

# That Other Clinton Promise—Ending 'Welfare as We Know It'

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

During his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton pledged "the end of welfare as we know it." He promised to "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."

Now, as Mr. Clinton's fledgling administration grapples with how to implement these words, key elements of the president-elect's liberal constituency are trying to water them down. Signs of this discord emerged at Donna Shalala's confirmation hearings last week, when Democratic senators, noting how little she has said on the subject since being nominated, questioned her commitment to welfare reform. But even if Mr. Clinton's choice to head the Department of Health and Human Services supports his welfare plan (as she has promised to do), her task, and Mr. Clinton's, will be enormously difficult.

The bulk of long-term welfare recipients are unmarried mothers, most of whom had their first baby as unwed teenagers. These young mothers do not have the education, practical skills or work habits needed to earn a satisfactory living. About half of all unwed teen mothers go on welfare within one year of the birth of their child; 77% go on within five years, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Nick Zill of Child Trends Inc. calculates that 43% of welfare recipients on the rolls for 10 years or more started their families as unwed teens.

Steady increases in unwed parenthood among ill-prepared young people pose the central challenge to contemporary efforts to fight poverty. It is within this context that the fight over how to implement Mr. Clinton's promise will be waged.

Those recipients motivated to improve their lives, such as most divorced mothers, will probably do well under Mr. Clinton's plan. But, to make a real dent in welfare dependency, the plan will have to apply to unwed mothers, who form the bulk

of long-term welfare recipients.

That will not be easy. Years of inactivity leave their mark. Even in a strong economy, breaking patterns of behavior takes years. Richly funded demonstration programs, for example, find it exceedingly difficult to improve the ability of these women to care for their children, let alone to become economically self-sufficient. Earnings improvements in the realm of 6% are considered successes for poorly educated young mothers who have sporadic work histories. (Most programs don't even try to do something with the fathers.)

California's welfare-to-work program is a case in point. In 1985, the state established the Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) Program, an education and training project for welfare recipients. A six-county evaluation found that, for single parents, average yearly earnings increased by only \$271. (Total yearly earnings averaged \$1,902.)

Thus, after two years of the services that Mr. Clinton would give welfare recipients, most unwed mothers will still not be able to support themselves. Imposing a work requirement on them would mean that a large proportion will end up in semipermanent "community service jobs," a euphemism for having them work to earn their welfare benefits (usually at the minimum wage).

The Clinton campaign estimates that about 1.5 million young mothers would be required to participate in such programs. Most will not come willingly, and many will drop out. The experience of teen-mother demonstration programs operated in Newark and Camden, N.J., and in Chicago between 1987 and 1991 suggests that, to maintain high levels of program participation, about half the mothers will have to be penalized with a reduction of benefits at least once.

This kind of "workfare" program, because of added costs for education and 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. Clinton staffers estimate

that monitoring each job would cost \$2,100 annually; child care for the children of each mother mandated to work would add \$1,300. That's \$3,400 for overhead costs—about the same as the average Aid to Families With Dependent Children grant to families.

Strong opposition to Mr. Clinton's proposals is already forming. The welfare policy establishment has never liked strong work requirements that force poor mothers to work at very-low-paying jobs, even if only part-time. Efforts to impose work requirements during the Nixon and Carter years were derailed by labeling them as "slaveware." Such arguments strike a responsive chord among some Americans.

Moreover, many real questions remain unanswered about instituting a nationwide workfare program: Can welfare agencies enforce work requirements without being overly punitive? What about those recipients who are prevented from responding because of psychological problems or drug and alcohol addiction? Will they be permanently penalized, or, as some have suggested, will they be exempted from work because of their "disabilities"? Can we avoid the meaningless, make-work jobs of the past, or will this simply be CETA II? Can adequate child care be provided for millions of children? And, most important, can all this be done in a way that ultimately reduces caseloads—rather than increases them?

These tough questions call for caution in pursuing Mr. Clinton's promise, not a wholesale retreat from it. The temptation, of course, will be to exempt the most dependent: young unwed mothers. The opening would be his phrase "those who can work will be required to go to work." It would be easy to say that mothers with young children cannot work. This would be a mistake.

First, a work requirement is one of the best ways to reduce the attraction of welfare for young people with poor earnings prospects. If young people know that the welfare agency is serious about mandating work, they will be less likely to view

long-term AFDC-recipientcy as a possible life option.

Second, mandated community service may be the only way to build the job skills and work habits of those who cannot support themselves in the regular job market. Inactivity is bad for everyone; it can be devastating for those loosely connected to the labor market. Child abuse, drug abuse and a whole host of social problems are associated with long-term welfare dependency. A work requirement will help to reduce their levels.

The problems of some young mothers will prevent them from satisfying even this minimal obligation. These young people may need a modern version of the 19th century settlement house, where counseling, education and other activities to structure otherwise idle time are all provided under one roof. The base for such a program could be the expanded Head Start program that everyone seems to support. Head Start professionals call this approach "two-generational" programming.

Those young people who had a child out of wedlock — with no means to support it and largely unprepared to care for it—have demonstrated that, on their own, they do not make the wisest decisions. Their lives desperately need the structure that only the larger society can provide. Participation mandates such as those Mr. Clinton has proposed could end welfare as we know it — for the good of society, the children and, yes, the mothers.

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