

The Sun

August 2, 2007

Spitzer Reaches for High Ground in Welfare Veto

By Jacob Gershman

Chiding lawmakers for ignoring "the realities of the marketplace," Governor Spitzer stunned fellow Democrats yesterday by vetoing a bill that would have reordered the priorities of welfare offices by forcing caseworkers to steer female welfare recipients to higher-wage jobs in male-dominated fields.

With a stroke of his veto pen, Mr. Spitzer swung attention, at least briefly, toward a substantive policy disagreement in a capital consumed recently by personal recrimination and scandal.

The debate pits critics against the champions of a mid-1990s overhaul of welfare laws that many believe led to the sharp drop in welfare rolls in New York and across the nation.

Advocates of the overhaul say much of its success is due to the increased emphasis on getting welfare recipients back to work and on the road to self-sufficiency as soon as possible. Opponents charge that, while employment has increased, the single mothers who make up the bulk of the caseload are too often directed to low-paying clerical or service jobs that leave them mired in poverty. The legislation, they say, is an attempt to help women aim for higher-wage jobs that require more skills and typically employ more men.

Mr. Spitzer, a moderate Democrat who has been mostly silent on the issue of welfare, has taken the side of Mayor Bloomberg and other supporters of the reigning welfare philosophy.

Democrats said they were surprised and displeased that a governor who was endorsed last year by much of the labor community, including by the Working Families Party, would side with what they described as a conservative position.

"I'm very disappointed," a Democratic state senator of Manhattan, Thomas Duane, said. "He may have been influenced by the city of New York."

The legislation would have mandated that state welfare offices encourage recipients to seek training for "sustainable wage jobs" and promote employment in "nontraditional" fields. The bill defines "sustainable" as 185% of the poverty level, or \$37,000 for a

family of four. "Nontraditional" is defined as an industry in which one gender makes up more than 75% of the work force. The bill's official memo highlights as "nontraditional" jobs for women such occupations as furniture movers, taxi drivers, carpenters, chemists, firefighters, and aerospace engineers.

A two-thirds majority in each house is required to override a governor's veto. In June, the bill passed both the Democrat-led Assembly and Republican-led Senate unanimously. Members of the Legislature are not expected to return to Albany from their recess until at least September.

Mr. Spitzer, in his veto message, took issue with the bill on three major points. Saying that only one-third of parents receiving welfare have a high school diploma, Mr. Spitzer wrote that low-wage jobs, combined with education and training, offer many recipients a better "opportunity" for employment. Lawmakers, he wrote, failed We appreciate the importance of "securing employment even at a low wage and building an employment history over time."

"Moreover," he continued, "providing public assistance recipients with training that emphasizes positions that pay 185% above the poverty level ignores the realities of the marketplace, which has many fewer 'sustainable wage' positions available."

The governor also warned that the bill, by emphasizing vocational training, would place New York in jeopardy of running afoul of federal work requirements that limit the number of hours of training someone on welfare may receive and penalizes states with fines of up to \$200 million for failing to meet work participation rates.

In addition, Mr. Spitzer said the legislation "is not necessary" to help people move up the economic ladder, arguing that he's already pursuing the goal by instructing the commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to find new ways to increase the use of "federally-allowable education and vocational skills training."

The governor also pointed to a "technical flaw" in the bill, which defines "sustainable wage" as at least 185% "above," rather than "of," the federal poverty level. Lawmakers say they made a mistake in drafting and meant to say "of."

Advocates of the bill say it's not example of social engineering but a corrective adjustment to polices they say are biased against women.

"People have completely misunderstood this bill," a Democratic state senator of the Upper East Side, Liz Krueger, said. She said the bill would simply change how welfare caseworkers assist recipients by helping them to broaden their employment options. In addition to pointing them toward traditional avenues, such as to a job search firm or to a GED preparation program, Ms. Krueger said, "You would say, 'Can you imagine yourself being a construction worker, or an electrician's assistant, or a utility worker?'"

"Why would the world end if that was one of the options available for directing poor women into jobs that can finally get them the opportunity to move out of poverty?" Ms. Krueger said.

Mr. Duane concurred: "I am someone who believes that women can work in the aerospace industry. I think women can do anything."

Both lawmakers argued that the welfare changes of the mid-1990s have not helped to lift single mothers out of poverty.

During the Pataki administration, welfare rolls fell by about 1 million people. Between 1995 and 2005, the poverty rate for families of single mothers in New York City fell to 49% from 56.3%, according to a report published by the Community Service Society of New York.

The child poverty rate in New York State fell to about 21% in 2005 from about 26% in 1996, the year before Mr. Pataki approved new welfare policies to bring New York into compliance with stricter federal welfare guidelines, which included a five-year time limit for benefits and passed under President Clinton.

During the same period, work rates for never-married single mothers between 18 and 64 increased to 70% from about 52%.