

Study shows how New York City cut its welfare rolls

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A seven-month study undertaken by the Washington Heights/Inwood Neighborhood Action Council in New York City has just concluded with a report which documents the methods by which city authorities have drastically reduced the welfare rolls in the past four years.

When the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani began calling its welfare offices “Job Centers” in 1998, Human Resources Administration Commissioner Jason Turner claimed that the name change signified that the city was now “reducing dependency by promoting job preparation, work, self-reliance and accountability.”

Among the proudest boasts of the Giuliani administration is its reduction of the welfare rolls by 50 percent in the past four years. As of May 2000, the total has dropped to 576,723.

In the Washington Heights/Inwood area of Upper Manhattan, the drop has been even greater. This is a densely populated immigrant neighborhood of more than 215,000 people. In October 1997, 72,766 people in this area received public assistance. By January of this year the rolls had dropped by two-thirds, to approximately 25,000 adults and children.

The Washington Heights/Inwood study shows that if by “reducing dependency” the authorities meant that the city would no longer take any responsibility for millions of the poor, that is an accurate description of what has taken place. The welfare “reforms” have nothing to do with job preparation or work, however. As the press release issued on June 26 in connection with the Washington Heights/Inwood report states, “The study shows a massive, deliberate effort to reduce public assistance rolls that is resulting in hardship and poverty for countless families and children—NOT JOBS!” (emphasis in original)

The study was based upon the work of the WHI Solutions 2000 Project, organized by a coalition of 35 members, including most of the neighborhood's social service agencies and organizations. Thirteen social work students were employed to staff a telephone hotline and interactive web site between October 1999 and May 2000. They responded to 225 separate cases dealing with problems involving public assistance, housing, legal services, domestic violence, childcare and other issues.

The vast majority of the problems, 174 out of 225, dealt

directly with public assistance. Of these, 166 involved either case opening failure (denial of benefits) or wrongful case closing. The Dyckman Job Center has become the organizer of the ruthless dismantling of what remains of the social safety net in this area. The report documents the practice of “churning,” the deliberate generation of administrative case closings in order to reduce the welfare rolls.

Churning is based on the assumption that most welfare recipients are “undeserving.” They are only on the welfare rolls, the theory goes, because they lack “self-reliance,” and they must therefore be forced to fend for themselves.

Proof that the authorities are engaged in a process of purging the welfare rolls that is illegal even under current law was demonstrated by the interventions carried out by the Washington Heights/Inwood Project. In all but 2 of the 174 cases involving public assistance, benefits were restored, but often only as the result of time-consuming hearings conducted under the provisions of state law. On average, it took 70 days to resolve a challenge over case opening failure or wrongful closing. The city is by law obliged to comply with the findings of such hearings within 90 days, but it often did not meet this deadline.

After public assistance recipients have been removed, or while they are waiting for the city to comply with a finding that they are entitled to benefits, they often face crises such as evictions. The study found 88 cases, more than 40 percent, citing housing problems. Rents in Washington Heights/Inwood are rising rapidly, as they have throughout the city. The study reports that “for many, even those who are able to get their case reopened, they have already been evicted and are unable to find an affordable apartment.”

The same process can be seen in other areas, such as medical treatment, child abuse and neglect. The loss of benefits can lead to illnesses such as diabetes and cancer going untreated. Children have been forced into foster care when their families are unable to care for them through conditions themselves created by the city authorities.

The study documents its findings with a number of case studies. One woman, with three children aged 10, 3 and 16 months, stated that the Dyckman Center changed her caseworker without formal notice, reduced her food stamps

with no explanation and removed her 10-year-old from the budget. She was unable to reach, let alone communicate, with her English speaking caseworker.

This woman's public assistance, medical assistance and food stamp benefits were discontinued last January because it was claimed she had sufficient income from employment. She had proof that she was no longer working, and had provided this information to her caseworker. She won a hearing in February, but her benefits were not restored as required within a 30-day period. By the end of March, her children were complaining constantly of hunger and she had received letters from her landlord warning of thousands of dollars owed in back rent and informing her that she would receive an eviction notice.

In another case, Mrs. A., a woman seriously ill with cancer and with two young children, did not receive benefits even though they had been approved. Her Medicaid benefits were discontinued without explanation or warning after she had used them only once. She was approved for food stamps but did not receive them. Her attempts to contact her caseworker were repeatedly unsuccessful, and none of her phone calls were returned. This woman is undergoing chemotherapy, and may not be able to afford the medication needed to accompany radiation treatment.

The cutbacks have not only not provided preparation for work, they have prevented those on public assistance from seeking out opportunities on their own. One woman, Nina S., was enrolled in a Medical Assistant Training Program. With five months left in the 15-month program, she was called to a Work Experience Program (WEP) assignment. She was only able to continue her training after appealing the decision to place her in a workfare job, but there are thousands of others who have given up. A recent study indicates that the City University of New York has 28,000 fewer students because of workfare, as former students have been forced to drop out so that they can "earn" their welfare benefits picking up trash in the city's parks and in similar assignments.

The Washington Heights/Inwood area, where the welfare cuts have been so drastic, is far removed from the Wall Street boom and prosperity continually advertised in the media. It still has an official poverty rate of 45 percent, about double that for the city as a whole. 40 percent of its residents are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, and 60 percent of the population is Spanish-speaking. 73.5 percent, according to the last census, speak English poorly or not at all. The unemployment rate is 19 percent, more than double that for the city as a whole.

This neighborhood, while suffering from serious social ills, is by no means unique in New York. If 172 out of 174 appeals of welfare cutoffs were successfully appealed here, what does that say about the many tens, if not hundreds of thousands, of others throughout the city who simply became discouraged after being removed from the rolls or being turned down for benefits? How many others have simply been denied food for their children and a roof over their heads, so that Giuliani and his fellow big

business politicians could claim that they had solved the welfare "problem," and at the same time saved billions of dollars in city revenues?

The apparent disorganization at the Dyckman Job Center, which is documented in the report, is the product of conscious policies. One city welfare worker told a student social worker, "We are in chaos. We are operating without procedures and have received no real training. Beyond a name change and a paint job, we are simply doing more with less."

Notwithstanding its devastating exposures, the WHI Solutions 2000 Project and its directors shrink from drawing any serious conclusions. The report concludes with a series of recommendations, which amount to little more than appeals to the city administration to mend its ways. They include proposals to comply with the findings of state hearings, "create safeguards" against "unnecessary and erroneous case closings," provide translators for the non-English-speaking population, provide a grievance procedure for those on workfare, and so forth. These are, to put it mildly, extremely limited measures, if not worse. The call for a grievance procedure for those in the WEP program amounts to the acceptance of this forced labor.

The reason for the timidity of the report is fairly obvious. Among those listed as its sponsors are the offices of local Democratic politicians, including Congressman Charles Rangel and City Councilmember Guillermo Linares. These officials are linked in turn to the Clinton/Gore administration in Washington. The report diplomatically acknowledges the role of Clinton when it states that "the environment at the Dyckman Center is a reflection of the federal government politics that are being applied to poor people and how the current administration of New York City has translated and implemented those policies."

Giuliani's war on the poor would not have been possible without Clinton's determination to "end welfare as we know it." Any fight against this assault of the most impoverished layers of the population must clearly acknowledge its bipartisan character and draw the necessary conclusions for independent political struggle on the part of the working class.



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