



Welfare Reform©

The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) has been a long-standing champion of programs aimed at eradicating poverty. Our members understand first hand the deleterious effects of poverty caused by welfare dependency. Thus, we have been at the forefront of promoting a reformed welfare system that gives primacy to moving people out of poverty into independent living. Our opposition to the current (PRWORA) is grounded in its failure to adequately address the etiology of poverty and welfare dependency, especially in the Black community.

Five years of welfare reform has created little relief from poverty for poor African American families who continue to stagger under the strain of continued high levels of unemployment; job dislocation; and low wages. For African American families on welfare it has once again exposed these, our most vulnerable families, to a social policy experiment resulting for many in further disruption as stringent time limits and harsh sanctions have been applied in an attempt to move families from welfare to work. Many beliefs and assumptions that propel the welfare to work experiment fly in the face of the Black cultural reality. Most mistaken is the failure of welfare reform policy makers to understand or to use the principles that underpin the strength of the Black family. A strong work ethic and strong achievement orientation buttressed by flexible family roles and kinship bonds prominently permeate the Black community and family life. These anchors have served to assure, even in the face of race discrimination and other unfair marketplace practices, the indomitable spirit of Blacks to win and to succeed.

While official public pronouncements boasts of a great achievement in moving some 4.6 million to about 2.2 million welfare users from welfare to work, this claim obscures the real devastation and continued disadvantage experienced by poor African American families on welfare. Despite the significant decrease in all state caseloads in numbers, overall the percent of Blacks (and Latinos) on TANF caseloads are increasing. We know of states that had majority white caseloads in 1995 that show decreases from 22% to 13% by 1999 while those states having Black majority caseloads increased from 14% in 1995 to 18% in 1999. These findings disclose a growing pattern of State welfare rolls becoming more and more colored.

Further studies also found that significant differences exist in the success rate of Blacks and Whites in their transition from welfare to work. Black success rates have been impeded by the reassertion of many traditional factors such as market discrimination and persistent racial bias in the labor market that disfavors Blacks. Caseworker bias in job referrals and other longstanding practices contribute to continued inequitable results. Other factors were found specifically in the labor markets, such as, historical higher

unemployment, longer periods of unemployment and absence from the labor force; these actors continues to impede and limit successful transition of Black families from welfare to work.

Indeed, while we remain mindful that the condition of poor families on welfare is largely contiguous with the broader issues of poverty among African Americans, there is recognition that the "welfare poor" represent a very special population of families in poverty. While the policies of welfare reform as framed, fragments and obscures concern with overall Black community poverty, proscribing repair to the condition of the welfare poor, demands our special attention. A primary problem confronting welfare families is the fact the institutional system designed to provide assistance to poor families has often created greater problems for poor families that it was designed to help. It has failed to provide the

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A primary problem confronting welfare families is the fact the institutional system designed to provide assistance to poor families has often created greater problems for poor families that it was designed to help. It has failed to provide the resources necessary to gain a footing to move from welfare to adequate earning; it has penalized families that try to supplement income with earnings and work by too quickly decreasing public assistance; and it has employed policies that make public assistance to families dependent on the absence of a male in the house.

And too, the current welfare approach embodied in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) fails to adequately address the etiology of poverty and welfare dependency, especially in the Black community. As the PRWORA has unfolded, some individuals and families have been successful in transitioning from welfare to work, and some to a livable wage. We credit these successes to a combination of reasons, including a favorable economy, provision of supports, such as child care and

housing vouchers, more individualized plans and the dismantling of previous programmatic barriers in accessing needed supports.

Notwithstanding, the Reauthorization process of Congress presents State Legislators, Congressional Representatives, Senators, Social Workers and community workers with an opportunity to address several very crucial issues concerning poverty and poor families in Black America.

Adopted by the NABSW National Steering Committee. October 2002.