

The New York Times

In a Tough Economy, Old Limits on Welfare

By ROBERT PEAR

Published: April 10, 2010



Ryan Conaty for The New York Times

Kimberly E. Kaplan, with her son, Landon, is running out of cash assistance.

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Kimberly E. Kaplan recently received a notice telling her that she and her three children were about to lose their monthly welfare benefit of \$584 because they had reached the time limit on cash assistance and she had not made adequate efforts to find work.



Ms. Kaplan, 43, is required to work 20 hours a week, but is seeking a hardship exemption. Her 4-year-old son, Landon, has psychological and behavioral problems, and she said that “it’s a full-time job to take care of him.”

Rhode Island has the nation’s third-highest unemployment rate, but the welfare rolls here continue to decline because of the time limits and stringent work requirements.

Since the start of the recession in December 2007, the number of Americans receiving benefits under the main federal-state welfare program, [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#), or TANF, has increased less than 10 percent, even though unemployment has nearly doubled and the number of people receiving food stamps has grown more than 40 percent, to 39 million.

Congress overhauled the welfare law in 1996 to emphasize work, and in a booming economy the changes were widely considered a great success.

But the latest trends are prompting federal officials to ask whether welfare is fulfilling its mission in tough economic times. Congress and the Obama administration are considering changes as the program comes up for renewal this year.

“TANF seems far less responsive to the growing need than other safety net programs, such as food stamps or unemployment insurance,” said Representative Jim McDermott, Democrat of Washington and chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security.

Carmen R. Nazario, the assistant secretary of health and human services in charge of welfare policy, said, “Some states with some of the worst economic conditions are not seeing significant caseload increases.”

Indeed, in a recent report, the [Government Accountability Office](#), an investigative arm of Congress, said, “We found no clear association between the change in the number of families receiving cash assistance in a state and its unemployment rate.”

Ronald T. Haskins, who helped write the 1996 law as an aide to House Republicans, said, “There’s definitely a problem.”

“Many states have been too slow to take destitute families back on the rolls,” Mr. Haskins said. “In 1996, both Republicans and Democrats assumed that welfare rolls would rise during a recession as jobs got harder to find.”

Rhode Island changed its welfare program in 2008. Under the new program, known as [Rhode Island Works](#), people can receive cash assistance for no more than 24 months in any 60-month period, with a lifetime maximum of 48 months of benefits. The lifetime limit had been 60 months.

Benefits go mostly to families headed by women. For Coralie I. Concepcion and her three boys in Woonsocket, R.I., cash assistance ended on Jan. 31.

They lost a monthly benefit of \$584, and the impact, she said, has been drastic. “If we go out locally, we usually walk instead of using the car,” she said. Ms. Concepcion, 23, began receiving cash assistance four years ago, when her first son was born, and she said she had filed more than 200 job applications in the last year.

“It’s very difficult to find any job,” Ms. Concepcion said. “I am competing against people with bachelor’s and master’s degrees. I went to high school through the 10th grade.”

Cash assistance is also running out for Meagan L. Fontaine, 24, and her 5-year-old girl and 2-year-old boy. She has a temporary subsidized job as an administrative assistant at Project Hope, a social service organization run by [Catholic Charities](#) in Pawtucket, R.I.

“It’s horrible,” Ms. Fontaine said. “I apply for 45 jobs in a week. You don’t get calls back, or you get an interview but no job. Employers are so picky. They can pick anyone they want in these hard times.”

Workers in the Head Start program see the effects of the new welfare rules in several ways.

Many children eligible for Head Start are from families receiving cash assistance. But Dee L. Henry, who has worked at the Woonsocket Head Start program for 35 years, said, “For the first time, we are seeing significant numbers of families who report no income whatsoever, zero, because they have reached the time limit on cash assistance or have been sanctioned for not meeting work requirements.”

Besides teaching the children, Head Start workers visit the families at home at least three times a year. And sometimes they observe ominous signs of domestic violence.

Jody A. Ragosta, a Head Start worker in Woonsocket, said: “I see moms who have been cut off cash assistance and can’t find work. In some cases, they return to the father or another man who was abusive, in the hope that he can provide financially for the kids.”

As Congress turns its attention to the temporary assistance program, Republicans suspect that Democrats want to dismantle parts of the 1996 law and expand welfare once again. Democrats say they want to preserve the emphasis on work, but reward states for lifting families out of poverty, not just reducing the welfare rolls.

The 1996 law changed the culture of cash assistance. The number of people on welfare fell more than expected, the employment of single mothers increased and child poverty declined.

But those trends have not been sustained. Child poverty has increased. Since 1996, the proportion of poor children receiving assistance has declined by more than half. Fewer than half of eligible families participate in the program.

Rhode Island officials said the state had been less than aggressive in carrying out the 1996 welfare law. They allowed welfare recipients to attend education and training programs for years while other states emphasized work above all other activities.

When Rhode Island began to overhaul its welfare program in 2008, the state unemployment rate was about 7 percent and state officials believed that jobs would be readily available to welfare recipients even if the rate climbed to 9 percent. They never expected the rate to soar to its current level of 12.7 percent.

Given the high jobless rate, Donalda M. Carlson, associate director of the Rhode Island Department of Human Services, said: "I thought the applications for temporary assistance and the rolls would grow. To our surprise, it has not happened."

Ms. Kaplan was granted a three-month extension of cash benefits late last year so she could care for her son. But the Department of Human Services said she did not use the time for the designated purpose, "to transition off cash assistance" and become self-sufficient.

She says that if she goes back to work, her son will lose home-based therapeutic services that help him develop social skills and deal with his anger.

A similar deadline is looming for Amanda R. Choiniere, 22, and her 17-month-old daughter. Ms. Choiniere said she had graduated from high school with a certificate as a nursing assistant and had training as a pharmacy technician but could not find a job.

She is learning to be a bookkeeping and accounting clerk in a vocational education program at Rhode Island College. She has no idea how she and her daughter will get by when their cash assistance runs out in June.

"I'll be stuck," Ms. Choiniere said.

A version of this article appeared in print on April 11, 2010, on page A17 of the New York edition.