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Editorial

The Impact of Welfare Reform on Families

On the horizon a huge wave is building, about to crash down on the poorest most hard pressed families in our country. The impact of welfare reform on families and on those who serve them will be profound. The degree to which families and workers will be adversely affected is to date not fully understood. Yet as my son concluded, "...basically, if you are on welfare you had better win the lottery or learn to swim in the treacherous waters of poverty!" (C. Sallee, personal communication, November, 1996). We are also informed by looking back at the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601 where we find the origin of welfare reform. Orphanages, the responsibility of relatives, poorhouses and awarding relief work to the lowest private sector bidder, all introduced in the beginning of the welfare state, are key components of the current reform. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 washes away the entitlements and rights created during this country's greatest depression, leaving exposed the stark selfishness of the junk bond 1980's.

The impact of welfare reform will be largely borne by women and their children. If ever there is an illustration of the feminization of poverty, this is it. From teenage mothers being required to live with their parents, in what we know are often abusive homes, to wives who are forced to remain in unhealthy marriages, this policy will greatly affect women. We know mothers will eat less and less well in order to provide for their children. Women and their children in increasing numbers will be forced to choose between living in abusive situations and inadequate living arrangements. Families will be forced to live in over-crowded situations or on the street.

Poor children, who already have so little of the wealth of this country, will in even greater numbers be shipped off to low cost day care or to relatives who may or may not wish to care for them. The one thing that poor children may have in the world, love and bonding with their mothers (and hopefully fathers), will be greatly reduced as their parents are forced out of the home and into menial, low paying jobs or "make work" community services.

For thousands of legal alien residents all benefits will be lost even though they have paid federal, state and local taxes. The expulsion of these families from welfare as well as those who have already fallen through the safety net will create enormous pressure on child welfare, juvenile justice, the schools and mental health systems. Many states are already more narrowly defining what constitutes child abuse and neglect as a way of maintaining caseloads at a manageable level. Often neglect cases are viewed as being poverty related and are referred to poverty programs such as Aid to Families with Dependant Children and Food Stamps. With major reductions in these programs and an overall reduction in child care dollars, states will race to the lowest possible rate allowed.

Not only have families been assaulted by these policy changes but the basic values and principles of Family Preservation are also under fire. Welfare as a right and entitlement has

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been replaced with a punitive system. How can this new approach support children spending as much time as necessary with their parents? Where is the belief that families want to change, and often do, by building on their strengths? How can this policy possibly instill hope for families?

Can these new policies and programs really enhance the motivation in families to a greater degree to live as full members of society? Is the families' culture and heritage being respected when they will have to move from rural communities to cities just to find work? It is as if families are being told to swim for themselves in the rough and unpredictable seas of capitalism and the free market. They will be allowed the use of meager life boats for only a few months before they are tossed overboard to fend for themselves among the managed care sharks. Where are the Family Preservation values and principles in the Personal Responsibility Act?

How will Family Preservation stand up to this tidal wave on behalf of families? As Family Preservationists, we must rail against the punitive reforms that are anti-family. We must join in true partnership with families in every community and every state capital to educate and confront the myths of welfare. There is no empirical evidence that these reforms will help families. As Alvin Schorr says, "...only the Congress and newspapers believe there are enough quality jobs with benefits for everyone in this country" (A. Schorr, personal communication, November, 1996). In fact, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Urban Institute predict that over one million children will be pushed into poverty by the implementation of this Act (Bane, 1996).

Next to the families affected by these reforms, Family Preservation workers are, and will be the most expert source on the direct impact of welfare reform on families. We work with these policies at the interface with the family in their own home. What other professional group has this critical perspective? Surely not the in-the-beltway politico's who propose the "traditional family values of the 1950's" and debate TV sit-coms as if Murphy Brown lives in the real world. No, it is those who travel into the neighborhoods and small towns and into the homes and apartments of the poor who know the real story.

We must ferret out and present the facts and the startling brutal realities which result from poverty in this rich country. We must document the results of welfare reform with facts and figures now so that when the cycle of political power comes back around we will be ready with the story of poverty told through pain and suffering of real families.

We know it is no longer enough for us to serve families in their own homes, we must now serve them in every statehouse through our lobbying efforts. We must focus the discussion on the values which underpin the reform. We know the average citizen supports the value of helping their neighbor and those truly in need, yet the general public strongly holds to the welfare Cadillac myths. The inability of the public and the media to integrate the facts in welfare policy indicates the serious need for a thorough and clear discussion of values. What are the real family values and how does the reform damage the families? We need to develop a methodology to bridge the gap between the realities of poverty and the myths of welfare. Who, if not family preservationists, are prepared for these tasks?

We believe the articles in this issue will aid us in the task of addressing the impact of poverty by building the capacities of families. Roger Friedman meets this challenge with a thoughtful piece on the status of Family Preservation, where we are going and what we believe in these troubled times. Pamela DeSanto explores Family Preservation with Lesbian Clients and Susan Whitelaw Downs provides guidance to strengthen extended family ties in Family Support Programs. Issues involved in how states are implementing the Family Preservation and Support Act are presented in June Lloyd's article. The reviews of current resources offer additional ideas and inspiration, both of which we will need in the days to come as we in Family Preservation and Support continue to be the primary advocates with so many families.

Alvin L. Sallee

References

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