



MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE

Finding solutions to poverty and improving the lives of people with low income in Maine.

Governor Recycles So-Called “Welfare Reform” Strategy

Up-front work search in TANF: Requiring TANF applicants to apply for jobs before they have access to the program’s work readiness services is putting the cart before the horse. More importantly, it blocks people who are in crisis from receiving desperately needed help in a timely manner.

The Governor proposes that parents applying for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program who are deemed “job ready” must first apply for 3 jobs *before* they can qualify for help.

Many families turn to TANF when they are in crisis or face obstacles to work:

- Nationally more than 50% of women who receive public assistance report experiencing domestic violence. Nearly 1/4 of respondents to a 2010 Maine study applied for TANF because of an abusive relationship. (http://www.mainewomenspolicycenter.org/assets/files/reports/Families_in_Focus_Final%20Report.pdf)
- Many parents who turn to TANF need help with childcare and transportation in order to work. It makes little sense for these parents to apply for jobs they are unable to accept.
- Many parents who turn to TANF need additional training or education in order to get a job that will allow them to support their families. More than half of the 3,000 parents who lost TANF due to the Maine’s time limit policy *do not* have a GED or high school diploma.

This proposal puts the cart before the horse by undermining TANF’s new job-readiness assessment process. Once enrolled in TANF, parents currently undergo a comprehensive vocational assessment conducted by qualified professionals from Maine Medical Center’s Rehabilitation Center to determine job readiness and to identify and address barriers to work. *Of the 1,800 families that have completed this assessment an overwhelming number said they wanted to work, but only 32% were found to be actually “job ready”.* **This new assessment process is just starting to bear fruit but the Governor’s proposal undermines it by denying this opportunity to many who would benefit.**

This proposal creates a new and redundant layer of bureaucracy. Maine's TANF rules already require that as soon as a parent becomes eligible for TANF she must immediately be assessed, look for work, start to work, or engage in an education, training or work experience program. If this proposal becomes law, front line DHHS workers without special training in work readiness would assess these applicants and possibly deny them entry into the program before they ever get access to the new job-readiness assessment process conducted by qualified professionals. Not only would this prevent some parents from getting a legitimate assessment, but it is also inefficient and administratively burdensome.

Here's what Maine's major newspapers said about this proposal last year:

Portland Press Herald: This proposal will *"worsen the plight of the most needy."* It will not *"address the real reasons people find it hard to get work."*

Bangor Daily News: This proposal is *"uncreative and harmful."* It *"isn't actually about helping people find work. It's about preventing them from getting benefits...Requiring an upfront work requirement might appeal to some voters, but it wouldn't address the underlying causes that drive people to seek assistance."* The editorial went on to challenge the Governor to *"spur real reform" by "work[ing] with the Legislature to find common ground on genuine ways to prepare welfare recipients for lasting success in the workforce."*

There is no evidence that up-front work requirements actually result in parents getting secure and lasting employment that enables them to support their families. Only a minority of states have adopted an up-front job search requirement. There is little data on these experiments, but several states have seen an increase in application denials and a decline in caseload. While proponents claim that a decline in caseload means that people are finding jobs, there is no evidence supporting these claims.

- Kansas implemented an up-front job search requirement in its TANF program in November 2011. In the first year alone, thousands of applicants were denied help as a result with the state estimating that this policy led to a 10 percentage point drop in the approval rate of applications. Kansas since abandoned this approach for a more comprehensive post-eligibility assessment similar to Maine's.
- Large numbers of families also lost assistance in Georgia, South Carolina and Ohio. When Pennsylvania imposed an up-front job search thousands of families were denied help they badly needed. ([http://articles.philly.com/2013-09-24/news/42326737_1_welfare-benefits-welfare-rolls-most-welfare-recipients.](http://articles.philly.com/2013-09-24/news/42326737_1_welfare-benefits-welfare-rolls-most-welfare-recipients))

Gainful employment is a real solution to poverty--but this proposal does not provide families with that opportunity. Instead it just makes it harder to access the TANF program, which can provide parents with the training or childcare they need in order to work. Real reform must promote and support work while taking in to account the challenges that families face in today's economy.

**Real reform should create opportunity for families;
not push them deeper into poverty.**