



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

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Statement of U.S. Senator Max Baucus Welfare Reform Reauthorization Markup

“After nine extensions of current law, today’s markup brings us one step closer to a full reauthorization of the 1996 welfare program. The Chairman deserves credit for his efforts to make this mark as balanced as possible. I was a strong supporter of the 1996 bill, and looking back, I’m glad I did. Hundreds of thousands of people have left welfare for work – and welfare caseloads have fallen by more than 50 percent since 1996. Despite our success, we still have more to do.

Most importantly, to make a lasting difference, we need to help welfare recipients to work. That’s why we need to provide child care assistance. And that’s why we need to provide transitional health care. We also need to focus on the hardest cases: Families who face more difficult challenges. Children with disabilities. Adults with mental illness or substance abuse issues. Those with little or no education.

For the most part, I believe that this bill moves in the right direction. I appreciate that Senator Snowe’s amendment to add an additional \$5 billion in child care funding has been accepted as part of the Chairman’s modification. Child care is a pivotal issue given the increase in work hours in our bill.

I am also pleased that the Smith-Jeffords amendment to focus on rehabilitation services for hard-to-serve cases has been accepted. This flexibility will allow states to tailor programs for those with the greatest barriers to getting and keeping a good job.

Adding the option for states to cover an additional 12 months of transitional medical assistance, along with many of the ‘simplification’ provisions championed by Senator Breaux, is also very helpful.

The robust package of child support reforms to help get more money to custodial parents is an integral component of reducing poverty for families on welfare. And Senator Snowe’s ‘Parents as Scholars’ program supports parents getting an education, a clear path out of poverty for many families.

For Montana, the tribal TANF provisions are particularly important. The mark includes many provisions that are vital to helping Indian tribes under welfare reform. I appreciate the Chairman’s openness to including these policies. In all of these areas, the mark improves upon current law.

Many of these improvements are especially important for Montana, because our waiver expired in 2003. Without the added flexibility and additional child care funding, Montana would not be able to meet the increased work requirements in the Chairman's mark.

The Chairman's mark is also a much more balanced package compared to the House bill. In my view, the House bill is a heavy-handed mix of prescriptive rules and unfunded mandates.

The mark is not perfect, of course. It contains substantial funding for social policy that has given me pause for quite some time. The so-called 'abstinence-only' provisions, which provide welfare money for states to fund abstinence-only education programs, are prescriptive and limited, in my view. We need to make those funds more flexible for the states to determine what kind of education makes sense. I intend to revisit this issue on the floor.

Although the mark contains funding for marriage promotion programs, of which I have been highly skeptical, it also incorporates constructive safeguards. These safeguards recognize a role for domestic violence prevention and clarify that participation in these programs is strictly voluntary. People should not lose their welfare benefits because they choose not to participate in marriage promotion activities.

As my colleagues know, I have raised concerns about marriage promotion at several hearings and past markups. The Chairman has taken steps to address my skepticism, and I appreciate that very much. We need to respect privacy. We need to ensure that these largely untried marriage promotion programs are safe.

I'd like to thank the Chairman and his staff for working hard to craft compromise language on some of the key issues. It has not been an easy road, and I know that we have a long way to go. But it's usually better in the Senate to travel down that road together. I am pleased to support this mark, and I urge my colleagues on the Democratic side to do the same."

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