Welfare "Reform"

written by Betty Reid Mandell | June 28, 2009

With the Obama election, many of us are wondering how far we can push the new Administration in a progressive direction. As Frances Fox Piven says, he won't go left unless there is a powerful movement pushing him in that direction. Piven compares him to FDR, under whose Administration many liberal programs, including Social Security, were enacted. FDR began as a centrist but was pushed to the left by protest movements. There has been a steady drum roll of pundits proclaiming that welfare reform is a success. In the face of all this opposition, what chance do we have of achieving anything progressive on the welfare issue? Is it futile to even try, considering the current economic situation? It is certainly a formidable challenge, but what does it gain us if we succumb to hopelessness and give up our vision of a better world? Paul Krugman expressed it well:

> Some people say that our economic problems are structural, with no quick cure available; but I believe that the only important structural obstacles to world prosperity are the obsolete doctrines that clutter the minds of men.

These are the "mind forg'd manacles" that William Blake wrote about in his poem "London" (in A. J. M. Smith, *Seven Centuries of Verse*. New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1967, p. 285):

> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

We may not get to the promised land of a compassionate system that takes collective responsibility for people's welfare, but we need a vision of what such a system would look like in order to even begin the journey toward our goal. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act is due to be reauthorized by Congress in 2010. The financial meltdown and rising unemployment will force policy makers to take a fresh look at the work requirements and the time limits of TANF. It may even be an opportune time to introduce a completely new approach to helping parents to care for their children. The middle class has fallen into the ranks of the poor, and is beginning to understand the need for welfare. When middle class people are affected, then we can begin to talk about universal, not means-tested, benefits. Barbara Ehrenreich says it best:

> If that sounds politically unfeasible, consider this: When Clinton was cutting welfare and food stamps in the 90s, the poor were still an easily marginalized group, subjected to the nastiest sorts of racial and gender stereotyping. They were lazy, promiscuous, addicted, deadbeats, as whole choruses of conservative experts announced. Thanks to the recession, however — and I knew there had to be a bright side — the ranks of the poor are swelling every day with failed business owners, office workers, salespeople, and long-time homeowners. Stereotype that! As the poor and the formerly middle class Nouveau Poor become the American majority, they will finally have the clout to get their needs met.

With the “audacity of hope,” some Boston area activists formed a group called the “Care Caucus” to talk about improvements or alternatives to welfare, to clarify our thinking about policies, and to try to influence legislation. There are 14 people in the group, and it is open to others. It meets monthly. It is coordinated by Betty Reid Mandell, who wrote an article about care work to provide a basis for discussion. She can be contacted at mmandell@curry.edu if anyone would like to see the article, or would like to ask questions about the group. At their first meeting in January, the group drafted the following position paper:

Why the Care Caucus

- Instead of offering universal support, recognition and guidance for the necessary and valuable work of parenting, PRWORA has provided sanctions, inadequate assistance and stigma to recipients.
- As reauthorization nears and the economy deteriorates, it is time to call for a system that will replace TANF.
- This needs to be centered around the idea of care giving and its value

Some problems with TANF

There are objections to TANF from a number of perspectives

- Feminist (see also economic rights)
    - Women are punished for being outside the nuclear family model
    - Care giving is an important societal service and should be valued
- Human/universal rights
    - Recipients are stripped of their choices: e.g. child-cap
    - Recipients cannot raise their children but must use day care
- Race and class
    - Black households, disproportionately represented, are stigmatized
    - Implicit scorn of African-American realities, e.g. household structure
- Economic rights
    - Model of 2-parent family reinforced in many ways: child support, e.g.
    - Why widows, divorcees, and spouses’ entitlements under OASDI?

PRWORA makes many assumptions that should not be accepted; some follow.

- Regarding social norms and social responsibility: Work fosters character, respect, self-government, as well as self-esteem and societal value. Parents show responsibility and care for their families through work – and this is only work if wages are earned
- Regarding the social contract: Recipients are only entitled to receive the care of a welfare state if they participate in wage-labor. In this view, child care workers participate in “productive” activity, but a mother does not.
- Regarding social control: Recipients are deprived self-determination, believed to have limited capacities for prudent decision making. It is decided on their behalf that any job will be better for the family than the care the recipient provides at home. If child care is needed, children are removed from a parent’s care and placed in a setting that is supposed to be better for the child.

None of the above recognize the value of dependent care to a family and to society. None of the above acknowledge that the choice to provide care to a dependent may be an important one; one that should be respected; one that should be “counted”. Further, the welfare system assumes that jobs are available, family sustaining jobs can be achieved within a reasonable period, and that the

system of work supports in place is enough to get families out of poverty. We know these assumptions are not true, particularly today – as the economy sours, the effects on current recipients and applicant households will be profound.

What should replace TANF

A new system that offers a benefit to care work that is:

- Universal
- A cash benefit
- Provides flexibility to the recipient to pursue a job, education, other opportunities as well as care provision

A quick try at a vision statement:

- “Every person responsible for the care of another should be entitled to a cash benefit which, in combination with existing and applicable social support programs, will provide recipients with a stable and secure foundation from which they can enrich their families, communities, and society and realize their potential and opportunity to contribute through care giving, education, employment and other valuable contributions.”