

## Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations

### Statement on “Wisconsin Works” (W-2)

#### Legislative History:

December 5, 1995: Principles of position recommended by the Domestic Public Policy Task Force.

December 11, 1995: Detailed position drafted by Chair David Feiss and Paula Simon.

January 8, 1996: Position recommended by the Domestic Public Policy Task Force.

January 10, 1996: Position recommended by the Executive Committee.

January 17, 1996: Approved by the Board of Directors

The Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations recognizes the need to transform the present welfare system. We support those efforts which enable the poor and near poor to:

- live independently;
- live with dignity; and
- move from poverty to economic self-sufficiency.

It is our belief that government at every level has a moral obligation to enact laws and regulations and 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. It is morally reprehensible to further jeopardize the already tenuous lives of the weakest and most vulnerable amongst us. Of particular concern are:

- children living in poverty;
- individuals who will never be able to achieve the goal of self-sufficiency through work;
- the very elderly;
- legal immigrants who will be ineligible for programs and services and,
- those impacted by external economic conditions such as recessions.

The Jewish 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. However, government cannot rely on non-profit agencies and religious institutions to provide for the needs of those who will have no other safety net when the government at every level abandons them.

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# **Principles for Addressing Poverty and Welfare Reform**

*Adopted by the NJCRAC Executive Committee*

*June 13, 1994*

## **Preamble**

Helping Jewish poor as well as those in the general community achieve self-sufficiency has been a fundamental commitment of the Jewish people. Jewish 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. Most welfare recipients are eager to achieve this goal. Blaming welfare recipients for their own plight, rather than addressing the inadequacies of the welfare system and of the nation's economy, is cause for alarm. Instead, a comprehensive approach should be developed, using a full range of collaborative programs and realistic measures of accountability on both the system and the recipient.

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 NJCRAC will support measures which provide families with realistic work opportunities and adequate financial and other supports, especially for the children in such families. While such reforms may require meaningful financial investment in the short term, they save money in the long-term by constituting a worthwhile investment in people, effectively enabling them to move from welfare to work and ensuring the well-being of children.

## **Principles**

The NJCRAC has therefore set forth the following principles as a basis for developing a comprehensive and humane welfare reform policy:

1. Welfare reform is part of an overall commitment and strategy to reduce poverty and promote economic independence and social well being among the poor. A wide range of policies and programs, including job creation, health care for all, childcare, and other support services, must be developed to enable the working poor, as well as those dependent on public assistance, to become self-supporting. A commitment to adequate funding is necessary to ensure that these goals are met.
2. The federal government has a primary responsibility for alleviating poverty by providing the necessary programs to enable individuals and families to progress from poverty to economic self-sufficiency.
3. The federal government should ensure a basic minimum level of support to provide a decent living standard for the poor. The level of government funding for welfare benefits should be brought, as quickly as possible, to the federally defined poverty line, with regional adjustments for differentials in living costs. Any action which would further reduce net benefits to individuals, such as taxing welfare dollars, should be rejected.
4. Government policy should recognize the diversity of those who are poor and include programs which respond to the heterogeneous needs of this population. One group requiring targeted services is the long-term poor, who face the greatest barriers to employment. Another key target group, requiring special attention by government,

educational and community institutions, is children who have children. Preventing pregnancies among teenagers could have a substantial impact on breaking the cycle of welfare dependence. Children who become parents, or who may potentially become parents, both fathers and mothers, require the following specialized services: targeted education and employment programs; inducements to remain in school; child care and health care counseling, to include programs and social service supports which reduce pregnancy rates and encourage parent responsibility.

5. Training, education, and job creation programs should be funded at levels that enable such programs to be effective in moving clients from welfare to employment and sustainable self-sufficiency. Federal funding for the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program -- or any successor program -- should be increased to expand education and training opportunities. Adequate funding must be provided also for job development strategies, as well as for job search assistance. Matching state funding requirements should be reduced, and application procedures simplified, so that administrative and fiscal constraints no longer prevent states from accessing their full allocation from these programs.
6. Welfare reform should not be funded at the expense of established government benefit programs which currently serve welfare, low-income, and immigrant populations, the working poor, the disabled, and other needy groups.
7. Government policy should provide for comprehensive support services for welfare recipients enrolled in job training, education, and placement programs and for recipients in transition from welfare to work. Services should include health care, childcare, housing transportation, legal services, and other social service supports.
8. Any mandatory employment, whether in the private or public sector, to which welfare recipients are assigned must not displace current workers and jobs, must provide pay and benefits equal to those of other workers doing the same work, and should not at any time pay wages below the minimum wage.
9. If fixed limits are established, such as time limits in programs associated with training and job placement, they should be contingent upon individual circumstances (including provision of waivers for people with disabilities or other needs), the capacity of the federal government to guarantee adequate education and training services within the given time frame, the ability of the economy to generate sufficient numbers of permanent jobs within reasonable geographic access, the needs of dependent children, and the government's capacity to provide the necessary support services.
10. Government policy should be flexible in assigning operational responsibility for the design and implementation of non-cash welfare programs, such as job training and child care, enabling participation by a range of state and local government and non-governmental agencies experienced in developing effective, localized service delivery programs. The policy, however, must be based upon an adequate level of government funding for service provision and clearly established government standards of accountability.
11. Welfare programs should emphasize incentives over penalties. Family cap provisions and other punitive restrictions endanger the welfare of children and families and do not promote self-sufficiency.

12. Welfare programs should facilitate family stability by removing bars to participation by two parent families, and by not penalizing impoverished families in which both parents are employed. Reforms should make it easier to combine some paid work with welfare benefits, particularly in cases where only part-time and low wage work is available, without loss of health care, child care, and other support services, and to allow recipients to retain more of their earnings in order to save for future needs.
13. Preferred remedies to poverty are those which support families, promote self-sufficiency, and reward work, such as the earned income tax credit (EITC). The recent expansion of the EITC means that families with one member working full-time in a minimum wage job will be able to live above the poverty line. To ensure use of the EITC, including awareness of advance payment availability, outreach efforts, to both recipients and employers, should be enhanced. All welfare recipients, upon application for and departure from welfare programs, should be notified in writing of the availability of the EITC. Employers should be required to inform new employees of the option of having advance EITC payments available through their payroll. At the same time, the federal government should continue to explore ways of establishing a more effective and efficient advance payment system.
14. Given that child support enforcement services are critical to preventing poverty, child support by absent parents should be enforced more vigorously through mechanisms such as: establishment of paternity as soon as possible following birth; periodic update of guidelines for appropriate support payment levels; interstate coordination of central registries for collections and disbursements; and a federal child support enforcement clearinghouse, and other federal assistance wherever possible. However, failure of efforts to establish paternity should not result in disqualification for welfare eligibility. A safety net of assured minimum child support must be provided regardless of parents' employment status.

### **Conclusion**

The NJCRAC is committed to calling to the attention of the Jewish and general community the problems associated with poverty, and to advocating support for those programs that will move individuals and families out of poverty toward self-sufficiency.

The NJCRAC recognizes federal, state, local, private, and individual responsibility in working to develop a coordinated program of support for welfare recipients and their families.

The NJCRAC urges local and national Jewish organizations to join in coalition with other civic, religious, and advocacy organizations, and together to disseminate this or similar welfare reform position papers in their states and communities, and to express these positions as preferred public policy to government officials, newspaper and magazine editorial boards, and candidates for office in this election year.