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Posted on: Monday, August 5, 2002

Welfare reform may hurt education program

By [Beverly Creamer](#)
 Advertiser Education Writer

Michele Saballa lives by a motto: "As long as you can dream it, you can be it."

But it's the Bridge to Hope program that has kept her motto and her dream alive.

The program allows single parents on welfare to get an education, work on campus for as few as eight hours a week and continue to receive assistance.

"If you can believe in yourself, you have no limit," said Saballa, who dropped out of school in the ninth grade because she was pregnant. "You can do anything you want."

Bridge to Hope was created by the state Legislature and the University of Hawai'i system two years ago to help single parents gain self-sufficiency before their benefits end as called for by the welfare reform law enacted in 1996.

The law expires Sept. 30, and Congress is preparing to reauthorize it. Bridge to Hope and programs like it could disappear under some proposals being debated.

Teresa Bill, UH systemwide coordinator for Bridge to Hope, said that would be a tragedy.

"This is such an incentive for people to go back to school," Bill said. "For a small investment, a single parent on welfare can better their education, make a living wage and become an employed, tax-paying citizen."

For example, if Saballa, who is studying to become a counselor for troubled teens, were not in school full time, the law would require that she work or volunteer 32 hours per week in order to receive her benefits. As a full-time student, she must work only eight hours, and it is Bridge to Hope that provides her on-campus job and salary. That salary and her welfare benefits allow her to attend school and care for her three children still at home.

Hawai'i is one of more than a dozen states that allow welfare recipients to use education to meet their work requirements, Bill said.



Michele Saballa is among the Hawai'i residents working to get off welfare with help from Bridge to Hope.

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How to contact Bridge to Hope

To reach the Bridge to Hope program, call coordinator Teresa Bill at 956-8059 or 454-4779. She can help single-parent welfare recipients apply for the program.

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"The U.S. House bill doesn't have the same kinds of local control," she said. "We're hoping the Senate version will include more of that. But the Bush administration is not really supporting education (as part of welfare reform). We haven't figured out what we would do if the House version passes."

In the past year, Bridge to Hope put 127 welfare parents into campus jobs throughout the UH system, bringing them closer to earning college degrees and leaving poverty behind.

"Basically, Bridge to Hope is a student employment program," Bill said. "You can't work 32 hours a week, plus go to school, plus take care of your kids, so this program supports welfare recipients to gain the skills and education they need to achieve lifelong economic self-sufficiency."

Nanette Miles is another single mother who found herself back in school to provide a more secure future for her two children, 12 and 15. After working for 14 years as a cosmetologist, she lost her job when her employer went out of business. A few months of unemployment made Miles realize her previous occupation and her education level didn't offer enough job security.

"But there's no way I could go back to school without this," Miles said of Bridge to Hope. "Hopefully I'll get a bachelor's degree in two (more) years and then, with my major in speech pathology, a master's."

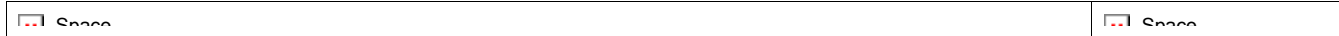
Miles has supplemented her Bridge to Hope job answering phones in a Kapi'olani Community College office with two other campus part-time jobs.

"I need all three to make ends meet," she said. "But they work around my schedule. If I have to study for a final, they're so flexible."

With a new academic year beginning, more than 55 additional students will benefit from the program this year, if Congress allows the program to continue, Bill says.

Reach Beverly Creamer at bcreamer@honoluluadvertiser.com or 525-8013.

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