

COMMENTARY

Despite Clinton's rhetoric, welfare reform not working

By Barbara Reynolds
Special to Sentinel-Voice

If you listen to President Clinton and his powerful Black friends you might think welfare reform is working.

Administration statistics and the silence of the civil rights industry convey a notion of a rising tide lifting all boats. The message is: If you care about poor people, be happy, don't worry.

But during a recent conference titled the "Call For Renewal," organized by a coalition of more than 500 religious groups headed by the Rev. Jim Wallis, it became clear that politicians should stop congratulating themselves.

Moreover, Black leaders shouldn't be so "glued" to President Clinton that they can't call attention to what is happening to those falling off the welfare rolls.

The official numbers have been widely reported from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. From August 1996, when new welfare legislation was passed, to July 1998, caseloads have dropped from 4.4 million to 3 million families, 1.4 million fewer families or a decline of 31 percent. Also the number of individuals has dropped from 12.2 million to 8.4 million, a fall of 3.9

million or 32 percent.

So, where did all these people go?

The short answer is nobody of official importance seems to care. In fact, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act does not include adequate tracking measures. That has resulted in grassroots organizations coming together with universities to track former welfare recipients themselves.

Overall, according to Wallis, instead of the goal being to move people from welfare to work, it has changed to just cutting families off, a method that some states have applied across the United States.

"Only about half of all welfare recipients losing benefits are getting jobs, which means the other half are not. And, of those getting work, most are stuck in very low-paying jobs that don't begin to provide an adequate family income," he said. "So when these mostly single moms and their kids lose assistance, they're ending up poorer than they were on welfare. For example, three of four jobs welfare recipients have landed in the last year don't have any health benefits (after a year people lose their Medicaid). What kind of solution is that to poverty?"

"Homeless shelters already report a shift

in population from men with substance abuse problems to women with children," he continued. "The international Union of Gospel Missions recently reported that 22 percent of those coming to missions for shelter say they have lost government benefits in the last year. The U.S. Conference of Mayors reports that families with children now make up 38 percent of the homeless population."

Grassroots organizations working with volunteers on a shoe-string budget are keeping tabs on various categories of welfare recipients.

One group, the Welfare Reform Watch Project in Washington D.C., is a faith-based social justice lobby with member organizations, such as the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and Pax Christi USA.

In a recent preliminary study conducted with the help of Drexel University, it found that even the most basic needs of the poor are not being met after government assistance is cut off.

The initial message that came from talking to about 1,000 people in 60 agencies in 10 states is: Those who are fortunate to find jobs are not earning livable wages or sustainable benefits and their housing is less stable because passage of the welfare bill coincided with the

first year of decline in federally-assisted housing units.

Nine percent reported sleeping on the street or in a shelter in the previous six months and 48 percent reported having to eat less per meal or fewer meals over the previous six months because of cost.

Yet with all of these dire statistics you don't hear much criticism of welfare reform from leaders who represent the group that is hurting the most. Although Blacks are about 12 percent of the total population, they make up 37 percent of welfare cases. Yet their leadership, most of whom is raving about Clinton, is virtually silent.

Dr. Eugene Rivers, a Boston pastor and a presenter at the conference, said "most of the Blacks who are protecting Clinton are in a trap. They are making no demands upon him. On welfare reform, they are not holding Clinton accountable."

It seems to me that Clinton's powerful Black friends are so busy protecting him that they don't want to embarrass him by revealing that he is telling another lie when he says that welfare reform is working. It is not working for the poor and that is a much bigger crime than what happened with one person — Monica Lewinsky.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

President's rhetoric on education leaves questions unanswered

Special to Sentinel-Voice

When that guru of the religious right, the Rev. Pat Robertson, says that President Clinton "hit a home run" with his State of the Union address, it ought to be hard for me and others to challenge parts of that speech. But it isn't.

That address has been called "a laundry list with something in it for everybody," and any speech that has something for everybody to like surely has something for everyone to dislike. I dislike some things in the area where Clinton usually is at best: education.

I like the president's deploring of our schools' practice of giving certificates and diplomas to students who can't read or haven't mastered the materials for the grade that they are leaving. But I dislike his characterizing their advancements as "social promotions." These are more often "good riddance" promotions — acts by teachers and school officials who don't want the trouble of really teaching underprivileged children, or don't want to bear the cost of holding back lots of youngsters.

It seemed to me that Clinton was playing to conservatives when he talked about shutting down "the worst-performing schools." A lot of schools perform at a low level because of "social assignments" of teachers, with the most-skilled and favored teachers almost always assigned to the prestigious schools with the best equipment and the least troublesome pupils. It is great that Clinton wants to hire 100,000 new teachers, but only if those teachers agree to



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teach with dedication in rural and urban districts that don't have social A-lists.

We must not rush blindly to shut down or strip federal funds from schools that seem to be under-performing. Their needs may be for more federal funds and support in getting competent teachers

President Clinton may have set the stage for undermining a lot of public schools that struggle at the margin of good achievement when he said, "And parents should have more choice in selecting their public schools. When I became president, there was one independent public charter school in all America. With our support, there are 1,100 today. My budget assures that early in the next century there will be 3,000."

Someone should tell the president that the charter school movement is not an unquestioned success.

Some have been disasters and many are little more than attempts by hustlers to exploit criticisms of public schools so as to grab a pile of federal and state education dollars. It doesn't matter whether it is a private, church or charter school, it drains money from a public school for the education of a few kids. It is inimical to the needs of the community and the great mass of children.

President Clinton surely knows that it is impossible to please everyone with any public education program. Rhetoric that attempts to please everyone simply makes harder his well-conceived plans for educational progress.

Silicon Valley Report: Government rewards persistent discrimination

By John Templeton
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SAN FRANCISCO — The "Digital Divide" will cost African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans more than \$3 trillion over the next 20 years without urgent government and private action, according to the first comprehensive report on Silicon Valley employment and business equal opportunity, produced by the Coalition for Fair Employment in Silicon Valley.

Coalition co-convenors, along with representatives of the Greenlining Coalition and Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, presented the report to deputy assistant secretary of labor Shirley J. Wilcher, director of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, and other Labor Department officials early last month in San Francisco and, before that, to California Attorney General Bill Lockyer and State Sen. Kevin Murray, chairman of the Legislative Black Caucus.

Through a Freedom of Information Act request, the coalition learned that only 175 of a potential 6,000 Valley firms even submitted an EEO-1 form to the U.S. government, a requirement for federal contractors and subcontractors with more than 25 employees.

Beyond that record-keeping, the report indicated that intentional practices of restrictive recruitment, narrow marketing and lack of access had created a "steel door" that prevented Blacks, Native Americans and Latinos from even knowing about jobs, technology and business opportunities there. Technology firms are extensively using "no urban dictates" in product and recruitment advertising.

Although 39 percent of Whites in the San Jose metropolitan area hold managerial or professional jobs, only 12.2 percent of Latinos in the same community hold such jobs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

By comparison, Latinos hold 21.2 percent of managerial and professional jobs in the

Sacramento area and 24.9 percent in the Oakland area.

For the 175 firms, Black and Latino representation in managerial and professional fields is dramatically below their representation in specific fields, yet almost none engage in a set of 35 practices for effective equal opportunity developed by the coalition's convenors.

The report recommended that President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore bring federal leadership to the issue.

"The continued government giveaways to private firms and the recent decision to increase H-1B visas are a reward for racial discrimination," the report states.

It also called upon investment firms and banks to conduct "social responsibility audits" of firms as part of the due diligence process for loans and equity investments, citing the potential exposure for negative market impacts, litigation and penalties from discriminatory activities.

"At our recent conference, we drove home the point that inclusion leads to economic growth and is the key to expansion," said Rainbow/Push Coalition President Jesse Jackson. "I share your concern that African-Americans and other people of color are not well represented in the high-tech industry and that there might be a pattern of neglect and/or resistance to fair employment, contracting and charitable support."

The coalition also gave specific guidance to federal and state enforcement agencies on investigative strategies to root out discrimination.

Since any federal grant at less than market value constitutes "federal financial assistance" under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many firms that have benefited from federally-funded innovations, such as the Internet, have the same obligations as educational institutions and governmental grantees.

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