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## Confronting sobering truths about welfare in the High Desert

By Joseph W. Brady

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The number of people receiving public assistance is often cited by commenters as one of the greatest challenges facing the High Desert. According to the latest data from the San Bernardino County Department of Human Services, the numbers are, indeed, quite staggering. Among the nearly 400,000 residents of the five incorporated cities on the High Desert and their surrounding unincorporated areas roughly 56 percent receive some form of public assistance, which includes Medi-Cal (health services), CalWorks (commonly referred to as welfare) and Cal Fresh (formerly known as food stamps).

Critics of public assistance and the people who receive it need a better understanding of the economic benefits these dollars provide our communities, as well as the built-in disincentives to work that these programs create. Only by embracing the complexity of this issue can we hope to work toward reducing the proportion of our population receiving aid while acknowledging the role that public assistance plays in sustaining the High Desert economy.

Collectively, CalWorks and Cal Fresh put roughly \$940 million annually into the hands of High Desert residents. The vast majority of these funds are spent locally, creating multiplier effects throughout our economy. Even accounting for the fact that food sales are not subject to sales tax and that some of these dollars flow into the untaxed underground economy it is reasonable to assume that approximately \$2 million per year flow into our city treasuries as a result of taxable spending by High Desert public assistance recipients. If one goes on to consider Medi-Cal benefits (estimated by the state at \$818 per month per recipient) the numbers obviously go much higher. Undoubtedly, the jobs, salaries and expenditures of those who work in the retail, food service and healthcare sectors of the High Desert economy depend, in large part, on the dollars generated by public assistance recipients. Were these dollars to be suddenly cut off or significantly reduced the local economy would collapse.

Having said all of that is it not preferable for those on public assistance to enter the paid workforce? A single parent with three children would need to make at least \$1,450 per month plus medical benefits to beat what they now receive from public assistance. A 30-hour per week job earning \$10.50 per hour would pay just \$1,260 monthly. Considering these facts some might argue that remaining on public assistance is a rational economic choice for many recipients. Reversing this built-in disincentive to work would require either that benefits be reduced (which would hurt both the recipients and the local economy) or that the job skills of recipients be upgraded so that they might command salaries and benefits in excess of the minimum wage. I would argue that the latter approach offers our best chance at confronting the public assistance dilemma.

As a trustee at Victor Valley Community College I, along with my counterparts at Barstow Community College, represent the best opportunity for upward mobility for High Desert public assistance recipients. We offer occupational training in numerous professions that offer good paying job opportunities. Just as importantly, for students that meet income requirements (as all public aid recipients do), community college tuition is free of charge. A list of and programs available at Victor Valley College can be viewed at

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In addition to upgrading the job skills of our local workforce, reducing the dependent population requires an infusion of additional good paying jobs. Attracting new employers to the area necessitates that we address the issue of violent crime, as I have persistently argued in recent months. The future vitality of the High Desert will depend, in large part, on our effectiveness in improving the marketability of our communities and our workforce.

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