

Why Welfare Should Respect the Dignity of Work

By Hugh Whelchel and Anne Rathbone Bradley

The Obama administration, through the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has announced a new policy directive to the states that would waive work requirements in the welfare program known as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This program specifies the work requirements that accompany welfare assistance and requires recipients to work or actively look for work. The new policy allows flexibility for states to help families find and secure employment.

Since the emergence of this presidential memo, the issue has been hotly debated on both sides of the political aisle. But are we asking the right questions? What does removing the work requirements do to the very nature of work itself, and how does it alter the incentives for those receiving welfare?

Designed to Work

Instinctively, we know that people are designed to work. We all have special gifts and talents that differ in degree, kind, and combination. Being a good steward of these talents, we are to package them and offer them to the world through our work, whether as a CEO or janitor.

Taking away work requirements, rather than continuing to build skills and hone talents, encourages dependency. And dependency can ensnare. It is what Alexander Hamilton warned about when he said, "A power over a man's subsistence amounts to a power over his will." Dependency encourages us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do. Removing the incentive for able-bodied men and women to work fosters continual reliance on others, robbing us of our dignity and sapping our creative spirit. It can actually harm the very people we intend to help.

Purpose of Prosperity

From an economic perspective, think about what has fueled progress in the United States over the last 200 years: a productive institutional environment where work and innovation are rewarded and encouraged. Specialization and the division of labor have fostered massive economic growth, allowing most people to rise above subsistence living. It has created jobs in a wide diversity of areas from auto manufacturing and construction to technology and medicine.

The entire goal of a prosperous society is to have fewer and fewer people who need the support of welfare. To achieve that goal we need to foster an environment where people, with the support of neighbors, churches, and non-profit organizations, can learn new skills and hone them through the market. This is the best anti-poverty program the world has ever known.

Finally, the key to making short-term support beneficial is that the support remains short-term. The goal in helping people is to set them up for success and put them in a position where they no longer need the welfare. And that is what we got in the welfare reform of the 1990s that this new executive order threatens to undo. According to the Heritage Foundation, six years after TANF was introduced the results were tremendous:¹

- Overall poverty, child poverty, and black child poverty all dropped substantially.
- Some 2.9 million fewer children lived in poverty in 2003 than in 1995.
- A dramatic reduction in the number of black children living in poverty.
- Hunger among children was cut roughly in half.
- Welfare caseloads were cut nearly in half
- The explosive growth curve of out-of-wedlock childbearing had come to a virtual halt.

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Those are true innovations—long-term reductions in poverty, hunger, and dependence, as well as getting people back to work—not only so that they can help themselves but also so they can bring their unique gifts, talents, and skills to serve their communities and workplaces.

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¹ Robert Rector and Patrick F. Fagan, “The Continuing Good News About Welfare Reform,” Heritage Backgrounder #1620 (2003).
<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2003/02/the-continuing-good-news>