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RELEASE: September 10, 1982

WORKFARE

It seems like everybody is for welfare reform, but it is very difficult to show any tangible results that have really cut costs or eliminated fraud and abuse.

Many people believe that the idea called Workfare is the answer to the welfare problem. Workfare is a program requiring able-bodied individuals who are receiving welfare assistance to perform some form of useful community service in return for their welfare benefits. Every community can use additional employees to perform useful jobs, and most communities are quite strapped for funds.

Workfare raises the self-esteem of welfare recipients at the same time that it makes them more employable in other jobs. Those who participate in Workfare get the opportunity to gain work experience, to develop good work habits, and to establish a history of employment that will eventually move them off the welfare rolls and into regular jobs.

At the same time, Workfare gives the taxpayers something in return for their money. Workfare saves the taxpayers' money because it eliminates from the welfare rolls many people who should not be on them, either because they refuse to work or because they have another source of employment. Workfare is an effective means of reducing welfare fraud.

At least 20 states have implemented some kind of Workfare program. A recent Heritage Foundation study on Workfare examined several cities with experience in this idea, such as Cincinnati which has had a workfare program as part of its General Welfare for 40 years.

An evaluation of the Cincinnati program showed that workfare has a high initial rate of removing people from welfare. When they realize they have to work to get their benefits, the no-show rate may be as high as 60-75%.

The tax funds saved as a result of this deterrent effect more than pay for the costs of administering the Workfare program in Cincinnati.

Some critics claim that Workfare won't work because most AFDC recipients are mothers with small children who are unable to take jobs anyway. The 1980 Census Report, however, reveals that more than half of American's mothers do have jobs, and employing workfare

participants in day-care centers could solve more than one problem with the same program.

Utah is the only state with statewide mandatory workfare that includes AFDC recipients (although it exempts mothers of children under age 6). The program requires participants to work 3 days and job-hunt 2 days per week.

An evaluation of the Utah program shows that it has a good "housecleaning effect" on welfare (27% were removed because they failed to perform); and those who did perform greatly enhanced their employability in permanent jobs.

When Ronald Reagan was California's Governor, he initiated the California Community Work Experience Program under which AFDC recipients were required to work 20 hours a week in public service jobs in exchange for their welfare grants. This program was conducted as a 3-year experiment starting in 1971, at the end of which it was discontinued. Many people believe the program was never given a real chance to be effective because less than half of California's counties tried it at all, and the program was hamstrung both by the state legislature and court action.

The Heritage Foundation study concluded that many of the current welfare programs have fostered permanent dependency on welfare by providing benefits of greater value than what the individual could earn by working. Put another way, the government has offered poor people a financial incentive NOT to be gainfully employed. That ought to be contrary to public policy.

Workfare is a constructive way to offset these work disincentives and keep the less advantaged to acquire the job skills that can make them self-supporting.

Workfare is an idea whose time has come. In fact, its time is overdue.