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Many Still in Poverty After Leaving Welfare Concludes Welfare Reform Forum by NYWF®

The numbers did decrease as welfare reform's five-year term limits moved many off the rolls, but not necessarily out of poverty. For the next phase of welfare reform -- presently being debated by Congress -- to be successful, more emphasis should be put on education, child care, job training and providing a safety net for those without assistance but who are still poor. Such were the conclusions presented Wednesday by a panel of present and former welfare recipients and those who provide them with support, organized by The New York Women's Foundation (NYWF), the only non-profit group providing grants and support exclusively to New York City's women-run community groups helping low-income women and girls.

The recurring message from all the panelists was that the decline in welfare caseloads over the last five years does not mean significantly less women and children live in poverty. According to Trudy Renwick, chief economist for the Financial Policy Institute, "while the number of public assistance recipients fell by 46% between 1995- 2000, the number of New Yorkers living in poverty fell by only 15%," she said. "About 19% of New York's children lived in poverty in 2000, but 40% of African American children in New York lived in situations below the poverty level." Renwick added, "Because welfare now is so punitive, many are forced to work at fast food places" and other dead-end jobs with few, if any, benefits for those who need a living wage. "Close to 40% of families in New York State don't have enough money to make ends meet. This is not a successful welfare policy."

In the face of this country's economic downtown, coupled with "workfare," keynote speaker Frances Fox Piven, noted welfare expert, award-winning author and Political Science and Sociology Professor at CUNY Graduate School and University Center told the forum audience that "rising unemployment is exposing the recklessness of welfare reform."

"Even the poster children of welfare reform, the women who actually got jobs, now confront layoffs and cuts in hours. Most of these women are not eligible for unemployment insurance, partly because that program has also been whittled back

over the past two decades. In the past, welfare was the program to which jobless poor women turned. Under the new regime of time limits and tough love, these women have only soup kitchens and shelters to which to turn.”

And, while welfare reforms provide no more than five years of assistance – during a person’s lifetime -- to recipients who must then be employed and self-supporting thereafter, “the reality is people receiving welfare are forced into workfare assignments that almost never help them secure employment that can sustain them,” said Roxanna Henry, student leader at the Welfare Rights Initiative, a group that helps women on assistance stay in college.

“Hidden from public view are heartbreaking accounts of welfare policy malfunction, such as that while nearly 90% of the students who complete a college degree do secure living wage jobs and permanently exit welfare, 27,000 students receiving public assistance were forced out of City University of NY in the last six years,” she said.

For women fleeing domestic abuse, welfare’s reforms make it even harder to lead a safe and self-sufficient life. “Welfare reform has made it significantly difficult for women to leave abusive homes, maintain economic self-sufficiency and protect their children,” said Sham-e-Ali al-Jamil from the Urban Justice Center’s Empowerment Project. “There should be more sensitivity and understanding about family violence issues, since survivors are already living a life that is fragile. Without a safety net, their situation becomes even more desperate for themselves and their children.”

But there are poor women who find it virtually impossible to access the system, contends Leslie Monroy, former welfare recipient and representative from community group Make The Road By Walking. “In the past 5 years, immigrant women and their children are among those half a million families who lost important government support that helped feed their children, keep their apartments, and receive important medical care.”

“The lack of translation service means that eligible immigrant women and their families are going hungry and becoming homeless,” she said. From her own experience, Monroy added, “When the welfare center sends us to work, among the problems is no information about licensed child care providers. All in all, the system needs to give better protection to immigrants, be fair, provide adequate childcare and be accessible to all low income women.”

Panelists from this timely and important forum, co-sponsored by the Center for New York City Affairs and the Nonprofit Management Program at the Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy, New School University, addressed an audience of policy makers, representatives of elected officials, other community groups, lawyers, media, students, and former and present welfare recipients.

Several of the panelists noted that while some of the reforms are working, many are not and many people who need help are falling through the cracks while the media and the government concentrate, and even flaunt, the reduction of the welfare rolls as proof of the program's success. "The media only concentrate on the dwindling numbers on welfare, not on how these people are doing," said WRI's Henry.

So for the next phase of welfare reform, which will include term limits and perhaps even more stringent regulations, one conclusion from the panel is to use the past five years as a lesson for future reform.

"We have an extraordinary opportunity today to learn from the lessons of this recent welfare reform. It is essential that we design a system that creates and supports a living wage for every adult and every child. To accomplish this we must eliminate administrative obstacles to obtaining subsistence level benefits, create real support services, and allow universal access to education and training," said Wendy Bach, a forum moderator, a NYWF board member, and an attorney for the Urban Justice Center.

Echoing Bach's sentiment was Andrew White, Director of the Center for New York City Affairs at the Milano Graduate School. "With more than half a million New Yorkers leaving the welfare rolls last year; with a new mayor, many new City Council members; a new relationship being forged with Albany and Washington and new welfare legislation just around the corner, we need to examine the grassroots impact of these government decisions. As future policy makers and program directors, our students -- and the rest of this city -- need to take advantage of the tremendous educational opportunity."

In concluding the forum, but hopefully beginning a very important debate, NYWF's Executive Director, Miriam Buhl, said: "As a non-profit that works with agencies that help the city's low-income women and girls, we see what it's like in the 'trenches' and we see the impact of welfare's changes."

Buhl called on policy makers, welfare administrators, reporters, government officials, and all involved in the welfare program and even New York's citizens to "see what we see before TANF legislation is re-enacted; before more women lose their assistance and self-confidence and before another poverty stereotype is created. Our future steps in welfare reform should be worthwhile ones, humane ones, and ones that benefit those who need help the most."