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'Welfare to work' doesn't work, Network finds

by Casey McCorry

In the current economic climate of prolonged recession, 'welfare-to-work' programs are insufficient to meet their stated aim of raising families out of poverty, according to a new report from Network, the Catholic social justice lobby based in Washington.

The programs, administered by states and funded by federal block grants, known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, have 'not reached all who need it, particularly during the recession, nor has it been successful in helping enough families rise above poverty,' said the report, 'TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty During the Recession.'

From February to March 2010, Network surveyed people at 70 emergency service agencies, including food pantries and homeless shelters in 21 states and Washington. Adult members of more than 800 families that included 1,300 children were personally interviewed.

These programs were created by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which eliminated open-ended federal entitlement programs, instated a five-year lifetime limit on the receipt of benefits and added work requirements to the aid programs.

This was the third study of the poverty programs that Network has conducted since the welfare reform law was passed in 1996.

One conservative critic said ideas like Network's would dismantle the reform of 1996. Robert Rector, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, called the idea of expanding programs 'a bunch of nonsense.'

However, Network found the programs' 'work-first' emphasis 'especially problematic during periods of high unemployment and low wages.'

In the boom time of the late 1990s, Network said, the programs did help families find work, but this effectiveness dwindled as the economy soared.

“Despite TANF’s goal to promote work, only 42 percent of respondents who had received TANF funds found a job while under the program,” Network reported. Furthermore, because TANF recipients are pushed toward “immediate employment,” they took jobs that “did not provide enough finances to meet all of their basic needs.”

These jobs also were mostly in low-skilled sectors. The report quoted a program director at a transitional center in Baltimore, who said, “The welfare-to-work program does not seem to be successfully preparing individuals to develop the necessary skills in order to become self-reliant or employable.”

Current programs do little to eliminate significant barriers to employment, Network said. Among the respondents who said they found work through a TANF program:

Twenty-six percent reported that they lost their child-care benefits, which added to their financial burden. Only 30 percent could access education or training programs and these opportunities were limited to a 12-month period.

Forty percent said that limited access to education and job training has proven to be a hindrance in finding employment.

“Welfare recipients are finding themselves in an increasingly skills-based economy yet in a program that places too little emphasis on education,” Network said.

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Other obstacles to employment that the “work-first” approach does not address, according to Network, are disabilities, prison records, language, domestic violence, substance abuse, and transportation.

Network made a number of recommendations to increase the effectiveness of these programs:

Change the way success is measured. Instead of counting the number of people who find work, success should be measured by “reduced poverty and improved child well-being.”

Increased funding to “human needs programs,” such as food stamps and child nutrition programs, “so that they truly serve as a safety net during an economic downturn and provide an effective pathway out of poverty.”

Provide more help for individuals and families facing multiple barriers to entry into the workforce.

Expand access to education and training.

Provide more flexibility regarding the five-year time limit on assistance.

Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, said that the Network report “accurately paints a picture of the reality of far too many people who live in the throes of poverty in this country. This report gives us not only a foundational context of the experience of poverty, it gives credible strategies for social change.”

In reference to Network’s proposal for increased funding and more programs for those with employment barriers, Rector said, “That’s exactly what the people on the left said right before the reforms in the 1990s and their programs never increased employment.”

Rector said there are over 70 federal programs for low-income families. “We spend over \$400 billion a

year on low-income families with children. When you want to expand this program, you need to realize you're already spending \$30,000 on each family before you start adding to the national debt," he said.

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