

## **Welfare Reform: A Devastating Blow to Counties**

**by  
James T. Beall, Jr.**

Welfare "reform" is a euphemism for destroying one of our government's most fundamental poverty programs. As the administrators of welfare in California, counties collectively shudder at the impacts the proposed legislation will have on our system of delivering welfare -- and ultimately, on our society.

By utilizing block grants, the federal government proposes to pass welfare's administrative functions, along with a lump sum of aid, on to states and local governments. Counties relish the opportunity to have more control over welfare: we welcome the discretion to develop programs appropriate to our own communities. What we cannot ignore about this proposal is that block grants have historically not kept pace with either need or the cost of living. For high-cost, urban counties such as Santa Clara, this portends the shutdown of our welfare system. What Washington fails to (or is unwilling to) recognize is that simply cutting welfare spending will not cut the need for welfare. And counties, charged as the "provider of last resort," will be left to pick up the pieces.

Advocates of welfare reform state that recipients "just need to go get a job." Here is why that simple solution is not really a solution at all: nationwide, 9 million out of 13 million welfare recipients are children. In Santa Clara County, almost three-fourths of our AFDC population is children. Those fighting for welfare reform have been successful in framing the debate around the issue of responsibility. I believe we must turn this question around and ask, must children be held responsible for the errors or shortcomings of their parents?

Furthermore, as a state with a high immigrant population, California's wounds have not yet healed from the political battle over Proposition 187 last November. We are now being asked to deny legal immigrants -- taxpaying members of our community -- welfare and related services. In Santa Clara County alone, as many as 23,000 families on AFDC, Food Stamps and Medi-Cal will no longer be eligible for benefits. Without access to welfare, these individuals will merely turn to county government for access to health services and General Assistance, which is 100% county funded. There is no savings to the taxpayer in this proposal -- only a redirection of spending from the federal to the county level.

Perhaps the biggest flaw of the proposed welfare reform legislation is that it fails to address one of the key problems of our current system: a lack of jobs that pay a living wage. Without an adequate supply of jobs, welfare

recipients have no viable options to help them get off the system. At this critical juncture, Congress also recently passed measures eliminating or substantially reducing job training programs. As California struggles to recover from our recent economic downturn, I believe government officials must be highly sensitive to the needs of local businesses. Instead, asking business to absorb additional individuals, who may be lacking in education or training, into the work force at this time creates a no-win situation.

To county government, welfare reform represents a mishmash of illogical programmatic decisions and unjust social policy. As a member of the Board of Supervisors, I cannot and will not let our poor and vulnerable populations fall through the cracks because those at the federal level are unwilling to continue the necessary support. Counties do not deny the need to change our system. We just want "reform" that lives up to the meaning of the word.

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