

State and Local Advocacy for Welfare Policy - 1997

Women of Reform Judaism has adapted strong resolutions on welfare reform (1995) and on state and local advocacy, as outlined in the 1993 Citizenship and Civic Responsibility. These resolutions should be used as guides for advocacy and action regarding welfare policy on the state and county levels.

Now, with passage of the 1996 U.S. Federal Personal Responsibility Act, public assistance as we have known it has been dismantled. The safety net for the poor has been shredded. For example, the Personal Responsibility Act denies legal immigrants any assistance through the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Food Stamp Programs, which have been lifelines for elderly and disabled legal immigrants, and states have the option of denying them Medicaid. All new immigrants (after enactment of the bill in August 1996) are ineligible for Medicaid and most other non-emergency means-tested federal aid for their first five years in the United States. The legislation's narrowed definition of disability will result in the removal of more than 100,000 disabled children from SSI benefits. Moreover, there is a five-year cumulative lifetime limit for receipt of benefits paid for with federal funds. Instead of the former nationwide uniform federal public assistance program, federal dollars are being given to states as block grants.

The states are developing their own plans for provision of temporary assistance; in some instances states are planning to give counties block grants with the right to determine allocations. Women of Reform Judaism fears a "race to the bottom" where states (and counties) will compete to provide the lowest possible social welfare benefits in order to use federal funding for other budgetary purposes and to prevent themselves from being a magnet for the poor from other states (and counties).

In order to prevent the deepening of poverty of North America's needy populations, the Board of Directors of Women of Reform Judaism urges its Sisterhoods to:

1. Continue to work with UAHC congregational and regional social action chairs on such issues.
2. Join and work on welfare reform with local coalitions which share WRJ positions.
3. Contact state and county legislators to urge compassionate welfare policy which includes:
 1. Support for legal immigrants whose benefits have been withdrawn by the federal government.
 2. Education, training and subsidized child care and health benefits to be available for those seeking to enter the job market and continued as long as needed.
 3. Benefits for those unable to work or locate a job.
 4. Standardized benefit levels throughout the state.
4. Develop and strengthen community services such as food banks and mentoring programs, or organize a community-wide effort to collect and provide job appropriate clothing.