

New Welfare Rule Friendlier to Students

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Welfare recipients who go to college will be able to use up to a year of classwork to meet the program's work requirements and will no longer need to have their homework supervised to have some of that time count as well.

The unsupervised homework provision, which also applies to vocational school and other educational activities, represents a change from rules put into place in 2006 for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program. A copy of the final rule was obtained by The Associated Press. It will be published in the Federal Register next week.

The nation's governors had sought the changes, arguing the requirement that homework be supervised would increase state costs. The Bush administration had wanted as much supervision as possible, but eventually it conceded that most students aren't monitored as they do their homework.

"Since we're trying to imitate what real life is like, we thought we were asking a little too much there," said Sidonie Squier, director of the Office of Family Assistance, which is within the Health and Human Services Department.

Under welfare reform, adults getting cash assistance are generally required to work a minimum number of hours each week. The 2006 rule more strictly defined what constitutes work. The new rule incorporates the feedback it received.

The interim rule also did not count getting a bachelor's degree as a work activity. The new rule will allow recipients to count one year of college as a work activity. Some analysts say this is an important step in helping recipients get a better education.

"Long-term success will depend upon people getting better jobs, better skills, better wages," said Liz Schott, a senior fellow at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal-leaning think tank.

The rules did not incorporate the governors' request for more leeway in setting the work requirements for people with disabilities. Some participants with disabilities simply cannot meet the minimum 20 or 30 hours that's required, but states should still get credit for helping them, they said.

Half of the single-parent families participating in the TANF program must meet the work requirements or states could lose some federal funding.

"We recognize that many individuals with disabilities are capable of participating in productive work activities and encourage states to explore these capabilities, rather than focusing on their limitations," the final rule states.

The administration said it plans to expand its efforts to give states more technical assistance in helping them find full employment for disabled welfare recipients.

Squier rejected the notion that states could have more of an incentive to removed the disabled from the TANF rolls if their participation makes it harder for states to avoid financial sanctions.

"States really have a nasty little tendency to shove folks with a disability to the side because they're harder to work with," Squier said. "When you move them aside, that's a not-so-subtle form of discrimination."

But Schott said that giving states more leeway in serving the disabled increased the financial incentive to do so.

"There is a lot of lip service to states that they should serve families with disabilities, but the rules do not support that kind of language," she said.

About 2 million families per month get cash assistance, down from the historical high of 5 million families in the mid-1990s.

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