

PROJECT MATCH



TANF Reauthorization: The View from Project Match

By Toby Herr and Suzanne L. Wagner

Since 1985, Project Match has operated a community-based employment program for welfare recipients and other low-income individuals in Chicago and simultaneously engaged in research in the areas of welfare-to-work and workforce development. In recent years, the program has begun replicating the community-based model in Chicago and elsewhere around the country and also has developed the Pathways Case Management System for state and local welfare agencies.

All these activities have given us the opportunity to learn in-depth about the lives of welfare-dependent families and the workings of the agencies and institutions that serve them. As reauthorization hearings for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) get under way, we have drawn on experience and research to develop recommendations about the main tenets of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) portion of the legislation: the sixty-month lifetime limit on receipt of TANF and the work requirement.

The Time Limit

There is beginning to be a push from some quarters to get rid of the time limit with reauthorization. Congress needs to recognize the critical role that the time limit plays in communicating the message that welfare should not be a way of life, but only a temporary means of support while preparing or looking for work. If you believe this message is important, as we do, there is no other way to communicate it, because *temporary* is meaningless without a time limit.

A time limit turns *temporary* from an abstract concept into something concrete and real. It translates it into a finite number that can be crossed off on a calendar or counted down on your fingers. You can walk into welfare offices around the country, even Head Start programs, community health centers, and other programs for low-income Americans, and you'll hear the mantra "Your clock is ticking." If the time limit is taken away, the message that people should take responsibility for the financial support of their families will be weakened or even lost.

Some researchers argue that the time limit has not changed welfare recipients' behavior. We would argue that this is because it takes time for norms to change: not only will people need to keep hearing the message repeatedly, and from every quarter, but they will need to see the time limit policy enforced. We, too, have met many welfare recipients who do not appear responsive to the time limit, but we believe this will gradually change, particularly as families begin hitting the five-year limit this fall.

So far, the time limit has most affected the agencies and institutions that serve welfare recipients. It has been the impetus for new policies and programs—and even attitudes—that support work and families and lessen the need for cash assistance. Many people who work with welfare recipients always wanted to encourage personal responsibility, but they often felt constrained by the lack of policy and program support before PRWORA. The time limit has given them permission to say, "You can't rely on welfare forever. You need to prepare for the future," and it has given them more tools to help welfare recipients do this. For this reason alone, the time limit should not be abolished.

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The Work Requirement

On the other hand, there are many families that will run out of time before they are self-supporting—as well as some that never will be—and the 20 percent caseload exemption each state is allowed is not adequate to cover this group.¹ People who are playing by the rules should not be penalized just because Congress didn't get the formula right, however. While some states will commit their own funds to covering welfare recipients above the 20 percent exemption rate, we are concerned that many states will not have the means or the desire to assume responsibility.

Clearly Congress needs to increase the exemption rate, but then there is still the problem of how to define "playing by the rules"—that is, how to define the work requirement. Federal law requires that people receiving TANF either work or participate in approved work-prep activities. Unfortunately, for many of the people still on TANF who aren't working, the approved activities—such as job-readiness classes and community work experience—do not fit their needs and circumstances.

With reauthorization, we'd like to see Congress consider making a whole new range of personal and family activities countable toward the work requirement, like taking kids to scheduled activities and appointments or being active in a community group or tenant association. When incorporated into a monthly employability plan, monitored, and verified—and with assistance to keep taking on more complex and higher-level activities—these types of activities can become stepping-stones to employment: they can help

welfare recipients develop such fundamental skills as getting places regularly and on time, but in settings where the consequences for failure are less serious than at work, and they can help them learn to balance multiple roles such as worker, parent, and partner—keys to becoming a steady worker. For welfare recipients who will never be workers, but who also do not qualify for federal disability benefits, these activities can at least provide alternative expectations and opportunities for improving the day-to-day lives of children and strengthening communities.²

Getting reauthorization right will require a balancing act. Congress should do nothing to undermine the message that cash assistance is a temporary support and something is expected in exchange for a grant. At the same time, Congress must rework the social contract so that welfare recipients can hold up their end of the bargain through developmentally appropriate activities that are indicators of progress and a good-faith effort.

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¹See "TANF: States Facing 5-Year Time Limit," *CLASP Update* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, June 25, 2001).

²These types of activities are incorporated into Project Match's Pathways Case Management System, which is currently being implemented by welfare agencies at sites in five states.