

Policy Implications

This paper provides a summary of the policy implications presented in the preceding papers.

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The rural economy is different from the urban economy. Rural employers tend to be small businesses offering limited employment opportunities. Further, small businesses are less likely to offer employees the full array of employee benefits that large employers offer. Formal supports for families are scarce in rural communities also. These factors combined challenge rural workers to juggle work and family issues.

A one-size-fits-all approach to policies to enable rural workers to more successfully combine work and family life is not likely to provide the relief that many rural families need. This summary looks at several types of policies, i.e., child care support, employment support, social support, in addition to federal and state policies that could benefit rural, low-income mothers and their families.

Child care. Low wage workers find that the cost of the child care easily exceeds their take home wages, especially when care is needed for multiple children and/or an infant. Rural low-income mothers would benefit from more access to child care subsidies. Allowing mothers with income up to 200% of poverty to apply for subsidies would substantially reduce the burden of child care for rural families, as well as urban families. Expanding the child care tax credit would also benefit both rural and urban low income families. But child care subsidies alone are not enough. One of the consistent issues for rural working mothers is the lack of child care options. Many rural mothers rely on relative care for their children because other options are not available. This is especially true for those with infants and for those who work non-standard hours. While making subsidies available to pay relative care-takers would help somewhat, developing incentives to offer more child care options in rural areas is also necessary. Especially when the rural economy is based on tourism and hospitality industries, the state and local government should work together to help communities develop child care that meets the need of those working non-standard hours. More before- and after-school programs for rural children would also serve the needs of rural working parents, as would full-day kindergarten. Finally, Head Start and Early Head Start programs should be more universally available in rural areas.

Employment. Employers who are cognizant of the challenges facing their low-wage workers, and attempt to accommodate their workers, have much more loyal workers. It is more cost-effective for an employer to accommodate a worker who needs time off to deal with a family issue, than it is for that employer to fire the worker and train a new worker. High turn-over rates are not good for business – employers want/need reliable, stable employees. Rural mothers indicate that they want jobs that fit with their children's schedules. If the mother has a partner who works full-time, then part-time work may be possible financially. But issues arise even when one parent works part-time. When an employee has no sick/personal/vacation days to draw upon when the need to take care of a child (or other family member) arises, the employee will forego work to deal with the family issue. The employee is then thought to be "unreliable," and an unreliable employee may be terminated. Even in the best organized households, emergencies arise. When parents work in jobs that offer little flexibility, work and family can collide. Two national initiatives are helping employers to be more responsive to employees needs. The U.S. Department of Labor's FlexOptions Project offers employers, who are interested in offering flex-time to their employees, free counseling via telephone to help employers resolve flex-time issues. The "When Work Works" initiative, sponsored by the A.P. Sloan Foundation, Institute for a Competitive Workforce and the Twiga Foundation, gives awards to businesses that meet certain criteria for fostering an environment that allows workers flexibility in meeting both their work and family obligations. These types of programs with state, federal, and private assistance could encourage rural employers to work with their employees to create a work environment that would allow the employees to more easily combine work and family life.

Low-income rural mothers who have employer-sponsored health insurance are more likely to maintain their employment. But health insurance is not the only health-related issue: access to health care in rural areas can be difficult. Many rural counties have no hospital and physicians are few and far between, and they do not always

accept Medicaid patients. Developing incentives for rural doctors to take Medicaid patients, and creating mobile health care units for rural areas would alleviate some of these problems.

Education is one pathway that will often lead to better employment, high wages, and less poverty. The efficacy of this strategy in rural areas is reduced because of the rural employment situation – many jobs have little opportunity for advancement. Regardless, job readiness programs and certificate programs through community colleges do offer the potential for advancement to rural workers. TANF recipients should be able to count education as work when the education has the potential to lead to a well-paying job. Another strategy would be to encourage employers, through tax credits and similar incentives, to help their employees get further training in related areas. Enabling rural communities and employers to work together to identify and access resources to help low-wage workers to successfully deal with work and family issues creates a positive work environment. Finally, programs should be developed that keep teen mothers in school. Abstinence education is not enough.

Tax policies. The Earned Income Tax Credit program should be expanded. One proposal is to provide a larger credit for families with three or more children. Another proposal would be to reduce the drop-off rate as income rises.

Other types of assistance. In rural areas, transportation is critical. Expansion of programs that help low-income workers to get subsidies for car repair, or to purchase a car, is needed. Some rural mothers may even need help getting their driver's licenses. Finally, because rural employers tend to pay low wages, having a job, even a full-time job, and even when both parents are employed, may not result in earnings adequate to lift a rural family very far above poverty. We may need to develop programs that will provide some level of assistance to those who are the rural working poor. Localities/governments utilizing tax incentives to attract employers should explore opportunities to integrate employee supports into the agreement. Government and private collaborations can target solutions in childcare, transportation, and education for job advancement opportunity.

Summary

Employees who are able to manage the requirements of their jobs while meeting the needs of their family members are the best workers. The small businesses that are the mainstay of the rural economy need support and incentives to implement family-friendly working conditions for their employees. When community leaders and business people work with local workers, supported by state and federal incentives, creative solutions can be found to ensure that low-wage rural workers can meet both their work and family obligations.

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