



D. ROSS CAMERON — Staff

Leilani Luia of Oakland is working her way toward a sociology degree at California State University, Hayward; she said a good education is the only way to move from welfare to a well-paying job with room to grow.

## 'I was one of the lucky ones'

Leilani Luia foresaw what welfare reform would mean to her future before it was implemented in the state in 1998. Hitting her third year on welfare in 1997, she suspected coming state laws would push her to quickly take any job, regardless of how much it paid, and would discourage her from going to school to boost her earnings, the 31-year-old Oakland woman said.

She had wanted to get off welfare and work but had wanted to do it right; she was looking for a career, not just a job, she said.

So she enrolled at California State University, Hayward, and began studying for her bachelor's degree in sociology, with a future in social work in mind, she said.

"The news kept talking about welfare reform, but nobody knew how it was going to affect everybody," Luia said. "When I realized how bad it was going to be, I decided I've got to do something. I don't want to be a certified nurse assistant for the rest of my life."

As it turned out, Luia made the right move.

Under welfare reform, going to school in lieu of immediately searching for employment was rarely permitted by county officials administering the state's "work first" welfare laws.

Currently, only 5 percent of Alameda County's eligible pool of welfare recipients are enrolled in training or educational programs, county records show. That, despite numerous studies showing long-term vocational skills training boosts recipients' earnings, especially for women.

Salaries for beginning Alameda County child welfare workers start at \$44,772 a year.

Because Luia had enrolled in college before 1998, she had the legal right under state law to finish her studies before being pushed into the job hunt.

"I was one of the lucky ones," she said. "A lot of people didn't know. . . they had an opportunity to go to university. The county didn't pressure me to get a job because I wasn't going to allow them to pressure me to go to work."

Raising her two young daughters alone, Luia is now finishing her junior year of college. When she gets out, she wants to help other low-income families get out of the welfare cycle and start careers, she said.

Many of the challenges such as finding adequate transportation and child care facing recipients trying to get off welfare have bypassed Luia.

She owns her own car and drives herself to college and her daughters to elementary school. She does not need child care because her class schedule coincides with her daughters' and she can pick them up after school.

Luia gets \$1,084 in monthly public aid in addition to student loans and work-study income.

After Luia graduates, she will have another six months to find a job before losing her public aid, but Luia said she does not expect to stay on the rolls that long.

"I'm positively sure that once I graduate, there's going to be job offers," she said. "I have (gained) a lot of skills over the years, because I've worked a lot of jobs. But none of those jobs would lead to a career. They were just jobs. Because I'm getting an education, by the time I get out, I will have a career."

— JACK CHANG