



## Bush is Right on Welfare Reform

by David Hogberg

In late February the *Des Moines Register* Editorial Board continued its assault on President Bush's proposed welfare reform.<sup>1</sup> The editorial bemoaned the fact that Bush's welfare reform would increase the number of hours a week a welfare recipient must work from 20 to 26:

... it's the work requirements that really stand to hurt people. It may not sound like a big deal to require welfare mothers to work more, but it is...

If the [Bush] legislation is imposed, [an] Iowa woman might need to work 24 hours in a job before her schooling could count for her "work requirement." (It's worth noting jobs are in short supply in the current economy.) That could result in her having to go to school part-time instead of full-time. If she makes even a little too much money at her job, both her child-care subsidy and tuition aid could be at risk.

That's what stricter work requirements mean in the real world.<sup>2</sup>

The Editorial Board appears to be ignorant of the research on the effect of work requirements on the decline of welfare caseloads. A July 2001 study by June O'Neill and M. Anne Hill found that the 1996 welfare reform law accounted for more than 60% of the increase in work participation.<sup>3</sup> This strongly suggests that the work requirements in the 1996 welfare reform law had the intended effect. Furthermore, studies by both Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute found individual states that enforced work requirements with very strict sanctions (immediate loss of benefits) for noncompliance had larger declines in the welfare rolls than did states with less severe sanctions.<sup>4</sup>

In what may be the most heartening news, these work requirements are beneficial to the income of single-parent families. A recent University of Michigan Study by Rebecca M. Blank and Robert F. Schoeni found that single-parent families in states with strict or moderate penalties for not working had higher gains in income than those in states with lenient penalties. The researchers stated:

This is perhaps surprising, since many have predicted that strong penalties would lead to greater impoverishment among those who lose their eligibility for welfare but are unable to replace benefits with earnings. Instead, it is the more lenient states with softer penalties where children's income seems to have grown the least.<sup>5</sup>

Given that strict work requirements have led to lower rates of welfare dependency and increases in income for former recipients, the Bush Administration is on the right track in making work requirements slightly more strict.

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A Publication of:

**Public Interest Institute at Iowa Wesleyan College**

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The Editorial Board further disparaged the proposed marriage counseling initiative in Bush's plan:

The marriage initiatives are simply wrong. They don't work. They only further stigmatize single motherhood and scapegoat single parents as the reason for poverty.<sup>6</sup>

Much of our society does not stigmatize single motherhood but rather tolerates or even celebrates it—witness television shows like *Murphy Brown* and *Friends*. Given the well-demonstrated connection between single motherhood and poverty, a bit more stigma would seem to be in order.

What is most curious about the above quote is the claim that marriage initiatives “don't work.” In this case, the Editorial Board is not ignoring the evidence, but rather misinterpreting it. The editorial is referring to two studies released last year that showed that welfare recipients in Connecticut and Iowa who had entered the workforce were less likely to get married than recipients who did not enter the workforce.<sup>7</sup> Neither study showed that marriage counseling didn't work because in neither case was marriage counseling part of the welfare program. There is no evidence that the proposed marriage counseling initiatives don't work, because such programs do not yet exist.

President Bush's welfare plan moves welfare in the right direction. It builds on a successful reform by strengthening the proven policy of work requirements, and introducing an experimental marriage counseling program. These reforms will further decrease dependence and enable more people to move out of poverty.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>For previous attacks on Bush's welfare reform, see Register Editorial Board, “Editorial: Don't Carry Reform Too Far,” *Des Moines Register*, April 23, 2002, <<http://desmoinesregister.com/news/stories/c5917686/17985708.html>> (April 23, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>Register Editorial Board, “Editorial: Reform Run Amok,” *Des Moines Register*, February 22, 2003, <<http://www.dmregister.com/opinion/stories/c2125555/20556093.html>> (February 25, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>June E. O'Neill and M. Anne Hill, “Gaining Ground? Measuring the Impact of Welfare Reform on Welfare and Work,” *Civic Report*, Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, No. 17, July 2001.

<sup>4</sup>Robert E. Rector and Sarah E. Youssef, “The Determinants of Welfare Caseload Decline,” The Heritage Center for Data Analysis, No. CDA99-04, May 11, 1999; Michael J. New, “Welfare Reform that Works: Explaining the Welfare Caseload Decline, 1996-2000,” *Policy Analysis*, Cato Institute, No.435, May 7, 2002.

<sup>5</sup>Rebecca M. Blank and Robert F. Schoeni, “Changes in the Distribution of Children's Family Income Over the 1990s,” University of Michigan, January 2003.

<sup>6</sup>Register Editorial Board, “Editorial: Reform Run Amok,” *Des Moines Register*, February 22, 2003, <<http://www.dmregister.com/opinion/stories/c2125555/20556093.html>> (February 25, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Bruce Fuller, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Susanna Loeb, “New Lives for Poor Families? Mothers and Young Children Move Through Welfare Reform, The Growing Up in Poverty Project—Wave 2 Findings, April 2002; Thomas M. Fraker, Christine M. Ross, Rita A Stapulonis, Robert B. Olsen, Martha D. Kovac, and Anu Rangarajan, “The Evaluation of Welfare Reform in Iowa: Final Impact Report,” Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., June 11, 2002.

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