

Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations
Statement of Principles on Welfare

Legislative History:

November 11, 1987: Adopted by the Board of Directors
January 29, 1995: Revisions recommended by the Welfare Reform Task Force
February 1, 1995: Action by the Executive Committee
February 15, 1995: Action by the Board of Directors

Poverty is an unfortunate reality in American society. Helping Jewish poor, as well as those in the general community achieve self-sufficiency has been a fundamental commitment of the Jewish people. Our tradition and values emphasize the responsibility of the larger community to provide for the poor and the near poor in ways that enable them to live independently, with dignity and to move from poverty to economic self-sufficiency.

Any effort to change the system must be guided by compassion and recognition of the diversity of the population needing assistance. Many adult recipients find themselves forced into poverty by the wrenching employment losses caused by a changing American economy. Others are the victims of discrimination, disability and/or neglect. There are also many working poor, struggling to support themselves on minimum wage salaries with no health care benefits. Nearly two-thirds of the people living in poverty are children. To jeopardize the lives of these children further is morally reprehensible.

Efforts which address only individual behavior or existing social institutions to remedy the problem of poverty must be discarded. We affirm the importance of co-responsibility to resolve the problems confronting the welfare system. This recognizes that individual behavior and institutions must both change. However, efforts to prepare individuals to become economically self-sufficient must extend beyond the education, skill development and supportive services typically provided to individuals to achieve this goal. Teaching people about responsibility and providing the opportunities, means and structure to act responsibly are key components in affecting change. Responsibility is a learned behavior, it must be both taught and positively reinforced. The concept of co-responsibility also extends to government and the private sector, business and non-profit, working together to eliminate poverty.

Conditions which enable families to leave the welfare system include: jobs that pay enough to allow families to support themselves, opportunities for affordable housing, child care and other social services that meet basic needs.

The Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations believes that the framework for measuring our response to the public policy debates concerning poverty and welfare should be based on

the following principles:

1. The Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations is committed to supporting strategies to reduce poverty and to promote economic independence, maintenance of the family, social well-being for all members of society and to remove disincentives to work. We call upon government, private industry and the not-for-profit sectors to pursue jointly strategies which would lead to job creation, provision of child care, provision of health insurance and adequate skills training.
2. Jewish law has always emphasized the responsibility of the community to treat the poor with dignity so as to help them avoid the degradation and stigma of poverty. Benefits and programs should be administered with respect for the dignity, privacy and due process rights of those receiving them.
3. Government at every level has a moral responsibility to enact laws and regulations and to adopt policies which support employment opportunities for the poor as well as provide a safety net of services which meets basic needs for food, shelter and medical care.
4. Our tradition teaches that the responsibility of government in no way diminishes individual and community responsibilities to aid the poor and the responsibility of the individual to strive to attain a position of economic independence. The Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations calls upon the Jewish community to continue and expand upon its efforts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and care for those unable to provide for themselves.
5. We recognize that teenage pregnancy is a key factor in the perpetuation of poverty. We urge the establishment of effective policies and programs to reduce teen pregnancy by all levels of government, social service agencies, and religious and community organizations.

--end--