

WE DON'T ALL AGREE THAT WELFARE HAS FAILED

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ONE OF THE MOST CONFUSING EVOLUTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY welfare politics began around the time when Congress passed the Family Support Act in 1988 with bipartisan support. Mainstream politicians, writers, and policymakers created the great lie that, even though there are differences over what exactly to do next, still today:

- ♦ Everyone agrees that welfare, as we know it, has failed.
- ♦ All responsible (intelligent) people agree that welfare must end and be replaced with a program more in harmony with the "basic values of the American people."

The most clear example of this problem occurred during the Contract with America's Welfare Reform debate in March 1995. For once, many House Democrats rose up and protested long and hard about the need to retain a federal commitment to income maintenance, and against the cruelty of the Republican proposals. The next day, President Clinton chided House Democrats for being "too partisan." "After all, we all agree that welfare has failed," he intoned unctuously. "Let's tone down the rhetoric" (*Boston Globe*, 25 March 1995).

However, in the mid-1980s, Massachusetts welfare officials had made public speeches that agreed with welfare rights activists that the system was punitive and demeaning. When I make speeches, people consistently began their remarks with "We all agree...." I try to present a view that grapples with the complexities of the issue.

* The handouts that follow are ones that I give out before I speak. They are a quick summary of how different the arguments that "welfare has failed" are for welfare activists and for opponents of real reform. I also use the handouts to answer the question: "So what do we really agree on?"

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WELFARE AS WE KNEW IT— EVEN BEFORE "WELFARE REFORM"

Here is the welfare rights perspective that builds on the arguments of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the National Welfare Rights Union, and local welfare rights organizations and activists in various places:

1. THE WELFARE SYSTEM FAILS TO RESPECT THE STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS WOMEN FACE IN TRYING TO FORM TWO-PARENT FAMILIES WITH MEN—when the men leave, or force the women to leave, women are often in situations where what they most need is time to heal themselves and care for their children. Women don't have to stay with men when the relationship hurts them, physically or otherwise. Taking care of children is a legitimate role, and mothers must feel able to choose it first, before they can make other choices. *Men as we know them fail single mothers.*
2. THE WELFARE SYSTEM FAILS TO ADMIT TO THE STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS WOMEN FACE IN THE WORKPLACE, ESPECIALLY IF THEY LACK EDUCATION AND ARE SINGLE PARENTS. Few jobs are available, and many of those that are available are not affordable (women can't afford the wages, inflexible time, lack of health and childcare). It is understandable that many single mothers cannot be employed, especially full-time and without wage subsidies. *Jobs as we know them fail single mothers.*
3. THE WELFARE SYSTEM FAILS TO PROTECT RIGHTS, as we see them, under the constitutional mandate to "promote the general welfare," and out of the logic of the Social Security Act, the federal government has an obligation to provide support so that children and families can have a minimal level of security, regardless of employment status, because abject poverty hurts all. In other words, some kind of welfare is a *right* that is not being well guarded by the government. *Women have a right to choose welfare if it makes the best sense for their families.*
4. WELFARE COSTS TOO LITTLE. AFDC GRANTS ARE SO LOW that they do not allow families any stability to plan how to get on with their lives when men and jobs fail them. At 60 percent of poverty level or less, a family is always behind on rent, can't travel, must borrow and is generally destabilized. This forces women to find additional resources somewhere,

so that *a woman on welfare must always be on edge out of fear that what they need to do to keep their families going will be labeled "fraud."*

5. THE WELFARE BUREAUCRACY CREATES CONSTANT STRESS by forcing women to constantly prove and reprove their situation, and by questioning their abilities as parents. Workers in the system often treat women badly. This stress further destabilizes family. A major reason this can happen is that the system is not democratic; it gives recipients no say in setting policies that affect their lives. *"Clients" are disempowered and disrespected.*
6. IT'S HARD FOR TWO-PARENT FAMILIES TO USE THE SYSTEM. The difficulty with getting on and off welfare, if another adult joins the family (either the father or a potentially helpful partner), becomes so bureaucratically crazy-making that mothers are afraid to tell the truth about their lives. This stress creates another source of destabilization and denial.
7. IT'S DIFFICULT TO COMBINE WORK WITH EXTRA SUPPORT. It is almost impossible to take either a part-time job or a low-wage "mother's hours" job, such as in the field of childcare, if you want to. Loss of benefits or fear of losing benefits makes it not worth seeking jobs that are really available.
8. AFDC DIVIDES WELFARE FAMILIES FROM EMPLOYED FAMILIES in ways that foster hostility: if transitional health or childcare benefits are available, they are not available to those working at low wages. Food stamps are harder for those with low wages to obtain. What few wage subsidies exist for welfare recipients are not available for all workers.
9. NOT ENOUGH TIME IS ALLOTTED FOR TRAINING AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS that are needed to reflect and respond to women's real abilities and desires. *Hope for the future is quenched.*
10. SOCIETAL STIGMA associated with getting what one needs to take care of one's family is intense and damaging to women and children. It has always been there, is deeply imbedded with racist stereotypes, and does severe damage to recipients and to those who need help but are too fearful of the stigma to apply.

WHAT'S REALLY NEEDED: A LOW-INCOME FAMILY SECURITY SYSTEM

A welfare rights-based proposal would look something like this:

1. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WOULD HAVE THE MAJOR ROLE, as the source of basic income for poor families. The mandates of the Social Security Act, built upon the General Welfare clause in the Constitution, should be expanded, not diminished. Still, the welfare system will only be embraced when the current two-tier system is ended and replaced with a guaranteed income floor for all. *Recipients need a mandated role in setting policy and overseeing practice.*
2. ALL FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN EARNING LESS IN TOTAL THAN THE POVERTY LEVEL FOR FULL- OR PART-TIME WORK WOULD RECEIVE A FEDERAL INCOME SUBSIDY to bring them up to the poverty level or, if not employed at all, would receive the basic family allowance at some percentage of poverty level. Or as an alternative, all individuals, including children, would receive a basic income subsidy, which would be paid back in taxes as people earned money from wage work.
3. ALL FAMILIES WOULD RECEIVE CHILDCARE AND HEALTH CARE support until they are earning up to 150 percent of the poverty level or higher with demonstrated special needs. Or childcare and health care provided free to all, with families paying a sliding scale after earning certain levels of income. Education and training would be available for all.
4. A HIGHER MINIMUM WAGE AND FULL EMPLOYMENT should be guaranteed, with public or private sector jobs available for all seeking them.
5. CHILD SUPPORT SHOULD BE A RIGHT FOR ALL, not just for women on welfare; jobs and training must be available for fathers too.
6. SOCIAL SUPPORTS SHOULD BE AVAILABLE for treating substance abuse, stress, counseling, etc. These services would not be punitive, but allowed for all.
7. ALL PEOPLE DESERVE RESPECT, especially parents and children. Society needs to recognize that poverty is rooted in structural problems; individuals are not to blame, they often need support and assistance to get their lives together. Single parenting in poverty is the hardest work of society and should be recognized and appreciated.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WELFARE, AS THE "WELFARE REFORMERS" KNOW IT

This is a summary of views of those who are politicians, academics, and policy types who see welfare as bad and having created many social problems. They cross the gamut from far Right politicians and writers, such as Newt Gingrich, Charles Murray, Marvin Olasky, or Lawrence Mead, to neoliberals like Bill Clinton and David Ellwood. All such critics draw on a long history of opposing income maintenance, which they see as either outdated or fundamentally wrong-headed.

1. AFDC IS BASED ON A BAD PRINCIPLE. For some who now oppose welfare, the very principle of a federal obligation to provide income maintenance is denied. They view federal aid as only emergencies, only temporary and only for children, not for their parents. This view is old, and has always been in the culture but has not been articulated for a very long time. For these folks—members of the John Birch Society, old anti-welfare people, the historically strong conservatives—it is a knee-jerk reaction to oppose welfare. Other critics such as Bill Clinton, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and others, don't exactly deny the right; they just say that what we have been doing doesn't work, it degrades people, it promotes single parenthood, and it doesn't help women move on with their lives.
2. WELFARE GRANTS INEVITABLY HURT PEOPLE BY MAKING THEM DEPENDENT. This has been an increasingly widespread view since the mid-80s. Believers of this view hold that welfare programs hurt and weaken people who receive them because they give them an alternative to "independence," to supporting their families with wages that are always available if a family is willing to make hard choices. The economy has not failed single mothers; there are jobs; it's just that welfare makes people think they don't have to take them.
People must be taken off the welfare rolls, or forced into job programs—a dispute among the Right—and made to assume that there is no ongoing floor under unemployment insurance, that everyone has to be employed.
3. MOTHERHOOD IS NOT ENOUGH; parenting cannot be supported as an economic category of socially valued work. It must always be

combined with employment, unless the father is willing to pay for it by sharing his wages through child support.

Welfare encourages marriage break-up or lack of marriage by giving women alternatives. There are men to be with; women and men just have to take responsibilities for their children. Men are essential to a healthy family and are discouraged from being there by welfare. Paternity must be established and child support enforced.

No one should be able to expect public assistance for her child; it removes her from the job market and isolates her, and it saps her energy and keeps her from bettering herself. Especially if she is already on welfare, the expectation of support for additional children is not healthy.

4. SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR HAS BEEN NURTURED AND FOSTERED BY AFDC—promiscuity, drug abuse, and lack of attention to the education of kids are caused by lack of employment and lack of a man in the home.

5. WELFARE SHOULD NO LONGER BE A CHOICE. Women always have other options, but they choose to be on welfare rather than work or stay married. Single motherhood and unemployment should not be rewarded nor should welfare really be available any longer now that women are expected to work.

6. NON-CITIZENS CAN PARTICIPATE. People who come to this country are admitted assuming they can support themselves. Their use of AFDC violates their terms of entry and promotes the wrong values.

7. WELFARE BUREAUCRATS have both coddled and abused recipients which will naturally happen once a dependent relationship is established.

8. WELFARE COSTS TOO MUCH even though it is only 2% of federal budget, it still does not invest in the productive sector. So, any penny spent on welfare is a penny wasted.

9. RACISM IS NO LONGER A PROBLEM, so we don't have to consider how it affects chances or how we view women on welfare.

10. WELFARE HAS NO POLITICAL BASE OF SUPPORT and hurts our government efforts because it goes against "core values" that emphasize employment, traditional families, and sexual "responsibility" from everyo

WHAT'S REALLY NEEDED: AN END TO WELFARE, AT LEAST, AND SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYMENT, AT MOST

1. ALL THAT SHOULD BE PROVIDED IS "TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE, with time limits (2 to 5 years), required work programs, and education only at the most basic levels. The goal is to prevent dependence by never raising expectations. The biggest agreement is on this:

- ♦ Most proposals will allow childcare, health care and even some subsidies to employers for hiring welfare recipients.
- ♦ Some proposals say no money, only vouchers and subsidies, with tight control.

2. THE NEW TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS MUST REQUIRE PUNISHMENTS and controls over the most destructive behaviors—teenage mothers must be at home, or in group settings with no money; family caps should be in place so that there is no reward for continued "breaking of the rules," also learnfare and shot fare, fingerprinting and identification cards. Sometimes, unmarried minors are denied benefits entirely, except for Medicaid.

3. THERE WILL BE AN END TO FEDERAL COMMITMENT. States will be given block grants with only punitive limits. There will be no guarantee of fair hearings, consistent standards, or even a mandate that states participate.

4. "WORKING POVERTY" IS ACCEPTABLE, but welfare poverty is not, and people who break this rule must be punished for the good of the social order.

5. NON-CITIZENS SHOULD NOT RECEIVE ANY ASSISTANCE. If they wish to come here, that may be O.K., but they must do it like other immigrants did, on their own, expecting no assistance.