

## EDITORIAL: California's poor need more than handouts

Opponents of Sen. Holly Mitchell's long-running legislative effort to end the 20-year-old law aimed at so-called "welfare queens" are right: Removing the maximum family grant provision from the CalWORKs assistance program won't save our poorest kids from lives of poverty.

It will take much more than that.

For the third time, Mitchell, D-Los Angeles, is trying to pass legislation removing the rule that denies extra benefits to women and families who have a new child while receiving cash grants from the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids program. The extra benefit is \$122 a month.

Mitchell makes the case that the CalWORKs program is a different animal than it was in the 1990s. Participants must be in a job-training program, in school or have a job, and can only receive assistance for up to 24 months. The average grant is \$450, according to Mitchell. This is crisis relief, really, not a steady paycheck for raising kids.

We wish Mitchell luck with Senate Bill 23. She will need it, as this legislation has dredged up the familiar trope of scheming poor women ready to pump out babies for cash. The cap was adopted during an era of welfare reform nationwide, when a few stories of fraud were whipped up into a national fear of the apocryphal welfare queen, draped in furs and jewels and driving a luxury car, thanks to taxpayer generosity.

This one hot-button topic should not derail discussion of the larger issue here: California has the highest child-poverty rate in the country. That ranking designation is from a new report by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a charitable organization that focuses on improving opportunities for the poor. The report says more than 25% of children in the Golden State are living in households with income below the poverty line. What is more interesting, the report notes, is how many more would be living in poverty without government assistance, about 40%.

To improve the lives of these children will take more than bigger handouts. People in extreme financial distress need an array of support, including child care, and economic opportunities, including job training and jobs. The Children's Defense Fund-California has put together a list of recommendations for California policymakers to achieve this. Some them are:

- Establishing a state earned-income tax credit.
- Raising the state minimum wage to \$13 an hour.
- Expanding subsidized child care slots for low-income children.
- Increasing participation in CalFresh, what we used to call food stamps. The Children's Defense Fund estimates that 3.2 million more Californians could qualify for this benefit.
- Establishing a state housing trust fund for extremely low-income families.

Many of the recommendations are embodied in pending legislation, including bills to raise the minimum wage and provide an earned-income tax credit.

Such proposals would cost the state money and could require reductions elsewhere. That will all play out in the debate to come. Let's hope the discussion won't degenerate into talk of mythical notions of welfare queens.

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