

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The Road to Welfare Reform

The legislature opens our new session this month with a massive piece of unfinished business that demands immediate action. We have both the requirement and the mandate to change the state's welfare system—and to change it quickly. The requirement exists because the department will run out of money in the middle of February, the mandate because voters want the failed system replaced. We have reached this situation because of a budget veto and a woman named Clarabel Ventura.

The veto was Governor Weld's response to last year's so-called legislative reforms, measures that would have raised costs and encouraged fraud. To put some muscle behind the veto, the governor also struck down funding for four months of the year, forcing the legislature to act. The Senate failed last month to override that veto, so we start the new year under the gun, challenged to produce a new program for welfare recipients.

Clarabel Ventura is the Boston woman arrested last year for child abuse. When the liberal Boston Globe investigated her background, it discovered that she, her mother, her 13 siblings and 5 children are the recipients each year of up to \$1 million in state and federal grants. Her case mobilized public opinion to say, "Enough!" So here we are with a month in which to reinvent a system that has grown without focus since the 1930s.

What will the new welfare law look like? It will reflect the conservative nature of the new legislature, building on many areas of agreement among legislators and the governor. Welfare grants will not be increased if additional children are born after the family is on welfare. We will probably have a work requirement. A single teenage mother will have the choice of staying in her family home or moving to a group home. Day care and health care will be provided for families in transition from welfare to the working world.

Gov. Weld's bill, introduced January 11th, is the only one before us at this time. That bill focuses on returning welfare families to world of work, so an able bodied adult has 60 days of relief before being required to work. Community service of 25 hours a week is offered if a person is unable to find a paying job.

The governor's proposal includes an anti-fraud measure I introduced last year, a fingerprint component to the application that will eliminate duplicate cases for a single individual. He also allows rental payments to be sent directly from the state to a landlord.

After the legislature considers the governor's bill, negotiation and compromise will follow. The deadline of February 28 can be extended to provide for welfare recipients if the new law is not enacted by that date. And the final package should be a step toward self-sufficiency for parents and, most importantly, for the children of welfare families. The governor stated this goal last week, saying, "It is a tragedy when an eight year old child has never seen an adult go to work." The new Massachusetts welfare system will change that reality for our children.