

Welfare bill gives state a break

Work requirement threshold would be lower for Wisconsin

By Craig Gilbert

Wisconsin would get a significant break in meeting new federal work rules under a change pushed by Rep. Paul Ryan and folded into the welfare reform bill expected to pass the House.

Two committees in the Republican-controlled House approved welfare plans Thursday on party lines. Those measures patterned after a Bush administration plan require states to have 70% of their welfare recipients working by 2007. That's compared with an average of about one-third now.

But under the change sought by Ryan, a Janesville Republican, the states with the biggest drop in their welfare caseloads since 1995 would have a lower threshold to meet.

Wisconsin had the third-biggest caseload drop between 1995 and 2001 76%. Under Ryan's change, that would mean the state would need to have 54% of its welfare recipients working by 2007, instead of 70%. Sixteen other states would get relief under the change, but only two states would benefit more than Wisconsin.

Ryan said the new provision would give the state more flexibility in meeting the tough new federal work requirements expected to be enacted this year including more use of education and training to help move people into better-paying jobs.

"We need to be able to have the freedom to exercise discrimination on a case-by-case basis," said Ryan, who has voiced concern that proposed changes in the welfare laws could leave the state with less freedom to design its own welfare programs.

The historic 1996 overhaul of welfare is up for reauthorization this year. President Bush has proposed tougher work rules and no significant change in funding for welfare programs. Critics in Congress, most but not all of them Democrats, argue the work rules are too strict, rob states of flexibility, and create unfunded costs; requiring more mothers to work longer hours, they say, means more money will have to be spent on day care than Bush proposed.

Republicans on the House Ways and Means Committee made some changes in their bill Wednesday that pleased Democrats. Ryan's provision was one. The committee also agreed to allow welfare recipients relief from the work requirements for a four-month stretch out of every two years. That's up from the three proposed by Bush, and is designed to accommodate a full semester of schooling. Also added was language making poverty reduction an explicit goal of welfare reform.

Ryan also got a provision included that is designed to make it easier for states to get broad waivers from federal rules in order to experiment with new programs.

Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.) also promised to seek more day care funding when the full House takes up the bill.

But the GOP majority rejected a wide assortment of changes sought by Democrats.

Milwaukee Democrat Jerry Kleczka, who serves with Ryan on Ways and Means, said Ryan's amendment reducing Wisconsin's work mandate is "going to help," but he argued that the plan still gives short shrift to education and training for welfare recipients and fails to provide enough money for day care.

"Any hope for an improvement will rest with the Senate," said Kleczka.

Two different Senate plans surfaced Thursday. One, by a key group of Democrats and Republicans, would require 70% of recipients to work, as does the Bush plan.

But unlike those plans, the Senate proposal would allow states far more latitude in counting vocational education and job search as "work." Those senators, including Louisiana Democrat John Breaux and Utah Republican Orrin Hatch, also vowed to seek more day care money.

A separate group of Democrats, including Indiana's Evan Bayh and New York's Hillary Clinton, announced a plan that diverged much more from the Bush proposal. Those senators called for looser work mandates and said any new work rules should be tied to add day care funding. They called for an extra \$8 billion for day care over five years.

Kleczka did succeed Thursday in adding a provision to the House bill aimed at toughening oversight over contractors used by states to provide welfare services.

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