

# TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

## Don't rush through welfare reforms

By Paul Craney

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There are 126 federal anti-poverty programs. There are 33 housing programs, run by four different cabinet departments, which strangely includes the Department of Energy. There are currently 21 different programs providing food or food purchasing assistance. These programs are administered by three different federal departments and one independent agency.

There are eight different health care programs, administered by five separate agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services. And six cabinet departments and five independent agencies oversee 27 cash or general assistance programs. Altogether, seven different cabinet agencies and six independent agencies administer at least one anti-poverty program.

The states and the federal government spend approximately \$1 trillion annually on anti-poverty programs. The federal poverty line is \$11,490 and taxpayers on average spend \$20,989 in total welfare spending per person in poverty every year. That means, we could write large enough checks to every person in poverty, which would get people out of poverty and still save taxpayers over \$9,000 per person.

It's important that when we study anti-poverty programs, we judge them not by how much money we spend, but rather how successfully they lift people out of poverty. If we continue to throw more funding into anti-poverty programs without looking at the results of the programs, we are only exacerbating the problem and making poverty more comfortable.

House leaders in the Massachusetts Legislature told the media that they want to take up welfare reform this week. The House voted 125-29 last Wednesday to approve an order calling for the House bill (H 3737) to be filed by 5 p.m. last Friday and for lawmakers to file amendments by 5 p.m. Monday, yesterday; in other words, the public had only one business day to contact their legislators and offer suggestions for improving the proposal. Just like with the computer software tax, legislative leaders are rushing through another proposal without much public input.

Some politicians have taken to social media to publicize their experience in what it's like to live off of one anti-poverty program, in the hopes to persuade the public to further fund the program. In order to understand our state's ranking and performance in how we administer anti-poverty programs, lawmakers should study the recently published report by Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute.

Tanner, a native of Massachusetts, concluded that when you compare all 50 states, Massachusetts is the third most generous in the nation for welfare benefits given out. We are only behind Hawaii (which naturally has a higher cost of living due to the extra costs associated with transporting goods to and from an island) and Washington, D.C.

Tanner found that a typical welfare household consists of a mother and two young children. With the seven most common benefit programs, a typical welfare household in Massachusetts could earn as much as \$42,515 or approximately just under \$25 an hour. If the state wanted to employ this person in the private sector, a company would need to pay that person approximately \$50,540 to cover the cost of taxes and other fees associated with employment.

Tanner also found that Massachusetts is the second-worst state, only behind Missouri, for TANF work participation rate. Work participation is broadly defined but could be interpreted as looking for work. Massachusetts has an 18 percent work participation rate for individuals receiving welfare benefits.

As lawmakers prepare to take a vote to reform our state's welfare benefits with only a few days to review the legislation, they should consider strengthening work participation programs to be more defined as actual work. They should reduce the number of exemptions for work requirements and require individuals that participate in the benefits programs to learn how to look for work before receiving benefits.

There will always be those who need these benefits and there is a place for such benefits in our society. We need to care for the most vulnerable and those in need; I am not arguing against that. I am shifting the argument from one that judges success by how much we spend, to one that measures how many people are freed from poverty.

If the state wants to address poverty, lawmakers need to focus on four areas: education, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, work participation and savings. 50 percent of those who fail to finish high school live in poverty, but fewer than 1 in 10 college graduates do. More than 1 in 3 single-parent households are impoverished, as compared with fewer than 1 in 10 two-parent homes. This isn't meant as moral judgment, but as economic comparison. Obvious as it may seem, those who have any job whatsoever, including a part time minimum wage job, and save even a little bit of income, are also much less likely to find themselves in poverty.

Beacon Hill lawmakers, quick to get welfare off the table as they head into 2014, would be wise to learn from past mistakes. As we saw with the tech tax, when addressing major policy decisions, it's crucial that our representatives and senators be deliberate, thorough and seek comment from a wide array of citizens. Reform ought to happen soon, but it should happen thoroughly too. Necessary steps must not be avoided due to haste. There is no need to rush reform.

*Paul D. Craney is the executive director of Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance. Follow him on Twitter at @PaulDiegoCraney.*