



**Policy Brief from the
Alameda County CalWORKs Needs Assessment
and Outcomes Study**

Child Care Essential Ingredient for Sustained, Full-Time Work for Welfare Recipients

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In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) to move welfare recipients into full-time work. Effective January 1998 California's legislature created the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program to implement the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Among other provisions, the law required job search or work preparation, followed by full-time work, from 80% of aid recipients within two years and limited lifetime receipt of aid to 60 months. CalWORKs assisted the transition to work through work preparation and other services as well as child care subsidies which could continue for up to two years after departure from CalWORKs.

A major study by the Public Health Institute examining welfare and barriers to work in the TANF program finds that full-time work is three to four times more likely when a family has secure child care arrangements. The finding is particularly important in light of the pending legislative deadline to reauthorize TANF on September 30, 2004. Study results highlight the need to ensure supports for families departing welfare for work.

The Research Brief, *Welfare and Work Status under TANF: Effect of Barriers to Employment and Implications for Program Planning*, shows that the two principal barriers for a single parent trying to work full-time are child care and lack of transportation. In addition, barriers such as physical health problems and activity limitations, limited language ability, and few work skills hold recipients back from getting or keeping work.

Most TANF recipients experience several barriers to employment. At the start of the study, over one-third of the sample reported four or more barriers. As the number of barriers increased, working was less and less likely at any one point in time.

Of the 323 study subjects, almost two-thirds had no car or drivers license. One-fourth had a child with a health problem that required intensive personal care. One in ten said their poor ability to read or write in English was a problem in getting or keeping work, and that applied to US born

respondents as well as immigrants. Even though TANF provides for formal child care, twice as many parents had child care arrangements within the family, compared to non-family childcare.

Deborah Cutler-Ortiz, Director of the Family Income Division at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., observed, "this research comes at a critical time as we approach the next deadline to reauthorize TANF. These results emphasize the critical need for supports such as child care, transportation help, access to barrier removal services and training. Members of Congress who claim to support TANF families must incorporate, as a goal of reauthorization, a family's ability to access the necessary resources to retain jobs over the long haul. We know that work supports such as child care are essential for a parent to be successful in the workplace. This research proves the significance once again."

As Congress considers TANF reauthorization, it must avoid creating an inflexible program by adding unnecessary requirements and restrictions that fail to address the needs of the TANF population. Flexibility in addressing employment barriers will be far more effective for families and will promote, rather than retard, moving parents securely into the work force.

Findings are from the Alameda County CalWORKs Needs Assessment and Outcomes Study, a 27-month, prospective study of a cohort of CalWORKs recipients. The Public Health Institute study, designed to examine the prevalence and assess the impact of health problems and other potential barriers to employment, followed the progress from welfare to work of 512 randomly selected welfare recipients. White, Black, Hispanic and Vietnamese respondents who were subject to work requirements were interviewed three times over two years: in late 1998 through early 1999, in mid-2000, and in mid-2001. Respondents were asked about many aspects of their lives, including physical and mental health, child care arrangements, and access to transportation. Survey data on demographics, childcare arrangements, and barriers were supplemented with State administrative data on monthly aid status and quarterly earnings from 1994 to mid-2002. The findings reported in the research brief are based on data concerning 323 respondents who were in single-parent cases when selected for the study.

At the baseline interview, almost two-thirds of the sample reported a transportation barrier. Over 40% lacked a high school diploma or GED. Almost one-third reported symptoms of drug or alcohol abuse, and 27% checked off fewer than five work skills. One-fifth to one-fourth of the sample reported problems with physical health, activity limitations, and children needing extra care. Over one-third of the sample reported four or more barriers at baseline.

Several health barriers – physical activity limitations, health problems that interfere with responsibilities, mental health symptoms, and alcohol and drug problems – are important predictors of not working, when examined one at a time, but they do not remain significant in statistical models including other factors. These models permitted the researchers to examine the effects of individual barriers to employment and the cumulative effect of the total number of barriers.

Although the CalWORKs program provides support for child care, only one in five respondents reported non-family childcare arrangements, while two in five handled child care within the family.

Dr. Marcy Whitebook, Director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, commented, “it is not just the parents whose incomes and careers benefit from access to child care. We know that children’s lives are enriched in child care. If families can access high quality care, children’s development is also enhanced, raising their chances for success in school and later life.” However, as Dr. Whitebook emphasized, “affordable and high quality child care has been difficult to secure in locations and for hours that new employees may require. Many workers turn instead to informal arrangements which can also be difficult to arrange, and may be of lower quality than licensed care.”

The research shows which type of child care, by family members or formal child care outside the family, is more likely to support full-time work. For periods in which respondents combined work and welfare, child care by family members was a stronger predictor than was non-family child care arrangements. However, full-time work without welfare was most strongly associated with formal child care, not provided by family members. The findings suggest that jurisdictions need to promote access to quality childcare with efficient referrals and user-friendly payment systems.

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The Research Brief by Jean C. Norris and Richard Speigman, can be found with materials from the **Alameda County CalWORKs Needs Assessment and Outcomes Study**, at www.phi.org under “What’s New”.

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