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Off the rolls, or just rolled?

Oregon must make sure to check up on the welfare of those who have gone to work

Somewhere between the crowing of the state and the keening of the advocates lies the truth about the effects of welfare reform in Oregon.

It's just that nobody knows exactly what that truth is, as The Oregonian's Kate Taylor reported this week.

State officials point to a welfare case-load reduction of more than half over the past three years. Anti-poverty activists point to growing lines at charities and food banks.

But the state doesn't really know where its cases went, and the advocates don't really know who's standing in those lines.

Thankfully, though, work is under way that may tell us. The University of Oregon expects the results next spring of a survey of about 800 people who have left welfare. And there's an effort in Congress to require states to collect such data. This information is indispensable to the next, crucial stage of welfare-to-work — making sure that work isn't worse than welfare. Taylor reported some cases in which it is, as low-income workers lost benefits such as food stamps and child care as their pay inched up.

If Oregon's goal is indeed to get people into jobs and to keep them there, as

opposed to simply getting them off welfare rolls, then the next steps must be identified soon. Oregon already figured out and provided what many welfare recipients needed to enter the work force — drug treatment, transportation, child care. Now officials must figure out what workers need to stay there, and ultimately to get ahead. Is it continued help with child care, is it extended health insurance, is it a little longer on food stamps? Once that's determined, state government and employers both must work to provide it. Each has a stake in keeping former welfare recipients on the job.

Advocates rightly decry the fact that many people who moved off welfare are still living in poverty. But so were they when they were on welfare. Now many are employed, with at least a chance to advance. And returning to welfare remains an option, as Jim Neely, deputy administrator of state Adult and Family Services, points out.

No one said it was going to be easy. Oregon still has the right approach, but we have to take it one step at a time. Gathering information about those who leave welfare, and applying the data, are the next steps. We must lose no time in taking them.