



Office of the Legislative Auditor

State of Minnesota • James Nobles, Legislative Auditor

Date: February 9, 2000

TO: Members, Senate Health and Family Security Committee
Members, House Health and Human Services Policy Committee

FROM: Jim Nobles
Legislative Auditor

SUBJECT: Additional information on MFIP sanctions

Our January 2000 report titled *Welfare Reform* presented a sort of “status report” on many aspects of Minnesota’s welfare system. The report relied on a variety of information, including individual-level data on welfare recipients, statewide surveys, interviews, literature reviews, and file reviews.

One of many issues discussed in the report was client sanctions. Presently, a Minnesota family can have its welfare grant reduced by up to 30 percent for noncompliance with program rules. We recommended that: “The Legislature should consider increasing MFIP’s maximum allowable sanctions for persistent noncompliance with program requirements.” We thought consideration should be given to larger sanctions in part because some county officials and employment service providers told us that current sanctions might not be effective in increasing Minnesota’s overall levels of client participation in work-related activities. While we did not offer a recommendation about the appropriate level of MFIP sanctions, the Minnesota Department of Human Services recently recommended a full (100 percent) sanction for certain noncompliant MFIP families.

Our report indicated that many of the county and provider officials we surveyed expressed a preference for larger maximum sanctions (p. 113). To supplement the information in the report, we have attached a list showing the opinions expressed by individual counties and providers about sanctions for one- and two-parent MFIP families. The officials we surveyed administer Minnesota’s programs for welfare recipients, so we expected that they would have useful insights about their clients and welfare policies. As with any such survey, however, we cannot be certain whether the opinions expressed by respondents accurately reflect the prevailing opinions among other human service staff (or elected officials) within those counties.

Since our report was issued, some people have suggested that we should have weighted the survey responses by the size of the caseloads in each county. Of course, the effect of such weighting would be to give much greater significance to the opinions of the human service directors in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, who said they opposed an increase in sanctions.

In drafting our report, we concluded that this kind of “weighting” of the survey responses would be inappropriate because it would give undue importance to the opinions of individuals from the state’s largest counties. We think the opinions of officials in the other counties are also valid and should not be discounted just because their caseloads are smaller. In addition, on a technical level, weighting the survey responses in this instance would produce an unacceptably high “error rate” because only a few individuals would be representing a majority of the welfare caseload. Therefore, we continue to believe that the way our report presents data on local perceptions regarding sanctions is appropriate.

We hope you find this additional information helpful. If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me or project manager Joel Alter.