

Welfare Reform - 1995

It is you who have ravaged the vineyard; that which was robbed from the poor is in your houses. How dare you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor, says my God. (Isaiah 3:14-15)

Issue

Systemic change in welfare and social assistance in the United States and Canada has generated concern for the continuing protection of those in need.

Background

We are mandated as Jews to care for the poor and needy (Lev. 19:9-37). Maimonides teaches us that the highest degree of tzedakah is to provide employment that enables a person to be self-supporting (Mishneh Torah). Traditional United States welfare policy, requiring the status quo as a condition of continuing eligibility and offering recipients their only access to health care, has failed to provide an effective transition from poverty and dependence to self-support.

In Canada, on October 5, 1994, the Minister of Human Resources, the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, released the Liberal government's policy paper on social security review. In response to social concerns, the proposed reforms would alter some of the fundamental means by which Canada provides for the vulnerable members of its society by reorganizing and decreasing funding of social assistance and healthcare programs and by decreasing entitlements to unemployment insurance. Provincial governments in turn are making dramatic cuts in welfare and health programs.

The U.S. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, known as "welfare," was enacted in 1935 to provide cash assistance for needy children. As an entitlement it mandates benefits to any person meeting federal statutory eligibility requirements; expenditures are outside the annual congressional appropriations process.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the typical AFDC family, a mother and two children, receives an average monthly payment of \$367, or \$4,404 a year, well below the poverty line. This constitutes 1% of the federal budget, 3% if food stamps are included. Of those entering the system, 70% leave within 2 years and 50% within one year. However, many reenter when child care or jobs fall through, or when health care is needed.

WRJ has long supported compassionate reform. In 1969 two resolutions, Priorities for Peace (p. A-12) and Hunger (p. N-4), called for reform of a "costly, inequitable, cumbersome [system that] penalizes job seekers [and] tends to disrupt families," and for a federal food stamp program. In 1981 and 1985, "Economic Justice" resolutions opposed severe cutbacks in "job training, food aid subsidies, Medicaid and child care" and insisted that "the perceived need for a balanced budget not outweigh... human needs." In 1983 WRJ called for child support payments; in 1987, for community day care centers, family life and sex education curricula, family-planning programs, and jobs and job training by local businesses.

Currently, the U.S. Congress is seeking to nullify welfare as an entitlement, thereby abolishing federal guarantees of minimum cash payments for all who qualify and funding for many nutrition and social service programs. Proposed block grants permit each state to determine how it uses federal funds, which programs it

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supports and who is eligible, as well as how much of its own money that state expends. This approach also leaves programs that serve the nation's neediest vulnerable to further budget cutting and balancing measures.

Resolution

The Women of Reform Judaism, in order to preserve human dignity and meet human needs, calls upon its world-wide affiliates, and especially those in the United States and Canada, to:

1. Educate their constituencies that true reform of welfare and social assistance systems is a complex, long-term challenge that will require substantial expenditures for education, jobs and job-training and support systems in health and child care.
2. Support welfare reform initiatives that promote self-sufficiency and family stability and assure:
 1. Education and training in marketable, life and parenting skills, family-planning and job placement programs and continuation of benefits and support services during a flexible
 2. transition period from welfare dependency to self-support;
 3. Health care, affordable day care and pre- and after-school care and guaranteed minimum child
 4. support levels when still necessary after entering the workplace;
 5. Jobs with adequate wages and employee benefits through a joint private and public sector effort; and
 6. Continuing benefits to those who remain in the home to care for disabled or elderly dependents.
3. Encourage local businesses to expand job opportunities and provide on-the-job training.
4. Urge their constituencies to continue and increase personal and communal financial aid and assistance to those in need.
5. Advocate reform that is respectful of those whose needs must be served and non-punitive and compassionate toward those who are unable to achieve established goals.

The Women of Reform Judaism calls upon its United States affiliates to:

1. Seek enforcement of child support by non-custodial parents.
2. Oppose the withdrawal of child support to mothers who decline to establish paternity.
3. Oppose child-exclusion proposals.
4. Oppose citizenship as a requirement of eligibility for benefits.
5. Advocate federally mandated basic and supplemental nutrition programs.
6. Monitor and advocate state and municipal budget proposals to assure, at a minimum, matching funding for federal block grants and programs and allocations adequate to meet needs.

Women of Reform Judaism congratulates the Canadian Council for Reform Judaism for responding to the Canadian government's policy paper on social security review and urges Canadian affiliates to use the response as a means of education and advocacy.

Further, WRJ calls upon its affiliates worldwide to monitor existing programs in their countries and advocate adequate programs to serve those in need.

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