

SUGGESTED HED: Pennsylvania senators get briefing on welfare work requirements from former Maine official who implemented them there

The topic of tying work requirements to public assistance benefits has come up frequently during the current legislative session in Pennsylvania. During **budget hearings** early in the spring, the Wolf administration asserted that getting more state citizens onto the rolls was intrinsically a good thing – while a number of pieces of **Republican legislation** have sought to do precisely the opposite, encouraging beneficiaries to transition into paying jobs instead of continuing to rely on public benefits indefinitely.

[link 1 - https://www.watchdog.org/pennsylvania/wolf-administration-opposes-work-training-requirements-for-healthy-medicaid-food/article_3c7fb89e-369f-11e8-825a-e3dddd7d6769.html]

[link 2 - https://www.watchdog.org/pennsylvania/pennsylvania-house-adopts-bill-aiming-to-get-food-stamp-beneficiaries/article_c15591c8-4e3d-11e8-86dd-0b508e20c539.html]

One of the central points of contention in these discussions has been the varying viewpoints of how such work requirements have fared in other states. Republican legislators have cited reports saying that programs in Maine and Kansas have been highly effective in improving the quality of life for residents, while the administration and Democratic legislators have insisted that their information shows precisely the opposite.

Seeking to get to the bottom of this discrepancy, the state Senate Majority Policy Committee brought in one of the architects of Maine's trailblazing efforts in expanding work requirements. Sam Adolphsen is now a senior fellow for the Foundation for Government Accountability, but he previously worked in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services during the time period when the requirements were being implemented.

Adolphsen also spent significant time tracking the outcomes that resulted from that work, and as such he was able to provide senators with a first-person perspective on why Maine took the steps that it did, how they were implemented, and the repercussions in the immediate aftermath.

"When Maine required able bodied adults on food stamps to work, train or volunteer, we tracked those individuals the year after they left the program," Adolphsen told the committee during a hearing Tuesday in Harrisburg. "They ended up earning more than double what they had earned before in one year, and the average person moved out of poverty. Work is what worked to move them out of poverty."

Adolphsen said that after he left government for the FGA, he worked with Kansas officials to conduct a similar study.

“And the results were the same,” he said. “People were better off, they went back to work in over 600 different industries, and what they earned more than made up for the benefit they left behind.”

Sen. Scott Martin, R-Lancaster, asked Adolphsen to weigh in on the Wolf administration’s claims that moving forward with work requirement programs would cost Pennsylvania many hundreds of millions of dollars.

“The administration, [Human Services] Secretary [Teresa] Miller, cited the cost to actually implement the system, to put it in place, as some obscene number,” Martin said, referencing an estimate that it would cost the state up to \$800 million. “It was such a large number that that’s what would prevent us from actually implementing an effective program. What do you say to that, given your experience and the fact that we already have work requirements on other programs?”

In reply, Adolphsen said that it didn’t cost Maine anything to implement.

“Most systems are already prepared for the requirement,” he said. “The cost they’re coming up with, let’s say, is based on the idea that you need to give each and every person a specialized suite of supports around the requirement. And that’s just not true. You don’t have to do that.”

Adolphsen explained that the concept of work requirements for public assistance dated to federal welfare reform efforts from the 1990s, and as a result virtually every state system was already capable of administering such a program.

“I was in Maine when we implemented those, and it didn’t cost any money,” he said. “We’re in the same type of situation, smaller state, but all we did was turn back on the work requirements selection in the computer system, and then make sure that folks were getting access to available trainings. It was really that simple.”

Committee Chairman David Argall, R-Mahanoy City, asked for a ranking of potential welfare reform measures, seeking to learn where the state could have the biggest impact. Adolphsen replied that work requirements for food stamps and Medicaid would be the top two, with “childcare cooperation” and anti-fraud efforts third and fourth.

That third priority, Adolphsen explained, was about using the resources of the state to ensure that legally required child support payments are being made. He cited statistics showing that child support can have a significant effect on decreasing the use of food stamps.

“When kids and families get the child support they’re supposed to receive, it reduces poverty dramatically,” he said. “In fact, child support is one of the best anti-poverty programs that we have. When families receive the child support they are owed, it increases those families’ incomes by 54 percent.”

He further noted that the federal government lets states require cooperation with child support payments to get food stamps, but Pennsylvania doesn't have such a requirement.

"Pennsylvania has 202,000 single parent families on food stamps, and only 29 percent of those are receiving child support," he said. "In states where cooperation is required, child support collections have increased by 40 percent. So we estimate that if Pennsylvania required cooperation in child support for food stamps for the non custodial parents, it would mean an estimated \$10 million in additional support provided to those single parent households. So this is an opportunity for your state to boost incomes for poor families with children."

Beyond the nuts and bolts of the programs, Adolphsen talked at length about the power of work requirements to transform populations currently relying on government handouts to take control of their lives and become productive taxpayers.

"I think what we all want to see is people do really well," he said. "We want to see people in our states, our communities thriving. I think what we've found both empirically and just from a common sense standpoint, is that there's a lot more dignity in work and getting a paycheck, than in staying on welfare for years and years. ... And so this isn't cruel, it's caring. It's caring to put someone back on that path to work, and it's much more powerful than giving them a plastic card with 180 bucks a month."