Baker again seeks to restrict eligibility for welfare program

By Laura Krantz | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 28, 2017

A small provision buried in the $40.5 billion state budget proposed by Governor Charlie Baker last week could strip benefits from about 5,700 of the state’s poorest families, according to state officials and advocates for the poor who have analyzed the plan.

Baker, a Republican who pledged to reform the state’s welfare system, has proposed to shrink the number of families who qualify for a state cash benefit that currently helps about 32,000 families with a benefit of about $447 a month.

The prospect has infuriated advocates for the poor, especially because Baker proposed a similar change last year but, after a fight, the Legislature nixed it.

“It’s really disconcerting to those families who may lose their benefits,” said Kelly Turley, director of advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

The program in question is known as Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and it provides cash to families with children and to pregnant women.
past decade

The governor’s plan would require people who apply for this state benefit to list federal aid they also receive from Supplemental Security Income toward their income, effectively meaning fewer people would qualify for the state benefit.

SSI provides money to elderly, blind, and disabled people to help them afford food, clothing, and a place to live.

The administration estimates that narrowing the eligibility will save $16.2 million, of which $4 million would go toward a new workforce training program called Learn to Earn.

Administration officials said the reason for the change is to level the playing field among people who receive both state and federal benefits.

Veterans, people with disabilities, and those who receive other kinds of federal aid must report that money when they apply for the state benefit program, and officials said those who receive SSI should be required to do so as well.

“The administration’s welfare reform proposal, including concepts proposed by the Patrick administration, ensures equity in state cash assistance for veterans, the disability community, unemployed, and others receiving benefits in alignment with federal [food stamp] eligibility,” said the governor’s spokesman, Billy Pitman, in a statement.

According to the governor’s office, 4,300 families would lose benefit entirely and 1,400 would receive less money under the proposal.

At the same time, the administration believes 2,800 families would receive more money, because of a change in the way children are counted. Advocates for poor families, however, expressed skepticism.

Lawmakers who stood up for the state program last year are angry that the governor has again proposed to cut it.
“How do we take the most vulnerable and take resources away from them? How does it actually help them?” said Representative Marjorie Decker, a Cambridge Democrat.

Decker, who said she grew up in public housing and knows what it is like to hunt under couch cushions for spare change to buy bread, said it is unfair to penalize the poorest families simply to bring them in line with veterans and others.

The workforce training program, for which the administration plans to spend $4 million of the savings, is an initiative designed to provide credentials and employment for unemployed and underemployed individuals in high-demand fields, said Pitman.

He added that $1 million of the money would go toward transportation, child care expenses, and other barriers to employment.

Baker is not the first to put forth such a welfare proposal. Then-Governor Deval Patrick sought such a change in 2010. Baker’s proposal this year is slightly different from the one last year.

Although this specific change to the state aid program would save $16.2 million, Baker’s budget proposal shows he is counting on much more savings because the number of families who receive this benefit is declining.

In his State of the Commonwealth speech last week, the governor touted the fact that the welfare caseload has dropped 25 percent during his two years in office.

But Deborah Harris, a lawyer with the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, said just because fewer poor families receive this benefit doesn’t mean they have risen out of poverty.

She said statistics show that most poor families received the state benefit in the mid-1990s, but now the number of recipients has shrunk to just one in four poor families.
That could be because the maximum amount of the grant has been frozen for the past 16 years, she said, and since the minimum wage has risen, fewer people qualify for the grant even though the cost of living has also gone up.

Or it could be because the process of applying for the grant is so complex, Harris said.

She and Turley, of the homelessness group, worry that this change will also inadvertently set the state back in its goal of reducing homelessness. Many needy families use the state money to afford rent, often in public housing, they said.

“Families who are already at the margin won’t be able to pay private rent and many of them will become homeless,” Harris said.

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