

Increase welfare support

Written by Judge Greg Mathis
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The current economic crisis has prompted legislators on both sides of the political aisle to consider ways to support the nation's middle class through the financial downturn. But who is thinking about the nation's poor, those individuals, many of whom support a family, who, in 1996, were cut off from federal financial support in the name of reform.

Heralded by a Republican controlled Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act moved millions of people off of the welfare rolls and into jobs. Unfortunately, most of these jobs were low-skilled positions that paid less than sustainable wages. The bill did provide for job training, child care and transportation needs but the allowances under the now state-run programs didn't take into account the true needs of those who may have spent years on welfare, were under-educated and lacked viable job skills.

Instead of joining the workforce after the reform bill passed, many welfare recipients eventually "disappeared" from the rolls. They became frustrated with the lack of support from their local office and the caseworker's seemingly inability to understand the reality of their lives. While the numbers on the welfare rolls may have decreased, many of our poor were not much better off than before.

The number of welfare recipients rose last year for the first time in 15 years. And while the current roster of 4 million doesn't come close to that of the pre-reform years, we must not forget our nation's poor. Indeed, the middle class needs support but our lawmakers cannot cater to that population, with the hopes of gaining and maintaining political support, at the expense of the country's most vulnerable population.

Creating an entrance into the workforce by developing a training program that provides marketable job skills in in-demand industries is one of many supports that are needed. Subsidies that would offset the costs of higher-education are another. Increasing funds for childcare and transportation programs is yet another.

While elected officials – Democrats and Republicans alike – debate strategies to improve our economy, they must also begin to create a safety net for America's poor. This is not a plea to bring welfare back as we knew it. It was a flawed system. It is, however, a challenge to those in power to think of new ways to uplift the poor in a meaningful way.

Judge Greg Mathis became the youngest judge in Michigan's history and was elected a Superior Court Judge for Michigan's 36th District. He has been called upon as a regular contributor to national television programs, including "Larry King Live," "Politically Incorrect," CNN's "Talk Back Live," "Showbiz Tonight" and "Extra" to discuss his opinions on complex issues of the day, such as national security, unique sentencing, affirmative action and celebrity scandals. He also offers his take on high-profile legal cases.