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Cover Page Footnote

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URBAN WELFARE REFORM: A COMMUNITY-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Margo D. Butts*

I. Introduction

There is a consensus concerning the need to reform the existing welfare system.¹ Reform, however, must be well considered. Welfare, like other social service programs, provides a necessary "safety net" for many Americans.² Ill-conceived reform may have a destructive effect on the lives of millions.³

Appropriate reform will attempt to remedy the socioeconomic conditions that cause poverty and welfare dependency.⁴ Unfortunately, the welfare reform strategies currently being debated across the country overlook the causes of poverty and misconstrue the basis for welfare dependency. Current reform proposals "reinforce the idea that the government's aim should be to cut immediate costs [of welfare] rather than invest effectively in the productivity of future generations."⁵ Such notions are not only misguided but if implemented will have harsh and adverse consequences in the future.

This Essay argues that logical answers to the welfare "problem" can be found in community-based efforts to redeem the welfare system.⁶ Community organizations are particularly competent to

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1. See, e.g., Personal Responsibility Act of 1995, H.R. 4, 104th Cong., 1st Sess. (1995); Camilla E. Watson, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Welfare, National Health, and Old Age: A Comparative Perspective of the Policies of the United States and Canada*, 1993 UTAH L. REV. 1337, 1355 (1993).

2. See Jason DeParle, *Despising Welfare, Pitying Its Young*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 28, 1994, § 4, at 5.

3. See *infra* text accompanying notes 21-30.

4. See *infra* part IV.

5. Stephanie Coontz, *The Welfare Discussion We Really Need*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Dec. 29, 1994, at 19. See also MARK GREENBERG, STRIKING OUT: HOUSE REPUBLICAN OFFER A TROUBLING VISION FOR WELFARE REFORM, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, CENTER FOR SOCIAL POLICY (1994); Kevin Sack, *Pataki Proposing Deepest Cutbacks in Welfare Plans*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 15, 1995, at A1; Steven L. Myers, *Giuliani Seeks Deepest Cut in City Spending Since 1930's*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 15, 1995, at A1.

6. See *infra* part V for an example of one community's efforts to change the existing welfare system.

bring about effective welfare reform. Each community has its own unique socio-economic conditions that contribute to poverty and welfare dependency. The residents, businesses and service providers of each neighborhood are in the best position to identify those problems and develop strategies to remedy them. Part II explores the causes of welfare dependency. Part III discusses the potentially devastating effects that the current reform proposals will have on the country. Part IV outlines the goals for effective welfare reform. Part V describes the welfare reform program that the Bedford-Stuyvesant community is implementing. This Essay concludes that effective welfare reform requires community initiated programs that focus on remedying the factors that lead to poverty and welfare dependency.

II. Welfare Dependency

Welfare was originally established to provide for those who, because of a disability, were incapable of providing for themselves.⁷ Widespread unemployment during the Great Depression, however, forced the expansion of welfare to provide for those who were fit for work but temporarily unable to "make a living."⁸ Under the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933,⁹ the federal government assumed the responsibility for providing temporary monetary relief for all needy unemployed persons and their dependents.¹⁰ For some families and individuals, what was supposed to be a temporary means of survival has turned into a way of life.¹¹ Many of these families and individuals do not perceive gainful employment as a realistic option; instead, they rely exclusively on welfare on account of low self-esteem and lack of marketable skills. The cur-

7. See Lucy A. Williams, *The Ideology Of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 102 YALE L.J. 719, 721 (1992):

Public welfare programs in the United States originated as discretionary programs for the 'worthy' poor. Local asylums or poorhouses separated the deserving poor, such as the blind, deaf, insane and eventually the orphaned, from undeserving, compromising all other paupers including children in families, with wide variation and broad local administrative discretion.

Id.

8. See generally EDWARD BERKOWITZ & KIM MCQUAID, *CREATING THE WELFARE SYSTEM: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TWENTIETH CENTURY REFORM* (1980) (discussing expansion of welfare in the 20th century).

9. Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, Pub. L. No. 73-15, Ch. 30, § 4(a), 48 Stat. 57 (1933).

10. Williams, *supra* note 7, at 722.

11. See *Crackdown on Deadbeat Parents Good Start Toward Welfare Reform*, SUN-SENTINEL, Apr. 25, 1995, at 8A; *Cheers For Welfare Reform*, BOSTON HERALD, Feb. 10, 1995, at 26.

rent debate on welfare reform recognizes the need to end welfare as a way of life.¹² Effective welfare reform, however, will not come about through reactionary, short-termed, proposals. Only a thoughtful response that looks to the root causes of welfare dependency will prove successful in effectuating a more self-sufficient society.

Since the early 1990s, the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform has been reactionary.¹³ Furthermore, the conservative explanation for welfare dependency has confused cause and effect. As Professor Lucy Williams summed up, "the current 'welfare reform' debate goes something like this: Aid to Families with Dependent Children ("AFDC") recipients are themselves responsible for their poverty because they have not 'pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps'; they are dysfunctional mothers incapable of fitting into the mainstream of society, and they are economically and emotionally atrophied because of their 'dependence' on welfare." ¹⁴ These arguments overlook the fact that a family without boots has no bootstraps with which to pull itself up.

Welfare dependency is rooted in poverty, not indolence.¹⁵ Children do not aspire to grow up to be welfare recipients. However, since one out of every five American children is living in poverty,¹⁶ their indigence, when left unaddressed, breeds generational destitution. Therefore, many of America's welfare dependents face a vicious cycle. The institution of poverty they are born into, reinforces dependency rather than escape from the welfare system. In order to address the current welfare problem, society must tackle the root cause of poverty. Today's poverty stems from a lack of marketable skills and insufficient employment opportunities.

12. See, e.g., Richard A. Gephardt, *Shortsighted GOP Plan Would Not Solve Welfare's Ills; Proposal is "Weak on Work, Tough on Kids"*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Mar. 23, 1995, at B7; Jean Hopfensperger, *Fixing Welfare*, MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL STAR-TRIBUNE, Sept. 6, 1994, at A1.

13. See, e.g., Michael Wines, *White House Links Riots to Welfare*, N.Y. TIMES, May 5, 1992, at A1 (Bush administration attributed the Los Angeles riots that followed the verdict in the Rodney King beating case to welfare); Seth Sutel, *Quayle: Welfare to Blame*, BOSTON GLOBE, May 14, 1992, at 13 (same).

14. Williams, *supra* note 7, at 719 (footnotes omitted).

15. Lucie B. White, *No Exit: Rethinking Welfare Dependency from a Different Ground*, 81 GEO. L.J. 1961, 1962 n.3 (1993).

16. Note, *Into the Mouths of Babes: La Familia Latina and Federally Funded Child Welfare*, 195 HARV. L. REV. 1319 (1992) (citing STATISTICAL HANDBOOK ON U.S. HISPANICS 218 tbl. H3-5 (Frank L. Schnick & Renee Schnick eds., 1991)).

III. Current Reform Proposals

Current welfare reform proposals have two goals.¹⁷ They seek to (i) rid the system of people who purportedly "do not want to work" and (ii) "reduc[e] the costs of welfare."¹⁸ While the current proposals offer short range strategies that reduce welfare roles and outlays, they do not provide comprehensive solutions that will change the economic status of welfare recipients so as to eliminate the need for welfare altogether. In short, if the current welfare reform proposals are enacted, the availability of welfare assistance will be reduced, while the need for welfare will continue to persist.

Social service providers and urban community-based organizations are concerned that the current welfare reform proposals will have catastrophic effects on the fabric of society. Experimental programs such as Learnfare, a Wisconsin program that docked welfare payments to families in which a teenager in the household did not attend school regularly,¹⁹ have been found to cause major hardships.²⁰ Similar strategies such as Family Cap,²¹ Wedfare²² and incentives for recipients to use Norplant contraception²³ attempt to impose moral standards upon welfare recipients rather than reduce their poverty.²⁴

Other aspects of the current welfare reform proposals promise to impose great human suffering.²⁵ Forcing welfare mothers to work

17. See, e.g., Personal Responsibility Act of 1995, H.R. 4, 104th Cong., 1st Sess. (1995).

18. Martha F. Davis & Mimi Abramovitz, *The Myth that Welfare Policies Don't Work*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, May 21, 1992, at 19.

19. See David Whitman, *War on Welfare Dependency*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Apr. 20, 1992, at 34.

20. The program was discontinued by an injunction issued in federal court. Under this program, families were left destitute and homeless when their grants were drastically reduced. See White, *supra* note 15, at 1962 n.3.

21. This is a program that lowers welfare payments to women who have an additional child while on welfare. Kery Murakami, *Welfare Proposal May Be Hard To Sell*, SEATTLE TIMES, May 12, 1995, at B4; Mimi Abramowitz & Frances F. Piven, *Scapegoating Women On Welfare*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 23, 1993, at A23.

22. Wedfare is a New Jersey program that offers bonuses to women who marry while on welfare. Mimi Abramowitz & Frances F. Piven, *Scapegoating Women On Welfare*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 23, 1993, at A23.

23. *Id.*

24. Cheryl Wetzstein, *Abortion Tops "Family Cap" Debate*, WASH. TIMES, May 1, 1995, at A6.

25. See Frank Reeves & Jack Torry, *Ticket Sales No Good News For Specter*, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, May 7, 1995, at B2; Myriam Marques, *In The Rush to Reform Welfare, GOP Forgot About Grandparents*, ORLANDO SENTINEL, May 1, 1995, at A10; Robert A. Jordon, *Welfare Reform In A Harsh Light*, BOSTON GLOBE, Feb. 4, 1995, at 19.

after two years and putting limits on welfare benefits will increase the burden on people in desperate situations, particularly children.²⁶ Starvation will become a brutal reality in urban America.²⁷ Prison populations will increase dramatically. Child welfare needs, arising out of abuse and neglect, will reach epidemic proportions.²⁸ Health care needs will be addressed at astronomical costs, or ultimately ignored. Mental illness among current welfare recipients will reach astounding heights. Those Americans who are fortunate enough to have jobs will face danger on the urban streets through which they walk.

IV. Effective Welfare Reform

The goals for welfare reform programs should be to provide welfare recipients with (i) the technical skills necessary for obtaining a job in today's competitive job market, and (ii) the life skills necessary to retain a job and care for a family. In addition, a successful welfare program must be based in, and operated by, a community. Community-based organizations are in the best position to develop and implement welfare reform proposals. The particular problems facing each unique neighborhood can be most easily identified and effectively addressed by the businesses, residents and service providers of the community.

The primary goal of welfare reform must be to alleviate generational destitution through education and the creation of employment opportunities.²⁹ These goals must be part of a comprehensive

26. See Kery Murakami, *Welfare Proposal May Be Hard To Sell*, SEATTLE TIMES, May 12, 1995, at B4 (stating that Washington state's welfare reforms most harshly affect children); Interview with Charles Rangel, United States Congressman from New York (D), on NIGHTLINE (ABC Television, Nov. 23, 1994) (arguing that even Republicans would not agree to welfare cuts that would have inhumane results).

27. See Jonathan S. Landay, *Welfare Reform Threatens to Bring a Scrooge Effect*, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Dec. 22, 1994, at 2 ("A coalition of religious groups and charities that feed the poor . . . said [that] states and charities are already unable to cope with rising food-aid demands and will drop millions of Americans from food programs if funds are reduced.").

28. See Donald Bradley, *Report Reveals the Sad and Shocking Extent of Fatal Child Abuse; Recommendations of Board are in Conflict with GOP Welfare Plan*, KANSAS CITY STAR, Apr. 27, 1995, at A1; Judith Havemann, *Packwood Backs State Food Stamp Plan; Senate Chairman Favors Welfare Reform Separate From Budget Bill*, WASH. POST, Apr. 27, 1995, at A18.

29. See Coontz, *supra* note 5, at 19:

Our modern welfare system emerged as a substitute for the Full Employment Act proposed by the United Auto Workers in the 1940s. The consequence of America's refusal to commit to investing in jobs for all were hidden for years by rising wages and job security for union-protected work-

plan that addresses every cause of welfare dependency. Welfare reform must ensure that there is adequate education, housing, nutrition and mental health services for community residents. It must develop plans for career exploration, life skills training, job creation and economic development for the community. Inadequate nutrition prevents children from learning. Substandard housing causes stress that negatively affects motivation. The children of illiterate parents are likely to suffer from poor school performance. Lack of diversion activity leads to delinquency. Lack of practical skills result in insufficient employment opportunities. Individuals and families who have not had the opportunity to provide for themselves often develop a sense of hopelessness. This hopelessness leaves families with a feeling of impotence; they begin to believe that public support is absolutely necessary for survival.

A society of truly self-sufficient individuals who do not depend on welfare for survival will only come about if all these issues are addressed. A holistic approach to achieving self-sufficiency is essential to effective welfare reform. Chronically unemployed or underemployed individuals must be given the confidence to learn a marketable skill. Studies show that recipients who complete college or successful vocational programs can be gainfully employed, tax-paying citizens.³⁰ In addition, it is important that welfare recipients acquire the life skills that are essential to successful job retention.

V. The Sty Tech Technological Training Center: One Community's Welfare Reform Program

The Bedford-Stuyvesant community has worked together for the past nine years to improve the general quality of life in its neighborhood. With the belief that the residents could remedy the problems that plague their community, a coalition of local businesses, organizations, residents and service providers founded the Bedford-Stuyvesant Community Conference, Inc. ("BSCC").³¹ The community-based strategic planning efforts of BSCC provide

ers, government subsidized educational expansion for the middle class, and a policy of coercion and exclusion directed at unprotected workers.

30. See generally HOWARD SAMUELS STATE MANAGEMENT AND POLICY CENTER, THE GRADUATE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY CENTER OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, FROM WELFARE TO INDEPENDENCE: THE COLLEGE OPTION (A Report to the Ford Foundation, Mar. 1990).

31. See *Brooklyn Neighborhoods*, NEWSDAY, Feb. 22, 1995, at II9 (Brooklyn ed.).

solutions for many societal concerns currently being addressed, including welfare reform.³²

In 1992, BSCC developed a Strategic Neighborhood Action Plan ("SNAP"). This plan studied every factor that affects the quality of life in a community, including economic development, community safety and the availability of adequate housing, early childhood education, child welfare and health and human services. BSCC then developed strategic goals for addressing the root causes of the community's socioeconomic conditions and securing economic revitalization and self-sufficiency for neighborhood residents.

The strategic plan developed by BSCC for reforming welfare includes the Sty Tech Technological Training Center, a comprehensive community-based program. It is specifically designed to help public assistance recipients in becoming self-sufficient. While the Bedford-Stuyvesant community has only begun the initial stages of implementation related to the Sty Tech program, it promises to be a model for welfare reform.

As the name implies, the Sty Tech Technological Training Center is an educational facility that will train the unemployed, the underemployed and the youth of the community for careers in the technological industry. Sty Tech will offer an eighteen-month curriculum beginning with a preorientation phase. This phase will focus on such preparatory needs as goal setting, physical wellness, ending math anxiety, stress management and family counseling. The preparatory phase of the Sty Tech curriculum is essential to any welfare reform program that seeks to put people to work.

The training phase will offer instruction in such basic skills as business math and English, and such technological skills as telecommunications, digital electronics, telephony, and computer literacy, assembly and repair. By focusing on technological skills, the employment prospects for program participants will be ensured through the twenty-first century. Basic life skills will be taught as well to ensure successful job retention. Sty Tech will also provide entrepreneurship training for those interested in self-employment.³³ The instruction is designed to be nontraditional. It will rely on hands-on training sessions, on-the-job instruction and condensed classroom periods. Program participants will be given the

32. See, e.g., Personal Responsibility Act of 1995, H.R. 4, 104th Cong., 1st Sess. (1995).

33. This component of the program includes training with respect to small business ventures including securing funding, business budgeting, preparing competitive bids, etc.

opportunity to apply the skills learned in the training center through participation in internships.

The Sty Tech program was developed by individuals and organizations who are part of the Bedford-Stuyvesant community. Some organizers include retired technological experts, representatives from Advanced Technological Solutions,³⁴ and social service professionals who have successfully developed and operated other community-based training programs. It is part of a comprehensive economic development strategy that includes business and labor force development in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The Sty Tech program represents an alternative to the other "workfare" programs. Current welfare-to-work strategies require recipients to search for jobs immediately.³⁵ Recipients with few or no skills, however, will not benefit from a two-to-six week program. Additionally, "make work" jobs that lack long-term employment opportunities, only prolong the inevitable. When the "make work" is completed and its benefits cut, the welfare recipient is left unemployed. The Sty Tech program would provide Bedford-Stuyvesant residents with the tools to obtain gainful employment. In addition, by focusing on technological training, the trainee has an increased chance for long-term employment. Though implementation of the Sty Tech program will initially cost an estimated \$1.9 million,³⁶ it promises to bring about greater savings in dollars and in human suffering in the long run.

VI. Conclusion

Effective welfare reform requires initiatives that focus on the causes of poverty and welfare dependence. Community-based organizations must play an important role in any welfare reform strategy. Those who live and work in the community are in the best position to understand the needs of the neighborhood and develop solutions for the problems it faces. The Sty Tech program offers a model for reform. Developed by members of the Bedford-Stuyvesant community, Sty Tech is designed to create new employment opportunities and to place welfare recipients in well-paying,

34. This company was formerly part of IBM. When IBM proposed to close the Bedford-Stuyvesant plant, the employees solicited funding to purchase the plant from IBM, and formed a new corporation.

35. See DeParle, *supra* note 2.

36. Personal Responsibility Act of 1995, H.R. 4, 104th Cong., 1st Sess. (1995).

long-term jobs. Every effort to reform welfare must focus on job creation and job training that is geared toward current labor market trends. Such measures will put people to work and bring about a self-sufficient society.

