

# Welfare change imminent

Continued from page 1A

be determined by several factors, including growth of the state's economy, will be capped until 2002. The bill in essence creates 50 separate welfare states.

"I call it the shift and shaft," said Mecklenburg County Social Services director Richard Jacobsen.

Opposition to the bill has been vocal and comes from unlikely sources. "The federal government has basically capped its responsibility as a partner," Jacobsen said. "Any increases in cost on the administration of the house are going to reside with the county."

Congressional Democrats were split evenly on the bill, which was largely crafted by the Republican majority.

The original proposal also sought to end any increase in benefits for welfare mothers who had additional children while receiving benefits. To pass the bill, a compromise was made that states be allowed to determine whether or not such increases would continue.

"Why should they continue having children that the government takes care of," asked Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) of Charlotte. "We are raising a couple of generations who think the government is responsible for kids."

The current allocation increase for North Carolina women who have children is less than \$30 per month.

The issue of welfare is hotly debated in the African American community. Nationally, African Americans comprise 35.5 percent of those receiving welfare benefits. Fifteen percent of the African American population is also considered chronically poor, compared with 3.1 percent of the white population. African Americans also tend to get more benefits, owing to larger families and lower incomes. At least half of these chronically poor are children.

In Mecklenburg County, the numbers are more staggering.

African Americans make up 26 percent of the population, yet are more than 80 percent of the welfare recipients.

Despite the rapidly approaching deadline for change, many welfare recipients are unaware of the impending changes.

"I had no idea," said Cheryl Ray. "I didn't know all this was happening."

Ray, a single mother of four, has been on and off welfare for several years.

"I used to get \$324 per month and \$488 in food stamps," she said. "Then I started working. Each month it decreased, then finally they said, I couldn't get it no more. My rent went up to \$316. I made \$326 every two weeks. That is what they should have fixed. They take you off before you get your head above water."

Ray, who lacks a high school diploma, is currently job hunting.

The success of the new program depends largely on the economy and how quickly the state can get people back to work, which could mean more rapid cut-offs like the one Ray

experienced.

It also depends heavily on an increase in new jobs for workers who will complete job training as part of their transition from welfare. The time limits for benefits, as well as the stipulations, have made many leery.

"Certainly there is no guarantee that work will be available," said Rep. Mel Watt (D-N.C.) of Charlotte, one of 98 Democrats who voted against the bill.

"Neither the state, nor the federal government is required to provide employment of last resort," he said.

It is this part of the bill that worries welfare officials.

"The governor received some waivers for the state of North Carolina to implement his Work First (program) Jacobsen said. "That starts a two-year time limit for those that are targeted - basically parents with school-age children."

Responsibility will sign a Personal Responsibility Contract and be given two years to work their way off welfare. The North Carolina plan does provide a backup for parents unable to find work.

"...They can prove to an appeals board that they need to be extended," said Jacobsen. "They can appeal on an individual basis."

In an effort to decrease the number of cases, Mecklenburg County, currently riding a wave of decreased cases and benefits disbursement, has entered into a unique agreement with the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce to market the state-funded Work First program to local employers. Work First provides job training for participants, while JOBS offered college degrees.

"Our slogan is 'Just take one,'" said Jacobsen. "If every member of the Charlotte Chamber, just took one welfare recipient, we would cut the case load by 53 percent and reduce the budget by \$13 million."

Mecklenburg is also looking for ways to increase access to public transportation and day care for the new work force. According to Jacobsen, transportation has been a problem for a number of program graduates.

"The population we are talking about basically can not get to Arrowood, which is the largest industrial park in North Carolina on public transport," he said. "We need to form a public/private consortium to figure out how to do that."

Jacobsen cites Host Marriott as an example of a successful transportation program. The company is offering transportation for their employees from the inner city to the airport. They have also expanded the program to include other area businesses.

Jacobsen is also depending on the religious community to help Social Services address issues of self esteem and help support clients as they try to become more self sufficient.

He admits that there will have to be a lot of changes in both the public, private, and religious sectors to make poverty relief work, which is seen by many as political posturing to make Clinton look more attractive in his bid for reelection against a tide of conservatism.

Detractors also believe, like Jacobsen and Watt, that eventually states and counties will be forced to take up the slack to ensure that the poor are protected by hiking taxes.

"I will do what I need to do to make sure my kids eat," said Ray. "Even if it means going to the women's shelter. My kids come first."



Watt



Myrick

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Sir Purr, the Carolina Panthers' mascot, Panthers linebacker Carlton Bailey, United Way executive director Gloria Pace King and Malcolm Everett III, chairman of the board of United Way, helped kick off a pep rally for the non-profit agency at Ericsson Stadium.

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