

Governor's plan would limit welfare to 2 years

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PROVIDENCE — The future of Rhode Island's welfare system rests with the General Assembly.

Lawmakers spent yesterday afternoon poring through Governor Carcieri's 101-page plan that would dramatically cut benefits to the poor, while encouraging a "work-first" model and promoting "healthy marriages."

The governor's sweeping proposal, if adopted by the legislature in the coming months, would constitute the most significant shift in the state's Family Independence Program, often referred to as welfare, in more than a decade. Carcieri has even created a new name: the Rhode Island Work First Program.

"Work First is exactly what it says. We would have people early in the game looking for a job," Donalda Carlson, administrator of child and family support services at the Department of Human Services, told the House Finance Committee, as she and other Carcieri officials briefed lawmakers for nearly an hour.

Carcieri wants to push low-income Rhode Islanders into the work force immediately, while the current system allows for training and education first. He also wants to cut eligibility for cash assistance from 60 months to 24 months for new recipients beginning July 1.

The new limits wouldn't apply to the existing 10,000 enrollees until July 2009.

The move, according to Carcieri's proposal, is aimed at ending "the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage."

Yvonne Freeman says that no one wants to be on public assistance. The 40-year-old Providence woman waited three hours yesterday among the government bureaucrats and poverty advocates before she was allowed to address the committee.

She spoke of being a homeless single mother more than a decade ago. She said she was desperate for a change in her life after her fourth child was born.

Using public assistance to cover living expenses, Freeman enrolled in a nursing program at Rhode Island College.

“I was extremely grateful to have had the FIP benefits as it allowed me to continue with school and feed my children and pay rent,” she testified. “It also helped me to focus on the end result, which was to be self-sufficient and not have to rely on the system as I had in the past.”

Today, Freeman is a full-time nurse.

Under Carcieri’s proposal, she would have been required to work 20 hours a week in order to go to college. And the higher education benefit would have ended after two years.

Advocates for the poor yesterday were not shy about their disdain for the governor’s plan.

“This proposal is just outrageous,” said Linda Katz, policy director for Rhode Island College’s Poverty Institute. “The way to help build more taxpayers out of the people who are on FIP is to give them the opportunities to build the skills they need to get stable jobs.”

She continued: “Given the governor’s comments about women on welfare, this bill is ideologically driven. It’s not driven by good policy. It’s not driven by research. It’s not driven by best practices in other states.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that 28 states and the District of Columbia have 60-month time limits for cash assistance, which is the maximum benefit allowed under federal Medicaid rules. Massachusetts is one of two states that have no lifetime limit, but intermittent caps allowing 24 months of cash benefits during each 60-month period.

Carcieri’s plan also cuts benefits to legal immigrants in Rhode Island less than five years and blocks families from earning more money after the birth of a child. The benefit for a family of three is currently \$554 a month, but families receive \$80 per month for each additional child.

A total of 21 states have similar cap policies, according to the information distributed by the governor’s office yesterday.

Carcieri made headlines last fall when he said on talk radio, “Most of the people on our welfare programs are single women, unmarried with multiple children.”

Data collected by the DHS shows that the governor is largely correct: 93 percent of families that received cash assistance in Rhode Island in 2006 were led by a parent who is single, separated, widowed or divorced. And 92 percent of the families are headed by women.

Also, one third of the total Family Independence Program recipients “added a child to their household” while on welfare; 77 percent of all families in the program had one or two children.

The governor’s welfare plans would “prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies” and “encourage the formation of two-parent families.” While there was virtually no detail included in the comprehensive plan about achieving those goals, Carlson, of DHS, testified that the administration would develop programs aimed at “family counseling, family interventions, and responsible decisions before getting married.”

Carcieri’s proposal includes partnering with faith-based organizations to “promote collaboration between state agencies and religious organizations to strengthen family relationships and connections...”

Overall, the welfare plans discussed yesterday would save an estimated \$8 million in the fiscal year that begins in July; it is one the governor’s many cost-cutting proposals aimed at closing a budget deficit estimated at \$384 million next year.

House Finance Committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino acknowledged that FIP enrollments have been declining steadily over the last decade.

“I believe that this program, and I’d even add RItE Care [the state’s subsidized health care program for the low-income], are not the drivers in the cost of human services,” he said, adding that it’s “the easy path to take” for policymakers hesitant to change the more expensive long-term care system for the disabled and elderly.

(The committee yesterday also heard about the governor’s plan to shift Rhode Island’s long-term care system away from expensive institutions toward home-based nursing care and assisted living situations. That discussion will continue this afternoon.)

Meanwhile, Freeman, the Providence woman, said she was grateful for having the opportunity to speak to the committee. She’s not the same woman she was a decade ago.

She owns her home. She pays taxes. And she just received a master’s degree in nursing administration.

Freeman rushed out of the committee room yesterday afternoon shortly after testifying.

She was late for work.

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