

Reader's view: Time to dispel myths about public assistance

Letter to the Editor – January 3, 2010

The board of directors of Community Action Duluth recently viewed a portion of an October St. Louis County Board meeting during which some commissioners suggested people receiving public assistance should have their names published in the newspaper because the “stigma will make them have ambition and they just don’t feel like working like the rest of us.”

Thankfully, the Data Privacy Act prohibits such action.

However, our board found the comment and the others like it at the meeting to be demeaning and offensive.

The comments of some commissioners showed a lack of understanding about the reality of the Minnesota Family Investment Program, or MFIP. First, the benefit amount has not increased since 1986. No adjustments for inflation have been made so that a family of three receives \$532 per month in cash assistance. Even with housing and food support, \$532 doesn’t go far. Second, more than half of MFIP participants worked in the three months before applying for benefits. Ambition doesn’t seem to be a problem.

Our agency works with many MFIP participants, and our board, staff and volunteers include people who have been on MFIP at one point in their lives. We know from firsthand experience that most people on public assistance receive benefits for a short amount of time, something verified by statistics. Almost everyone on public assistance for an extended number of years suffers from a chronic mental illness, a severe learning disability or chemical dependency that prevents them from working.

We are happy to meet with commissioners any time to help provide actual testimonials from people who have at one time been on MFIP. We are sure that by listening to the collective stories, many of the myths about MFIP would be dispelled.

Marsha Hystead

Duluth

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