

United States Senate
Office of the Majority Leader
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Statement by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle
Welfare Reform Press Conference
Tuesday, March 5, 2002

We're here today in the hope that we can use the reauthorization of Welfare Reform as an opportunity to make even greater progress in helping low-income families build better lives for themselves and their children.

Since 1996, we have made a lot of progress. One-third of all people receiving benefits are working – triple what it was in 1996. Caseloads have been cut by more than half, and out of wedlock births are on the decline. I made clear when we first considered these changes that I had real concerns about the impact cuts in food stamp benefits and other support services would have on children. Luckily, our economy was strong – and there were opportunities for people making the transition from welfare to work.

Now comes the hard part. Our economy is in recession. Those who could move easily into the workforce have already done so, and many who took minimum-wage or dead-end jobs are realizing that they need more skills to move up the economic ladder.

If there's one lesson we have learned so far, it is this: it takes more than a strong economy to turn lives around. It takes strong support. If we're going to require mothers to work, we also need to make sure they can find the child care that will allow them to do so. For parents with older children, we need to ensure that our schools can provide the after-school programs that will keep them safe. Non-native English speakers may need intensive help to learn English as a second language. Someone who has never worked before may need vocational training. And some who have dropped out of the work force may need treatment for addiction or dependency.

There's really no question about it; if we are to deal with the whole array of challenges people face in moving from welfare to work, states need greater flexibility, and welfare recipients need greater support.

When President Bush was running for reelection as Governor, he campaigned in a bus that had "opportunity" written on one side, and "responsibility," on the other. I agree with the President that those principles are two sides of the same coin. But as we demand responsibility, we need to provide greater opportunity. I have real concerns that the President's welfare proposals don't do enough to provide that opportunity.

For example, I agree with the President that we need to restore food stamp benefits to immigrant families. But to suggest that other support -- like temporary TANF benefits -- encourages dependency, is ridiculous. I worry that the President's plan provides no new resources for child care -- which will make it nearly impossible for many mothers to meet the tougher work requirements.

I also worry that the President's proposal may push states to adopt one-size-fits all programs rather than encourage states to do more to meet the specific needs of each family.

We now have an opportunity to once again change welfare as we know it, and to change the lives of welfare beneficiaries for the better. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the Senate -- and everyone here today -- to make the most of it.

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