

# GUARDIAN

## Welfare wedlock

*Bush says marriage is no good for gays and lesbians, but encourages it for the poor*

By Rachel Brahinsky

While President George W. Bush condemns queers who seek the right to marry, he continues to press Congress to foist wedlock on welfare moms. Tucked into the pending federal welfare bill, which the U.S. Senate is expected to act on by the end of the month, Bush is asking for \$1.5 billion to promote marriage to the poor.

He and his allies, backed by conservative think tanks like the Brookings Institution, insist that married couples are more stable financially and can more easily support themselves without government assistance. Several states have already begun such programs, holding group therapy-style sessions to help welfare mothers learn how to change their behavior to attract and keep a mate.

But it's doubtful the rites of matrimony are the tonic that will alleviate the problems that put most people in need of welfare in the first place: lack of living-wage jobs, barriers to education, and the dearth of affordable child care and health insurance. The proposal raises particular concerns for defenders of domestic violence victims who point out that encouraging marriage for women who are being battered can



have fatal consequences.

"It's the irony that he wants to push marriage on people who it may not be appropriate for, but when people are in loving committed relationships, it's not OK," says Diana Spatz, executive director of the Oakland-based welfare rights group Low-income Families' Empowerment Through Education (LIFETIME). "Getting married is not a way out of poverty ... when both parents are in low-wage, dead-end jobs."

A new survey by Spatz's group shows that many domestic violence victims may be falling through the cracks — leaving open the possibility that they could be swept up in any new push to marry.

California began implementing welfare reform in 1998, limiting welfare clients on CalWORKS to a maximum of five years of cash aid. The time limit has increased stress on single mothers who have barriers to sticking with job-training programs or work, such as dealing with domestic violence.

Under the law, victims are supposed to be exempted from the program's work requirement while they get help and can receive financial aid over the

five-year limit. That way, if a mom has to spend hours in court fighting for a restraining order, for example, she can later complete her job training.

But a review by LIFETIME of state data shows that less than 2 percent of CalWORKS mothers received services or waivers for domestic violence last year. There's no way to know for sure how many more women are in need, but it's likely the number is far higher. A recent California Institute for

Mental Health study of welfare clients in two counties, for example, found that some 65 percent were domestic violence victims in the last three years.

State welfare officials told the *Bay Guardian* the numbers LIFETIME is using for most counties are too low, but they were unable to give us revised figures (officials believe it's likely many victims are accessing services outside of the CalWORKS system).

San Francisco CalWORKS program manager Dolores Heaven told us her staffers are doing their best to get information about the waiver program to their clients. "This is a bureaucratic organization," she said. "Let's be honest here, not everybody wants to tell us."

But Spatz challenged Heaven's explanation. "The onus is on the welfare department to assess for these barriers," she said. "Handing someone a stack of materials that they may or may not be able to understand is a different thing from sitting down and doing an assessment."

In San Francisco 389 families reached their five-year limit as of last month and another 79 are expected to time out this year. Though the clock started ticking back in 1998, the state didn't begin its do-

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estic violence assessment program until last June. That's where the five-year limit becomes crucial. If any of those timed-out families are headed up by a domestic violence victim who needs more time to get back on her feet, her chances of making it without government aid are that much smaller.

In that context, the marriage push, and the idea that it's better to pair a woman with a second low-wage worker than to help her get the education and train-

ing she would need to develop a career that pays a living wage, appears even more cynical.

Minouche Kandel, a Bay Area Legal Aid staff attorney who advocates for welfare moms and who helped design San Francisco's domestic violence program, can't take a position on the welfare bill but told us the marriage promotion idea "comes from a very ideological place that we need a society made up of heterosexual couples. And if you look at what in the

federal government can be a vehicle for that policy, welfare is one place you can enforce it."

For domestic violence victims, she adds, that ideology is misplaced. "Unless you are very, very careful about safety issues," she said, "you do run a risk of increasing domestic violence because you are potentially pushing people into a relationship where they could get hurt." ♦