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***Race, Gender & TANF:
Welfare Reform in Texas & Washington State***

When President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) on August 22, 1996, which created Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), he joined a long line of political moderates and conservatives in affirming the male-headed nuclear family as the cornerstone of American success and the solution to poverty in the United States. TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) with block grants to states governed by punitive measures to cut back the welfare rolls, including an emphasis on work requirements and a five-year limit on federal assistance. The Office of Family Assistance touts TANF’s four seemingly benign goals as (1) assisting needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes; (2) reducing the dependence of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work and marriage; (3) preventing out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and (4) encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.¹ However, a closer look at the changes brought about by TANF and an analysis of what the devolution of this policymaking to states means to low-income families in different regions reveals a startling legacy of racialized and gendered national dialogue on welfare.

In his support of this sweeping welfare reform, President Clinton relied on a growing rhetoric attributing problems that afflict a largely minority “underclass” to the breakdown of the family – a rhetoric that enables policymakers to justify both the failure of government programs and the failure of government to act at all. Targeting unmarried mothers instead of poverty, the ideological thrust of TANF offers marriage and financial fatherhood as the solution to economic

¹ Office of Family Assistance, “Fact Sheet,” *TANF Essential Under Welfare Reform of 1996*, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opa/fact_sheets/tanf_factsheet.html

inequality and devalues the work that women do as caregivers in the home. Shifting focus from the problems of unemployment, low wages, discrimination, and economic restructuring to concentrate on family dysfunction and the behavior of low-income citizens, this policy approach specifically spotlights women of color as moral failures.² Instead of addressing the social and economic realities of poverty, it focuses solely on behavior remedies. If the problems and the failings are “theirs” and not “ours,” the prescription is therefore to change the deviants, not the system.”³

The assumption that family structure rather than inequality keeps single female-headed families poor not only ignores systematic inequalities and structural economic change, it reinforces a hierarchy of racial and gender order that can be traced back throughout the history of welfare in the United States.⁴ This paper examines the historical context of welfare in the United States with close attention to the influential role of race in determining how policy was formulated and implemented across the nation. The second part looks at the devolution of welfare in greater detail by comparing current TANF programs in Texas and Washington, two states with historically different approaches to social policy.

The differences between the two state programs will help illustrate one of the most profound consequences of TANF – a complicated and highly decentralized welfare system that is difficult to monitor on a federal level with consequences that vary widely across different regions of the nation. Welfare reform seriously trenches on the rights of low-income minority women. Poor minority women are caught in a political web, in which representations of the black family and the “welfare queen” channel the current national dialogue on welfare reform and serve to further oppress this already marginalized population.

² Gwendolyn Mink, “From Welfare to Wedlock: Marriage Promotion and Poor Mothers’ Inequality.” *Fundamental Differences: Feminists Talk Back to Social Conservatives*. Ed. Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 204-216.

³ Stephen Steinberg, “The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-Civil Rights Era.” *Fundamental Differences: Feminists Talk Back to Social Conservatives*. Ed. Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 27.

⁴ Mink, “From Welfare to Wedlock,” *Fundamental Differences*, 209.

Part I: Historical Context of Welfare in the United States

Attributing poverty to individual behaviors rather than economic, social, or political causes is not a new phenomenon in the United States. In *Welfare Policymaking in the States: The Devil in Devolution*, Pamela Winston notes that a certain “ambivalence to the poor” has long marked U.S. attitudes to social assistance.⁵ Though the era of the New Deal was an important exception to this mindset, reformers have consistently worried that rather than improving people’s lives and opportunities, social assistance leads to dependency and antisocial behaviors.⁶ In the colonies, poor laws similar to those in Britain reflected the view that those receiving aid were worse off than those who worked and a stigmatizing institutional approach to dealing with poverty forced low-income families into poor houses and workhouses throughout the 1800’s. During this time, Social Darwinism further demonized the poor as its most extreme proponents argued that not only was social assistance useless, it was in Pamela Winston’s words, “dangerous because it allowed poor people to survive, multiply, and weaken the species.”⁷

The first form of federal assistance in the United States appeared during the Civil War when Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands to aid slaves transitioning to freedom during and after the war.⁸ The first pension system followed shortly in 1862 to provide for veterans and their dependents, though it was discontinued in 1910 under charges of corruption. Despite the stunted beginnings of nation-wide systems of social assistance, the rapid urbanization and immigration that accompanied the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century mobilized reform movements. The need for public

⁵ Pamela Winston, *Welfare Policymaking in the States* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25

assistance gained wider acknowledgement and public and private institutions multiplied to meet the growing demands.

Women played a critical role in this push for social reform during the first three decades of the Twentieth Century. Even before gaining the vote in 1920, educated upper middle class women formed groups to advocate for state and federal programs benefiting mothers and children. In many states, they succeeded in securing small pensions for mothers and widows implemented so that “deserving mothers” could stay in the home to care for their children full time. These programs marked a shift away from previously held notions that the children of poor women were better off in institutions or foster care. In reality, however, the modest sums distributed through these pensions only supplemented the earnings of mothers working in low-wage jobs who could not earn enough to fully support their families. In 1931 only 2.5% of the 3.8 million female-headed households received assistance.⁹

Race has always influenced the evolution of social policy in the United States. From the debates of the founding fathers through the Civil Rights Era, struggles over American federalism and the rights of states have been inseparable from a history of racial apartheid. Even during the New Deal, state and local autonomy over social policy enabled Southern states to maintain a racial hierarchy of low-wage labor.¹⁰ Under the Social Security Act of 1935, the predecessor to AFDC, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), became one of six original programs designed to provide temporary relief, including Old-Age Assistance, Old-Age Benefits (better known as social security), Maternal and Child Welfare, and Aid to the Blind. While the federal government ran social security without state or local interference, the five other programs were run by states through federal grants. Despite the expansive and far-reaching benefits of these programs, southern states concerned with

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

maintaining access to large labor pools of low-income black workers ensured that benefits would not be equally distributed across divisions of race and class.

In order to appease these white Southern Democrats, the federal government left it to states to determine eligibility requirements that limited the type and number of people who would receive help with disproportionate consequences for blacks. Agriculture and domestic workers were not eligible for Old Age Insurance, leaving out 90% of black Americans who worked, while Unemployment Insurance was left to the jurisdiction of the state and local municipalities, many of which excluded the neediest agricultural and migrant workers, women, and African Americans.¹¹ ADC was intended to support poor children whose parents were dead, absent, or incapacitated. However, the one-party Democratic South supported ADC only on the condition that states could set their own assistance levels and criteria because federally determined payments could once again have threatened its supply of black low-wage labor. Consequently, ADC usually benefited white widows who met the moral standards of a “deserving” woman.

As this history clearly illustrates, welfare in the United States was never an “entitlement” for those with the greatest need. Discrimination and social bias have continually played a role in defining the deserving poor. Black families in the south were particularly vulnerable to discrimination and narrowly defined eligibility requirements, which *intentionally* blocked their access and ensured a race-based class system that benefited the economies of southern states. “Suitable home” regulations gave states the flexibility to deny aid based on the moral behavior of mothers, barring many of the poorest women and children from federal assistance, often for circumstances beyond their control.

However, as we see in the 1996 movement for welfare reform, the idea that welfare had become an “entitlement” leading to dependency, the moral decay of poor families (particularly

¹¹ Ibid., 27.

black families), and the hypersexual reproduction of unmarried minority women, provided a politically powerful platform for many aspiring politicians and policymakers. This social ideology played into the racism of large segments of the American population, and it did not take great political savvy to persuade middle class white families that their “hard-earned dollars” were paying for the antisocial behaviors and reproduction of black families. Though largely unaware of competing welfare proposals, a great percentage of the American population enthusiastically supported the “idea” of welfare reform.¹² In the mid-1990s, factions of both the Republican and Democratic parties benefited from the great political capital of this misconstrued social policy issue, which held enormous sway over citizens ignorant of existing eligibility requirements and low state and national spending on welfare.

From the New Deal to the Reagan Years: Reform from ADC to AFDC

From the New Deal era, we can trace the modern evolution of ADC into the current policy through a few important phases. In 1950, the government added caregivers to ADC family grants and changed the name to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), but states continued to set restrictions on eligibility. Varying from state to state these restrictions included lengthy residency requirements, burdensome application processes, policies that cut mothers off during period of seasonal labor, and notorious “man in the house” rules that ended assistance if a man was found to be living in the house or if the father was living nearby.¹³ Arguments that welfare was breaking up poor families rather than helping them get back on their feet would eventually leverage these latter restrictions in the 1996 debate over welfare reform.

In the 1960s, Congress passed legislation enabling states to provide benefits to families with unemployed fathers in residence called AFDC-UP (unemployed parents program) and in 1962 the Public Welfare Amendments made some modest increases in federal funding for social services

¹² Ibid., 54.

¹³ Ibid., 28.

programs.¹⁴ Section 1115 of these 1962 amendments brought about another very important change. It granted the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) authority to provide state waivers from AFDC requirements for “any experimental, pilot, or demonstration project” that was “likely to assist in promoting the (AFDC) objectives” as long as they were strictly supervised and evaluated.¹⁵ Though the Supreme Court has protected some rights of welfare recipients, these waivers meant that states could individually tailor their federal welfare programs, leading to an even greater diversity of programs across the nation.

Changes to AFDC during this period were part of President Johnson’s reform movement, referred to by 1964 as the “Great Society.” Kennedy’s presidency laid the foundation for the anti-poverty program Johnson pursued and it differed from the New Deal by purporting to end the causes of poverty rather than simply providing short-term economic relief. This shift in national dialogue on welfare focused on training, education, and community action, designed in part to mobilize the poor politically and incorporate them into policymaking. However, these aspects of the Great Society became a brief experiment as the growing demands of militant black power movements provoked white backlash and the War on Poverty was overshadowed and under-funded because of the war in Vietnam. Though short-lived, Johnson’s Great Society introduced several important initiatives and had lasting influence on reform during the Nixon years. Changes to AFDC in 1967 directed states to emphasize work rather than welfare and required many recipients to register for some type of training or work program under the Work Incentive Program (WIN).¹⁶ Other important initiatives included the Food Stamps program, which was created in 1964 and put under the control of the USDA, and the Medicaid program in 1965, which made health care services

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ ESA Program Briefing Book 2000, “Welfare History Overview.” A7-1.

available to low-income individuals with the already popular Medicare health program for the elderly.

Scholar Stephen Steinberg points to another legacy of Johnson's presidency, arguing that under his administration the black protest movement's radical vision of "equal results" was replaced by a "useless dissection of the black family."¹⁷ While blacks achieved civil rights across the nation, those who hoped for proactive antiracist policies to address both intentional discrimination and institutionalized racism were nonetheless disappointed. The release of *The Negro Family*, popularly known as *The Moynihan Report* in 1965 further contributed to a "victim-blaming" paradigm that identified family breakdown as the source of most problems afflicting black America.

Welfare reform during Nixon's presidency reflected many of the profound changes brought about by the women's movement and recognized an economy in which more and more women worked outside of the home. Higher rates of divorce and out of wedlock births began to destabilize the myth of a male-headed nuclear family as the norm of American society and call into question whether a single male breadwinner could realistically support an entire family under changing economic circumstances. In this context of social change, Nixon took up the cause of a guaranteed minimum income. His Family Assistance Plan (FAP) proposed to dismantle the "Democratic strongholds" of the human services sector structured by Kennedy and Johnson, and to replace AFDC with a modest guaranteed minimum income provided by the federal government and accompanied by food stamps, Medicaid, mandatory job training, and child care.¹⁸ Nixon's attempts to legislate FAP failed repeatedly between 1969 and 1972, encountering opposition from liberals because it would reduce northern levels of support and white southern opposition because it would increase southern levels of support for poor blacks. He was successful only in amending the Social

¹⁷ Stephen Steinberg, "The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-Civil Rights Era," *The House that Race Built* (New York: Random House, Inc, 1997), 27.

¹⁸ Winston, *Welfare Policymaking in the States*, 33.

Security Act in 1972 to establish Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which funneled benefits for the blind, disabled, and elderly into a separate program for the “deserving poor.” President Jimmy Carter’s attempts to replace AFDC, SSI, and Food Stamps with cash payments and public service jobs also met with great opposition and quickly failed.

Setting the Stage for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

The election of President Reagan signaled the end of innovative federal initiatives to address poverty and set into motion the devolution of welfare policymaking to the states. With the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act in 1981 taxes, benefits, and welfare rolls were cut and discussion about the *adequacy* of benefits dropped from the dominant political discourse on welfare. Despite the fact that neither welfare costs nor caseloads were growing during this time, discussion turned again to dependency and fears of the “culture of poverty” and a growing “underclass.”¹⁹ This shift was reflected in a growing literature of poverty research, which changed its focus from problems of unemployment, low wages, discrimination, and economic restructuring to concentrate on family dysfunction and the behavior of low-income citizens.²⁰

By the late 1980s the idea that a working welfare mother was a better mother had fully evolved. Though proponents of welfare reform continually talked of preserving “family values,” this one-dimensional rhetoric placed no value on childrearing or the work women have traditionally done within the home. If welfare mothers were working, their children would have to be cared by someone else. Blaming single mothers for a host of social problems, proponents of welfare reform ignored the economic reality that jobs paying a “family wage” do not exist for single mothers or primary caregivers expected to raise their children, attend training programs, and work for wages.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35

²⁰ Jenrose Fitzgerald, “A Liberal Dose of Conservatism: The ‘New Consensus’ on Welfare and Other Strange Synergies.” *Fundamental Differences: Feminists Talk Back to Social Conservatives*. Ed. Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 95-110.

²¹ Fitzgerald, *Fundamental Differences*, 97.

As a result, the work of many researchers and policymakers lacked a thorough analysis of poverty and the unequal distribution of income and opportunity in the United States.

The Family Support Act of 1988 was the final reform prior to TANF. This bipartisan law established the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program to provide a federal match to nationally mandated state employment programs; matched state funds for child care; set standards for states to establish the paternity of children born out of wedlock; instituted the automatic withholding of child support from noncustodial parent's pay checks; required states to guarantee Medicaid and child care for twelve months for those ineligible for AFDC because of income; and required the twenty-six states without AFDC-UP to implement the program by 1991.²² Though the FSA was unpopular, it set the stage for the reforms of 1996 as states faced federal cuts and began developing new approaches to welfare under a rapidly increasing number of state waivers.

With the election of a "New Democrat" president, who ran on centrist politics and made "End welfare as we know it" a campaign slogan, welfare reform climbed to the top of the national agenda. Republicans introduced welfare reform bills with extremely punitive methods in 1993 and 1994. The first proposed a two-year lifetime maximum on social assistance and a family cap offering no supplemental benefits to a woman giving birth while on AFDC. It would have cut off support to parents under the age of 18 and women who didn't identify the father of their children, and ended block grant food programs such as Food Stamps and child nutrition programs. The second bill in 1994 would have denied AFDC and Food Stamps to unmarried mothers under 21 as well as denying benefits to their children. With the Democrats in control of Congress, however, these bills did not go far; neither did Clinton's Work and Responsibility Act in the summer of 1994,

²² Winston, *Welfare Policymaking in the States*, 39.

just prior to the November presidential elections. More restrictive than AFDC, it was also less restrictive than the recent Republican proposals and the final bill in 1996.²³

The Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 led to a volley between the President and Congress over what changes would be made to AFDC. While the president threatened to veto more extreme Republican versions of reform, the Department of Health and Human Services granted state waivers with increasing frequency. By May 1996, 37 states operated pilot welfare programs under these waivers. Finally, in August Congress and the Administration reached a compromise when President Clinton signed H.R. 3734, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, into law. This act created fixed-sum TANF block grants to states, which totaled 16.5 billion dollars annually. In order to end “entitlement,” PRWORA placed a five-year lifetime limit on all federal cash assistance, granting states a 20% caseload exception for state-determined reasons of hardship or domestic violence. It also placed a two-year limit was on cash assistance without work and states were given an option to impose family caps or refuse benefits to mothers under the age of 18. Three billion dollars in additional funding was provided for childcare in a block grant and a maintenance of efforts (MOE) requirement instructed states to maintain 75 to 80% of current levels of spending on assistance. In addition, PRWORA mandated a new framework for establishing paternity, tracking down absent parents, and enforcing child support orders. The heaviest budget cuts were in the abolition of cash assistance, SSI, Medicaid, and food stamps to most legal immigrants.

From the beginning of AFDC, states set their own income eligibility requirements and payment levels. As evidenced in the broad differences between northern and southern states, these standards varied widely across the nation, but the government would match state expenditures to assist the eligible poor with few federal requirements. In this limited sense, states were “entitled” to

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

receive federal funds in order to aid families who met the determined criteria. TANF changed this definition of entitlement by eliminating the guarantee of cash assistance and emphasizing time limits and more stringent work requirements. The legislation also shifted focus from education and training to “work-first” strategies intended to get welfare recipients into jobs and off assistance as quickly as possible. TANF gave states greater flexibility in allocating funds to different programs, and the consequences of this change varied widely across the nation. TANF also intensified the need for innovative ways to assist welfare recipients in achieving employment and self-sufficiency. With the federal social safety net greatly reduced and harder to access for many low-income families, only a close look at how specific states have incorporated this new legislation reveals the actual effects of TANF on those living in poverty within different regions of the United States.

Part II: The Effects of Welfare Reform in Texas and Washington

One look at a U.S. map reveals some of the most obvious differences between Texas and Washington. Texas, bordering Mexico in the southwest region of the United States, is second largest in both population and area, surpassed only by California and Alaska, respectively. Washington is located in the upper northwest corner of the country, a Pacific Rim state that borders Canada, with a population of approximately six million residents. These differences embody only a few aspects of the regional and political culture and diversity that offer a striking case study for the implementation of TANF. Sharply contrasting state histories, demographics, political constituents, and attitudes toward social policy have shaped responses to welfare reform in both Texas and Washington and changed the assistance available to low-income families under TANF. While Texas has traditionally provided minimal government assistance and few social services, Washington State developed a strong social services network early in its history with an emphasis on training and education for low-income individuals. The varying consequences of TANF in these two states

reveal as much about the differences between states as they do about the restrictions legislated by welfare reform and show how highly variable welfare programs are across the United States.

State Approaches to Welfare Prior to TANF

Texans have woven a strong state mythology of individualism and independence from their rebel roots. With a defiant history that claims ten years of independence as the Republic of Texas prior to annexation in 1845, and a refusal to surrender in the bloody Mexican-American War that followed, a general skepticism of government still permeates state politics. This philosophy of minimal government and a disproportionate emphasis on big business has led to a fragmented system of social assistance across the state. Despite one of the highest poverty rates, lowest median incomes, and greatest income disparities in the nation, Texas provided the fourth lowest cash benefits to welfare recipients under AFDC.²⁴ In 1996, a family of three could receive a maximum of \$188 in cash benefits, \$227 below the national median, and only 40% of children living in poverty received welfare benefits. As witnessed in political debate over welfare reform in the 1990s, Texas' identity as a "low-benefit state" is a point of pride among many politicians. These low levels of spending are codified by a constitutional provision limiting welfare expenditures to 1% of the state budget.²⁵

On the other side of the nation, case studies of welfare reform in Washington State note a strong tradition of providing low-income families, both those on welfare and the non-welfare working poor, with a strong safety net of social services.²⁶ Though the state tends to be divided along party lines with the urban areas surrounding Seattle/King County electing Democrats and more rural areas in the east voting largely Republican, these divisions have not prevented strong

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

²⁵ Randolph Capps and others, "Recent Changes in Texas Welfare and Work, Child Care, and Child Welfare Systems," *Urban Institute*, June 1, 2001, <http://www.urban.org/publications/310182.html>.

²⁶ Terri Thompson and others, "Recent Changes in Washington Welfare and Work, Child Care, and Child Welfare Systems," *Urban Institute*, August 1, 2001, <http://www.urban.org/publications/310178.html>.

bipartisan alliances in support of public programs. Nearly 20% of the state's general fund, which finances public schools, public assistance, social services, natural resource management, and environmental protection, was allocated to AFDC and Medicaid in 1996. As a result, Washington's AFDC program was among the most generous in the United States with maximum family benefits significantly above the national average. In 1996, a family of three could receive maximum cash assistance of \$545, \$131 above the national median and \$357 above Texas' maximum benefit levels.²⁷ Additionally, 78.5% of children living in poverty were receiving welfare as opposed to 40% in Texas.

Washington has also been at the forefront of welfare reform efforts, though its initial efforts emphasized education, training, and a "caretaker focus" rather than immediate employment.²⁸ In 1988, Washington began a waiver demonstration predating the Family Support Act called the Family Independence Program (FIP), which focused on achieving self-sufficiency through voluntary participation in education and training programs. FIP provided financial incentive to obtain education and training, provided cash rather than Food Stamps, social services while participating, and childcare and medical coupons for twelve months after exiting the program with employment. FIP was later replaced by the Success Through Employment Program (STEP), reflecting the national shift towards work requirements. However, STEP still offered an approach to welfare reform dramatically different from PRWORA's. In contrast to TANF's stringent time limits and work requirements, STEP included a 10% reduction in benefits for families who had been on welfare for more than four years and a fourteen-year lifetime cap on assistance; STEP was repealed before implementation by the 1997 state legislation passed in response to federal welfare reform.

²⁷ Thompson, "Recent Changes in Washington Welfare."

²⁸ Sharon K. Long and others, "Income Support and Social Services for Low-Income People in Washington: Highlights from State Reports," *Urban Institute*, September 1, 1998, <http://www.urban.org/publications/310175.html>.

Responses to TANF

As it became clear that welfare reform was on the federal agenda, it should not be surprising that policymakers in Texas and Washington responded very differently. Before the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) became law, the Texas legislature passed House Bill 1863 in 1995, requiring the Texas Department of Human Services (TDHS) to apply for a waiver from the federal government for the Achieving Change for Texans (ACT) demonstration project. Approved in March of 1996, ACT established time limits, work requirements and a “Personal Responsibility Agreement,” addressing child support cooperation, early medical screening, work requirements, drug and alcohol abuse, school attendance, parenting skills, and similar issues. Not only did these changes reflect the tone of national discourse, they embodied Texas’ distinct approach to state politics – local control, small government, and an emphasis on individual responsibility.²⁹ ACT devolved the management of TANF employment, workforce development, and childcare to a local level, and gave “Local Workforce Development Boards” responsibility for overseeing the operation of employment programs. Texas politicians were eager to incorporate the promotion of financial fatherhood under TANF and, for the first time in state history, alimony gained real support under ACT when framed as a way to shift financial burden away from state welfare to the divorced husband.

In Washington, *Washington WorkFirst Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Act*, Engrossed House Bill (EHB) 3901, was enacted on April 17, 1997. This legislation established WorkFirst through the coordination of four state agencies, Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), Employment Security Department (ESD), the Community Trade and Economic Development Department (CTED), and the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). Unlike ACT in Texas, WorkFirst’s immediate employment strategy represented a

²⁹ Capps, “Recent Changes in Texas Welfare.”

significant shift away from the education and training-first philosophy of pre-TANF programs and welfare reform in Washington. Nonetheless, the reform included an increased income disregard and a wide range of activities that qualify as work participation. Although they must be combined with subsidized work or a job search, training and educational activities qualify as WorkFirst activities, offering participants greater flexibility as they transition into work.³⁰ Additionally, in response to restrictions on federal assistance to legal immigrants, the state legislature created the State Family Assistance (SFA) and Food Assistance Program (WCCC) to mediate the effects of federal cuts.

Differences Between TANF Policies in Texas and Washington

The most important differences between the state TANF policies of Texas and Washington are the amounts of cash assistance, time limits, child care, and the provisions that address federally mandated TANF goals of promoting marriage and preventing out-of-wedlock births. Because federal block grant amounts to states were determined by calculating previous levels of spending, the disparity between the annual family assistance grants to Texas and Washington are great relative to state population. As previously noted, Texas provided one of the lowest levels of AFDC assistance in the nation while Washington provided one of the highest. As a result, PRWORA allocated a yearly grant of \$486,257,000 to Texas and \$399,637,000 to Washington in 1996.³¹ However, to account for unequal spending across states, PRWORA also provided for additional block grants to states with high population growth and/or low welfare grants per poor person. Texas received an additional \$116,698,000 between 1998 and 2001 while Washington did not receive any additional funds under this provision.

Still, levels of spending per family diverged dramatically. In 1998, the maximum monthly benefit to a family of three had not increased from \$188, though it increased to \$201 by 2000.³² In

³⁰ Thompson, "Recent Changes in Washington Welfare."

³¹ P.L. 104-193, Title 1, Part A, Sec. 103.

³² Capps, "Recent Changes in Texas Welfare."

Washington, levels of assistance remained the same between 1996 and 2000, not keeping pace with inflation, but remaining well above the national median. Though adjusting for the higher cost of living in Washington decreases the difference in real terms between assistance levels in the two states, it does not account for the wide inequality.

Within the guidelines of PRWORA, Texas and Washington implemented very different policies concerning welfare time limits. Texas is one of the few states that operates TANF under a tiered time limit with 12, 24, or 36-month periods, each followed by a 60-month ineligibility period or “freeze out.” The 12-month limit applies to families in which the caretaker has at least a high school diploma; the 24-month limit for families in which the caregiver has completed three years of high school; and a 36-month limit for families in which the caregiver has less than six months of recent work experience and completed less than three years of high school.³³ Washington, on the other hand, does not impose any limits less than the federally mandated 60 months. While Texas’ time limits are based on the assumption that more educated recipients will be more qualified to secure work, they have the effect of punishing TANF recipients who have received more education and providing a disincentive to earning credentials that may eventually lead to higher-wage employment. Though Washington’s welfare strategy has shifted away from its previous emphasis on skills and training, a strong state focus on education still informs its policymaking when employing work-first methods. State representatives like U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell have pointed to the inadequacy of TANF block grants, encouraging the state to look into setting aside separate funding to provide training to low-income individuals.³⁴

The work requirements established by TANF have made access to childcare a crucial component of welfare reform. Though states cannot penalize single parents with children under six

³³ State of Texas, “State Plan for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families,” October 1, 2004.

³⁴ United States Senator Maria Cantwell, “Statement by U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell (as prepared) to the Washington State Poverty Action Network,” March 3, 2002, <http://cantwell.senate.gov/news/record>.

for failing to meet work requirements if they cannot find adequate childcare, the quality and availability of these services is one of the greatest determinants of participant success under TANF legislation. In Texas, eligibility for subsidized childcare depends on the standards set by Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) and consists of different initial and exit levels, making it very difficult to measure the consistency of childcare.³⁵ Most urban areas maintain eligibility cutoffs at 150% of the federal poverty line and families are likely to face difficulties with childcare as they leave welfare. As part of welfare reform in Washington, all subsidized childcare programs were consolidated into one program and it remains one of the few state programs without a waiting list. As a result, TANF recipients, non-welfare families, and families just leaving TANF have equal access to Washington's programs. A family entering the system can receive subsidies until its gross income exceeds 225% of the federal poverty line.³⁶ Washington's integrated approach to childcare has been very successful while the striking differences in levels of need and local organization of Texas' system make it very difficult to evaluate or closely monitor.

The different approaches to marriage promotion and the prevention of out of wedlock births within the two state plans are also striking. To meet these requirements, Texas provides marriage education, pre-marital education, and marriage skills training for engaged couples and couples interested in marriage to meet these federal requirements. The state has also been an enthusiastic supporter of abstinence-only education. With a very different strategy to accomplish the same federal objectives, Washington State extends family planning services to women earning up to 185% of the federal poverty line through a federal waiver called TAKE CHARGE. DSHS and HRSA efforts focus on providing family planning information, education services, an informational hotline, and a statewide education campaign to raise awareness of the availability of birth control. These agencies are also conducting an evaluation of their services, including a qualitative research

³⁵ Capps, "Recent Changes in Texas Welfare."

³⁶ Thompson, "Recent Changes in Washington Welfare."

component examining the “role of community attitudes, perceptions, feelings and values play in the availability and use of family planning services and birth control methods.”³⁷ Sidestepping aspects of the two-parent family language of TANF, Washington’s state plan also resists providing a formal definition of “family” for the purposes of assistance.

Policy Recommendations

The differences between Texas and Washington cash assistance levels, time limits, childcare, and marriage promotion highlight the inconsistent results of TANF in different regions of the state. For a low-benefit state like Texas, TANF provided greater incentive to restrict already limited benefits. In Washington, the national mood had the inevitable consequence of shifting welfare reform debate to the right. Though PRWORA succeeded in encouraging policymakers to think within a work-first framework, this new emphasis did not completely devalue the importance of skills and training in the eyes of most Washington politicians. Education continues to be a top priority for the state, even in policy that impacts the lives of low-income citizens. Washington also continues to provide a generous safety net for those in need.

In light of the historic limitations of welfare in the United States, the continued devolution of welfare to the state and local level allows century-old inequities to persist. Rather than effectively addressing the inadequacy of social services in many regions of the nation, debates surrounding TANF continue to exploit inaccurate and racialized representation of low-income women and focus attention on a behavior diagnosis to poverty. As political theorist Gwendolyn Mink points out, with explicit incentives encouraging states to reduce illegitimate births and raise the numbers of children living in married-parent families, the government has justified its interference in single motherhood

³⁷ State of Washington, “Washington’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) State Plan.” October 1, 2005.

through arguments for child well-being and financial fatherhood.³⁸ By failing to address structural forces of poverty, discrimination, and gender inequity, TANF places greater obstacles in the way of low-income families as they attempt to access federal support systems.

³⁸ Gwendolyn Mink, "From Welfare to Wedlock: Marriage Promotion and Poor Mothers' Inequality." *Fundamental Differences: Feminists Talk Back to Social Conservatives*. Ed. Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 207-216.

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