

Welfare Recipients Enjoy Bright Spots of Support

By Anna Limontas-Salisbury
WeNews correspondent
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Welfare recipients say a sense of isolation often comes with the predicament of needing public assistance. But there are activist leaders and support groups out there helping to battle that lonely, outcast feeling.

Bronx, N.Y. (WOMENSENEWS)--Wanda Salaman's interest in improving the work training experience for women on welfare started when she was working as an office manager and staff organizer for the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition about 10 years ago.

Welfare recipients who took jobs required by reform rules passed by Congress in 1996 were often stigmatized by the organizations they joined.

"In the 1990s nonprofits started taking 'Work Experience Program' workers to work on their sites, but only gave them cleaning jobs, like those in the parks," said Salaman. "That's not right."

During a number of recent interviews, welfare participants have said that dealing with public assistance often involves a crushing sense of isolation.

"When you're out there so long, you feel like you're the only one," one woman said.

Although not widely known, a number of nonprofit and volunteer groups do exist to help.

One of them is Salaman's Mother's on the Move, founded in 1992 by parents who were alarmed about educational funding disparities within their local school districts. The organization is located in the Hunts Point-Longwood section of the South Bronx, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. The area also has some of the highest rates of asthma.

Since its founding, the group has continued to run community activism campaigns. Currently, Mothers on the Move is creating curricula to explain the concept of "going green"--lowering the energy waste that contributes to global warming--to their community.

"We want people in urban farming and weatherization (industry) to train our people," said Salaman. "We get people from WEP (Work Experience Program) programs to help each other, to give advice...People on welfare are the experts."

Nova Strachan is an organizer of Mothers on the Move's Welfare to Work campaign.

"When young ladies come here, we're about building, we're able to change things," she said. "We're not able to change things working at McDonalds or (cleaning) parks."

Welfare Warriors

Another support group, Welfare Warriors, is run by volunteers in Milwaukee. About 15 mothers and 10 children rely on donations to run local campaigns to educate mothers and transform them into activists about such welfare issues as denials of benefits and unfair reductions in cash assistance.

"Locally we staff a MOMS line that teaches women the 'Three Step Plan of Self-Defense' to get the public benefits for which they are legally entitled," said Pat Gowens, the group's co-founder.

Welfare Warriors' Web site lists the names and phone numbers of directors and supervisors at food stamp offices, child care facilities and work assignments under welfare work programs. It also offers pointers on documenting conversations, following up on phone calls and requesting a fair hearing. The organization also maintains a support group for caregivers who have had children removed from their homes by child welfare services.



Wanda Salaman (left) and Maria Rivera pose in front of a mural at Mothers on the Move's office in the Bronx.

Credit: Anna Limontas-Salisbury

Legislatively, it lobbies for the demise of the two-year time limit on welfare benefits and mandatory labor for unwaged work under TANF, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The 1996 law comes up for Congressional reauthorization this month, offering a chance for lawmakers to enact changes.

"Few activists address the war on the poor, women's access to income or the need to abolish and-or reform TANF. Few acknowledge the horrors of TANF's impact on poor families, the disabled and the workplace. Welfare has become a non-issue," said Gowens.

The group has joined forces with other welfare-rights groups under the banner of Women for Economic Justice, a coalition based in Oakland, Calif., founded by the welfare justice group LIFETIME, to fight an array of welfare rules and regulations.

Gowens says she has been fighting for economic justice alongside mothers and children on public assistance for more than 30 years. She is also one of them. She raised three children alone on welfare and then worked as a paralegal, all while struggling to make ends meet.

In the mid-1980s she co-founded Milwaukee County Welfare Coalition, a group of professional, social and legal services workers. Inspired by activist homemakers in Mexico, they launched a quarterly publication called Mother Warriors Voice to address the issues of poor women and welfare moms all over the globe, from Japan to Latin America to Australia. Since 1986, Mother Warriors Voice, which is still publishing, has been the only media focusing on the issue of poor mothers and welfare. It has 145 distributors nationwide.

Graduating With Honors, Legal Scars

In 1996 Diana Spatz, now 50, graduated with honors from the University of California Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in the political economy of industrial societies.

For Spatz, once homeless and pregnant, the achievement wasn't just scholastic. It was the finish line of a hard-won legal battle for a welfare recipient's right to education.

As an undergraduate on welfare, she fought against the local agency that limited the time she could put into her studies at City College of San Francisco. A lawyer helped her write a legal brief and she handled her own appeal at a hearing with an administrative judge.

"Being pissed off took over being afraid," said Spatz, who won the case.

Afterwards she switched to the University of California Berkeley, which she attended on scholarship. There she began to organize other students on welfare who wanted to pursue their degrees while on public assistance. With the help of professor Jane Mauldon, those organizing sessions were turned into a course at the university.

Spatz then applied for and won a grant that helped turn the class into a nonprofit organization that now helps 400 parents annually through peer counseling.

LIFETIME (Low-income Families Empowerment through Higher Education) is the outcome of all that, an organization of student moms based at the University of California Berkeley who support each other in pursuing educational goals and employment. "From GEDs to Ph.D.s," reads a banner on the group's Web page.

Group's Education and Outreach

LIFETIME participants not only educate themselves on public policy, they also spend, Spatz said, hours reaching out at welfare offices and informing applicants of basic welfare policy.

A current focus is publicizing a work-requirement waiver for some survivors of domestic violence.

Spatz said 25 years ago she was pregnant, homeless and in an abusive relationship. "Any woman who is not economically sound is at risk of future abuse," she said.

Women such as Spatz have a forerunner in Johnnie Tillman Blackston. In 1996 when the rallying cry from some to "end welfare as we know it" was loudest, Blackston had been dead for a year. But she left behind a legacy of 45 years of self-help organizing.

In 1962, after becoming ill and having to apply for public assistance herself, Blackston, was having trouble getting benefits in the Watts section of Los Angeles even though she had developed diabetes, lost her job in a laundry and had six children to support.

The daughter of sharecroppers from Arkansas, she organized her neighbors on welfare to form the group Aid to Needy Children Mothers Anonymous, which would eventually become known as ANC-Mother's Anonymous. She eventually became president of the California Welfare Rights Organization.

In her essay, "Welfare As a Women's Issue," which appeared in Ms. Magazine in 1972, she wrote: "Welfare is like a traffic accident. It can happen to anybody, but especially it happens to women."

Blackston has passed on, but the leaders of groups such as LIFETIME, Welfare Warriors and Mothers on the Move are still there to help pick up the pieces.

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For more information:

Mothers On The Move:

<http://www.mothersonthemove.org/>

Welfare Warriors:

<http://welfarewarriors.org/>

LIFETIME:

<http://www.geds-to-phds.org/>