

WORKFORCE SERVICES PLAN MAKES WELFARE MEANINGFUL

Deseret News. Salt Lake City, Utah: January 20, 1996. pg. A10

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When Americans think of the welfare system, many envision waste, duplication and methods that do little or nothing to lift people into financial independence. It's an image supported by anecdotal evidence and girded with statistics.

That's why the proposal to form a state Department of Workforce Services, soon to be presented to Utah lawmakers, is so refreshing. It would turn the welfare system in Utah from a bureaucratic mess into a tool for economic development. Lawmakers ought to pass it. This is more than just another creative spin on a federally driven system. The Department of Workforce Services is Utah's answer to the argument that states are incompetent to handle the responsibilities many in Congress are willing to grant.

Anyone who watched Gov. Mike Leavitt deliver his State of the State address this week carries the lasting image of former Utah Jazz center Mark Eaton piling boxes of bureaucratic welfare forms atop each other to demonstrate how inefficient the current system is. That was a dramatic and effective visual image. Here are the cold facts:

- Thirteen separate welfare and job training programs offer similar benefits in six areas ranging from family support to vocational training.
- Twenty-three other programs offer at least some types of benefits that duplicate or overlap with those available elsewhere.

One would have difficulty setting out to deliberately design a more inefficient or wasteful system.

The new proposal, which has the bipartisan support of the governor and several key legislative leaders, would create a single department to handle all welfare and employment-related programs. The department would be divided into three divisions. One would include all labor, safety and regulatory programs handling things such as workers' compensation, anti-discrimination efforts, training and health and safety issues. Another division would handle legal challenges and appeals. The third division would administer welfare and job-related programs, working directly with the private sector to train and select employees.

A single, consolidated department should produce obvious benefits. Programs would be better monitored to ensure their effectiveness. People in need of help would face a simpler, more effective way to get it, and private business would be able to tap from a better trained and motivated pool of potential employees.

In short, the programs would have a better chance of helping people rather than merely providing work for pencil-pushers.

The bill that will be presented soon to lawmakers doesn't attempt to tackle any of the vexing philosophical questions surrounding welfare reform. It doesn't decide whether teenage mothers should be eligible or whether women who become pregnant while on welfare should be cutoff. Nor does it set a time limit for finding a job. Those are questions to be settled separately.

What it would do quite effectively is establish a framework for a complete overhaul of welfare in Utah.

Ultimately, Congress will decide whether states are worthy of the freedom to enact reform. But the prevailing winds out of Washington are encouraging, and the Department of Workforce Services proposal, if passed, would be a strong argument in favor of the states.