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Too many in poverty after leaving welfare

Goal should be road to self-sufficiency.

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It's been more than 10 years since President Clinton signed welfare reform into law that, among other things, limited monthly cash payments to five years. Since then, welfare rolls have been slashed. The monthly average number of Iowans receiving cash welfare through Iowa's Family Investment Program has been cut almost in half since 1993.

That likely thrills welfare critics, but this story hardly has a happy ending: Too many Americans leaving welfare continue to rely on some form of public assistance. The nation is still short of the goal of making the transition to self-sufficiency complete.

The average hourly wage of Iowans leaving cash welfare in fiscal year 2006 was \$7.58. These include the people working in check-out lanes, stocking shelves, caring for our elderly and frequently still relying on other forms of government help.

According to a recent analysis by the Associated Press, even though the number of families receiving cash welfare has dropped, nearly one in six people rely on some form of public assistance. That's a larger share of people than at any time since the government started measuring public-assistance rates about 20 years ago.

Americans are leaving welfare, but they're still in poverty, and Iowa is no exception. A 2006 U.S. Census Bureau report found the poverty rate in Iowa had risen to 11.1 percent - a jump of three percentage points in five years.

Many of these poor rely on the government for help.

Nearly 100,000 Iowans received food stamps in fiscal year 2006, a 13 percent increase compared to the previous year. Nearly 20,000 Iowa children were served each month by government child-care assistance during that time. Currently, nearly 300,000 Iowans - more than the entire population of the city of Des Moines - use Medicaid, the government health-care program for the poor.

According to the Iowa Policy Project, the number of Iowans covered by public health insurance (Medicare, Medicaid, the state children's health insurance program and the military) has grown by 17 percent over the past five years.

In short, too many Americans are too poor to provide for their needs, and this country needs to help all Americans become self-sufficient.

That should include making health care insurance available and affordable for everyone, investing in education and job training so Americans can earn higher wages, creating jobs that pay a living wage and investing in child care and preschool to get all children on track for a better future.

One in six Americans relying on some form of public assistance in a country as wealthy and prosperous as the United States is disgraceful. This country is supposed to be the land of opportunity. At \$7.58 an hour, opportunities are limited.