

For many, welfare help exceeds limit

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PROVIDENCE — Thousands of poor Rhode Islanders have received cash welfare benefits for longer than five years, the time limit adopted by state leaders during the sweeping welfare changes of a decade ago intended to push poor families into the work force.

Nearly half of the state's 10,755 families receiving cash assistance last year had been on welfare rolls for more than five years, according to data provided by the Department of Human Services. And nearly one quarter of the families had been on cash assistance for more than 10 years.

The cash benefit, known as the Family Independence Program, has been thrust into the state spending debate as policymakers grapple with how to fill a deficit next year estimated as high as \$450 million, or more than 13 percent of state spending.

Governor Carcieri has made headlines with a workforce-reduction plan he hopes will save \$100 million next year by eliminating 1,000 state jobs. But he will have to go much further to present a balanced budget — as required by law — on the third Thursday in January.

The governor has suggested widespread cuts to social programs, but has been reluctant to release specific proposals — except regarding the Family Independence Program.

Carcieri said on talk radio in recent weeks that he would propose cutting in half, from 60 months to 30 months, the time limit for Rhode Island families receiving cash benefits. It is the same plan blocked by the General Assembly when he proposed it two years ago.

It is unclear how much the plan would save taxpayers. The Family Independence Program cost Rhode Island \$13.3 million last year in a budget of more than \$3.2 billion in general revenues.

And the Department of Human Services data suggest that state law contains exemptions that would make new time limits irrelevant for a large percentage of welfare recipients.

“It was a policy choice that we made to have a more liberal program than other places,” said Gary Sasse, executive director of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, who was involved in creating the welfare changes in 1996. “But when you look at our budget situation, you have to ask questions about what level of services we can afford.”

Rhode Island is not unusual in its decision to cap welfare benefits at 60 months over a person’s lifetime. Thirty-seven states have a 60-month limit and five states and the District of Columbia have no limit, according to an analysis provided by the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College.

But Rhode Island law contains broad exemptions that explain, in part, why the state had the third-highest number of recipients on welfare as a percentage of population in the nation last year. The analysis, released in Congressional Quarterly’s 2007 State Fact Finder, ranks Massachusetts as 17th and Connecticut as 30th.

The Poverty Institute’s policy director, Linda Katz, explained that when drafting the initial legislation, lawmakers purposely exempted children and the working poor from time limits.

Indeed, Rhode Island law allows children to receive cash benefits indefinitely even if their parents’ time runs out. “That is certainly an area where Rhode Island made a policy decision where we’re not going to hurt children,” Katz said.

Last year there were 4,232 “child only cases” (out of a total of 10,755) in which a parent or caretaker did not qualify for cash assistance, but the child continued to receive checks, according to the Department of Human Services.

Similarly, there were 1,427 people on welfare last year who held jobs. State law allows single parents to work 30 hours a week while indefinitely receiving reduced cash benefits from the state, as long as the total income doesn’t exceed federal poverty guidelines.

“Those people are working, but they’re still very poor,” Katz said. “If we want to end that support, then we need to figure out how to get those parents more skills to get them a better paying job.”

Exemptions also include families that have a child under a year old or those in which a mother is in her third trimester of pregnancy, disabled adults, parents of a disabled child, and victims of domestic violence. Welfare recipients must participate in job-training programs, education programs or work, unless exempted.

The governor’s office, meanwhile, fashioned the data as evidence that the Family Independence Program must be altered.

“The fact that nearly half of Rhode Island’s welfare recipients continue to receive benefits over the five-year limit, and up to a quarter of recipients have been on welfare for over 10 years, demonstrates conclusively that the Family Independence Program has not been effective in moving people from welfare to work,” said the governor’s spokesman, Jeff Neal. “From the governor’s point of view, this lack of effectiveness is neither positive for Rhode Island taxpayers nor for the majority of welfare recipients.”

And Neal cited data backing up Carcieri’s claims last week that, “Most of the people on our welfare programs are single women, unmarried with multiple children.”

Data collected by the DHS shows that 93 percent of families that received cash assistance in Rhode Island last year 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 has “added a child to their household” while on welfare. But 77 percent of all families in the program had one or two children.

Overall, however, the welfare changes adopted a decade ago have dramatically reduced the number of families receiving cash assistance. The rolls have dropped from 18,815 households in 1997 to 10,755 last year, with a corresponding drop in the state dollars spent on the program, from \$58 million to \$13.3 million.

Katz said she takes offense to the governor’s recent comment that the state welfare programs have “been enabling and continue to enable a lot of bad decisions.”

“To be shut out by pronouncements about the morality of the people who need to use the FIP program is really, I think, disrespectful of the people who have worked hard...who want to see the families succeed,” she said. “The bottom line is nobody wants to see kids growing up on FIP. Nobody wants to see it as a way of life. But taking away everything is not the answer.”

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