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Readers Forum: Next step: Promoting family self-sufficiency

By HENRY PRIMEAUX and JIM CURRY

It's crunch time in Washington, D.C., for policymakers working to craft a welfare reauthorization bill that will pass Congress and that President Bush will sign. Among those working on this legislation is Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla. Sen. Nickles and his colleagues on the Senate Finance Committee are charged with crafting legislation that will help families leaving welfare become self-sufficient through finding and keeping good jobs. On that goal there is broad consensus. Missing is a measure of what self-sufficiency really is and how to help families achieve it.

Oklahoma knows what self-sufficiency is. Last February, the Community Action Project of Tulsa County joined the national organization Wider Opportunities for Women and a statewide committee of advocacy groups and public agencies in releasing "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Oklahoma."

The standard calculates what it costs 70 different types of families in each of Oklahoma's 77 counties to meet their most basic needs -- housing, child care, transportation, food, health care, taxes and other essentials. The report underscores the need for Oklahoma to put its nose to the grindstone and help workers get the training they need to get better jobs, and for our state's businesses to invest in work force development.

Welfare policies must work for employers and people leaving welfare. They must help build our state's economy by helping meet employers' needs for skilled and committed employees. Employees need access to job training programs, so that they can build their skills, and to work supports like transportation and child care, so they can get to work and focus on their jobs.

The standard is a tool state welfare offices can use to identify the combination of work supports (like child care, transportation and food stamps) and job income that will allow families leaving welfare to take good care of their children, show up at work on time and advance to better paying jobs. Caseworkers can use the standard to find job training programs that will help their clients move into full-time jobs that offer them benefits and security.

A total of 24 states have calculated the cost of self-sufficiency. They have learned many lessons about the realities of moving people off the welfare rolls and into the work force. It's time for the federal government to encourage all states to take advantage of this tool. "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Oklahoma" sheds light on the need to bring public and private partners together to help workers develop the skills they need to get good jobs that will last and ending the impossible choices between decent meals and proper clothing.

As they work toward welfare reauthorization, our leaders in Washington must recognize that families leaving welfare are unlikely to earn enough money to become self-sufficient right away. It is unrealistic to expect a business to pay an entry-level employee \$20 or even \$10 an hour, but it is not unrealistic for businesses to do their part to move people up the career ladder and provide benefits to their employees, like health insurance. Government, too, has a role in moving families to self-sufficiency by providing work supports -- such as child care, food stamps, and education and training that will help workers increase their wages and become economically self-sufficient over time. Workers must be responsible for taking advantage of opportunities to invest in their futures.

The self-sufficiency standard charts a path out of poverty and provides a measuring stick to help policy makers evaluate the impact of welfare policies. By setting an income benchmark for self-sufficiency, the Standard will show if families that move off welfare are really moving out of poverty, into good jobs and toward self-sufficiency.

For welfare policies to work for families in Oklahoma and all across the nation, Congress must design legislation that helps welfare-leavers receive the training and work supports they need to become a part of a skilled and steady work force. The self-sufficiency standard can help state policy makers state welfare agencies, work force investment boards and other stakeholders build that work force.

Henry Primeaux is the chairman of the Oklahoma Work Force Investment Board and Jim Curry is the president of the Oklahoma AFL-CIO