

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE (LETTER)

# Welfare rules

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Chicago -- Just as the clock is ticking for welfare recipients, time also is running out for our nation's leaders to vote on welfare legislation.

The Chicago Jobs Council urges the Senate to pass the Finance Committee's reauthorization bill for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The current law expires Sept. 30.

For the past five months, legislators have created and debated TANF reauthorization proposals. In May, the House passed a bill that wrongly assumes that long-term unemployed welfare recipients can find a 24-hour-a-week job and learn real job skills in a three-month training program.

In June, the Senate Finance Committee offered a bipartisan bill that better addresses the needs of our poorest families. It also provides cash-strapped states like Illinois a few additional resources needed to produce more skilled workers.

But senators still have not passed a TANF bill, an inaction that jeopardizes the futures of their low-income constituents--in Illinois, as many as 100,000 current and former welfare recipients, ex-offenders and others--who need flexible access to education and training to compete in today's skill-demanding labor market. Their apparent apathy also endangers the investments that businesses, local government, foundations and community-based organizations have made to turn welfare into an effective tool for moving people into family-sustaining employment and out of poverty.

At the heart of this inertia are misconceptions about welfare recipients' access to education and training. To jump-start the process, we offer a brief analysis of government certified training programs in three Illinois cities:

- Very few certified training programs are accessible to low-skilled welfare recipients. In Chicago, only 9 percent accept students with a 6th grade reading level--a level many welfare participants strive to reach. Accessibility is worse for northeastern Illinoisans. None of Aurora's or Dixon's programs accepts welfare recipients whose reading proficiency is below the 6th grade.

- Few three-month certified training programs are available. In Aurora, a mere 6 percent can be completed in three months or less--the benchmark drawn by the House bill. In Dixon only 14 percent and in Chicago 49 percent can be completed in that timeframe. Many of these short programs are one-week courses that allow inadequate time to train adults for good jobs.

- Low-wage jobs don't accommodate training schedules. All certified training programs commit students to a regular course schedule. Meanwhile, most working welfare recipients have low-skilled service industry jobs whose work schedules are often erratic because of fluctuating service demands. But by limiting welfare recipients to 16 hours for training after 24 hours of work, the House bill ignores the realities of entry-level, low-skilled jobs.

Combine this analysis with the reality of today's labor market--fewer entry-level, low-skilled positions exist after layoffs and technological advances--and this conclusion is clear: Welfare recipients need adult basic education and skills training. The Senate bill, while not the total solution, is a step in the right direction. It provides flexibility and resources that citizens and the states need. And it has the bipartisan backing to ensure its survival through a heated political process.

The next step is obvious. Our senators should pass the Senate Finance Committee's bipartisan TANF bill immediately.

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