

DETOURS ON THE ROAD TO EMPLOYMENT

Obstacles Facing Low-Income Women

Findings from a national
survey of job trainers and
other providers serving
low-income women

National Partnership
for Women & Families

mission statement

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that uses public education and advocacy to promote fairness in the workplace, quality health care, and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family.

Founded in 1971 as the Women's Legal Defense Fund, the National Partnership has grown from a small group of volunteers into one of the nation's most powerful and effective advocates for women and families. Working with business, government, unions, nonprofit organizations, and the media, the National Partnership is a voice for fairness, a source for solutions, and a force for change.

Detours on the Road to Employment: Obstacles Facing Low-Income Women

I. The Context: Low-Income Women Face a Range of Employment Barriers

For many women, the path to finding and keeping a job with decent wages and advancement opportunities is strewn with obstacles — from lack of adequate child care, to juggling work and family responsibilities, to dealing with on-the-job discrimination. These barriers to employment are especially challenging for women living on the economic margins, particularly welfare recipients, for whom the consequences of lacking or losing a job can be devastating.

To document the real impact of these employment barriers, the National Partnership for Women & Families surveyed programs that primarily work with low-income women as they look for jobs. The goal of the survey was to learn more about the prevalence and severity of different employment barriers and how they affect welfare recipients and

other low-income women. In particular, we wanted to gather information about the effects of discrimination and work/family conflicts, since their impact on low-income women generally receives very little public attention.

The survey explores employment obstacles faced by all low-income women, and whether those obstacles change in nature or intensity according to a woman's welfare status. Because of recent welfare law changes, welfare recipients now must meet rigid new work requirements or risk losing vital benefits. Unfortunately, the current welfare debate — and resulting policies — rarely acknowledge the range of barriers that stand between most welfare recipients and permanent employment. Learning more about these barriers is the first step toward developing serious strategies to help welfare recipients, and all low-income women, successfully enter and remain in the workforce.

Survey Methodology

The National Partnership (with assistance from the AFL-CIO, Equal Rights Advocates, Wider Opportunities for Women, Women Employed, and Women Work! The National Network for Women's Employment) distributed written surveys to approximately 1,700 program providers¹ across the country in August-September 1998. The results detailed below are based on a review of the 215 responses received from 45 states, primarily between September and October 1998. Anecdotes are also drawn from approximately 35 follow-up phone interviews.

This survey gathered information and stories about what is happening at the ground level as low-income women seek out job opportunities. It was not intended or administered to produce statistically significant data. Instead, it was designed to identify specific problems, possible policy solutions, and areas for future research and analysis.

II. Key Findings

The survey responses drive home that even in a robust economy, matching people with jobs remains quite challenging at the low end of the pay scale. More than one-third of survey respondents (35.4%) reported that they “always” or “usually” experience difficulties placing clients in jobs; less than 2% of respondents (1.86%) “never” encountered difficulties when trying to place a client. The survey also asked providers how frequently their clients — both those who receive welfare benefits (“welfare clients”) and those who do not (“non-welfare clients”) — face specific barriers when trying to find or keep a job. The survey distinguished between welfare and non-welfare clients to learn more about whether welfare status raised unique barriers to employment. The survey produced four major findings:

1) Inadequacies in three primary support services — education and training, child care, and transportation — are the most common barriers to low-income women’s employment.

Approximately three out of four providers reported that lack of education and training, lack of child care, and/or lack of transportation “often”² limit work opportunities for their non-welfare clients. More than four out of five said their welfare clients “often” encounter these same barriers.

2) Employer inflexibility toward employees’ family needs is one of the most difficult employment barriers for low-income women to overcome.

More than half of providers reported that employer unwillingness to accommodate family and medical needs — such as time off to care for a sick child, a seriously ill relative, or a client’s own illness — “often” makes it difficult for non-welfare clients to find or keep a job. Nearly two-thirds reported that the same work/family conflicts are “often” a barrier for welfare clients.

3) Employment discrimination remains a serious problem for low-income women entering the workforce.

About half of providers said that non-welfare clients “often” face one or more of the following types of discrimination when looking for a job or on the job: race/ethnic, gender, pregnancy, or disability discrimination or sexual/racial harassment. More than half said their welfare clients “often” encounter at least one such form of employment discrimination.

4) Employment barriers affect all low-income women, regardless of their welfare status.

According to providers, employment barriers pose formidable obstacles for non-welfare and welfare clients alike. While some appear to have a greater impact on welfare recipients than on other low-income women, the differences are generally quite small. These findings suggest the need for creative policy solutions to employment problems faced by all low-income women regardless of their welfare status.

III. A Closer Look at Employment Barriers

A. Lack of Primary Support Services: Education and Training, Child Care, and Transportation

Most providers said that lack of education and training, child care, and transportation frequently caused employment problems for non-welfare and welfare clients alike. Given the pressing need for primary support services, it is not surprising that these three barriers were cited by the largest majority of respondents.

About three out of four respondents reported that lack of education and training (75.4%), lack of child care (74.0%), and lack of transportation (72.1%) “often”³ limit work opportunities for their non-welfare clients. Even more respondents said their welfare clients “often” encounter problems tied to: lack of education and training (87.9%), lack of transportation (86.5%), and lack of child care (84.7%).

Many respondents described their own and their clients' frustration as they struggled with these three issues:

- A South Carolina provider⁴ described lack of transportation as “a huge problem” because her clients live in a rural area with no public bus routes. Her clients have trouble getting to any centers that offer training and education because most are located outside of town. Even if these women manage to get the training they need, they “have no car and can’t take a job.” She noted that her clients frequently “will get jobs, but their ride falls through, and they are let go.”
- A Wisconsin provider found that a number of clients do not take jobs because they have no child care and cannot leave their children alone. She discovered that other clients, however, feel they have no option but to leave children as young as eight years old at home alone at night. Her clients tell her, “Well, we don’t have a choice. We can take the job and put food on the table or not take the job and not put food on the table.”
- An Iowa provider stressed that lack of transportation and child care, particularly during evening hours, creates serious problems.

Many clients can only get jobs at odd hours, often at night, such as data processing or cleaning/janitorial service jobs. But the bus transit system in their community is quite limited in the evenings and available only in a few neighborhoods. Too many women are faced with the dilemma of how to get to and from their evening jobs and take children to and from some form of child care. Some employers have a “you take what you can get” attitude and are inflexible about hours and child care needs. This leaves many clients essentially unable to accept jobs, in part because the money that they would make through night work would be eaten up in child care and transportation costs (if they could find child care and transportation at all).

- A Colorado service provider is frustrated by recent welfare changes that force her clients to drop out of education and training programs and forfeit their chances to get better paying jobs that could truly support a family.⁵ She recalled a woman with four children who was completing a teacher training program, but had to drop out when her benefits were cut off. Now, she works two part-time jobs at a fast food restaurant and a grocery store to make ends meet, with little chance of moving into more secure employment.

Table I. Inadequacies in Primary Support Services

Barrier	Percentage of providers reporting that NON-WELFARE clients face the barrier “often” or “very often”	Percentage of providers reporting that WELFARE clients face the barrier “often” or “very often”
Lack of adequate child care	74.0%	84.7%
Lack of transportation to work	72.1%	86.5%
Lack of skills or education for a particular job	75.4%	87.9%

B. Balancing Work and Family Obligations — Inadequate Supports

Providers also identified work/family conflicts as a serious employment barrier for both non-welfare and welfare clients. Low-income women trying to find and keep jobs while caring for their families must meet multiple obligations with usually inadequate work/family supports. Their ability to balance work and family relies heavily on employer attitudes, the presence or absence of flexible workplace policies, child care cost and availability, and access to time off for family emergencies.

Notably, more than half (54.4%) of respondents said that employer unwillingness to accommodate family and medical needs — such as time off to care for a sick child, a seriously ill relative, or a client’s own illness — “often” makes it difficult for non-welfare clients to find or keep a job. Nearly two-thirds (62.3%) reported that these work/family conflicts are “often” a barrier for welfare clients. As explained

by one Pennsylvania provider, many clients “miss work because either they are sick or their children are sick, [. . . and] regular child care won’t take care of a sick child.”

Several providers described the challenges that confront clients struggling to balance work and family responsibilities:

- One job trainer in Arizona, who works with single parents and displaced homemakers, explained that her clients miss work when one of their children gets sick and back-up child care is unavailable. The job trainer noted that these parents often rely on informal child care arrangements because they do not earn enough to afford formal child care. When informal child care falls through, these parents find themselves needing “back up for their back up,” which they rarely have. Most employers in her area are not willing to be flexible with new employees and inevitably

Table II. Discrimination as a Barrier to Employment Opportunities

Barrier	Percentage of providers reporting that NON-WELFARE clients face the barrier “often” or “very often”	Percentage of providers reporting that WELFARE clients face the barrier “often” or “very often”
Employer seeking an employee of a different race or ethnicity	20.0%	23.3%
Employer seeking an employee of a different gender	27.0%	28.4%
Employer unwillingness to accommodate a disability	19.1%	21.9%
Sexual and/ or racial harassment on the job	22.3%	21.4%
Employer reluctance to hire participant because she is (or might become) pregnant	23.7%	35.4%

Table III. Unique Welfare Barriers

Barrier	Percentage of providers reporting that WELFARE clients face the barrier “often” or “very often”
Employer reluctance to hire welfare recipients	59.1%
Unwillingness to pay welfare recipients the same wages as other workers	23.3%

hold absences from work against them, regardless of the reason. For her clients, who are often hired subject to a three or four-month probation period, this means that they are dismissed at the end of the probation period.

- A provider in Tennessee, who also assists single parents and displaced homemakers, noted with frustration that “employers tend to take the stance that these people are expendable. A woman can get fired for absenteeism due to a sick child.” The provider believes that her clients have a particularly difficult time balancing work and family obligations because they are in “low-paying jobs without benefits,” such as sick leave or family leave. Like other respondents, this provider believes that employers are unwilling to accommodate the family or medical needs of low-income workers because they “assume there are lots of [other] folks like them who can fill their shoes.”

Providers are especially frustrated by how employer inflexibility limits their clients’ opportunities:

- One Virginia provider noted that, for single parents, keeping a job can be as hard, if not harder, than getting a job. “One small setback — a broken car or a sick child — can cause them to miss work and lose the job. Some employers seem willing to give one chance, and if workers blow that chance, they are let go.”

- A Pennsylvania provider explained that employers often refuse to make flex-time available or accommodate employees who have difficulty arranging child care. Many employers are inflexible, with a “take it or leave it” attitude. One welfare recipient, who was required by the state welfare program to work 20 hours per week,⁶ was often given night hours even though she could not obtain child care at night. Her employer was unwilling to give her regular, daytime hours. This put the employee in a very precarious position: if she refused to take the night hours, she would lose her job; and if she could not find another job, her welfare benefits would be threatened. She ultimately chose to look for another job.

These anecdotes paint a clear picture of the work/family conflicts facing both non-welfare and welfare clients. The situations often involve a mix of competing responsibilities that become almost unmanageable when they converge: because clients lack basic benefits such as sick leave, the employers are inflexible, or they do not have access to adequate support services like child care. For these low-income women, the triumph of successfully finding a job is often defeated by working conditions that make it difficult — or impossible — to succeed without putting their families at risk.

C. Discrimination — Biases Are Still Barriers

In addition to inadequate services and work/family supports, survey respondents identified discrimination as a substantial employment barrier. One-third (34.0%) said that employers' discriminatory attitudes make it difficult to find jobs for their clients. An Illinois provider, for example, recalled a local employer declining to hire her highly qualified female client for an electrical job because those positions were traditionally held by men.

About half of all respondents are confident that their clients — regardless of welfare status — will confront one or more discrimination problems when looking for work. **When asked how frequently their clients encounter race/ethnic, gender, pregnancy, or disability discrimination or sexual/racial harassment when looking for a job or on the job, 48.8% of respondents said that non-welfare clients “often” face one or more types of discrimination. A slightly higher 54.4% said their welfare clients “often” encounter at least one form of work-related discrimination.**

The survey results also suggest that respondents' welfare and non-welfare clients encounter most types of discrimination with similar frequency. Only in the case of pregnancy discrimination did providers' responses reveal a substantial difference between the experience of welfare and non-welfare clients: 23.7% of respondents said pregnancy discrimination was “often” a barrier for their non-welfare clients, while 35.4% (nearly 50% more) said it was “often” a barrier for their welfare clients.

Race and Gender Discrimination

Given that the low-wage labor market is disproportionately female and minority, the reported prevalence of race and gender discrimination is particularly disturbing. Several respondents described situations in which employment discrimination made it difficult for their clients to find or keep jobs:

- A provider operating a commercial drivers license training program in New Jersey is aware that a neighboring school district routinely refused to hire African American and/or Hispanic drivers. She recalled a former participant, an African American woman, who was fully trained, an “excellent driver,” and job ready. This participant and a white female participant were accepted into the school district's internal training program. From the very beginning of the training, the two women were treated very differently. The instructor singled out the African American woman for criticism, always treating her in a condescending manner and questioning her ability. The white applicant, in contrast, was not criticized and found the training enjoyable and easy. After four days of the training, the African American participant quit. (In this case, fortunately, the participant found work as a driver in another district.)
- One New York provider described a recent case involving a female welfare recipient who was sexually harassed at the attorney's office where she worked. The woman believed that she had no other choice but to keep the job because she risked losing her welfare benefits if she quit. (After working in this situation for more than a year, she learned that other co-workers were also being sexually harassed, and they joined together to pursue legal action as a group. The case was still pending as of October 1998.)

In many cases, clients reluctantly put up with discrimination and abuse, or they leave the job without ever filing a complaint for fear of additional problems:

- An Iowa provider recalled one case involving a welfare recipient who reported having to endure a co-worker's racially derogatory comments on a daily basis. The co-worker referred to African American and Hispanic office workers as “gang members” and likely to steal.

- An Illinois provider discovered that a client had to rely on welfare benefits after leaving a job because of sexual harassment by her employer. The harassment included groping and suggestive comments about sexual favors. The client repeatedly asked her boss to stop, but he ignored her. When the client saw no other alternative, she quit and, as a result, had to seek public assistance to make ends meet. She never filed an official complaint, and she never told any members of her family because she was afraid of their reaction. (She later found a low-paying job and continued to receive some assistance with food stamps and child care.)

Even in cases where the client does report discrimination, the employer's solution may create other problems:

- An Indiana provider recalled a former client who left a job at a local fast food restaurant after a co-worker repeatedly made sexual comments and touched her inappropriately over several months. The client registered a formal complaint through the established procedures and, in response, was offered a transfer to another location. Given the choice of taking the transfer or quitting, she decided to transfer. The new location, however, was located outside of the city limits. At the time the client had two children, one infant and one pre-schooler. The combined pressures of the commute and child care complications forced her to resign after a few months.

Many providers noted that women face particular problems when they look for jobs in non-traditional, predominantly male fields. As one Tennessee provider explained, some employers insist that it is "more of a hassle to hire women" because, for example, employers then have to make sure that portable bathrooms are on site and other employees "have to watch what they say." Other respondents described various incidents involving sexual

harassment and gender stereotyping in non-traditional fields:

- One client of a Florida provider, after completing training as a machinist, was placed at a work site where she was one of only a handful of women. The men she worked with made her an "outcast." She left the job due to the stressful and untenable work environment and later enrolled in a training program for another field.
- The owner of a cabinet-making shop called a New York provider looking for potential interviewees. When the provider began to describe one of her students, the owner of the shop began to suspect that the student was female. The owner then asked if there were any males in the program. He ultimately agreed to consider the woman only when he found out there were no men in the program.

Several respondents also pointed out that some employers try to rationalize discriminatory hiring practices by blaming the attitudes of their employees or customers.

- In the course of telling an employer about a job candidate, a Tennessee provider got a "gut feeling" that the employer might be racially prejudiced. Not wanting to send the client into a bad situation, the provider told the employer that her client was African American. The employer stated, "Well, it's not a problem for me, but all my patients are white." The provider concluded that it was better not even to send the client for an interview.

Pregnancy Discrimination and Discrimination Based on Parental Responsibilities

As noted above, almost one in four respondents said their non-welfare clients "often" encounter pregnancy discrimination, and more than one in three said their welfare clients are "often" faced with it. (See Table II). Several respondents spoke about the subtle and not-so-subtle manifestations of pregnancy discrimination:

- A Tennessee provider recalled several recent instances in which employers asked clients with children whether they were “going to get pregnant again.” In the provider’s experience, very few program participants are pregnant. Those who are usually go to school and opt to get a job after their pregnancy. The provider added that employers often raise questions about potential candidates — such as “Do they have young kids?” — to try to screen out candidates with certain family responsibilities.

Other respondents observed employer reluctance to hire single parents and women caring for young children:

- A Pennsylvania employer informed a job placement counselor and her client that he “never” hires single parents because he believes their attendance will be poor. The counselor encountered similar problems with other employers, who asked clients such questions as: “Do you have a child?; How old are they [the children]?; Are you going to have any more?; Are you going to get pregnant?”

These anecdotes raise important questions about the intersection between discrimination and work/family issues, and the extent to which perceptions about low-income mothers and pregnant women can lead to discrimination that limits job opportunities.

Discrimination Against Individuals with Disabilities

Almost one in five providers (19.1%) reported that non-welfare clients “often” have problems finding or keeping a job because employers are unwilling to accommodate a disability. Slightly more than one in five (21.9%) said the same held true for welfare clients. The responses about welfare clients are consistent with other surveys and research on welfare recipients with disabilities.⁷ Respondents also raised concerns about how well their clients’ abilities were being assessed when applying for public benefits or services. A New Mexico provider, for example, stated

that some of her clients had learning disabilities that often went undiagnosed for months.

Discrimination Based on Negative Attitudes About Welfare

Many survey respondents reported that welfare clients frequently encountered negative attitudes and stereotypes about welfare recipients when looking for work. Three out of five respondents (59.1%) said that employers were “often” reluctant to hire a welfare recipient, and about one in four (23.3%) said that employers “often” did not want to pay welfare recipients the same wages as other workers doing the same job. (See Table III.) A California provider observed, for example, that many employers have condescending attitudes about welfare recipients and assume they are incapable of carrying out their duties in a responsible or skillful fashion. Although the provider noted that employers’ attitudes are getting better as they have positive experiences employing welfare recipients, she also remarked that there is “a long way to go” in overcoming employers’ negative perceptions of welfare recipients. Many other providers echoed this concern.

These responses suggest that negative stereotypes and misperceptions about welfare recipients as a group create additional hurdles for many individual recipients. It is also possible that some employer bias against welfare recipients is based on assumptions about their race/ethnicity, sex, and/or parental status — with welfare status effectively standing in for other factors that trigger discrimination. Regardless, it is clear that welfare status itself can be a frequent barrier to employment.

Additional Employment Barriers

In addition to the employment barriers discussed above, survey respondents mentioned a number of other barriers that affect job opportunities for some of their clients. Several providers mentioned the impact of domestic violence and abuse. A New Mexico provider, for example, recalled a mother of four whose only available caregiver — her mother

— was physically and verbally abusive. The client's husband was an absent father. As a result, she felt she could not leave her children alone with her mother, could only participate in the provider's program about two days each week, and could not work regular hours. Several providers mentioned that language barriers affect clients' job opportunities, and that many clients lack access to much-needed language resources, such as ESL (English as a second language) classes. Many providers also stressed the critical role of life skills training and working with clients to help them build the necessary skills to better manage their work and family responsibilities. Other providers mentioned difficulties faced by clients with criminal records who are searching for jobs. Although these issues were not explored in detail in this survey, they suggest additional areas for future research and policy development.

IV. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The lack of child care, transportation, job training, and education remains a major obstacle for low-income women struggling to enter and stay in the workforce. However, our findings show that even if low-income women are able to secure these basic support services, discrimination and work/family conflicts can substantially undermine their efforts to find and keep a job. Our research suggests that the public policy responses to these employment barriers are either absent or woefully inadequate. In addition to increasing access to primary support services, policy makers must begin to address the effects that discrimination and lack of employer flexibility have on low-income women's job opportunities.

Other recent research confirms that discrimination and work/family conflicts can play a significant role in preventing low-income women from making a successful transition from welfare to work. Reports suggest that White recipients have been leaving the welfare rolls at a greater rate than African American and

Hispanic recipients,⁸ and that discrimination may be a factor in the changing racial demographics of the welfare caseload.⁹ In addition, a recent study reported that women who left welfare for work were less likely than other working women to have jobs that offered paid sick days, family leave, or flexible job schedules, even though they were more likely to have children with chronic health problems.¹⁰

As long as welfare recipients and low-wage workers are disproportionately women and minorities with family responsibilities,¹¹ any comprehensive strategy to help lift families out of poverty must also help low-income women overcome the discrimination and work/family conflicts they face when searching for work or on the job. We recommend that the following steps be taken to respond to the needs of low-income women — both those who are welfare recipients and those who are not.

◆ **Vigorously enforce existing employment discrimination and other labor laws.** Enforcement of anti-discrimination and employment laws is critical for low-wage workers who may disproportionately face discriminatory and exploitative practices in the workplace. The civil rights guidance issued by HHS in August 1999 is an important step forward in drawing attention to the laws that offer welfare clients some protections, and now policy makers must take steps to ensure that these laws are vigorously enforced. State and federal government agencies charged with enforcement of these laws, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or state Fair Employment Practices Agencies, should develop and pursue new strategies to combat discriminatory practices and ensure compliance with civil rights laws in welfare-related programs.

◆ **Conduct thorough training for caseworkers, counselors, and agency staff.** Education about workplace laws, what steps to take if a client encounters a problem, and what resources are available to address workplace violations is necessary to ensure that clients are treated fairly. Training on how to conduct thorough assessments of clients'

needs is also essential to providing clients with necessary supports. Those individuals who work directly with clients such as caseworkers, counselors, job training and placement providers should be specifically targeted.

◆ **Develop and distribute accessible public education materials.** Many clients are unaware of their rights and what they are entitled to expect in the workplace. They need access to clear, concise, readable information about legal rights and protections, so they can be better informed and better able to protect and advocate for themselves.

◆ **Provide targeted information and develop positive working relationships with employers.** Many of the programs that have been most successful in helping clients enter the workforce have established close relationships with local employers. Through these relationships, programs gain a better understanding of employer needs, and employers learn to work with a new pool of candidates. Several survey respondents spoke about how working closely with employers helped minimize potential problems. In addition, employers also should be given information specifying the workplace rights and protections to which these employees are entitled.

◆ **Establish comprehensive policies that enable low-income women to balance work and family responsibilities.** Many survey respondents spoke about their clients' work/family struggles, both on and off welfare. Unfortunately, many low-income workers are unable to take advantage of the few work/family policies that are in place at the national or state level. For example, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has helped millions of eligible workers take job-protected leave for new babies, family medical emergencies, and serious personal illnesses. However, millions more workers are unable to take FMLA leave because they do not meet job tenure requirements, they work for an employer that is too small to be covered, or they simply cannot afford to take the unpaid leave the law provides. Many of those who

cannot take family and medical leave are low-income women struggling to obtain or remain in their jobs. For these women to succeed in the workplace, it is critical that we adopt policies that address the work/family needs of low-wage workers. For example:

- **State Family Support Programs.** Encourage states to develop programs that help low-income women and men address work/family problems and avoid welfare (with particular attention to those who have left welfare, but are at risk of returning). Such support programs could be funded either through states' TANF block grant or states' maintenance of effort (MOE)¹² funds in ways that do not trigger rigid TANF rules such as work participation requirements and time limits. For example, states could use these funds to increase the availability of child care for needy families, especially care for children with special needs, sick-child care, and child care during non-traditional work hours. Another possible use of these funds is to provide short-term support to needy families during a family emergency, such as when a low-income working parent must stay home to care for an ill child or elderly parent.
- **Data Collection and Research.** Improve data collection to better assess how work/family conflicts affect the ability of low-income workers to keep a job or obtain specific benefits, such as tracking welfare recipients who were sanctioned or lost jobs due to loss or lack of child care, or a family medical emergency. Conduct research and analyze data to identify the most persistent work/family problems facing low-income families. Use this information to develop and assess policy proposals that address the employment barriers posed by work/family conflicts.
- **Family Leave Income.** Encourage state policies and programs to provide financial support to individuals who need to take time off from work to deal with essential family

responsibilities. For instance, states can expand state unemployment or disability insurance programs to provide some pay during periods of family and medical leave.

- **Child Care.** Explore ways to use existing funds to expand the number of available child care slots, particularly for infants, and to provide facilities to care for sick children while their parents are at work.
- **24 Hours of Non-Emergency Leave.** Establish workplace policies to provide 24 hours of leave (or some other specified period of time) to deal with non-emergency family needs, such as parent-teacher meetings and routine doctors' appointments for children and elderly relatives.
- **FMLA Coverage.** Expand the FMLA to include businesses with 25 or more employees so that 13 million more working people — including many low-wage workers — can become eligible.

Linkages to Other Policy Initiatives. Beyond these specific recommendations, the survey results also raise issues tied to other broader policy initiatives. For example, potential legislative responses to provide more financial support to low-income families include **increasing the minimum wage and expanding unemployment insurance eligibility to cover more low-income women. Reauthorizing the federal Welfare-to-Work grants program**, which targets dollars at clients with multiple barriers to employment, could help fund important supportive services (such as assistance for parents with disabled children) or accommodate other work/family barriers. New initiatives, such as the recent **proposal to prohibit job discrimination against parents**, could address the concerns raised by survey respondents about discrimination targeted at low-income single mothers.

Specific changes to the welfare law (federal and state) could also be useful, such as encouraging states to make clear that leaving work in cases of work/family conflicts qualifies as “good cause,” raising the age limit (currently children under six

years) when parents can be exempted from work if the reason for not working is lack of child care, and easing welfare restrictions on training and post-secondary or other education options so that low-income women can improve their skills and prepare for secure, better-paying jobs. Innovative programs designed to expand transportation options for welfare clients who live too far from available jobs or offer child care assistance for parents who work irregular hours could help clients retain jobs without shirking their family responsibilities. Other policies, such as increasing the availability of family support services to lessen job interruptions due to short-term or unexpected work/family emergencies, could help put women in a better position to balance their work/family obligations and become economically secure.

The survey findings also suggest a number of issues requiring further study. These issues include examining barriers faced by individuals with: limited English proficiency, disabilities, criminal records, substance abuse problems, or mental health problems. The survey findings also indicate the critical need for accurate data and information about what is happening to low-income women with different racial and ethnic backgrounds and family situations as they search for work in order to craft meaningful public policies that genuinely assist low-income women in achieving financial security.

V. Conclusion

The National Partnership's survey sought to learn more about and draw attention to employment barriers facing low-income women by gathering information from people who work closely with clients as they look for work. The responses paint a complex picture of women's lives: many low-income women are grappling with myriad challenges as they search for secure jobs that pay livable wages. Often complicating their efforts are a wide range of barriers — such as inadequate child care, unreliable transportation, inflexible work hours,

and workplace discrimination — that can quickly derail potential job options even before they fully materialize. What becomes clear is the need for a more comprehensive and more effective set of policies crafted to address the full range of employment barriers. Developing innovative programs that offer child care assistance during evening hours, training caseworkers and other agency staff about workplace laws, and working with employers to understand clients' scheduling challenges are but a few of the steps that can and should be taken to assist low-income women as they look for work. Such policies are essential to help move low-income women a step closer to economic security for themselves and their families.

Endnotes

¹ The providers surveyed operate programs that enroll a wide variety of participants. Many, but not all, of the programs concentrate on assisting low-income women, and a significant number of those programs serve a large percentage of welfare recipients — 41.4 % of the survey respondents ran programs with 75% or more welfare recipients, while 29.3% of the survey respondents operated programs with 25% or less welfare recipients. Many of the programs also provide services to displaced homemakers and other women who have been out of the workforce for an extended period of time — 20.0% of respondents served primarily displaced homemakers. Given certain limitations of the survey instrument and differences in how specific the survey responses were, we could not gather precise statistics on the racial and ethnic breakdown of respondents' program participants. Of those who chose to provide demographic information about their clients, most reported serving a diverse and primarily female clientele.

² Several survey questions asked providers to report how frequently program participants faced a particular employment barrier. When discussing survey findings, the word "often" always refers to the combined responses of "often" and "very often."

³ See footnote 2.

⁴ To preserve confidentiality, specific program names and descriptions are not included in the anecdotes. Instead, the term "provider" is used to refer generally to each respondent and is intended to encompass a wide variety of programs and services.

⁵ The 1996 federal welfare law imposes strict work requirements on welfare clients requiring them to participate in certain work activities for a minimum number of hours. Because many education and training programs are not considered work activities under that law, many clients have been forced to drop out of education and training programs to meet their work participation requirement.

⁶ The state welfare program now imposes a 25 hour per week work requirement.

⁷ See, for example, Pamela Loprest and Gregory Acs, *Profile of Disability Among AFDC Families* (Washington: The Urban Institute,

Summer-Fall 1996) 11. See also Terri Thompson, et al., *State Welfare-to-Work Policies for People with Disabilities* (Washington: The Urban Institute, Dec. 1998) 1 (citing Amy Johnson and Alicia Meckstroth, *Ancillary Services to Support Welfare to Work*, Dept. of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (Washington: June 1998)).

⁸ Jason DeParle, "Welfare Rolls Show Growing Racial and Urban Imbalance," *New York Times*, 27 July 1998, § A1 (relying on an analysis of Census Bureau data); see also Rachel L. Swarns, "Hispanic Mothers Lagging as Others Escape Welfare," *New York Times*, 15 Sept. 1998, § A1.

⁹ A recent study in a Virginia county, for example, found that welfare caseworkers were less likely to provide African American clients with transportation vouchers than White clients. See Susan T. Gooden, "All Things Not Being Equal: Differences in Caseworker Support Toward Black and White Welfare Clients," *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy* 4 (1998): 23-33; Gooden, "Race and Welfare Report: Examining Racial Differences in Employment Status among Welfare Recipients," 1 Jan. 1997, <http://www.arc.org/gripp/eventsUpdates/goodenReport/reportTitlePg.html> (25 May 1999). See also Sandra Danziger, et al., *Barriers to Employment of Welfare Recipients* (Ann Arbor, MI: Poverty Research & Training Center, July 1999) (finding that out of 753 mothers who were welfare recipients about half believed that they had encountered discrimination and about 14 percent reported four or more instances of having been subject to discrimination); Harry J. Holzer, "Employer Demand, AFDC Recipients, and Labor Market Policy" (Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper No. 1115-96, Nov. 1996) (survey of employers in four major cities — Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles — found that firms were less likely to hire African Americans, with firms in the suburbs and smaller firms especially likely to discriminate against African Americans); Katherine S. Newman, "Dead-end Jobs: A Way Out Improving Job Mobility in the Inner City," *Brookings Review* (Fall 1995): 25 (describing Harlem fast food study concluding that racial stereotypes and stereotypes about the "underclass" limited job opportunities and job mobility for many low-income African American job seekers).

¹⁰ See S. Jody Heymann and Alison Earle, "Impact of Welfare Reform on Parents' Ability to Care for Their Children's Health," *American Journal of Public Health* 89 (1999): 502-05.

¹¹ See Dept. of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Part VII. Demographic and Financial Characteristics of Families Receiving Assistance," in *TANF: First Annual Report to Congress* (Washington: Aug. 1998); "Table 11: Percentage Distribution of TANF Adult Recipients by Race," in *TANF: Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients, Jul-Sept 1997* (Washington: Dec. 1998); data on the demographics of low-wage workers in the U.S. based on Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1997 Current Population Survey data provided by Jared Bernstein (on file with the National Partnership for Women & Families).

¹² Under the 1996 federal welfare law, in order to receive a full allocation of TANF funds, a state must meet a maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement by maintaining its own annual spending on welfare at 80% of the non-federal funds that it spent in fiscal year 1994 on AFDC and related programs (or at 75%, if work participation requirements are met). 42 U.S.C. § 609 (a)(7) (1999).

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