

## Delayed report shows B.C. welfare-to-work programs ineffective, expensive

In August, the government released an 11-month-old evaluation of its Job Placement and Training for Jobs programs. The report shows a lack of effectiveness, misapplication of efforts, and hefty price tag for the government's work-focused welfare experiment, writes **Matthew Beall**.

ON AUGUST 3, 2005, the B.C. government released the summary of a September 2004 assessment of its welfare-to-work programs. A couple weeks later, the full report and a follow-up report that updates the original through July 2005 were also posted Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance website. The reports are the first independent evaluation the public has seen of any aspect of the government's work-focused welfare experiment. The assessment shows that the Job Placement and Training for Jobs programs have, to date, been ineffective and expensive. This comes as no surprise to many critics of the system, who have been critical of the government's lack of transparency and accountability and who have cited failures of similar programs in Ontario and the U.S.

Regardless of the policy's successes or fail-

ures, it is not fair to the citizens of British Columbia that they receive little or no information on the cost or efficacy of welfare-to-work programs apart from the government's unsubstantiated (and repeated) claims of success. That a report like the one released in August was delayed eleven months (and one election) before being released—and the public was left unaware of its existence for so long—is a clear demonstration that the government has little interest in transparency or accountability. Supporters and critics of work-focused welfare alike deserve to know whether the system is working as proposed and how, when, and if it will be improved and evaluated over time.

### **The first report card: failing grades**

The reports indicate that neither of the government's extended employment-oriented pro-

**“All government programs, especially those like work-focused welfare, where the well-being of our least privileged citizens is at stake, should be open to a maximum of public scrutiny.”**

grams have met with success.

The Job Placement program, ostensibly designed to place eligible individuals in jobs so that they become, and remain, independent of welfare, does not appear to be of significant help to those admitted, nor does it seem to be helping those who need it most. The difference in the amount of ‘independence’ from income assistance payments gained by individuals accepted into the Job Placement program versus those who were referred but not accepted is minimal: 19.7 months versus 18.3 months (over 34 months). In addition, the authors of the report noted that of those referred to the Job Placement program but not accepted, many were not accepted because the contractors perceived them as less employable by the contractors, and therefore less profitable under the performance-based contracts. Even so, this referred-but-not-accepted (and less employable) group had only 1.4 months less ‘independence’ over the almost three years of the Job Placement program. What this indicates, essentially, is that the vast majority of people on welfare are without significant barriers to employment can and will find work whether admitted to a job referral program or not. The preference given to the most employable welfare recipients means that little time and effort is directed toward helping the minority of ‘expected to work’ individuals who actually need significant help finding and retaining work. It is this group that faces the greatest potential hardship under the time limits set by

the government.

The story is not dramatically different for the Training for Jobs program, which aims to provide short-term, job-relevant training to individ-

**“That a report like the one released in August was delayed eleven months (and one election) before being released—and the public was left unaware of its existence for so long—is a clear demonstration that the government has little interest in transparency or accountability.”**

uals and then place them in jobs. Only half of the individuals accepted into the program have been placed in a job to date. Just one-in-three has achieved at least one month of independence, and only one-in-four has attained six or more months of independence. Again, as with the Job Placement program, the telling statistic is the incremental improvement in independence for individuals accepted into the program is minimal as compared to those referred-but-not-accepted: only two weeks more independence over 28 months. What this may indicate is that those referred to the Training for Jobs program do not in fact so much need short-term job or skills training, but broad-based, individually oriented social supports, guidance, and programs.

On top of the less-than-spectacular successes of the welfare-to-work programs and apparent misapplication of efforts, the programs have been expensive. To date, the authors of the report

*continued on page 20*

*continued from page 19*

estimate that contractors have received \$53 million to earn a net welfare savings of \$19.5 million. While a \$33 million outlay over three years may not be unreasonable for helping employment-challenged individuals prepare for, find, and retain sustainable employment, the record so far points to programs that are ineffective and which misdirect funds and efforts to the detriment of those who need them the most.

### **Moving forward**

The government has already announced that it intends to revise the current programs. With a new round of contracts worth \$120 million being handed out this Fall and \$300 million dedicated to continuing its work-focused welfare policies over the next three years, you can be sure that the government is keenly interested in showing that its reforms are successful.

While the reports released by the government are a good first step in assessing the efficacy of its welfare-to-work programs, more transparency and accountability is required. All government programs, especially those like work-focused welfare, where the well-being of our least privileged citizens is at stake, should be open to a maximum of public scrutiny. While governments risk public criticism where programs do not perform well, they stand to benefit from external input and in those cases where the successes of such programs are clear.

Further, many questions remain about the work-focused welfare initiative, and the public deserves answers. Are individuals who achieve independence from the welfare rolls actually get-

ting out of poverty? What happens to those individuals who have their benefits reduced or revoked? How many people who were on welfare or who were denied benefits are now homeless?

Just as it is revising the Job Placement and Training for Jobs programs, the B.C. government needs to reexamine its reporting and evaluation procedures. The public requires a minimum standard of transparency and accountability far greater than the one shown to date, and further, we need to know that the government is committed to tracking the effects of its policy changes. ■

---

### **On the Web**

The data cited in this article is available in the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance's posted evaluations of the Job Placement and Training for Jobs programs available at:

[<www.mhr.gov.bc.ca/research/reports/eval\\_JP\\_TJ.htm >](http://www.mhr.gov.bc.ca/research/reports/eval_JP_TJ.htm)

---

### **COMING SOON**

## **SPARC BC Policy Spotlight on WORK-FOCUSED WELFARE**

SPARC BC has developed a new publication series we call *Policy Spotlights*. We plan to produce these short on a regular basis—probably around four times per year—to feature an emerging or existing local, provincial, or national policy issue from the standpoint of its contribution or threat to building a just and healthy society for all.

Our first *SPARC BC Policy Spotlight* is on B.C.'s new work-focused welfare policies. It will be published this fall on our website, with hard copies available to those that request them.

[<www.sparc.bc.ca >](http://www.sparc.bc.ca) •  [info@sparc.bc.ca](mailto:info@sparc.bc.ca)