



**Legal Momentum Statement**

**For**

**New York State Assembly Committee on Social Services  
November 20, 2008 Public Hearing on  
New York State's TANF Funded Welfare to Work Program**

**By**

**Irasema Garza, President of Legal Momentum**

Good afternoon, my name is Irasema Garza and I am the new President of Legal Momentum. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. With offices in New York City and Washington, D.C., Legal Momentum is the oldest legal advocacy organization in the United States dedicated to advancing the rights of women and girls. Since its founding in 1970, Legal Momentum has been a leader in establishing legal, legislative and educational strategies to secure equality and justice for women across the country. Welfare is a critical women's issues because most adult welfare recipients are women.

We applaud the Committee for holding today's hearing. We hope this hearing will lead to real reform of New York's welfare to work program.

For far too long New York has followed a punitive "work first" philosophy. Work first channels recipients into low-paying, dead end jobs and prevents women from participating in education and training that will allow them a real chance to escape not just public assistance but poverty as well.

New York currently relies almost exclusively on unpaid work-for-relief in "community service" and "work experience" to satisfy federal TANF work participation rates even though these activities rarely improve job skills, earnings capacity, or basic employability. Indeed, New York carries this penny wise, pound foolish approach to such an extreme that far fewer of its TANF recipients participate in education and training than permitted by federal TANF rules. As stated in the Committee's hearing notice, in September 2007 only 14% of recipients were engaged in education or training activities such as vocational education even though federal rules allow 30% of recipients to be in vocational education.

New York should be "education and training first" not "work first." Women who complete real educational programs are much more likely to leave welfare for good than are

women who do not receive such opportunities. And there is an overwhelming amount of data supporting the lasting impact of education on fighting poverty. For example, in New York State in 2007, average earnings for women who worked full-time were \$20,916 for high school dropouts, \$31,787 for high school graduates, \$47,003 for those with an Associate Degree, and \$52,511 for those with a BA degree. Clearly education pays.

New York's welfare to work and its workforce development systems should work in tandem to allow, indeed encourage, recipients to improve their skills. New York should offer a broad menu of education and training opportunities attuned to the diverse needs of its very diverse population. It is important, for example, to expand the availability of English language instruction for those who need it. One quarter of New York's work force is foreign born, and those who are still struggling to learn the language face a substantial handicap in the job market. The Fiscal Policy Institute's 2007 study *A Profile of Immigrants in the New York State Economy* reports that average earnings for immigrants who do speak English very well are much higher than for immigrants who do not speak English very well.

It is also imperative that New York expand women's access to "non-traditional jobs." One of the reasons that women in New York earn only 78% of what men earn is that women are largely excluded from non-traditional jobs that offer high wages, good benefits, and career growth. The top twenty women-dominated fields for women's employment pay 20-30% less than non-traditional jobs. Compared to most service-sector jobs, non-traditional jobs – in construction, building and other skilled trades, law enforcement, firefighting and information technologies – provide much higher salaries and much better benefits. In New York State hairdressers earn \$30,930 including tips while carpenters earn \$66,660

The *Working First, Working Poor* study that Legal Momentum commissioned found a pattern of gender segregation in client referrals to job training programs. Many working mothers were shunted into unstable low-paying jobs that did not sustain their families and held little opportunity for advancement. Both the women and caseworkers were unaware of what non-traditional occupations were available in their area and the advantages that non-traditional jobs might offer them.

We need systemic education of welfare case managers and vocational counselors about the advantages of nontraditional job training, and improvement in counseling and assessment procedures to better tap low-income women's interest in nontraditional employment or other high-wage opportunities. We urge the Legislature to repass the legislation that Governor Spitzer vetoed in 2007 mandating that welfare job counselors tell women about non-traditional job training opportunities.

Here are some additional steps that should be taken to expand women's access to non-traditional jobs: treat participation in training programs for non-traditional jobs as satisfying welfare work requirements; expand funding for such training programs; broaden access to vocational and technical education for high school girls; instruct public assistance and workforce development staff on the advantages of non-traditional employment for women and on the importance of informing their women clients about those advantages; use women's placement rate in non-traditional jobs as a performance measure when evaluating workforce development and public assistance work programs.

In conclusion, let me repeat my appreciation for today's hearing. Legal Momentum would be glad to answer questions or to provide additional information about any of the matters that I have discussed today.