

March 11, 2020

House Labor Committee  
Re: H-7881

The Economic Progress Institute writes in support of H-7881, amending the RI Works statute to strengthen engagement of parents in their employment-readiness plans. The proposed change would require a parent applying for RI Works cash assistance to sign her employment plan soon after receipt of cash assistance starts instead of prior to authorization of the benefit payment.

The RI Works law, enacted in 2008, replaced the Family Independence Program (FIP), as our state's Temporary to Needy Families (TANF) program. The new law enacted changes that made it more difficult for parents to succeed in moving 'from welfare to work', including: the 24 month time periodic time-limit, restricting the employment readiness activities in which a parent could engage, and the "plan as condition of eligibility" requirement. Over the years, the General Assembly has made changes to the RI Works law that make it more responsive to the needs of the families that rely on the program for basic needs support and work-force development services for parents. The menu of work-readiness activities was expanded to include vocational education so that parents could gain a skill to make them more marketable and last session, the 24 month time limit was repealed. Passage of H-7881 would continue the progress.

When parents apply for RI Works benefits, they do so because of significant financial stress. A family of 3 can have no more than \$554 in countable income to qualify for assistance. Most applicants have no income at all. These include women escaping domestic violence, and women who have lost a job and either don't qualify for unemployment benefits or whose benefits have expired. Under the current law, when a parent applies for RI Works benefits, an eligibility worker determines whether the family meets the financial and non-financial (e.g., citizenship/lawful immigrant status) requirements. Then the parent is required to meet with a counselor for a quick assessment of the parent's readiness for work, development of an employment plan and referral to a DHS vendor based on the plan.

There are several problems with this approach: (1) It is inefficient - the vendor to whom the parent is referred will conduct another assessment that is much more thorough and truly identifies the parent's capabilities and challenges for moving to gainful employment. Duplicate assessments by DHS and the vendor is not a good use of resources. (2) It sends the wrong message to the parent – requiring an assessment and signing a plan as a condition of getting the cash, sends the message that "the employment plan is something you must do" to get the cash assistance the parent needs to feed and house her children. The message should be: we are providing you with assistance and we are here to help you gain the skills you need to move into the workforce and a path to economic security. The latter message is supported by separating the development of an employment plan that is response to the parent's individual needs based on a comprehensive assessment from the provision of the cash benefit.

It is more likely that a parent will participate in her employment plan if it is targeted to her needs. If she fails to take the steps necessary to develop the plan and continue with the agreed-upon activities, DHS has the ability to sanction the parent by reducing and/or stopping the family's benefit.

We urge the committee to pass this bill and continue the work of improving the RI Works program so it lives up to its mission of protecting children and helping parents gain economic security.