

Source: Marquette University Libraries; Tommy G. Thompson Collection; Series 2:
Gubernatorial Speeches

Thank you, Mayor (Richard) Daley, for those kind words and for hosting the welfare to work partnership in the City of Big Shoulders. Chicago is a wonderful city in a wonderful state. And this community's success reflects the strong, innovative leadership of its mayor.

Chicago and Illinois are tremendous neighbors. In addition to keeping Wisconsin's tourism industry thriving, they're strong partners in strengthening the overall quality of life in the Midwest through a surging economy, vibrant communities and strong, healthy families.

Illinois is doing so well that it almost reminds me of Wisconsin ... *Except, of course, for its pro football team.*

Actually, Wisconsin, Illinois and all of America are partnering to improve the quality of life in this nation by working together to move people from welfare to work.

I was honored when President Clinton recognized Wisconsin's cutting edge leadership in moving people from welfare to work by asking me to serve as a national co-chairman of the welfare-to-work partnership. For I believe such a partnership is not only essential to the success of welfare reform in America, but this partnership will be the underlying foundation upon which our great nation will raise the standard of living for all people.

And just as government alone could not solve the problem of poverty, government alone cannot free families from the shackles of welfare dependency.

Ending welfare must involve a strong partnership between government, our churches and social service agencies, our neighborhoods groups, and most importantly our business community. It was the business community, after all, that helped spark our landmark reforms in Wisconsin, which have had rippling effect on the entire country and indeed the world.

When I was first elected governor in 1986, Wisconsin was a much different state than it is today.

Instead of creating hundreds of thousands of new jobs and breaking record low unemployment rates, Wisconsin was setting record high unemployment rates and driving businesses, jobs and people from the state in droves.

In stark contrast, there was one segment of America's population that made Wisconsin a priority destination - welfare recipients.

Plain and simple, Wisconsin was a welfare magnet. Generous cash benefits led to messages scribbled on the walls at bus stations in Chicago and in cities across America to move to Wisconsin because get more money on welfare.

To their credit and because of their foresight, it was our business community that stepped up to the plate early on and said something must be done to reverse this devastating. And once elected, I made a solemn pledge to our business leaders, "I'll work to reform the system, but you need to step forward, as the backbone of your respective communities, to hire people coming off of welfare."

That was the beginning of a unique, strong and enduring partnership.

We set out, as partners, to free low-income families from welfare dependency. Our decade long work culminated in the nation's most innovative and very first welfare replacement program; Wisconsin Works ... Commonly called w2.

W-2 demands that people take responsibility for their own lives. It demands that people go to work each day ... earn a living ... support themselves and their families ... just like the rest of the world. The only check that participants are entitled to receive is the one they earn through working.

That may sound harsh to some, but w-2 requires work because it is the only way to truly climb out of welfare and poverty.

But W-2 is all encompassing. It not only puts people to work, it helps them stay there by providing important support services such as ample child care, high quality health care, transportation, and training. We provide this support so people can make the transition into self-sufficiency and remain independent.

Now, Wisconsin is telling a much different story.

Since 1987, caseloads have been reduced by more than 91 percent. But more importantly people are working, contributing to their own success and investing in their families and future.

Today, just 8,000 people remain on cash assistance in Wisconsin - down from more than 100,000. And every day we're adding to the list of those who can hold their head high and take pride in providing for themselves while striving to attain the American Dream ... In America's State.

((new numbers))

For the critics and opponents of welfare reform, our state – all people of all income levels – are doing better today than when AFDC was holding people back from reaching their full potential.

Wages for the lowest-income residents in our state are rising faster than any other group. In 1989, we ranked 29th in wages for our poorest residents; today we rank 12th. And we boast the nation's 4th smallest gap between the rich and poor, and the 5th lowest poverty rate in America.

Child poverty in Wisconsin has dropped 13 percent since 1985. Our infant mortality rate hit an all-time low ... teen pregnancies have dropped to the seventh lowest rate in the country and we are enjoying our lowest level of crime since 1973.

So much for the starvation and want predicted by welfare reform opponents.

You see, the design of AFDC was flawed from the outset. For too many years America measured our nation's compassion by the number of welfare checks it handed out and the number of families that were dependent on government.

Increasing the number of families dependant on the state simply increased the number of those trapped in poverty, while school dropout rates, crime rates and illegitimacy rates soared.

The truth is we paid people to be unemployed. We paid people to have additional children.

And we paid mothers not to marry, thereby separating fathers from their families and creating a host of additional societal problems.

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There was no compassion in that system. No encouragement for these individuals to find a job. No encouragement to get training ... And no incentive to move people from welfare to work. The program was ingrained with a callousness of simply handing out a check each month and saying "see you in 30 days."

It was a system that was worse than flawed; it was broken.

And although they may not have intended consequences, the results of this broken system threatened to undermine the integrity and framework of our society and the American adage that work does pay.

For those working and leaving welfare behind, the investments we've made are paying huge dividends.

The average wage for those leaving w-2 is now \$7.42 an hour - more than \$2 above the minimum wage. For a family of three that places them 30 percent above the poverty line, and when compared to AFDC that same family was struggling at 30 percent below the poverty line.

W-2's critics are left without an argument. Clearly, the program is working - as are its participants.

Just ask George Stinson, a good friend of mine who also has been a leader in the welfare to work partnership.

George is president of general converters and assemblers in Racine, Wisconsin. A minority-owned business, GCA was founded with the purpose of providing jobs to unemployed and underemployed workers.

These workers, which other companies were afraid to take a chance on, have built GCA into a highly profitable business that now employs hundreds workers ... with more than half of those workers hired off of public assistance.

The company is doing so well that they expanded their facility by more than 200,000 square feet and hired 100 more workers. Again, most of them off of public assistance.

George said his company's hiring of welfare workers has not only helped his business build a stronger bottom line, but it has helped improve the overall quality of life of the community.

George says, "*one of our goals is to make taxpayers out of tax users. The end result will increase the employment pool and lower crime.*"

But George Stinson is just one example, there are hundreds more. And the lesson we've learned from GCA and others is clear: hiring welfare recipients is not just compassionate, it makes good business sense.

Welfare reform not only provides opportunity to the poor, but it provides opportunity to the business community.

A new pool of ready, willing and enthusiastic workers is being made available through welfare reform. And the successful companies of tomorrow will be the companies that find ways to utilize these workers today.

Wisconsin and the nation are experiencing record economic growth. Our burgeoning economies are creating an enormous new challenge of finding enough workers to sustain and build upon our economic success.

We know from experience that the vast majority of welfare recipients want to work. They want their independence. Our past experience with welfare reform is an excellent testimonial to meeting America's employment needs, helping to stimulate continued economic growth while giving people the tools to enter the workforce to become productive employees and members of society.

One woman, a former welfare mother, perhaps illustrated the power and positive impact w-2 is having on our former welfare recipients and business sector.

During my state of the state address this spring, I asked her come on stage and share with the world her wonderful story.

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Michelle Crawford, a mother of three who never worked before, joined me at the podium and said: *"I thought I would always be on welfare. I was always down on myself, thinking i would never accomplish anything."*

Michelle earned a promotion from a janitorial job at a factory to a job on the production line, which required her to study, train and be tested. And she succeeded.

Pointing to her children in the balcony, Michelle went on to say: *"I was so proud when I got the job. Now I tell my kids that this is what happens when you do your homework."*

Michelle closed her comments by pumping her fist in the air and saying: *"I ask others to take a chance on W-2 workers. We won't let you down!"*

Everyone stood in awe of this woman of little education, once tethered to a government check as she told an inspiring story of providing for her family in ways she never dreamt possible.

There wasn't a dry eye in the legislative chambers.

That, my friends, is powerful. And it is just one example of where and how we can find the people to help build a new, dynamic era of prosperity for this great nation.

The national welfare-to-work partnership has become an invaluable tool in encouraging business involvement in welfare reform and showing businesses how to get involved, drawing upon the best practices of both corporations and states, and sharing successful ideas and spawning new success stories like Michelle Crawford.

Since its inception, the national welfare-to-work partnership has grown from just 5 large companies to more than 12,000 ... And we're still growing. The concentrated efforts of these dedicated members has resulted in more than 410,000 new hires from welfare rolls nationwide.

But we are far, far from done. Thousands of families remain. And thousands of more success stories have yet to be realized.

The bottom line is we need you.

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We need businesses, from the major corporations to the mom-and-pop grocery stores, to give welfare recipients a chance.

With hard work, the right investments and strong determination, we can match those coming off welfare with companies looking for workers. And we can give the remaining families greater hope for a brighter future through the power of a job and a paycheck.

So hire a former welfare recipient. In the stirring words of Michelle Crawford, “they won’t let you down.” And help build the promise of a better tomorrow and the America of the 21st century.

Thank you.