

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

It's Time to Correct Coercive Welfare Policies

Welfare reform legislation passed in 1996 must be reauthorized, giving Congress the opportunity to correct coercive policies that promoted marriage and family formation as a “cure for poverty.” The theory behind these statutes is that unmarried mothers receiving welfare benefits would be lifted out of poverty through marriage, and would therefore rely on a husband’s salary to support them rather than welfare benefits.

As people of faith, we believe families need realistic, cost-effective programs such as job training to overcome poverty, not unproven schemes that coerce women into marriage as a cure for poverty. True welfare reform should reduce women’s poverty, not punish women and children for social and economic factors that are frequently beyond their control. We believe poverty will be alleviated when the real needs of women can be met such as access to contraceptive services, affordable childcare, higher education, job training and a living wage.

Government Pressure

The controversial welfare reform legislation replaced a system of monthly welfare checks with a new program—Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), run by the states with federal grants—that gives poor families temporary cash assistance while moving them into jobs.

Under TANF, virtually every state has adopted measures to discourage poor women from having children and unmarried women from having sex. Beneath the banner of “family values,” welfare reform promoted the false notion that sex and childbearing—rather than discrimination, violence, inadequate salaries and lack of job training,

education and childcare—cause poverty. The most vulnerable women and families were penalized.

For example:

- ❑ **Teens:** Unmarried teenage mothers, who account for only 5% of the welfare caseload, were required to reside with a parent or in another supervised setting, on the premise that they have children to qualify for welfare and leave home. However, a Cornell University study found that living at home was associated with a 10% *increase* in out-of-wedlock childbearing.
- ❑ **Illegitimacy Bonus:** \$20 million bonuses were given to each of the five states with the greatest decline in out-of-wedlock births compared to total births, while holding their abortion rate at 1995 levels. There is no evidence the bonuses were effective.
- ❑ **Family Caps:** On the premise that poor women have children to increase their welfare payments, benefits were denied to children born into families receiving welfare. Twenty-three states adopted this onerous provision. Research limitations have prevented researchers from determining whether the caps are a disincentive to having more children.
- ❑ **Abstinence-Only Education:** Nearly two-thirds of school districts in the country have not applied for funding for abstinence-only education, which excludes any mention of contraception. A randomized control trial found that teens who received abstinence-only education were more likely to engage in unprotected sex than those who received accurate information on contraception.

No Evidence

According to an Alan Guttmacher Institute study in the Winter of 2002 *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association*, there is no scientific evidence that any of these measures decreased

unintended pregnancies or out-of-wedlock births. Furthermore, in May 2003 an Alan Guttmacher Institute Public Policy report titled “Marriage is no Immunity from Problems with Planning Pregnancies,” confirmed that marriage does not necessarily control and prevent unintended pregnancies.

Good Legislation Can Help

Legislation to reauthorize TANF should emphasize poverty reduction and address the concerns of reproductive health advocates by eliminating coercive measures:

- End the Illegitimacy Reduction Bonus,
- Ban “family caps” and require states to provide assistance to all children, including those born into a family already receiving welfare,
- No longer require states to deny aid to minor mothers living away from their parents or not enrolled in school,
- Prohibit states from penalizing individuals for failure to help establish paternity of children.

What You Can Do

- The voice of the religious pro-choice community can help restore the reproductive autonomy and dignity of low-income women.
- Challenge false assumptions about low-income people and welfare recipients whenever you encounter them.
- Write to your representatives in Congress. Let them know that you don’t want women coerced or restricted by punitive policies. Urge them to reinstate the requirement that states make family planning services and information available to all those on welfare.
- Encourage dialogue in your place of worship. Motivate other religious people to take action with you.

Answers to Tough Questions

These responses, adapted from the ProChoice Resource Center’s “Welfare Reform Update,” will help you advocate for better policies.

Q. If women can’t support their children, should the government make it possible for them to have them anyway?

A. If income were the basis for childbearing, no poor women would be able to have children. For this reason, all industrialized countries have family

support policies. They recognize that because of the nature of the labor market, some people will not be able to find jobs and others will not earn enough to support a family. Income should not be a prerequisite for childbearing.

Q. Why should taxpayers support the children of women on welfare when no one pays for their children?

A. Government support for childrearing is not limited to women on welfare. Tax policy recognizes that individuals need additional resources when they have children. The government supports middle-class families with children through the tax code in a number of ways, including tax exemptions for children, earned income tax credits, and childcare credits. Tax dollars support the nation’s public schools, which benefit parents of all income levels.

Q. Won’t comprehensive sexuality education encourage unmarried teenagers to have sex?

A. Comprehensive sexuality education encourages responsible behavior. In addition, the evidence indicates that the primary factors influencing a young woman’s decision to put off childbearing are education and life prospects—not fear of moral censure.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition—comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country—works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

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