

# Forum Article: Rehabbing the Poor

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Both major political parties in recent decades seem to have abandoned the poor. Most recently the preoccupation has been with the “disappearing” middle class and the focus on inequality between the middle and upper classes.

But in June of this year, the Republicans organized a *Task Force on Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility* and produced *A Better Way*, a paper that lays out the broad goals of a plan for reducing poverty and creating opportunity for the poor. (House of Representatives 2016).

With a poverty rate of 15 percent, a child poverty rate of 21 percent (US Bureau of the Census) and a sudden awareness of extreme income inequality, this would seem natural, but not for conservatives. The interest largely emerged from a Republican movement called *reform conservatism*. This new wave of conservatism says that the core problem is

*weak mobility from the bottom of the income ladder and wage stagnation for the middle class... But economic and social policy can make a difference ...making family life more affordable, upward mobility more likely, and employment easier to find*

according to Ross Douthat. (Douthat, 2013)  
The new conservatism believes that Republicans have a better way of creating mobility and opportunity for the lower income classes than what the Democrats have done so far. Poverty and dependency have not been eliminated by the current safety-net programs, the GOP thinking goes.

The conservative solution to the problem (American Enterprise Institute, 2014) is a plan that compels the receiver of social benefits to become a patient in a highly intensive therapeutic relationship in order to become rehabilitated and thus self-sufficient.

In this view, our safety-net is now fragmented into numerous benefit programs that are not coordinated, not evaluated, and lack accountability for the program or its recipients. Each program has its own “tax rate” (the rate at which benefits are reduced when the client goes to work.) Combining these reductions creates a situation where people become mired in dependency rather than undertaking or increasing work effort and becoming self-sufficient. Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House has said:

*We don't want a dependency culture. Our concern in this country is with the idea that more and more able-bodied people are becoming more dependent upon the government than upon themselves* (Meet the Press, 2014).

The Opportunity Grant calls for at least eleven social welfare programs like cash assistance, food stamps, housing assistance, and Medicaid to be combined and given to the states as a block grant. This means fixed rather than open-ended funding which largely exists now. States, after creating a plan to be approved by the federal agency would then decide how they want to spend the money. State programs would be monitored by a third party

to periodically assess how and whether their stated program goals are being met. Programs would be locally focused and involve communities, non-profit agencies, churches, and other non-government institutions—to act as providers. Getting people to work is the operative intent in order to facilitate the over-all goal of getting them off assistance and out of poverty.

This is in contrast to the current safety-net where programs are separately managed and funded by states and the federal government, and is accountable to the federal government for following federal program rules. Federal funding is for the most part, “open-ended” where money is allocated to the states on a basis of need, and so is flexible and responsive to need.

In return for assistance, arguably the most radical part of the Opportunity Grant plan, is the client’s obligation. The family receiving assistance would need to agree to ongoing intense monitoring by state therapeutic workers who would work with the client to forward the goal of self-sufficiency. Progress toward this goal would be constantly evaluated until the family gets off assistance which is the objective of the therapy. The family would be explicitly and directly held accountable for ending assistance.

Although novel for these times, moral oversight of those receiving assistance is not new. It is a throwback all the way to the 1870s when the price of getting economic relief was rehabilitation by the Charity Organization Society, a professional organization of charity workers who felt that too many poor people were getting indiscriminate and unsupervised assistance. Up until then what was called “outdoor relief” was casual and required little input from those receiving it. But things changed when the COS “friendly visitors” started to intervene and attempt to reform those whose poverty was said to be due to their own immoral and shiftless ways. Their mission was to build character and enforce self-reliance with the goal of reducing the relief rolls.

In 1935 as a result of the Depression, the Social Security Act which included Aid To Dependent Children (ADC) was passed. This

program assisted children deprived of a father’s support. ADC mothers were not expected to work—the avowed purpose of assistance was so that they could stay home to properly take care of the children.

But by 1962, the welfare rolls had grown astronomically (Rein, 1982) and some families were exhibiting problematic behavior. The solution, starting with the 1962 amendments to the welfare legislation, created social services to be given to these families by the welfare worker in an effort to “strengthen the family and promote self-sufficiency.” Such services were implemented by one-to-one counseling. The strategy of providing services that were to rehabilitate the assistance family continued with the 1967 amendments and ended in 1975 with the Title XX Social Services Block Grant. Social services were clearly designed to get families off welfare by changing their moral behavior.

So the Opportunity Grant’s innovative way to get people off assistance is not new but is a continuation of this tradition in the history of social welfare benefits.

Social services did not eliminate the ever-growing welfare rolls and in 1996, President Clinton “ended welfare as we know it,” and the new program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—a block grant to the states, replaced now Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In TANF, work for welfare families was no longer encouraged through social services. It became mandatory. States were required to have a pre-determined percentage of their clients involved in work or work training or their federal funds would be cut. Welfare grantees had to work for a pre-determined number of hours each week or their grants could be eliminated.

Although TANF welfare agencies practice monitoring to ensure work effort as the law requires, it appears much less onerous than what the Opportunity Grant envisions in the way of therapeutic oversight for each family receiving benefits from any one of a dozen programs.

Families being forced into personal rehabilitation is intrusive and turns legal benefits for those in need into *contract assistance* i.e.,

assistance is no longer a *right* as defined by law but a discretionary contract as defined by the giver, and requires some specified actions in return for assistance. Assistance as a right is different as it depends on the *status* of the group as being needy and not on an obligatory arrangement with the giver.

The need to rehabilitate those getting benefits also implies the *culture of poverty* argument where the irresponsibility of the family is said to be influenced or created by the culture of the community that it lives in. Paul Ryan has famously said:

There is a culture in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work. (Ryan, 2014).

So, back to the times of Moynihan and the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the 1960s and the studies of ghetto life where culture was the causative culprit of immoral behavior. These residents of low income communities had to reject the negative influences of their surroundings and be made moral and productive. Such theories have long ago been refuted. Just as what was believed then, the current basic conservative idea is to change the client and not the system, though it is clear that at this time, economic conditions such as unemployment and low wages are responsible for the high rate of beneficiaries of welfare programs.

We know that social services as a way to reduce the AFDC rolls did not succeed as the caseload continued to increase and few recipients in those years went to work. (Gabe, 2014 pp 22, 23) What did promote work was the change from AFDC to TANF where work became a required goal for cash recipients. At that time, single mothers—responding to this straightforward objective, encouraged by the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (for those working) and by the availability of jobs in a flourishing labor market—greatly increased their work effort and abandoned welfare. In the early 1990s about 30 percent of single mothers were on welfare. By 2013 only 7 percent received this cash assistance. In the 1990s, 12 million people were on welfare—down to about 4 million now. (Gabe, pp 23, 75).

Although counseling and therapeutic intervention can be effective and appropriate in helping with emotional problems, it is clear that trying to change people's character as a condition for getting economic assistance, is not the solution to poverty and dependency.

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