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Welfare reform's unfulfilled promise

Delays in day-care OK can cost a job

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The bargain that Welfare Reform made with poor single moms was this: Go to work, and the government will help pay for your children's day care.

But one Cleveland woman says Cuyahoga County took so long to OK her child care that she lost her job.

"I'm not trying to stay on welfare all my life," said Tomeka Rose. The 29-year-old mother of two said she was forced to leave her job as a customer-service representative for a Beachwood call center after she went a month without formal day care.

"I've got two kids I'm trying to be a role model to. I just want it to be known that there should be more help for people who want to work."

Rose said she tried to get help for five weeks, making her first call to her caseworker as soon as she got a job offer and one week before she actually began work. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has negotiated a handful of similar cases in the past six months, said Stephanie Jackson, managing attorney for the health, education, work and income unit.

Delayed approval is a typical complaint, Jackson said. And those delays can be devastating, robbing a family of its stability. "There are all kinds of ramifications when you can't get day care when you need it," she said.

"A lot of times people end up losing their jobs."

The issue is a problem nationally, too, said Henry Freedman, executive director of the Welfare Law Center in New York.

"Often because of chaotic offices or not enough funding, people aren't able to gain access to the subsidy" for child care, Freedman said.

While Rose waited for the county to approve her day-care application, she lined up friends and relatives to watch her children for what she thought would be a few days. In the meantime, she made dozens of unreturned calls to her caseworker. Even after she dropped off her application in person and was told her caseworker would call, days went by without any communication, she said.

In the end, Rose had to take off three days in her first month of work because her patched-together day care fell through. That, she said, led to her dismissal on Sept. 26.

"I feel like the system was not there when I needed it most," Rose said, "when I was trying to do something to help myself."

Joseph Gauntner, director of Cuyahoga County's Department of Employment & Family Services, the

agency that decides who gets child care, said his department works well for most of its 240,000 clients.

But he acknowledged that some have complaints.

"The one that's most frequent and that's increasing" is being able to reach a caseworker, he said. In their defense, he said caseworkers try to return calls but sometimes their voice mail fills twice each day.

Gaunter also pointed out that state regulations give his department 30 days from when it receives a complete application to determine if someone is eligible for child care.

Rose said that after a week and a half of calling for help, and with assistance from another agency, she obtained a child care application and dropped it off at county offices, as she was told to do. Then she went 2½ more weeks without a response.

Besides that, she said, the 30 days the county gets to OK paperwork is too long. Many employers want workers to start a week or two after they are offered a job. And parents can't apply for day care until they have a job offer.

Gaunter said he does not know what the average wait is or if many cases take longer than the 30 days the state allows.

"But I don't think it happens routinely," he said.

And, he pointed out, his department has endured significant staff cuts.

Because of state funding cuts, the county slashed the number of employees who help provide welfare benefits from 1,250 to about 900 during that same time.

"There's certainly no question that we're feeling challenged," Gaunter said. Those numbers are no reason for poor treatment of clients, he added.

"We see the need to improve customer service. That's why we asked the commissioners for additional resources -- an additional 80 staff -- and that's why they approved them."

Those employees should begin work in December or January, Gaunter said. Sixty of them will help clients obtain benefits.

In addition, Gaunter said the county has improved services over the past few years by certifying 1,500 additional day-care centers and providing faster help to those who walk into the Virgil Brown Center, instead of requesting day care over the phone or by mail.

Rose isn't the only one who complained about the tangled day-care system.

Some child-care workers say that the system is difficult to navigate and that parents struggle to get the necessary paperwork filed.

And another young mother said it took her six weeks to get her day care approved by the county.

While she waited, family friends watched her children and her father used up a week's vacation to stay with them. Neither she nor her father wanted to be quoted, saying they were afraid it would make getting help even more difficult.

She wasn't fired, but she worried that she would be for taking 2½ days off in her first four weeks of work to get care for her children sorted out.

"My thing is, who's accountable?" her father asked. "Who's going to step up to the plate?"

Rose said she has heard similar stories from friends. And she's concerned that the delays are reinforcing

the stereotype of women on welfare.

"I want to do more for my kids," she said. "I want to be able to help myself.

"And I want it to be known that there's people out there that really want to work, but the government isn't helping."

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