

A New Way to Work – Strengthening Welfare Work Requirements

A job is the best anti-poverty program. As a congressman, John Kasich led the effort to implement successful welfare reforms requiring work and education for individuals receiving public benefits. A pillar of those reforms was empowering states to seek new and innovative solutions to help welfare recipients achieve independence. Unfortunately, in the years since, a number of draconian federal rules have been added that limit state autonomy.

Here in Ohio, Gov. Kasich is modernizing the welfare system by partnering with the General Assembly to transform the statewide network of human service and workforce programs in order to improve employment outcomes for low-income Ohioans. But more needs to be done. Ohio is battling the same challenges states across our nation face, such as how to improve the skills of our unemployed so they can obtain sustainable, long-term employment. Gov. Kasich strongly believes in asserting Ohio's right to reform its public assistance system so that it can be successful for the people it serves.

More opportunities to help lift Ohioans up out of poverty: Ohio is ending the siloed, fragmented approach that for far too long has tried to treat the collected “symptoms” of poverty instead of seeking a cure for the underlying challenges that needy Ohioans face. By allocating existing federal and state funds to create a comprehensive case management and employment initiative, Ohio is providing services based on each individual's unique needs, including a focus on obtaining a GED or high school diploma, occupational skills training, and mentoring. However, a number of rules in federal law severely restrict Ohio's ability to move forward.

Federal rules pose challenges to Ohio's new person-centered focus: Individuals receiving benefits through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) generally are required to participate in work activities. Unfortunately, current federal rules governing work activities are overly prescriptive and fail to give states flexibility to customize case management based on an individual's employment-readiness needs. To remedy this federal shortcoming, Ohio is seeking a waiver from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to enable the state to adopt a new approach to reducing dependence on public assistance. Ohio seeks to:

- Remove the distinction between variously weighted work activities to allow recipients to engage in activities that make sense based on their individual circumstances.
- Increase the limit on vocational education training from 12 to 36 months. In Ohio, a number of in-demand jobs require a certification that takes more than 12 months to complete.
- Increase the job search and job readiness time limits from six to 12 weeks and remove the four-consecutive-week limit. Stringent limits on job searches make it harder to connect individuals to employment that fits their skill set.

- Remove the monthly cap (but maintain the annual cap) on good cause hours to provide more flexibility to manage extenuating circumstances impacting work participation, such as caring for sick children who cannot attend child care.

Accountability and personal responsibility are important components of Ohio's efforts: Ohio is not requesting any exemption from the federal program's work requirements. The state will continue to require TANF recipients to engage in work-related activities for the federally required minimum hours and sanction those who fail to comply. Increasing flexibility will ensure Ohio has a stronger ability to assign only those activities that improve employment outcomes for individuals receiving assistance.

Congress is moving too slow: The U.S. Congress currently is considering legislation that would make some of the changes Ohio needs to be successful, yet that timing remains uncertain. Ohio is poised to move forward quickly and cannot afford to wait for Congress to act.

BOTTOM LINE: Ohio is transforming its network of human service and workforce programs to help more Ohioans get jobs and succeed at work. We cannot allow the federal government's rigid public assistance regulations to continue holding Ohioans back. By customizing work participation to help address each individual's employment readiness needs, we can strengthen our efforts to help get Ohioans on the path to meaningful employment.

