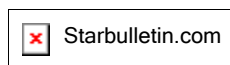




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Keikilani Meyer, UH
Graduate Student
Organization president, feels
that a federal proposal to
implement more work hours
in the Bridge to Hope
program would hurt children
of welfare parents the most.

Students oppose welfare proposal

**Some isle residents say the
federal plan to raise work hours
may hurt their education**

By Treena Shapiro

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Keikilani Meyer is trying to figure out how to support herself and her 9-year-old son after losing welfare benefits while finishing her master's degree in urban and regional planning at

the University of Hawaii.

Until last month, Meyer, president of the UH Graduate Student Organization, had been one of about 100 students in a program that reduces the number of work hours for full-time students who need to stay on welfare to 20 from 32, counting class time as work and providing funding for the additional work hours.

In February, however, the single mother ran up against the five-year federal limit on welfare assistance and consequently lost her eligibility to participate in the Bridge to Hope program, which had funded a campus job that brought in about \$200 a month.

President Bush is pushing to have welfare recipients work more hours, which would put more full-time students in a situation similar to Meyer's. The proposal raises the mandatory work hours to 40 from 30 (some states have set larger minimums), and only 16 hours can be used for education or training.

Currently, the state requires welfare-to-work participants to work 32 hours a week to receive cash benefits, but full-time students meet the requirement by combining 20 hours of school and work.

Kris Foster, financial assistance program administrator for the Department of Human Services, said Bush's proposal would make it difficult for welfare recipients to attend school because it essentially doubles the amount of time they need to spend meeting the guidelines.

"I would think the biggest problem would be people being able to participate, not as a result of funding, but that the participation criteria are so strenuous," she said, noting that study time does not count toward the work requirement.

Foster said the department has found Bridge to Hope to be an "enormously successful" program. "I think it has the right combination of employment and participation ... and it provides a lot of peer support, which is very, very important."

Meyer opposes Bush's plan, and she points out that through education, welfare recipients will become lifelong taxpayers and contribute to their communities.

"Whatever benefits (the government) gives now, they're going to get it paid back tenfold."

She advocates instead for continuation of Bridge for Hope, which works on the premise that it is beneficial to reduce the mandatory work hours for people trying to find a permanent way off public assistance through education.

Meyer had received \$877 a month until last month when she received her final \$452 welfare check and about \$200 from her 16-hour-a-month job through Bridge to Hope.

She also receives a \$225 monthly stipend as UH Graduate Student Organization president.

Now she makes \$499 a month -- the GSO stipend and a new 10-hour-a-week job that pays \$6.85 an hour.

Meyer recently learned that the 20 hours a week she puts in as GSO president -- including

participation on the strategic-planning committees for UH-Manoa and the UH system -- do not count as paid employment. Unless she works 20 hours a week, she does not qualify for the Department of Human Service's \$200 monthly stipend for those who have lost welfare benefits.

In July she would have to increase her hours to 32 a week to remain eligible for the stipend.

The university only allows student employees to work 20 hours a week during the school year.

While she sorts through this dilemma, Meyer says leaving school is not an option. "I guess it's because I'm almost done," she said. "You're going to do whatever it takes."

Teresa Bill, systemwide coordinator for Bridge to Hope, said the program was created as a partnership between UH and the Department of Human Services to address the difficulty single parents had attending school while working full time and trying to raise their families.

"It was just so clear that people who are working full time and then going to school and have families are just overwhelmed," Bill said. "People were leaving school so quickly."

The program, now in its second year, combines at least 12 hours per week of class time with on-campus work opportunities like student assistantships, internships and mentoring opportunities with professors.

Most participants attend the community colleges, some are finishing their bachelor's degrees, others take 12-week skills building programs at the Employment Training Center, and a small handful are working on graduate degrees.

When Meyer evaluated the Bridge to Hope program for one of her classes, she found that participants valued the program because on-campus jobs saved transportation time, which they were then able to spend with their families.

"If they implement more work hours, it's the child that's going to lose out. If they are home, they're not going to be able to take care of their (children's) needs because they're going to be studying ... if they even continue to go to school," Meyer said.

Yvonne Santos knows well what kind of toll trying to juggle school and work can take on a family.

Santos had been working as a cashier at Longs Drugs when she found herself trying to raise her infant daughter alone.

She knew the two of them would not be able to survive on her \$8-an-hour job, and decided then that "the only thing that would help me bring in the amount of money to be self-sufficient is to go back to school."

For years she worked 32 hours a week, attended school full time and "rarely had any time to spend with my daughter, and that was a real hardship," she said.

Only now that she has a job as a social worker at the Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center has Santos found the time to bond with her daughter, now 9.

During her last year in school, Santos found relief in Bridge to Hope, which allowed her to work less and study more, earning a 4.0 grade-point average for the first time.

Santos received her master's degree in social work in August 1999, and by October had landed the job that enabled her to leave public assistance behind.

"I loved the day I got off welfare. I just felt so free," she said. "I appreciate the help that I got, but it's so much better to be self-sufficient and not to have to follow certain rules and guidelines. It's just less stressful."

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