

Reforming welfare would help build a better Maine

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Body

Maine is the second-biggest welfare state in the nation. Let that sink in.

This state ranks third for the percentage of households on TANF cash welfare, second for food stamps, second for food stamp error rate, and third for Medicaid enrollment. Medicaid has doubled as a share of Maine's budget during the past 15 years and the Department of Health and Human Services now consumes almost half the budget. Overall, 30.5 percent of the budget is spent on welfare.

It's gotten so bad that politicians through the years have resorted to raiding oil cleanup and disaster relief funds just to plug the ever-growing, welfare-induced leaks in the budget, and those who need help the most are relegated to wait lists.

Maine's welfare enrollment has increased through good economic times and bad, and it can't be blamed on the high average age of Maine people -- all MaineCare non-categorical enrollees are under the age of 65.

It is simply a function of liberal politicians run amok. Democrats have had a near-monopoly on Maine politics since the 1970s, and their policies are about as appropriate in today's world as a leisure suit.

While the rest of the country has streamlined its welfare programs, Maine has stuck stubbornly by a welfare status quo that rewards unemployment and invites abuse.

Maine people see the need for reform. One poll revealed that 63 percent of us believe the state doesn't do enough to encourage work among welfare recipients. When Democrats this year said they would only pay off our \$500 million welfare debt to Maine hospitals if Republicans agreed to pass a massive expansion of the very program that created it, 70 percent of Mainers said the hospitals should be paid with no strings attached and only 15 percent agreed with the Democrats' tactic.

Even liberal Maine activist and donor Roxanne Quimby went so far as to call Maine "a welfare state."

Nationally, in a June NBC/Wall Street Journal poll that asked respondents to choose the greatest of eight factors that are "most responsible for the continuing problem of poverty," respondents' number one choice was "too much welfare that prevents initiative." A distant sixth was "lack of government funding."

So why do we keep funding the same old welfare programs while expecting different results?

Reforming welfare would help build a better Maine

Fortunately, in 2011-2012 when Republicans controlled Maine government, we enacted meaningful welfare reforms. But despite the clear need to bring Maine's welfare system within reason, Democrats, back in the majority this year, fought tooth-and-nail to stop further welfare reforms and roll back the common sense improvements made by the previous Legislature.

They tried to repeal the new two-year cap on methadone treatment and resisted efforts to relieve the taxpayers from having to subsidize cab fares to get to the methadone clinics.

While Democrats gave welfare recipients the all-clear to buy alcohol and tobacco with taxpayers' dollars, they wagged their finger and gave a stern "no" to anyone seeking to buy a drink with their own money in a licensed cigar lounge. They even killed a bill that would have prevented serious, convicted drug felons from receiving cash welfare.

Democrats proceeded to kill welfare reform proposals that even had support within their own party -- bills that would have made junk food ineligible for food stamp purchases and created a study group to eliminate those oddities in the welfare system that make it more profitable for people to collect government benefits than take a job.

This year's assault on welfare reform by liberal politicians culminated in a proposal -- LD 1066 -- to expand Maine's medical welfare program to tens of thousands of young, able-bodied individuals at a bank-breaking cost of over \$200,000 per day to working Mainers.

It's time for a new direction for Maine. Maine people deserve better than to pay some of the highest taxes in the country to support one of the most generous welfare systems in the country.

The most prosperous states have small welfare systems because they see the connection between welfare dependence, budgets and jobs. Large welfare programs burden state budgets, crowding out funding for economic drivers like infrastructure improvement and job training while increasing the tax burden on workers and businesses. They also create a culture of dependency.

It is economically and morally wrong to turn our safety net into a comfy hammock.

There are reasons to be optimistic about Maine's future, however. Maine people have shown in the past that they want jobs and opportunity, not welfare and dependency. Together, with a loud enough voice, we can build a better, more prosperous Maine.

Rep. Dale Crafts, R-Lisbon, and Rep. Jeff Timberlake, R-Turner, are small business owners serving in the Maine House of Representatives.

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