

New York City forces homeless to work or face eviction from shelters

Andrea Peters
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New York City's Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced plans earlier this week to implement a work requirement policy for those seeking refuge in the city's homeless shelters. Beginning in 45 to 60 days, the homeless will be required to work for their nightly beds. Refusal to participate in the city's workfare program will result in eviction from the shelter. For parents, failure to work can result in the removal of their children and placement in foster care. Individuals who do participate in the work program, if fired from their assigned positions, will also be thrown onto the street.

In New York City there are an estimated 27,000 - 81,000 homeless. On any night, an average of 21,000 people seek cover in a homeless shelter. While in most cities homeless shelters are run by non-profit organizations and funded by private charities, the city's Department of Homeless Services imposes its regulations on the shelters contracted out to the non-profits. This means that great numbers of the city's homeless population will be subject to the new shelter restrictions.

The new conditions have actually been a part of state social service regulations since 1997. However, legal challenges by homeless advocacy groups prevented the Giuliani administration from instituting the rules sooner. Earlier this year, an appellate court ruled against the protestations of the homeless advocacy groups and since then the mayor's office has pushed ahead with the implementation of the new requirements.

The work policy for the homeless comes on the heels of an extensive and systematic right-wing push in social services and public assistance—the development of the country's largest workfare program for welfare recipients, New York City's "Work Experience

Program." Homeless seeking shelter will now be integrated into this program, which has been lauded for the decrease of the city's welfare rolls by more than 500,000 people.

Under this system, which currently employs 40,000 people, participants are forced to work for their welfare benefits. WEP workers are ineligible for benefits that would be given to a regular civil service employee and receive a fraction of the wages paid to these workers. Workfare participants are denied various legal rights such as the ability to file grievances against unsafe working conditions. Employment rules for this population are extremely strict—missing an hour of work can result in the closure of one's case. For the homeless such regulations will mean eviction from the shelter.

Outrage over the portion of the Giuliani administration's plan that mandates the removal of one's children due to failure to work has prompted various justifications by mayoral spokespersons. "Ultimately, the city is asking parents to take responsibility for themselves and their children," said Anthony Coles, a senior advisor to Giuliani, "but if parents are unable to take responsibility for themselves, then it raises a real question of whether they can take responsibility for their children."

The denial of a custodial rights as a result of a parents refusal to work for poverty-level benefits means that the city's 4,600 homeless families are particularly vulnerable to the new crackdown on New York's most impoverished residents.

Because of the lack of low-income affordable housing in New York City, it is often impossible for homeless people receiving the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour to move out of the shelters. However, under the new laws, those individuals employed in jobs receiving

wages greater than what they would get from public assistance are required to compensate the city for their shelter bed—a cost that can exceed \$20,000 a year.

Serious questions have also been raised over how the workfare policy will affect the large portion of homeless who are mentally and/or physically disabled. In a speech accusing opponents of employing "scare tactics," Mayor Giuliani asserted, "If somebody is on welfare and they can't work because they are sick or ill, the city will take care of them and their children."

Those who have seen the effects of the workfare program so far are not convinced. Many disabled welfare recipients are required to participate in the workfare program despite severe physical or mental limitations and many others are denied exemption due to bureaucratic foulups.

The plan's announcement provoked widespread protest from advocates for the homeless. Mary Brosnahan, director of the Coalition for the Homeless, said, "The Giuliani plan is a return to the poorhouses of 100 years ago. Let's remember people used to chop wood and crack stone all day for shelter. That's what Giuliani is taking us back to."



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