

More than ever, state should cast wide net in search of foster parents

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The Weld administration has expressed shock that significant numbers of welfare recipients are serving as foster parents; it was similarly surprised last year when it learned that the Department of Social Services had licensed as foster parents large numbers of people with serious criminal records, including records of domestic violence and child abuse. One has to hope that the governor is more aware of how his state's foster care system works. Although DSS Commissioner Linda Carlisle is correct that poverty shouldn't be seen as proof of parental unfitness, there are risks to children inherent in the current system, and those with the power to change that system should know it.

The DSS operates on premises that are common to child-welfare systems throughout the country: if children must be taken from

their parents they should be placed either with kin or within their local and racial communities. Only as a last resort should they be placed with other-race "strangers." So it should be no surprise that the system recruits welfare recipients, among others, since the kin and the same-race neighbors of the children who come into foster care are overwhelmingly from the poorer segments of our society.

DSS officials say they wish they had more middle-class foster parents to choose from, and weren't forced to rely so extensively on welfare mothers. Commissioner Carlisle says the DSS has been forced by the shortage of good foster homes to move children into institutional homes. But the truth is that the DSS casts its recruitment net very narrowly, excluding from consideration the majority of middle-class families because they live in the wrong neighborhood or are the wrong color.

Kin and neighbors who live near the foster child's family will make the best, foster

parents in certain cases, regardless of whether they are poor or on welfare. The problem is that the foster-care system in Massachusetts places too absolute a priority on placing with kin or locally, denying social workers any opportunity to make a comparative judgment as to what placement will be best for the child in the particular circumstances at issue.

The dangers for children of recruiting such a narrow group for the foster parent pool are exacerbated by the economics of foster care and Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Foster payments look low to those on a middle-class income thinking about the expense of raising children, but for those on the poverty level they are high enough to be tempting to people who may have no interest in parenting.

In Massachusetts each foster child means a monthly stipend of a little more than \$400, so that fostering four children means a monthly income of over \$1,600 and yearly income of about \$19,600. (Somewhat

higher stipends are available for children 13 and older and for special-needs children.) Welfare payments for a mother with four children amount to less than half these amounts. While many parents are as devoted to their children and committed to parenting as anyone could hope, those who work in the field testify that others see foster parenting as a combination of welfare and employment.

The pressures will probably increase. Welfare "reform" will radically limit AFDC payments without providing any guarantee of job opportunities, leaving foster and adoption subsidies as the only entitlements on the table. At the same time, many in the child-welfare field push for making kin and local foster placement an even higher priority. A recent federal law bans the use of race to delay or deny foster or adoptive placement, but many in child welfare talk as if the law's primary purpose was to mandate same-race recruitment.

"It takes a village to raise a child," goes the saying. But this should mean that the

larger community - the global village - should take responsibility for the care of its children. Children should not be seen as the responsibility solely of their blood-linked relatives and their race-linked neighbors.

It's true that many children will be best off when placed with loving kin or placed locally so their lives will be minimally disrupted pending reunification with their families. But many children should never be returned to their families and should instead be placed immediately with the best available pre-adoptive families. The Department of Social Services should cast its recruitment net widely and require that social workers make choices based on genuine assessments of children's best interest, free from today's mandatory preferences.

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