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FROM WELFARE TO WORK:

Minority Female Single Parent Program



Report from
The Rockefeller Foundation

As Congress debates how and whether it will reform the nation's welfare system, consensus has emerged on at least one point: that able-bodied welfare recipients should be encouraged to find work. There is less consensus on how that goal should be reached and whether it should include women with very young children.

Fortunately, however, recent approaches to job training and placement are beginning to help policymakers differentiate between ideas that might work and those that do not. The purpose of this Rockefeller Foundation report is to describe such an approach—the Minority Female Single Parent (MFSP) program. Although the program is not complete, we are publishing some interim observations here in the hope that those responsible for such programs in the future can build on the lessons of the past.

The current focus of the welfare reform movement, and its central challenge, is the \$15.8-billion state-administered program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC was established in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act. Its original aim was to sustain widows and their children while the Social Security survivors' fund processed their claims.

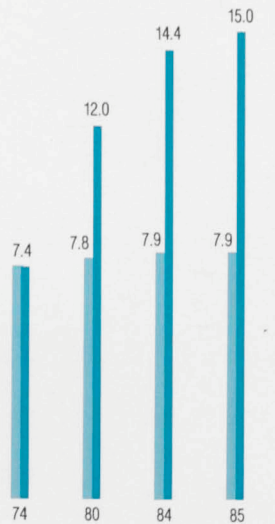
The program has since grown to encompass 11 million people, the vast majority of them female single parents and their children. This group has generated the most controversy in the welfare debate. Poverty rates have gone up since the 1970s, and the increase has been especially sharp among the children the system is meant to help; concern for the children in turn fuels the desire among reformers to encourage parents to support their children by working.

Efforts at reform, of course, have been made in the past. All struggled for a way to provide for the poor without discouraging them from seeking work. Since 1967, under the WIN (Work Incentive) program, most AFDC mothers without preschool children have been required to register for work and training and to engage in a variety of activities such as looking for work, accepting job offers, registering with the state employment service, or participating in job training.

But the WIN program has been underfunded and criticized for not enforcing the mandatory work provision and for failing to provide the necessary training and education. Congress responded in 1981, passing a bill authorizing the states to implement their own work-incentive programs.

Since then at least 38 states have tried out approaches in this area. Each has offered some combination of remedial education, job training, and job-search techniques, but support services such as child care have been limited. According to an Urban Institute study, only Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, and California have appropriated enough state funds to maintain stable program levels or to expand their programs, and only a handful of states have allocated funds for child care.

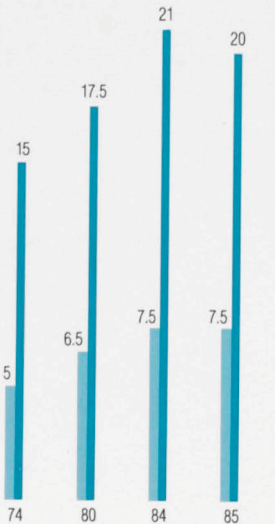
So far there is little evidence that tells us whether such programs can prepare AFDC mothers for the work force and place them in jobs that compensate for their loss of income, health care, and other benefits provided by welfare.



AFDC Payments 1974-85

In Millions of Dollars
■ Adjusted for Inflation ■ Payments

Source: Office of Financial Management, Family Support Administration



Poverty Rates (Percent Poor)

■ Adults under 65 ■ Children

Source: Congressional Research Service Review, July 1987, p. 4.

Child care is a key element of the Minority Female Single Parent (MFSP) program. Celia Chacon, a data entry trainee, spends time between training sessions with her son, who is cared for by employees at the San Jose facility's child development center.



The Minority Female Single Parent Program

In 1981, the same year Congress passed its bill encouraging states to experiment with ways to help welfare recipients find jobs, the Rockefeller Foundation began planning a job-training and -placement program for minority mothers on welfare.

The resulting six-year effort, implemented in 1982, is known as the Minority Female Single Parent (MFSP) program. The program enabled six community-based organizations to create and provide comprehensive services, including skills training, education, counseling, and child care, to low-income minority single mothers. Four of these organizations were subsequently selected to continue in the four-year evaluation phase that began in 1984:

- Atlanta Urban League, Atlanta, Georgia;
- Center for Employment Training, San Jose, California;
- Opportunities Industrialization Center, Providence, Rhode Island; and
- Wider Opportunities for Women, Washington, D.C.

The Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor provided significant funding for the program's child care services.

Many of the women in the program are trained in office skills (typing, filing, word processing, and data entry). Some sites also offer training in nontraditional areas, such as electronics and printing, and some in child care and health care.

When the program is completed, approximately 2,500 women will have enrolled, with an average stay of six to seven months. A group of slightly fewer applicants who were not enrolled in training, but who are similar in other respects, constitute the randomly assigned control group for the program's comprehensive evaluation being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Princeton, New Jersey.

The key questions in the evaluation are whether the participating women will find and keep jobs paying 30 percent more than the minimum wage, and how their families will be affected. The answers will not be forthcoming until 1989, after completion of the program and follow-up surveys. What can be reported now, however, are some of the factors that can cause serious problems in programs like these and some of the approaches that look promising.

Phyllis Rodriguez with her two-year-old daughter Jessica on the playground outside the Center for Employment Training child development center. The playground was built by CET facility maintenance trainees.





Observations after Five Years

There are similarities between some state-run programs and the projects funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. But in applying the following observations to public policy, two caveats must be noted. First, unlike many state programs and those proposed in Congress, the MFSP is voluntary, dealing, therefore, with more motivated individuals among the population of low-income single mothers. (Not everyone in the program is currently an AFDC recipient, although about 82 percent have received entitlement benefits and all are at risk of becoming AFDC dependent.) Second, the Foundation's program operates through private community-based organizations, not public-sector agencies, and the projects are supported with private as well as public funds.

1. Remember that motherhood comes first

The low-income single mothers who are interested in being trained for a job see themselves, first and foremost, as mothers. They enroll in the program because they want to provide for their children.

As one participant said, "It's not just me that's important but it's my family, my children. What we think of ourselves and what we become in life—we influence our children more than we even think we do."

Child-care arrangements are therefore crucial. The mothers will not participate successfully in a training or work program if their children do not have adequate care. Special consideration must be given to the care of infants and children when they are sick, and home pick-up may be necessary. In addition, the child-care schedule must match the mother's training or work schedule.

"I think the part that helped me the most was the child care," one woman said. "I was able to concentrate on the training more because I know the kids are being well taken care of. And that gave me an opportunity to show the people that I work with that I can be trusted, I am a good person, I can come in on time. That I'm dependable."

Many mothers on welfare are unaccustomed to having strangers care for their children. Therefore, to create the necessary trust in day-care arrangements, a training program should begin with an orientation effort designed to make sure the mothers understand what to expect from day care and feel comfortable with the concept as well as with the specific arrangements.

The San Jose child development center is a training site as well as a service to other MFSP women. Rosa Carrasco, foreground, an aide at the center, is the mother of six children. Observing her is Augusta Williams, who completed the child-care provider training program in March and is now working in the center as an employee.

2. Provide suitable training in basic skills

Lack of basic reading and language skills is prevalent among mothers on welfare. But because most of these young women have not succeeded in school, putting them back in a classroom is not the solution to this problem. To be effective, literacy training must be presented so that its relevance to job and income are readily apparent to the participant. A program that emulates the school setting tends to reinforce the negative experiences so many participants had in school.

3. Keep the focus on the job

Although child care and other support services are essential to running a successful job program, the organizing focus for everything must be job training and placement.

"The end of the rainbow, you know, is not training and a diploma," said the San Jose project director. "The end of the rainbow is placement in a job and work."

Job training and basic skills should be taught simultaneously, or the participants will lose interest in learning the basics. Moreover, basic skills should be taught in ways that make them obviously relevant to the job that is the participant's goal.

The students are not ordinary students, and the teachers cannot be ordinary either. The best teachers often have work experience outside the classroom. Combining the functions of teacher and counselor also works well.

Most of the program participants have little confidence in themselves when they begin the MFSP program. They must be constantly reassured. Their education and training should not reinforce negative views about their lives or their cultural environments. It should instead put value on their community experiences and build their self-esteem by recognizing the talents and skills they already have.

A California woman put it this way: "The project director is really good because he tells you, 'Hey, you're somebody. You're not nobody. Just because you have three, four kids and you're on welfare and this and that, you can be somebody.' And it's true. And this time I know I'm going to be somebody."

Program advisory boards have proved valuable when they reflect the "job focus" by including community employers who may be in positions to offer employment to the participating women.

MFSP training emphasizes skills that are in immediate demand in the community. Microelectronics assembly trainee Maria E. Ramirez, left, improves her manual dexterity and microscope technique with the encouragement of instructor Rosemary Carrillo.





4. Respect individual needs

Program participants have a number of problems that can impede their efforts to take part in the job-training activities. They require support services beyond child care, including transportation, medical care, and a variety of services to help them deal with the housing and legal problems that are commonplace among the poor.

A staff member at one of the sites said, "Personal counseling is one of the services we provide. Sometimes it's just a matter of having someone listen to all of the effort it takes to get to school: to get up at five in the morning, prepare yourself and an infant, and get on two buses to get here."

The organizations that participate in the Rockefeller Foundation program have found that if a participant's day-to-day concerns are not addressed, sooner or later, she will drop out.

The training programs also must be flexible enough to meet a participant's schedule and her changing circumstances. One promising approach uses "open entry/open exit," enabling the participant to move through the program at her own pace. This approach allows the participant's educational and personal circumstances to dictate when she enters or leaves the program, and has the added advantage of putting distance between the program and the traditional classroom approach to education and training.

5. Consolidate services

Fragmented services simply won't work. Low-income mothers, many of whom are also poorly educated and lack basic reading and math skills, cannot be expected to find their way among a confusing array of programs, much less have time to go from one agency to another trying to piece together an adequate mix of services.

"You have baby-sitting problems, transportation problems sometimes," one woman said. "And sometimes you don't have any money to even get here."

MFSP sites have involved representatives of many agencies and organizations to offer easier access to services beyond the core job training, counseling, and placement. These include child care, parent education, basic and adult education, family planning, housing assistance, legal services, AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid.

Although professional counseling and education are key services in the MFSP program, the support the trainees offer each other is also vital. Gloria Razo, left, enrolled in the accounting clerk program, helps newcomer Hahn Po learn to multiply and divide on a 10-key calculator.

Concluding Observations

Our observations so far about the MFSP program are encouraging. Most striking is the range of services the MFSP women were able to tap compared with the control group, even though the latter group comprised women who were actively trying to get off welfare and who were similar in all other ways to the MFSP participants. Only 20 to 30 percent of the control group reported receiving education, training, or other services during the year following application to the MFSP program. They most frequently obtained help in job training; however, among those receiving any services, 50 percent of the MFSP women said they received child-care assistance through the job program, while only 24 percent of the control group did.

As the reports from the MFSP evaluation are completed, they will deal with a number of issues that cannot be addressed now, including:

- Will women who participated in the program be better off economically than women who were not enrolled? Unless a mother can earn a wage that will enable her to provide for her family, she may not have improved her well-being by going through the program.
- From the perspective of the participant and that of society, what will be the costs of the training program relative to the benefits derived from it?
- What will be the nature of the program's impact on young children and on family structure? Asked how the program had affected them and their families, some women said they felt better about themselves and more at ease with their children. "I can talk to them now," one woman said. "And they are proud of me."

An earlier social experiment, the National Supported Work Demonstration, offered work experience and some services to long-term female AFDC recipients, ex-addicts, ex-offenders, and young school dropouts. The experiment, done by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, found gains in employment and earnings for AFDC women. Such results are encouraging as we await the final results of the more comprehensive MFSP evaluation.

We now know, however, that any new effort at welfare reform that involves encouraging low-income minority single mothers to seek careers outside their homes will certainly fail unless it includes adequately funded provisions addressing the participant's desire to be both mother and wage earner, and enables her to gain the support and skills to do both.

Juana Estrada, 59, was a farm worker in Mexico who came to the San Jose Center for Employment Training speaking only a few words of English. After completing language and child-care job training, she was able to receive credit for an early childhood education course offered by a community college in San Jose. Estrada then landed a job on her first interview, with a local day-care business. Here she talks with Bruce Pickett, director of the San Jose child development center, and Katherine Moore Wines, instructor for child-care provider skills, outside the facility where she received her training.



How can welfare mothers prepare for the work force and find the jobs they need to support their families? Is job training enough, or do these women also need other services to end their dependence on welfare?

In 1981, the Rockefeller Foundation launched the Minority Female Single Parent (MFSP) program. This community-based program is designed to train minority welfare mothers for jobs and to provide a network of services, such as child care and basic education, to help them succeed. Although the program is not complete, the Foundation is publishing some interim information here with the hope that others interested in these issues will benefit from our observations so far.

The women featured in this report are from the Center for Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, Calif., one of four MFSP training sites. On the cover, Yolanda Jackson gestures in celebration at winning a job as a senior data entry clerk at a major corporation in Santa Clara, Calif. She and Alma Arias, left, are data entry trainees.

For More Information

A research status report by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., will be released later in the fall. For a copy of this report, or for more details about the MFSP program, please contact:

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