

Obama Administration Adopts New Policy: Welfare Without Work

The Department of Health and Human Services recently announced that they would issue waivers exempting states from requiring welfare recipients to engage in work-related activities while receiving cash benefits, as is required by the historic 1996 welfare reform law. I am deeply concerned about this action for two reasons. First, the Administration has again overstepped its authority and circumvented Congress, because the law clearly does not give them the power to waive these requirements. Even more alarming, the action by HHS threatens to undermine the very core of the successful 1996 reforms and the progress that has been made to lift millions of American families out of poverty.

To understand what rolling back work requirements could mean, I believe it is important to look at the record of welfare reform by examining where we were and how far we have come.

Prior to welfare reform, millions of Americans were trapped in a cycle of poverty created by a program that rewarded states for every additional person it added to its welfare rolls. Instead of fighting poverty, it created a culture of government dependency. Welfare reform changed this by emphasizing the best path for families to escape poverty and provide a better future for their children: work and self-sufficiency. The 1996 reforms, signed into law by President Clinton, removed the incentive for states to unjustifiably increase their rolls by capping the amount of federal welfare dollars each state could receive. Additionally, the law instituted requirements that able-bodied individuals receiving cash benefits be engaged in work-related activities, including job training and seeking a GED. The results were dramatic: the number of individuals receiving welfare benefits dropped by 57 percent; poverty among single mothers fell by 30 percent; and child poverty rates fell dramatically. The chart below is a powerful visual demonstrating the success of welfare reform.



The Administration defends its dubious claim of waiver authority by arguing that states need

flexibility in how they move people from welfare to work. Unfortunately, we already have evidence that some states are anxious to weaken work requirements. A 2005 Government Accountability Office study documented how some states were counting bed rest, personal journaling, and weight loss as “work activities.” Allowing states to avoid work requirements does not help those on welfare move towards self-sufficiency, and it is not in the best interest of American taxpayers. I believe most Americans support extending a helping hand to those in need, but they do not support permanent, open-ended benefits for healthy adults.

As the chairman of Ways and Means Subcommittee that spearheaded the reauthorization of the momentous reforms in 2006, I worked to preserve and strengthen the law’s crucial work requirements to help ensure that even more Americans escape poverty. I am both saddened and appalled that the Obama Administration seems determined to undo these reasonable and effective requirements. As a result, I have cosponsored H.R. 6140, the Preserving Work Requirements for Welfare Programs Act, to prevent the Administration from taking this harmful action. I am hopeful that the House and Senate will vote on this commonsense—and critically important—legislation in the near future.