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Welfare Reform for Real People: Engaging the Moral and Economic Debate*

john a. powell**

This conference is really about you, the participants, and how to make the welfare-to-work effort work for real people with real and disparate needs. Many people in our society are less concerned about what happens to people on welfare, or those who have recently gotten off welfare, but are instead only concerned with reducing the welfare roll. The initial understanding that informed our thinking and our policies as a nation in implementing a welfare system was based on the insight that the structural failure exposed families to abject poverty through no fault of their own. While the welfare system was never perfect and was not designed to make people—primarily women and children—able to live adequately, it was not mean-spirited. Much of the public discourse that led to the support of the change in the welfare system was based on the unworthiness of the women needing welfare. Indeed, as Black women started winning the struggle to have the same right of access as White women, the public support for the welfare system started to erode. The discourse shifted from fixing, or at least supplementing, a flawed system to fixing and punishing flawed women. Women on welfare were no longer just poor or in need of assistance; they were undeserving, often cheats, and frequently Black. Indeed, if there was a structural defect that played any role in the condition of these women and their children, it was the welfare system itself.

There has been a sea of change in our attitude about welfare. The goal of the present reform that is animated by a perception of welfare cheats and undeserving minorities is to get these women and children off of welfare. States proudly announce success of the new welfare reform by talking of the reduction of the welfare roll, even while some, like Wisconsin, have taken a punitive approach. There is very little effort—and it is not required by federal law—to

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track what is happening to those leaving the welfare roll. There is little national concern or attention to poverty reduction or increasing the life chances of these families. There is also some indication that the welfare-to-work effort is being carried out in a way that further disadvantages Latina and Black women over Whites. There are incomplete but important data that suggest that there are a number of significant barriers that must be addressed to make welfare-to-work really work. Some of those barriers include transportation, day care, education and training, and even the neighborhood in which the welfare recipient lives.

We have changed the focus on welfare from addressing the needs of the recipient and structural impediments to focusing on the apparent defects of the recipients. We used to talk about "market defects" or "market imperfections"—how the market left certain people behind. We have changed that language now, and much of the language today is really about "personal responsibility," about "morals" and about "bad people." This change is not just a change in politics or a change in policy; it is a change in approach. What we want to do today and then tomorrow is really join those issues and bring back some of the structural issues around poverty, around welfare, and look at the barriers. Today there are "misbehaviors" that we have to be concerned about. There is inappropriate behavior, not just in low-income communities; there is inappropriate behavior in middle-class communities, there is inappropriate behavior in rich communities, and certainly there is inappropriate behavior in the corporate community. But today much of the current discussion and debate around these issues really focuses almost exclusively on low-income people.

One possible response to this assertion that there are inappropriate behaviors in other parts of the population is that what is different about welfare recipients is that their bad behavior is making them poor and unproductive, that they do not pull their own weight, and that the old welfare system caused this. While there have been arguments and counter-arguments about this assertion, what is often missed is that behavior itself is often tied to structure, environment and opportunities. There is substantial evidence to suggest that people's behavior changes as their opportunities and environments change. Equally important, there is very strong evidence to suggest that if there is a lack of structured opportunity, changes in behavior will not be enough to overcome this structural disability. While most people would not disagree with this last assertion, the question becomes whether there is adequate opportunity that already exists in society, and the major problem is again one of personal disability. The strong economy

and the low unemployment rate would seem to add credibility to the latter position. However, when one looks at the growing number of the working poor, the claim of existing opportunity seems overstated.

My point is not that *all* the barriers to making welfare-to-work work are structural (they are not) although some argue that a substantial majority are. Nor am I suggesting that behavior is not a factor that contributes to persistent poverty. My point is this: We know that there are multiple factors that affect people's life opportunities, and many of these are interactive and mutually reinforcing. The politically and racially charged discourse that tried to exonerate society by simplistically only looking at behavior, rather than at the causes of the so-called culture of poverty or welfare itself, is simply wrong and unproductive. We are in a political environment where there is hostility towards those with needs. And too often we have adopted a posture of cultivated ignorance so that biases will not be disturbed.

There are many possible responses to what is happening in our society today, and we will talk about some of those responses again over the next two days. Responses can be legal. Responses can be economic. Responses can be political. Responses can be personal. And in fact, one of these responses that we will not have a chance to talk much about today, but at least I would like to raise it and encourage you to think about over the next several months and years, is globalization. One of the tools for addressing issues around poverty, around homelessness and around welfare generally, is the human rights instrument—particularly the instrument to eliminate discrimination and racial bias and the instrument on economic and political rights. These instruments specifically talk about rights to adequate housing, rights to adequate health care and rights to participate in society. Even though the United States is a signator to a number of these covenants, it is clear that we have not incorporated many of these standards set out in these international instruments. So one of the things I would like to invite you to think about is how you can bring international attention to these issues. It is not a far-fetched assumption to believe that many of the programs that we are embarking on now are really a violation of human rights. We have not raised the national discussion to that level.

The country's welfare law is euphemistically called "The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act." In Minnesota we refer to it as the "Family Investment Plan." As we look at real people and real lives, we see that it is false to assert that the con-

dition many people find themselves in is their own personal responsibility. We are not just responsible for ourselves, but also for each other. It is always, then, difficult to be poor in the United States. We have just made it more difficult, and to some extent we have added a mean-spiritedness toward those who are poor. As many working on welfare issues have recognized, welfare reform marks the emergence of a new form of parentalism on the government. I would add that it is a mean-spirited form of parentalism. But current welfare reforms, which in reality amount to a lot of finger-wagging, have little to do with addressing structural or personal problems. Individual welfare recipients, and especially communities living in concentrated poverty, face structural barriers when attempting to play by the rules in our society. We insist now that people get married, [and] that people stay married. We insist now that people do not have children, or at least limit the number of their children. We insist now that people work, and we insist that they play by the rules and follow the law. In all of this, there is no look at what we as a society provide for them. In fact, Congress itself has acknowledged that in terms of the current welfare bill, this is inadequate.

It is interesting that as states and now the federal government generate a surplus, no one is talking about going back and collecting the shortfall that we all acknowledge in terms of the allocation of welfare. Professor Peter Edelman, who will be our keynote speaker tomorrow, has said that the current welfare bill essentially ignores all the facts and complexities of the real world and essentially says to recipients, "find a job." Increasingly, when people do find jobs, those jobs do not pay living wages, do not provide active benefits, and are oftentimes situated in places where people do not reside. We talk about the mismatch between people and jobs. In terms of where poor people are concentrated, it is the inner city where adequate jobs do not exist. And two-thirds of the job growth over the next 20 years is anticipated to be in the suburbs, generally under-representing people of color, and particularly poor people of color. Furthermore, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that we have currently under-budgeted \$12 billion for welfare. Even the federal increase in child-care funding is supposed to be short by \$1 billion.

What we are going to invite you to do over the next couple of days is to try to identify the impediments—structural and otherwise—to making the welfare bill work. The structural impediments are great. And certainly we need to think about values, we need to think about behavior; but also, we need to think about how structures and values interact, how we have structured certain

people to lose even if they behave as we think they should behave. We need to engage the moral debate, we need to engage the economic debate, and we need to make welfare work—not just for those who are fortunate enough to be at the right place at the right time, but for those who have been consigned to live in concentrated poverty, those who have been consigned to live in the inner city. And we also have to acknowledge that even under the best scheme, there will be some people who simply will not be able to work and support their families. We must acknowledge that we will never have a situation where all people can work or all people should work. And we must insist that the states and the federal government start to compile meaningful data on not just the opportunity to be pushed off welfare, but to work at a living wage. We must also look at how these issues play out racially, and in different neighborhoods, and in different parts of the country. And we must also be aware of how these different systems and structures are interactive.

So as you address these issues over the next couple of days, we will ask you to think about these issues and identify real problems, real barriers, remedies and possibilities for addressing them. Professor Edelman said that the worst thing President Clinton did was sign the welfare bill. But even though the welfare bill is flawed, even though it is a problematic law, there are opportunities in the new welfare law, especially during this economic boom, that we have to seize and struggle with. Part of that is involved in looking at the changes in the structure of opportunity, the structure of possibilities, so that those people who are forced off the welfare rolls are not forced into deeper poverty and despair.

