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GUEST OPINION: A better picture of welfare families

By Jo Weber, director of Sonoma County Human Services Department

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has recently proposed eliminating CalWORKs, the California welfare-to-work program. This idea would be universally seen as ethically inconceivable if it weren't for some negative stereotypes about welfare families.

You've probably heard these stereotypes: undocumented immigrants sponging off taxpayer dollars, lazy individuals spending their lives comfortably on welfare rather than looking for work, and recently, welfare recipients using their assistance at casinos. It's time to share some facts about Sonoma County's CalWORKs families.

Fact: Although the recession has swollen our local CalWORKs caseload by 19 percent over the past two years, the number of CalWORKs families in Sonoma County is still quite small. Our total is 3,752 families — 8,391 people in all — who currently receive support through CalWORKs. That is only 3 percent of all Sonoma County families. Most CalWORKs recipients (74 percent) are children.

Fact: Eligibility requirements for CalWORKs are quite stringent. Adults can only receive benefits if they participate in a work activity (with a few exceptions such as being disabled or having a child under the age of 2). And the amount of a CalWORKs benefit is based, in part, on the amount of family income. Many families do not receive the maximum payment because they are receiving income from work. There is a 60-month lifetime limit for receiving this assistance. And, undocumented immigrants cannot receive CalWORKs benefits, although their children who are legal citizens may.

Fact: A CalWORKs grant is small. The average CalWORKs family in Sonoma County is a single parent and one child. To receive CalWORKs, a family must have income below the poverty level. The official poverty level for a two-person family is \$1,214 a month. Assistance through CalWORKs doesn't even bring a family up to the poverty level.

In Sonoma County, the average two-person CalWORKs family receives \$501 in cash benefits, \$346 in Food Stamps and \$157 in earned income. This totals \$1,004 per month — only 83 percent of the poverty level.

To put this in perspective, the median monthly income in Sonoma County is \$7,513, and the average one-bedroom apartment rents for \$1,026 a month. CalWORKs families are hardly financially comfortable.

And the fact is, a very small percentage (one-twentieth of 1 percent) of California's "welfare" recipients make withdrawals from ATMs at casinos. I do not condone the use of CalWORKs benefits for gambling. I also cannot assume that all of the benefits drawn from those ATMs were used for gambling.

Most CalWORKs recipients are required to work, and in Sonoma County, a few have occasionally been employed in or near casinos. At such low-income levels, many CalWORKs families do not have reliable transportation, and they understandably use an ATM that is closest to their home or work. Even if all of the casino ATM

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withdrawals were used for gambling, we can't let the poor choices of a fraction of 1 percent jeopardize this vital safety net for our poorest neighbors.

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I understand that for some people, our welfare program can conjure sweeping — and hurtful — stereotypes about people who are struggling economically and who need temporary and limited support. But the vast majority of our CalWORKs families are struggling day to day just to stretch their benefits to cover necessities and to find a way to support their families. We can't let inaccurate stereotypes cloud our compassion for the families in our community that genuinely need our help.

Jo Weber is director of the Sonoma County Human Services Department.