

OPINION | COMMENTARY

'Free' Money Can Make Life Worse

Social workers, not check writers, address problems like substance abuse and domestic violence.

By Robert Doar

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ILLUSTRATION: DAVID GOTHARD

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The left continues its push to do away with accountability in safety-net programs. Democrats in Congress recently made an enormous change to public social programs while no one was paying attention and without bipartisan support.

Next month the Internal Revenue Service will start sending checks to qualifying families —\$300 a month for every child under 6 and \$250 for each older child. These monthly payments will flow regardless of whether the recipient is working, looking for work, or in training or education programs. In addition, recipients will no longer have to enter a welfare office, ask for help, and have government workers encourage them to find a job. Democrats in Washington claim these checks will reduce child poverty, as if the absence of money were the only problem for these families.



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My decades of work in New York’s social services agencies make me skeptical. People weather all kinds of challenges and hardships, and nothing is as simple as it seems. Sending money is sometimes helpful, but it rarely addresses the underlying issues.

Current federal welfare policy, shaped by bipartisan welfare reform during the Clinton administration, establishes specific requirements as a condition of benefits—precisely because these expectations help people find work and improve their lives. Many homes plagued by addiction, domestic violence and unemployment need the attention of a social worker. Meddling with that connection, imperfect as it may be, has consequences.

This new, no-strings-attached cash from Washington, for example, will leave unaddressed the serious problems of substance abuse. By sending checks directly, the Biden administration will sever the contact between parents and social workers, which helps uncover signs of addiction.

Not every unmarried, nonworking mother who dropped out of high school has a substance-abuse problem. But many do. New York’s cash aid program offered help to struggling parents when they sought public assistance. A substance-abuse screen—a mandated set of questions—could lead to treatment and counseling. The questionnaire didn’t catch every case, but it helped many.

Sending automatic checks will eliminate other opportunities to help, too. Under current law, when single parents apply for aid they must help locate and engage nonresident parents for child support. This effort not only leads to significant financial support, it sends a strong signal about parental responsibility, especially for fathers.

Not surprisingly, these steps ultimately have positive effects on children. By ensuring that absent parents meet their financial obligations, they cause billions of dollars to flow to single-parent households annually. More important, parents who pay child support become more involved in their children's lives. That in turn improves the test scores, self-esteem and behavioral development of children in one-parent households. This can't happen with an IRS computer cutting checks.

The close contact between social workers and beneficiaries can save lives. My social-services colleagues in New York understood that domestic violence was an issue in some households seeking aid. We were pleased to enforce the federal mandate that required us to ask if those seeking aid were contending with abusive partners. In a small but especially vulnerable group of families, we uncovered very serious problems. This won't be possible in a system with automatic benefits.

Then there are the many health-related implications. The involvement of a social worker, which brings another pair of eyes into the household, can lead to care and important diagnoses, particularly mental-health difficulties.

The fundamental problem with the new program is that it will reduce the community connection of millions of families that are at heightened risk of distress. Many of these families need help that money can't buy. The mission of welfare programs isn't merely to raise incomes; it's to help struggling families thrive.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan didn't like the welfare reforms of the 1990s. He worried that the system, which emphasized personal responsibility and encouraged work, would lead to "children sleeping on grates." He was wrong. In fact, outcomes improved across nearly every measure of child well-being. Child hunger has dropped, education has improved, and health outcomes have gotten progressively better. Properly measured, child poverty fell almost 8 percentage points in the subsequent decade.

These days, you know who sleeps on grates? Adults who receive monthly checks from the federal government but don't have to deal with caseworkers. Almost 80% of the homeless, the people setting up tents in cities all across America, receive government benefits, often in the form of monthly cash aid that comes without any regular connection to caseworkers.

The new child payment program is in place for one year, though Democrats want to make the checks permanent. My liberal friends who cheer the checks from Washington are concerned about substance abuse, absent parents, domestic violence and mental health. But their new benefit circumvents some of the most effective ways to address these serious challenges.

Mr. Doar is president of the American Enterprise Institute. He served as New York City's commissioner of social services, 2007-13.

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