

Commentary

'Welfare-to-work' plan can work if we act now

With job training and support while times are good, folks can learn to be good workers

By Steve Cramer



About the author

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The strength of today's Twin Cities area economy is phenomenal, but one consequence is a growing labor shortage. Help-wanted signs dot the landscape. Companies shelve or reduce growth plans because qualified workers aren't available. Entry-level positions go unfilled. Unemployment has dropped.

Under these conditions, it is good news that a group of labor market participants is hitting the streets looking for work. On July 1 of this year, new welfare eligibility requirements took effect that limit thousands of recipients to five years of public assistance. When their 60-month clocks stop ticking, government income support will be unavailable, so the incentive to find and keep a job during that period is strong.

The timing couldn't be better. From an emotional and self-esteem standpoint, people are far better off working than receiving a government check. In the past, work over welfare hasn't been a rational economic choice, but now it will be a financial necessity.

Very few people I know supported the old welfare system. Their opposition didn't stem from a belief that recipients are lazy or undeserving. Rather, they felt the system too often fostered dependence by penalizing initiative.

These same people, however, are nervous about "welfare-to-work" revisions adopted by Congress and implemented by the state. This unease is not allayed

by the surging metropolitan job market. Despite seemingly ideal circumstances, several responsible government officials, community leaders and businesspeople are quietly concerned about how welfare-to-work is going to work. Why?

Prepared to work

First and foremost, many people entering the work force from public assistance don't have the job-readiness skills that employers take as an absolute given for even the most basic entry-level positions. Workplace norms such as prompt and regular attendance, cooperation with coworkers and appropriate dress are taken for granted by experienced employees. But if work hasn't been a part of someone's life experience, it's not surprising that these behaviors don't come as easily. It would be like making the perfect cast and landing a trophy bass on the first try without instruction — it just doesn't happen that way.

On the other hand, job readiness, like bass fishing, can be

taught. A combination of classroom and on-the-job experience is most effective. Minnesota's welfare-to-work program provides training dollars that can be used for this purpose. In addition, large employers with entry-level work-force needs should consider investing in job-readiness training.

These same companies think nothing of spending thousands of dollars searching for the right middle- and upper-level managers through executive "headhunter" firms. Think of job-readiness training investments in the same way, as a cost to create the right entry-level work force. If companies don't know how to approach this issue, they should partner with agencies that do, especially those that view welfare-to-work not as a client-centered social service program but as an employment-driven jobs initiative.

Obstacles to working

A second concern revolves around barriers to work-force participation facing those who are ready to work. Chief among these are child care and transportation.

The good news about child care is that additional funds are available because of legislative action. Supply of quality care is lagging, however, as is after-hours care for workers who don't arrive home by about 5:30 p.m. The capacity and flexibility of the child-care system must grow rapidly.

It's difficult to see any good news about transportation barriers. Our bus system is woefully inadequate to deliver workers from city neighborhoods to high-job areas in the suburbs. No quick fix here — just a need for sustained attention to improving transit options, expanding affordable housing choices and encouraging job growth closer to the urban core.

The time is now

Finally, what happens when the business cycle turns, the economy cools off and the labor market softens? Those coming off assistance who haven't yet made it into the work force may have an even harder time as they compete with more qualified applicants for limited openings. Those who have become employed may see their opportunities for advancement diminished.

The inevitability of this slowdown is the best reason to deal aggressively with welfare-to-work now. It's tempting to leave the hardest cases for last. That would be a mistake. Better to put in place the training, job commitments and support necessary to employ as many former recipients as possible or at least begin preparing them for work. Today there is business necessity as well

as government policy and a spirit of philanthropy influencing employers. That won't always be the case.

The challenges to successful welfare-to-work implementation can be overcome, but only if quiet whispers of concern about how things will really work are translated into bold commitments to act. One such commitment has been made by Allina Health System and Honeywell Inc. through their sponsorship of a program to train south Minneapolis residents for 150 good-paying Abbott Northwestern Hospital jobs. Much more is needed.

Welfare-to-work should work. But for many former welfare recipients, it won't without prompt attention to job-readiness training, obtaining employer commitments and removing barriers to work. It's time to get busy.



Your turn to comment

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