

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY,
WORK, AND FAMILY PROMOTION
ACT OF 2002

SPEECH OF

HON. PATSY T. MINK

OF HAWAII

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, May 16, 2002

Mrs. MINK of Hawaii. Mr. Speaker, welfare rolls have been cut in half. In 1996 we had over 5 million families on welfare. Today, there are about 2.2 million families on welfare. The work requirement has forced over 3 million families to leave welfare. Most States will advise that they are not certain whether these parents are working. The guess is that about half are not. We are not sure how these families are doing. Just getting off welfare does not mean that the family is no longer in need. We certainly don't know whether the children have adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Reports tell us that most are still in poverty.

Welfare should be about children. But sadly this debate is not about what is good for children in poverty. Congress and the White House have turned welfare into a hardball game aimed at the single moms. Few have turned their questions to the children.

There is no real dispute that preschool age children are better off if they can be cared for by their own mothers. If their mothers must work then these children must be placed in quality child care programs. Secretary Tommy Thompson says they must be provided with child care. Anticipating this work requirement Congress has provided some child care funds under this program, but not nearly enough. A child care program is made available for all low income working families. Currently there are over 15 million preschool age children eligible for federally funded child care programs. But only 1.8 million are actually provided with help.

Welfare mothers mostly have to fend for themselves in finding child care. They ask neighbors or family to help if they live close by. It is a myth to say that welfare mothers are made to work and that child care is provided. Any wonder that 30 percent of these moms work nights and another 30 percent work weekends to make their work hours as required under TANF. They obviously have to work these odd hours because they can't find child care and by working nights or weekends they can leave their small children in the care of the older children in the family or with acquaintances in the building. This is a far cry from quality child care.

Poor children are already at risk. Keeping them apart from their mothers is pushing them further into harm. If welfare is about children, we need to pay special attention to the fragile frames upon which their lives are built.

When children are of school age, it is reasonable to expect that the mother could use her free time to work or to improve her chances of getting a good paying job by stepping into various education career-building opportunities.

Legislation must be designed to make this possible. Education must be considered a work activity. As such, it would qualify for child care support. The parent could qualify for a Pell grant, work study program, or a subsidized student loan.

The reports indicate that 42 percent of welfare recipients today lack a high school di-

ploma. Their first priority must be to get a GED diploma. After that further post secondary options should be considered.

Any reauthorization of TANF must provide for educational opportunity. If Welfare to Work is about ending poverty, education is the best tool to make that happen.

It is important to recognize that many on welfare come for help because of the dire circumstances they face. Personal problems like divorce, husbands sent to prison, serious illnesses in the family, substance abuse, domestic violence, severe depression and mental illness in the family are some of the reasons families have been forced into welfare. All of the above are barriers to getting a job and to holding on to one. With good intentions they find a job, but find that they can't keep it. Without work, they soon find themselves pushed off of welfare.

We should be helping these families. We should be referring them to other programs that can help them recover, offer treatment, counseling, etc. The Republican bill provides only three months of treatment once in two years. Without help these families will be locked into poverty and the children will pay the price of our neglect. Those that cannot be helped should be moved into permanent assistance programs like SSI.

In the long run, if we help them overcome these barriers, they will be able to hold down a job, and support their families as society expects them to.

All we are talking about today is continued eligibility for cash assistance for a welfare family. Current law says the longest they can stay on welfare is 5 years. But please note that 21 States have enacted much lower time limits. Texas for one has a limit of 1 to 3 years, Tennessee is 18 months, Connecticut is 21 months, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Nebraska, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Virginia, Oregon, and South Carolina all have 2-year time limits. Delaware, Ohio, and Utah have a 3-year limit and Georgia is four.

And what about the cash assistance?; 24 states pay a family of three \$141 to \$291 a month. At \$291 a month that's not even \$3,500 a year that a family of three would receive.

Under current law that welfare family is expected to work at least 30 hours a week. At minimum wage the total monthly income would be about \$700 a month.

Often the states will reduce the cash benefit when the single mother finds a job, or drop her entirely.

There are two ways to reduce the welfare rolls: the single mom gets a minimum wage job or fails to find or hold a job and is sanctioned. That is basically how the rolls were so dramatically cut in half in the past 5 years.

Yet the Republican bill complains that the States have not done enough. They haven't kicked the welfare families off fast enough. They complain that of the current case load 57 percent are not working. Consequently their new bill increases the work participation rate to 70 percent in 5 years. This means that the heat will be on, and the States will have to press harder for the welfare mothers to find work or be pushed off of welfare.

The 70 percent work rate is an unconscionable demand upon the States who all have made good faith efforts up to now. This pressure coupled with the increased hours to 40 of

approved activity leaves little room for any mother to nurture and care for her children.

Two weeks ago, in Missouri, a 9-year-old girl died a horrible death in a fire caused by a lit candle. Her mother could not pay her electric bill. Without electricity, she used candles to light her apartment that housed 11 people.

This tragic end of a child's life, because the family was too poor to pay the electric bill is a reminder that we must think of our children as we write laws that purport to benefit them.

Sadly I had prepared four basic amendments to offer for this debate which the Rules Committee refused to allow.

The first would have provided services for single mothers who were victims of domestic violence so that they could comply with the work requirements, and while being treated would not be sanctioned. Reports advise that perhaps as many as 60 percent of the women on welfare have suffered from domestic violence at some point in their lives, and that 30 percent report abuse within the last year. Many live in shelters and are still in danger for their lives.

The second amendment would have prohibited sanctions against mothers who could not work because they could not find child care.

The third amendment would have allowed all education programs as a work activity.

The fourth amendment would have included participation in services and programs to help recipients with barriers to employment as allowable work activity. The barriers are mental and physical illness, substance abuse, literacy and learning disabilities. A GAO report states that 38 percent of the adult welfare recipients have severe physical impairments. Further it reports that 20 percent of the families have a child with a disability, and that 20 percent have a substance abuse problem. Four out of ten mothers report severe clinical depression. Help for all these conditions are prerequisites for successful work experiences.

Until we face the reality of why people apply for welfare, and help them we are not fulfilling our responsibility to provide a safety net for the neediest of this country.

I urge a "no" vote against H.R. 4737.

TRIBUTE TO HONORABLE
KATHLEEN O'FERRALL FRIEDMAN

HON. BENJAMIN L. CARDIN

OF MARYLAND

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, May 20, 2002

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor the Honorable Kathleen O'Ferrall Friedman whose legal career and civic works have made life better and safer for all Marylanders.

A 1962 graduate of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Judge Friedman received her LLB from the University of Maryland School of Law and was awarded an MSW from the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work.

She began her legal career in January 1971 as a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Bureau. For the next six years, she specialized in domestic law, becoming the Managing Attorney of the Domestic Law Unit. In private practice from 1977-1985, she specialized in domestic law, and was named in the Seaview/Putnam Book *The Best Lawyers in America*.