest the daunting task of moving people from welfare to work wasn't going to be daunting after all.

The number of people who have gotten off welfare has dropped dramatically, across the country.

However, advocates of the poor warned the shrinking welfare rolls were only part of the story. What is happening to people once they get off welfare? And what's happening to the children who had been beneficiaries of the government assistance?

In recent weeks, a number of studies have been released that begin to provide some answers. Just last week, two such studies documented the tough challenges that remain.

The Public Policy Institute of California released a report that found people who move off of welfare remain stuck in poverty. Nearly 80 percent of the state's welfare recipient have low or very low basic skills. That compares to 34 percent of the full-time work force.

The 34 percent figure should come as more of a surprise than the 80 percent. (Indeed, it should be cause for alarm that more than one-third of the state's full-time workers have low or very low basic skills.) The finding of low basic skills among welfare recipients makes you want to say, "Duh." Of course they have low basic skills. Why else would they have been stuck on welfare?

Without extensive education and training, they leave welfare for low-paying or part-time jobs; 70 percent didn't earn enough to raise their families out of poverty.

A RAND research group study of California's welfare-to-work program, CalWORKs, made similar findings. Counties across the state have made progress in setting up transition programs. But noncompliance among recipients is a major problem; an estimated half of the recipients have not shown up to scheduled welfare-to-work activities and appointments. Researchers offered a number of reasons. Including possible substance abuse and a lack of understanding of the mandatory nature of the activities.

The report emphasized the importance of understanding the issue of noncompliance and addressing it. The RAND study also concluded that to truly transition from government assistance, one family member must hold a full-time job that pays at least \$8.36 an hour. As the Public Policy Institute of California report found, few welfare recipients have the skills to get full-time work above the minimum wage.

The families might be off welfare, but they are still stuck in poverty.

"These reports are important because they point out the wrongheaded public policy of CalWORKs," said Ethel Long-Scott, executive director of the Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP), an Oakland-based advocacy group for poor women.

"You can't fix something by hiding the symptoms instead of attacking the problem. Our longstanding position is that a job alone doesn't get women out of poverty."

Long-Scott said the assumption behind CalWORKs was that poor people didn't want to work.

"The policy was directed by the notion that there were deserving and undeserving poor. That some people just want to live at the bottom and eat out of garbage cans. No one in their sound mind chooses poverty."

Further, she pointed out that people leaving welfare for the lowest paying jobs are competing with the working poor. "Public policy has to address public assistance and working poor issues together.

The CalWORKs approach never addressed lifting people out of poverty," she said.

People who have gotten off welfare find themselves faced with the choice between abject poverty and returning to public assistance.

After the time limits for welfare expire, they will face only poverty.

The recent studies illustrate that eliminating welfare does not do away with poverty. If we're serious about eradicating the need for welfare, we have a lot of work ahead of us.