

Carcieri seeks faster welfare-to-work route

But advocates for the poor say the state's generous benefit period allows recipients to get the training they need to land and keep jobs.

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PROVIDENCE -- In the last decade, Rhode Island has dramatically reduced the number of people receiving welfare payments -- from 55,000 in 1997 to 33,500 today.

But that's not enough for Governor Carcieri.

The Republican governor says that while Rhode Island has moved a great number of people off public assistance, other states have done more.

Rhode Islanders stay on welfare longer than residents of any other state, the governor said. And the state has one of the nation's highest percentages of population on assistance.

So now, 10 years after federal and state reforms, it's time to revisit welfare, Carcieri said. On Tuesday, he will put the issue back on the table when he unveils his annual budget.

In the past three years, the Democrat-dominated General Assembly has rejected the bulk of human-services cuts that Carcieri has proposed. But with a potential \$230-million deficit, this year could be different.

Carcieri is not releasing details of his proposals yet. But he will probably call for fewer months allowed on assistance, more work up front, tougher sanctions for people who don't comply with their work plans, and greater scrutiny of applicants' time on welfare in other states.

"We are not being as effective, particularly as our neighbors, nor as most of the country, in getting people into the work force faster," Carcieri said. "The best solution for families is to get working."

For the governor, welfare exists to help people through tough times such as a death in the family. "That's what communities are for, to rally behind those things," Carcieri said.

But after a while, he said, people need to get into the work force and help themselves; incentives are needed to push people to find jobs.

When talking about welfare, Carcieri draws on his year and a half working for Catholic Relief Services in Jamaica. There, he said, he was taught: "When you give somebody something that they feel as though they haven't earned, you diminish their sense of self-worth."

"We fool ourselves," he said, that keeping somebody on welfare is the right thing to do.

"It might make us feel better, but is it really helping the person?" he asks. "You go back to the Bible: If you give a person a fish, they eat once. You teach them to fish, they eat for their whole lives."

ADVOCATES FOR the poor say Rhode Island made a conscious decision during welfare reform in 1996 to allow longer periods of assistance.

"That was the whole goal of this program. We made policy choices that we wanted people to have access to education and training to be able to move up the job ladder," said Kate Brewster, director of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College.

From July 2004 to June 2005, the Community College of Rhode Island tested 1,408 people on public assistance and found that 32 percent read at or below a sixth-grade level. Another 43 percent could read only at a seventh-to-11th-grade level.

"When you start with someone at a sixth-grade education level, it can take a few years to get them the education and skills they need," Brewster said.

Brewster said people who get training earn more, keep their jobs longer and stay off welfare.

"This notion that people want handouts is ridiculous," she said. "Nobody wants to live on \$554 a month."

Heidi Collins, director of Rhode Island Parents for Progress, said the determining factor in getting people off welfare is not time limits but education.

"In Rhode Island, we've taken a slow-but-steady-route approach," Collins said. "If we go backwards by pushing people to work faster . . . we're really going to be pushing more and more families into poverty."

Henry Shelton, coordinator of the George Wiley Center, said government needs to place some of the burden on businesses: in exchange for tax breaks, they should train and hire a certain number of welfare recipients.

Shelton said people want to learn but often can't get into the programs.

"I don't think he really fully understands what's out there and what the struggles of a family are," Shelton said of the governor. "Nobody wants to beg."

WELFARE REFORM is not a new idea.

In 1996, during the Clinton administration, Congress passed a wide-ranging set of changes to the nation's welfare system.

Under the new program, recipients had to get to work sooner, no more than two years after entering the rolls. Single parents were required to work at least 30 hours a week. Failure to meet requirements meant termination of benefits.

At the same time, Rhode Island passed its own reforms. The new state entitlement system, called the Family Independence Program or FIP, took effect May 1, 1997.

Many states took a hard-line approach, but Rhode Island's program generally provided the maximum benefit allowed by federal law. The idea was not just to get people into jobs, but to have them stay employed.

Advocates for the poor point to data from the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council showing Rhode Islanders coming off assistance in 2004 had a 65-percent job-retention rate compared with 60 percent for the nation and 55 percent for Massachusetts.

As part of the reforms, the state also expanded its subsidized childcare, making it easier for parents to work. For every dollar the state now gives out in assistance, another three and a half dollars are spent on childcare, leaving families to pay only about a third of the normal cost.

Carcieri's plans fall into line with what the Republican-controlled Congress is doing. Federal lawmakers Wednesday sent a package of welfare and Medicaid reforms to President Bush. Among the changes are greater work requirements for people on welfare.

THE FAMILY Independence Program is available to low-income parents and their children. Single adults without children can participate in various other aid programs such as food stamps and medical assistance but can't get cash assistance.

To be eligible for FIP, a family can earn no more than 102 percent of the federal poverty rate. For a family of three, that means less than \$16,000 a year. The family must also have less than \$1,000 in assets other than a car.

A family of two receives up to \$449 a month, a family of three \$554 and a family of four \$632. But the payment is reduced if a family member has a job. The first \$170 of monthly earnings is exempt, but for every additional \$2 in earnings, the monthly payment is cut by \$1.

During the first two years, recipients aren't required to be employed but must be in an educational or job-training program. After that, they have to work. For a parent with a child under 6, 20 hours a week are required; everybody else must work 30 hours a week.

Rhode Island sets a lifetime maximum of five years on FIP. The state does not include any time in other states. Massachusetts has no lifetime limit, but allows people to stay on welfare for only two years during any five-year period. Connecticut has a lifetime limit of 21 months.

THOSE WHO SUPPORT reductions point to federal data that they say shows how the state is out of line with the rest of the country.

For instance, Rhode Island families in 2003 stayed on assistance longer than people in any other state, according to the federal Department of Health and Human Services. The national average was 21.9 months; Rhode Island families stayed on for 38.5 months. Connecticut residents spent, on average, 18.8 months on assistance; in Massachusetts, it was 10.4 months.

Rhode Island also had one of the highest percentages of its population on welfare in 2004, at 3 percent. Only Tennessee and California had a larger share of their residents on assistance. Connecticut had 1.2 percent, Massachusetts 1.7 percent.

The state has also been one of the slowest in the nation to pare down its welfare rolls. From 1996 to 2004, the number of people nationally on assistance dropped 60.9 percent, according to Health and Human Services. However, Rhode Island cut its enrollment by only 42.5 percent, the 10th lowest drop in the country. Massachusetts had a 52.9-percent reduction and Connecticut saw a 73.1-percent cut.

Rhode Island allows beneficiaries up to two years of education and training before forcing them to enter the work force. A different approach is taken by 35 "work first" states where welfare recipients must get jobs immediately.

BUT ADVOCATES for the poor have their own arguments.

First, they note, this data applies just to people whose welfare checks include some federal money. Several states offer benefits without federal help. That skews the data, they say, making some rolls look leaner than they really are.

Additionally, they say, Rhode Island is spending less money on cash payments to the poor than ever before. In fiscal year 1996, the state paid out \$58 million directly to the poor. This year, that figure has plummeted to \$13.3 million. Family Independence Program payments in 1996 were 3.4 percent of the overall state budget; now they are less than half a percent.

Most of that money has been shifted to childcare subsidies. But even when that is added in, the combined FIP and childcare budget has shrunk in the last decade from 3.7 percent to 2 percent of overall spending.

The real cause of growth in the budget comes from Medicaid, but the governor has been lumping all human services together, saying that the growth there is "not sustainable."

The budget will be just the start of the debate.

Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport, recently said, "I believe we, as a society, are judged by how we care for the most frail."

However, House Finance Chairman Steven M. Costantino, D-Providence, said, "I've been supporting human services for years. To me, this is going to be an extraordinary year because of the shortfall in revenues. Everything's on the table."

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