

THE CHICAGO REPORTER

June 2003

Tactics Questioned in Welfare Cuts

By Sarah Karp

The number of families in Illinois receiving monthly welfare checks has dropped 78 percent since federal welfare reform was implemented in July 1997, and the state is leading the nation in caseload reduction since the recession hit two years ago.

Some state lawmakers and officials say this is evidence that Illinois has successfully put policies in place to help move people from welfare to work. But others say pressure to save money and trim the rolls—both politically popular measures—might be responsible for the sustained declines.

Welfare recipients, advocates and even some caseworkers say the state has engaged in a practice of aggressively kicking people off the rolls for not complying with rules, many of which are nebulous and can vary from local office to office. And caseworkers, stressed out by staff reductions and growing amounts of work, do everything possible to keep people from returning to welfare, they say.

A caseworker in the Englewood office of the Illinois Department of Human Services, who asked that her identity not be revealed out of fear of reprisal, said she feels “as though the whole system is set up to discourage people from applying or receiving the benefits they qualify for.”

Advocates from the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago and the Chicago-based National Center on Poverty Law have documented hundreds of instances in which caseworkers gave out misinformation, wrongly terminated cases or used diversionary tactics to get people off welfare, and keep them off.

The Department of Human Services does not keep track of how many people statewide are told they aren't eligible to apply when they visit the department's local offices, or never get their applications processed.

But other Human Services data show:

- Last December, 2,325 parents in Cook County applied for welfare, an 80 percent drop from June 1997, the month before the federal reform law was implemented. Almost a quarter of the Cook County applications processed in December were denied, up from 14 percent in June 1997.
- Over the last six years, more than half of the cases closed were done so for “non-compliance” or “non-financial” reasons, which could range from missing appointments to filling out forms

incorrectly. Cook County residents and black and Latino families were more likely to see their cases terminated for these reasons than white families and those living downstate.

- Many families still rely on other forms of assistance. From November 2002 to March, the number of families in Illinois getting food stamps rose 8 percent and the number getting Medicaid climbed 2 percent, while the total of those receiving cash dropped 6 percent.

Victoria Gill, a mother of four from Chicago's South Shore neighborhood, is indignant at those calling welfare reform a triumph. Over the past couple years, she said, she's tried to follow rules that didn't make sense to her and waited long hours at the welfare office—only to have her benefits cut off after attempting to get a job on her own. "I am tired of doing their dance," she said.

"You want to look at it like we got 80 percent of people off public aid," said Gill, 38. "Out of that 80 percent, how many did you really help? I am quite sure those that they helped are ecstatic, but those that they didn't, well, they are saying, 'Don't even spit in my face and tell me that it is raining.'"

Gill and her children are among a growing number of formerly dependent families now living with no welfare and no employment income, according to The Illinois Families Study, conducted by Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research at the behest of the Illinois General Assembly. The ongoing study found that 37 percent of 1,072 tracked families who were on welfare in 1998 had no adult working or receiving cash assistance by the end of 2002.

"These women spend each day just trying to figure out how to get over," said Phyllis Russell, executive director of Work, Welfare and Families, a statewide coalition of service providers. "Once they are off welfare, we've lost any ability to offer them positive choices. They become a lost population."

The loss of benefits to the poorest families has meant a "deepening of poverty," especially for black children, said Deborah Weinstein, director of family income for the Children's Defense Fund, a national advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

The number of black children nationwide living in extreme poverty is at its highest level in 23 years, according to the group's 2003 analysis of census data.

In July 2002, a *Chicago Reporter* investigation revealed that African Americans made up 74 percent of the welfare caseload in Illinois in 2001, compared with 62 percent five years earlier.

Carol L. Adams, who in January was appointed secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services by Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, said she is worried that welfare recipients—almost all of whom are women and children—are being unfairly cut off, and that families are trying to survive with no income.

Adams said she is committed to conducting a "ground-zero" assessment to see how prevalent these practices are and how they affect "customers." "I do not want anybody to have their options

limited or their rights trampled upon,” Adams said.

But some caseworkers and more conservative advocates defend the practice of making it difficult for people to get assistance.

“If [applicants] say ‘Okay’ too easily then they don’t really need it,” said Sheliah Gamble, a caseworker with the Human Services office at 8001 S. Cottage Grove Ave. on Chicago’s South Side. Gamble said she assumes the people who give up have some other income allowing them to make ends meet.

Some people needed to be pushed to go to work, said Ron Haskins, a senior fellow for economic studies at the Brookings Institution, a research organization based in Washington, D.C. Because welfare reform had “strong requirements” for what people had to do in order to get assistance, thousands of low-income women have found jobs, he said.

Service Plan

In December, the Chicago Jobs Council, a local public policy group, convened area leaders to make recommendations to the new Illinois Department of Human Services administration.

On many welfare issues, the leaders noted, the state had adopted progressive policies they already supported. For example, welfare recipients who are victims of domestic violence, have children less than a year old, or are in school full-time are exempted from having to look for jobs.

But they pointed out that these policies are implemented haphazardly, with workers at each of the department’s 131 branch offices throughout the state telling clients different things.

Many caseworkers discouraged applicants during the assessment process, said Audra Wilson, who since 1999 has written about problems in local welfare offices for the Illinois Welfare News, a publication of the National Center on Poverty Law.

State law requires each welfare applicant to work with a caseworker on a plan for getting ready for a job. Applicants must each sign a “responsibility and service plan,” agreeing to take specific steps such as conducting 20 job searches a week or enrolling in a drug treatment program. If applicants fail to fulfill parts of their plans, they risk being temporarily cut off or having their cases terminated entirely.

Caseworkers sometimes neglect to tell applicants they may be exempt from the “work-first” requirements, Wilson said. Instead, they make the applicants promise to get jobs as part of their plans. In other cases, caseworkers have forced women to sign plans that the local office drew up before the women even arrived or had a chance to describe their own situations.

“We, as advocates, say, ‘Wait a minute, if someone was misled or never told what their options are, then the agreement shouldn’t stand,’” said Wilson, a welfare advocacy staff attorney for the law center. “We fight that all the time.”

Wilson also wrote about a case in which a young woman lost all her benefits when she lacked a

permanent address. Under welfare law, homeless people can qualify for benefits, and, according to Wilson's report, the young woman reportedly told her caseworker that, while she was moving from place to place, information could be sent to her grandmother's home. But when her case was suddenly cancelled, the caseworker said it was because she learned the woman wasn't living with her grandmother.

The caseworker from the Englewood office told the Reporter that the Human Services Department once cut off dozens of her cases without allowing the recipients to correct problems—or even notifying them that it was happening. Gamble said people are sometimes told to come back several times before they are given an appointment to see a caseworker.

Human Services officials don't dispute that these things happen. Marva Arnold, who oversees the welfare program as the department's deputy director of transitional services, said that she corrects problems whenever she hears about them, though she argues they are isolated.

Adams points out that more than 4,000 caseworkers and supervisors work in the local offices, and concedes that they sometimes don't follow the rules, either on purpose or by mistake. She said she wants to put some "checks and balances" in place and ensure welfare recipients have some way to rectify problems.

She said she will send a message to staff: "It does not benefit us at all to deny people the things for which they are eligible."

Help First

When then-President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, he said it would "change welfare as we know it." Under the law, a public aid check would no longer be an entitlement for mothers who weren't working, but a temporary benefit that people could only receive for a lifetime total of 60 months.

Illinois had already implemented a program in 1994 that encouraged recipients to work by allowing them to receive welfare money until their job earnings were three times their income from public aid—about \$1,188 for a mother with two children.

Under the requirements of welfare reform, that encouragement turned into pressure. Illinois adopted its strict work-first approach that directed mothers to make getting a job a priority. In fact, showing up for appointments and participating in placement programs often became stipulations for getting welfare.

Republicans and some Democrats argued this approach was necessary so that women wouldn't use up their lifetime limits on benefits. Then-Human Services Secretary Howard A. Peters III told the Reporter in 2000 that the state was not responsible for those who had their cases terminated because they had chosen not to follow the rules. "If you are supposed to be involved and you are not, that is your decision," he said.

Peters also insisted that many of those who disappeared from the system after being cut off did so

because they got jobs on their own and therefore didn't need the support.

But Adams said she is ready to re-examine the work-first approach, saying that the people who haven't landed jobs over the past six years might be the ones who need more help.

And Arnold, who served as deputy director of the welfare program under former Gov. George Ryan, agrees. She said she is now convinced that women with few skills and many barriers to work shouldn't be thrown into the position of having to find a job.

"Starting day one with the work-first philosophy is not the best approach," Arnold said. "Starting day one giving them what they need is the best way to get people self-sufficient."

But that does not mean Adams and Arnold want people to linger on welfare. Adams said mothers have a responsibility to themselves and to their families to be independent.

"I want to encourage people to invite the government out of their lives whenever they possibly can by taking more control over their lives themselves," she said.

High Volume

In general, Adams wants the Illinois Department of Human Services to become more customer-friendly. "I want to look at policies from the receiving end," she said.

Russell, of Work, Welfare and Families, is pleased that Adams wants to address service delivery problems. But she questions whether Adams will really be able to make welfare more accessible in the current economic climate.

The state's fiscal crisis has already cost local offices throughout the state hundreds of caseworkers, Russell noted, and Blagojevich's budget calls for the welfare rolls to be reduced further.

"I am not sure that [Adams] has the resources to make that kind of change," she said.

The staff cuts have left caseworkers overwhelmed, giving them more incentive to turn people away, said Andrew Cohen, supervisor for the welfare and social security law project at the Legal Assistance Foundation. Since 1997, the foundation has run a public-benefits hotline for people who feel they have been wronged by the Human Services Department.

Call volume has gone up dramatically, he said. From November 2002 to February 2003, the hotline received an average of 750 calls each month, up from 600. He said many people call to complain because they feel they were unfairly cut off or they can't get a hold of their caseworker to find out the status of a pending application.

"We have just been inundated," he said.

Some state lawmakers worry that welfare reform might be eroded by the new administration's

desire to make the system more accessible.

“Part of the public policy debate will be whether we should expand access to public assistance or mitigate cuts in education or other initiatives,” said state Sen. Dale A. Righter, a Springfield Republican who serves as his party’s spokesman on the senate Health and Human Services Committee.

“I absolutely think we should mitigate the cuts in education before we should reach out or take on more programs,” he said.

But welfare recipients and advocates argue that the state has to make sure diversionary tactics and misinformation aren’t used to keep the rolls down.

Gill said she and her children are suffering. Recently, she spent a Saturday morning putting labels on a mailing for a small nonprofit agency in South Shore. Technically, she was volunteering, but she acknowledged hoping the director would slip her a little cash.

“He knows my situation,” she said.

Without a regular job or cash from welfare, Gill gets more desperate each day. Her landlord let her pay \$300 for her monthly rent in April and in May, \$200 less than what she owes. Unless her situation changes, she and her 5-year-old, 6-year-old and 14-year-old will have to move out. And they have nowhere to go.

“It is very stressful,” she said. “It is depressing. Throughout the week of going through the whole process, I spend a day or two in the house, just like, ‘I can’t believe this.’ It is just so terrible, so hard.”