



### **Welfare Reform: Struggling Families Challenged By 40 Hour Work Week**

Proposals to raise hourly work requirements for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) beneficiaries reflect a fundamental lack of understanding about the real struggles facing working parents, particularly single parents. These parents need access to primary support services, such as childcare, paid leave, transportation, healthcare, education and training. Supports available to working parents under the current TANF system are already insufficient to meet the needs of families. While forcing individuals to work additional hours, the Administration proposal ignores the real life challenges these parents face – such as dealing with sick children, lack of child care during non-traditional hours, or family or medical emergencies – that have always made it difficult to transition into the workforce.

### **Low-Income Women Lack Basic Workplace Flexibility including Sick Leave**

TANF beneficiaries are more likely to work in low wage jobs that offer little or no flexibility or benefits, such as sick leave. At the same time, these parents are in greater need of workplace flexibility because they are more likely to be responsible for family caregiving and are less able to pay for safe, quality child care. Lack of work flexibility means that being available to take a child to the doctor or to take a parent to chemotherapy, to attend a parent-teacher conference, to supervise children before or after school, can place job security in jeopardy. Without sick leave, low-income women cannot take time off when they get sick or when they need to take care of a sick child, parent, or spouse without losing pay or without the risk of losing their job.

### **Low-Income Women Lack Protections Provided by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)**

As part-time workers and recent entrants to the workforce, many low-income women who work and receive TANF are ineligible for the job protection and unpaid leave the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides. The FMLA provides 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected leave to care for a newborn or newly adopted child or a sick parent, child, or spouse, or when the worker herself is sick. In order to qualify for FMLA leave you must have worked for the same employer for at least 12 months and for at least 1,250 hours during those 12 months, a policy which eliminates eligibility for most recent entrants to the workforce. In addition, even if individuals are eligible for FMLA, many cannot afford to take unpaid FMLA leave.

### **Access to Child Care is Insufficient**

Many welfare clients work irregular hours or second or third shifts.<sup>1</sup> Traditional child

care, however, is typically open only during standard work hours. Even during standard hours, finding available and quality child care is a barrier for low-income parents. Many of these families may be forced to resort to unsafe or unstable child care arrangements, such as placing their children in uninspected, private care, or leaving them home without adequate supervision.<sup>2</sup>

### **When Transportation Fails, Employees Fail**

To maintain employment, many welfare recipients and low-income workers require reliable public or private transportation. Transportation barriers impact the ability of recipients to meet their workfare and other employment requirements, yet the Administration's 40-hour work week requirement does not take into consideration the transportation problems clients may have or the time that such transportation may take.

### **Proposals Fail to Recognize that Education and Training are Key to Successful Employment**

One critical strategy for helping clients permanently transfer into jobs with greater economic security is to offer expanded access to training and education, including post-secondary education and English as a Second Language classes. Current TANF law and the 40-hour work week proposal discourage such endeavors by limiting the flexibility and time available to welfare clients to engage in these activities. By limiting access to education and training, the TANF law and current proposals limit the potential of families to achieve economic stability.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While proposals to require 40 hours of work and 70% work participation would exacerbate many of the problems welfare clients already face, there are strategies that can make real differences for welfare clients and their families:

**Employer Incentives and Rewards** Flexible hours, paid sick leave, paid personal leave, and access to family and medical leave are benefits that would make it much easier for working parents to address unforeseen emergencies, as well as routine childcare needs, without risking their jobs. Yet these benefits are often unavailable to recent entrants to the workforce and low income workers. Proposals should include incentives that reward employers for providing these benefits to individuals moving from welfare to work.

**Providing Key Work Supports** Devoting new resources to providing welfare clients with the necessary supports to make a permanent transition from welfare to work – and economic security.

*Increased Investments in Different Types of Child Care.* Allocating more funds for child care - especially for care during non-traditional hours,

infant care, and emergency care - is crucial to ensuring that welfare clients can be both responsible parents and workers.

*Programs to Provide Parental Care to Very Young Children.* There are many programs that states can create that allow parents to spend the first few critical weeks of their child's life at home. These programs recognize that often infant child care is just not available. Minnesota and Montana use At Home Infant Care Programs (AHIC) to allow parents to receive funding while at home taking care of a newborn or adopted child.

*Increased Access to Education and Training.* States should give clients more flexibility to participate in education and training programs that can lead to higher-paying jobs and advancement opportunities.

**Good Cause Provisions/State Performance Measures** Creating performance measures that reward states for adopting good cause or exemption policies that enable welfare clients to leave work to handle family or medical crises without fear of being sanctioned or losing vital benefits.

**State Demonstrations and Models Funding** demonstration projects to foster creative approaches and new models at the state level that focus on ways to afford welfare clients flexibility to meet family responsibilities without jeopardizing their jobs. Examples could include:

- Creating a demonstration project that provides a minimum amount of paid leave to employees to see if this increases retention.
- Creating a demonstration project that creates a family and medical leave fund to provide supplemental income to workers that need to take family and medical leave
- Creating a demonstration project that rewards employers for providing flexible hours and other family friendly benefits for parents moving from welfare to work.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. See Lane, et al., 2002. *Low-Income and Low-Skilled Workers' Involvement in Nonstandard Employment*, Washington, DC: The Urban Institute (noting that "workers who are at risk of welfare reciprocity are more than twice as likely to be in alternative work arrangements as other workers.")

2. A legal advocate in Iowa emphasized that insufficient or inappropriate child care impedes the economic progress and empowerment of families trying to transition from welfare to work. He noted: "Many clients have to work second-shift. It is difficult to find day care if you have a child that is ill at all." He added that in many cases "the daycare is uninspected, private care."