

Domestic Poverty Legislative Updates: Workforce Investment Act, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and Child Nutrition Programs

This year, Congress is scheduled to reauthorize legislation of paramount importance to working families. Programs scheduled to be reauthorized include the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which provides for resources to employers and people in need of employment, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the nation's major cash assistance program for low-income families with dependent children, and Child Nutrition Programs. Read below for details and updates on legislation.

Workforce Investment Act (WIA)

The House is likely to vote in late April on reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The Senate has not yet begun to consider WIA reauthorization.

The bill reported March 27 by the House Education and Workforce Committee (HR 1261) closely reflects President Bush's WIA proposal. It would consolidate three separate WIA programs for adults, dislocated workers, and youth into a single block grant to states. Basic skills programs that now serve 2.7 million people would be changed to focus on reading, writing, and math. Committee Republicans defeated a provision that would have given workers Personal Reemployment Accounts of up to \$3,000 to find a job by relocating or acquiring new skills. The Committee approved this provision on March 5 as part of the President's economic stimulus plan.

The original WIA legislation permitted religious groups to offer job training and educational services to program participants as long as they met the prohibition on religious discrimination in hiring for program staff. Education Committee Democrats attempted to add a similar provision to the reauthorization legislation but lost the struggle on a party-line vote. President Bush has issued an executive order permitting religious discrimination in hiring for programs such as WIA.

In 1998 Congress enacted the Workforce Investment Act to provide an array of resources to employers and people who need help gaining employment, such as dislocated workers and youth in employment centers. WIA, the successor to the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), provides job training to people who otherwise might end up on the public assistance rolls. It also establishes a one-stop delivery system so that both workers and employers can more easily access workforce services at a single location in their area.

A new report from the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP) has revealed some disturbing findings about WIA in its first full year of operation (July 1, 2000-June 30, 2001). There has been a dramatic decline in worker training under WIA, as compared with JTPA. CLASP suggests that a contributing factor may be that, although WIA was meant to reach more of the population than JTPA, the legislation changed the services provided and the order in which they occur, making it difficult for people to participate, especially those who need only retraining or new skill development.

WIA established three tiers of service – core, intensive, and training. In order to receive training, a person seeking work has to go through the core and intensive services first. Core services include job search assistance and information about job openings and training programs. Intensive services cover things such as comprehensive client assessment, development of individual employment plans, work experience activities, and case management. Training involves actual occupational skill development, upgrading, and retraining as well as adult education and literacy programs.

Opponents of H.R. 1261 believe that the legislation does not go far enough in providing access to training for jobseekers and employers. They contend that a greater federal investment is needed in skill development and that reduced resources for the program will pit different groups of participants against each other, rather than meeting the education and training needs of all who are eligible for assistance.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

The Senate leadership hopes to complete action before the end of June on legislation to reauthorize Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the nation's major cash assistance program for low-income families with dependent children. The House passed its bill in February, essentially adopting the Bush Administration's proposal for reauthorizing TANF, which expired on September 30, 2002. The program has been funded since that time through a Continuing Resolution that ends June 30, 2003.

The House-passed measure reauthorizes TANF for five more years at the same funding level (\$16.5 billion per year) that has been in place since the creation of the program in 1996. The current program requires that the adults in any family that qualifies for TANF benefits on the basis of poverty must be working within 24 months of initial receipt of benefits, at which point benefits end. There is a lifetime limit of 60 months on adult eligibility for TANF assistance.

The current TANF program requires that participants be engaged in actual employment or work-readiness activities for 30 hours a week (20 hours for mothers of preschool children). Participation in vocational education can count toward meeting the work requirement for twelve months. States are allowed to exempt up to 20% of their caseload from the work requirement in cases where there are insurmountable barriers to work (such as handicapping conditions, caregiving responsibilities for relatives, lack of child care, lack of marketable skills, or domestic violence). The 1996 law achieved most of its budget savings by taking food stamp, Medicaid, TANF, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits away from legal immigrants. Nutrition, health care and SSI benefits have since been reinstated for some children, handicapped and elderly immigrants.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington Office has joined others in the religious community in calling for TANF reauthorization in a form that would:

*Continue funding at the current level, indexed to inflation;

*Maintain the current work requirement at 30 hours per week (20 for parents of preschool children);

- *Give states the option to provide benefits to legal immigrants;
- *Significantly increase funding for child care;
- *Expand the list of education and training activities that count as work, increasing the provision for vocational education from 12 to 24 months; and
- *Give states greater flexibility in extending or waiving time limits for families that face insurmountable barriers to work.

The measure passed by the House on a partisan vote does not meet these principles. It would require that all TANF adults (including those with newborn children) work for 40 hours per week. The allowance for vocational education to count as a work activity would be cut from twelve to three months, and the list of other activities that qualify as work would be sharply reduced. The House bill makes no changes with regard to immigrant coverage or time limits and increases child care funding only negligibly, despite the greatly expanded work requirement.

The Senate Finance Committee has held one half day of hearings and does not plan any more. Chairman Charles Grassley (R-IA) has indicated that he favors using the current TANF program as the starting point for legislation, and making minor changes such as increasing the work requirement less than the House did and adding a small additional amount of funding for child care.

Child Nutrition

Several key child nutrition programs are due to be reauthorized in 2003, including:

The National School Lunch Program, a federally assisted meal program that was created in 1946 as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children;”

The School Breakfast Program, which began as a pilot program in 1966 and was made permanent in 1975, provides free and reduced-priced breakfast to children. The program, which operates like the school lunch program, is located in more than 75,000 schools and institutions. In 2001, an average of 7.8 million children participated in the program each day;

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which helps families purchase specified foods to nourish low-income pregnant women and their preschool children;

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which funds food for low-income preschoolers in family child care homes, child care centers, after-school programs domestic violence and homeless shelters, and Head Start programs; and

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which pays for meals and snacks for low-income children in summer programs operated by schools and other public agencies.

Taken together with the Food Stamp program, these child nutrition efforts very nearly assure that no poor child needs to go hungry or to be undernourished. Over the decades, many studies have shown that providing adequate nutrition contributes greatly to children’s ability to learn and to grow into educated, productive adults. None of these

programs have ever been sufficiently funded to meet the entire need, however, and complicated application and screening processes often keep families from participating.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington Office was among dozens of organizations that signed a November 2002 letter to Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA), then Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. The letter called on Congress to simplify and amend the eligibility guidelines for the child nutrition programs in order to serve all children, and to cover them through their teen years.

In developing its budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2004, the House included funding cuts in a number of nutrition programs that serve low-income people. These cuts were not included in the budget finally approved by the House and Senate. Reductions are still possible, however, since the budget included instructions for the making of future program cuts later in the year.

General Assembly Policy:

Nutrition, Poverty, & Welfare

When the Presbyterian Church adopted a contemporary Confession of Faith in 1967, it stated that “the reconciliation...through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God’s good creation. Because Jesus identified himself with the needy and exploited, the cause of the world’s poor is the cause of his disciples... A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God” (*The Confession of 1967*, 9.46).

Acting on such convictions of faith, Presbyterian General Assemblies over the years have expressed frequent concern for the economic well-being of the nation, the fairness of our economic system, and especially, the needs of the poor.

In 1971 the General Assembly asserted “that justice demands that everyone have the material conditions necessary for...physical and social existence...” It called for a guarantee to every American of an income or the opportunity to earn one “large enough to provide for basic needs and to sustain every person’s participation, with dignity, in society...” (PCUS, 1971, *Minutes*, p. 146).

Specifically that has meant vigorously supporting “the continuation, with effective outreach, administration and funding of child nutrition programs, including the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children, Child Care Food Program and Summer Feeding Program, School Breakfast Program, Special Milk Program and the School Lunch Program...” (UPCUSA, 1976, *Minutes*, p. 503).

Beyond endorsing specific nutrition programs, the 1996 General Assembly also joined other religious institutions in calling on all candidates for President and for the United States Congress “to make ending childhood hunger in the U.S. an important priority in their election platforms this year and to speak out boldly during the campaign concerning that issue;” and “if elected...to vote for and approve legislation and to

support federal programs that will help overcome childhood hunger in the United States” (*Minutes*, 1996, p.784).

A 1977 General Assembly appeal for a morally responsible food policy, called on the United States to:

- Treat the basic necessities of life as essential human rights, without reference to judgments as to who does or does not deserve them.
- Stimulate full employment with just wages by providing job training, incentives for increased employment in the private sector, and public employment as needed.
- Reform and simplify the welfare system, incorporating strong incentives to work, but not requiring acceptance of employment as a condition for receiving public assistance for (a) one parent family with preschool or elementary school-age children (PCUS, 1977, *Minutes*, p. 183).

The 1978 Assembly declared that “every society has the obligation to provide for all people the opportunity for: meaningful work, adequate food, clothing, shelter...health care...(and) education for meaningful participation in society” (PCUS, 1978, *Minutes*, p. 204).

Childhood Hunger

While prosperity is increasing in the United States, childhood hunger is still a serious problem. It is also a problem that past General Assemblies have made note of: “Childhood hunger is preventable and unacceptable... Good nutrition in childhood saves money by preventing nutrition-related medical, education, and welfare costs... The nation’s nutrition programs including WIC, school [meals], summer and child-care meals; and food stamps, have significantly improved children’s nutrition... The federal government has a legitimate and necessary role in setting nutrition standards and providing resources to assure that all children in the United States have access to a nutritionally adequate diet” (*Minutes*, 1996, p. 784).

Welfare Reform

The 1996 welfare reform bill drastically changed the old federal entitlement program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and put in its place a block grant program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The new law gives states significantly more power to design their own welfare programs using both state and federal funding. The 1997 General Assembly responded by adopting a resolution that is designed to offer “guidelines for the church and government to follow in promoting the general welfare of the poor” (*Minutes*, 1996, p. 553). The guidelines include the following:

- 1) Maintain at least the 1996 level of welfare funding for as long as needed in the transition to a work-based welfare system.
- 2) Oppose any tightening of eligibility requirements for public assistance that would make persons in need even more vulnerable.
- 3) Provide adequate funding for job training that leads to employment at a family-sustaining wage.
- 4) Where necessary, provide state-funded employment options, including sheltered workshops, for the least employable.

- 5) Provide additional state funds as necessary to prevent children and parents from being denied assistance when, despite their best efforts, adults reach a program time limit but cannot find work at adequate pay.
- 6) Exempt single parents with a child under age one from work requirements.
- 7) Provide adequate funding for child care and transportation assistance to recipients in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, as well as to low-income working families, in order to make job training and employment viable.
- 8) Decline to implement a "family cap" that would exclude cash assistance for children born to a welfare recipient.
- 9) Provide exemption of teen-parents from the requirement that they live with a parent or guardian unless the home is known to be safe for both the teen-parent and the child.
- 10) Provide adequately for disabled persons and immigrants who may lose eligibility for means-tested programs.
- 11) Opt not to restrict access by immigrants to WIC, the Child and Adult Care Food Program; and the Summer Food Program.
- 12) Make contingency plans for meeting increased needs and the likelihood of inadequate funding in the event of an economic recession.

In support of such state actions, the Assembly urged the federal government to adopt the following policies:

- 1) Investment in job creation programs that go beyond the commitments of the recent welfare reform legislation. The investment should lead to a job at a living wage.
- 2) Restoration of the \$27 billion cut from the food stamp program in the 1997 budget.
- 3) Commitment to maintain funding of the TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) block grant to the states at the same or higher levels in the years beyond 2002, and the excess funds be used for the creation of jobs at a living wage (*Minutes*, 1996, pp. 554-555).

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