

# The Broken Promise: *Welfare Reform Two Years Later*

## Equal Rights Advocates†

“You’ve spent twenty years telling them [employers] we are lazy, and now you want them to hire us?” — A Focus Group Participant

### I. INTRODUCTION

When President Clinton signed federal welfare reform into law in 1996, he promised that it would reduce the welfare rolls and “increase independence.” Many welfare recipients remember hearing him talk about both “ending welfare as we know it” and working with companies to hire welfare recipients. A welfare recipient in Los Angeles described her reaction: “I was excited kind of. Because what I heard on TV is that a lot of companies were going to be hiring off the welfare rolls. That was the

---

© 2000, Equal Rights Advocates.

† Equal Rights Advocates produced this report as part of its Californians for Family Economic Self-Sufficiency (CFESS) Project, in partnership with Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW). The project is made possible in part by The Rosenberg Foundation.

Authors: Doris Y. Ng and Ana J. Matosantos

Profiles: Emily Katz Kishawi

Editor: Beth H. Parker

Production: Terri Witherspoon

We greatly appreciate the enthusiastic involvement of the more than 50 women who participated in our focus groups and those who agreed to be interviewed for this study. We could not have completed this project without their dedication and willingness to share their experiences. We also collaborated with the following CFESS members: Community Service, Education and Training (CSET), Asian Resources, and Women at Work. The staff at each of these organizations did an incredible job recruiting for the focus groups. We also thank our skillful facilitator, Ana Rivera.

Many agencies, individuals and organizations collaborated with ERA to develop the recommendations and themes of this report. They include: Center on Poverty Law and Economic Opportunity, Coalition for Ethical Welfare Reform, Coalition on Homelessness, Community Legal Services, East Bay Community Law Center, Employment Law Center, Family Rights and Dignity Project, LIFEtimE, Cindy Marano, National Economic Development and Law Center, Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, San Francisco Neighborhood Legal Assistance Foundation, We Interrupt This Message, and Western Center on Law and Poverty. We appreciate their valuable contributions and look forward to continuing our collaborative work on behalf of welfare recipients and the working poor.

reason that I actually volunteered myself to go through the GAIN<sup>1</sup> program.”

On August 11, 1997, Governor Wilson signed California’s welfare reform law. California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids, CalWORKs, establishes a five-year lifetime limit for receipt of aid, which started ticking on January 1, 1998, for all California adult recipients then on aid.

Under CalWORKs, adult recipients must engage in “work activities” and must find work within 18 or 24 months. “Work activities” can include job search, English as a Second Language (ESL), Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED), on-the-job training, work experience, and vocational training.

CalWORKs adopts a “Work First” approach to moving people from welfare to work. Work First policies emphasize welfare recipients getting the first job they can, no matter what kind and typically at the least expense to the government. Consequently, Work First generally places recipients into activities such as job club (where one typically learns how to prepare a resume and apply for a job) or job search, rather than educational or training programs.

When a recipient enrolls in CalWORKs, she generally attends an orientation, followed by an appraisal, job club, and job search. In developing a job search strategy, the county is supposed to consider the interests and skills of the participant.

If the participant has not located a job after completing her job search, she receives a vocational assessment of her work and education history, skills, and barriers to employment. She then signs a welfare-to-work plan based on the assessment, which describes her work activities and the supportive services she needs. The welfare-to-work plan also is supposed to take into account the participant’s interests. Once she signs or refuses to sign the plan, her 18- or 24-month clock starts ticking.

---

Equal Rights Advocates works to achieve women’s equality and economic security through litigation, education, legislative advocacy and practical advice and counseling. ERA focuses on assuring equal opportunity, advancing workplace rights, preventing sexual harassment in the workplace and schools, and reforming welfare-to-work.

To order copies of this report, please contact ERA at:

Equal Rights Advocates  
Publication Department  
1663 Mission St., Suite 550  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
Telephone: 415/621-0672  
Fax: 415/621-6744  
info@equalrights.org  
www.equalrights.org

1. GAIN, or Greater Avenues for Independence, is the current employment-related component of the CalWORKs program in Los Angeles County. It is also the name of the limited training program that several counties operated under the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program.

CalWORKs requires that domestic violence survivors are to receive referrals to domestic violence agencies and other resources and may be considered for a waiver of their work requirements and time limits. Recipients with disabilities, mental health problems or substance abuse problems are supposed to receive evaluations and appropriate services. Recipients are entitled to supportive services (e.g., childcare, transportation, clothing) while they engage in work activities.

Now that welfare reform has gone into effect, many welfare recipients and their families view it as a broken promise. They have neither received help to access decent jobs, nor experienced economic independence. As the Los Angeles recipient said: "Once I got in there, it wasn't what I was expecting. There [were] no resources. There [were] no jobs, like American Airlines or anything."

In late 1999, Equal Rights Advocates (ERA) asked welfare recipients throughout California about how welfare reform was working. This article contains the recommendations and findings from six focus groups that ERA conducted in three California counties: Sacramento, Tulare, and Los Angeles.

The consistent thread from our interviews is that welfare reform has not met its promise. The line of employers waiting to hire off the welfare rolls does not exist. Moreover, ERA found rampant violations of CalWORKs law, ranging from failing to consider welfare recipients' interest in developing a job search strategy to failing to assess properly welfare recipients' barriers to employment.

We hope that the voices of the women with whom we spoke will carry to Governor Davis' office, welfare offices, and the Legislature. The message they carry is clear: California must leave behind the approach of Work First, a practice that forces mostly single parents into unstable, low-wage jobs that offer no hope of independence. Instead, California must develop and implement a welfare reform system that will move families out of poverty permanently.

## II. FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

ERA collaborated with a key community-based organization in each county: Community Services, Education and Training in Tulare; Asian Resources in Sacramento; and Women at Work in Los Angeles. These organizations were in charge of recruiting participants and identifying women who were on their way to economic self-sufficiency. ERA also engaged a professional focus group facilitator, Ana Rivera, who conducted all six focus groups.

All focus group participants were women who had participated in at least one Work First component of their county's CalWORKs plan (e.g., job search). One group in each county was comprised only of women of

color (Tulare: Latina; Sacramento: Asian-American; Los Angeles: African-American). ERA conducted all six focus groups in English; each ranged from five to twelve participants. Each participant filled out a questionnaire to provide baseline information, which included demographic data, past work experiences, current work experience, and work aspirations. All focus groups occurred in September and October 1999.

### A. Counties' Demographics

All three counties are quite diverse ethnically. In all three counties, the number of racial minorities who are on welfare or are economically disadvantaged exceed their percentage in the general population. Since implementation of CalWORKs, caseloads in California have plummeted 30%.<sup>2</sup> In Los Angeles, as with other large cities across the country, whites are leaving welfare more quickly than people of color, particularly African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

### ABOUT THE COUNTIES

Sacramento			
	General Population <sup>a</sup>	Welfare Population <sup>b</sup>	Economically Disadvantaged <sup>c</sup>
White	63%	44%	52%
Latino	15%	32%	16%
African-American	10%	18%	16%
Asian-American	12%	15%	15%
Native American	1%	1%	2%
Unemployment Rate: 4%		Total Caseload (1999): 31,000	

2. See U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Children and Families (visited Dec. 7, 1999) <<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/news/stats/caseload.htm>>.

3. See Jason DeParle, *Shrinking Welfare Rolls Leave Record High Share of Minorities*, N.Y. TIMES, July 27, 1998, at A1.

Tulare			
	General Population <sup>a</sup>	Welfare Population <sup>b</sup>	Economically Disadvantaged <sup>c</sup>
White	47%	32%	33%
Latino	46%	59%	58%
African-American	2%	3%	1%
Asian-American	6%	6%	7%
Native American	2%	1%	1%
Unemployment Rate: 20%		Total Caseload (1999): 11,770	
Los Angeles			
	General Population <sup>a</sup>	Welfare Population <sup>b</sup>	Economically Disadvantaged <sup>c</sup>
White	47%	15%	18%
Latino	27%	50%	60%
African-American	18%	29%	10%
Asian-American	8%	6%	11%
Native American	0.3%	0.2%	1%
Unemployment Rate: 6%		Total Caseload (1999): 224,790	
<sup>a</sup> POPULATION ESTIMATES PROGRAM, POPULATION DIV., U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS (1998).			
<sup>b</sup> DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVS., PUBLIC WELFARE IN CALIFORNIA (1998).			
<sup>c</sup> U.S. CENSUS (1990). "Economically Disadvantaged" is defined in the Job Training Partnership Act as being 1) on welfare, or 2) below either the federal poverty level or 70% of the lower living standard income level. See 29 U.S.C. § 1503 (2000).			

## 1. Sacramento

The Sacramento program is structured as a neighborhood-based, one-stop center. The Sacramento sequence of activities starts with an evaluation that leads to an employment services orientation. Subsequently, a "personal plan" is developed for each individual. This plan may include

“job services,” ESL, GED or SIP<sup>4</sup> activities. Job services consists of job club workshops, job search, jobs or work experience.

## 2. Tulare

Tulare has many significant challenges to moving welfare recipients to work, including a lack of jobs. Moreover, 25% of cash aid recipients live in areas that are not accessible by public transportation. Tulare-WORKs refers people to other community resources and tries to avoid having them go on welfare in the first place. Once an individual is on aid, the county conducts the initial appraisal. Clients then are referred to job search. If they are unable to find a job, a plan is developed that may include education or training. It appears that significant numbers of recipients are unable to find employment and instead receive short-term job training or work experience.

## 3. Los Angeles

In Los Angeles County, about 80% of CalWORKs recipients who are assigned to an activity are assigned to job club and job search. Recipients participate in one week of job club followed by three weeks of job search. If they do not get a job, they must complete another session of job search. If, at the end of the second session, they are unable to get a job, they are referred to a vocational assessment. The remaining 20% participate in an education or training program. In Los Angeles County, 85% of CalWORKs clients who secured employment remain eligible for welfare cash aid. On average, they earned \$6.81 an hour.

### About the Participants

	Sacramento	Tulare	Los Angeles
Currently Working	50%	24%	59%
Participated in Job Search	87%	72%	82%
Average # of children	2.47	3.05	1.76
Average Age	30.3	26.9	36
Average Level of Education			
Eighth Grade or Less	0%	26%	0%
Some High School	33%	26%	0%
High School/GED	40%	26%	35%

4. Self-Initiated Programs or “SIPs” refer to welfare recipients who enrolled in educational programs before being assigned to a CalWORKs work activity. SIPs are allowed to continue their educational programs. See *infra* note 12.

Some College	20%	16%	29%
AA Degree	0%	0%	24%
BA/BS Degree	0%	0%	6%
Other (training certificate)	40%	0%	6%
Length of Time on Aid	6.4 years	5.8 years	9 years

### III. FINDINGS

#### A. Getting Information

"I didn't find . . . out [about domestic violence services] until after they almost dumped me out of the GAIN program." — A Los Angeles Woman

##### 1. Written Mailings Insufficient

ERA asked the women in our focus groups about their understanding of CalWORKs. We found a widespread lack of understanding about the time limits and the availability of education, training, and supportive services.

Communication is a predominate problem, one that has many layers. Although several participants acknowledged getting some written material in the mail, low literacy levels or the lack of "user-friendliness" of some written materials was a barrier. It was clear that they need verbal reinforcement of that information.

Our participants, and particularly the Latinas, received most of their information by word of mouth: either off the street, from neighbors or friends or on the bus. A Los Angeles woman who learned about going to school and getting work study "off the street" said: "They [need to] tell people about the different programs out there, rather than you have to meet somebody on the street or on the bus and you hear about it."

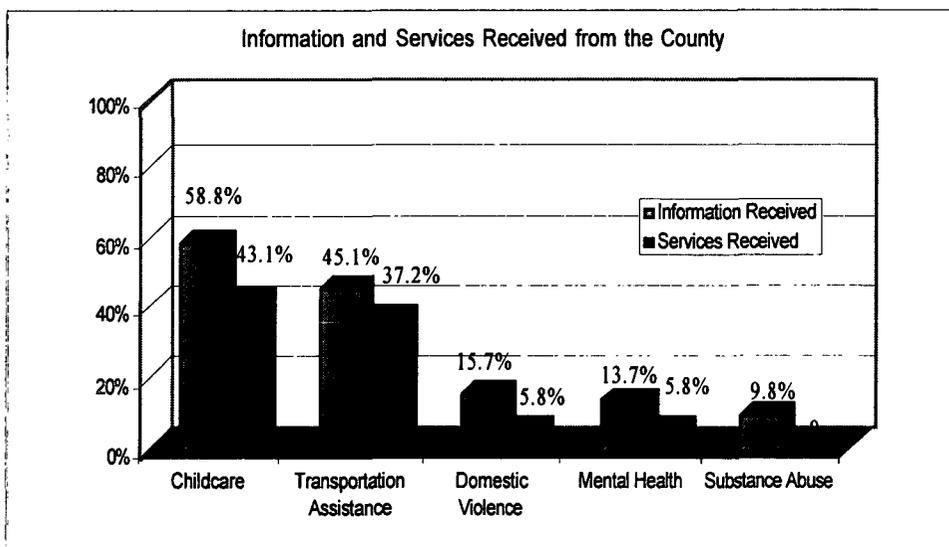
The participants felt that it is important for welfare agencies to provide the same information to all welfare recipients, notwithstanding different caseworkers, levels of assertiveness, or reading ability. As a Sacramento woman said: "I think they need to let you know more about [training and educational programs]. The reason I know that is because I read through the book at the office. A lot of my friends or my neighbors don't know nothing about it. . . . I see a lot of my neighbors [who] don't know how to read."

## 2. Confusion Reigns

The overwhelming majority of participants were confused about their time limits. Only a few completely understood that CalWORKs establishes two important time limits. Most understand one time limit, but not the other. "The only thing I knew was that there was a five-year limit," said one woman. A few had no conception of what either time limit was.

Differences in receipt of information were particularly pronounced in relation to transitional services. CalWORKs recipients who are working and no longer eligible for cash aid are entitled to two years of childcare; most remain eligible for MediCal. Most of the women with whom we spoke had no idea that they are entitled to these transitional services. Most participants also did not know about the availability of other supportive services, such as domestic violence, substance abuse treatment, or mental health counseling.

Several women discovered during the focus group sessions that they did not receive services that other women received. For example, in the two Los Angeles groups, some women received more money for bus passes than others. Most who received less did not understand the reason for the difference. Fortunately, one woman explained that full-time students qualify for a discount. No one from the welfare office had ever explained that to them. Unless welfare recipients receive information about why they receive different services, many will believe that the system is unfair and capricious.



### 3. If You Don't Ask, They Won't Tell

"One social worker told a friend of mine, 'It's not our responsibility to tell you [about these programs]. If you ask me about a program, I have to tell you. But if you don't ask me [then I won't tell you.]" — A Los Angeles Woman

Exacerbating the communication problem is what many women in Los Angeles described as an "If you don't ask, they won't tell" policy. A Los Angeles woman frustratingly described the Catch-22 situation in which so many welfare recipients find themselves: "If you're not educated enough to ask questions or be resourceful, they don't tell you. You have to know to ask these questions to get that information." Several women in the other counties agreed that "they don't tell you about programs, you have to ask."

One woman offered a possible explanation for this practice. Caseworkers "assume we know all this stuff. Assume that we've been manipulating the system all this time. When you ask them something they look at you like you are crazy." The participants reported that caseworkers both look down on them as ignorant and lazy *and* assume that they know an extraordinary amount about the system and have the know-how to manipulate it. Meanwhile, crucial information about available services is kept from recipients. Available resources remain largely unused.<sup>5</sup>

Often, caseworkers do not know enough about CalWORKs or available resources for welfare recipients. As a Sacramento woman said: "I've had some real experience with welfare workers who had no idea what [certain programs] were."

### B. Women Need Individualized Treatment

"Everyone has different needs [but the system] treats welfare recipients like we are all the same. . . . It is ludicrous to think that everybody's life is the same and have the same rules for everybody." — A Tulare Woman

"Each worker has like thousands of cases to handle and maybe . . . that is why they just don't give enough information of what we need."

— A Tulare Woman

Welfare recipients told us that welfare reform should be real reform, not just cutting the rolls in half. They want real jobs, ones that offer the

---

5. Many organizations and trainers who have contracts to provide welfare-to-work services to the "hardest to serve" have complained that counties have not referred clients to them. Counties have responded that it has been difficult identifying welfare recipients that meet the federal criteria of "hard to serve." See Nancy Weaver Teichert, *Critics: California Lags on Welfare Job Training*, SACRAMENTO BEE, Aug. 3, 1999, at A1. In addition, California, like most other states, has a significant amount of unspent federal Temporary Aid to Needy Families and Department of Labor Welfare-to-Work funds. See Carla Rivera, *Welfare-to-Work Effort Awash in Unused Funds*, L.A. TIMES, May 31, 1999, at A1.

possibility of supporting their families. To access higher-wage jobs, welfare recipients need help. As one participant stated: "It is encouraging that they are trying to get us to work, but we need more help."

For CalWORKs to provide that help, it must provide as much individualized attention as possible. The women in our focus groups emphasized the importance of viewing each woman as an individual, with her own needs and goals, and providing her with appropriate services.

Individualized attention includes a range of conduct, from "[t]ak[ing] time to get to know the individual person, instead of shuffling us around like a piece of paper," as one Los Angeles woman suggested, to finding out what the recipient wants or needs and connecting her to appropriate services.

A few women described how their caseworkers helped them. One Los Angeles woman told us that her caseworker asked her about what she was interested in, gave her a year to finish her degree for business administration, and explained the rules to her. A Tulare woman said: "I have to say with my worker, he has been more than helpful. He has made sure that I had the same opportunities as everybody else, if not more. He's really helped me make sure that I've found what I've wanted to do. When I go over to pick up a piece of paper, he's like 'How's it going for you? I'm so happy that you're happy with what you have.' He's really nice." A few other women who were satisfied with the services they received described how they received specific job leads in the fields in which they were interested through the job search program.

A crucial component of individualized attention is an up-front, accurate assessment of skills, interests, and needs. Many welfare recipients lack sufficient basic skills to obtain and retain decent employment.<sup>6</sup> Without an up-front assessment, many women are channeled into inappropriate job club and job search services. CalWORKs requires that recipients be evaluated for disabilities and barriers to employment. Yet some of the women with whom we spoke appeared to have learning or other types of disabilities that had not been assessed or addressed.<sup>7</sup> For example, one woman described that although she is a whiz at math, she cannot "put that on paper." Another woman said that she can type but not spell.

Many recipients understand that caseworkers are overburdened with cases and must work within a system that elevates paperwork above clients: "They have too big caseloads. It's not an individualized scenario and they don't have time to call you back. They don't have time on a one-

---

6. A recent study reported that a majority of welfare recipients, particularly in California, lack the basic skills to succeed in the workplace. See H. JOHNSON & S. TAFOYA, PUBLIC POLICY INST. OF CAL., *THE BASIC SKILLS OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR WELFARE REFORM* (1999).

7. A national report also found that many welfare recipients face severe barriers to employment that are not identified or remedied through state welfare-to-work programs. See CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, *WELFARE TO WHAT?* 24 (1998).

on-one basis to sit with you." One Tulare woman suggested hiring more caseworkers to decrease the workload.

### C. Job Search: The Good, The Bad, The Really Bad

"Obviously we are undereducated and underskilled. And you are putting us in this room and saying do this by yourselves. Who the heck do we contact? We don't know who to contact to get a good job." — A Los Angeles Woman

"I felt like I was going in the circle again all over. . . . I haven't been able to move anywhere." — A Tulare Woman

"[Job search] is just trying to prepare you for an interview. It doesn't prepare you for a job." — A Sacramento Woman

Forty out of fifty-one focus group participants completed job club and job search programs. The majority of these women, however, did not find any employment that way. Of the twenty-one women currently working, only eight indicated that they found their jobs through CalWORKs.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the fact that none of them found a job through job search, several of the women in the Latina-only focus group in Tulare seemed to appreciate their job club and job search services. The few women who enjoyed the job club services did so because it exposed them to new skills or new ideas or connected them to other women in similar situations. For example, a Tulare woman described what she liked about job club: "The first two weeks you're in a conference room and she teaches you how to prepare for an interview, how to fill out job applications, how to dress for success. I thought it was cool. It was something new to me." A Los Angeles woman liked "a self-esteem class that showed us how to be women. It was very helpful to me. We had a black lady who came in and showed us how to dress, how to feel about ourselves. When you are out there and you are not used to doing things for so long, that helped me a lot." Another Tulare woman said: "What I did get out of job club was that it helped me get out there, because I was like a hermit. I was stuck at home and I'm scared of going out there. . . . So I started getting more of a social life, more talking to people, more friends and that helped me a lot."

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of our participants did not benefit from either job club or job search. These women reported: "I didn't learn anything that I did not know how to do myself." Most of the women we spoke with have held jobs in the past. Thus, "they know how to dress, how to fill out an application, about a resume." Many women

---

8. Los Angeles County estimates that 28% of participants are employed after completing job search.

told us that job search merely puts them into a room and gives them a telephone book to make cold calls.

Our participants also described being sent to the same kinds of jobs they had held in the past or going to interview with employers that clearly did not want to hire them. A few of the women felt frustrated because they complied with the rules, went through job search and a short-term training program, but did not find employment and were told they had to go through job club again.

Worse, several women described experiences with job search services that were counterproductive to the philosophy behind job club to develop recipients' self-esteem. One woman reported that during job search, instructors made such comments as, "I am not the one who has to be here. I have a job." She made us feel really bad." A Los Angeles woman described her job club class: "People were genuinely trying to come up with what they wanted to do with their lives and what they had to go over in order to reach their goals, and she was in the front of the class making faces at people. That was just not helpful to anyone in the room. That woman had us in tears. She did not motivate us at all."

Under CalWORKs, welfare recipients who have disabilities are supposed to be given a good cause reason for not engaging in work activities, such as job search. One woman described this blatant violation of the CalWORKs rule: "I had a cyst in my ovary. The job club instructor told me even though my stomach was really swollen and I was going in for surgery that I had to finish the program."

#### **D. Women Need Experience, Job Training and Education**

"For me it's 'I got this training, but where is the job?' They say unemployment is low but you wouldn't know it looking at me. I look for work but can't find any." — A Sacramento Woman

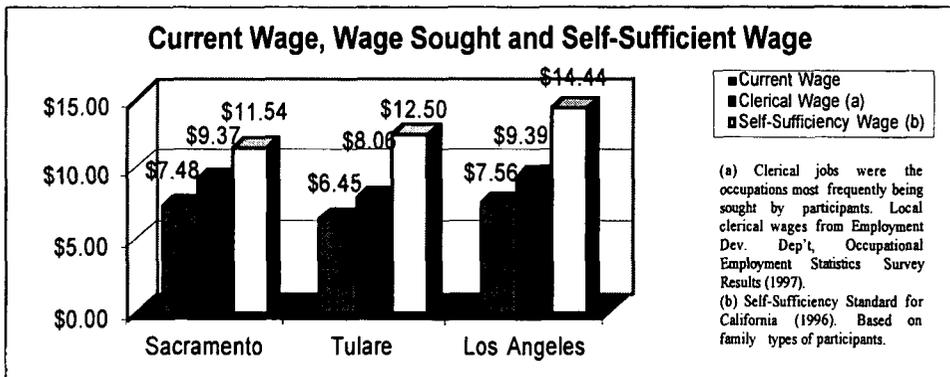
We asked participants whether they had received vocational assessments of their skills and developed "welfare-to-work" plans as provided under CalWORKs, what services they have received so far, whether the services were helpful and what they need to get decent jobs.

Many women seemed unaware that they had signed written welfare-to-work plans. A few peers, however, reminded them of the written paper they signed sending them to various work activities. A Los Angeles woman said: "After I went to my orientation, I talked to my GAIN worker. He said, 'Well, you already signed your plan.' I said, 'What did I sign?' He said, 'You are going to GAIN and job club.' I said, 'That can't be right, I didn't get to say anything about what I wanted.'"

The education and training programs included in most participants' welfare-to-work plans are short-term and do not improve their ability to find decent jobs. As one woman said: "They only approve the kind of training that will get you the same minimum wage job you'd had before."

### 1. Any Job Is Not Enough

The overwhelming majority reported that just getting a job is not the answer. Work First leads most women to temporary, low-pay, gender-stereotyped jobs that do not offer a path out of poverty.<sup>9</sup> In one Los Angeles focus group, none of the women could support their families with the jobs they currently or recently held. Said a Tulare woman: "I would like a job that would in the future get more advanced and actually [become] a career. A job is just a job." A Los Angeles woman commented: "It's time to stop working these penny ante jobs. GAIN tells you to get a job. A job is not going to support your family." Another woman explains that with CalWORKs, "You actually have to go to work and make less than you were making when you were on welfare, which isn't anything to be happy about."<sup>10</sup>



A recent Urban Institute study of welfare recipients who recently left welfare reported that they earned on average \$6.61 an hour. Approximately 29% returned to welfare at some point within the three-year study period. Unlike other low-income families who have not received public assistance, welfare recipients tended to: (1) have jobs that do not provide health benefits; (2) retain their jobs for fewer months; (3) be single parents with younger children; (4) not have other family member in-

9. A Los Angeles study confirms that Work First strategies force most recipients into low-wage, temporary employment without career mobility. See DRAYSE ET AL., ECONOMIC ROUNDTABLE, ON THE EDGE: A PROGRESS REPORT ON WELFARE TO WORK IN LOS ANGELES 5 (1999).
10. Other studies document that welfare reform has pushed women to below poverty level jobs and many families lose income after leaving welfare. See, e.g., CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, *supra* note 7, at 7-10.

comes; and (5) face more serious struggles with providing food and housing for their families.<sup>11</sup>

Many women talked about the need for permanent jobs, not temporary ones. Yet through job search, most of our participants simply received connections to temporary agencies. As one Sacramento woman said: "I don't want to work temp. I want a permanent job where I'm stable. I want to get off of welfare—I'm tired of being on welfare."

Several women who completed short-term job training still were unable to locate stable employment. These women identify the need for more outreach and connections to employers to make sure jobs are available.

## 2. On-The-Job Training and Education

"I don't want a job, I want a career. Someone can come and take your job away, but when you have education . . . you can move up and you can go on to the next step." — A Sacramento Woman

"I was going to . . . college for medical assistant and they didn't let me finish going because they weren't going to pay for it. . . . I would have had a job." — A Tulare Woman

Many women identified education as their path to economic self-sufficiency.<sup>12</sup> One Tulare woman who was able to go back to school under CalWORKs finds that aspect of the program valuable: "I didn't have an education. I only went through seventh grade. When I found out that they would send you back to school and do this and that, I said, 'Wow'. To me, that was really neat. They pay for the books and everything." Many of our participants echoed this theme: "Give us access to education because the more education we have the more we get paid."

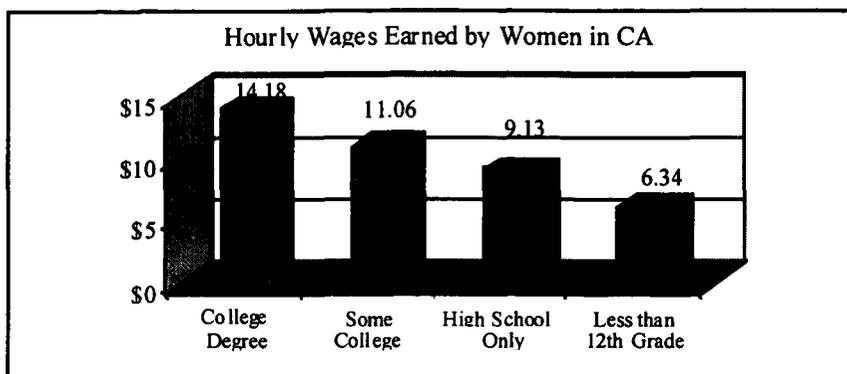
Some consider themselves extremely fortunate to be able to continue their educational programs, with CalWORKs paying for books, transportation and childcare. But those who are permitted to continue are in the minority. In violation of CalWORKs' protections for Self-Initiated Program participants,<sup>13</sup> many women were told they could not go to school or had to quit.

---

11. See URBAN INSTITUTE, *FAMILIES WHO LEFT WELFARE: WHO ARE THEY AND HOW ARE THEY DOING?* (1999).

12. A national study of 1,700 program service providers found that lack of skills or education "often" or "very often" is a barrier to their ability to place welfare recipients in jobs. See NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR WOMEN & FAMILIES, *OBSTACLES FACING LOW-INCOME WOMEN 3* (1999). A Los Angeles study of welfare recipients found that education was the single most powerful factor affecting the incomes of the working poor. See DRAYSE ET AL., *supra* note 9, at 4.

13. Welfare recipients who enrolled in education or training programs (typically at community colleges, adult, and vocational schools) on their own before being assigned to CalWORKs activities may be allowed to continue in their education or training programs, despite Work First requirements. These self-enrolled programs are called "Self-Initiated Programs" or SIPs.



Several of our participants described being pulled out of school. They were told that their options were to work or be cut off of any government aid. Others, even if their self-initiated programs were approved, found that education was an impossible task, given that they still had to work part-time to meet the CalWORKs' 32 hours requirement and juggle school, homework, and care for their families.

Faced with the choice of quitting school to take any kind of job or incurring sanctions, several participants went to school on their own, without support from CalWORKs. A Los Angeles woman said: "I went to school on my own because I wanted to start getting my education . . . . They told me if you don't stop going to school, we're going to cut your cash." A Tulare woman, whose request for education was denied, was sent to short-term training instead. She finally had to work two jobs before the welfare office would allow her to attend school. She felt frustrated and angry.

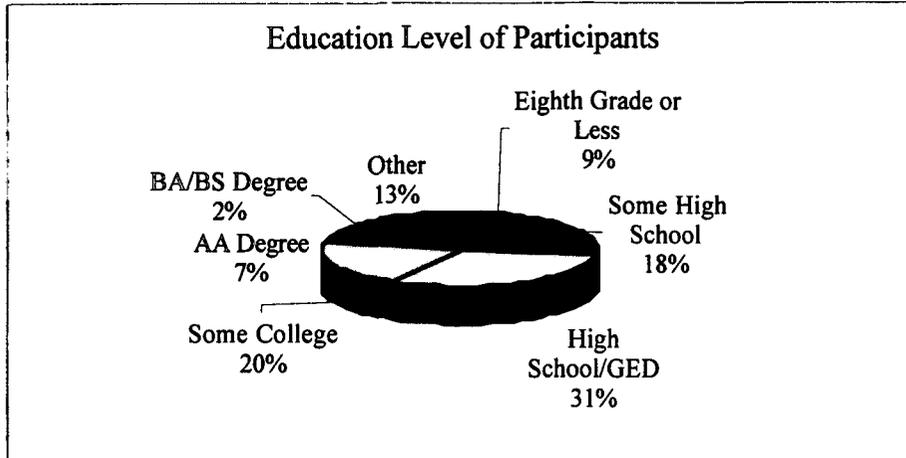
Women without eligible SIPs often do not have access to education. A Los Angeles woman told us: "I get kind of tired of feeling like I am getting the short end of somebody's political stick. You know, like this welfare-to-work program. I can't get what I want out of this program. . . . I needed the opportunity to go to school."

Other women liked the idea of on-the-job training because education was inappropriate for them. Said one woman: "I have no problem with working. My thing is, I need training." These women generally appreciated the short-term training programs but wanted to acquire skills on the job. Another woman in Tulare, who was initially put into a short-term

---

A recipient enrolled in a SIP that meets all the following criteria must be allowed to continue her SIP program for 18 or 24 months and cannot be assigned to other CalWORKs work activities that interfere: (1) participant does not already have a bachelor's degree (unless the SIP is a teaching credential); (2) the SIP is for a degree or certificate; (3) participant is making satisfactory progress; (4) the SIP will lead to employment; and (5) participant engages in 32 hours per week of classroom, internship, work-study or other CalWORKs work activities.

training program which she did not like, spoke with her caseworker and was transferred to a training program where she is learning a trade. She reported: “[A]ctually, I love it. I’m learning a trade that I’ve always wanted to learn.”



### **E. Welfare Recipients Experience Mistreatment and Discrimination**

We asked women whether and to what extent they experienced discrimination based on race or gender. Interestingly, the women talked about being mistreated due to their status as welfare recipients just as much as, if not more than, due to their race or gender.

One woman described experiencing a potential sexual harassment situation that discouraged her from seeking services. Several women reported being discriminated against by employers and welfare offices but were unsure whether they were treated that way because of their race, gender, or welfare status. For example, one of our participants in Los Angeles quit a job cleaning homes when she discovered that she was paid less than other employees but was given no explanation why.

#### **1. From Employers**

“[Employers] treat you like you have dirt on you, like you are trash.”

— A Los Angeles Woman

“I followed my job description. I don’t know if it was just because I am Mexican or I’m on welfare. She treated me like I didn’t belong there. Just because we are on welfare doesn’t mean we’re this low.”

— A Sacramento Woman

Many of our focus group participants felt ostracized by employers because of their status as welfare recipients. As one Los Angeles woman described: "I don't think [employers] will take you seriously. They feel like you are going through a program initiated by the county. They don't feel that you really want to work . . . I put in an application and I seen my application go in the wastebasket before I even got on the elevator. I cried. They didn't even give me a chance." A recent national study similarly found that employers are often reluctant to hire welfare recipients.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, many participants tried to hide the fact that they are welfare recipients. They recommended that CalWORKs stop forcing them to do things that make them stand out as welfare recipients. For example, participants from Los Angeles felt that the job search requirement that they complete two applications and turn one in to the CalWORKs office hurt their chances of getting jobs. Asking for two applications was a "dead give away" of their status.

Even on the job, the participants fear that they will be mistreated because they are welfare recipients. As one woman said: "When I was working for the government agency, I felt I was being treated badly because I was on welfare. I didn't feel good about myself. Apparently, no matter how good I did, it was never good enough."

Race discrimination also keeps many welfare recipients who are women of color from getting and keeping jobs.<sup>15</sup> One Sacramento woman described how she was fired from a job, where she was the sole African-American employee, after only a few days. Another Sacramento woman said: "I went to a couple of temp agencies and one of them sent me to this chiropractor's office and they knew that the employer wanted Asian [employees]. They sent me there, I guess to make a fool out of me."<sup>16</sup>

## 2. From the CalWORKs System

"I think they shouldn't look at all the participants as if they don't want to make a change. They are threatening you like it's their money."

— A Los Angeles Woman

- 
14. Nearly 60% of the service providers surveyed reported that welfare recipients face employer reluctance to hire them "often" or "very often." See NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR WOMEN & FAMILIES, *supra* note 12, at 5.
  15. Disparities in the wages of women based on race have been documented nationally. For every \$1.00 the average man earned in 1997, white women earned 75 cents, African-American women 67 cents, Latina women 53.9 cents, and Asian Pacific American women earned 80 cents. See AFL-CIO, FACT SHEET: IT'S HIGH TIME--PAST TIME--FOR WOMEN OF COLOR TO EARN EQUAL PAY (1997). Race discrimination also affects the wages of welfare recipients. See DRAYSE ET AL., *supra* note 9, at 78.
  16. See generally Susan T. Gooden, *All Things Not Being Equal: Differences in Caseworker Support Toward Black and White Welfare Clients*, 4 HARV. J. AFR. AM. PUB. POL'Y 23 (1998) (documenting discriminatory treatment against African-American welfare recipients in Virginia by potential and current employers).

One of the most significant findings of the focus groups was the way that many caseworkers look down on welfare recipients and do not comply with CalWORKs. Participants in all three counties, regardless of race, reported problems such as:

"I would get a job with American Express -- \$15 an hour and I tried calling my worker to approve my clothing. He was insulting to me. He sent me to some church for clothing. Those clothes were worse than second-hand. I told him, 'Do you ever walk into American Express and see how those people dress going to work?' . . . A week later he didn't approve for the clothing or my transportation." (This participant lost her opportunity to work at American Express.)

"Going through the GAIN program, it seems like these GAIN representatives are telling people anything. They're not actually there to help. They come in with these preconceived notions of who you are and what you're about and that you are nothing. . . . 'You are going to go through this and you are going to try this.' You will be ordered like this no matter where you are yourself."

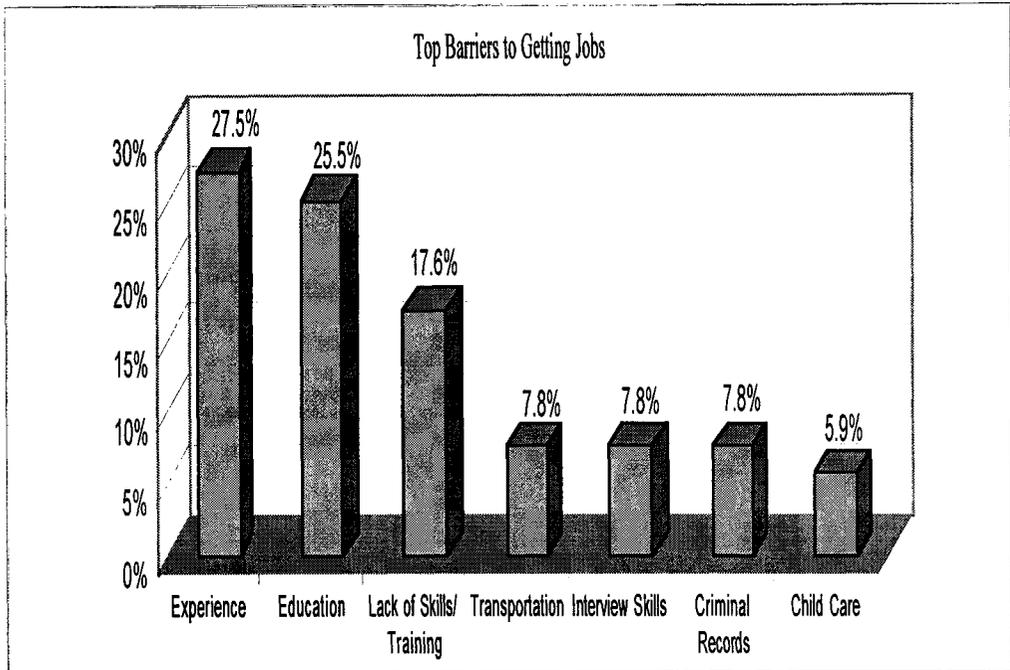
The Los Angeles groups, which had the largest percentage of African-American women, reported having the most negative experiences with their caseworkers. It appeared that these women experienced discrimination based on both race and welfare recipient status. Said one African-American woman: "I am treated differently because of my race by everybody -- the police department, the welfare department."

Our participants had differing views about the role race played in their relationship with their caseworkers. A few of the African-American women from Los Angeles, for example, complained that their caseworkers were not African-American and did not speak English well. Others, however, commented that having a caseworker of the same race did not guarantee respect. For example, a few of the Latina and Asian women complained of mistreatment from same-race caseworkers, along the lines of: "You are a disgrace to your race."

There is no simple solution to this problem. Caseworkers should treat all welfare recipients equally, fairly, and with respect, regardless of race. Additional research should be done to document gender, race, and national origin discrimination in the delivery of welfare services, particularly because of the important role that caseworkers have in connecting recipients to vocational assessment, supportive services, and employment.<sup>17</sup> Time limits underscore the importance of ensuring nondiscriminatory treatment in the provision of welfare-to-work services.

---

17. *See id.* (documenting discrimination against African-American welfare recipients in Virginia in the provision of education, transportation, discretionary supportive services and help finding jobs).



## F. Other Barriers to Employment

### 1. Childcare and Transportation

"I couldn't find any adequate childcare. I found some for two of my children, but not the other two. . . . That is the whole reason why I couldn't go to job search."  
— A Tulare Woman

As numerous other studies have found, childcare and transportation pose serious barriers to finding and keeping jobs for many welfare recipients. While it seems that CalWORKs currently helps many welfare recipients with their childcare, crucial gaps exist.

Our participants also told us that the county's failure to make timely payments to childcare providers jeopardizes their ability to maintain quality childcare. Moreover, many women worry about what they will do once they are no longer eligible for childcare subsidies.

Participants, particularly those in Sacramento, identified various transportation problems, including delays and lack of public transportation at night.

## **2. Criminal Records**

Several participants mentioned they had a criminal record, which was a significant barrier to gaining employment. A few of them described their situations. “If you have a criminal record, they don’t even bother to read the rest of your application.” A Tulare woman told us: “I have a criminal record. It’s just for petty theft, a misdemeanor, but it’s an issue, especially when I apply for retail . . . People change, everybody needs a chance. You can’t just keep pulling them back because of something that happened years ago.”

CalWORKs does not address this barrier, nor does it offer guidance to counties about how to counsel such participants. One Tulare participant told us that she recently completed a nursing program through CalWORKs but did not get a job because of her criminal record. Instead, she watched while her classmates got jobs. It is unclear whether anyone told her she cannot pass state clearance to be a certified nurse if she has a criminal record. It is also unclear whether her caseworker will place her in a different program. Meanwhile, her time clock is ticking. A participant in Los Angeles reported: “At job club they told me to lie about my criminal record—to mark no on the application and then explain during the interview.” Obviously, this is no solution to the problem.

## **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The participants in our focus groups had several recommendations for improving California’s welfare reform system. ERA also convened a meeting of advocates and community-based service providers to discuss the preliminary findings and develop additional recommendations. The following are key recommendations that we believe are needed to mend the broken promise of welfare reform.

### **A. Legislature**

#### **1. Make Talk About Empowering Welfare Recipients a Reality**

“They keep preaching that you are in charge of your life. You determine the outcome and stuff like that. But then they turn around and they won’t let you.”

— A Los Angeles Woman

The Legislature wants to empower welfare recipients to move into the workforce but has not provided them with the tools to do so. It should start by amending CalWORKs to provide up-front assessments of skills, interests, and barriers to employment. As one focus group participant suggested: “Assess when you first see us.”

Then, caseworkers should provide welfare recipients with the information they need to make decisions about what they want to do and help them accomplish their goals. As one participant suggested: "Start people off with something they want to do, be it a job, school, or training. Stick with them until the end, until they can make it on their own. . . . Don't leave them when they make \$5 an hour flipping burgers."

## **2. Amend CalWORKs' County Incentive Provisions**

Currently, California provides financial incentives to counties that have reduced their caseloads due to employment lasting a minimum of six months. Caseload reductions, however, are not an accurate indicator of success. Instead, the State should reward those counties that do a good job at developing and connecting recipients to: (1) quality on-the-job training programs (including training in nontraditional occupations for women); (2) education (GED, ESL, certificate, and degree programs); (3) career counseling; and (4) employers that pay livable wages.

## **3. Establish a State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)**

California should set up a state-operated tax credit for welfare recipients who are moving from welfare to work but do not earn self-sufficient wages. This tax credit also should be offered to the "working poor" who are not welfare recipients. To ensure success, California must devote resources to conducting outreach, training, and technical assistance about the state EITC.

## **B. State and County Administrators**

### **1. Properly Train Caseworkers and Reduce Their Workload**

Many caseworkers are trying hard. With little support and training, caseworkers are charged with helping welfare recipients locate stable employment. ERA recommends continuous caseworker training and oversight to ensure that they understand the CalWORKs rules and provide recipients with accurate information, either through workshops or individualized meetings. The practice of waiting for welfare recipients to ask the right question before providing helpful information must stop. Counties also should evaluate and reduce caseworker workloads.

### **2. Monitor CalWORKs Implementation**

California has not met its responsibilities to monitor and evaluate welfare reform to ensure that counties comply with CalWORKs law. In many instances, the State does not know what is happening in the coun-

ties and what is or is not working. For CalWORKs to work, the State must conduct careful oversight of its 58 county-run programs.

To facilitate monitoring, the State must ensure that counties collect and report data about their welfare recipients, including the wages and duration of employment; the number who receive vocational assessments, education, and training services; and the number who receive various supportive services, such as mental health counseling, domestic violence services, and substance abuse treatment. Although counties currently are required to submit monthly reports containing much of this data, many have not done so. The State must enforce this requirement.

### **3. Develop a Model Program for Addressing Criminal Histories**

California should identify a best practices program that addresses participants' criminal histories as an employment barrier while respecting participants' privacy rights. The model program should provide caseworkers and other social services providers with information about when they or employers may inquire about criminal histories, when criminal histories can preclude certification or licensing required for certain jobs, and "do's and don'ts" for counseling participants with this barrier. The program also should connect welfare recipients to legal services to help them seal, expunge, or correct their criminal records, as appropriate.

### **4. Make CalWORKs Work Better**

Our focus groups identified many specific recommendations for improving the current CalWORKs system. These include, but are not limited to:

- Pay childcare providers on time
- Count study time toward a self-initiated program participant's requisite work hours to enable her to stay in school
- Develop sector employment intervention projects that target higher wage jobs towards which participants can work, and build in more career counseling about a range of available jobs
- Integrate "Know Your Workplace Rights" training into the CalWORKs system
- Match recipients with mentors who have "graduated" from welfare

## **C. Media**

### **1. Portray Welfare Recipients Without Stereotypes**

The media, caseworkers and government agents should strive to portray welfare recipients accurately. Welfare recipients are individuals who

are trying hard to succeed, despite many obstacles and few resources. No family wants to be on welfare.

#### **D. Advocates**

##### **1. Build a Constituency of Working Poor Families that Includes Welfare Recipients**

Advocates and unions should focus more attention on organizing welfare recipients to build a coalition of the "working poor" who vote. Only then will welfare recipients be able to influence Governor Davis and the Legislature. Organizing welfare recipients to form unions also makes sense because many recipients have been, are now, and will be in the workforce; they need employment protections, increased wages, and medical and other job benefits.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

The CalWORKs system needs an overhaul, not a fine-tuning. Welfare recipients have stepped up to the plate to meet their obligations under CalWORKs, but the State of California, despite being flush with federal welfare dollars, has not. The Governor and others must work together to ensure that California makes good on its promise of true welfare reform.

## APPENDIX

*The appendix contains longer stories about the experiences of two women in the CalWORKs system.*

## Melanie

Studying during odd hours, patching together childcare and rides to school from her cousin, Melanie has been determined to finish her education from the start. That determination helped convince her CalWORKs counselor not to track her into milking cows or working retail, two of the top choices available to women leaving welfare in Tulare County, but to support her degree in Human Services and Psychology. During a recent interview, Melanie said, “CalWORKs wants me to get a human services certificate, but I want to get a degree. Nothing guarantees a job, but with a degree, they know you have a college-level education.”

Melanie, a single mother of three, who started on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) at age 16 when she was pregnant with her first child, knows what it takes to make it. She says that at that time, “[Welfare] was all I knew to do; my mom was on it. I dropped out of high school my freshman year because of the pregnancy.”

Now, with a 3.9 grade point average, Melanie says it is her grades that make her happy. “I’ve had straight A’s for three semesters.” She is proud “knowing that I had it in me all along.”

Still the rigors of her schedule can be overwhelming. In addition to school, Melanie works 35 hours each week. “What gets me down is when I’m just on overload – the house is a mess, my boyfriend’s working late, and I have lots of homework to do.” Melanie starts her homework after her kids fall asleep. “Sometimes I am up until three in the morning because they don’t go to bed until nine in the evening.”

Melanie had been working on her general education requirements when she received a notice to attend a CalWORKs orientation. She worried when the counselors announced that her class would be the “guinea pigs.” “They are saying ‘you have to go to [job club] classes, otherwise we’ll cut off your aid, we’ll cut off aid to your children.’ The classes they had were just pushing everyone in the same direction.”

Melanie says she will never forget the day she went in to develop a welfare-to-work plan. She told her counselor that she was studying for a degree in Human Services. “He told me that my major was not an approved major for the CalWORKs program. He handed me a list of the top 50 jobs, according to the unemployment office. They were all certificate programs, not degree programs. I remember three of the jobs: agriculture

technician, retail sales, and preschool teacher.” “I was angry,” says Melanie. “I don’t usually cry very easily, but when he gave me that list, I just broke down. I just knew I wouldn’t be able to support my kids on a minimum wage job. That’s why I was in the degree program.”

Melanie fought to pursue her degree and was able to stay in her degree program. “I think people should be able to do what they’re good at, otherwise it doesn’t work and people just go back on welfare. That list—it’s just that what I wanted to do wasn’t there. I love children, but I don’t want to be a preschool teacher. I hate cows. And I did retail when I was 18; I know what I want to do. With the world the way it is today, don’t we need more counselors?”

Melanie’s cousin cares for her two-year-old and watches her seven and ten-year-olds after school. Her cousin also drives her to school, otherwise Melanie would have to commute two hours each way, taking at least four buses. CalWORKs pays for her childcare and mileage reimbursement. “The childcare has been really helpful,” says Melanie.

This support from her cousin and her college CalWORKs counselor, combined with her determination and hard work, are moving Melanie toward a better future. “I’m not here for a job,” says Melanie. “I’m here for a career.”

## **Kathy**

Kathy once described herself as a troubled youth and a high school dropout who could see no way out. Today she earns \$10.18 an hour as a mechanical drafter and travels to construction work sites to map their electrical systems and heating ducts. When she meets new people she pushes her bangs away from her eyes. Although she feels her progress is slow, she is developing confidence. For the first time in her life, Kathy is able to make eye contact. She says her new employer is even offering to pay to remove her tattoos.

After a promising start and several years of training, it almost didn’t work out this way. Kathy clearly remembers the moment she knew she wanted to leave welfare. She did not know where to start and made an appointment with a community-based organization’s job counselor who asked her what she wanted to do. This question inspired Kathy to set her sights on an unconventional goal—one that would truly lead her out of poverty. Her counselor helped her enroll in school to prepare for a career in a nontraditional field, one that employed mainly men, where the pay and the opportunities were far better. She saved her financial aid and mileage reimbursements and made a down payment on a car so she could work with companies in different areas.

For nine months she took day classes to finish her high school certificate and an orientation for working in “nontraditional fields.” “They

told us how to do interviews and warned us on what to do about sexual harassment, but we weren't trained for any specific jobs," says Kathy. Unfortunately, when she completed her studies and training, her job search proved fruitless. She wanted to go back to school but couldn't find an opportunity. Instead she occasionally cleaned houses for \$30 per day. "I was barely making it," she remembers.

When her job counselor from the training program called to see how she was faring, Kathy shared her disappointing news and her growing despair. Her counselor helped her enroll in a three-semester community college architectural drafting certificate program where she took night and home study classes. Federal funding through the Job Training Partnership Act paid for her son's childcare. With her newly acquired skills, Kathy found a job right away.

A single mother of three, without family support, Kathy believes you must "decide on what you want and make it happen." Habitually shy and quietly unassuming, Kathy drew inspiration as her friends began accomplishing their goals, leaving welfare for work.

What carried her through was determination to "show my kids you can accomplish something and get ahead in life." She wants a better life for them. What's most important, says Kathy, is that her children can look at her and feel proud.

"People who work with GAIN are told to get a job," reflects Kathy. "School is the best thing I've done."