

Ending Generational Dependency: Welfare Reform in Massachusetts

In August 1995, Pioneer Institute hosted a roundtable discussion on welfare reform in Massachusetts. The roundtable was held as a preamble to an upcoming book by Joe Loconte on the role of community organizations in the provision of social services. The book is being written for Pioneer Institute and the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University, under the supervision of Professor Peter Berger. Discussion focused on problems of long-term dependency and the impact of reform legislation signed by the governor last February. The participants were:

- Brigitte Berger, professor of sociology, Boston University
- Peter Berger, director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, Boston University
- Joe Loconte, deputy editor, Policy Review Magazine, Heritage Foundation
- Laura Salomons, executive director, Children's League of Massachusetts
- Edward Sanders-Bey, assistant commissioner for policy and program management, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

Pioneer presented the participants with a series of questions about welfare reform and the impact of the Massachusetts legislation. Pioneer has reproduced excerpts from the discussion in the following pages with the permission of the participants.

Breaking the Cycle of Dependency

Pioneer Institute: Based on your knowledge of the welfare system, how would you improve it?

Edward Sanders-Bey: Our belief is that work is good, work is necessary, and work is an antidote to poverty. We do not approach reform with the idea of getting single mothers into training or education programs. Our focus is on work.

It is reasonable to demand that people seek an alternative to poverty. We honestly do not know how many people can make the transition to self-sufficiency, but we must find out. That some may not make it does not mean we should not try.

We believe we can craft policies that will free families from generations of poverty. Since most Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients are single mothers with children, we must focus on them. If the absent parents were providing child support, we would have a much smaller welfare population.

Laura Salomons: You say that most people on welfare are women with children. I would rephrase that to say two-thirds of welfare recipients are children. That means we cannot just look at whether a woman can hold down a job, if she has health insurance or child care. We also have to ask what is best for the child. The secret is to get people early on and to provide the social support, health care, and education in values-based decision making that they need to grow into healthy adults. This is much better than taking someone at twenty and spending ten years trying to transform them.

The support system needs to be made up of government and the community. I would love to see communities be the exclusive provider of services, but we are hard-pressed today to find communities that exemplify the "it takes a whole village to raise a child" ethos.

We also have to get the absent parent involved. Massachusetts is pretty good at collecting child support, but there is still a big gap between what is owed and what is collected.

Brigitte Berger: In the long run, educating mothers and educating children when they are very young will be cost-effective. But getting there will be very expensive.

We always talk about the inner-city communities that are most in need. But the most devastating result of the welfare system as it has existed over the past 40 years is that there is almost no community left in these areas anymore. We have destroyed volunteerism and the strong wish that exists within individuals to be responsible to each other. Can we create that again now?

Edward Sanders-Bey: In the area of child support enforcement, we must focus on encouraging people—particularly males—to become responsible parents. A start is to establish paternity, even if we cannot collect a dime from absent teenage parents. When they graduate from high school or go to work we

should pursue them for child support, even if they can only pay ten dollars a month. We have to show we are serious and make an effort to change behavior.

Implementing Reform in Massachusetts

Pioneer Institute: What will the effects of the new welfare reform law be in Massachusetts?

Edward Sanders-Bey: We at the Department of Transitional Assistance believe the law, as passed by the legislature and signed by the governor, can work. It is not unreasonable.

Since welfare is a federal-state program and the federal government exercises tremendous influence over its rules and regulations, the Commonwealth had to request waivers from the federal government in order to implement parts of the law. Among the waivers approved was one to implement mandatory work programs. Anyone who is able-bodied and has a child six or older who can attend school must either work twenty hours per week or perform community service for twenty hours per week. People in this category will have 60 days to find work before they are placed in a community service job.

It is important to get welfare recipients into the habit of getting up and going to work every day. We think community service provides that opportunity for all who cannot find a job. It ensures that they learn about the world of work and learn that there is value in work. There is value in learning to supervise and be supervised. There is value in peer support. These experiences can be obtained in a workplace where no wage is being paid.

We should note that although the current AFDC caseload in Massachusetts is about 93,000, about half will probably be exempt from the work requirement because they will not be judged able-bodied. Another group will be exempt because they have children who are too young to attend school. Because we believe there are enough jobs out there for the recipients impacted by the requirement, we are directing our efforts toward identifying the able-bodied.

We believe there are employers who are willing to hire people now receiving assistance. Some recipients are better educated than others, but enough jobs are currently available to get people on their way to self-sufficiency. On any given day, the Department of Employment and Training lists about 5,000 entry-level jobs that are open. That represents about one-third of the total entry-level jobs available in the Commonwealth.

DTA is often criticized for not encouraging recipients to go to college. We certainly understand the benefits of higher education, but it is not the purpose or intent of AFDC to support recipients through four-year post-secondary institutions. Although it is possible to enroll in higher education programs while working, the key is exposing people to the reality of work. To that end, our investments are in health care, child care, and employment assistance.

If we agree that welfare is a program that has doomed people to generational poverty, then we must believe we can make improvements that result in more families escaping from poverty.

In the area of child care, DTA funds programs that train AFDC mothers to take children into their homes and provide child care. This provides employment and a way out of welfare. The recipients can also gather with other women to form child care centers that adhere to a particular philosophy, so parents can choose a style they like for their children. There should be choice in the child care marketplace.

Joe Loconte: I have reservations about the emphasis on day care. I see single mothers with kids who have the advantage of several strong male role models within the extended family, yet those kids are still out of control a lot of the time. If the kids were in day care, without this loving and supportive family interaction, I shudder to think what kind of shape they would be in.

But the need for day care is a reality in our society. I just wonder if there is a way to use day care to expose children to mentors, churches, or other community groups— people who will instill values that will help keep these kids from slipping into welfare themselves.

Laura Salomons: There is good child care and bad child care. Quality child care provides early educational experiences that prepare children to learn in kindergarten and first grade. It provides positive social opportunities and can set the stage for children to succeed in life. Studies show that children, particularly poor children, who have had quality pre-school experiences are more likely to stay in school, and less likely to become teenage mothers or resort to crime, than those who did not have a quality pre-school program.

Brigitte Berger: As for how to fund child care, I used to be a great advocate of vouchers, but no longer. If we give child care vouchers to welfare moms, they will naturally want to redeem them and put their children into day care. It may be much better for some children not to be in day care. It depends on the child.

What we need to do is impart responsibility, not an automatic incentive to give a child to someone else for care. Tax credits may be a better approach. That way a mother can place her child in day care, have care provided by a grandmother who is at home, by a neighbor, the father, or she can choose to provide the care herself.

Pioneer Institute: What about the federal waiver the Commonwealth must obtain to get a firm time limit for receipt of benefits?

Edward Sanders-Bey: All of the waivers we requested have been granted except this one. The sticking point is the issue of extensions to the 24-month time limit for welfare recipients that is included in the legislation. The Commonwealth proposed that we be allowed to determine who is to receive an extension on a case-by-case basis. The federal government has not granted us this authority. They believe recipients who show they have been looking for work should automatically receive an extension if they have not found a job at the end of the two-year period.

If we do not get a firm two-year limit, there will be fiscal ramifications as well as the social problems that go along with failure to end long-term dependency. The federal government requires that our reforms be cost neutral. But welfare reform tends to cost money up front, with savings coming later. If we are forced to grant extensions, we may not be able to comply with the cost neutrality provision.

Looking Beyond Government

Pioneer Institute: What role can alternatives to government, like church and community groups, play in providing assistance to the truly needy?

Edward Sanders-Bey: When you look at the needs of those who are on welfare, you quickly see that their problems cannot be solved by the welfare bureaucracy. Welfare bureaucrats are not educators. They are not job placement specialists. Nor are most trained social workers. We are not equipped to address the myriad needs welfare families have.

Unfortunately, we are seeing a lot of crime perpetrated by and against AFDC dependents. Many of these children are known to the Department of Social Services (DSS), to the Department of Youth Services (DYS), and to police officials. They are fatherless, Godless, and jobless. We need to do something about these young people, and it cannot be accomplished through welfare. Police enforcement alone will not adequately address it. Non-governmental institutions need to be involved.

Laura Salomons: Communities must play a role in taking care of the needy. That includes educational and religious institutions. It includes human service providers and the families in the community. We must reshape communities to ensure that families value education and impart the idea that it is important to remain economically independent.

Peter Berger: Values and "values education" are integral to any discussion of welfare reform. In any society, a certain amount of people do not want to be responsible. In terms of public policy, values often come down to ties between government and non-governmental institutions capable of teaching values. The problem is that about 85 percent of these institutions are religious, and we have a very rigid notion of how government may interact with churches. The question is how to bring government investment together with institutions that have a fighting chance to impart values and change behavior.

Edward Sanders-Bey: It depends on what you want religious institutions to do. I do not think it is appropriate for a governmental agency to contract with a church, synagogue, or mosque to provide values education. But it is appropriate to contract with them for basic adult education, or skill training, or job placement. We currently have contracts with the Archdiocese of Boston to provide services like homeless shelters and adult basic education.

Joe Loconte: What I am coming to learn is that the spiritual aspect of these faith-based organizations is what makes their social service programs so effective. So if the state contracts with religion-based social service agencies, but asks them to do work that has no bearing on their religious mission, we are not tapping into the magic of what they are able to do in people's lives.

Yesterday I was conducting some interviews at the Temple Baptist Church in Dorchester. Each year, they work with hundreds of kids who are in some way at risk. They offer a variety of programs ranging from mentoring to remedial education. Volunteers from Harvard, Boston University and elsewhere give their time to serve as role models to these kids. It is powerful for kids to see older peers whose lives have been changed by faith. The message is "you too can make decisions that will change your lives." The church not only pulls in children and their families, but it reaches out to others in the community. The way they build bridges and make connections shows real vision.

On the other hand, YouthBuild here in Boston is a secular program with no faith component. Yet I am struck by the values they communicate to the participants in the program, particularly in the first few weeks, which they call "boot camp." These are inner-city kids, 98 percent of whom have dropped out of high school, and they go through a very disciplined program. The emphasis is on personal responsibility and self-reliance, values very consistent with the Judeo-Christian ethic. The program produces tangible results; these kids get out to a work site and build, or partially build, homes.

Brigitte Berger: I think a "conversion" is necessary to move people from dependency to independence. It does not necessarily have to be religiously informed, but one must come to believe that another way of life is possible.

Peter Berger: One constraint community organizations face is funding. Tax credits, as opposed to deductions, for giving to charitable organizations that provide social services might encourage additional support for the organizations.

Joe Loconte: I think people would feel a lot freer to give to charitable organizations if the federal tax burden were less. If a quarter of every dollar did not go to the federal government, people would have a lot more disposable income to give.

Edward Sanders-Bey: People want to give to people and places they know, where they can see their money at work. They do not have that confidence in government. The Department of Transitional Assistance will spend \$800 million this year, and most taxpayers do not know how it will be spent. The local institution can give tangible examples of how and where they spend their money. The accountability makes people more willing to increase their contributions.

Control and Responsibility

Pioneer Institute: Should welfare programs revert entirely to the state or municipal level?

Peter Berger: Looking at it from a global perspective, there is no place where the welfare state can continue as it has, because nobody can afford it. Everyone is looking for alternatives. But no democratic society will let children starve on the streets, so two kinds of devolution are going on. We have talked about devolution from government to non-governmental agencies, but there is also devolution from one level of government to another.

Edward Sanders-Bey: One school of thought argues we should transfer government responsibility to a local level because it will save money. If that happens, the federal government would have to give up control. For example, the president would have to allow the governor of Massachusetts to operate the welfare program in accordance with the law passed here. The Clinton administration, through its refusal thus far to grant all the waivers we have requested, has indicated it does not want to give up that control.

Peter Berger: Take it a step further. Does the governor want to give up control to the mayor of Pittsfield?

Edward Sanders-Bey: The higher the level of government, the greater the desire for uniformity. I believe this approach is often embraced by those who favor entitlement. If you give up the authority to mandate that, you cannot control what others may do. It comes down to how much control you are willing to give up to save dollars and whether or not Washington believes states can be trusted to care for their poor.

Laura Salomons: I think you can set certain basic standards that we could all agree on and let communities craft programs to suit their needs. If everything is block granted, we will not need federal waivers or approval. But federal reforms could also result in funding cuts for programs that affect children in Massachusetts.

Final Thoughts

Joe Loconte: I was at a conference last year on the role of religious groups in politics. The attendees were largely religious people. A self-proclaimed agnostic at the conference got up and said, "You are the best hope for the moral renewal of America." He obviously did not say it because he agreed with their religious doctrine, but because there is a confidence that the religious community can provide this transformation. In a recent sermon, a pastor at one of the larger conservative Protestant churches in America said the greatest weakness of conservative churches was in the area of transformation. We have become comfortable with the idea that someone can come into a church with problems, rough edges, and hang-ups, and 30 years later, he or she has not changed.

Whether in a church or social service context, it is this issue of transformation that we are after. It is very challenging, but I think it can happen, and the religious community is one of the best sources for that. The

non-religious groups with the most successful social service programs are those that have a value system in place that is consistent with religious values like self-sufficiency and personal responsibility.

Edward Sanders-Bey: Experience has taught us what does and does not work. Welfare does not work if it becomes a generational reality, so let's end it. Let's start investing in the things that show promise.

Brigitte Berger: I agree that we know what does not work, but I am less sure we know what does work. I hope Massachusetts will be flexible enough to allow experimentation with a variety of programs and not just implement standardized programs at a different level of government.

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