

Capitol Report

2-Page Welfare Eligibility Form Blasted

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The Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations said Tuesday a new state eligibility form for welfare and food stamps is so complicated that many families will lose their benefits for improperly filling it out.

But a spokeswoman for the state Department of Social Welfare said the form would prove a benefit to welfare and food stamp recipients at the same time it brings the state "substantial cost savings."

The two-page form, which asks more than 100 questions, is being readied for mailing to about 765,000 welfare and food stamp families with their January welfare checks to comply with a federal law.

Welfare and food stamps are state and federal benefits largely administered by counties.

Spokeswoman Carla Goodman said recipients can use the forms to update their eligibility and assure they get the benefits to which they are entitled.

Furthermore, they can telephone for help in filling them out, then mail them back, saving trips to the welfare eligibility offices, she said.

Recipients will have to complete the first of the new forms by Feb. 5. They must be returned to the counties by Feb. 11 or welfare, Medi-Cal benefits or food stamps may be delayed, reduced or discontinued, the forms warn.

The forms ask recipients to report their total housing costs, expenses for gas, electricity, trash collection, water and telephones, utility installations and whether they got any help from anyone during January — all questions designed to detect any changes in eligibility status.

Answers could affect benefits for March, one assistant welfare director explained.

The trouble is, said Kevin Aslanian of the coalition, 80 percent of the welfare and food stamp recipients have no changes to report.

He blamed the Deukmejian administration, which boasts about reducing government paperwork, for forcing the counties to handle 4.5 million of the reports a year at an annual cost of \$22.5 million, mostly for forms that contain nothing new.

However, because of the complexity of the new forms, Aslanian predicted that welfare applicants would have to make more trips to county offices to correct their mis-

takes.

County welfare officials said recipients in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program have been filling out a simpler form since 1974. They said recent tests in Alameda and Yolo counties showed AFDC recipients would have little trouble with the new forms, which now include the food stamp questions.

Food stamp recipients who do not receive other forms of aid, however, would have trouble, officials said.

The pilot tests were handled by the state and results have not been released.

County officials said, and Goodman confirmed, some revisions are needed. But the revisions cannot be made in time for the federal January deadline, Goodman said.

Welfare directors and assistants in Sacramento, Stanislaus, Yolo and Alameda counties said their eligibility staffs expect the forms to increase their workloads, at least until recipients learn to fill them out.

Gene Medlin in Stanislaus County said his staff fears the change will be a "lollapalooza" to handle, but the state won't pay for more employees to do the additional work.

Medlin said somehow his staff would handle the workload because "they've got us boxed in." Failure to monitor the forms would lead to a higher county "error rate" and reduced state aid, he said.

"Just looking at it reminds me of my income taxes," said Richard Winsor, assistant director in Sacramento County. "The counties have been very concerned."