

Berkeley Daily Planet


 Qui

Tuesday
January 23, 2001

[Today's News](#)

[Sports](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#)

[Calendar of Events](#)

[Opinions & Letters](#)

[Rediscovering Berkeley](#)

[Personals](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Search Archives](#)

[Community Resources](#)

[Advertising Info](#)

[Contact Us](#)

CalWORKS recipients work, often stay poor

By Erika Fricke Daily Planet Staff (12-19-00)

Aimee Fisher got pregnant her senior year of high school, and the Christian day care she worked for fired her when she wouldn't marry her baby's father.

"I didn't have any skills to get a job," she said.

Fisher, whose mother and grandmother had both been on welfare, became a welfare recipient herself.

Unlike many people on welfare who are funneled into the "Work-First" program, where they are encouraged to find work and worry about gaining skills later, Fisher went to school. After six years of receiving welfare, she'll receive a bachelor's degree in Social Work from UC Berkeley in May.

The California Work, Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids agency, known as CalWORKS, focuses on moving welfare recipients to work and self-sufficiency.

The most recent data from the Alameda County CalWORKS programs show that in Berkeley, about 400 CalWorks recipients were participating in the employment services program.

Most of these have or will end up in entry-level jobs in the service industry, sales, or clerical. Seventy-seven percent will make \$10 an hour or less. They move off welfare to join the working poor.

In an Assembly Human Services Committee hearing held Monday in the Alameda County Supervisors' Chambers in Oakland, Assemblymember Dion Aroner, D-Berkeley, said she hopes to find ways to move people out of entry-level jobs up into higher wage positions.

"It's always been an anomaly that you have a lot more services if you're unemployed. We think the focus should shift more to people who are working and their career advancement," said Michael Bernick of the California Employment Development Project.

Speakers supported the idea of career ladders to train entry-level employees to move up to higher level positions within an organization. "We think very strongly that the program needs to have some learning on the job," said Bernick.

Bob Lanter from the California Workforce Association described a coordination in Napa County among Kaiser, CalWorks, and the local community college where janitors and others in entry-level positions are trained to become Certified Nurse Assistants. They garner higher wages and leave the entry-level positions open for new employees.

Rasheedah Mwangazi went on welfare for the second time when she was 48 years old. She said she felt frustrated with the lack of skills building in CalWorks workshops. "We're talking about people who may not have a GED, who may have had a sporadic education," she said. The panel of CalWorks recipients reiterated the fact that lack of skills, especially communication skills, made it difficult for new

Today

[Counc
gas h](#)

[Anten
meeti](#)

[Landl
appea
decisi](#)

[Active
mour](#)

[Study:
povert
declin](#)

[No rel
woes
start](#)

[Securi
keep
notify
in adv](#)

[Bush
energ
free-
advoc](#)

[Phone
go to](#)

[BRIEF
Marke](#)

workers to ever move up on the job.

Employees without those skills, who are already on the job, have to work with employers, to create "new forms of apprenticeship" and enable themselves to advance, said Bernick. But "it has to be industry driven." Employers must be able to voice their needs so that programs can train workers accordingly.

The term "working poor" has no exact definition. Jean Ross of the California Budget Project said in her publication "Making Ends Meet," that two working parents each need to earn \$10.78 in order to achieve a modest standard of living. Unfortunately, she notes that unskilled workers are looking at an economy that has relatively few middle wage jobs which can afford to feed a family. She said most new available jobs offer only \$8 to \$10 an hour, even while the growth in the technology sector is hailed as providing new well-paying positions.

"The tech industry in general is not a panacea for people to have sustainable jobs unless they already have technical skills," said Robert Barrer, program director of Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency, a Berkeley based nonprofit. "It's mind boggling how every economic boom has a defined set of winners who rationalize that this is good for everyone. But it's contributed to hyperinflation and that really has had more negative impact on poor folks and working poor folks than any positive benefit from the tech market," he said.

To illustrate the position of many families who work and yet struggle to make ends meet, Ross noted that the federal poverty rate is \$14,500 for a family of three. But rent on a one-bedroom apartment in Oakland costs 70 percent of that amount.

Social Service workers in Berkeley find that many people they assist in the transition to work can't find housing at all.

"I would say that right now, the critical issue is housing, big surprise," said Barrer, whose agency served about 2,000 Berkeley residents last year. Employment coordinator Adrian Harper says that 45-50 percent of his clients come from Berkeley. "But that's changing," he said. "A lot of people come in from Berkeley that are homeless but once they get a job they have to move out of Berkeley because of the housing market."

Aroner intends to consider speakers' proposals seriously, and tailor some of them to legislation for the upcoming session, said Kirsten Deichert, a member of Aroner's staff. Deichert said Aroner hopes to allow study time for people who are in school to count toward 32 hours of work per week required for CalWorks recipients, and she will examine the possibility of a state Earned Income Tax Credit to allow low-income people to keep more of their paychecks. At the hearing, Aroner expressed great interest in the possibility of creating career ladders to assist entry-level low wage workers to become higher-wage earners.

Meanwhile, welfare recipients still rely on formal education to provide them with the skills they need to move up in the job market. And navigating the system to maintain benefits and stay in school can be a challenge. "My two year limit comes up, and then school won't count for my 32 hours (of required work per week)," said Fisher. She'll have to work almost full time in addition to finishing the last two months of school. But Fisher already has three employment offers for after graduation.

"Things are looking good," she said.

[Today's News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Arts & Entertainment](#) | [Calendar of Events](#)
[Opinions & Letters](#) | [Rediscovering Berkeley](#) | [Personals](#) | [Search Archives](#)
[Community Resources](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Site Design by: [Interweavers Web Design](#)

© 2000 Berkeley Daily Planet