



Effectiveness of ‘Welfare to Work’ reform unclear

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Courtesy photo/Wikimedia Commons President Bill Clinton sign into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 - or “Welfare to Work” - which created the Temporary Aid to Needy Families program.

When passed, it was considered a milestone in America’s fight against poverty, and it is still held up today as a success story. But not all are in agreement that the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 – better known as “Welfare to Work” – is everything it was cracked up to be.

The act was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on Aug. 22, 1996. Two previous attempts at passage by the Republican-controlled Congress were vetoed by Clinton, but the GOP successfully positioned welfare reform as a central campaign issue in 1996.

Though Clinton supported welfare reform, he disagreed with Congress about its details. With a third welfare bill on his desk during an election year, Clinton gave some ground and applied his signature.

The act instituted Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The program was reauthorized by the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act. TANF became a political hot-topic again in 2012, when the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – with the support of the Obama administration – told the states they could apply for work requirement waivers, provided they implemented programs to increase employment by 20 percent. Qualifying states could provide assistance even if they did not meet the program’s requirement that 50 percent of a state’s TANF recipients must be working or looking for work.

Though a local program, the KiBois Area Transit System illustrates how innovative concepts can boost employment.

“We’ve been able to decrease the state’s rolls [of welfare recipients] by at least half in Cherokee County,” Charla Sloan told the Daily Press in 2011. “Now the Department of Human Services can clear their cases.”

KATS allows those without transportation to look for jobs, or maintain employment. The state can also remove people without vehicles from welfare rolls if they refuse to use KATS to job-hunt.

During an election year, many in the GOP labeled the move as an attempt to “gut” the work requirement. Administration officials said the changes would allow states greater flexibility – even to develop their own programs.

When Kathleen Sebelius was secretary of Health and Human Services, she produced a 2005 letter signed by 29 Republican governors, asking for some sort of TANF waiver. The House of Representatives passed a bill in 2013 to block the waivers, but it never made it to the Senate floor. Over time, states have adjusted TANF eligibilities and benefits, though all recipients must also meet federal requirements.

The U.S. government has monetary guidelines. People on the program must complete work-related assignments, establish the paternity of all children in the home, and report regularly to the state. Oklahoma requires that at least one member of the household be younger than 19. There is also a five-year limit on benefits. Any Oklahoma family eligible for TANF benefits is also eligible for the food stamp program.

While politicians and pundits across the political spectrum generally agree that an education-employment component is desirable in a welfare program, there are differing perceptions about people on the programs.

Those with conservative perspectives express concern that welfare programs are too generous, and “trap” families because there is little incentive to work. In 2013, two Cato Institute analysts reported the annual tax-free welfare package in Oklahoma was \$26,784, while an entry-level medical secretary was paid an average gross of \$22,000, and assessed federal and state income taxes.

Left-leaning commentators believe many training and education programs within welfare are underfunded or poorly applied, the stereotype of the lazy welfare recipient is inaccurate, and that the intended beneficiaries of welfare aid are children. A study in New York indicated many – perhaps most – on the state’s welfare rolls are difficult to employ. Some reported post-traumatic stress disorder due to serving in combat or domestic abuse. Others were expected to find work though they did not have high school diplomas or GEDs. Others were looking for jobs while recovering from drug addiction.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma’s law requiring the denial of benefits to those failing drug screenings netted 83 transgressors – less than 5 percent of applicants – in its first seven months, at a cost of nearly \$83,000.

Whether welfare reform is a success is still debated today. Fewer families receive benefits and caseloads are down, but most studies indicate poverty is high among those who leave TANF, the national poverty rate has consistently remained around 10 percent, and unemployment rates still rise and fall with booms and recessions.

