

Stopping the clock: A time limit for welfare?

Fear of 'negative public reaction' put end to time-limit legislation

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Should people who have been on welfare for two years be cut off benefits for the following three years, even if they need assistance?

In 2002, the B.C. Liberal government answered "yes" and passed welfare time-limit legislation. The first recipients were due to be cut off in April 2004.

Significantly, shortly before this date a large portion of the public answered the same question with a resounding "no," with the result that the government capitulated and effectively ended time-limited welfare.

Our recent report, *The Rise and Fall of Welfare Time Limits in British Columbia*, documents the fascinating story behind the government's capitulation on one of its key welfare policy reforms.

It draws extensively on more than 1,000 pages of internal government documents acquired through a Freedom of Information request, as well as public documents and media reports. The report provides an analysis of the first attempt in Canadian history to deny welfare to people in need solely on the basis of an arbitrary time limit.

The report addresses two related questions: Which groups were active in opposing time limits and what dynamics led to the downfall of time limits?

Not surprisingly, the initial opposition came from diverse groups concerned for people in poverty, including front-line community organizations, anti-poverty groups, people living in poverty, progressive policy analysts and academics and public interest lawyers.

However, more surprisingly, once the legislation had passed, significant and effective opposition arose within the ministry charged with implementing time limits.

While the civil society organizations were motivated by concern for the well-being of those in poverty, the motivations of ministry staff were more complex.

The documents obtained through the FOI request reveal that ministry staff warned their leaders that time limits would apply to recipients who could not be expected to find or keep jobs. The limits would deny benefits to people who, in the ministry's own assessment, should receive assistance and therefore were contrary to its mandate.

Ministry staff also alerted their leaders to the fact that the government could face "negative public reaction" if time limits took effect.

As a result of this internal opposition, in the spring of 2003 the government began to introduce more exemptions to time limits for several classes of recipients.

By the summer of 2003, there were significant shifts in the opposition. The civil society groups succeeded in

bringing time-limited welfare to the attention of mainstream society. The number of recipients facing time-limit sanctions was unknown, but leaked government documents indicated that it could be upwards of 19,000 people.

By that fall, municipal councils, including Vancouver and Victoria city councils, school boards and various faith communities had come out in opposition to the change. The motivations were likely diverse, but the record indicates a primary concern was the prospect of a dramatic increase in the number of homeless people and the community and social problems that would ensue.

Within government, the focus shifted to the politics of managing an issue in the face of significant and increasing public opposition. At this stage, the debate galvanized around the question of how many recipients would be cut off.

The government refused to answer this question. This secrecy led to media pressure, as the credibility of the government crumbled over its refusal to answer simple questions that were clearly in the public interest.

On Feb. 6, 2004, the government capitulated and created a 25th exemption to time limits. It exempted recipients who were complying with their employment plans.

This made the time limits policy redundant, as people who weren't compliant with their employment plans were already ineligible for benefits.

The result of the exemption, according to ministry projections, was that the number of recipients facing time-limit sanctions in 2004 and 2005 would fall from 6,777 to 339. In fact, the actual number affected in this time period was 31.

It was a reluctant capitulation, not motivated by humanitarian concern for people in poverty, but rather by pure political expediency.

What can be learned from the downfall of this failed social policy?

First, welfare time limits were one element of a broader program of regressive welfare reform.

The rejection of this policy should lead the government to re-evaluate and rescind other regressive measures, including the three-week wait in order to apply for benefits and the requirement of two years of independence before eligibility.

Second, the fall of welfare time limits was the result of anti-poverty groups, social policy researchers and public-interest lawyers acting as a catalyst for broad public opposition.

Welfare time limits fell in part because their information and analysis enabled mainstream organizations to articulate and voice their opposition.

The result was a rejection of a policy contrary to values that are fundamental to a humane society.

Finally, it is hoped that the failure of this policy in B.C. will deter other provincial governments from implementing time-limited welfare.

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