

Floodgates open for new attacks on welfare

by H. Graham Lowry

The hue and cry for welfare reform, already at a fever pitch among the nation's governors, will certainly intensify following President Clinton's State of the Union message. His endorsement of a federal two-year limit on welfare assistance, and forced work to make up for missed child support payments, opens the way for more vicious schemes already entertained in state capitals across the country.

In violation of existing federal law, many of the "reforms" at the state level were permitted nonetheless under waivers granted under President Bush. One of the most notorious of these was the New Jersey statute which denied mothers any additional funds for children born after they were on welfare. A pilot program in Wisconsin to completely terminate Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) after two years was similarly granted a waiver by Bush, and renewed last November by the Clinton administration. During the first month of 1994, state legislative proposals to treat welfare victims simply as "useless eaters" accumulated at an alarming rate.

'Fox hounds and pit bulls'

Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, the blueblood scion of an old New England family of opium traders, has offered a plan to force "able-bodied" welfare recipients off the rolls and into "community service" jobs at less than the minimum wage. In his State of the State address on Jan. 13, Weld claimed the scheme would put 50,000 welfare recipients to work—about half the state's total—and slash AFDC funding by \$40 million. If granted federal approval, Weld's plan would cut off all benefits and require "community service" for all new welfare recipients who failed to find jobs within 60 days; all current recipients would have to do so within a year. In December, official unemployment in Massachusetts stood at 200,000. The *total* number of full-time jobs listed by the state's Department of Employment and Training was less than 10,000.

On Jan. 21, Weld virtually resurrected debtors' prisons, signing a law which makes failure to provide child support a felony punishable by up to five years in jail and a \$10,000 fine. He claimed the law would turn the government of Massachusetts "into both a fox hound and a pit bull when it comes to chasing deadbeat dads." In less eloquent language, the bill is best described as a budget-cutting measure.

The Massachusetts Department of Revenue is now em-

powered to use records of labor unions, professional organizations, telephone and utility companies, and credit card companies to "track down" parents who are behind in their child support payments. Many such parents will also be required to provide health insurance. Weld says the bill will knock another 7,000 families out of AFDC and will reduce welfare and Medicaid payments by \$102 million. With all these "savings," Weld has offered a \$105 million tax cut in his new budget—though that assumes \$125 million in new revenues from his proposed floating casinos and video gambling games.

Forced reduction of the welfare population

The future of welfare recipients is also becoming much bleaker in Wisconsin. Gov. Tommy Thompson signed a bill Dec. 13 abolishing the AFDC program by Jan. 1, 1999. An interim pilot program for two counties will cut off benefits for those who do not find work within two years.

The same day that the bill became law, State Sen. Herbert Kohl floated the idea of mandatory birth control for welfare mothers, claiming that such measures were becoming more "acceptable" as a "solution" to poverty. "In their interest, I'm not suggesting Norplant," Kohl said, referring to the contraceptive drug implanted under the skin as a birth-control enforcement measure. "But people are moving in that direction." On Jan. 11, Gerald Whitburn, Wisconsin's Health and Social Service Secretary, declared that women who need welfare assistance to support their children should not have more children.

The state of Colorado received approval from the Clinton administration on Jan. 12 to force welfare recipients to work or be removed from the rolls after two years. Oregon is awaiting federal approval for its plan to abolish all welfare and food stamp payments, and use the funds for forced work programs. Democratic leaders of the House in Washington State called on Jan. 20 for "a phase-down of benefits for long-term recipients" by 10% per year after four years on welfare. They also proposed eliminating additional payments to mothers who give birth while on welfare.

In California, where Gov. Pete Wilson has already proposed shifting 50% of the cost of AFDC payments to the counties, legislation has been filed to begin terminating county payments to able-bodied recipients. Assembly Republican Jan Goldsmith filed a bill Jan. 24 to end benefits for recipients able to work after they have accepted assistance for three months in any given year.

The bill would overturn two state court rulings which struck down previous ordinances in San Diego and Alameda counties limiting welfare payments, which the courts found to be in violation of California law. If cutting off assistance becomes a matter of state law, the counties can chop away at will. Goldsmith said the bill was necessary to permit the counties to keep up with the tight budgetary times—and to force more people to find work.