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New workers off welfare are too poor, report says

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ATLANTA -- Americans leaving welfare for the work force aren't making enough money to make ends meet, according to a report that measures income in a new way.

In a study compiled for advocacy groups in Georgia and 24 other states, a national women's organization proposes a **'self-sufficiency standard'** to show how much income families require for basic necessities.

Whether that family consists of a single adult or two parents with several children, the report shows it takes an income much larger than the decades-old federal poverty limit to reach self-sufficiency. And in many cases, the entry-level jobs being filled by former welfare recipients are falling far short of the mark.

'If you put someone into a job where there's no possibility of meeting the basic cost of living, what are you doing to that family?' said Elizabeth Appley, legislative counsel for the Atlanta-based Women's Policy Group.

'The only way to give people the tools to leave poverty is to give them access to meaningful education and training, not just job readiness.'

While the federal welfare reforms enacted in 1996 quickly shrank welfare rolls across the country, women's advocates long have criticized the new system for pushing former recipients into the work force without the skills they need to earn a livable wage.

This year, Congress is taking up legislation reauthorizing the reform program for another six years.

A bill pushed by the Bush administration and passed by the Republican-controlled House contains stiffer work requirements than the current law, setting a 40-hour work week. A Democratic alternative in the Senate would limit the work week to 30 hours.

The GOP bill's opponents worry that it wouldn't leave enough time for former welfare recipients to learn the skills necessary to move beyond entry-level jobs.

'If we make it impossible for them to gain access to education and training because there aren't enough hours in the day, we can't move them to self-sufficiency," said Jennifer Brooks, who co-authored the report for Washington-based Wider Opportunities for Women.

But Georgia Labor Commissioner Michael Thurmond warned that the hours set aside for education and training must be truly productive if self-sufficiency is to be achieved. He said training programs under the old welfare system often didn't lead to meaningful jobs.

'I'm not for training just for training's sake," said Thurmond, the architect of welfare reform in Georgia when he headed the state's child-protection agency. 'We've gone through that, training for jobs that don't exist or just pay minimum wage.'

Brooks cited a recent study that found the average American moving from welfare to work was making \$ 7.42 an hour to start, more than \$ 2 above the federal minimum wage of \$ 5.15 an hour.

That translates into an annual income of \$ 15,600, enough to get many workers above the federal poverty limit, which is \$ 14,630 for a family of three. Staff writer Dave Williams can be reached at (404) 589-8424 or via e-mail at davemns@mindspring.com.