

Remarks During a Visit to the East Capitol Center for Change and an Exchange With Reporters

February 26, 2002

[The President's remarks are joined in progress.]

The President. —with healers, people of great and deep faith, who have come from some of the toughest circumstances known, to be leaders in their communities; people—one-time crack addicts, a heroin user, both of whom now are a good mom and dad; people who are helping others to learn that there's a better way.

And I just want to thank you all for sharing with me your experiences and your thoughts. You know, my dream for the country is that the welfare system work side by side with the faith-based programs, which can do a heck of a good job about changing people's hearts and their souls and, therefore, their minds and, therefore, their behavior. And you're living proof of what I'm talking about.

So I want to thank you for sharing your testimony with us. It only strengthens my resolve to make a good law that will propel the healers of America forward. And it only strengthens my knowledge about where the true strength of the country is, and it's in the hearts and souls of our citizens.

Thank you for your time, Curtis. Thank you for your leadership. I appreciate you inviting us to your program. I look forward to sharing some thoughts about some legislation.

Welfare Reform

Q. Are there enough jobs—

The President. I'm going to make sure the economy grows. And yes, there are.

Q. You stiffened the requirements. Do you think there's enough jobs in this economy?

The President. Yes, I do.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:47 p.m. in the gymnasium at St. Luke's Catholic Church. In his remarks, he referred to Curtis Watkins, executive director, East Capitol Center for Change. The press release issued by the Office of the Press Secretary did not include the complete opening remarks of the President. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language tran-

script of these remarks. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks on the Welfare Reform Agenda

February 26, 2002

Thank you very much for that warm welcome, and thank you for your kind introduction, Tommy. Tommy, as Bob Woodson noted, was on the leading edge of welfare reform in the State of Wisconsin, and the people of Wisconsin were better off for it. And fortunately, he's agreed to come to Washington, DC, to serve an incredibly important position as the Secretary of Health and Human Services. And the American people are going to be better off for his leadership, as well.

I appreciate Bob Woodson's spirit. I like to call Bob a social entrepreneur. And there's a lot of social entrepreneurs here in this room, and I want to thank you for caring about your communities. I had the privilege and honor of meeting with some neighborhood healers here a little earlier, soldiers in the armies of compassion, people whose lives were one time dark and hopeless, who now see a bright and clear future because of faith and are willing to share that future with others.

It was a powerful meeting for me. I sometimes get encapsulated in a bubble. It is important for me to, as often as I can, to hear the true stories of America. It reminds me of the strength of our country, and the strength of the country is in the hearts and souls of compassionate citizens. So thank you all very much for sharing your stories with me today.

I see that we've got some Members of the United States Congress here. I see a Senator, a couple of House Members. I want to thank you all for coming. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules to come and to hear what I hope happens when it comes to the welfare bill, its reauthorization. I'm really honored you took time.

And I also want to thank a couple of my Governor buddies. I see the Governors of Wisconsin, Colorado, and Tennessee are here. You all are awfully kind to come. Thank

you for being here, as well. We appreciate your presence.

I also want to thank Curtis Watkins. Curtis is a social entrepreneur, as well. He started the East Capitol Center for Change and provides support and care to countless lives. Curtis, thank you for your time, and thank you for what you do. See, this is something Government can't start. We can try, but we're not very good about inventing programs such as this. This program was invented because somebody loved their neighbor as much as they loved themselves. And as a result, there is a program—programs here which work on crime prevention and substance abuse treatment.

Listen, there's all kinds of ways to treat substance. I understand that. But one sure way to help, one sure way to help somebody kick the habit is to introduce them to faith.

Curtis' program has got mentoring and after-school activities. Mentoring programs are so important, because it gives somebody a chance to say to a young child, "I love you. America belongs to you just as much as it belongs to anybody else."

There's Bible studies here; there's job training programs here; there's forums to improve parenting skills and to strengthen marriage. This organization was built on a simple and powerful principle: Every life has equal value, and no life is beyond hope or help. This conviction motivates thousands all across our country, and this conviction must always be reflected in the policies of our Government.

Senator Hubert Humphrey once said that the moral test of a Government is how it treats those in the shadows of life. He was talking about the needy and the sick and the handicapped.

I believe Americans in need are not problems; they are our neighbors. They're not strangers; they are citizens of our country. And to live up to our national ideals, ideals of equality and justice, every American of every background must have access to opportunity. We must never be content with islands of despair in the midst of a nation of promise. We want all Americans to believe in the potential of their own lives and the promise of their own country.

So today I'm outlining the next steps of welfare reform, the next actions we must take to build a more just and generous nation. America began a war on poverty more than three decades ago, a story of good intention but conflicted results. There were important successes; no doubt about it, there were some good successes. Seniors were lifted out of poverty. Poor families got basic health care. Disadvantaged children were given a headstart in life.

Yet, many Americans, in Bob Woodson's words, were injured by the helping hand. The welfare system became an enemy of individual effort and responsibility, with dependence passed from one generation to the next. Between 1965 and 1995, Federal and State spending on poor and low-income families increased from around \$40 billion to more than \$350 billion a year. Yet, during the same 30-year period we made virtually no progress—no progress—in reducing child poverty, and the number of children born out of wedlock grew from 1 in 13 to 1 in 3.

By the mid-1990s, few denied there was need for change. In sweeping reforms passed by Congress, welfare benefits were transferred into temporary help, not a permanent way of life. The new system honors work by requiring work and helps people find jobs. States are required to promote independence, and they are given the flexibility to seek that goal in new ways, with dollars that were once used for welfare payments, for example, now being used for childcare and other ways to help working families.

Critics initially called these changes brutal and mean-spirited. Yet, the results of reform have proven them wrong. Many lives have been dramatically improved. Since 1996, welfare caseloads dropped by more than half. Today, 5.4 million fewer people live in poverty than in 1996, including 2.6 million fewer children. Child poverty for African-American children is at its lowest level ever. For the first time in generations, the out-of-wedlock birthrate has leveled off, and the unwed teen birthrate has declined since the mid-1990s.

Many families understandably report financial difficulties in their lives after welfare. Yet, a majority also say that their lives are

better. Many are learning it is more rewarding to be a responsible citizen than a welfare client; it is better to be a breadwinner respected by your family.

Sherrie Jordan, a mother of four children and a former welfare recipient living in Buffalo, New York, described her experience this way: "It's overwhelming. I'm very happy. There aren't many words to describe it. I'm looking forward to being financially independent. I can do it myself now."

Sherrie and millions of others are good people facing a tough climb. They are gaining self-confidence. They are earning the respect of their fellow citizens and their Nation.

Some analysts try to dismiss all these gains as the product of good economic times. Yet, we have had good economic times before, and the number of people on welfare went up. Beginning in the mid-1960s, welfare caseloads often increased even as the economy grew and unemployment fell.

Overall caseloads increased substantially over the last 30 years, but thanks to the 1996 welfare reform legislation, the increases have ended. Welfare reform in 1996 was good and sound and compassionate public policy. It passed because leaders of both political parties agreed on what needed to be done, and we need that same spirit of bipartisanship today in Washington, DC, as we address this issue.

We are encouraged by the initial results of welfare reform, but we're not content. We ended welfare as we've known it, yet it is not a post-poverty America. Child poverty is still too high. Too many families are strained and fragile and broken. Too many Americans still have not found work and the purpose it brings.

Because these needs continue, our work is not done. We will continue a determined assault on poverty in this country. Later this year, the 1996 welfare law must be reauthorized by the United States Congress. I have proposed spending more than \$17 billion a year on welfare for years 2003 to 2007. These funds will be provided to States through block grants, giving them the flexibility to use the funds for their most pressing needs. The budget I submitted will continue to maintain historically high levels of childcare funding.

Yet, my administration will do more than spend money. We will pursue four important goals to continue transforming welfare in the lives of those that it helped. We will strengthen work requirements. We must promote strong families. We will give States more flexibility, and we will show compassion to those in need.

First, we will strengthen the work requirements for those on welfare. Work is the pathway to independence and self-respect. Yet, because of a quirk in the 1996 law, States on average must require work of only 5 percent of the adults receiving welfare. This is certainly not what Congress had in mind when it wrote the reforms in 1996, so I'm recommending that the law be changed and every State be required within 5 years to have 70 percent of the welfare recipients working, so that more Americans know the independence and the dignity of work.

Welfare recipients must spend at least 40 hours a week in work and preparing for work. Because many adults on welfare need new skills, my plan will allow States to combine work with up to 2 days each week of education or job training. So in other words, it's a combination of working and training. And for people who need intensive short-term help, our proposal offers 3 months of full-time drug rehabilitation or 3 months of full-time job training. And adolescent's mothers—adolescent mothers can meet their work requirements by attending high school.

At the heart of all these proposals is a single commitment to return an ethic of work to an important place in all American lives.

Secondly, we will work to strengthen marriage. As we reduce welfare caseloads, we must improve the lives of children. And the most effective, direct way to improve the lives of children is to encourage the stability of American families.

Across America, no doubt about it, single mothers do heroic work. They have the toughest job in our country. Raising children by themselves is an incredibly hard job. In many cases, their lives and their children's lives would be better if their fathers had lived up to their responsibilities.

Statistics tell us that children from two-parent families are less likely to end up in poverty, drop out of school, become addicted

to drugs, have a child out of wedlock, suffer abuse, or become a violent criminal and end up in prison. Building and preserving families are not always possible; I recognize that. But they should always be our goal.

So my administration will give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages. Many good programs help couples who want to get married and stay married. Isn't that right? We just talked about one such program. Premarital education programs can increase happiness in marriage and reduce divorce by teaching couples how to resolve conflict, how to improve communication, and most importantly, how to treat each other with respect.

There are also programs for couples with serious problems, alcoholism, infidelity, or gambling. Trained mentor couples who have had experience—who have experienced severe marital problems themselves now teach other couples how to repair their own marriages. Using this approach, one national program reports being able to save up to 70 percent of very troubled marriages.

Under the plan that I'm submitting, up to \$300 million a year will be available to support innovation and to find programs which are most effective. You see, strong marriages and stable families are incredibly good for children. And stable families should be the central goal of American welfare policy.

The welfare system can honor the family in other ways. Under current welfare law, State governments can keep some of a father's child support payments to defray the costs of welfare. I'll give States financial incentives to give more of a father's child support directly to his children, instead of putting it into the welfare system. Mothers and children will be better off, and the children will see that their father supports and cares for them.

I'm also proposing \$135 million for abstinence education programs. Abstinence is the surest way and the only completely effective way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. When our children face a choice between self-restraint and self-destruction, Government should not be neutral. Government should not sell children short by assuming they are incapable of act-

ing responsibly. We must promote the good choices.

Third, we will give States greater flexibility in spending welfare money. Right now, there are hundreds—hundreds—of Federal Government programs to help low-income Americans achieve better lives. Unfortunately, recipients often find the different rules very confusing. Conflicting regulations are keeping people from getting the help they need when they need it.

My proposal will provide waivers to allow States to completely redesign how many Federal programs would operate in their State. Rather than dictate to States how each major welfare and training program should operate, we must allow States to use their creativity to build a network of assistance for low-income families. Americans will get better childcare services and better job training and better housing and better nutrition programs if States have the flexibility and freedom to explore innovative ideas.

And fourth, even as welfare reform proceeds, we must encourage the essential work of faith-based groups and charities. Work and independence are the goals of welfare reform. Yet, compassionate help for an abandoned child is not a work requirement; it is a loving mentor. The answer to addiction is not a demand for independence; it is personal support on the hard road to recovery.

Charities and faith-based groups fill needs that no welfare system, no matter how well designed, can possibly fill. Our Nation needs men and women who rescue children from gangs, who tutor children in failed schools, who visit the sick and the dying. In times of personal crisis, people do not need the rules of a bureaucracy; they need the help of a neighbor.

America's neighborhood healers, like the place we are today, are indispensable, are irreplaceable, and deserve our support. I support legislation that encourages charitable giving and ends discrimination against faith-based organizations that compete for contracts to provide social services to people who need help.

Faith-based groups are reclaiming America, block by block, life by life, from the inside out. We must encourage their work without undermining their freedom or their

identity or their purpose. It is time for the United States Senate to pass the Faith-Based Initiative. The bill's sponsor, Rick Santorum, is here. I appreciate you, Mr. Senator, working hard. Get it out of the Senate, and get it on my desk for the good of the American people.

And at the same time, we must recognize that our Government has responsibilities to help people who cannot help themselves, that we've got a responsibility to help people who need a transition, that need a helping hand. We've got that responsibility. My budget reflects that responsibility. And there's one area that we need to improve help on: We need to restore nutrition benefits for legal immigrants.

The 1996 reforms imposed a 5-year ban on most welfare benefits for new legal immigrants, including a permanent ban on food stamps, unless immigrants have worked here for 10 years or have become citizens. We've proposed changing this law so that legal immigrants receive food stamps after 5 years, so that those who are eligible, those who need help, like an elderly immigrant farmworker, somebody who has worked hard all his life and cannot help himself, ought to get food stamps. Or a legal immigrant who has been working here for 5 years and raising a family and all a sudden gets laid off and needs a helping hand, ought to get food stamps.

This Nation must show compassion in a time of a person's need. These are the important goals that I've—that I want to talk to Congress about when the welfare reauthorization bill comes up: work, families, more flexibility to States, and compassion—a compassionate welfare system that knows the true strength of the country lies in the hearts and souls of our fellow citizens.

We can build on the advances of recent years, confident there's more progress to be made and, therefore, expand the promise of this Nation. More Americans will know the dignity of a job. More children will find shelter in strong families. More citizens will gain the tools to succeed in a free society. And more Americans in need will find love and hope that can help them rebuild their lives.

Everyone can join in the work of welfare reform by serving a neighbor. Americans can

heed that call in all kinds of ways, in local community groups. And if they're really interested, they can call the USA Freedom Corps or get on the Web site at usafreedomcorps.org to find out how you can help, how you can be a soldier in the armies of compassion, how you can put your good heart to work to make America a hopeful and strong and decent country for all of us.

We've made progress; there's no question the doors of opportunity that were shut and sealed have now been opened. Ask some of the folks on the stage here. They had that door slammed in their face, and now it's open, and there's a brighter day ahead.

Yet, there is no acceptable level of despair and hopelessness in America. We will not leave people in need to their own struggle, and we will not leave them to their own fate.

The success of the past few years should not make us complacent as a nation. They prove what is possible when we press forward, and I am determined to press forward to build a single nation of justice and opportunity.

May God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:53 p.m. in the gymnasium at St. Luke's Catholic Church. In his remarks, he referred to Robert L. Woodson, Sr., founder and president, National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise; Curtis Watkins, executive director, East Capitol Center for Change; Gov. Scott McCallum of Wisconsin; Gov. Bill Owens of Colorado; and Gov. Don Sundquist of Tennessee. Public Law No. 104-193, approved August 22, 1996, was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

Statement on Proposed Pension Security Legislation

February 26, 2002

I applaud Senators Tim Hutchinson, Trent Lott, and Judd Gregg for introducing legislation today to strengthen the retirement security of American workers. This legislation would protect workers by giving them freedom to manage their own retirement savings, fair notice of any blackout period, better access to sound investment advice, and is consistent with the retirement security principles I previously outlined. This bill also assures