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# CHICAGO WELFARE MOTHERS DERIDE CLINTON'S PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

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By William Claiborne April 7, 1994

CHICAGO -- Sitting around a table in Chicago's tough West Humboldt Park neighborhood with a pirated copy of still-unreleased White House welfare reform proposals, a group of poorly educated welfare mothers concluded last week that President Clinton -- for all his learning -- must be naive.

"What he needs to do is go on welfare for six months with his wife and daughter. Let him live on the kind of monthly check we do for six months and see if he sings the same tune," said Joyce Alexander, 33, a mother of three who said she has been on and off welfare for about 10 years.

Reacting to a proposal that recipients be denied additional benefits if they have more children while on welfare, the women laughed derisively when Sheila Booker, a 25-year-old single mother of five, suggested policymakers in Washington also might need some sex education.

Punishing young mothers for unwanted pregnancies would do little to reduce out-of-wedlock births and would only force them to stretch their monthly welfare checks more thinly while trying to provide for a larger family, Booker said.

As for an administration proposal that unmarried teenaged mothers lose their benefits unless they live with their parents, the recipients concluded such a step would only increase the number of runaways.

Forcing a teen parent to live in a dysfunctional household or with parents who "threw her out for getting pregnant in the first place" could force many young women into prostitution, Booker said. West Humboldt Park is one of Chicago's most impoverished and crime-ridden neighborhoods and is not usually associated with creative social policymaking by its inhabitants. Drug-related gang murders are so commonplace they almost go unnoticed; more than 40 percent of the mostly black and Hispanic population of 67,500 are on welfare and the high school dropout rate is 67 percent. In terms of poverty and social disintegration, the neighborhood is consistently ranked as one of the city's worst by social agencies.

But when it comes to overhauling the nation's failed welfare system, recipients here say, they know what they like when they see it.

And so far, not only have they not liked what they have seen of Clinton's plan to "end welfare as we know it," but they are getting ready to lobby to try to change the proposal as it moves through Congress later this year. A dozen welfare mothers have been meeting two mornings a week at the Chicago Commons Employment Training Center to draft a detailed critique of the welfare reform proposals presented to Clinton last month by a 32-member task force.

Working with a copy of the draft plan, which although marked "confidential -- for discussion only" has circulated widely in the anti-poverty community, the women have been meticulously picking apart the proposals like congressional committee members at a markup session.

With a minimum of prompting by their teacher, they engage in spirited arguments over narrow aspects of the plan until they reach a consensus on what they feel would be best for those who will be affected most by welfare reform. They then move on to the next reform proposal with a sense of urgency driven by the White House's timetable for submitting a bill in late May.

"When you aren't invited to the table, sometimes you have to set your own," is a maxim adopted by the welfare mothers, who plan to submit a copy of their analysis to White House officials when it is completed sometime later this month.

The recipients, who are among 150 neighborhood residents participating in social service programs at the center, are working for their General Equivalency Diploma and are using the exercise not only to try to influence national welfare policy, but to sharpen their reading and writing skills at the same time.

Not surprisingly, their vision of welfare reform mirrors the public assistance philosophy of the Humboldt Park welfare-to-work demonstration project, a \$518,000 experiment funded by state and private foundation grants that is part of the \$10 million-a-year Chicago Commons, the city's second oldest settlement house.

That back-to-basics approach relies heavily on fundamental education, literacy training, the teaching of simple "life skills" like punctuality and organization, and individually tailored job preparation programs.

The center provides an array of social services, including health care, day care and a Head Start program, courses leading to a high school equivalency diploma, parenting classes and special programs for victims of rape and incest, alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence. "Flexibility in meeting individual needs and not imposing one-size-fits-all solutions is what we're about,"

and this is where we part company with the president's welfare reform plan," said Jody Raphael, director of the three-year-old education and training center.

"We encounter an appalling range and depth of problems here, and that's precisely why you can't just push people through the same kind of government-formula vocational training program in two years or less and expect them to succeed in their jobs," Raphael added.

She said 70 percent of recipients at the center need extensive education before they are able even to qualify for most job training programs; 54 percent lived in homes with domestic violence; 13 percent had been victims of rape or incest, and 14 percent had severe mental health problems.

"You can't just say this is an economic problem and push these people into a rigid job training regimen. You've got to work on the more fundamental problems, too," Raphael said.

Raphael said the center's back-to-basics approach, which she acknowledged is relatively expensive at about \$6,000 a year per participant, had produced demonstrable results: A fifth of all recipients who entered since February 1991 are employed and off welfare, she said, and 45 percent are still in the program. Ninety percent of those who moved from welfare to work still have their jobs, she said.

The heart of the Clinton welfare reform plan -- and, indeed, of most of the half-dozen competing welfare reform bills introduced in Congress -- is a two-year time limit on welfare benefits, during which recipients would receive education and job training in an expanded version of the federal Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. At the end of two years, they would be forced to find jobs or, if none were available, perform community service work in exchange for benefits.

Recipients at the Chicago Commons center, while supporting the general principle of job training followed by mandatory work, were sharply critical of what they see as inflexibility in the Clinton plan's two-year time limit.

"Not everybody learns at the same speed. You've got fast learners and you've got slow learners. What about the ones who don't know English at all?" asked Alexander, who will take her high school equivalency exam in a few months.

Belinda Harris, 37, a mother of four who has been on welfare for nine years, said: "If people aren't prepared for jobs, two years and out just becomes a clever way to end welfare benefits. What happens if you go off aid and you're not ready? You've got no income and you've got no way you can make it without hitting Joey over the head. It'll lead to more crime."

Members of the group also complained that the Clinton plan is geared to forcing recipients into \$4.25-an-hour minimum wage jobs -- either in the private sector or in community service -- when they believe it is impossible to live on a minimum wage without being heavily subsidized.

Working for \$680 a month, before taxes, can hardly make sense to a mother of two who knows that as long as she stays on welfare she will receive, in Illinois, \$367 in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits, plus \$145 in food

stamps, day care for her children, free medical care, help in paying heating bills and other forms of assistance, some of the recipients said.

"When you go off welfare into a job you have to give up so much -- Medicaid, food stamps, day care and all those things. You've got to have more than minimum wage to give up all that," said Sheila Bowen ,25, a ninth-grade dropout with one child who has been on welfare for seven years.

Even with an expanded earned income tax credit raising the minimum wage to the equivalent of \$6.25 an hour, the welfare mothers said, the motivation to give up public assistance might not be great enough. They suggested \$8 an hour as a minimum for a welfare-to-work position, along with medical care, day care and better child support enforcement against the absent fathers of their children.

But most important to successful welfare reform, they said, is adequate preparation of unskilled and uneducated people who have little work ethic and even less work experience. This is needed so that when they emerge from whatever time limits are imposed on benefits they will be able to compete for decent-paying jobs.

"Don't just herd us in and out of job training for the sake of getting us off public aid. When you do that you assume that either everybody is at the same {aptitude} level or that they are all just lazy," said Dorothy Osby, 43, a five-year welfare recipient and mother of four.