

Advocates for poor seek more money
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Legislators are told that programs for low-income residents serve as an investment in the state.

PROVIDENCE -- A coalition of antipoverty advocates came before lawmakers yesterday to ask for \$12.3 million in various programs to help the working poor.

They urged legislators not to see the initiatives as handouts but as an investment in the state.

"These proposals should be seen as part of a comprehensive strategy for economic development," said Kate Brewster, executive director of Rhode Island College's Poverty Institute.

Take food stamps.

About 78,000 people in the state are part of the federal program. Another 32 percent of the state's population is estimated to be eligible.

The coalition of advocates -- called One Rhode Island -- is seeking \$250,000 in state funds to help identify and enroll people who are eligible for food stamps. The money would be matched by another \$250,000 from the federal government.

If the outreach program added another 10 percent to the program, an additional \$7.3 million in food stamps -- paid for by the federal government -- would be spent in the state, Brewster said, most at local grocers.

Brewster and a host of others said each part of their platform does not just help the working poor, but the whole state.

The platform would also provide a greater clothing allowance to children on welfare, increase the state's earned-income tax credit, allow more job training and education for people on welfare, lower health-care costs and provide for more affordable housing.

"Churches, synagogues, mosques and civic groups across the state are trying to meet the demands of serving our brothers and sisters," said the Rev. Bernard A. Healey, lobbyist for the Diocese of Providence. "Charity is a wonderful thing. The people of Rhode Island are to be commended for their valiant volunteer efforts on behalf of the poor and their generous donations to charities. However, charity cannot and must not be confused with justice.

"Charity cannot and will not replace sound public policy that reflects moral values," Healey added. "These are not luxuries but basic necessities that must be a priority in the halls and hearing rooms of this State House."

Ronald A. Lebel, acting director of the state Department of Human Resources, wrote in opposition of most bills saying there was not adequate financing for the programs. He did, however, support the food stamp measure.

Another bill would increase annual payments made for children on the Family Independence Program -- Rhode Island's version of welfare to work. Currently, families on FIP get a \$30-a-year clothing allowance for each school-age child. The proposed measure expands the allowance to all children -- not just those in school -- and increases the payment to \$150 a year.

Awilda Rosario, a single mother with four girls, said that \$30 is not enough to buy clothing for a child. She noted that just one pair of jeans at Wal-Mart costs \$11.82.

"Children grow every year and it's very hard to keep up," said Danielle Lopes, a single mom who has three kids.

Rep. Paul W. Crowley, D-Newport, said that while he sees the need for such legislation he wanted to know where the fathers of these children are and what, if anything, they are contributing in child support.

The women testifying before the committee said they were not receiving any support and didn't know the whereabouts of the fathers.

Crowley said the state was letting such men "off the hook" and needed to do more to get child-support payments. He urged the advocates to suggest such changes in conjunction with their package.

The other bills heard yesterday would:

Increase the state's earned income tax credit, a credit given to low-income workers. Rhode Island gives 1.5 percent of the federal credit as its own. One Rhode Islander would like to see the state give 5 percent, increasing the maximum state credit from \$50 to \$210.

Give more flexibility in the FIP program to allow welfare recipients to get more education and job training. Currently people on FIP are only allowed to include education and training as part of their work plan during the first two years on public assistance. The group is looking to allow up to 10 hours of training or education to count toward the 30 hours of work a week needed to stay on FIP.

The advocates told the committee that Rhode Island women without high school degrees were earning \$16,900 in 1999. Those with high school degrees made \$24,200 and those with college degrees made \$32,600.

Allow more people to receive subsidized child care. The state currently subsidizes child care for families who earn up to 225 percent of the federal poverty level: \$42,412 for a family of four. The coalition wants to see the subsidy expanded to families who earn up to 250 percent of the poverty level: \$47,125. A single parent with two children at 225 percent of the poverty level pays \$401 a month for the subsidized care, Brewster said. Without the subsidy, the cost jumps to \$1,215.

Cut in half the monthly premiums for the RItE Care subsidized health-care program. A family of four earning \$47,125 currently pays \$92 a month to insure the children.
