

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

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The Wrong Idea at the Wrong Time: Governor's Welfare Work Requirement for Parents of Pre-school Children

Massachusetts welfare reform

In 1995, Massachusetts become one of the first states in the country to enact a comprehensive welfare reform plan. Able-bodied parents whose youngest child is age 2 or older are subject to a 2-year time limit on their benefits. During those 2 years, parents whose youngest child is full-time school age (age 6 and over) are required to work 20 hours per week to receive cash assistance. Parents whose youngest children are ages 2 through 5 are not subject to a strict work requirement but may be required or may volunteer to participate in education or training activities to help them prepare for the time limit. The state must fund child care services for recipient families who are working or participating in education and training activities.

The Governor's FY 04 budget proposal

The Governor says that imposing a 20-hour per week work requirement on an estimated 9,350 parents whose youngest child is age 2 through 5 will provide them the "dignity of work." However, DTA expects that about 6,500 of these families would not meet the work requirement and would lose cash assistance. Families who would be subject to sanction include families currently participating in education or training or other activities to prepare for employment. The Administration calculates that it would cost \$7.4 million to cover the increased child care costs for the families who would be working under the Governor's proposal.

Concerns about the Governor's proposal

1. **Child care costs:** One of the primary reasons the Legislature in 1995 did not impose a strict work requirement on parents of 2-5 year olds was the high cost of child care for very young children. Another reason was the importance to child development of parents being with their children when they are very young. The Governor has calculated relatively low child care costs of \$7.4 million for his proposal by assuming that most families would not comply and would get sanctioned. But even if the Governor is right that child care costs for his proposal would be only \$7.4 million, those scarce child care dollars would be better spent addressing the waiting list of 19,000 children of working parents who are not receiving assistance.

2. **The faltering economy:** In the current economic climate, there are very few entry level jobs for which these parents would qualify. To comply with a work requirement, they would have to engage in unpaid, “make-work” community service programs to meet the work requirement. DTA would incur additional administrative costs in developing community service sites for all these families. DTA has historically taken the position that community service does not prepare parents to support their families. The Governor’s proposal is ill-timed in the current economy.
3. **The need for education, training and transportation:** Particularly in a recessionary economy, parents with low-skills and limited work histories need education and training to be able to succeed in the work place. The 1995 welfare law gives DTA the power, subject to appropriation, to require parents of children age 2-5 to engage in education or training. As of December 2002, almost 2,500 of these parents were working, in education or training, or both. However, in January, the Governor eliminated all remaining FY 03 funding for education, job training and transportation services for welfare recipients. His FY 04 budget proposal would restore only part of these funds. Instead of imposing a “busy work” requirement on families with young children, limited state dollars would be better spent on more job training, education and transportation services to help these families succeed in the long term.
4. **Wide-spread sanctions of families with young children:** Far from offering families with young children the “dignity of work,” this plan would simply result in thousands of such families being sanctioned and losing some or all their cash assistance. This is a result of DTA’s punitive, non-supportive administration of the work program. As documented in the recent report “The Impact of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Infants and Toddlers,” A Report from the Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (July 2002) (http://dcc2.bumc.bu.edu/csnappublic/C-SNAP_Report.pdf), such sanctions harm the health of very young children. Instead of sanctioning the vast majority of families, DTA should offer them the supports they need to succeed.

Conclusion

The Governor’s proposal to require parents of very young children to work in order to receive welfare is ill-conceived and ill-timed, particularly given the current economy and the state’s fiscal crisis.

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