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3,000 Rhode Island families to be cut from welfare

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PROVIDENCE — The state is set to cut welfare payments and related employment assistance from an estimated 3,000 Rhode Island families at the end of June, slicing welfare rolls to their lowest levels in history amid the worst economic conditions in decades.

The reduction, which will affect an estimated 7,800 adults and children, is the result of strict time limits imposed by [Governor Carcieri](#)'s high-profile welfare overhaul, dubbed "Rhode Island Works," which was adopted by the legislature last year. The change was intended to push welfare recipients into the work force sooner by emphasizing job training and detailed "employment plans."

But the state has been slow to add staff to provide employment assistance as promised. And the new limits were crafted before the state's unemployment rate hit 10.5 percent, as it did last month, its highest point in three decades.

"This is in an economy in which [welfare recipients] are competing with people with much higher skills to get the limited jobs that are out there. They will also lose the opportunity to get any assistance in finding work or training," said Linda Katz, policy director for Rhode Island College's Poverty Institute. "We cannot let these 3,000 families become homeless and hungry."

Katz joins a handful of Democratic lawmakers pushing to delay the new time limits until the economy improves. The governor's office, however, maintains that delay is unnecessary.

"Warning letters have gone out," Carcieri spokeswoman Amy Kempe said. "There is a system in place for people to seek hardship extensions."

Indeed, state officials can extend benefits beyond the new limits, which apply a two-year cap over any five-year period with a four-year lifetime limit as of July 1. The exceptions listed in state law, however, are related to physical and mental disabilities, domestic violence and homelessness.

"If there is a situation, they should be reaching out to their caseworkers," Kempe said of welfare recipients who may have extenuating circumstances.

There have never been fewer welfare recipients in Rhode Island in the history of the Depression-era program.

The state Department of Human Services reports that 8,330 families received cash assistance at the end of March; the average three-person family received \$478.87 each month. The number of recipients will fall to around 5,300 if the new time limits take effect, a drop from roughly 18,750 families in 1997.

Rhode Island taxpayers are expected to contribute \$10.8 million to the welfare program this fiscal year.

Rep. Elizabeth Dennigan, D-East Providence, a member of the powerful House Finance Committee, says the timing could not be worse for a major cut.

“We all understand what’s going on out there in this economy,” she said. “I think...we need to make an extension, even for nine months. Nine months from now, the jobless rate won’t be over 10 percent.”

Rep. Thomas C. Slater, D-Providence, another Finance Committee member, has introduced legislation that would repeal the time limits altogether. But committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino said yesterday that Democratic leaders haven’t decided whether to support a repeal or delay.

Critics complain that the governor’s office introduced the new welfare time limits while promising to strengthen workforce preparation. Indeed, materials distributed by the Carcieri administration last year note that a “new collection of DHS staff with Department of Labor and Training staff will insure expert services and intensive support for improved success in job search activities.”

State departments have collaborated to offer new services, but they have yet to add enough staff to reach all those in need, according to Donalda Carlson, administrator of child and family support services at DHS.

“The design itself is pretty rock solid,” she said, acknowledging staffing problems.

Carlson said that people would not lose access to state-subsidized career centers if they are cut from the welfare program. But they would lose access to related services, such as subsidized child care and transportation assistance.

There are more than 14,000 children among the 8,330 families currently on the state’s welfare rolls, according to data provided by DHS. The vast majority of families are led by single parents with no more than a high school education. And almost half of them live in the greater Providence area.

“These are not people that are sitting at home. They have to be looking for work or in a training program to qualify,” Dennigan said. “These are going to be very desperate individuals.” Welfare by the numbers

- 3,000 families scheduled to lose cash assistance and related job training July 1

- Number of families currently on welfare: 8,900
- Number of families on welfare in 2004: 14,142
- Average monthly payment: \$440
- Projected cost to state taxpayers this year: \$10.8 million

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