



NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

Federal Support for Millions of Mothers at Risk

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By Betty Holcomb, [Women's Enews](#)

For Erin Lane, mother of two and a senior at the University of Montana, Sept. 30 is a critical date. That's the day the nation's 1996 welfare law expires and Congress must act to extend or amend it. That action—or lack of it—could dramatically transform her life and the lives of millions of other American women who depend on federal benefits.

As a federal assistance recipient, Lane depends on the small cash grant she now receives to cover the rent on her home, along with the food stamps, child care vouchers and federal medical insurance. All of that is now in play as Congress debates the future of federal assistance to families—called TANF for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Lane's worries are grounded in proposals now floating in Congress. One version, pushed by the Bush administration and already passed by the House, would end programs like the one in Montana that allows women such as Lane to attend college and still receive welfare benefits.

Most controversial of all are the new work requirements in the House bill, which are ardently supported by the Bush administration. That bill would extend the current law on Monday, but require recipients to work 10 additional hours every week—pushing them up to 40 hours—to retain their benefits. There is no new money for child care.

Direct Action Welfare Group and other organizations say they are near exhaustion after fighting for nearly a year for improvements in the current law.

"I never thought I'd say that a simple extension of the law, as it is now, would be a victory," says Jackie Payne, policy attorney for the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. "Now we're just hoping to keep things from getting worse, to stop the House bill from becoming law and imposing new requirements that are downright punitive."

Losing any of those benefits or working for pay 40 hours per week could create hardships for Lane and her 3- and 5-year-old daughters. In addition, one pivotal part of the proposals could drastically change the entire family's current life and future opportunities.

"I may have to drop out of college," Lane explains. "That's what I worry about the most. That I'd have to go back to waitressing, like I used to do, or just get some minimum-wage job to keep my benefits," says Lane, who hopes to get certified to teach art after she graduates. "Then I'll be stuck again, never getting ahead. College is my ticket out. I really believe that."

Robert Rector, senior policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation and a key lobbyist for increased work requirements, as well as the author of the 1996 changes to welfare law, counters that the new work requirements simply build on the success of the five-year-old law.

"Passage of that law was historic. For the first time, we made benefits contingent on work. The welfare caseloads are now down. All we want to do now is push a little further in that direction," he says. "Moving people from 30 hours a week to 40 is not that big a deal."

House Bill Threatens Innovative State Programs

The Montana effort, similar to those in other states, is one of the striking and successful innovations to grow out of the 1996 changed to federal welfare law under the umbrella of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Under that law, time limits were imposed on welfare grants, recipients were required to work to "earn" the benefits and recipients could spend at most one year in job-training programs.

At the same time, however states were given new latitude to define just what constituted "work" and devise new programs that helped move welfare recipients—overwhelmingly female—toward lifelong self-sufficiency.

Montana, creating what is known simply as "PSE," began to permit welfare recipients to count post-secondary education—college—as a job-training program. In the past, most state welfare laws only allowed vocational education to count as job training, even though such programs rarely have the power to improve lifetime earnings the way a college degree can.

Since then, programs like Montana's have been touted as models for the future and inspired advocates across the country to fight for their extension.

"We're doing everything we can to make sure that education is still included in welfare reform, and especially the ability to attend college," says Evelyn Dortch, head of Direct Action Welfare Group, a welfare-rights group in West Virginia.

"A lot of our members are in college now, and we see this as a critical issue," says Dortch, a mother of four children and former welfare recipient herself. "How else can women get out of poverty?"

By getting a job immediately, argue supporters of the House bill. "The debate over college and higher education is a ridiculous one," says The Heritage Foundation's Rector. "A college education is not a good road for single mothers to escape from poverty. Very few women on welfare have the verbal or math skills to go to college. What they need is direct work experience."

If anything, Rector argues, single moms need to learn the skills it takes to find and hold a full-time job—and increasing the work hours simply creates an incentive for welfare recipients to do just that. "The fact that caseloads are down proves that this approach works," he says.

But many activists and women on welfare say the drop in caseloads does not necessarily mean welfare recipients have moved out of poverty.

"There's a big difference between lowering caseloads and moving people into real jobs," says Tyletha Samuels of Community Voices Heard, a New York-based advocacy group and former welfare recipient. "The real question is whether we are pushing women to work at Burger King because the rent is late, or if we are going to help them get real jobs."

Bill with Child Care Fund Languishing in Senate

In addition, without new money for child care, the proposal to increase the number of hours required to work makes little sense to the bevy of women's groups and anti-poverty advocates fighting to defeat it. They hope to pry loose a bill they characterize as more positive that is locked up in Senate committees that does not increase the work requirement and does include more child care funding.

"The administration has yet to offer a convincing explanation for how you can require people to work more hours without providing any new child care funding," says Mark Greenberg, senior staff attorney at the Center for Law and Social Policy.

The Center for Law and Social Policy estimates that it would take at least \$8 billion in new money to pay for the child care families would need to satisfy the new work requirement. Right now, no state has the funds to provide child care vouchers to all the families that qualify for them. Under current budgets, only one in seven families who are deemed eligible by dint of their income actually receives any help. Meanwhile, state coffers are stretched thinner than ever.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle holds the key to further action, because he has the power to schedule bills for a vote on the floor of the Senate. This summer Daschle, a South Dakota Democrat, said the bills needed to include more money for child care before he would put them on the calendar for a full Senate vote. Since then, the possibility of action has dimmed, as debates over national security dominate the national political agenda.

Two weeks ago, senators Olympia Snowe of Maine and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas sent a letter signed by 50 senators urging Daschle to bring the legislation to a vote on the floor of the Senate, but there's still been no action.

"It's hard to believe that it went this way," Payne says. "I think we all approached the reauthorization thinking we could build on some positive things that happened in welfare reform."

Betty Holcomb, author of "The Best Friend's Guide to Maternity Leave," writes on work/family issues for many national publications. [Women's Enews](#) is a news service based in New York City.

UPDATE: Legislation passed by both Houses of Congress (see H.J.Res. 111 at <http://thomas.loc.gov>) will extend the current TANF provisions through December 31, 2002, extending all federal funding to the states, including child care grants and cash assistance, for an additional three months. We have very little time to improve the proposals, and the outcome of the November elections will have considerable bearing on our ability to change the current punitive system. For information on how you can help, go to [Welfare: NOW Calls for Real Reform](#).

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