

'Wisconsin Works' welfare reform isn't working

Under the direction of Gov. Tommy Thompson (R), Wisconsin is implementing the most draconian welfare "reform" plan in the nation. Called "Wisconsin Works," or W-2, the program has cut the number of welfare recipients by more than 50% in less than a year, and is lauded by Conservative Revolutionaries as the model for the nation. But at the December convention of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, in Milwaukee, W-2 came under fire from Wisconsin legislators and other officials, who warned that it is actually a model for how *not* to run a welfare program. Two of those who spoke against W-2 at the NBCSL convention were Pat DeLessio, attorney for Legal Action of Wisconsin, and Wisconsin State Sen. Gwendolynne Moore, a leading opponent of W-2.

Interview: Pat DeLessio

Pat DeLessio, an attorney for Legal Action of Wisconsin, a federally funded agency, spoke with Marianna Wertz on Jan. 10.

EIR: You spoke at the NBCSL convention about the devastation of Milwaukee by W-2. Could you give me the picture of what is happening in Wisconsin with the Wisconsin Works workfare program?

DeLessio: What we're seeing is lots of people who don't have any means of support. Primarily it's because of the way the state is implementing W-2. There are four rungs to W-2. The first rung (I don't even know why they have it in there, because it's just unsubsidized employment), is employment that you found either with their help or on your own, and there's no subsidy to the employer.

The second is trial jobs, where they pay the employer up to \$300 a month, and then the employer hires you for three months, or six months, or whatever.

The third is community service jobs, which is basically jobs in the community that they've assigned you to—workfare. That can be up to 30 hours a week, and you can have that coupled with ten hours of education.

Then you get a grant for \$673 (per month). We don't have

grants anymore, based on family sizes by category.

EIR: So, it doesn't matter how many children you have?

DeLessio: Right. So, the community service job is \$673. The trial job, of course, is whatever the employer pays you. It has to, of course, be minimum wage.

The lowest rung is W-2 Transitions, which is for people with severe barriers to employment, maybe mental health problems, drug- or alcohol-abuse problems, children that are disabled, they have to stay home and take care of them—you get \$628 in that. They can assign you to a job up to 28 hours, and they can put you in other activities like school or counseling up to 12 hours.

So, that's the basic structure. How the state has interpreted it—and this is not in the legislation, and we are having a number of individual cases that we're challenging this on—is that, if they find you "job-ready," that you could work, then you're not eligible for any cash position. So, you're at that highest rung, unsubsidized employment, even though you may really not have a job.

Under AFDC, the big bulk of people on AFDC were people who do work, have worked, they want to work. You reported your income and your AFDC went up or went down. It was not a very adequate income supplement, but you could look at it as an income supplement. [AFDC, or Aid to Families with Dependent Children, is the former name for welfare—ed.]

EIR: It was a safety net when you don't have a job.

DeLessio: Yes. What we're finding—and we're doing a lot of individual representation to get at the issue, so we can hopefully make a larger challenge—is that some of the agencies, in fact, most of them, are saying that if you have any job at all, you're not eligible. So, we have a lot of clients who work part-time who are not eligible.

Milwaukee is divided into six regions, and we have five agencies running six W-2 regions. Good Will is one of the agencies with a contract and they run two regions. They testified recently that if you're working one hour a week, you're done, you're job-ready; that's it—you're not eligible for any W-2.

So, the biggest groups we're seeing, that are coming to us with nothing, are the people that they either found job-ready or the people that have not continuously been on AFDC, but have been off and on, and have jobs, either at temp agencies or part-time jobs, or jobs where they were promised 40 hours, like at fast-food restaurants, motels, but they really don't amount to 40 hours and they fluctuate, and they may have lost the job altogether. Then they go back in and try to reapply and they can't get benefits.

What's so horrible about the Federal law is, of course, that states can design systems that really do leave out groups of people. Then you have to ask whether a court would find violation of equal protection. Frankly, given the state of the

law, probably you wouldn't do very well.

EIR: We spoke in Los Angeles with Bob Ehrlenbusch, executive director of the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness. He said that he believes the purpose of the welfare reform legislation is to make people homeless, because the end result is that there is a rising wave of homelessness.

DeLessio: We were just literally inundated before Christmas with people with no money, that were being evicted or whatever. A lot of this is unseen. We don't have people on the street dying. But we're seeing increasing numbers. Again, we can't document it. We can just count the people that come in here. But increasing numbers of our clients are doubled up. And we see people just saying, "I don't want anything to do with their system." People say, "Too bad, I'll just live with my mother"; or "I'll just try to survive on this part-time job because I'm not going to deal with them." That would be a success for the state.

EIR: What is happening in Milwaukee County with W-2?

DeLessio: We have about 70% of the caseload now. We used to always run about 40-50% of the caseload in Wisconsin, which is bad enough. We're the largest city, we have a very significant minority population and the rest of the state is pretty much white and rural. I suspect in the other counties, they just told people there's no more welfare.

EIR: So, people moved to Milwaukee.

DeLessio: Well, it's just "go away." We also serve other counties. We're seeing in Kenosha, south of here, large numbers of people were just taken off the rolls as job-ready. I went to a couple of hearings this week in Kenosha County and that's clearly what's going on.

The state has no way to prove what it keeps saying. Now, we have clients who've had no means of support for a couple of months, who don't have jobs and who've been found not eligible for W-2.

Interview: Kelly Bablitch

Kelly Bablitch, policy analyst for Senator Moore, discussed the W-2 program with Marianna Wertz on Dec. 19.

EIR: What do you see as the problems that are arising now for the recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), as the welfare program is called?

Bablitch: There are a lot of problems that are arising. It's a new program and it's having a lot of trouble being implemented. We have 72 counties in Wisconsin and what we found out, when we did a case-by-case breakdown of where the money was going, Milwaukee gets the least amount of money

per case. We get \$23,175 per year, per case from the state. We have over 16,000 people on the rolls in Milwaukee. In Crawford County, there are two people that were on the AFDC caseload. They're getting, per case, over \$600,000 to get them off the rolls. And they have five caseworkers—two cases, five caseworkers, and over \$600,000. Obviously, in Crawford County, if you're unemployed, you're going to have a better chance of moving off the rolls, if you have five people helping you and \$600,000 to help you become job-ready and get some training.

EIR: So you have over 16,000 people in Milwaukee County. How many of them have actually found jobs?

Bablitch: We don't know. We don't have an evaluation of the program. A large number of people have dropped off the rolls. But where they go, and if they find jobs, we don't know. We herald Wisconsin performance because we've seen a mass reduction in the caseload. But, does that mean that they're in good jobs? No. Does that mean that they're in homeless shelters? Maybe.

EIR: There's no money to track what's happening to them?

Bablitch: There's money to track what's happening, but it's done by the state. They refuse to have something Gwen Moore had fought for very hard, which was to have a good evaluation of the program, to be conducted by an independent third party, and to ask questions like: Do we see a result in homelessness, in the increased use of shelters, as a result of W-2? That is not being done.

We have definitely seen an increase in the use of homeless shelters and in food pantries as a result of W-2 in Milwaukee County. There is definitely an increased need for it. Can you make the assumption that it's a result of W-2? Most of the homeless shelters and most of the people who operate the food pantries say yes.

EIR: What is Senator Moore proposing to do, or what can be done?

Bablitch: Gwen has fought very hard on the forefront, to help their reform work, as she says, making sure that there's things like education, wage-paying jobs versus grant-paying jobs, so you get the benefits of working, Earned Income Tax credit, and we have a state homestead tax credit. We have a Republican administration. We have a Republican Assembly. We have a very slim majority in the State Senate. We just finished our biennial budget proposal. We had a great package and we had to ditch it all. We got a couple things in the final bipartisan version of the budget, both the Assembly and the Senate voted to pass it, by overwhelming majorities, with 70 votes in the Senate out of 99. The Governor vetoed all the provisions that were there to improve W-2, except to increase the grant levels to minimum wage. Legislatively, there's not a lot we can do at this point, until, unfortunately, a tragedy occurs.