

WELFARE TO WORK DILEMMA



LAURA A. ODA — Staff

Because single mother Nicole Lewis is going to cosmetology school, she is ineligible for state assistance for day care for her triplets, Naylani, Laylani and Imani Allen.

Cosmetology students state case for county child care assistance

Officials to consider policy change

By Karen de Sa
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — She's got three babies younger than age 2, a \$673 monthly welfare check and a knack for doing hair. But in Alameda County, doing what she does best won't get Nicole Lewis off the public dole any time soon, as she sees it.

The 21-year-old mother of triplets says all she needs to be free of government aid is money to pay a babysitter while attending a cosmetology training center in San Francisco, where she is scheduled to begin a 10-month series of classes.

But longstanding policy here states that budding cosmetologists are not eligible for the subsidized child care and transportation assistance the county regularly dispenses to mothers on welfare. Alameda County does subsidize child care for training in "demand occupations" as diverse as public relations and hazardous waste management, but not for such fields as cosmetology — or acting, modeling or music, for that matter.

During a community forum Thursday in Oakland, an outspoken group of college students on welfare

demanding that county leaders expand support services to include women training to braid, press, weave and style hair for a living.

"I just want to know, who is your barber?" Chemika Rash loudly queried Marto Solis, the county's assistant social services director. "There's a whole lot of money in the hair business."

Other cosmetology students on aid, some with small children in their arms and wearing white lab coats, expressed similar sentiments.

Solis and other county leaders — who have followed the lead of labor market data showing few employment opportunities in cosmetology — appeared to have gotten the message.

"I think we need to look at that," Solis responded to repeated and often aggressive queries. "We may need to modify our proposal."

Follow-up scheduled

Within minutes after the exchange, a group was convened to discuss the issue. A follow-up session is scheduled for Monday morning at Laney College.

Because 46 percent of hairstylists are self-employed, micro-enterprise and small business appear to have made it into the local welfare debate, where stakes are high to match welfare recipients with jobs. Alameda County has 28,000 single

mothers on aid, the majority of whom have to find work in the next two years as a result of the 1996 federal welfare overhaul.

Policy may change

Although the county has previously stood by its policy against assisting most aid recipients who want to do hair or nails for a living — claiming they have not been able to attract the client base needed to become economically independent — that may soon change.

And none too soon, as far as many people here are concerned.

"There are a lot of women that have bought homes and made lives through cosmetology," Lewis said. "My grandma taught me to press hair when I was 8, and I have an auntie that's been doing hair for over 40 years."

Diana Spatz — who directs Lifetime, a Bay Area group that helps single parents on aid get an education — said such family traditions are not uncommon.

"Large numbers of women, and particularly black women, have thriving cottage industries out of their kitchens," she said. "Alameda County's perception that this is not a viable option is proof of a little cultural ignorance. This could be a real important opportunity for women to start their own businesses."