

REPORT: SUPPORT FOR SINGLE MOMS SHALLOW, QUICK TO FADE AWAY

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, NOV. 12, 2008.....Bay State single mothers attempting to enter the middle class are hampered by the inadequacy of government work support programs, which are disjointed and withdrawn too quickly as recipients climb into higher income brackets, according to a report issued Wednesday from a UMass-Boston policy center and a non-profit group aimed at helping low-income women attain economic independence.

“The inconsistent eligibility requirements and limited coordination between programs can cause recipients to lose several work supports at the same time, with devastating financial consequences for struggling families,” says the report, released by the Center for Social Policy and the Crittenton Women’s Union. “Finally, most current work supports phase out fairly quickly, leaving workers vulnerable to steep increases in costs when their wages rise even slightly.”

The report calls for the expansion of government childcare and housing programs to sustain workers who are also students and parents. The report also recommends restructuring some of the programs to index benefits to the cost of living, and allow for the losses of benefits to be graduated.

A top Patrick administration official, while acknowledging budget constraints make costly policy changes difficult, said the administration is exploring ways to slow down the phasing out of benefits as those on public assistance begin to earn money in the workplace.

The report notes that a single working mother with two children, living in Greater Boston, receiving the full array of government support benefits, and earning the minimum wage of \$8 an hour, is left with \$439 a month after taxes for basic living expenses. Basic living expenses include housing, food, health care, transportation, clothing, and household supplies.

Work supports she would be eligible for include child care assistance, food stamps, MassHealth, earned income tax credit, child tax credit, the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Nutrition program from the Department of Public Health, and Section 8 housing. Most families don’t receive all seven benefits, many of them federal programs, partly due to lack of funding and high demand, according to the report.

“They earn enough to be eligible but not enough to pay the bills,” said Randy Albelda, a UMass-Boston professor and co-author of the report.

To earn enough to live in Massachusetts without public assistance, a single parent with two children – a preschooler and a school-age child – would have to earn between \$44,000 to \$55,000 per year, or \$22 to \$29 per hour, the report says.

The government support programs are meant to push individuals off the rolls and into the state’s economy, but participants instead look to stay in the programs because they can’t get by without supports and on low hourly wages, Albelda said. “The supports are shallow and they fade away quickly,” she said.

Albelda said universal early education and universal health insurance on the national level would “make a difference.”

She suggested a stimulus package that would include universal early education, which would generate jobs. “We need to build social infrastructure along with bridges and roads,” she said.

Marilyn Chase, assistant secretary for the state Office of Children, Youth and Families, pledged to the Nurses Hall crowd of women, who gathered for the release of the report, that the state's health and human services secretariat would "keep trying" to aid working single parents, "irrespective of budget challenges."

Chase told the News Service that the secretariat is looking to slow down some of the phase-out of benefits, so as not to quickly reduce access as income grows.

Chase also pointed to the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, a federally-funded Housing and Urban Development program, and said the state Department of Transitional Assistance encourages individuals who also receive housing benefits to enroll in that program.

The program allows families to set up an escrow account to support ongoing education efforts, while putting them in a five-year plan to become "economically self-sufficient," according to the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

Rep. Jamie Eldridge (D-Acton) said that while most of the government support programs come from the federal level, the state can see if it can align and integrate how people receive the benefits.

"Changing these policies will actually reduce costs," he said.

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