

## TANF crisis , State's children will suffer most from program cuts

By **Rick Wilson** Gazette contributing columnist

Regular readers of my columns (a group which I'm told consists primarily of my aged mother and her cat) will know that I have a certain fondness for apt quotations.

But the recent draconian cuts to programs for the poorest children and families proposed by Gov. Bob Wise and the state Department of Health and Human Resources have put me in a quandary. I can't decide which of two quotes fits the situation best. One is by English mystical and Romantic poet William Blake, who thrived 200 years ago. The other is by the rock band AC/DC.

The Blake quote is from the poem "Holy Thursday" in "Songs of Experience." It goes like this:

"Is this a holy thing to see / In a rich and fruitful land / Babes reduced to misery / Fed with cold and usurous hand?"

The AC/DC quote is a little briefer and to the point: "Dirty deeds done dirt cheap" (I'll bet the headbangers out there saw that one coming).

Among other things, Gov. Wise and the leadership of the department want to cut cash assistance to poor families by 25 percent beginning in August, with a straight cut rather than a phased-in reduction. For the typical family - two children and a single parent - this means a cut from \$ 453 to \$ 340 per month and drop from 35 to 26 percent of the federal poverty level. I guess the poor have been living too high on the hog.

The problem was caused by the deliberate choice of the Wise administration to use TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) money to pay for other programs and its failure to act on the recommendations of the TANF Advisory Council in 2001.

While direct aid to poor families will be slashed, the department's administrative budget will be increased to a level higher than the national average.

Most of the adults in these families are not sitting around watching Jerry Springer 24/7; they are participating in work activities in exchange for benefits. But by far the largest group that will suffer from these cuts consists of children: 28,155 kids, to be exact, according to DHHR figures from April.

Making life even more miserable for almost 30,000 poor kids - now that's something I'd not like to be remembered for.

Ironically, a new survey of likely West Virginia voters seems to indicate that kicking kids around is not nearly as politically popular as some people in power evidently believe.

A scientific poll of Republicans, Democrats and Independents commissioned by the Every Child Matters Education Fund found that 94 percent of voters think children's issues are important and 66 percent think they are very important. Voters of all parties don't think the state or federal government is doing enough for children.

Voters are more interested in public investments in children than they are in tax cuts or any other issue except jobs and the economy. (By the way, the administration also wants to eliminate or cut programs that help adults in these families find and keep jobs. Go figure.)

The Legislature is not to blame for the situation. During budget briefings in the 2004 general session, legislators were given no advance notice of an impending budget crisis. Instead, they read about them in the paper two months after the session ended.

There are two possible scenarios. Either the Wise administration didn't know about a TANF crisis in February and March and only discovered it a few weeks later - or it knew and deliberately didn't say anything. During the recent legislative interim meetings, delegates and senators from both parties questioned the proposed cuts, and some of the most eloquent defenders of public programs for poor children were conservative Republicans.

To its credit, the Legislature did come up with a supplemental appropriation of \$ 5 million, which may at least preserve child-care subsidies for low-income workers. But the Legislature was not given sufficient time or information to deliberate these issues fully.

There is a rational solution to the problem. Rather than cut assistance to children by 25 percent in one leap, phase in the cuts by 5 percent stages. This will give the Legislature time to do its job and look for an equitable solution. That's the least the children of our state deserve.

And while I can't think of an appropriate AC/DC quote with which to close, one from Blake gives pretty good advice: "Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door."

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