

Local Leaders Criticize Limits on Job Training within Bush's Welfare Proposal

CHICAGO (March 8, 2002) - The Bush Administration's welfare reform proposal, reinforced by Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson's statement Wednesday, is drawing strong criticism from local advocates and training providers who helped welfare recipients enter skilled jobs and leave public assistance during the first phase of welfare reform. The plan, says a prominent advocacy group, makes job training an unrealistic option for welfare recipients and is a major set back for Illinois - a state that has adopted progressive policies to allow people to access post-secondary education and two-year skills training that help lead to good jobs.

"This welfare plan makes no sense," reports Robert Wordlaw, Executive Director of the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC), a 20-year-old coalition of local trainers, advocates and businesses focused on workforce development. The Bush plan, unveiled in Washington last week, would serve as the next phase of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the 1996 federal program that eliminated welfare as an entitlement and emphasized work as a goal for welfare recipients. "President Bush and his staff give repeated speeches about the importance of education and training. But look beyond the spin and you find that the substance of this welfare proposal puts drastic limits on low-income parents who want to enroll in school or a training program in order to get a skilled job that could support their families."

In an official statement, Secretary Thompson echoed the President saying the administration's plan is "granting states greater flexibility to provide more opportunities for education and job training." But according to Wordlaw, it puts into peril Illinois' flexibility to create policies that meet local needs by:

- Requiring welfare clients each week to spend 24 hours in paid employment and a maximum of 16 hours in education, skills training or counseling. However, Illinois' current policies allow low-income residents - including the nation's fifth largest concentration of immigrants - to pursue English as a Second Language, General Education Diplomas, post-secondary education and two-year vocational skills training programs. The proposal, advocates say, would not allow low-income Illinoisans sufficient time to overcome barriers and gain valuable skills.
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- Freezing the amount of federal welfare funding offered to Illinois and other states at a time when governors are cutting budgets in the face of lost tax revenue.

"The Bush plan micromanages welfare, dictating down to the number of hours a week how Illinois can work with their TANF clients," notes Wordlaw. "It ignores all lessons we've learned that say a flexible and mixed-service approach is the best way to meet local needs. The plan would require states to put more people in more work activities with flat funding. Add to that fewer tax revenues, and we're concerned that welfare clients will get cheap, one-size-fits-all service that will not allow people to learn the skills they need to compete in today's labor market."

"Employers in Chicago still have available jobs, but they are skilled jobs," explains Steve Heller, Executive Director of the Regional Manufacturing Training Collaborative. "Local industries have been hard at work with training organizations and public agencies to get TANF recipients trained for their positions. But these new welfare dictates, clear examples of micromanagement, would make it difficult for employers to be responsive. The bottom line is, that in a production environment like manufacturing, a 24-hour work week does not exist."

Hospitals and technology industries have turned to Central States SER, a training organization based on Chicago's west side, for skilled workers. "The President's proposal puts Illinois in an impossible situation," says Rose Mary Bombela, Director. "With more people to serve and no new funds, Illinois won't have the time or money to put people into training programs like ours."

Bombela explains untrained welfare recipients will not be able to compete with skilled workers who are now also looking for jobs with the current recession. "There is no way people on welfare will be able to find jobs in Chicago to meet these new work requirements-particularly if we can't get their skills up first."

The Bush Administration's welfare plan comes on the heels of its recent 2003 budget proposal that calls for deep cuts in federally funded job training programs for low-income adults, dislocated workers and youth. "What has happened to the President's promise to 'make it easier for people to find good jobs by giving them the education and training they need to succeed?'" asks Wordlaw.

Founded in 1981, the Chicago Jobs Council is a membership organization whose mission is to increase job opportunities for all city residents, with an emphasis on those in poverty, racial minorities, the long-term unemployed, women and others who experience systemic exclusion from employment and career mobility. Its widely read Critical Issues & Initial Answers: Recommendations for TANF Reauthorization offers a blueprint for re-shaping TANF to be more effective in moving welfare participants into the workforce and out of poverty.

The Regional Manufacturing Training Collaborative (RMTC) was founded in 1999 to support quality training for Chicago's manufacturing sector through a community/business partnership approach. Chicago continues to be a major center for manufacturing, not only in the US, but in the world. Visit RMTC online at www.chicagolandrmtc.org.

Central States SER, Jobs for Progress, Inc. has been providing training to the city's low-income communities since 1987. SER's mission is to promote upward mobility and economic self-sufficiency among low-income community residents through education and employment. Visit SER online at www.ser-national.org.

Related Information:

The Bush Plan can be found at:
www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/welfarereform/.

Secretary Thompson's statement can be found at:

www.hhs.gov/news/press/2002pres/20020306a.html