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Bush welfare plan needs more work

The Bush administration's welfare reform proposal represents the type of doublespeak that might be good for politics but is bad for people in poverty.

The Bush plan, recently released in Washington, ignores all lessons we've learned that say a flexible and mixed-service approach works best.

President Bush speaks repeatedly and publicly about the importance of education and training. But look beyond the spin and you find that his plan is wrong on welfare and work. Here are three reasons:

- The plan micromanages welfare. It requires welfare clients to spend 24 hours in paid employment and a maximum of 16 hours in education, skills training or counseling. Any experienced training provider will tell you this 16-hour weekly allowance is not enough time for the chronically unemployed to learn marketable skills while struggling in low-wage, low-skilled jobs.
- The plan puts imperils Illinois' flexibility to create policies that meet its own workforce needs. Illinois has adopted policies so its low-income residents – including the nation's fifth largest concentration of immigrants – can pursue English as a Second Language, General Education Diplomas, vocational skills training and post-secondary education. The Bush plan would severely restrict progressive policies like these.
- The plan hands Illinois an unfunded mandate. The plan freezes the amount of federal welfare funding for Illinois and other states while governors are losing tax revenues and cutting budgets. Forget about using other federal dollars: the Bush 2003 budget calls for deep cuts in federally funded job training programs for low-income adults, dislocated workers and youth.

We are concerned that welfare clients who want to work will get one-size-fits-all service that will not help them gain the skills they need to compete in today's labor market. The Chicago Jobs Council has worked with its members-about 100 community groups that have helped disadvantaged jobseekers move into work-to develop a blueprint for re-shaping Temporary Assistance for Needy Families into effective policy that moves welfare recipients into work and out of poverty.

We suggest that the Bush Administration listen to our experts about what it will take to make welfare really work. Otherwise his promise to "make it easier for people to find good jobs by giving them the education and training they need to succeed" is nothing but a lot of talk.

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