

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Four straight years of Massachusetts welfare decline

Massachusetts was one of the first states to tackle an overhaul of the welfare system when the legislature enacted reform legislation in 1995. As the state embarked on its new course, requiring recipient families to take more responsibility for themselves, we were entering uncharted waters. Nobody knew how changes would affect families in need.

Writing this column involves reporting many numbers and percentages which are not easy to read. I encourage you to do so because the results are so striking and so hopeful for the future. The statistics document an overall decline in welfare dependency in Massachusetts that exceeds 35 percent.

As we approach the third year of the law, we should understand that the state's all-time high was reached in March 1981. The trend since that time has been downward, and the last month to register an increase was August 1993, when some 114,000 cases were active. Last month marked the completion of 48 consecutive months of decline. Such substantial reductions were not even imagined three years ago by the most hopeful legislators.

Measuring from the 1993 peak, our case load has declined by 42,063 cases, 36.7 percent. Taken from the time welfare reform was signed into law in Massachusetts in February 1995, the decline is 30,385 cases or 29.5 percent. The 72,608 families on welfare represent a drop of 533 cases from July.

“Since August and September are historically months in which there is either an increase or very little decline, the latest numbers speak very positively about a strong state economy and the impact of welfare reform,” said Department of Transitional Assistance Commissioner Claire McIntire.

Much of the credit belongs to the new approach to welfare enacted by the state and endorsed at the federal level. Beginning with a new name, Transitional Aid to Families and Dependent Children (TAFDC), the focus in Massachusetts has been the temporary nature of a family's welfare status. Job training and child care assist parents in need of assistance, and the message is delivered that the state will not support them indefinitely.

The enormity of the change is illustrated by the fact that the current figure is the lowest in the state's monthly computerized records, which date back to July 1973. My congratulations to the state workers and the families that they have helped to become participants in our society of workers.