

## Advocates for the poor blast Carcieri

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PROVIDENCE — Advocates for the poor blasted Gov. Donald Carcieri's plan to shift Rhode Island's welfare focus from the current Family Independence Program (FIP) to a "Work First" model that limits cash benefits to 24 months rather than 60 and requires recipients to accept paid work before receiving education and other benefits.

Testifying before the House Finance Committee Monday, opponents called the plan "outrageous," "ideologically driven" and perhaps even discriminatory to blacks and Hispanics. "This is an unrealistic proposal that is going to harm children and harm their parents," said Linda Katz, policy director of The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College. The 24-month lifetime limit on cash benefits is "more stringent than in all but eight other states." She said that, "given the governor's comments about women on welfare" having children out of wedlock, "this (budget) article is ideologically driven. It is not driven by research and it is not driven by best practices in other states. This bill is just outrageous. It is anti-family and anti-children."

Katz said the FIP caseload has actually dropped nearly 50 percent — 18,815 families to 9,953 — in the 10 years it has been in existence and state spending on cash assistance has dropped from \$51.5 million to \$16.1 million, a 69 percent reduction.

"FIP worked," she asserted, "thousands of parents have moved into the workforce and hundreds benefited from the short-term training they received so they could get a better job."

Yvonne Freeman presented herself to the committee as "living proof that FIP works."

In 1994, she said, she became homeless. When FIP was established a few years later "it kept my family fed, clothed and thriving" while she underwent job training.

She is now a pre-natal nurse, married with four children, she said.

The Carcieri administration makes the opposite argument.

In his State of the State speech, the governor said FIP "has been ineffective at promoting self-sufficiency. Rhode Island has one of the poorest records in the country for getting people off welfare and into the workforce. As things stand now, 70% of families in the program have been on cash assistance for more than two years; 50% of those families have been on assistance for over 5 years, and 25% of those families have been receiving cash assistance for 10 years.

"The system has encouraged long-term dependence, and provided generous supports," Carcieri said, adding that the Work First program "is designed to accelerate movement out of poverty. It will require an immediate Employment Plan for all participants, and will provide support for a maximum of 2 years.

"Families in need deserve better than continued dependence on the state," Carcieri contends. Besides that, the governor noted at a Statehouse press conference last month, "We have to do this. We are out of alignment with federal welfare rules. If changes are not made soon, Rhode Island could lose up to \$20 million in federal money over the next couple of years.

The current Family Independence Program, Carcieri said at that time, "has not been anywhere near as effective as it needs to be at getting people from welfare to work."

Brenda Dann-Messier, president of Dorcas Place, which works with adults who can not read, write or speak English, said Work First has the concept backwards.

Some of Dorcas Place's clients are school dropouts who came back for a second chance at

learning, she said.

“Why would we have them fail yet again, when they have made the decision to finally better themselves, by telling them that they can not access our work skills services but they need to first seek employment? Why would we humiliate them, have them go out and try to find a job and be rejected for employment because they can’t read or write English?”

“I don’t comprehend the public policy decision that would require FIP beneficiaries to seek employment first and then if they fail they would be allowed some services,” Messier said. “If you can’t read or write or speak English, you certainly can’t fill out a job application.

“Forcing people to seek employment for which they have no skills is not good public policy,” she said

Citing statistics she said show that 7.8 percent of whites live below the poverty level while 25.9 percent of African Americans and 26 percent of Hispanics are in poverty, Trish DiPrete of the Urban League of RI asserted that “making these cuts will add to the current downward spiral that these families are already in. Considering that the minority populations are so clearly over-represented, these proposals have the effect of disparate treatment to Rhode Island’s African-Americans and Hispanics.

“The governor’s budget proposals also demonstrate a lack of concern for the increasing racial inequity in Rhode Island and indeed enacting these proposals to cut social service programs discriminates against the state’s African-American and Latino communities,” DiPrete argued. Adding to the inequity, she said, is the fact that the poorest Rhode Islanders pay 13 percent of their annual income in taxes while the poorest pay just 6 percent. “Everything needs to be looked at,” she said.

That sentiment was echoed by Rick Harris, executive director of the National Association of Social Workers, Rhode Island Chapter.

“Everything is not on the table,” Harris told the finance panel. “Only poverty programs are on the table.”

Asked about that statement after his testimony, Harris told The Times, “Anything above the lower middle class is not on the table. What is not? Looking at tax revenues, looking at tax expenditures (such as tax credits). The tax cuts for the wealthy such as the flat tax and (phasing out) the capital gains tax, shouldn’t they be on the table? It is all on those in poverty and the working poor – and that moves into the middle class real quickly.”