

Community Voices: Welfare reform impacts children

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One of the most affected and vulnerable populations in welfare policy is our nation's children. If we are truly committed to crafting welfare policies that will move parents and children out of poverty, we need to ask ourselves one critical question: What will be the effects of welfare reauthorization on our kids?

Today a Children's Policy Summit organized by the Kern County Network for Children will provide the opportunity to examine the impacts of our social service system on children. Decision-makers, community members and agency staff will explore issues surrounding poverty, access to services, prevention programs and the challenges of helping children transition from foster care to adulthood during this day-long event.

Poverty among Kern County children is already a reality. According to the Kern County Network for Children, one out of every four kids in Kern County lives in poverty. When one considers that the poverty measure for a family of four is an annual income of only \$17,650, coupled with the fact that the average household will spend \$23,000 on basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), not including child care it's easy to see why many families struggle.

It is said that a nation is judged by how it treats its most powerless citizens. By that measure, our federal welfare policies reflect poorly on our nation. Since 1996, welfare programs have focused less on providing a safety net for vulnerable families and more on stripping away supports and pushing people into often low-wage, dead-end jobs. Parents should work; there is no question. But welfare programs should focus on moving working parents into economic self-sufficiency and permanently out of poverty by providing training and education, transportation assistance and child care until those parents are earning enough to cover those costs on their own.

This summer, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a welfare bill with stringent work requirements that will keep parents away from their children for more hours every week; with decreased

opportunities for education and training that will force parents leaving welfare into low-paying jobs; and with inadequate child care funding needed to provide a structured, safe environment for children while their parents work.

A second bill, crafted by the U.S. Senate's Finance Committee, will allow people struggling to get off welfare to count as work time spent on education and training, will maintain work requirements at their current, reasonable levels and will help low-income parents in rural communities get to work by encouraging car-ownership programs. These provisions represent truly "family friendly" policies that help parents on welfare take good care of their children.

In all the heated rhetoric around welfare reauthorization, there is one constituency that lawmakers, policy makers and advocates need to remember and protect our kids. As they move forward with the legislation that will reauthorize the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, we urge our nation's leaders to remember that more than welfare policy affects the moms and dads of today -- it affects their children children who represent the future of our nation.

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