

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **Waiting for Welfare Reform**

Our Massachusetts legislature passed a law to reform welfare and Governor Weld signed that law in February of this year. We made innovations to change the aspects of the welfare system that keep families dependent for generations. The house and the senate voted with overwhelming majorities from both parties to change the ground rules for families in need, effective July 1, 1995. But it has not happened. What went wrong?

The answer comes from Washington, D.C. The federal government has exercised its veto of the new Massachusetts law by refusing to grant full waivers of federal requirements. State programs depend on funds from Washington to augment state appropriations, and those funds come with strings attached. We changed our law after benefits became so generous that it did not make sense for a welfare recipient to get a job. These are some of the changes that put the state in breach of federal guidelines.

Additional children do not entitle the parent to added welfare dollars.

A recipient can stay on welfare for only 2 years.

Able-bodied adults must work or accept volunteer positions in order to receive benefits.

The people of the nation have indicated to their lawmakers that they want the country's welfare system reformed, and our state's changes can be approved by the Department of Health and Human Services without congressional action. President Clinton campaigned in 1992 that he would end welfare as we know it, but this is apparently not the improvement he had in mind.

Washington has been slow to accept the new Massachusetts approach, although other states have been granted waivers for changes for their welfare systems. After months of negotiations and unexpected delays, we got our answer last week. The family cap is approved, and teenage mothers can be required to live at home to receive benefits. But there are three lines in President Clinton's 43-page letter that prompted the governor to reject the proposal.

The offending language deals with the two-year limit on benefits and the strength of the work requirement. It provides an unlimited number of 90-day extensions if a recipient is unable to find a "suitable" job. Jobs that could be refused include those that pay less than welfare, jobs that are more than a two-mile walk from home and jobs that are available because of a strike or walkout. Governor Weld turned down the Clinton administration's proposal, stating that the attached conditions gut our new law. Massachusetts has worked to remove perverse incentives that perpetuate welfare dependency, and the exceptions to the two-year limit simply introduce another bureaucratic game.

The will of Massachusetts' voters and the act of our legislature has been blocked for now, and we await further action from Washington. Congress might pass its own welfare bill to supersede existing regulations. The Department of Health and Human Services may reevaluate the waiver in light of the Massachusetts rejection. In this year when every taxpayer and legislator knows welfare needs change, the Beacon Hill players in the public policy standoff are waiting for the next move from Capitol Hill.