

Carcieri chastises welfare system

01:00 AM EST on Tuesday, November 20, 2007

By Katherine Gregg

Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — Rhode Island's welfare system is "enabling" unmarried women to "have children they can't support."

That has been one of the recurrent themes in Governor Carcieri's recent radio and TV appearances, as he continues to set the stage for budget-cutting proposals that, in the welfare arena, seem to evolve out of his personal view of what constitutes a "loving, nurturing family environment."

"Frankly, I think from the state's perspective we've been enabling and continue to enable a lot of bad decisions," he said Sunday on WJAR-TV's 10 News Conference. Asked to define "bad decisions," he said: "Most of the people on our welfare programs are single women, unmarried with multiple children."

"I think it is a bad decision to have children you can't support...I am not making a moral judgment," he said. "What I am saying is that we as taxpayers and citizens of the state are being asked to finance and support those decisions."

Going a step further yesterday on WHJJ-radio's Helen Glover Show, Carcieri said: "When I look at our rolls of people receiving 'family-independence' [benefits] whether it be RIte Care, whatever, the vast majority of these are women with children and they are not married and this is not a good situation.

"I feel really badly for those women," he said, "but I feel worse for the kids, because these children are really condemned, if you will, if they don't have a loving, nurturing family environment. It takes two parents ... [And] right now, my sense is that the churches need to reach out much deeper into the communities all over the state because people, I think, are at sea right now. They are really confused ... and I think that many people are making very bad decisions."

In a brief interview yesterday before he took the rostrum at a Kids Count luncheon to receive an award, Carcieri was unwilling to elaborate on his radio and TV comments about "bad decisions," "condemned" children and the potential role of churches.

But he said his overriding concern is that "we are one of the worst-performing states in the country in terms of getting people into the work force and I want to see that change." Without elaborating, he said he is working on initiatives that take their cue from states that require "work-first, get somebody into a job, then give them the supports, but get them working as soon as possible."

But, beyond lowering the income ceiling for subsidized childcare, and cutting in half from 60 months to 30 the time limit for receiving cash assistance, Carcieri said: “I don’t want to talk about them now.”

Carcieri’s earlier comments stunned — and worried — some lawmakers and advocates for low-income residents.

“I don’t think anyone wakes up and decides to become a single parent. That notion is absurd,” said Kate Brewster, director of Rhode Island College’s Poverty Institute. “He spoke yesterday of single mothers on cash assistance having multiple children and the facts are that 77 percent of the families on the Family Independence Program have only one or two children.

“And the idea that single mothers are the cause of our budget woes is also a gross misrepresentation. Today, state spending on cash assistance through FIP accounts for less than one-half of 1 percent of our entire state budget,” Brewster said.

After appearing alongside Carcieri at a Kids Count lunch where they were both honored for their roles in preserving RIte Care, the state’s subsidized health-insurance program for families with children, a stunned Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport, said the welfare reforms Rhode Island adopted a decade ago “placed a high value on work.”

As a tradeoff for the new work requirements and time limits the state adopted in 1996, she said, Rhode Island made subsidized health care and childcare available so, she told the luncheon audience, talk today about “cutting welfare” to save any significant money would have to mean significant cuts in health and childcare. Both Carcieri and his critics have statistics to make their case.

Last year, only 23 percent of the families receiving cash assistance had more than one or two children. The majority — 79 percent — spoke English, 18 percent Spanish and 3 percent some other language. In terms of ethnicity, the largest group was white (37.6 percent), the next-largest Hispanic (29.3 percent), followed by black (14.6 percent) and Asian (2.8) and others in insignificant numbers, according to the Department of Human Service’s annual report. Close to half — 49 percent — had less than a 12th grade education, according to the DHS.

What has changed most dramatically in the 10 years since the new Family Independence Program took effect on May 1, 1997, is the amount the state shells out in direct cash aid.

In the 10 years since Rhode Island adopted its own reforms — including a minimum 30-hour-a-week work requirement for single parents — the cash assistance rolls have dropped from 18,815 households to 9,950, with a corresponding drop in the state dollars spent on the program, according to the DHS.

But while the cost of providing cash benefits plummeted, spending surged for the companion programs — subsidized health and childcare — that lawmakers and former governors offered to make it easier for welfare recipients to go to work.

In 1996, state taxpayers paid \$58 million directly to the poor. This year, that figure has dropped to \$7.7 million.

State officials were unable to produce growth numbers for the popular RIte Care program yesterday. But state spending on subsidized childcare jumped from \$6.3 million to \$39.1 million during this same period.

The net result: while the number of people getting cash dropped dramatically, the combined cost to state taxpayers of FIP and childcare went from \$57.3 million to \$55.3 million. Paiva Weed yesterday cited these figures as evidence that any substantial savings from here on out would have to come at the expense of the “supports” that enable struggling parents to work.

State officials were unable to produce any statistics yesterday more recent than 2003 on the average length of time spent on welfare in Rhode Island. But Carcieri anecdotally pointed to other statistics in which Rhode Island lags most other states and the national average on number of people working while receiving welfare.

In Rhode Island, where beneficiaries are allowed up to two years of education and training before they have to enter the work force, the “work participation” rate was only 24.9 percent in 2006, according to a study by an arm of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. By comparison, the percent of the welfare population working in Connecticut was 30.8 percent; the national average, 32.5 percent.

Few states lagged Rhode Island on that score, but Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Oregon and California were among them.

These are the kinds of numbers that will be batted about in the coming weeks as Carcieri builds a case for his as yet undisclosed welfare-cutting plan, and advocates for the poor fight back with competing facts and figures. Among them: that Rhode Island is currently one of 37 states with a 60-month limit on welfare benefits.

But as he starts to build his case, Carcieri is appealing to sentiments that go beyond bar graphs and statistics.

Talking about his own family, he told his TV audience: “There’s a bigger conversation here about how we treat and motivate people to improve their lives as opposed to supporting bad decisions.”

kgregg@projo.com