

Poverty shadows those leaving welfare

Although Oregon is proud of reducing the assistance caseload, indications are that neediness is anything but disappearing

BY KATE TAYLOR
THE OREGONIAN

It is a point of pride among Oregon welfare officials that the state slashed its caseload by more than half during the past three years.

Yet those who are no longer on the rolls — roughly 38,000 people — have slipped into society largely untracked by analysts or officials.

So if welfare reform is working in Oregon, then what does success look like?

April Burris, a single mother in Northeast Portland, is one of the statistics that make Oregon officials proud. She's left welfare and is no longer a burden to taxpayers.

Yet she swings from job to job, sometimes unable to pay for groceries, other times going without such essentials as heat and lights.

She argues that hers is not a story of success.

And although there is no comprehensive study on the well-being of people leaving welfare — two-thirds of whom are children — this snapshot emerges from patchy studies:

◆ Most people now leaving welfare for work make an average of \$7.35 an hour, work 35 hours a week and still get some benefits from the state, such as food stamps, according to the state's Department of Human Resources.

◆ Less than half of people leaving cash assistance were able to remain continuously employed for more than one year, according to the department.

◆ People leaving welfare and moving up the earnings ladder don't enjoy much more spending money because the state swiftly pulls away benefits.



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April Burris, a single mother living in Northeast Portland, is off welfare but says hers isn't a welfare reform success story. Burris and her children, Cecelia, 10, and Kyle, 13, have breakfast together most days, but it's sometimes on the run.

After incremental raises, they lose child-care subsidies, food stamps and the Oregon Health Plan.

◆ The job market can be a grim place for many coming off welfare. More than 77 percent of Oregon jobs do not pay a wage that allows such workers to save money, and there is heavy competition

for better-paying jobs, according to the Northwest Job Gap Study conducted by the nonprofit Oregon Action.

Academic and social researchers are just beginning to study whether people leaving welfare are able to keep jobs, whether children's health care needs are being met or even whether families

have enough to eat.

"You can't claim success based on no information," said Charles Sheketoff, director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy in Silverton. "Without good numbers, agencies (such as the state's

Please see **WELFARE**, Page A7

"I worry for them. It doesn't do a lot of good, but I worry anyway."

APRIL BURRIS,

WHO HAS LEFT WELFARE, ABOUT HER CHILDREN