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CARTER 'S WELFARE REFORM

The attachment of the word "reform" to a·lmost any piece of legislation gives it a tailwind that helps to speed its way through the cumbersome legislative process.

The American people, however, have wised up to the use of the word reform when it is attached to welfare. While true welfare reform is one of our most urgent needs, the American people have been stung too often on plans called "welfare reform" which actually meant spending more tax dollars on more welfare recipients.

This year we have a new President and a new version of welfare reform, but like the Nixon welfare reform proposal, it would also mean adding millions to the welfare rolls. Instead of moving people off welfare nto jobs, it would expand welfare coverage to persons now working and to those who get new jobs.

Of course, it goes without saying that it would require a big increase in the welfare bureaucracy at the Federal level. President Carter originally said that his welfare revision would have "no higher initial cost than the present systems." HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., estimates the present cost at
$23 billion. The price tag of the Carter proposal is $30.7 billion, plus another $3.4 billion for the cost of expanded income tax credits.

President Carter says that his new program "will ensure that work will always be more profitable than welfare, and that a private or non-subsidized public job will always be more profitable than a special federally-funded public service job."

.This is a noble goal, but it is unlikely that the complicated system of tax credits in the Carter proposal would make any progress toward it. The work requirements in the Carter welfare plan are not as strong as in many state general assistance programs.

One of the un"i°rtunate aspects of the Carter welfare proposal is that it exacerbates the problem of giving financial incentives to those who choose a

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non-family lifestyle. Under the Carter proposal, a father in an intact family with a small child could decline a subsidized job under the family program, abandon his family, thereby making them eligible in the "not expected to work" category for benefits of $4200 per year plus state supplements.

He then could apply for benefits himself as an individual and receive an additional $1100 per year. Because the 1 .4 million subsidized job slots are reserved for families, he could not be offered or required to accept one, and would continue to receive $1100 in benefits plus state supplements.

Under the Carter proposal, if one spouse of a married couple declined a job, total benefits to the couple would be denied. However, if the couple were unmarried but living together, they would receive benefits as singles; and if one declined a job, the other would not be cut off.

It is difficult to be optimistic about true welfare reform that would benefit the needy without rewarding the freeloaders or imposing an unfair tax burden on American workers. The best answer is to let the states experiment with various ways of tackling the problem, and see which get the best results at the lowest cost.

For example, Utah has a "workfare" program that applies not only to relief assistance, but also to the Federally-finan'5ed Aid to Families with Dependent Children. If private employment cannot be found for welfare recipients, they must work three days a week for public agencies doing jobs needed by state or local governments. Only ill, aged, or disablJ-,persons, or mothers with children under age six are exempted.

The Utah program is working well. It could be a model for national welfare reform. A lot of people won't like it, however, because it would reduce, not expand, the Federal bureaucracy.