

Labor Day is a good time to celebrate statewide success of welfare reform

John Burbank; News Tribune columnist

Labor Day is a good time to think about welfare reform. Five years ago liberals were all up in arms about the demise of welfare, then called Aid to Families with Dependent Children. They charged the Republicans and President Clinton with forsaking poor people. They assumed that the politicians were motivated to pursue a war against poor people.

But there was another reality to welfare reform. It was a reality that the old system captured women and their children, in particular, in a web of ongoing poverty with few opportunities for escape. And it did so by isolating these people from the rest of society, with rules and regulations that made it hard to work, to try to earn a living and even to marry, all for the pittance of a \$564 welfare check for a family of three at the beginning of the month. The old system, in fact, created hopelessness, divisiveness and poverty.

Now our state policy-makers could have created a new welfare system to punish poor people, as some other states have done. But we have charted a new course in welfare reform that leaves the welfare behind and puts the reform up front. It benefits all of us. And here is how.

We now have programs paid with federal welfare money that can help all lower-income and moderate-income working families. They range from health insurance for workers who don't get health care from their employers to subsidized child care for working parents. You can get your tuition and books paid for at Bates or Olympic or Columbia Basin colleges.

These programs are designed to benefit the people who make up the backbone of our economy, driving school buses, working as caregivers for our parents and the disabled and teaching our youngest children. So now, assistance is available for workers not on welfare, as well as those who are working to leave welfare behind. This assistance creates paths of opportunity and hope. It provides the tools for people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. As Americans, we share bedrock values of work and family. And the new welfare enables us to honor those values, by creating pathways to jobs and wage ladders, while ensuring some amount of family security.

The Community Jobs program is one of the shining new examples of welfare reform. Community Jobs takes people who haven't worked before, or only sporadically, and places them in jobs with private nonprofit agencies. In Pierce County, the Pierce County Workforce Development Council leads a group of agencies that have employed, trained and counseled 1,400 Community Jobs workers in the past three years. They have become receptionists, bus drivers and housing managers, launched into these careers through the intensive work and educational programs offered through Community Jobs.

In the Tri-Cities, Goodwill has trained and hired more than 300 Community Jobs workers. In Bremerton, Kitsap Community Resources has moved close to 200 families from welfare to work through Community Jobs. One Community Jobs participant said, "With no job and my self-esteem gone, I began to wonder why I should try. Self-doubt became my biggest friend."

This person would have been mired in the poverty of the old welfare system. With welfare reform, she went

to work, earned a paycheck and began pulling herself up to become a registered nurse. She is now off of welfare completely.

This is one of many outstanding examples. More than 3,000 people in our state are Community Jobs participants, earning paychecks from their employers instead of poverty maintenance checks from the Department of Social and Health Services.

Instead of collaring the very poor into an existence financed with \$564 a month for a family of three, Community Jobs has created the opportunity for those who choose to take it to advance in economic opportunity, career paths and wage ladders into the middle class. One year after leaving the program, Community Jobs participants have an average annual income of \$14,772, more than double what they had prior to that - and they earn it.

This welfare reform has reinforced the dignity of work and the reality of the American dream of educational opportunity and economic advancement for low-income workers. It is a good thing to celebrate on Labor Day 2001.

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John Burbank, executive director of the [Economic Opportunity Institute](#), writes every other Wednesday. Write to him in care of the institute at 2400 N. 45th St., #101, Seattle, WA 98103. His e-mail address is John@eoionline.org.


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