

# Growing Federal Attack on Poor Families on Welfare

by Becky Johnson

**I**t is time for Congress to tweak and adjust the sweeping welfare cutbacks begun by President Bill Clinton in 1996, effectively ending 62 years of entitlements to poor women and children in the United States.

How far we have come! The nation as a whole is now imitating pilot welfare reform states such as Wisconsin, where Governor Tommy Thompson attracted George Dubya's eye by mercilessly hacking moms and kids off the welfare roles in his state. Thompson claimed it to be a screaming success, but he never asked the women, or their dependent children.

Thompson's dirty secret was not just that the women forced off welfare could only find low-wage jobs which sucked away their life force and left them as impoverished as they were when collecting welfare. It was not only that more women were forced to go back into the arms of their violent or abusive partners. It was not simply that women were losing their children to foster families at a much higher rate than before the reform. It was not even that the statistics on homelessness among formerly housed welfare moms has steeply risen — for many had predicted that outcome.

Thompson's dirty secret is that his reform program created a five-layered bureaucracy to oversee fewer and fewer cases. Before the reform, there was only the County's human resource department. Bureaucrats are not cheap, so the costs of welfare actually went up from \$548 million to \$710 million while the caseloads dropped like a lead balloon from 280,000 to only 20,000.



A homeless woman in San Francisco asks for help for her family. Women and children are being left in poverty. Lydia Gans photo

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Now our pompous, overpaid, overfed, wheeler-dealer congressmen and senators will pick and choose how to redesign welfare so that even less money winds up in the pockets of the people who need it most.

HR 3113, sponsored by Patsy Mink (D-HI), would have increased spending to the states by \$2 billion per year, but there was no provision the money would be spent on recipients. The funding would have been spent on the salaries of upper-level administrators who, by successfully reducing caseloads (usually by imposing bureaucratic requirements which can be met by fewer and fewer recipients), would be rewarded with higher salaries. Currently, only 43 percent of spending under TANF is used for cash assistance.

Pat Gowens, editor of *Welfare Mothers Voice* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, deplors this trend. "Welfare dollars are supposed to go into the hands of the women who need it most," she said. "Instead, it goes to the terrible twos: two cars, two kids, two homes. People forget that this is just another way to put money into the pockets of the middle class by allocating funds to professionals who will 'counsel' welfare moms."

Kevin Aslanian, executive director of the California Coalition of Welfare Rights Organizations, condemned all of the bills by saying, "Time limits imposed on children continue undeterred without shame by the same people who rant and rave about leaving no child behind."

The Bush Plan (HR 4090), which Gowens claims is "the worst of the six," was passed by the House of Representatives on May 16, and froze funding at the current level. Congressmen displayed charts which dramatically showed both the precipitous drop in welfare cases since 1996 and a corresponding drop in poverty.

Since TANF was based on the Wisconsin Works (W-2) program, it's helpful to look at what has happened in Wisconsin since 1996. The number of families living in extreme poverty (incomes below 50 percent of the federal poverty line) has increased. Only one-third of those who have left welfare have incomes over the federal poverty line. The use of food pantries and meal programs has increased.

"And the use of sanctions is way up," Gowens reported. "If a welfare mom has not worked enough hours or failed to go to a meeting because of staying home with a sick child, her check will be sanctioned, or cut for not cooperating."

In Milwaukee, this is most insidious because the welfare departments have been privatized. And the rules say that any money the private agency can take away from the moms with sanctions, can be kept by the agency. "The YWCA opened a for-profit branch to administer welfare," Gowens said. "They have sanctioned 48 percent of their cases so far. That's taking money out of the pockets of poor, welfare mothers."

The long-sought COLAs (cost of living allowances) appeared in none of the six bills proposed by Republicans and Democrats. While every other business, both public and private, adjusts for the cost of living, welfare mothers are expected to house, feed, clothe, and equip for

school their children on a budget that last worked in 1995.

Both the Cardin bill (HR 3625) and the Mink bill provided for "poverty reduction bonuses" which would have paid the administrators even more money if they can somehow reduce their roles. Whether that mother and kids move into gainful employment and a better life or into homelessness and hunger would not have affected the bonus. But the House voted to reject any increase in spending for any reason.

The Bush proposal, which passed, gives states \$100 million annually to establish research programs to promote the formation of two-parent families. This is Bush and his conservative think tank's mentality that if only those welfare mothers would stay married, they would not need welfare. "This is just another way to put welfare mothers down for not being married," Gowens lamented.

Yet not paying poor women with children — refusing to help them with minimum levels of support — is misogyny on a grand scale. We will be living with this legacy of having abandoned a large swath of our children for years to come.

"Having Congress telling women who are already struggling to survive that they must to marry in order to get any assistance for their families, is a deadly interference in the sanctity of the family," challenged Linda Lemaster, Chair of the Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women in Santa Cruz. "Domestic violence is increasing among poor women. Of people who are newly seeking public benefits in California, 84 percent of them are coming out of an abusive or violent relationship. Cut-offs and work requirements they can't meet will only force them right back into those dan-

gerous relationships."

The Bush plan would increase the work requirements from 30 hours per week to 40 hours as a way of "helping" women out of poverty. The legislative ball has rolled into the Senate chambers now. A final vote is expected in late June unless it is held over for another year.

Gowens said it was urgent to speak out now for justice. "This is the time to contact your senators," she said, "and tell them that we need welfare legislation that provides real education for welfare moms, for child-care to count as work, the elimination of time limits, and the end of sanctions."

Visit the Welfare Mothers Voice website: [www.execpc.com/~wmvoice](http://www.execpc.com/~wmvoice).

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Attack on Poor  
Families on Welfare

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