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HEADLINE: Senate OKs bill to reform welfare rules; Recipients would get 2 years to find job or enter training; Cash aid a 'last resort'; Experiment planned in city, Arundel, P.G. would be canceled

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BODY:

Marylanders on welfare would be placed in community service positions unless they got jobs or were in training within two years, under a bill passed yesterday by the state Senate.

The measure also would make cash assistance to new applicants a "last resort," requiring them instead to begin an immediate search for work.

Without debate, senators unanimously approved a bill that its authors said would mark a "historic" shift in the nature of Maryland's welfare system.

"The vote is a recognition that, whatever your political standpoint, the current system doesn't move people from welfare to self-sufficiency," said Sen. Martin G. Madden, a Howard County Republican who worked with Glendening administration officials to fashion the bill.

The measure now goes to the House of Delegates, where its prospects are uncertain. Many delegates are as eager as their Senate colleagues to pursue the politically popular subject of welfare reform, but a key House leader is questioning the need to go farther until the federal government acts.

"We ought to make adjustments to reflect fiscal reality," said Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings, a Baltimore Democrat, "but I'm not aware of major statewide things the Assembly needs to do."

Those pressing for reform this year say the Republican-led Congress and President Clinton are likely to agree on a proposal to remake what the president calls "welfare as we know it." Federal changes are expected to eliminate the "entitlement" to federal welfare benefits, replacing those payments with block grants to the states.

Gov. Parris N. Glendening and others say Maryland ought to act before Washington does to prepare for reduced federal funding, but Mr. Rawlings says the state would be wiser to wait and see what will be required.

The bill approved by the Senate yesterday would retain an entitlement to cash payments in Maryland, although advocates for the poor say the size of the grants could be reduced if money ran short. Maryland now provides \$ 373 per month for a family of three, about 61 percent of what state officials call "minimally" acceptable.

The legislation also would cancel a heavily touted welfare reform project, approved by the legislature last year, that was scheduled to begin this summer in Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties and in Baltimore.

Even if successful, state officials say, the experiment could not be attempted statewide because there is not enough money to fund its child care and training guarantees.

Other major provisions of the Senate's bill would:

Require a welfare applicant to file for child support and welfare at the same time.

Offer cash assistance to a recipient only as a last resort. In the interim, families would get "welfare avoidance grants" to tide them over. In all cases, the idea would be to avoid situations in which long-term cash aid would be granted without review of the recipient's circumstances.

Allow a recipient to keep an automobile of any value, repealing the current \$ 1,500 maximum on the theory that a car is often critical to getting a job.

Permit aid to families with more than one parent in the home, lifting the general prohibition against assistance to families where a father or stepfather is present.

Offer considerable flexibility to local welfare directors so that they could tailor their efforts to individual circumstances, something not always possible under federal and state law. In Anne Arundel County, for example, a successful job-development program could be continued.

Repeal the state law providing for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the name given to family assistance in federal law. Instead, Maryland's system would be called the Family Investment Plan.

State Human Resources officials have determined that the experiments proposed last year for Baltimore and for Prince George's and Anne Arundel should be abandoned because the state could not afford to guarantee child care, job training and other job-related help for each of the 80,000 welfare families in Maryland.

In the experiment, each jurisdiction was to work with 1,000 families and compare what it did with a control group of 1,000, another expense the state wants to avoid.

Mr. Madden said the state can still afford to provide services to families that need them but that not every case will require the same amount of assistance.

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