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New Legal Problems Low-Income Clients Face When They Work
The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 encouraged a shift in the emphasis of state welfare policy toward a “work first” philosophy. This approach stresses rapid job placement by requiring increasing percentages of welfare recipients in each state to participate in work activities for increasing numbers of hours; at the same time it limits the extent to which education and training may count as such work activities. The strong economy, with its accompanying proliferation of jobs, coincided with the passage of the Act, giving the impression that “welfare reform” has caused the dramatic decline in the welfare rolls. In fact, the economy and increased aid to the working poor are arguably more responsible for the dramatic decline than passage of the Act. Furthermore, attributing the decline in welfare rolls to the successful placement of former recipients in self-sustaining jobs ignores the significant percentage of recipients who lose benefits for reasons other than newfound financial stability. With the addition of stringent work requirements, several pervasive problems plaguing low-income individuals have resurfaced and demand attention. These problems are significant obstacles to the promotion of “self-sufficiency,” the mantra of welfare reform.

Numerous articles have been written identifying the “hard to serve” population.
tion: those who have little formal education or job experience, who face the complexities of domestic violence, who have substance abuse problems, and who lack transportation or child care. Certain provisions of the federal welfare reform legislation enable states to address the needs of this group, but even when states adopt this philosophy in theory, the reality in the local welfare office is often very different. Illinois offers a telling example. Despite its stated intention to address the serious barriers many clients face in moving from welfare to work, too often clients face an assembly-line approach to moving them off cash assistance.

Most of the examples cited below come from the National Center on Poverty Law’s Let’s Get It Right! project, which, among other activities, reports its findings in a column in the Center’s monthly newsletter, Illinois Welfare News. The column features reports received from both clients and advocates about chronic problems resulting from the implementation of welfare reform at local Department of Human Services offices statewide. Some of the reports reflect minor issues that may be resolved at the local level. However, the project has also revealed more pervasive problems that go beyond local office error—problems that undoubtedly occur in other states as well. In such instances, project staff confer directly with welfare administrators about consistent misapplication of the Department of Human Services’ policies and insist upon intervention. In many cases the result has been changes in inequitable rules or clarification of confusing or conflicting policies.5

I. Welfare Reform: The Theory

With the implementation of welfare reform, the Illinois Department of Human Services boasted a new philosophy and detailed plan on how to address the needs of people requiring assistance. It offered four “beliefs” that would inform its welfare-to-work policies:

- Welfare is not good enough for any family.
- A job is better than welfare.
- Children are better off in families where the responsible adult(s) work.
- Work must pay (families must be financially better off working than on welfare).6

The Department of Human Services refers to its approach to helping welfare recipients move away from cash assistance as the “pipeline to self-sufficiency.”7 The pipeline incorporates a five-step process, beginning with an interview at the time of application for benefits. As required by federal welfare reform legislation, the caseworker assesses a client’s situation and helps develop a plan for services that will enable the client’s family to reach a point where cash assistance is

4 Such problems include the misapplication or nonapplication of proper department regulations at particular aid offices and recurring instances of client mistreatment by department personnel.

5 Two major advocacy efforts were commenced by the National Center on Poverty Law and supported by various examples compiled by the Let’s Get It Right! project. The first was a comprehensive approach to the Department of Human Services’ failure to implement Temporary Assistance for Needy Families appropriately for people with disabilities, resulting in inadequate opportunities for this group and unfair sanctions imposed on it. The initiative resulted in such changes within the agency as a new grievance procedure, placement of mental health professionals in local welfare offices, and several memos on policy sent to department personnel. The second advocacy effort focused on numerous examples of department noncompliance with food stamp program rules. The reports gained the attention of federal oversight officials within the U.S. Department of Agriculture; they helped leverage cooperation from the Department of Human Services in addressing the problems.


7 The “pipeline” is an actual diagram distributed by the department as well as a term describing its approach to welfare reform.
unnecessary. In addition to documenting the family’s goals for achieving financial independence, the Responsibility and Services Plan is expected to identify and address any barriers to achieving those goals. For their part, clients must agree to the goals detailed in the plan, and sign it, thereby demonstrating their willingness to comply with its goals.

At this preliminary stage, certain applicants who have only a temporary need may be diverted from cash assistance through the provision of “front-door money,” which pays certain work-related expenses to enable applicants to maintain employment. A common example is a major car repair for someone who relies on a car to travel to work. The Department of Human Services credits the availability of front-door money with averting dependence on public assistance by keeping people from getting on the rolls in the first place.

The second step in the department’s pipeline is “preparticipation activities,” or preparation for work. Federal legislation gives states some flexibility in determining how and when to use education and training in their welfare-to-work programs. Educational programs to address problems such as illiteracy, classes to prepare for high school equivalency examinations, English as a Second Language classes, and even postsecondary education are not specifically enumerated as allowable work activities. However, states may elect to include them in definitions of activities that are explicitly allowed, such as education directly related to employment, vocational education, training, or community service, and Illinois has done so. Recipients may also be required to participate in job-readiness activities to enhance fundamental skills for finding and maintaining employment, in job skills training, or in a job search, or all three.

The third stage of the pipeline, participation activities, calls for work experience or community service. Work experience means working without pay in order to develop job skills and work history and obtain the references necessary to find unsubsidized employment.

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8 Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, states must make an initial assessment of recipients’ skills and needs, 42 U.S.C. § 602(15)(A). States may also develop, for recipients, personal responsibility plans identifying the education, training, and job placement skills they need to move into the work force. In Illinois the Responsibility and Services Plan identifies both the recipient’s needs and any potential barriers to employment.

9 Such barriers may include alcohol or substance abuse; domestic violence; educational deficits such as limited English language skills, lack of a high school diploma or its equivalent, and insufficient reading abilities; transportation; or lack of adequate child care.

10 89 ILL. ADMIN CODE § 112.75(a).

11 ILL. DEPT OF HUMAN SERVS., POLICY MANUAL § 02-06-01-a (“Financial Help for Applicants When They Find a Job”). For further discussion see Diane M. Goffinet & Daniel Lesser, Front-Door Money Program Averts Dependence on Public Assistance, Department of Human Services Says, But Is Yet to Be Broadly Tapped by Recipients, ILL. WELFARE NEWS (Nat’l Ctr. on Poverty Law, Chicago, Ill.), Aug. 2000, at 1. The grants are not dispensed directly by the department but rather by local social service agencies with which the department contracts.

12 Id. The article notes that the department is referring only 150 people per month for front-door money, despite its claim that this program has helped reduce the welfare caseload significantly and that the lack of eligibility criteria raises concerns that the money may be distributed arbitrarily. Many welfare applicants are never informed of the availability of front-door money.


14 Recipients who lack a high school diploma or its equivalent, those whose reading level is at or below ninth grade, and those who need remedial education to complete college credits may be assigned to education activities below the postsecondary level. 89 ILL. ADMIN. CODE § 112.78.

15 ILL ADMIN. CODE tit. 89, § 112.78(e).

16 Id. § 112.78(e).
Some clients may participate in vocational training, which includes skills classes designed to increase clients’ ability to obtain and maintain employment. Other clients are deemed “job ready” and are assigned to job search, where they are required to begin interviewing for permanent employment. Alternatively those who have a high school diploma or its equivalent, who possess the necessary aptitude, ability, and interest, and who do not already possess a bachelor’s degree may be assigned to postsecondary education.17

The fourth stage of the pipeline is placement in full- or part-time employment. Rather than reducing cash assistance dollar for dollar, Illinois applies special budgeting known as “Work Pays” to recipients who find work.18 This allows recipients to keep two out of every three dollars they make and to remain eligible for a reduced cash grant until their income exceeds three times the amount of the original cash grant.

When clients are no longer eligible for cash assistance, they enter the fifth and final stage of the pipeline, in which they continue to receive food stamps and at least six months of “Transitional Medicaid.” The combination of Work Pays budgeting, child care subsidies, Transitional Medicaid regardless of earnings, and the possible continuing eligibility for food stamps is meant to make the transition to employment as smooth as possible.19

Numerous clients have reported the Illinois Department of Human Services’ resistance to approving postsecondary education. Many are improperly assessed and consequently ill suited to search for permanent employment, and they are threatened with sanctions if they fail or refuse to comply with their work assignments.

The purpose of the Let’s Get It Right! project is to address this disconnect between theory and reality. The project highlights the disparity between the comprehensive, pragmatic approach to achieving “self-sufficiency” that the Department of Human Services touts to the public and what is actually happening to aid recipients. Three of the most common categories of Let’s Get It Right! reports are problems with education and training programs, unwillingness to be responsive to child care difficulties, and the improper termination of benefits to which clients remain entitled even if they are no longer eligible for cash aid. The following examples illustrate the discrepancy between written policy and actual practice.

A. Education and Training

A “work first” philosophy maintains that actual work experience is more rewarding to individuals than preparatory classes. Although the department advocates this approach, it also acknowledges the necessity of proper preparation for work and consequently provides a variety of education and training programs that are counted as work activities. It also contracts with various trade organizations to provide specialized training to enable recipients to work in particular trades, such as manufacturing. Yet, despite the

17] They must also need the program to obtain employment in a recognized occupation or to upgrade skills for current employment, and they must apply for all available educational benefits, such as the Pell grant and other scholarships, although they are not required to exhaust private loan sources before receiving benefits.

18 ILL. DEPT. OF HUMAN SERVS., POLICY MANUAL §§ 08-01-02-C, 10-01-03-B.

19 See also Maurice Emseleem et al., supra note 2; Sujatha Jagadeesh Branch et al., Child Care for Families Leaving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, in this issue.
breadth of programs available, clients seeking to participate in them often meet considerable resistance and are routinely mandated to participate in a job search. Other clients describe pressure to accept extremely low-paying or otherwise unsuitable employment, despite the department’s public statements that clients who are working should be better off than they are on welfare.

One trend uncovered by the Let’s Get It Right! in the Chicago metropolitan area is pressuring recipients with limited English proficiency to take jobs at the expense of enrolling in English as a Second Language classes that would broaden their employment potential. Recall that the first step in the pipeline is assessment of clients’ employability and barriers to employment. Limited English fluency is considered a barrier to employment and may be addressed by enrollment in an English as a Second Language class.20 But several local welfare offices in the Chicago metropolitan area are located in neighborhoods where many residents’ first language is not English and where a non-English speaker may find employment under often less than optimal work conditions and with limited potential for growth. Consequently many clients are dissuaded from enrolling in language classes.

One report involved a Spanish-speaking domestic violence survivor newly liberated from her abuser but alone with two young children. The woman had always been dependent on her husband to communicate and translate for her, but now she needed to depend on herself. She asked her caseworker about possible enrollment in a nearby English as a Second Language program that met three evenings a week. Her caseworker told her that plentiful jobs in the area did not require her to speak English. However, many of these jobs were extremely low paying, provided no health insurance, and offered minimal potential for advancement or for increased earnings. Despite the woman’s protests, her caseworker threatened to discontinue her cash assistance if she did not apply to these local businesses. She is currently earning $5.25 an hour at an independent food market where she stocks shelves.

Another common complaint involves the inadequate preparation available in mandatory training programs. One report was from an aid recipient who was the legal guardian of her two grandchildren, aged 4 and 2.21 She resided with her grandchildren and her two teenage sons in a one-bedroom apartment.

The grandmother completed a preliminary “life skills” course, mandated by the department to “refresh” clients’ interpersonal skills in the work setting. She was then allowed to choose a specific field; she chose to be trained as a spring coil operator, with a starting salary of $8.00 per hour that could go up to $20.00. The grandmother described how the department, promoting the training program, told recipients that those who worked hard would be able to earn good money. She began the four-month course and worked diligently to learn her new trade. She praised the caliber of the instruction and prided herself on her ability to learn quickly. After completion of the four-month course, she felt confident and prepared.

Her first interview was promising until the employer began asking her about quality control and types of machines with which she was not familiar. She later learned that the four-month training was an abbreviated version of the actual eighteen-month course necessary for placement in the field. The grandmother was incredulous that the department would waste money by placing clients in abbreviated training programs that would be unlikely to make them employable.

20 Such a class may be considered vocational training when the course of study is focused on preparing the recipient for work. Regardless of its classification, the department includes English as a Second Language classes on its list of “preparticipation activities” in the pipeline to prepare recipients for full-time employment.

Furthermore, she discovered that none of the women with whom she trained found jobs in their respective disciplines. After she could not be placed, she returned to the aid office, was given a computer printout of jobs, and was advised to take whatever was available. She is currently working as a security guard for the Chicago Transit Authority at $6.00 per hour. The grandmother quipped, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to be working. I just feel we were promised steak and got bologna.”

Among the most contentious issues related to education and training is postsecondary education. Despite the inclusion of this option in the pipeline to self-sufficiency, higher education must be approved by the caseworker before it may be included in a client’s Responsibility and Services Plan. Numerous clients have reported the department’s resistance to approving postsecondary education: caseworkers have been unconvinced that completion of a postsecondary degree was necessary to find sufficient employment. A single mother of three who was working part-time and enrolled in a community college was one month shy of graduation. One of her two disabled children was stricken with seizures and needed constant care, forcing the mother to quit her job. She went to the local aid office to apply for assistance and informed the intake worker that she was enrolled in school full-time and worked in an accounting internship for sixteen hours per week. Although she had a special business administrator’s certificate, most of the jobs for which she applied required a bachelor of arts degree and practical experience, and thus the internship was an important part of her career preparation.

The intake worker processed the case but cautioned the mother that she might be mandated to work. The mother received benefits for two months but then received a notice from her caseworker that she would have to find employment immediately. According to the caseworker, the client’s business administrator’s certificate was sufficient for her to find work immediately. The mother pleaded with the caseworker; she explained that the accounting internship was giving her ample work experience to find a good-paying job upon graduation and that the business administrator’s certificate was merely like an associate’s degree—insufficient with which to find more than an entry-level position paying a modest wage. Due to the considerable expense of caring for two disabled children, completion of her degree would enable her to find more suitable, better-paying work.

The caseworker continued to insist that the client was already able to find work, refused to approve her education, and threatened to terminate her cash assistance if she did not comply with the department’s directive to find work. Not until an attorney intervened on the woman’s behalf and discussed her situation with the head of the local office were her benefits reinstated and was her Responsibility and Services Plan amended to include her education and accounting internship.

Let’s Get It Right! has received numerous complaints from recipients discouraged from completing postsecondary education. While clients may not quit a job and apply for assistance simply to return to school, most of those who have complained have been working and attending school, and circumstances beyond their control have led to their request for assistance. Furthermore, some of the protestations by caseworkers about completing education are illogical. In one case, a young mother of two was completing her course work in biochemistry at a local college. She had been attending school part-time for three years and working twenty-five hours per week as an intern in a science lab. The client maintained a 3.8 grade point average. Despite previously approving her educational plans, the caseworker suddenly directed her to seek employment one month before she was to graduate. The client pleaded with the caseworker, who demanded written proof of the type of

work available with a degree in biochemistry. An attorney who intervened discovered that the caseworker did not understand the nature of the degree and was not convinced that it would enable the client to get a higher-paying job than she could immediately.

B. Child Care and Working Parents

A second category of Let’s Get It Right! reports involves the need for child care. Several mothers have reported being threatened with sanctions if they did not find work, despite their difficulty in finding adequate child care. Such threats contravene federal law, which specifies that single parents with children under the age of 6 may not be penalized for failure to participate in work activities because of their inability to find child care.23

One report involved a recently divorced domestic violence survivor who lived in Chicago and had no family or friends nearby. Because of a severe learning disability, one of her two children was enrolled in a special preschool some distance away, and classes began mid-morning. Although transportation was provided, the school bus was frequently late and sometimes did not show up at all. To make sure the boy did not miss any of his specialized classes, the mother on occasion took her son to school on public transportation. She was also called occasionally to pick the boy up before the end of school because of emotional outbursts related to his disability.

The younger child could not be enrolled in prekindergarten for the fall because of her late birthday, and having the child with her everywhere made it difficult for the mother to seek work. Finding child care was also difficult since most providers were unable to accommodate the unique difficulties of her disabled son. Several referrals to child care providers who advertised care during nonstandard hours proved to be fruitless.

The mother dutifully recorded the names and numbers of the child care providers from whom she sought care and regularly turned in the list to her caseworker. Even so, her caseworker told her that finding work was imperative because she had already exhausted twenty-six months of her sixty-month lifetime limit on cash aid; the caseworker required her to see an employment contractor immediately. The mother questioned this assignment; again she cited her lack of child care during the hours she would be required to be at the employment agency. Instead of responding to her inquiry, the caseworker imposed sanctions and claimed that the mother had refused to cooperate. The mother lost half of the next month’s grant.24

Illinois has opted to exempt single parents of children under 12 months of age from mandatory work activities. However, several reports received from local offices suggest that caseworkers routinely ignore this provision of state law. While the exemption will not stop a client’s time clock or excuse her from responding to welfare office demands during the child’s first year, the reprieve from having to find work immediately after birth can be critical to the well-being of both mother and baby.

One client reported that, although she informed the caseworker that she had a 1-month-old child, the caseworker, citing her own personal experience of going back to work shortly after giving birth, insisted that the client look for work. The moral of the caseworker’s lecture was that sometimes “you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do.” Numerous Let’s Get It Right! reports have recounted similar stories of caseworkers failing to apply the “child under 1” exemption to new single mothers and instead pressuring them to find employment. Unlike other Let’s Get It Right! reports that involve potential

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23 42 U.S.C. § 602(19)(c)(ii). States may also exempt parents with children less than a year old from work requirements and disregard them in the calculation of participation rates for up to twelve months. Id.

24 For the first instance of a failure to cooperate, benefits are reduced by half of the payment level for the family size but are restored as soon as the family cooperates and signs the requisite forms. ILL. ADMIN. CODE tit. 89, § 117.15 (1999).
abuses of caseworker discretion, these examples uncovered blatant refusal to apply mandatory exemptions to clients’ cases.

C. Improper Termination of Benefits upon Finding Employment

The third category of reports received by Let’s Get It Right! involves the discontinuance of all benefits when a client is no longer eligible for cash assistance. The end of cash assistance does not necessarily mean the end of eligibility for food stamps and Medicaid. If a client becomes employed, the caseworker is supposed to redetermine continued eligibility for these programs.

An advocate from the Illinois Hunger Coalition sent a report regarding a client who was no longer eligible to receive cash aid because of her new employment and whose caseworker failed to reassess her ongoing eligibility for food stamps. The client earned $1,204 per month. Under federal guidelines, however, which the caseworker did not consult, a recipient making up to $1,533 for a family of three may still be eligible for food stamps. The caseworker simply presumed that, since the client was now above the poverty level, her family was ineligible for food stamps. The representative from the Hunger Coalition explained to the caseworker that food stamps were available for households up to 130 percent above the poverty level and demanded that the client’s case be reassessed.

Clients experience similar problems in continuing to receive Medicaid. Illinois has taken several steps to “delink” Medicaid eligibility from cash assistance. Explicit written instructions have been given to agency staff regarding the continuation of Medicaid, and even clients whose cash assistance is terminated for failure to cooperate remain eligible for Medicaid. Nonetheless, numerous clients have reported that, once they began working, their entire case, including Medicaid, was discontinued.

Clients also report that cash assistance is discontinued automatically without the required work incentive disregards being applied. In many instances, low-wage workers remain eligible for cash aid as well as food stamps and Medicaid. A single mother of three found employment at a fast-food restaurant, where she worked thirty hours per week at $5.35 per hour. As soon as she began reporting her income, she received a notice that her grant had been discontinued “due to earnings.” Recipients are entitled to receive partial cash assistance, however, until their earned income is three times the amount of their original cash grant. In this case, the client’s cash grant had been $414, and her earnings were far below the amount necessary to disqualify her from receiving benefits. The client did not realize that she was still eligible to receive cash assistance until she consulted an attorney about an unrelated matter. Several other clients have also sent in Let’s Get It Right! reports on other issues, only to discover, once an attorney reviewed their cases, that the disregards had not been applied. The aforementioned examples are not merely anecdotes of occasional errors or misunderstandings of department policy. The reports received during the project’s three years thus far exemplify systemic problems with welfare reform implementation in Illinois. Perhaps more important, the project has exposed the inconsistency between the philosophy the department touts to the general public about its treatment of welfare recipients and its workers’ actual practices in failing to help

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recipients take advantage of programs that offer support to low-wage workers.

III. Study Confirming Anecdotal Evidence

Living with Welfare Reform: A Survey of Low Income Families in Illinois reports on a study of low-income people in Illinois conducted by Work Welfare and Families and the Chicago Urban League. Responses were obtained from 2,166 clients of Illinois social service agencies through a self-administered survey, and data were collected also from the Department of Human Services and through focus groups conducted around the state. The study highlighted that focusing solely on the decline in the welfare caseload ignored the many families still in dire circumstances who no longer received assistance.

Many of the study’s findings bolster the experience of the Let’s Get It Right! project. For example, the study found that despite the requirement of a formal Responsibility and Services Plan, only 46 percent of those surveyed reported having completed such a plan. Others were not sure whether the plan was among the many forms they had signed; this suggests that, despite its centrality in the state’s theory of welfare reform, implementation of the plan was cursory at best and most likely insufficient to assess the client’s needs properly. Still others reported that they completed the plan with a community service provider, who would not be involved until after the caseworker assessment—supposedly the basis for the plan.

With respect to the availability of education and training, the study found that, in general, recipients were more likely than other low-income individuals to attribute unemployment to lack of skills, experience, or education. A clear sign of the success of education programs is that two-thirds of employed recipients who were referred to such programs were working full-time, compared with 60 percent of those referred to job-readiness skills training and only 43 percent of those referred to neither. While referral to job-readiness skills training did not correlate with having a job that provided health insurance, recipients referred to an educational program were more likely to find work with private health insurance than recipients who were not.

The study found that lack of child care was a more serious problem in Chicago than in central or southern Illinois. Generally recipients cited inability to find child care as a primary impediment to work; they noted particular problems in finding coverage for non-standard hours, after-school care, or programs for children with special needs. Of the recipients interviewed, 5 percent to 7 percent worked night shifts and half worked weekends. Both of these groups found child care especially difficult to secure. Recipients were particularly critical of the lack of child care assistance when they were making the transition from job search to the first few weeks of work. Others stated that once in the work force the state’s long delay in processing payments threatened their child care providers’ willingness to continue to care for their children and made it difficult to keep their jobs.

The study confirmed clients’ complaints that their benefits were terminated inappropriately; it cited community service providers’ reports of termination of cash assistance as soon as recipients

28 Id. at 41.
29 Id. at 59.
30 Id.
31 Id.
32 Id. at 50.
33 Id.
34 Id. at 49.
35 Id. at 50.
started to work even if they remained eligible.\textsuperscript{36} In a thorough examination of the self-reported income levels of ninety-two survey respondents who left cash assistance for employment, 16 percent had their benefits improperly terminated despite remaining eligible for Work Pays budgeting.\textsuperscript{37} Among all the recipients surveyed, 41 percent of those whose cash assistance ended also lost food stamp benefits, many simultaneously with reporting income.\textsuperscript{38} Although welfare recipients generally continue to be eligible for Medicaid benefits even if they find jobs, 39 percent of those surveyed found their Medicaid benefits terminated when they stopped receiving cash assistance.\textsuperscript{39}

Both the study and the \textit{Let's Get It Right!} reports confirm that the appreciable decline in the welfare rolls is attributable to more than achievement of economic independence. Many recipients are losing benefits to which they are still entitled or are being discouraged from utilizing those programs available to help them gain economic stability. While some of the reports imply individual caseworker negligence, in the aggregate they suggest that there may be pressure on caseworkers to reveal as little as possible about available benefits to clients who are not savvy enough to inquire, or there may be pressure on caseworkers to discourage clients from applying for benefits regardless of their eligibility.

\textbf{IV. Conclusion}

The precise reasons for the inconsistency between Department of Human Services policy and practice are open to debate. Some administrators cite the fear of being penalized when recipients start exhausting their five-year limit in July 2002.\textsuperscript{40} Yet, if this were so, more thorough assessments and attention to recipients’ individual needs would seem to be a better approach. A more likely explanation is the perpetual stereotype of welfare and welfare recipients. The “work first” philosophy presupposes that most persons seeking assistance simply need an impetus to seek work and that most of the education and training needed for work can be given on the job. \textit{Let's Get It Right!} reports confirm this hypothesis; clients have been reporting that department personnel often humiliate them for seeking assistance. Several clients report that caseworkers, recounting their own experiences with financial hardship, would point out how they resisted the temptation to ask for a handout. But proper assessments of potential recipients can easily distinguish clients with true barriers to finding permanent employment from those who are more equipped to find work.

Ultimately the detachment between policy and reality may stem from the failure to confront the fundamental question of welfare reform: is the purpose to reduce the welfare rolls or to move people out of poverty? Politicians boast of “ending welfare as we know it” and point to the number of former welfare recipients now working as evidence of the success of welfare reform. But the decrease in the welfare rolls has caused a significant increase in the “working poor,” whose circumstances generally go unacknowledged in public discourse.\textsuperscript{41} The myriad problems surfacing in welfare offices throughout Illinois is a testament to the conflict between truly breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing the rolls as quickly as possible at the expense of those who remain in need of assistance. If the purpose of welfare reform is to

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Id.} at 28.
\item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{Id.} at 29
\item \textsuperscript{38} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{39} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Twenty percent of the caseload may continue to receive benefits beyond the five-year limit. 42 U.S.C. § 608.
\item \textsuperscript{41} The term “working poor” is somewhat imprecise but generally refers to those who are eligible for subsidies for necessities such as housing, child care, or food stamps, despite employment at or above the federal minimum wage of $5.15 per hour. See GREGORY ACS \textit{ET AL., PLAYING BY THE RULES BUT LOSING THE GAME: AMERICA’S WORKING POOR} (2000).
\end{enumerate}
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reduce poverty, then the failure to provide all available services thwarts that goal. Existing policies recognize that finding employment is not always enough for families to become self-reliant, but implementation is lacking. Social service providers, advocates, and clients themselves must demand that practice conform to rhetoric and insist on a true commitment to “self-sufficiency.”

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