

OUR COSTLY DILEMMA — XII

Worried About the Rent? It's More Than \$7 Million

Gougers Tap Huge Welfare Outlay; Bills Range From \$22 to \$90 On Similar Quarters

This series of articles on public welfare follows six months of research and study by the staff of The News, including service by a reporter as a caseworker for the Erie County Department of Social Welfare.

The welfare problem, not confined to Erie County, is growing more costly each year. This series, spotlighting the system, is intended as an aid to officials who are struggling to confine welfare to the needy and thus benefit the taxpayer. All names of clients and places are fictitious to comply with New York State law.

By ED MAY

Population: 36,301. This is the second largest city in Erie County.

It has no mayor, no tax rate and no boundary lines. Its name is Welfare City.

Its residents are scattered from the crowded tenements of Buffalo to an occasional ramshackle farmhouse in the outlying towns. And in its center—the tattered pattern of slums—it has its own special characteristics.

Welfare City's colors are gray and rust. The once white houses and yellow houses have succumbed to the brushings of countless rainstorms.

There are the locks on the mailboxes—so no one can steal the welfare check... light bulbs burning feebly in shadow-filled hallways... The smell of fish (they're inexpensive) cooking on a stove.

"Landlord's Paradise," is what some caseworkers call it.

Rents Average \$49.86

But in Welfare City, like in any other, there are the neat-as-a-pin places too, where a fussy housewife will greet a caseworker with an accusing glare if he should forget to remove his overshoes.

Today to keep a collective roof over Welfare City costs the taxpayers more than \$7,000,000 a year. The rent bill ranks among the top of welfare's expense list.

In 1958, an Erie County Welfare Department survey showed it was paying \$5,800,000 rent a year. Today, officials concede, with a higher caseload and higher rentals, that figure is much larger.

In my own caseload while I served as a caseworker in the Erie County Welfare department the average rent was \$49.86 a month without utilities. If heat, cooking and light are included, the figure rises to \$63.80.

Lease, Carefully Worded

"Some of these places aren't worth half the price we're paying for them," more than one welfare official has said.

As an example, take the case of John B., a steelworker and father of seven children. He is receiving supplementary help from the Welfare Department so he can make ends meet.

If it were not for his exorbitant rent he wouldn't be on welfare.

John earns an average of \$80 a week. About 10% of it goes to pay for a 4-year-old furniture bill. What he's paying for already is worn out.

He lives in a seven-room, weather-worn flat in the Fruit Belt and his carefully worded lease says:

"Witnesseth that the landlord leases to the tenant and the tenant hereby hires and takes from the landlord...

Half a Loaf Will Have to Do

The Erie County Department of Social Welfare has fixed rent ceilings it is willing to pay for welfare recipients. However, because of housing shortages in Negro neighborhoods, exceptions frequently are made.

A single caseload may have between 20 and 30 exceptions.

Here is the maximum rent schedule:

	Utilities without	with
1 Person	\$41	\$47
2 to 3 persons	\$51	\$60
4 or more persons	\$61	\$73

Recently a caseworker accepting a new case found the client had been paying \$130 a month rent. The caseworker informed the landlord that \$73 was the Welfare Department's maximum.

"Well," said the landlord, "a half a loaf is better than none."

annual rent of one thousand and eighty dollars (\$1080.)"

One of Prime Dilemmas

For his \$90 a month John gets the floors, the walls and the ceilings. Heat, and the gas stove to furnish it, are his responsibility. In the winter his shelter bill is about \$130 a month.

If the flat were under rent control, reports the Temporary State Housing Rent Commission, the maximum monthly fair rental figure would be \$34.50.

The two-apartment building is assessed at \$3090. In two years the owner's gross rent receipts will exceed the assessed valuation.

Less than a mile away, a welfare client, occupying a similar seven-room flat, pays \$22.50 a month.

This contrast is one of welfare's prime dilemmas. Only a few months ago Commissioner Paul F. Burke lashed out at slum landlords who are gouging your tax dollars away.

In the high welfare areas, tenement rents often are...

from \$20 to \$30 is not uncommon.

Two Kinds of Arithmetic

This leads to tenant arithmetic and landlord arithmetic. The two are different.

In one of my cases, the client, paying \$22 a week, was convinced it was \$88 a month since you multiply by four. The actual figure (landlord arithmetic) was \$95.33 since there are 4 1/2 weeks in a month.

In a few cases, the unscrupulous have duped the uninformed because they have no understanding of the laws. Take, as an example, Mrs. Harriet F., one of my clients who was on welfare because she injured her foot.

Difference of Opinion

Mrs. F. said she owned the house she was living in and showed bundles of what she considered payment receipts that had been made to the "former" owner. A resource check produced this from the "former" owner's attorney:

"It appears this estate has been and still is paying the taxes on this property. It further appears that Mrs. F. has never paid any rental or other consideration for the use of this property."

In other words, Mrs. F. is paying rent, not making monthly payments toward the purchase of her house as she thinks. But as far as the owner's attorney is concerned, he knows nothing about rent or property payments.

Tangle of Violations

On the other side of the picture, some landlords who pride themselves on a "square deal" have refused welfare tenants.

"Too hard to collect the rent. Too much damage to the property," is their complaint.

City and county officials dealing with housing, as well as the banks, know the big-time slum operators by name. A half-dozen, they estimate, own hundreds of buildings alone.

These officials also know the sorry tangle of housing violations that thread their way through Buffalo. About 15,000 multiple dwellings now violate various fire, health and building laws. Since 1956, fewer than 700 have qualified for a certificate of occupancy.

Some Sent to Jail

One County Health Department spokesman termed "numerous" the houses which lack even minimum bathroom facilities of a toilet, wash basin and tub or shower.

Serious minimum housing law violations, he said, "run into the thousands" for lack of time and personnel to inspect the dwellings.

In New York City, on the other hand, a Special Sessions Housing Court has fined a steady parade of landlords. Some, who were chalking up fines as "a business expense," were sent to jail.

The County Health Department's court record here looks like this:

In 1959 it took 438 cases to City Court. Because of various adjournments allowed by the courts this required 1110 appearances.

Sixteen persons paid fines.

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