

The Campaign for the Empire State Jobs Program

MAKING WELFARE REFORM WORK

Community Service Society of New York, Community Voices Heard, CSEA, District Council 37/AFSCME, Fiscal Policy Institute, Hunger Action Network of NY State, National Employment Law Project, NYS AFL-CIO, and the Statewide Emergency Network for Social & Economic Security.

NEWS RELEASE

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Unions and Community Groups Call for Jobs for Welfare Participants

Bipartisan Group of Legislators Seek More Positive Use of TANF Surplus Funds

Legislation to use surplus federal welfare dollars to create 8,000 transitional jobs for welfare participants has been re-introduced in the State Legislature with strong bipartisan support.

Assembly Member Catherine Nolan (D) and Senator Nicholas Spano (R), both Chairs of the Labor Committees in their respective Houses, are the lead sponsors of the bill (A.6179/S.5292). "I am pleased to sponsor this important legislation which will establish a transitional employment program that will lead to unsubsidized permanent jobs in the private and public sectors and provide participants with the skills, education and training necessary to obtain permanent employment in the private, public, and non-profit sectors," said Assemblywoman Nolan. "The bill protects existing workers from being displaced and increases opportunities for career advancement for current workers in entry-level jobs."

Over the last two years the State Legislature has approved using more than \$70 million in funding for a wage subsidy program to assist welfare participants. However, more than one hundred labor unions, welfare advocates and community groups are pushing for a more comprehensive proposal, the Empire State Jobs Bill, that would provide funding for transitional jobs, targeting hard to place welfare participants who are rapidly approaching their five year time limit on receiving federal welfare benefits. In December 2001, over 76,000 New York State public assistance cases will reach their 5-year time limits for federal Family Assistance. At this point, these families will all move into the state and county-funded Safety Net Assistance Program.

Wage-based, transitional jobs programs are becoming more and more popular across the country; New York City last year approved creating 7,500 such positions over three years, though implementation has been held up by the Giuliani administration. Steve Savner, who monitors such programs nationally for the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), reported that such programs "are effective in helping to improve the employability of individuals who have significant barriers to employment and they can provide income and job skills to those

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families who reach welfare time limits. Wage-based, transitional jobs programs work because they focus on combining learning on the job with additional skill development activities.”

Community Voices Heard member Darlene Dubose, speaking from her own personal experience on public assistance, added that “the problem with current programs is that people are working for years for no pay and are not getting offered the jobs because employers don’t look at public assistance workers as REAL workers. The Empire State Jobs Program would allow people to be considered real workers, and people would be able to get real experience with real pay. People would be more interested in going to work if they felt they were not just working for their welfare checks, but they were working for REAL money, and that eventually they would be able to get jobs on their own.”

Participants in the program would benefit from both on-the-job experience and up to eight hours a week of paid education and training. “This program will not only benefit thousands of New Yorkers with skill-enhancing jobs,” said David R. Jones, President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York, “but it will also benefit the communities they live in. More residents will have paychecks to spend in local businesses and because many of the programs participants will be employed in non-profit organizations, their labor will serve critical community needs.”

Money to fund the program is being sought from New York’s TANF Surplus. “As of December 31, 2000, New York still had over \$1.5 billion in unspent TANF funds on account in Washington. Given the level of our TANF balances, the Empire State Jobs Program represents an excellent investment for New York. Spending these federal funds now to provide work experience for the hardest to place public assistance recipients will save New York state and local social services districts millions of dollars in the future,” stated Trudi Renwick of the Fiscal Policy Institute.

The New York State AFL-CIO, representing 2.5 million working men and women, announced that the Empire State Jobs program was a priority bill for them. “An important aspect of this bill is the fiscal advantage to counties and municipal governments, particularly, New York State and upstate Social Services Departments, as individuals reach their five year TANF limits. Local government as well as state government must now pay 100% of whatever support is paid to each person on the state Safety Net program. New York State has been less creative than almost any other state in the union in expending the TANF grant money, and this is one good way to remedy that misdirection.”

The use of surplus funds for innovative programs such as the Empire State Jobs Program will help better position New York State to maintain the size of the five year block grant in the federal TANF Reauthorization debate which has already begun. In March 2000, U.S. Representative Nancy L. Johnson (R-CT), Chair of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources, sent a letter to all 50 governors suggesting that future TANF funding would be safeguarded only if states continue to make efforts to spend the funds they are now receiving, and to spend those funds wisely and in accordance with the true objectives of welfare reform.

While caseloads across the nation have been falling, poverty has not been overcome. Members of the Campaign for an Empire State Jobs Program, a coalition of over 100 groups, stressed that TANF money can and should be used to fund new approaches to tackling poverty in an effective manner. Campaign members include Community Service Society of NY, Community Voices Heard, CSEA, District Council 37/ AFSCME, Fiscal Policy Institute, Hunger Action Network of NYS, National Employment Law Project, NYS AFL-CIO, and SENSES.

Assembly Member Deborah Glick, Chair of the Assembly Social Services Committee and a co-sponsor on the bill, stressed that the Empire State Jobs program will contribute to the building of an effective support network for people reaching their time limits, particularly in light of recent remarks by Jason Turner, Commissioner of NYC's Human Resources Administration, that he planned on having welfare recipients reapply for extended benefits beyond their five years. Assemblywoman Glick stated, "We've been concerned enough about how time limits would affect people on welfare, but in view of Commissioner Turner's remarks last week, it's certain that those women and children face a chaotic and lengthy transition to the Safety Net. We must pressure the Commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to provide a seamless transition as intended by the original legislation."

"Although the state continues to tout the declining welfare caseloads, not enough is being done to ensure that those moving off of the roles have training and support services needed to enter and remain in the workforce. As a public policy issue and as a social justice issue, we support the establishment of the Empire State Jobs Program, using a portion of the estimated \$1.5 billion TANF surplus. It's the smart thing to do, and it's the right thing to do," stated Dennis Poust of the NYS Catholic Conference.