

THE SACRAMENTO BEE sacbee.com

California would be only state without welfare-to-work program

sferriss@sacbee.com

Published Saturday, May. 15, 2010

If Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal to eliminate CalWORKs is enacted, California would stand alone as the only state in the nation without a welfare-to-work program.

The proposal could cause mothers to quit jobs because they would lose child-care subsidies – or leave kids home alone – and force families into shelters because they couldn't pay rent, family welfare advocates warn. It also could eliminate jobs for thousands of public employees who administer the program.

More than two-thirds of the 1.4 million people enrolled in CalWORKs are children, who receive cash grants and benefit from subsidies that help their parents study and work.

"California could look like something approaching a Third World situation with children begging in the streets," said Michael Herald, legislative advocate for the Western Center on Law and Poverty in Sacramento.

In a statement, the California Welfare Directors Association said the programs "will cost us billions of dollars as we lose out on federal matching funds, create the next generation of homelessness and turn back the clock on welfare reform."

Elimination of CalWORKs – the California Work Opportunity & Responsibility to Kids program – would save the state budget \$1.6 billion. The program makes up about 2.4 percent of the budget, which is lower than the 3 percent it made up in 1999.

If they don't have CalWORKs, needy families could turn to counties for help, said Frank Mecca, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association.

Families might seek cash grants of \$200 to \$300 a month that indigent adults receive to survive on. But counties can barely afford these grants right now, Mecca said.

Schwarzenegger's secretary of health and human services, Kim Belshe, agreed that "it's going to be an issue for the counties to deal with at the local level."

Speculation is strong that the administration is using the threat as a bargaining chip to obtain more surgical cuts in social programs, including CalWORKs, which was slashed last year to save money.

Belshe said "today is the next step in a process," and that it's legislators' turn to respond to the proposal.

CalWORKs requires parents to study, train or work in preparation to move off aid. Families receive cash grants, and aid to help pay for transportation, child care and uniforms or other items they might need for a job.

The maximum grant a CalWORKs mother and two children in Sacramento can receive is \$661 a month, which is less than it was in 1988.

A new law slated to start in July 2011 requires that adults who are not showing initiative be dropped from CalWORKs grants after three months.

Children's grants will be cut by 25 percent after six months and 50 percent after nine months if their parents aren't complying with rules.

Mecca and Herald defend CalWORKs as a good program that has helped many people learn skills and become productive employees.

Wiping out the program now would also affect graduates who work but still receive child care subsidies.

Jacqueline Buitrago, 29, said those subsidies are key for keeping her job involving children and the criminal justice system in Sonoma County. She trained for the job while on CalWORKs.

"That's why I can work every day. I can't afford child care. And everyone in my family works and can't help," she said.

Mecca's group estimates that 90,000 CalWORKs clients would lose jobs, and that 14,000 county employees who administer CalWORKs would lose their jobs.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

Call Susan Ferriss, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 321-1267.