

RESPECT

On Friday afternoon, November 1, SMOC hosted a ceremony to mark the first anniversary of Welfare Reform. The ceremony, held in the Metrowest Career Center space, at our Dennison Triangle Complex, honored eight women who have made the transition from Public Assistance to work. Governor Weld, Executive Office of Health and Human Services Secretary Joseph Gallant, Department of Transitional Assistance Commissioner Claire McIntyre and her staff were on hand to present certificates to the participants. The ceremony was well attended, and both local and state media were there covering the Governor due to the event's proximity to the 11/5 election.

SMOC is fully committed, from both a practical and philosophical perspective, to the principles of Welfare Reform. We view our role as being in partnership with the Department of Transitional Assistance to ensure that Reform is implemented in an effective and compassionate manner. Currently, all vacant positions in the agency are posted with the local DTA office. We have an internal goal of moving 10 recipients into full and part-time SMOC jobs within the next 6 months.

There was some objection to SMOC's hosting an event that was termed "political." One look at the women being honored would have rendered that criticism irrelevant and incorrect. Their faces shone with a well deserved sense of accomplishment. The fact that it was their achievements being honored was obvious to all who attended the ceremony.

There was some criticism leveled at SMOC by so-called advocates who believe that Welfare Reform is demeaning and demoralizing to disadvantaged families. Our response to the advocates' criticism is as follows. First, when they move beyond the position that access to quality day care and education and job training programs are required to make Welfare Reform work, they are wrong. Second, Governor Weld and his staff deserve credit for their leadership and innovation in this area. Third, the individual psychological, family and community benefit of job opportunities cannot be overstated. Recently, the Harvard Sociologist, William Julius Wilson, has written eloquently on this subject. Fourth, and most emphatically, the words of the three women who spoke would have dispelled any doubts. Each, in their own words, talked about making the difficult transition and the pride and self-esteem they felt in accomplishing their goals. They are now respectively a computer operator, a nurse and a receptionist. This new identity is clearly key to this growing sense of self-esteem.

In closing, I want to write about the event's most moving and significant moment to me. After the ceremony ended, I was talking with one of the honorees. She introduced me to her son, a handsome and well groomed teenager who had been taking pictures during the ceremony. After speaking with him, I turned and nearly

bumped into a young woman.

"Hi, I'm (the honoree's) daughter." Don't be surprised if I'll be looking for a job at SMOC some day soon."

"Great!" I replied. Hell, I thought, in 20 years I hope you'll be looking to run the place.

That's what it's all about.

James T. Cuddy
November, 1996