

Defying Bush, senate increases child care funds for the poor [US]

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EXCERPTS

Over strenuous objections from the White House, the Senate voted on Tuesday for a significant increase in money to provide child care to welfare recipients and other low-income families.

The vote, 78 to 20, expressed broad bipartisan support for a proposal to add \$6 billion to child care programs over the next five years, on top of a \$1 billion increase that was already included in a sweeping welfare bill. The federal government now earmarks \$4.8 billion a year for such child care assistance.

The Bush administration objected to the increase in child care money, saying it was not needed.

But President Bush and Republican leaders in Congress favor the overall bill, which would renew the 1996 welfare law and impose stricter work requirements on welfare recipients.

The bill still faces political and procedural hurdles in the Senate, where Democrats want to add amendments on the minimum wage, overtime pay, unemployment benefits and other topics.

Members of both parties said they voted for the increase because Congress could not require welfare recipients to work longer hours without more child care.

"If the aim of welfare reform is to move people off the welfare rolls and onto payrolls, if we want families to leave welfare and to stay off welfare, we have to provide them with affordable child care,"

Ms. Snowe said. "Only one in 7, or 15 percent, of eligible children are now receiving assistance with the cost of day care."

Mr. Dodd said, "You can't get from welfare to work without child care."

Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah, said the extra money for child care "goes hand in hand with an increase in the work requirements."

The House passed its version of the welfare bill in February 2003, with a \$1 billion increase in automatic, or mandatory, spending for child care over five years. House Republicans are keen to update the 1996 welfare law, which they and some Democrats see as one of their most significant achievements. Some lawmakers have suggested that the two chambers might split the difference on child care.

Senate Republican leaders said they hoped to finish work on the welfare legislation this week, so they could begin trying to work out differences with the House. Senator Dodd said that day care for a child could cost \$4,000 to \$10,000 a year and that more than 600,000 eligible children were on waiting lists for such care. States can use the federal money to subsidize child care for welfare recipients and for people who have left welfare for low-wage jobs.

The White House told Congress that it strongly opposed the increase. Substantial amounts of welfare money will be freed up for child care because the welfare rolls have fallen by more than half in the last eight years, while the federal grant for the basic welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, will continue "at its current high level" of \$16.5 billion a year, the White House said. Administration officials say some of the money can be used for child care.

Senator Snowe said she hoped the vote on child care would galvanize action and set a bipartisan tone for work on the welfare bill, which provides up to \$200 million a year for "healthy marriage" programs. To get the full amount of federal money, states would have to spend \$100 million a year of their own money for the same purpose.

- reprinted from the New York Times

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