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Welfare - Devolution

Elena

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we need to know
how much of this can
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in terms of lack of state uniformity
federal options etc

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After Getting Responsibility for Welfare, States May Pass It Down

By Judith Havemann and Barbara Vobejda
Washington Post Staff Writers

Only months after Congress turned control of welfare over to the states, legislatures around the country are considering whether to hand off responsibility for the poor once again, this time to county and local governments.

Several states, including California, New York, Colorado, Ohio and North Carolina, are weighing proposals that could in some cases allow thousands of county commissioners, town supervisors or other local officials to make fundamental decisions about who should receive welfare, how soon they have to go to work and under what conditions.

If adopted, these proposals would deliver to local governments an unprecedented level of authority to design social policy, and in ways hardly envisioned by many of the federal lawmakers who voted for revolutionary welfare changes last year.

It could mean, for example, that a welfare mother with two young children could be forced to get a job in one county, but allowed to stay home and collect benefits if she moved a few miles across the county line. Or one county could provide child care while the next county did not.

But it also could bring much more flexibility: Inner cities with high unemployment could decide that it makes sense for them to spend more money on creating public service jobs, for example, while rural areas could spend that money on transportation for those who need to travel long distances to work.

State legislatures are convening this month to take up the issue of welfare for the first time since the federal law was passed, and it is unclear what the fate of these and other proposals will be. They range from the radical—eliminating any state role in welfare in one case—to the more general notion that the state should share some of its new power.

In California, Gov. Pete Wilson (R) is recommending that individual counties be issued "block grants" to establish programs to put welfare recipients to work, and to get them off the rolls in a year.

In Colorado, several prominent lawmakers are united behind a plan to transfer federal and state funds directly to the 63 counties, which would then be free to decide how much

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money welfare recipients should receive each month, and on what programs the money should be spent.

- One proposal in Indiana would eliminate the state welfare department altogether and place control for welfare with local agencies. Another would turn federal funds over to the state's 1,008 township trustees, many of whom serve part time, to distribute to the needy much as they did in a previous era of "poor relief."

"Local people know the needs, they know the people," said Indiana State Rep. Dennis Kruse (R), whose proposal would allow counties to negotiate directly with the federal government for welfare funds. "You can detect fraud easier. It's more efficient."

But already, the prospect of a second wave of welfare "devolution" to the county level is prompting concern among some policymakers and other social policy analysts who worry about the possible ramifications of shifting power to the smallest jurisdictions.

How will local governments with large numbers of welfare families cope, critics ask, without the resources of more prosperous areas to help cushion them?

"Poor people tend to be concentrated in certain areas of states that don't have the resources to take care of them," said Mary Jo Bane, a Harvard University professor who recently resigned as President Clinton's top policy official on welfare.

In education, for example, Bane said states have had to intervene in the affairs of local school districts because the individual jurisdictions have had such widely varying abilities and resources to educate children.

There is also concern among some analysts and lawmakers that counties could begin competing with each other to pay the lowest monthly benefit in order to discourage poor families from moving there, setting off a "race to the bottom."

Already a form of this is occurring in the Washington area, where two states and the District share the same metropolitan area. On Saturday, the District will reduce the amount it pays welfare recipients for the fourth time in order to avoid becoming a magnet for the needy of Maryland and Virginia.

"Unless a state provides standards, there could be a race to the bottom between counties," said Jodie Levin-Epstein, a senior analyst for the Center for Law and Social Policy, a Washington group that specializes in welfare issues. "One county could say only married couples could receive assistance, and push out the single-parent families to another county."

Yet a countervailing array of specialists see further devolution of welfare as the best way to provide the

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most flexibility, and a natural outgrowth of the movement to strip power from the federal bureaucracy and give it back to governments closer to the people.

"What's good for New York City may not be good for Buffalo, and what's good for Buffalo may not be good for New York City," said Michael McKeon, spokesman for New York Gov. George E. Pataki (R), whose proposal would allow interested counties to opt for a lump-sum payment from the state and much more freedom to set their own welfare rules.

The debate over state vs. local control, say several state officials, is a critical step in achieving the aim of the new federal law—providing maximum flexibility to the people closest to the issue. Supporters say local control is the best way to accommodate the distinct challenges of running a welfare program in rural areas, booming suburbs and large inner cities.

"In general, it's a good idea," as long as states set certain standards, said New York University professor Lawrence Mead, who has studied welfare-to-work programs. He pointed to the success of county-run programs in Wisconsin, where a state agency sets standards, but counties can establish their own work programs.

The movement could lead to a nationwide network of finely honed programs targeted at the needs of recipients. Once-dependent mothers could be raised permanently from poverty by, for example, innovative transportation systems established in isolated regions, or training programs giving them the exact skills needed to compete for lucrative jobs in emerging local industries searching for workers.

That's the hope.

Franklin County (Ohio) Commissioner Dorothy Teeter, who is negotiating with state officials over control of welfare programs, said most county officials across the country would welcome more discretion "as long as they really had the freedom to design the programs that fit their counties." At the same time, she said, "some, especially in rural counties, would rather not be bothered. And they would not do any more than they have to do."

Under Wilson's emerging welfare proposal in California, the state would decide how much money families would get, who would be eligible to receive it, and how long they could get support. But counties would be required to design their own programs to help welfare recipients find work and to share the financial penalties if they fail.

The challenge for counties would be greater than in other states, however, because Wilson's proposal would limit benefits to 12 months at a time for new recipients. That would mean serious pressure on local jurisdictions to get people off welfare fast, a task that has proven difficult even in the most successful state welfare experiments.

Wilson also would make it the counties' responsibility to figure out how to meet strict new federal standards, including a requirement that half of all welfare recipients be working by the year 2002.

Some have argued that Wilson's proposal places too much of the burden on local governments.

"Counties have full responsibility for meeting all the federal requirements, with no assurance we will have the tools to succeed," said Frank Mecca, executive director of the California County Welfare Directors Association, whose members run county welfare offices in the state. "That is the rub."

Colorado officials, whose plan is one of the most far-reaching in turning power over to counties, argue that local governments should even be able to determine how much and what type of aid should go to the poor.

"Different people have different needs," said House Speaker Chuck Berry (R), who proposed the plan. "I don't believe everybody should get one cash benefit amount."

Gov. Roy Romer, a Democrat in a state where both houses of the legislature are controlled by Republicans, warns that Berry's plan could prompt some local governments to simply send poor families over the county line.

"We can't have 63 different programs," he said. "We need to have a minimum cash benefit. We can't have counties adopting a program where there is no cash assistance and they buy bus tickets to the urban area."

But Berry dismissed the concern, saying the state would require counties to continue spending the same amount on the poor as they had in the past, and counties might be able to establish waiting periods, or residency requirements to prevent an influx of the disadvantaged.

In Arizona, a fight is bubbling up between Gov. J. Fife Symington III (R) and state Sen. Tom Patterson (R-Phoenix), who chairs the committee overseeing welfare reform. Symington wants to expand an existing welfare reform program, while Patterson is proposing that the state eliminate welfare altogether. It would be replaced with a system supplying jobs for everybody except those Patterson calls "end-stage cases," who would be "adopted" by churches and other nonprofit agencies who would "do what it takes" to get them on their feet.

"That is the great thing about the state," said Patterson. "We can try things that would be very difficult for the feds to do. We can have a little more risk. Even if we fail, it will be instructive to the rest of the country."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read the full text of the welfare reform legislation, and to review debate on the bill in Congress, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at http://www.washingtonpost.com

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