

Op-ed: De Blasio's welfare reform correction: Critics who claim we're sliding back to the bad old are blind to reality

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Some see the slight increase in New York City's welfare rolls in recent months as cause for alarm, warning that we are on an inevitable slide back to bad old days of chronic government dependency.

In fact, the uptick reflects a long overdue policy correction. Changes underway are about making temporary assistance "a leg up and not a hand out," which is exactly what welfare should be.

Far from dismantling welfare reform, Mayor de Blasio and Human Resources Administration Commissioner Steve Banks are breathing life into the cadaver they inherited.

Under de Blasio's predecessor, the city's welfare policies were broken. During the four years of recession and weak recovery, 2008-11, unemployment doubled and food stamp rolls soared. Mayor Bloomberg's own poverty measurement charted a 20% earnings decline for low-income families and a sharp poverty rise.

Yet at a time when an increase in the city's welfare caseload would be expected, the numbers didn't budge. Bloomberg remained wedded to his predecessor's policy of thwarting recourse to public assistance.

Want proof of how unfairly stingy the city was? Many applicants who were routinely denied assistance appealed in the state-administered hearings to which they are entitled. The city's denial was upheld in only 10% of such appeals.

Not a great batting average for a performance-metrics-obsessed mayor. The state eventually threatened to impose its own sanction against the city, a \$10 million annual penalty.

Meanwhile, while city public assistance rolls were flat, they surged in neighboring Nassau and Suffolk counties.

This is not a theoretical debate. Half of the city's public assistance recipients are children. Many of the adult recipients can't work due to disability, illness or age.

Of the households with an adult who should be engaged in work, an adult is working in 30% of cases, but earning so little that the household still qualifies for cash assistance.

We all know where the mayor stands on raising the minimum wage. For the balance of the roughly 56,000 work-eligible adults, the administration is focused on helping them find work or acquire the skills needed to find and keep a job.

Some welfare-reform types attack this as backsliding to the days when there were a million people on welfare and not much was done to help people earn their own way.

That's just ridiculous.

Under de Blasio's two predecessors, a "work-first" mentality prevailed. People got put in jobs no matter how low the pay or poor the prospects for achieving self-sufficiency.

De Blasio and Banks want to help people take care of themselves by customizing assistance to client needs, whether it's for vocational training, educational credentials or English proficiency.

The new thrust also will phase out the work-for-benefits Work Experience Program and replace it with internships, work study, training or employment vouchers geared to real careers.

That's not bleeding-heart liberal; it's pragmatic. Only one in 10 city workers has not completed high school. Yet three out of five of HRA's employable clients lack a high-school diploma.

Allowing recipients up to age 24 to pursue education, meeting yearly goals and making sufficient progress, is the smart thing to do. Others pursue college degrees, provided they maintain a required grade average and are engaged in work activities for 20 hours per week.

Part of the recent increase in cash assistance rolls takes the form of one-time cash assistance to prevent eviction and reduce homelessness. Given the high cost of shelters, that, too, sounds to me like a smart fiscal strategy, as well being better for families.

A revamped approach to welfare was long overdue. That may mean that cash assistance rolls rise modestly for a period of time. If it reflects a bridge to better long-term outcomes, it's well worth the cost.