

ASPECTS OF WELFARE REFORM

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During the 1992 presidential campaign, I started paying attention to the subject of welfare reform at the federal level. I followed the various proposals in the news, in magazines, and in copies of drafts of proposals coming out of the Clinton Administration, the American Public Welfare Association, and so on. I was delighted to have a spotlight shown on my field and came to believe that reform of the AFDC program could be achieved and I enjoyed dreaming about how it could be. I knew it would not turn out to be exactly the kind of program I would like to see since very seldom has anything coming out of Washington D.C. really met my standards, but I welcomed the attention the subject was getting and looked forward to some improvements in the program.

Then came the Republican Sweep of the November 8th elections and the Rough Riders of the 104th Congress galloped into town on their high horses. The rhetoric and hyperbole in support of the Contract with America was hard to get away from. Some mornings I had to listen to classical music rather than my usual fare of Morning Edition on National Public Radio as I got ready for work. I couldn't stand to hear Newt Gingrich's voice. "You can look them (welfare recipients) in the eye and say 'You should be ashamed!'" As I saw their strength building, mine was ebbing. My colleagues in the human service arena at work, in the community and among friends would bemoan the latest passage of the bills., cutting programs which we knew would have dire consequences for our recipients and communities and nation.

I would alternate between guilt, anger, worry, fear, and denial. "Why didn't we do something sooner? This program (AFDC) hasn't been working for years. We shouldn't have allowed people to stay on aid year after year without expecting something of them. Now it's too late." "It's all their fault, the Newts and the Doles. We were going to improve it and now the rug has been pulled out from under us and it's all going to fall down around us." "People will starve and there will be more chaos in the streets." "My son will be at more risk being out on his own." "They have all the power, it's useless to try to do anything about it." "I should get a new, easier job and leave this hard stuff to the young people." "They're wrecking the ozone, they're wrecking the environment, they're wrecking the economy, and they're laughing all the way to the bank." "It's too big, I can't do anything about it. Why try?" "I'll lose my job and not be able to find another." "Finland sounds like a nice place to live."

At some point I diagnosed myself as suffering from loss and I was still in the beginning phases of the grief cycle, in the blame and self-blame phase, cycling between them endlessly.

Meanwhile, I started an internship with Kathy Gallagher, the Governmental Relations and Planning Director of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA). According to the position classification statement for her job, the Governmental Relations activities should consume 40% of her time, the Planning and Special Projects activities 40%, and 10% each for the Management Intern Program administration, and Grant Coordination. She reports to Richard O'Neill, the Social Services Agency Director.

According to the learning agreement we worked out I:

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—joined and attended the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) Legislative Committee and got a flavor of county involvement and input into public policy and legislation in California.

—provided support to CWDA in its sponsorship of Microenterprise legislation by acting as a technical advisor on the bill, worked with CWDA staff and advocates to develop bill language and strategies, and was prepared to testify before legislative committees.

--attended various legislative hearings to observe the process.

--participated in discussions, research and analysis of federal welfare reform proposals, and

--visited Santa Clara County to view the Governmental Relations (GR) operation and learn about the Management Intern Program they use to provide additional staff resources.

THE LEGISLATIVE ASPECT OF WELFARE REFORM

One way to accomplish Welfare Reform is to take part in the legislative process. All welfare regulations are promulgated through Federal or State Law. Here is how governmental relations operates in Santa Clara County.

Each fall, the Governmental Relations and Planning Department holds its Annual Legislative Priorities Meeting to identify and discuss key issues in various program and administrative areas in which legislative action may be required to ensure the most effective delivery of services. In addition to Kathy, participants include the Agency Director, the Director of Family and Children's Services, the Income Maintenance Director and the Adult Services Director. The priorities they identify are submitted at the county level to be included as part of the overall county plan. The GR staff then goes about crafting those priorities into legislation, getting sponsors, and shepherding the resulting bills through the process.

In 1994, one of the 4 bills they sponsored was passed and signed into law by the governor. It requires the California Department of Social Services to amend the state plan to authorize federal financial participation to counties operating a public child care institution with a licensed capacity exceeding 25 children.

In addition to developing and sponsoring legislation, the GR staff also track other bills at the state and federal level and issue weekly reports on bills of "major" importance and bills that they put in a "watch" category. This tracking is done on Legi-Tech, an on-line system to which Santa Clara County subscribes. According to how they feel a bill might affect recipients or staff, Kathy will attempt to influence the outcome of the major bills by working through the CWDA legislative committee and the lobbyist who works for the county.

Microenterprise Legislation

I worked on a piece of legislation during this internship which was initiated by our department in San Francisco County. I had been working for a couple of years with a group originally convened by a staffer from State Senator Marks' office. She brought together a number of people working in the small business or microenterprise arena in San Francisco. Marks had sponsored SB524 in 1992 which passed the Legislature but was vetoed by the governor.

There is a need for the AFDC budgeting rules relating to income from small business operators to be made more flexible. Currently, the regulations call for month by month budgeting. The client must report any expenses and income each month. If there are valid business-related expenses in a month in which there is no income, credit for those expenses is lost. They are not carried over to a month when there is income.

That can be drastic for many small business operators due to the cyclical nature of their income and out-go. They can be discontinued from AFDC and lose their benefits which can have a chilling effect upon a recipient's willingness to start a business. Yet for many people with limited job skills and experience, starting one's own business might be a viable option. Coupled with the existence of microenterprise loans to capitalize low- and no-income women in business, there are training and support classes available to help in developing an effective business plan and all the necessary components of creating and growing a microenterprise.

My work with Frank Mecca, Executive Director of CWDA, was an exercise in seeing how the legislative process works close up and to advocate for AFDC recipients at the legislative level. He was successful in getting State Senator Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles) to sponsor the Microenterprise bill. It was combined in SB973 with another welfare change dealing with recoupment of overpayments for recipients with earnings. The wording currently reads: "For purposes of computing the grant . . . a county shall deduct valid business-related expenses from business income calculated in determining eligibility for aid . . . provided that the expenses were incurred within 12 months of the month the income was earned."

The bill was calendared to be heard before the Senate Health and Human Services committee on April 19th. I almost had my first chance to testify before a committee, but at 7:30pm after six hours of hearing bills everyone was ready to go home so the last bills of the day got only cursory attention. When it was determined that there was no opposition and no questions, the bill was passed out of the committee by a vote of 6 - 0 and moved on to the Appropriations committee. According to Frank and Kathy this is not unusual but it is necessary for the "experts" to be there in case there are any questions from the committee members. Apparently there is a lot of waiting in Sacramento.

EDUCATING THE COMMUNITY

Another potential component in creating realistic Welfare Reform is contributing to the education of the public about our programs and recipient populations. To this end, Santa Clara's Governmental Relations Department recently sponsored a community forum on proposed changes to federal programs which they coordinated in conjunction with the County Board of

Supervisors, the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council and the Santa Clara Valley Manufacturing Group. The sponsors represented a cross section of local government, labor and business groups. The purpose of the forum was to inform the community about impending changes which according to the flier announcing the event, "may result in major reductions in federal and state funds which will have wide-ranging impacts on families and children."

The event was organized by Katie Ryan, a temporary consultant hired for a 3 to 4 month period by the SSA to keep track of federal and state Welfare Reform proposals as well as organizing the forum. A booklet was issued for the forum and for general use called "Federal Welfare Reform: How Will It Impact Santa Clara County?" It contains a summary of legislation with impact estimates for the county, facts about public assistance, charts on public assistance usage in the county, information on the Employment and Training and Children's Services Programs in Santa Clara County, and charts on various aspects of the economics of the county.

The forum was a success. The room was filled to capacity. The discussion was lively and informative. Two spin off forums are planned by two members of the Board for their home districts. It provided a source for factual information about the proposals and about how the population we serve and the greater community would be affected. It was a chance to provide counterpoint to the sound bites, half-truths and no-truths of the pushers of the Contract with America.

STAYING INFORMED AND INSPIRED

On May 5th, I attended the day long Welfare Reform Forum at the Sacramento Convention Center sponsored by UC Davis Extension. There were various panels of speakers throughout the day including economists, authors, a conservative spokesman, a representative from the CDSS Director's office, a welfare recipient, a welfare caseworker, social scientist/author Mark Rank, journalist and author, Robert Scheer, Rep. Daniel Matsui, and many other experts in the field. Dialogue was encouraged after the presentations of each panel were finished. There were microphones placed around the room and many people took advantage of the opportunity to ask questions or make comments. I attended the conference with two colleagues from family advocacy agencies in San Francisco. I left with a great deal of factual information and feeling energized and inspired to keep up the fight and not give in to feelings of despair even though the voices of the Newts and Doles are so loud and get so much air time. Our clients need us and we need to have sensible, life-affirming programs in order to have healthy communities in which to live.

CONCLUSION

So it was these three threads which stood out for me in the course of this internship.

- 1) Using the legislative process to effect Welfare Reform; having your (your own and your county's) voice heard in Sacramento, attempting to influence the body of legislation governing our programs. This becomes more and more important in an era of block grants in which the rules of the programs will be formulated to a much greater degree at the state

level. San Francisco county must be a player in that process in order to advocate for the needs of our recipients.

- 2) We in county welfare departments are positioned well to have accurate information about our caseloads and knowledge of our clientele which we can bring to the public and attempt to create discourse which was so sorely lacking in the House of Representatives. We are a credible source of information. We need to contribute to the body of knowledge which is available to the public. We need to alert them to the true effects of the proposals which threaten to deconstruct an entire system. The system needs reform yet we need to base that reform on a sound planning process which takes a careful look at the causes of the problems, includes input from all the stakeholders, including the recipients who need the programs, and arrives at its solutions taking into consideration long term as well as short term results.
- 3) On an individual level, we need to keep ourselves informed and supported and inspired in order to resist the onslaught of those who blame the victims of our economic and social policies for being poor and who blame welfare for causing it. The conference in Sacramento inspired and informed me and helped to muffle the loud, shrill voices which claim that the system needs to be dismantled in order to fix it and ignores the plight of the human beings who will be harmed by it.

Although I have a great deal to learn about the legislative process and how a county welfare department can be involved and use the process in a powerful way to advocate for our clientele, I can see that it is an important tool to create "Welfare Reform". For me, operating in this arena, utilizing this tool, is a way to move into the problem solving phase of the grief cycle. They may have passed the Contract with America, but they have not won. The fight goes on. It is for our clients and it is for ourselves.