

## Reading 10

# WELFARE REFORM: Is It Working?

*The welfare system and America's poor have been subject to numerous programs, plans, and legal changes over the years. Since the introduction of official government welfare programs in the 1930s, the pendulum of public opinion has fluctuated from one extreme to another. Some Americans see welfare as an invitation to laziness and generational poverty—others consider a strong welfare system to be a necessity in a humane nation. The following reading looks into an innovative program that hopes to turn “hand-outs” into salaries.*

Text reference: *Sociology and You*, Chapter 8

Whenever the talk turns to creating a path from welfare to work, discussion tends to focus on grand ideas, huge numbers, and sweeping solutions. It's certainly understandable, because the problem of welfare reform is an enormous one. That's why whenever I talk about welfare to work, I like to tell the story of one person and one company. The person is Talani Wilson. And the company is United Airlines.

Talani Wilson is a single parent from Chicago. After the birth of her first child, she found herself going on and off welfare for several years as she juggled the responsibility of raising her daughter and holding down a job. Earlier this year, when she learned from a local social-service agency that United was hiring, she signed up for a special, two-day training session offered by United and the agency. The session stressed core employment skills, such as preparing for an interview and putting together a resume. It also covered how to obtain training, transportation, and child care—issues that ultimately can affect on-the-job success. Following two successful interviews at United headquarters, we hired Talani in March of this year as a personnel clerk. She now works in our human-resources department, where her job includes inputting employment information on all our new hires into our computer database.

Soon after she joined United, Talani was matched with an employee mentor who helped

show her the ropes of her new job, an experience they both found invaluable. Now, she and her mentor sit on an internal task team that is developing and implementing mentoring opportunities for other new United employees leaving the welfare system and joining our work force.

To me, Talani's story not only vividly demonstrates why welfare to work is important, but also why every company has a reason and a responsibility to get involved.

True, this is just one story. And it involves just one company. But, by year's end, United Airlines will have 400 stories like Talani's to tell and, by the time the millennium rolls around, we expect to be able to share more than 2,000. If one company can become responsible for thousands of stories, and that company is joined by hundreds and then thousands of other companies, each creating their own stories, we'll be on our way to making a difference in a problem that otherwise might never be resolved.

Of course, some people may say, “Why bother? The economy is humming along. Inflation is in check. Serious crime rates are dropping. Unemployment is low. And our nation is at peace. So we can afford to live with welfare.” But, we can't.

Welfare not only drains our national resources, it robs confidence and self-worth. Anyway you look at it, welfare charges way too



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steep a price—for our country and the individual. We can never be the kind of country we want to be if we're content to leave people behind. The fact that times are good only means that now is precisely the right time to attack the problem. We have the resources. We have the time. We have the expertise. We also have the momentum. This past February, the Welfare Reform Act gave a new sense of direction and urgency to welfare reform. The cause went from a collection of programs to a national goal. But we know one thing, taking people off welfare rolls won't accomplish the goal. They must also have meaningful jobs to go to.

That's exactly the aim of a fast-growing effort called the Welfare-to-Work Partnership, which I have the privilege to chair. The Partnership is a national, non-partisan group of companies that are dedicated to moving people off the welfare rolls and onto the payroll. Together, United Airlines and our four other charter members—Burger King, Monsanto, Sprint and UPS—have accepted the challenge issued by President Clinton to energize and mobilize the U.S. business community to hire and retain welfare recipients without displacing existing workers.

As an organization, we have two objectives. First, we are promoting the corporate adoption of welfare-to-work programs through public service announcements, competitive challenges, and award ceremonies. Second, we are providing solid technical support to help companies establish their own welfare-to-work projects—including a best-practices manual, a list of service agencies willing to help corporate America, and a resource database of programs that can be broken down by geography and industry.

Burger King is creating 10,000 to 15,000 jobs a year that can be filled by welfare recipients, many in urban areas. Its welfare-to-work program provides child care, job preparedness, and transportation assistance.

Monsanto is testing its welfare-to-work program in four cities. It's not only hiring welfare recipients, but encouraging its key contractors, suppliers, and vendors to do so as well.

UPS has placed more than 80 welfare recipients at its regional air facility in Philadelphia and established a bus system to help these new workers reach their jobs.

Sprint has teamed with two other companies in Kansas City to fund a special center that provides welfare recipients with the training they need to interview successfully for jobs.

The fact is, the overwhelming majority of welfare recipients want to work. Consider that:

Almost 60 percent of people on welfare have completed high school or possess a higher level of education.

Two-thirds of the women on welfare have recent work experience.

More than 40 percent of families on welfare have received benefits for less than two years. These people are employable. We can help them, and they can help our business.

Right now, our country is clearly facing a challenge of historic importance. Welfare as we knew it has come to an end. Welfare reform is underway, with its renewed emphasis on moving people off the welfare rolls and into productive, long-term employment.

The Welfare-to-Work Partnership is a unique effort designed to help those individuals seeking to make the transition from dependence to independence, to forge the transition from welfare to work.

Working together to recruit, train, and employ former welfare recipients, we can build a stronger American work force, stronger American companies, stronger American families, and a stronger America. United Airlines is proud to be a charter member of the Welfare-to-Work Partnership. We invite your company to join us in this worthy endeavor.

Gerald Greenwald, "A Farewell to Alms," *Chief Executive*, Issue 129 (November 1997), p. 34.



**Student  
Worksheet  
10**

## WELFARE REFORM: IS IT WORKING?

**Directions:** Using information from the reading, answer the following questions.

### FROM WELFARE TO WORK

1. Describe the welfare-to-work story of Talani Wilson. Do you think programs that require training and provide jobs will be effective in reducing poverty in America? Explain your answer.

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2. What social and economic problems are caused by welfare programs that hand out money without requiring work or job training? Do you agree with the author's opinion on this issue?

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3. What is the Welfare-to-Work Partnership? Name some companies participating in the program.

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## TAKE A STAND ON WELFARE

4. What is your personal opinion of welfare? Do you think the government should continue to send money and other forms of aid to poor families—or should the government eliminate all “hand-out” programs? Explain your answers.

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5. What innovative programs, other than the Welfare-to-Work Partnership mentioned, would be useful in getting people off of welfare?

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