

# Oregon leads the nation in welfare reform, but . . .

■ Because the states use different definitions of what constitutes "work activity," Oregon's lead may not be as great as federal data indicate

By KATE TAYLOR  
of The Oregonian staff

Newly released federal data tout Oregon as a leader in welfare reform, with nearly all recipients working or participating in "work activity."

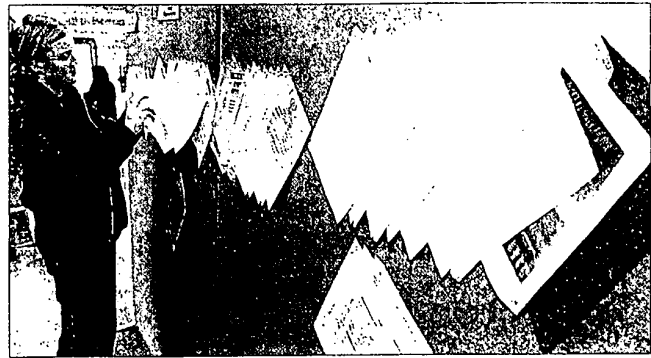
But a closer look at the information released last week by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests that while the state may be a high performer, the new data exaggerate Oregon's lead over other states in getting people from welfare to work.

Oregon is widely considered a leader

in welfare reform and was swiftly reducing caseloads long before passage of the 1996 federal law, which ended guaranteed aid to the nation's poorest and gave states responsibility for their own welfare programs.

From 1995 to 1997, the state's caseload plunged 39 percent from 39,264 to 24,307, according to the Adult and Family Services Division. During that same period, the average percent drop among all states was 15 percent. Oregon's case-

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Jessica Paulk looks through current job postings at Mt. Hood Community College. She is participating in the Steps to Success program that helps people leave public assistance by providing training and help with finding a job.

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load is now at 17,600.

The federal data reported by states for 1997 — the first report card on whether states are meeting the new law's requirements — suggests that about 97 percent of Oregon welfare recipients are involved in "work activity," but only 8 percent actually have earnings, according to Adult and Family Services.

For federal reporting purposes Oregon is permitted a relaxed definition of "work activity" because the state's guidelines count more people as involved in work activity than other states.

"Virtually anyone who walks in the door (of a welfare office) is involved in work activity. But that's not the same as working for their welfare check," said Chuck Sheketoff, director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy, based in Silverton.

The Oregon figure also includes those who promised to get jobs, took life skills classes or enrolled in drug treatment programs, said Jim Neely, deputy administrator of Adult and Family Services.

"Oregon is an A student, but I don't think the participation rate is a good barometer" of success, Neely said. "We are pleased with the other barometers," such as the dramatic caseload drop.

Other states limit the definition of "work activity" to include people who are earning some money or are in short-term training for work.

For example, the federal government allows most states to count a person seeking work as involved in work activity only if he finds a job within 10 weeks. Oregon obtained a waiver that allows the state to count that person as involved in work activity, regardless of whether he finds a job.

"In that sense, Oregon got to count many more people," said Michael Kharfen, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which issued the data. "There are some apples and oranges in the way states count these things."

In the federal data, Oregon is considered the top performer, followed by Wisconsin, Iowa and Wyoming. Yet those other states lag far behind, all with about 53 percent of families on welfare rolls involved in work activity.

In Wisconsin, which also is considered a leader in reducing welfare caseloads but ranked at only 53 percent in work participation, officials question the new data.

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In that state, the term work participation "is very literal," said Jean Rogers, administrator of the state's Adult Division of Economic Support. Those on Wisconsin's rolls work in subsidized jobs regardless of whether they need drug counseling or life skills training, she said.

"We don't inflate our figures and we've taken it under the chin as a result of it a few times," said Ross Mason, spokesman for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. "Number crunching is as much of an art as it is a science. We try to make real numbers that people can understand."

Idaho, which had a caseload drop of 9,200 in 1995 to 1,400 in 1998, measures its work participation at 32 percent.

That figure does not include job seekers who can't find employment within six weeks, those in training for jobs that aren't in demand in Idaho, or people enrolled in drug programs, Mason said.

Still, Kharfen said, "when someone asks for an example of a model state in terms of welfare reform, I give them Oregon. I would characterize Oregon as thoughtful in its approach."

Those on welfare in Oregon have been reduced to those who are considered the toughest to employ. In the year to come, Oregon will be trying to work on removing their obstacles to holding jobs, Neely said.

The state is still committed to supporting Oregonians in "whatever it takes to make that movement toward self-sufficiency. And though we anticipate continued success, the progress may be a bit more measured now."

*The Oregonian's Kate Taylor covers families and children. She can be reached at 294-7692.*