

On welfare reform: 'require and enable'

January 5, 2008 - Herald News, McClatchy-Tribune News Wire

Welfare policy analysts differ in many ways about the lessons of the reforms they endorsed in the 1990s. But most agree that after a protracted trial and error process documented by rigorous research, the field is now on a search for the right mix of two core policy ideas: require and enable.

Writing in the current edition of the policy journal *The Future of Children*, two authors apply those two core ideas in very different ways to the country's last great poverty puzzle - figuring out the role disadvantaged men can play in reducing child and family poverty. But both come up short, and we suggest a third way that improves upon both proposals.

Lawrence Mead, a conservative welfare reform expert at New York University, would require all non-custodial parents (usually fathers) who owe child support and have not paid, and all men recently released from jail to either find employment, accept public employment or face jail (or in the case of ex-offenders a return to jail).

Mead's "make work" ideas address the country's greatest remaining poverty policy question: Are perennially high unemployment rates among young black men the result of voluntary or involuntary unemployment?

Mead's mandated work policy cuts this Gordian knot and puts most unemployed men on the same footing, facing the same requirements and consequences. And like many big ideas, the policy ignores troubling details. In his case such details include the possibility of forced labor and violations of ex-offenders' civil liberties.

Gordon Berlin, a liberal welfare expert who heads the blue-chip evaluation think tank Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. of New York, addresses the second part of the require and enable equation with a proposal to extend coverage of the Earned Income Tax Credit to all low-income, employed individuals.

Currently the tax credit mainly targets low-income, employed, custodial parents and it is often cited as the country's largest and most effective poverty reduction program. It has been particularly effective at boosting the labor force participation of lesser-educated, single mothers.

Unfortunately, the current EITC also penalizes married couples in that it uses their combined income to compute eligibility and benefits.

By letting parents sign up as individuals, Berlin's version of the EITC not only eliminates this income limitation on married households but the measure enables all the working poor to find their way out of poverty.

The editors of the "Future of Children" volume present the two proposals together because one induces labor force participation among hard-to-employ men, and the other puts those new participants on a wage growth pathway.

And the editors are right - the twinned proposals condition assistance on work and put the "require and enable" mantra into play. But the two proposals ignore another key social welfare policy tenet at their peril. From the English Poor Laws to current American reforms, prioritizing assistance to disadvantaged people who have a responsibility for family members has been a welfare policy cornerstone.

Neither Mead nor Berlin gives a strong priority to assisting disadvantaged men based on their family status. Only when Mead extends his work requirements to men who have child-support obligations does he connect work requirements to support for a family.

Although Berlin's EITC proposal claims credit for eliminating the marriage disincentive in the current EITC, his plan to make earnings incentives much more general is a subtle, though important departure from the family responsibility cornerstone.

The two authors ignore this family connection in their policy ideas because each is after something bigger. Each seeks an anchor for a new American social welfare system.

One researcher wants to base that new system on policies that "fix" the cultural deficits of targeted minorities. The other suggests we rest a new system on broad universal policies that provide benefits for everyone, and fix structural defects in the economy.

But there is a third way, and New York state and Washington, D.C., have already shown it to us. The biggest parts of their EITC expansions go to low-income, non-custodial fathers who are meeting their financial obligations to their children. For Americans this priority on work-related assistance to low-income people with family responsibilities is as old as the Colonial era.

Because he wants to provide jobs of last resort to non-custodial parents, much of Mead's proposal is helpful. Extending coverage to recently released ex-offenders is unnecessary because, unfortunately, most male offenders are fathers. New sanctions are unnecessary because fathers who do not pay their child support obligations are already subject to sanctions including jail.

In a world of unlimited resources, we would support Berlin's proposal. But given real-world fiscal constraints we should follow the time-honored priority - in order to succeed, both of these proposals must be more family-friendly for low-income, disadvantaged men.

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