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NEWS RELEASE

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Governor Whitman Reports on Success of Work First New Jersey; Cites 55 % Drop in Number of Welfare Dependent Families

-- New Jersey Unemployment Rate Down to 4.3% --

Governor Christie Whitman today announced that the number of families dependent on welfare since she took office in 1994 has dropped from more than 117,000 families to less than half that amount - the most significant caseload reduction in New Jersey history.

The announcement also served as a platform for Gov. Whitman to discuss how the state's new welfare program, Work First New Jersey (WFNJ), is helping the many faces of New Jersey.

"I often refer to the State of New Jersey as many faces, but one family," said Gov. Whitman. "We all want the many faces in our family to enjoy a good, healthy, happy and fulfilling life. We want to see all our citizens reach their tremendous potential."

Since WFNJ began in 1997, the state's welfare caseload has dropped from 96,000 to 52,000, enabling tens of thousands of families to make the transition from welfare to work and begin building a brighter future for themselves and their children, according to Gov. Whitman.

Citing a recent study by Mathematica Policy Research (of Plainsboro), the Governor said it showed that families who left welfare for work were considerably better off financially than they had been before. This first report, part of a five-year evaluation of the initiative, found that the average monthly income of those families doubled.

While Gov. Whitman noted the statistics are impressive, she was quick to emphasize that WFNJ is not about numbers - it's about people: "It's about a single mother who can afford to have better care for her family. It's about the man who is meeting his child support obligations so that his children can have a better quality of life. It's about the feeling that comes with taking pride in what you do and the self-respect that develops from economic independence," she said.

The success of WFNJ also results from the economic powerhouse that is New Jersey - an economy in which the number of jobs created since 1994 rose to 378,600 according to Gov. Whitman. Indeed, preliminary results from the Department of Labor's monthly survey of employers show that the number of persons working in New Jersey grew by 6,300 from this past October to a new all-time high (seasonally adjusted) level of nearly 3.9 million in November. Meanwhile the state's unemployment rate continued on its downward trend to 4.3 percent in November, its 25th consecutive month under 5.0 percent.

"New Jersey has become the economic dynamo of the Northeast, with extraordinary job growth across the board, from entry level positions to lucrative jobs in our high-tech industries," said Labor Commissioner Mel Gelade. "Under Gov. Whitman's leadership and commitment to workforce development, we are working with our business and labor leadership to provide New Jerseyans with specialized training in those skills needed to fill the thousands of jobs that are being created each month."

Yet the positive results of WFNJ stem from more than New Jersey's strong economy explained Human Services Commissioner Michele Guhl. Referring to the Mathematica Policy Research Study, Commissioner Guhl said "When you consider the welfare caseload from what it was in 1997 [96,000] to what it is now [52,000], coupled with the fact that it never dropped this much during other strong economic periods, I think we need to conclude that Work First has played a major role in helping New Jersey families."

And WFNJ benefits local businesses too, added Gov. Whitman, upon introducing Keith DaCosta, the owner and chief executive officer of No Barriers Home Care Services in Newark. As an employer who takes pride in hiring WFNJ clients, Mr. DaCosta attested to the program; with him was an employee who works as a home health aide - Roselyn Smith, a former WFNJ client who has been off welfare for a year.

Other WFNJ employers who attended were Jack Wellman, president of Joule Staffing Services, and Delynn Orton, the company's Cherry Hill branch manager; with them was Dawn Favuzzi, a WFNJ client who now is a job recruiter for Joule Staffing Services. Also in attendance was Diane Gribbin, director of communications and marketing at Riverview Medical Center (part of Meridian Health Systems) in Red Bank, and Andrea Badan who works as an access associate at Riverview after being on welfare for 16 years.

WFNJ, the state's welfare reform program, is administered through county and municipal welfare offices throughout the state under the Department of Human Services. The program stresses work as a means to independence and help ends welfare dependency by limiting welfare assistance to five years while offering individuals the tools they need to find a job. WFNJ provides support services to

recipients, such as child care, health care and transportation to ease the progression from welfare to work.

Gov. Whitman concluded by saying that "Reducing the welfare rolls by more than half in only six years is a tremendous achievement. More important, it creates a situation where everyone wins. While I'm proud of that accomplishment, I promise to continue looking for ways to help those dependent on welfare to begin building a brighter future for themselves and their children. This will make our state an even better place to live, work and raise a family."