

Welfare Reform in California

On June 24, 1997, Eloise Anderson, director of the California Department of Social Services, delivered the keynote address at Pioneer Institute's Annual Meeting. Anderson, who oversees 4,200 employees and an annual budget in excess of \$16 billion, posed a series of policy questions states are facing as they address welfare reform. She then outlined California's approach to reform, which is based on the belief that adults who are capable should be responsible for themselves, and that the financial and emotional responsibility of a child falls to the parent, not the government. Her ideas about government aid stem from a belief in personal responsibility shaped by her own experience as a single mother who pumped gas to make ends meet rather than accept cash assistance. In the following pages, Pioneer Institute has reproduced an edited transcript of her remarks.

California has 2.4 million people on aid, the largest caseload in the United States. The next largest caseload in size is New York, which has roughly the caseload of Los Angeles. My TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) population, formerly called AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children), accounts for 28 percent of all TANF dollars spent nationwide. We represent 19 percent of the national caseload, but only 12 percent of the population. Our state has 38 percent of all legal immigrants who receive aid. We are facing difficult policy questions in welfare. Should mothers work outside the home? Some of us, especially those who are mothers, think that question has already been answered in the affirmative. But I am not sure the nation as a whole believes mothers should work outside the home. This is the core policy question for temporary assistance to needy families.

In 1930, when the AFDC program was created, the majority of women could not work outside the home and maintain a family. The reason was technology. It was very difficult to raise a child and do all the housework and go to work simultaneously. We have now come to the age of home technology, of central heating, irons, washing machines, stoves with buttons that you just push, microwave ovens and instant oatmeal, none of which mothers in the 1930s had. Housework itself was a large, consuming part of a woman's work. When a father was missing, it was usually due to death, and his income had to be replaced.

An interesting aspect of today's welfare debate is that you never hear about fathers. The father's role seems to be that of a checkbook. If we believe that men can nurture, then why is child care generally not a shared responsibility between two parents? Most working poor couples change shifts so one can stay home with the child while the other works. Why is it that we put no caretaking responsibility on the non-custodial father? We hold him responsible only for financial maintenance. We talk about more enforcement around child support, but I hear almost nothing about increased enforcement around visitation. As we develop new policies, we need to examine what we think about parenting, who we believe contributes, and how we think they should contribute.

If we are going to aid people, should there be time limits? If so, what should the limit be? Should it be permanent or should a person become eligible to reapply after a predetermined period? Harder for us to come to terms with is the notion of personal and parental responsibility. We have become a country that does not like to be responsible for our actions. We have to look at ourselves very differently.

Then there is the safety net question. What is its purpose? For whom should a net exist? How long should it last? This leads us to the question of a guaranteed annual income that no family would go below. In California, the notion of a guaranteed annual income is talked about covertly, but never out in the open. We will move in that direction without having an honest debate about whether we want to go there. What role should state government play? Some of us believe it should set standards for eligibility. Some of us believe it should establish the grant level. Some of us believe it should determine time limits. Some of us believe it should provide a fair hearing. Should government provide universal child care? Is it an aid program's responsibility to provide basic skills? Job training? Transportation? If these are the things that government should be able to do, the running and administration of these programs could be done outside of government, which would be a very different approach.

Those are the main policy questions that states must answer. I see three approaches to welfare. One approach is to undo everything that we have done to make welfare more work-friendly over the past

couple of years. Proponents of this approach do not want time limits. We do not currently have food stamps for legal immigrants. They want a food stamp program. We eliminated SSI (Supplemental Security Income) for illegal immigrants. They would restore the SSI program, both for legal immigrants and also for children who are no longer eligible. They would establish an earned income tax credit and a child support assurance program. These policies would create a lot of new entitlement programs. This approach basically views women as victims without choice. It also assumes that people on aid are different and cannot be held accountable. We ourselves do not have children until we can afford them, but we do not have the same expectation for people on aid. There is an underlying belief that these people are inferior and that government needs to take care of them.

Another approach is to give block grants to counties and forget about the welfare problem. Welfare was shaped by a 1959 court decision which struck down the state of Alabama's practice of giving out cash grants on the basis of moral character, because it violated the recipients' right to equal access to those grants. Some believe the counties are less concerned with the notion of equal access, but even with block grants, states will still be held accountable.

The third approach is the governor of California's approach. Governor Pete Wilson believes that adults who are capable should be responsible for themselves. He also believes that once a person decides to have a child, and keep it, the financial and emotional responsibility of that child falls to the parent, not to government.

Given those two beliefs, we set out to structure California's response to the policy questions I have posed. First, we believe that mothers should work. We suggest 32 hours a week for single parents, and 35 hours a week for two parent families. In this society, you are defined by work. Most places you go, even socially, people only ask your name to get to what you do. They are interested in what you do to such an extent that if you give the wrong occupation, they will not be around for very long.

It is important that people work. Work mainstreams people. Even more important is what it does for children. A child's first teacher is the parent and work skills are learned from parents. When children do not see work, they have no idea about work. We believe it is important for mothers, particularly single mothers, to be in the work force.

We also know that 20 to 60 percent of the aid caseload has some barrier to employment. It is most often substance abuse. To deal with that, we decided to give a block of grant money to counties to address treatment issues. Treatment without work is irresponsible. The disability communities have taught us that if you are physically or developmentally disabled, mentally ill, or substance addicted, you do better with work. Work is therapeutic. So why wouldn't a welfare parent with a substance abuse problem not do better with work?

Skills training is important. It is important that people have skills in order to go to work. But in California I am always astonished at the people jumping over the border every night who speak no English, have not gone to any school in the United States, and probably only to third or fourth grade in their own country, but who two days later are employed. In the United States we say that it is important that people have high school diplomas and good English skills in order to work.

We believe that skills training should go along with work. Most of the people on aid failed school. Yet we say to them, "In order for you to get a job, you must go back to the same systems in which you failed." Work is a better approach. When you work, your classroom work improves. If you go to work at a low skilled job, you get bored pretty quickly. School becomes very important in terms of your own mobility, and you put in more effort.

Because we are trying to structure our program to look like the world outside, we proposed a 12 week maternity leave. We will provide child care, but we also want to teach moms to be child care providers. Some women want to stay home with their children, and they can accomplish that by providing child care for other people. In addition, being in business provides another way out of the system than being someone's employee.

Fathers. It is very interesting to me that we have tried to design programs as if women have babies by themselves. Men are involved early in the game. We need to bring them to the table, and we have not been doing that.

In the California program, we believe mothers should not receive aid unless paternity is established. Thirty-eight percent of the children on aid in California have no legal father. The majority of women on aid in this country do not have simultaneous partners. The notion that women do not know who is the father is one we have to move past. One social worker told me that there are some women who do not know who the father is. I asked, "Under what circumstances does that occur? Does she put a bag over his

head? The social worker said, "No, she is out cold." "You mean she is blacked out?" "Yes." If I have a mother whose personal safety means so little to her that she would put herself in a position of being impregnated without her knowledge, what kind of safety does she provide for her child? We need to ask different questions than we are currently asking. Let's look at the role of fathers. People run around saying, "Let's get more child support." But 15 percent of the fathers of the children on aid are unemployed. We have an erroneous idea that they must be rocket scientists or engineers, while the mother has no education. The reality is that he looks very much like she does. If she does not have a high school diploma or work experience, it is very unlikely that he does. When we provide work experience and job training for her, we need to provide the same for him. If we do not include him in our programs, we will create a female whose mate sabotages her mobility.

We cannot develop programs that are not father friendly, not partner friendly, and expect that she is going to stay involved. You have to move him simultaneously with her. People live inside relationships. As we build a program for her, we must build one for him or the program will fail.

We also have to get rid of this notion that men are evil creatures from another planet. Men, by and large, are the products of their society. And they are very important to their children. We need to quit moving them out of the family, and out of our programs.

We must focus on child well-being. In California when a mother applies for aid for her school-age child, she must show proof that he has been immunized.

He must be not only enrolled in school, but also attending school. If the child is not immunized and attending school, the mother is not eligible for aid. The state paid the cost to be the boss. Our money is going to take care of this family's children, and we want them immunized and in school. In Sacramento County, where the state capital is located, 100 percent of the first to third grade children who are truant are receiving TANF.

If these moms need to learn such basic skills as getting up, and being punctual and reliable, how can they send their kid to school everyday? Work requires getting up every morning. It requires a good attitude and the ability to follow directions and be reliable. If you do not have these basic skills, which are transferable to parenting, how are you parenting? If a mother cannot get up on time, is the child going to school every day? If the mother is not reliable, are the kids participating in school programs? If the mother cannot get along with her peers, can her kids get along with theirs? All these things that are important to work are also important parenting skills.

When we examined our adolescent pregnancy program, we discovered where the hurt really is. The 18 and 19 year olds who finish school do all right. But the minor moms, mothers under the age of 18, are where most of our problems are. Our studies show that a mom under the age of 18 usually has a brother who is in our juvenile delinquency system. One out of three of our minor moms' families are connected to our child welfare system. The minor mom is not the problem; it is her family. Yet we focus our programs on her. We also find in our minor moms' programs that most do not get pregnant by minor boys; they become pregnant by adult men.

Most minor moms come from households where there has been no adult male in the household for at least two generations. The need for males in families is critical. Girls learn the difference between affection and sex from their fathers.

A study done in Europe a couple of years ago looked at households where there were no fathers and found that the puberty age of girls actually dropped. In single parent households, puberty starts earlier, at 12 and 13 years old. That is very young and it means that pregnancy happens earlier. Fathers are extremely important, both biologically and psychologically to our girls.

We need to move from the idea that government owes you something to the idea that you owe yourself something. What do you need to not be on aid? A one year time limit if you have never received aid, a two year time limit if you have, with some exemptions. If you cannot make it after the time limit is up, we are into vouchers. If you cannot find a job, my concern is for your child. We do not want homeless children who are bumped around from school to school. We want them to have stable lives. We will pay the rent, the utilities, and continue to give you food stamps, but we are not going to give you cash. We want to stabilize that family.

I want to leave you with a couple of thoughts. In a recent survey of teachers in the United States, I was struck by the fact that violence and drugs were not cited as the worst thing about schools. According to teachers, the worst thing happening to children in schools is lack of parent interest and involvement, not just among under-class, inner-city kids, but across the board. We are not involved with our children. Teachers also said that American parents lie, cheat, and steal, and that their children are doing exactly

the same thing. It scares me that we are creating dishonest children. It suggests why we have so much fraud in our welfare programs. People on aid are just a mirror of us.

The struggle to change how we provide assistance is going to be a reflection of who we are. We are not who we think we are. I am not sure we can win at this game, because I am not sure we want to be responsible for ourselves. If we are successful, it will put pressure on the K-12 system to change and improve. You cannot ask this system to carry the educational failures that it has been carrying. It will also push us closer to becoming a more integrated society.

Question: Is the purpose of aid to help people who are in trouble, or to bring poor people up to the level of everybody else?

Eloise Anderson: To help people in trouble. The notion that we can bring people up to the level of anybody else is a failed one. We can provide vehicles for educational training, but the rest is all self-motivation. We use income transfer to do things that it is not equipped to do. We try to educate; we try to get people to parent. What we ought to do is help people going through a crisis, and then have them move on. Moving up the ladder is a product of effort, not income transfer.

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