

# Harper's MAGAZINE

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## A WAY OUT OF THE WELFARE MESS

EDGAR MAY

*Our growing "handout society"—with all its waste and demoralization—can be cleaned up . . . but it will take more than Newburgh's tough talk, or the pious sentimentality of the social worker.*

A FEW miles from where you live there is a part of America nobody wants. It may be a group of ramshackle farm houses or the gray, weather-worn tenements of a city street. Row on row they shelter the culls of society whose togetherness is marked by frayed collars and the musty smell of the poor.

Their subsistence is a government check and their guardian is a civil servant, who, more often than not, has too little education, too many responsibilities, and too few dollars in his own pay envelope. For a number of months I was one of these untrained dispensers of public charity in the city of Buffalo.

During this stint I helped waste some of the millions of dollars and vast quantities of human energy which go into the program called public welfare. Today my counterparts range from the smallest village to our nation's largest

cities. And wherever they hold the purse strings of the slums, they are—with few exceptions—setting new spending records that are dismaying taxpayers and instilling the fear of voting-booth retaliation in politicians.

The recently headlined defiance of state and federal welfare regulations by a tiny city on the shores of the Hudson River—Newburgh, New York—is symptomatic of a growing public rumbling. And the chorus of editorial "hurrahs" for its new stringent relief rules underscores the unrest across the nation. Almost one-third of Newburgh's budget this year must be allocated to its needy population. My own metropolitan relief operation—the Erie County Welfare Department—this year will spend \$34 million—more money than it costs to educate every child in the public schools of Buffalo.

Similar industrial centers mirror the same fiscal dilemma. The Illinois legislature, for instance, passed a \$67-million deficiency appropriation early this year because Chicago's charity well was about to run dry. In Cleveland, last fall, welfare allowances were cut back to 70 per cent of what Ohio concedes is the minimum amount you can live on because there just weren't enough tax dollars. Yet our national effort to be our brother's keeper is as erratic as the Manhattan skyline. In Mississippi the average family receiving aid-to-dependent-children funds lives on \$36.41 a month while a New York State family

gets almost five times as much. In Alabama the caseworker who authorizes checks is the provider of 349 families; in New Jersey the figure is 86.

Behind these statistical disparities and monetary woes is a question asked with increasing frequency by legislative investigating committees in many states: Just what does this flood of money buy? The traditional answers always have been that it keeps families together, prevents children from starving, and blocks a wholesale increase in crime because otherwise people would have to steal to eat. But are these adequate answers when in almost every year since the war, the population of this public-dependent society has expanded through good times and bad?

"What you givin' me is okay," Mrs. A, one of my relief cases said. "But you gives the landlord most twice as much as this heap is worth and then I gives the grocer more than he should get 'cause he allows me credit when that check don't come on time. The money is here okay, but it ain't goin' to be no different next month, is it?"

The man at the wellspring of Mrs. A's relief check, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Abraham A. Ribicoff, recently explained her problem this way: "I've come to feel that we have just been drifting in the field of welfare. Many welfare workers have become mere conduits between state treasuries and those they seek to help—neglecting prevention, rehabilitation, and protective services." I verified this statement personally last year. For three months I worked as a welfare department caseworker on leave from my job as a reporter on the Buffalo *Evening News*. It was a sobering and—in many ways—surprising experience.

#### GENERATIONS OF PAUPERS

**A**FTER a week of training lectures on the job of a caseworker, my supervisor offered me the first of several helpful hints: "The main thing is to get the aid out," he said. "You can always check things later if you have suspicions." But "later"—as it turned out—I had more and more cases and there never was any time. Within two months, in fact, I was the government-assigned head-of-household for 160 families. "I'm sorry that you've got so many cases because you shouldn't really have them," my supervisor said, "but there just isn't anybody else." My colleague at the next desk had 181 and a veteran across the hall was struggling with 208. Meanwhile, social-work experts in the state welfare department estimated that each of us could really handle no more than 75 competently.

The fact that in some Southern states the case loads were twice as large as ours was little comfort as our telephone jingled with nerve-racking constancy.

"Mr. May, my gas has been shut off . . . Susy has no shoes to go to school . . . my check didn't come . . . the landlord wants to throw me out . . . John got picked up by the cops this afternoon. . . ." The distraught voices funneled their crises to me with the daily regularity of a department store complaint desk. But my defective merchandise was human. And as the calls multiplied, individual problems began to blend into a large mosaic of misery. People became case numbers and faces statistics. "The only time I know what's going on in my cases," a co-worker said, "is when something blows up."

The effect of such case loads was written in the records. One report, for instance, showed that at least five recipients had not been visited at home by a caseworker in three years although the mailman was delivering checks every month. For ten others the "home call" lapse was two years. Yet the rule book said they should be visited at least once every three months.

"If you see a visitor once a year, my, that's a lot," one of my clients told me after she had hesitated to open her door to me. "That's why when you first rang I didn't have any idea who you might be." Her record, which I had inherited, showed a home call eight months earlier, but the client could not remember seeing a caseworker for a year and a half. My predecessor apparently had reported a call that never was made. In all these cases the "conduits" described by Secretary Ribicoff dutifully kept on channeling dollars from the treasury to the needy. No one has starved. Few have committed crimes. But fewer still have been helped.

Take the case of Mrs. S, who first showed up in the relief files in 1946 with two out-of-wedlock children. Since then she has been receiving public charity almost every year. In 1955 when her older children were in high school, she had another illegitimate baby and three years later added a fourth. In the early years of her case record—when her worker visited her every month—the family's setbacks and accomplishments were chronicled in detail. Much of the story was de-

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*Edgar May, on the staff of the Buffalo "Evening News" won the Pulitzer Prize last spring for his series of articles on public welfare. He was born in Switzerland and is a graduate of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern.*

voted to her oldest daughter, Jane. It read like this:

November 1951—"Jane is doing very well in school. Her marks are: math 98; geography 96; history 94; English 95, and spelling 100."

March 1954—"Daughter Jane has the highest average in the eighth-grade class."

June 1954—"Jane's teachers are suggesting she take a college preparatory course."

November 1955—"Jane is taking two extra courses in high school. She is an honor student."

Suddenly Jane disappeared from the case record. The chronology was less detailed as caseworker visits became less frequent. Five years after the last entry, I visited Mrs. S and asked about her daughter. Here are my notes:

"Jane was married in March 1956 at the age of sixteen after being pregnant as a sophomore in high school. The nuns were trying to obtain a full college scholarship for her. Her first baby was born the following September. She had wanted to be a teacher."

There is a postscript to this story. Today the welfare files contain a new case number for Jane S., whose steel-worker husband was laid off in the recession. A new "conduit" is sending charity dollars to Jane and her slum-entangled children who still are too young to have their school grades inscribed on the record. This government biography of one family was written by seventeen different caseworkers. I have seen other cases that have had five workers in a single year. When I resigned after three months I was the fifth to quit of the eleven who started with me. By the end of the year more than half were gone.

Other cities have equally dismal records. Chicago's Cook County, for instance, writes "resigned" on about half of its caseworker personnel cards every year. In New Jersey the turnover rate was 48 per cent in 1959, Maryland, 46 per cent. Many counties—like mine—have had to hire provisional appointees to fill the holes with the hope that they would pass the civil-service test some time in the future. One state welfare commissioner wrote his governor after his resignation rate passed the halfway mark: "Workers do not have time to know their cases or to acquire the necessary skills in rendering services to people and preventing them from becoming permanently dependent on public aid."

Who are the people who fill the caseworker jobs in public welfare? Although many call themselves "social workers," most of them are wholly untrained and have neither the academic nor the on-the-job tools required to deal with complex human problems. In New York State,

a college degree (in any subject) is mandatory for a welfare caseworker's job. Among my co-workers were: a recent graduate in secretarial science, a former aircraft employee who had worked seven years as a shipping clerk, and a real-estate salesman whose wintertime business was too slow for him to make a living. Of the eleven in my indoctrination class, only three had taken a basic sociology or psychology course.

In our department—as in most public welfare agencies—a holder of a master's in social work is rarer than a relief client who turns back a check. Out of a social-service staff of 426, only four have graduate-school degrees while six hold one-year certificates. The others wandered in bearing degrees in fields ranging from merchandising to physical education. In fact in my county, academic training in social work is not a prerequisite for any public-welfare job, including commissioner of social welfare, his deputies, the casework consultant, and director. In my part of the state most of the commissioners do not even have the qualifications demanded of their caseworkers—a college degree. And there isn't any strong sentiment for change. A move to write job specifications for the four top posts was rebuffed by the county lawmakers.

"We have to be careful, you know," one politician said. "We don't want to get any of these Cloud Nine thinkers here."

#### KEEPERS OF THE PENNIES

**I**F THESE suspicions were to fade suddenly and a mass demand for trained staff were to arise, the campaign to get them would be like trying to wash your car with a water pistol. There just aren't that many. This June the largest institution of its kind in the country, Columbia's New York School of Social Work, awarded degrees to 155 men and women. If all of them had turned to public welfare careers (and only 15 per cent did) they wouldn't fill the vacancy that exists today in New York City alone.

Most deans of social-work schools still insist that it takes two years of graduate work to produce a social worker. However, there has been a recent murmur of self-criticism. The latest is in a recent summary of a thirteen-volume curriculum study which admitted that "the decision in 1937 to treat social-work education as strictly graduate in nature was quite probably a serious mistake. . . . It provided a picture of a profession upgrading itself in both quality and status without sufficient attention to its societal obligation to provide services to meet needs." As of today,

the shortage of social workers with any training whatever is a major problem across the country.

Why have Americans been so reluctant to enter this "helping" profession and why have even the untrained left it so quickly and in such droves? A research project conducted for a New York State legislative welfare investigation gave as one reason low pay. For instance one county in a state that long has prided itself on being a pacesetter in the welfare field pays its caseworkers \$3,484 a year. My own weekly take-home check was \$59.62, based on a \$4,200 annual salary (which since has been raised). For this salary I was supposed to have a strolling familiarity with politics, law, other governmental agencies, sociology, psychology, religion, police work, the courts, and bookkeeping.

It is this last obligation that has convinced many a caseworker that a major in statistics with minors in memo writing and form filling (in quadruplicate) would be the best preparation for a public-welfare job. It took twenty-four separate pieces of paper to give one of my clients her first welfare check. They were part of the arsenal of sixty-five forms labeled "most frequently used." Citizens' committees invariably agree that a leading contributor to the caseworker mortality rate is the paper-work monster—whether he rears his bureaucratic confetti in Pittsburgh, Detroit, or Buffalo.

My co-workers and I spent more than half of our time in the office in clerical tasks. Five distinct welfare categories (and now a sixth and seventh for those states adopting medical aid to the aged and expanded help to unemployed families) all with their own federal and state edicts have nurtured this proliferation of forms. The mass of regulations leads to exercises like this: Two of my old-age clients called me one day to say they had moved to a new apartment two months earlier. The rent was \$8.80 higher. Although they were man and wife, living in the same place and received identical grants, they were recorded as two separate cases. Changing their address and giving them the extra rent money they had missed required twenty-two pieces of paper, not counting four checks, four envelopes, and four postage stamps.

"How can you do casework around here when your master is a piece of carbon paper and an adding machine?" a worker at the next desk groaned. Budgets, figured separately for every individual in every family, have been honed to a penny science which would startle the most frugal housewife. A score of separate mathematical entries for one person is not uncommon and

these might include \$.50 for castor oil, \$1.45 for use of a gas stove (as opposed to \$2.15 for use of an electric one), and \$1.35 for laundry.

Monthly food allowances vary in pennies according to sex and age. When a new member joined one of my welfare families, I was there before the christening with a government-supplied layette that included 27 different items. Although caseworkers were supposed to list each item and its cost (1 card safety pins, 4 nipple caps, 1 bottle brush, etc.), more often than not, a lump-sum check was sent to the mother. That she might not have used it for what it was intended, was evident on the next home call.

#### BLAME IT ON WELFARE

THE largest single expenditure on all these budget cards is the rent bill. In Buffalo, landlords collect more than seven million welfare dollars annually, often for vermin-infested hovels that aren't worth half the price. For instance, Mr. K, one of my clients whose weekly salary wouldn't support the eight mouths he had to feed, was getting a supplementary welfare check because he was paying \$90 a month rent. Three years earlier, when his flat still was under rent control, his predecessor paid \$34.50. In most Northern cities, Negroes, on relief, pay considerably higher rents than whites. One of my colored clients showed me an \$80 rent receipt; a few miles away a white client, in a similar six-room flat, was paying \$22.50. As in other cities, all too many of these homes are substandard. Thousands of dwellings violate housing laws because the city doesn't have enough building inspectors or, on occasion, they look the other way.

Few of these interrelated problems were created by the welfare department—nor has it the exclusive power to solve them. Yet when tax bills and tempers rise correspondingly, a wave of social ills—ranging from illegitimacy to poverty itself—is blamed on welfare. Whipping-boy solutions are sometimes the results. In 1959 the North Carolina legislature had before it a bill that called for sterilizing mothers of illegitimate children. And last year Louisiana passed a law that denied money to 23,000 youngsters whose mothers had an out-of-wedlock birth anytime after receiving relief.

In the North, embattled Newburgh—miniature of the troubled welfare canvas—adopted a similar ruling. Further, the city told its 180 dependent children and home-relief families that public charity would be limited to three consecutive months a year. Amid the furor over

right relief policies—some of which have been in effect legally in nearby areas—other city problems were left in the shadows. These included a high unemployment rate, a lagging redevelopment program, a lack of major new industry, and slums that were unchecked by even a minimum housing law until two years ago. The Newburgh incident also illustrates another common symptom of municipal frustration—the tendency to picture most welfare recipients as bums and chisellers. In fact, when Newburgh relief recipients were questioned at police headquarters before receiving their May checks, not one case of fraud was discovered nor was a single chiseller brought to court in 1960.

Such widely publicized punitive approaches to the welfare problem have overshadowed the quiet and, unfortunately, isolated positive efforts. Rare though they are, some useful answers have in fact been found. From Marin County, California, to my neighboring Niagara County, experimental programs in human salvage have shown that many families do not have to stay on relief. Intensive casework aimed at rehabilitation has not only pushed them off the welfare rolls and made them productive, but has saved money as well. And the “case-closed” roster included not just able-bodied men, but the handicapped and those receiving dependent-children funds.

Mr. B, in my own city, is an example. Classified as disabled because of a leg amputation, he had been collecting checks for his family of six children since 1953. Last year he was referred to the State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation which trained him as an artificial limb fitter. This June he began an \$85-a-week job. The training bill was \$348.56 against more than \$15,000 the taxpayers spent to maintain him in the last seven years.

In Chicago a comprehensive recent study of aid to dependent children had this to say: “The rehabilitation potential in ADC families was found to be much higher than was expected. In almost half of the families the possibilities of achieving personal and economic independence within a reasonable period of time was excellent. . . .” However, the report emphasized, to achieve independence, these families need adequate day-care facilities for children, vocational training, and dental or medical care.

An experimental unit in Richmond, Virginia, a few years ago tested the validity of this thesis. By devoting extra time, patience, and skill to a group of ADC families, caseworkers managed to close an average of nineteen cases while in the

same period regular department personnel closed only two. An estimated \$300,000 was saved for the taxpayers.

Unfortunately few communities have been willing or have had the manpower to conduct such experiments on a major scale. My own county has taken a few encouraging steps. After the Buffalo *Evening News* published my experiences as a caseworker, Welfare Commissioner Paul F. Burke issued a thirty-four-point reform program. Subsequently, he reorganized the department to decrease case loads, won starting salary increases that rank among the highest in the state, and added forty-two new caseworkers as well as a personnel director and employment counselors.

“We have now,” he said recently, “a public understanding of our difficulties which we’ve never had before. And that allows for at least a beginning.” But “beginnings,” whether in Buffalo, or Richmond, Virginia, are not enough if they are to reverse the rising cost of the dependent population. Mayors and legislators clamoring in Washington for urban renewal must turn also to human renewal. Distributing relief checks to tenants in new housing projects will not save our cities.

#### UNDERDEVELOPED AMERICA

**W**E WILL be permanently saddled with the cost of a growing handout society unless our local, state, and federal welfare officials tackle two basic tasks. First, the public-welfare caseworker must be placed in a position where he can actually do more than dole out checks to the human beings in custody; this will be possible only if his crushing burden of paperwork is somehow reduced. One step in this direction would be to introduce modern business methods, with their mechanical handmaidens, into welfare departments. But little can be done to cure the plague of form-filling unless the federal government eliminates the many categories of welfare with their maze of diverse regulations and reimbursement formulas.\* Lo-

\* Public-assistance programs to which the federal government contributes now include Old Age Assistance (OAA), Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), Aid to the Blind (AB), and Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled (APTD). In addition, counties pay poor relief to needy persons not eligible for the foregoing. These programs are administered entirely apart from the various types of old-age and disability insurance provided by our social-security system and Veterans' benefits although some people are eligible for several kinds of payments.

### *New Frontiers of Science: The Squawk and Blat Sector*

**I**n solitude the Bottlenose Dolphin emits whistles and clicks and, very rarely, quacks or blats. In response to, and in exchange with, another dolphin at a distance, an animal emits whistles and trains of clicks (at a relatively slow repetition rate) and occasional quacks. In violent play, courtship, and intercourse, in close quarters, each may emit all three classes of sounds, with fairly frequent squawks, quacks, and blats.

—From an article by John C. Lilly and Alice M. Miller in *Science*, May 26, 1961.

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cal communities and state legislatures must battle for a single standard of aid instead of engaging in perennial flights of oratory about "red tape in Washington." Only when the tangle of administrative underbrush is cleared out will form-filling cease to be the main preoccupation of the public-welfare caseworker.

Assuming that caseworkers will thus be given time to engage in a genuine "helping" function, it will be no easy matter to find qualified people to fill the jobs. Manifestly, we cannot look to the graduate schools of social work to solve the shortage. What is needed—and urgently—is an experimental approach to this critical educational problem. It might, for example, be possible to add a public-welfare-oriented program in existing state universities. Or the few undergraduate colleges which now offer courses in the theory and practice of social work might expand their programs in the public-charity field. Alternatively, the states whose needs are greatest might establish undergraduate institutes of social work similar to teachers' colleges, for the exclusive purpose of turning out public-welfare workers. Admittedly this kind of abbreviated professional training is not as good as a two-year master's program; but it is considerably better than filling caseworker jobs with people trained as secretaries or basketball coaches.

If such an effort is to succeed, it must be coupled with a recruitment campaign pitched to the full level of the present emergency. It seems quite likely that patriotic young college men and women would respond to an appeal to help underdeveloped Americans with as much zeal as that with which they have flocked to the

Peace Corps. But the call will have to be couched in far more compelling terms than in past recruitment pamphlets and speeches of the social-work profession.

Assuming that such a program could succeed in attracting more and better-trained people, local welfare departments must see to it that they are well used. Too often today their personnel policies are of the shotgun variety—with their sparse staff deployed at random irrespective of abilities or opportunities for accomplishment. Social-service jobs must be reclassified so that the most skilled are assigned to the critical areas. For example, oldsters on relief because they have run out of money are not likely to become productive members of the community. A trained worker's time would be better spent with the multi-problem families of unwed mothers or the chronically unemployed.

After the jobs have been made workable and people found to fill them, then tested rehabilitation—a major and long-neglected goal of welfare legislation—can begin. With it, a few social taboos, whether whispered or paper policy, should be reviewed. The sharp rise of aid-to-dependent-children families—with their legitimate and out-of-wedlock children—suggests that birth-control information should be provided for those whose religious faith permits it. In some Northern industrial states a Planned Parenthood Leaguer arguing this before welfare investigation committees is greeted with the enthusiasm that would be accorded a rabbit attending the League's convention.

At the same time, any freeloaders should be rigorously weeded out. Judges who might be lenient to a convicted welfare chiseler because he doesn't even have money to pay a fine should hand down a jail sentence if the amount stolen warrants it. When a shoplifter goes to the penitentiary and a major relief cheat is placed on probation, the public's confidence is not enhanced.

But unless the key element—help—accompanies the future flow of relief checks, the tax of being our brother's keeper may become prohibitive. Beyond this, the human price may be too high. When government charity began on a major scale, the political patron saint of social work, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, said in his 1935 message to Congress:

"Continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."