

# Protests hit Pennsylvania welfare cuts

## Thousands face benefits cutoff as time limit expires

**Paul Scherrer**  
**10 March 1999**

Nearly 1,000 people--including welfare recipients, children, social workers and welfare rights advocates--marched in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh on March 3 to protest the imminent cutoff of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits to tens of thousands of recipients.

March 3 marked the second anniversary of the passage of the Pennsylvania version of the federal TANF act. Under the Pennsylvania program, recipients cannot receive benefits longer than two years unless they are working 20 hours a week.

Across the state some 38,000 welfare recipients and their families face cutoff of their benefits this month. During the next 12 months another 117,000 recipients face similar sanctions. In addition to families facing cutoff now, thousands of other recipients have already had their benefits cut as a result of sanctions imposed by the department of welfare for failing to meet job search requirements.

The Welfare Justice Project, an organization of the national food bank Just Harvest, which organized the Pittsburgh rally, estimates that there are 1,580 families in western Pennsylvania with children who will be made homeless due to the cutoff of family income.

Most of those present at the rally expressed frustration at the demand being made upon young mothers to get jobs or face loss of all benefits without being provided the necessary support to find work, such as childcare and transportation.

Frances Carter, a grandmother, told the WSWWS, "How are people supposed to pay for housing, rent, utilities and food when all the jobs that people can get are dead end jobs? The state gave money to many companies to hire people off of welfare. They would hire someone for 90 days and then lay them off so that they could hire someone else and thus meet their quota of jobs.

The state went along with it because they could say they were getting people off of welfare."

"I am unemployed right now," said Toya Carter, a friend of Frances. "I have been looking since September and I just found a job. It is a temporary job; it pays just \$6.35 an hour and will only last five weeks. I have to support three children on that, it is very hard. I went off of welfare three years ago. I struggle continuously to take care and care of my children. There is no money to help pay for childcare and not all jobs are 9 to 5. What happens when a women has to take a job and work evenings, nights or over the weekends? Who is going to look after the children?"

According to official figures and statements by state officials, the economy in Pennsylvania is booming. Official unemployment is down to its lowest level since the 1970s. But jobs that pay enough to support a family are scarce. A study conducted by the Keystone Research center in Harrisburg cited that there may be as many as 18 people looking for every job that pays a living wage.

Ralph Bangs, a research associate at the University of Pittsburgh Center for Social and Urban Research, conducted a study that determined that a mother with two children would have to earn \$14.84 an hour to meet basic family needs such as food, housing, transportation, utilities and medical care. For a two parent family, both parents need to earn \$8.69 an hour to make ends meet.

Figures from the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare confirm that the vast majority of those leaving welfare earn less than half of what is required to support their families. Average wages for those leaving welfare in Pittsburgh is \$6.24 and slightly higher in Philadelphia, \$6.93 an hour.

Robin Phillips came to the rally with her daughter

Ashley to support her friends and family members who are receiving welfare. "This is going to make a lot of people homeless and hungry. People can't survive on a minimum wage job, it is not enough to pay for food and housing. My sister has three children and my brother has two. He is a painter and only works during the good weather. When he works he only gets about 30 hours a week and that is not enough to feed his family and pay his other bills. Welfare says he has to get a job, but there are none there for him to get."

Elizabeth, a mother of children ages 6, 8 and 9 went on welfare to leave an abusive husband. "I went up north to live with my children. When I went into the welfare office for assistance, the first thing they did was to place me in a job search. I did not have any time to settle down, to establish a home. I had to start looking for work right away.

"I wanted to go to school, to get a trade so I could earn enough money to support us. I went through all the trouble of signing up for school and arranging for the money to pay for it, but the welfare office said that I could not go, that if I did not find work right away I would lose my benefits.

"They would not pay for childcare, yet I had to look for work. I don't like to say this, but there were times when I had to leave my children alone when I went to a job interview. I have had to move back to Pittsburgh in hope of finding something. I feel that these changes in welfare will also cause a lot of women to remain in abusive relationships because they know there is nothing out there for them."

In addition to those who are directly affected by the welfare cutoffs, the rallies also attracted a number of social workers from community centers that provide many support services for poor families in their area.

Both Michelle Rodgers and Andrienne Roberts are social workers at the Sto-Rox Family Center near Pittsburgh. Andrienne said, "I don't think the politicians realize how hard it is, the day to day struggle that people are going through to try and survive. How do they expect women to find a job if there is not any money for daycare while they are at work? I had a child while I was still in high school. I was able to finish and I went onto college and got my degree. It was hard but I was able to do that. Today a young mother can't do that. They are saying that if you are not working after two years they will cut you off of your benefits. Two years

does not give a women enough time to earn a degree, and there are not any jobs out there that will pay enough to live on without one."

Michelle added, "I am a childcare aid. I came here to support the families who are facing cutoff. I feel that people need a chance to get an education, otherwise people are being pushed into jobs that they cannot do. Many people are being told that if they go to school that will not qualify for the 20-hour work requirement and that they will lose their benefits. This law is going to punish the children, they are the ones who are going to be hurt the most by it."

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