

THE MORAL VOICE OF WELFARE REFORM

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In 1963, Nancy A. Humphreys, now dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut, was a child protective services worker in Los Angeles. One of her clients was a pregnant teenager, a school referral. The girl came from a large and rather troubled family--one sibling was retarded, a couple of her brothers had been in trouble with the law, her father was disabled, and each of her parents was on a different kind of financial assistance. There were nine or 10 kids in the family.

One day the mother called and invited Nancy Humphreys to their home; they set the time for 2 p.m. on a Thursday. "I was the first one to get there," Dr. Humphreys recalls. "But one by one, eight other people arrived. I didn't know any of them. When we were all there, the family went out the back door, leaving us to ourselves. It turned out we were all their social workers, each of us working with one or more people in that family. None of us had ever met or even talked about the case to any of the others."

The mother had made her point. The nine social workers held a case conference right there in the family's living room. "It showed me how important system coordination is," Dr. Humphreys said, "but it also showed me the coping strengths of this family. They were getting mixed messages from all these different service providers. The mother wanted us to get *our* act together so we could better help the family work on theirs."

Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Annual Report 1990

Since 1963, when the incident Nancy Humphreys described occurred, categorical programs serving disadvantaged children and families have proliferated, so, now, there might be twice as many social workers to call together. In fact, if one tried to collect all the social workers who somehow touch a disadvantaged family over the years, they might not even fit in one home. The costly inefficiency of this atomized approach has been widely lamented; social workers, for example, rarely have the time to get as involved with their clients as they once did. But seldom mentioned is the impact of this fractionalization on the *moral* voice of social agencies—and individuals within those agencies—who are free to send their own "message," whether or not it is consistent with that of others serving the family.

Take as an example the experience of Rebecca Maynard of Mathematica Policy Research, who directed the evaluation of federally-funded demonstration programs for teenage mothers on welfare in Chicago, Illinois, and in Newark and Camden, New Jersey. She describes how the caseworkers in one of the teen centers encouraged the young mothers to seek child support from the fathers of their children, only to discover that the welfare department's caseworkers (who would be responsible for collecting it) were giving the exact opposite advice. Another example of contradictory signals was discovered during the evaluation of a group of Rockefeller Foundation-funded welfare-to-work projects. Job training caseworkers were actively encouraging the mothers to build specific work skills and look for a job. But, simultaneously, caseworkers in a community-based project who sought to "empower" these same mothers, told them that they had a right to be on welfare, and that they should take

advantage of the opportunities afforded by AFDC to stay home, to take care of their children, and finish their schooling. When social agencies convey such opposing messages, is it any wonder that they have so little success in redirecting the lives of their clients?

Teen Mothers and Welfare

Long-term welfare dependency is a serious and growing social problem. We often hear that about half of all new recipients are off the rolls within two years. This is true—but only because of the high turnover among short-term recipients. At any one time, about 82 percent of all recipients are in the midst of spells that will last five years or more. And about 65 percent are caught up in spells of eight or more years. The bulk of long-term welfare recipients are young, unmarried mothers, most of whom had their first baby as unwed teenagers. Starting with poor prospects, these young women have further limited their life chances by systematically underinvesting in themselves—by dropping out of school, by having a baby out of wedlock, and by not working. As a result, they do not have the education, practical skills, or work habits needed to earn a satisfactory living.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, about 50 percent of all unwed teen mothers go on welfare within one year of the birth of their first child; 77 percent go on within five years. Nick Zill of Child Trends, Inc., calculates that 43 percent of long-term welfare recipients (on the rolls for ten years or more) started their families as unwed teens.

A mother's age and marital status at the birth of her first child are stronger determinants of welfare dependency than is her race. One year after the birth of their first child, white and black unmarried, adolescent mothers have about the same welfare rate. After five years, black mothers have a somewhat higher rate (84 percent versus 72 percent), but various demographic factors account for this relatively small difference.

Reducing long-term dependency, therefore, requires doing something constructive about the young mothers who are on welfare. If, like Humphreys' client, we called together all the social workers assigned to a teen mother, what message would we want them to give? To answer that question it helps to ask another: What would concerned parents say to their own daughter?

The parents' message would probably be quite direct:

1. Finish your schooling: If you have not graduated from high school, stay in school; if you dropped out, go back to school.
2. Take care of yourself and your baby: Eat well; get medical checkups for yourself while you are pregnant and then for your baby; and do the best you can to meet your child's physical, emotional, and developmental needs.
3. Work: After you complete your schooling, get a job, even a part-time one.
4. Child support: Tell us who the father is so that we can get him to contribute to the support of the child.
5. Birth control: You made a mistake once, don't do it again. Each additional child makes it harder to work your way off welfare since your home expenses will rise faster than your earning ability.

6. Mutuality: Throughout, we will help you—as long as you try your best; we will take care of your child while you are in school or at work. If you cannot earn enough to support yourself and your child, we will chip in.

Why don't we give young mothers on welfare this message? A major cause is our fractionated welfare system. Because there are so many different individuals and agencies involved, the process of social support and education resembles an assembly line more than a guiding relationship. But unlike an assembly line, the final product is never put together—so no one realizes that the pieces do not fit together.

The current system speaks with too many voices to have any impact. Recipients do not hear a clear message about what society expects of them. As a result, they come to believe that there are no expectations, or only confused, if not contradictory ones.

On a system-wide basis, we need to try to do what Humphreys' client asked her social workers to do: integrate the articulated goals as well as service structures of public welfare agencies. This, in effect, is what Bill Clinton implied in his formulation of welfare reform when he stated that welfare programs should “provide people with the education, training, job placement assistance and child care they need for two years—so that they can break the cycle of dependency. After two years, those who can work will be required to go to work, either in the private sector or in meaningful community service jobs.”

Mutual Responsibility

Some young mothers will eagerly take hold of the opportunities provided by such an offer to escape from poverty and begin building a better life. But many others will not. Even richly-funded demonstration programs find it exceedingly difficult to improve the ability of these young women to care for their children, let alone to become economically self-sufficient. Earnings improvements in the realm of six percent are considered successes. (Most programs don't even try to work with the young fathers.)

This should not be surprising. Even in a strong economy, breaking patterns of behavior that took a lifetime to establish can take years. Thus, after the two years of services that Clinton would give them, most of these unwed mothers will not be able to support themselves. If they will still be expected to work, as his formulation suggests, a large proportion will end up in semi-permanent “community service jobs,” a euphemism for having them work to earn their welfare benefits (usually at the minimum wage).

This kind of “workfare” program, because of added costs for job training, child care (while the mothers work), and administration (to establish and monitor placements), is much more expensive than the current system, at least in the short run. But, in the long run, it is the only way to build job skills and work habits and thus reduce dependency. Inactivity is bad for anyone; it can be devastating for those loosely connected to the labor market. A work requirement also reinforces the mutuality of welfare assistance, which is essential to continued public support.

Most young mothers will not willingly enter such programs, however, and many will drop out. The experience of teen-mother demonstration programs previously mentioned suggests that, to maintain high levels of program participation, about 50 percent of the mothers will have to be sanctioned with a reduction of benefits at least once. Hence, society, through welfare

agencies, must be prepared to monitor compliance with program requirements and to sanction noncompliance.

Key elements of the welfare policy establishment have never liked strong work requirements that force poor mothers to work at very low paying jobs, even if only part-time. To discredit earlier efforts to impose work requirements, they successfully labeled them “slavefare.” For example, according to Lawrence Mead in *Beyond Entitlement*, welfare rights organizer George Wiley had this to say in 1971 about the work requirement that had been attached to Richard Nixon’s proposed Family Assistance Plan: “You don’t promote family life by forcing women out of their homes to empty bedpans. When Richard Nixon is ready to give up his \$200,000 salary to scrub floors and empty bedpans in the interest of his family, then we will take him seriously.”

Such arguments strike a responsive chord among Americans who feel partially responsible for the situation facing these mothers and ambivalent about imposing “further hardship” and “our values” on them. But, if not our values, whose? Certainly not those of a teenager who, by having a child out of wedlock—with no means to support it and largely unprepared to care for it—has already demonstrated that she does not make responsible decisions.

Imposing a clear-cut set of rules on these young mothers acknowledges the desperate need for structure in their lives—and society’s right and obligation to provide it. To take no action is to turn our backs on fellow citizens who need our help and guidance most. As long as these requirements are not pursued in a malevolent or harsh manner, government should enforce the same level of responsible behavior that a loving parent would. Such reforms are needed—for the good of society, the children and, yes, the mothers.

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