

## Community Voices

# They would love to be working alongside others this Labor Day

It's 7:30 on a Tuesday morning, when most working people are fortunate enough to be driving to work. Already at this hour, the line of people in front of the Department of Human Services located on East California Avenue stretches the length of the building — a building that covers more than a block. When the



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doors open, eligibility staff and even the security guards direct and assist people in finding which line they are supposed to go to first. The line for new applicants is the longest of all, stretching deep into the lobby. This scene repeats itself every day, as it has since the beginning of the year.

“Katherine,” 29, is visibly pregnant. She has never needed public assistance before. She has worked since she was 16 years old, but her unemployment benefits just ran out. “My dad is really angry with me that I’m applying (for assistance), but I need this help — just until I can get back to where I was before,” she says. She knows how some people view those on aid. “I used to look down my nose, too, at people on aid. But I need help right now.”

“John,” 55, is a substance-abuse counselor. “My job loss is a sign of the times,” with many recovery programs facing budget cuts and jobs being eliminated, he says. “I still have a child to support,” he says, as he looks down the long line of people in front of him.

But the governor’s budget proposes to eliminate the help that is waiting at the end of this long line of individuals — people who stand in those lines for the families that they cannot feed, for the rent they can no longer afford, for the utility bills they can no longer pay. And the current political climate is filled with exaggeration that throws punches at families who cannot fight back — making claims that California is assisting too many people, giving them too much money, and allowing them to remain unemployed. These claims are far from the

truth.

The truth about CalWORKs, California’s Welfare-to-Work Program, is that able-bodied participants must work, or continue to look for work, or participate in job training or education efforts in order to receive their family benefit. And the truth about CalWORKs is that an adult individual can only remain on assistance for a lifetime total of five years. These important changes were made with bipartisan support when welfare reforms were made nearly 15 years ago, ending the “entitlement” program, and turning it into a “back to work” program.

The truth about CalWORKs is that the amount of money that families receive is extremely low: The average amount a family consisting of one adult and two children receives is less than \$600 a month. More than 51,000 individuals in Kern County receive aid through the CalWORKs Program, but what is even more important to remember is that 80 percent of these individuals are children — children who live in poverty in our communities. Cutting these programs literally will take food off their plates and put families into the streets. Additional cuts to families include eliminating child care and transportation assistance, making it virtually impossible for our working poor to assure their children are being well-cared for while they work for minimum wage.

No one can dispute that we are in the worst economic crisis in three generations and the worst state budget crisis ever, and cuts need to be made. But this is not the time for inaccurate or false information that shamefully attacks families that have had to turn to public-assistance programs to help meet the very basic needs of food and shelter, while the recession continues to disrupt the stability provided through jobs and affordable housing. These are the times when assistance can help — as Katherine says, “just until I can get back up on my feet.”

*Pat Cheadle is the director of the Kern County Department of Human Services, which oversees the local CalWORKs Program and Child Protective Services.*