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## Advocates say welfare raise is long overdue

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Because the state is blessed with surpluses in both its general fund and federal funds aimed at helping people out of poverty, welfare advocates are pushing for an increase in the monthly public assistance given to some of the state's neediest families.

The state sets the formula for calculating cash assistance, but the Legislature — concerned about costs — has chosen to keep the amount tied to 1993 federal poverty guidelines. Since then, the cost of living in Honolulu has increased by about 23 percent.

For a single parent with two children, that means trying to make ends meet on \$570 a month. If the formula — 62.5 percent of the 1993 poverty level — were based on the present poverty level, the same family would get almost \$400 a month more.

Now that the state has extra money — \$574 million in the general fund and \$150 million in welfare funds — some advocates argue that the time is right to make that increase happen.

"The basic amount that they are starting with is so low that people are not able to rent or get a place to live," said Debbie Shimizu, executive director of the state's chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

If the cash assistance were raised to where people could find permanent shelter, other things would fall into place. "If they can be stable in that area, then they can go out and get a job," she said.

Rep. Dennis Arakaki, D-30th (Moanalua, Kalihi Valley), said the Legislature wants to increase benefits, but the cash payments cannot be considered by themselves, since families may qualify for other services, such as food stamps, housing or medical insurance.

Since the programs have different eligibility guidelines, and some, like subsidized medical insurance and housing, have enrollment caps, not every family will receive the same services.

"In my opinion, if you can get housing and you can get medical care, you can survive, but when you don't have those things, it makes it hard, especially if you have young children," Arakaki said.

However, while the desire to raise the payments is there, lawmakers have to consider the financial impact on the state.

"People have to realize it's not just a one-time thing. The cost keeps recurring once we pass the increase," Arakaki said. "Once you pass it, it's hard to decrease it."

The Department of Human Services, which runs the public assistance programs, supports calculating annually the percentage of the federal poverty level the state can afford.

The current formula "has resulted in a very, very inadequate cash assistance level that has been the same for 13 years," said DHS Director Lillian Koller.

However, coming up with the correct formula will be challenging, since it not only will affect single-parent families who qualify for federal dollars, but will add costs to state-funded programs that give aid to two-parent families, and aged, blind and disabled program participants, as well as increase the numbers of those eligible for Medicaid.

If the state were to base payments on 62.5 percent of the present poverty level, as advocated by the Welfare Employment Rights Coalition, it would cost the state an additional \$24.3 million this year.

Joel Fisher, a professor in the University of Hawai'i School of Social Work, urged lawmakers at a hearing on Thursday to use present federal poverty levels for calculating payments, arguing that anything less would put the state back in the same position it is in now in just a few years.

"The amount of money that we'll be awarding to financial recipients will simply not be adequate or be based on outdated information," he said.

Teresa Bill, statewide coordinator for the Bridge to Hope program, which helps welfare recipients get a college education, said: "Because it has lagged for so long, the increase seems large, but the longer you wait, the bigger the step becomes."

Melissa Arriba, a former Bridge to Hope participant, said the cash assistance alone would not have been enough for her to have made it out of poverty.

As the single mother of one child, she received about \$500 a month in assistance, of which \$350 went toward renting a room. "With the welfare benefit, I was able to make my rent with a little bit extra," she said. "If I had tried to get a bigger place, I probably wouldn't have been able to make ends meet."

Arriba was able to make it through with a part-time job, student loans and a childcare subsidy.

She found all the requirements tied to receiving assistance discouraging, while trying to juggle parenting, school and work, and she often had to worry about losing her benefits because of problems with paperwork.

Delays in reimbursement for childcare also forced Arriba to borrow from friends and family. "It's kind of embarrassing and frustrating and difficult," she said, suggesting that the state find a way to provide childcare subsidies up front.

However, Arriba stuck with it because she knew it was the only way to get ahead. "I had to do it because I wanted to be out of this poverty place," she said.

Now the 28-year-old has a full-time job at the University of Hawai'i that pays about \$34,000 a year — enough to live on, although not enough for her and her son to have a place of their own.

As for public assistance, "I'm just happy to be off of it," she said.

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