

Beacon Hill Byline - By Mary Rogeness

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Is it finally time for welfare reform?

I stood with Gov. Weld at last month's State House press conference as he outlined his proposals for welfare reform. His goal of breaking the cycle of welfare dependency was captured in this line: "Nothing sends a worse message to kids than seeing their parents pick up welfare checks month after month, year after year, and not have to do anything for I them." The governor proposed the following changes to our existing program.

Welfare in Massachusetts is dispensed primarily as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a program of the '30s that sought to alleviate the hardship of the Depression. It has expanded over the years without facing a reality check against a changing society. One welfare assumption is that a mother should be at home with her children until they are grown. Gov. Weld challenges this assumption in the '90s, when non-AFDC mothers are struggling to care for their children while holding a job.

The new proposal does not affect benefits for parents of preschoolers, but once the children are in school, those who have received benefits for more than 24 months will be asked to join the workforce. The work can be a job training or a volunteer activity, any attempt to "do something" for the check. The modest form of workfare will now face the legislature.

Gov. Weld is in good company when he addresses the welfare issue. Two and three generation welfare families have long been criticized by social planners. President Clinton campaigned for office decrying the existing welfare system, and he promised that nobody would receive benefits for more than two years. But legislative leaders in Boston seem unwilling to contemplate adding a work component to the welfare picture, Speaker Flaherty called the new program "unconscionable."

The Boston press corps may be an obstacle more substantial than the politicians. During a question period following the press conference, reporter followed Boston reporter to challenge the program's validity. As they continued to point out why each aspect of reform would not work, an observer commented to me, "They really want this to fail."

I am not ready to accept the status quo as the perpetual condition of welfare families. Several young mothers spoke to the reporters about the training programs they have completed, and they radiated success. One speaker has six children, and those kids have to be so proud of their mother, now a bank employee and a member of the middle class. If the mandate to spend time as a school volunteer can introduce other parents to the world of work, society has taken another step in the right direction.