

Oregon welfare applicants told to dig through trash to save money

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Applicants seeking welfare assistance were told to “check the dump and residential/business dumpsters” during an Oregon state training workshop on how to save money. Oregon's Department of Human Services (DHS) requires all welfare applicants to take the workshop before becoming eligible to receive benefits, as part of the state's efforts to reduce welfare rolls.

The suggestion to “dumpster dive” was one of a list of seventeen other suggestions from the state agency on how to save money while shopping. The list also advised applicants to “look for freebies, bargain for prices” and to “barter or trade.” The list was given out to all applicants in the Eugene-Springfield area, a medium-sized metropolitan area 110 miles south of Portland, Oregon.

“This is very insulting and demeaning for people who attended these workshops,” said Chuck Sheketoff, director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy, a research organization that analyzes budget and policy issues and how these issues affect low- and moderate-income people in the state. “Low-income people generally are the most careful shoppers and to tell them to go through dumpsters or to bargain for prices at a supermarket is trying to reduce them to a class of beggars.”

The shopping tips handout was created by an independent contractor. The state of Oregon, like many state and local governments, has contracted out large portions of its social services to privately run, for-profit enterprises. Contracts are awarded to the lowest bidder, not on the basis of having personnel trained in the field of social work.

The list containing the suggestion on digging through trash dumpsters has been randomly used for four years and became a standard part of training material last October, despite the complaints of several applicants

and the decision of some individual instructors not to use it.

The list was only removed by the DHS after a woman complained to the local newspaper, the *Register-Guard*, which ran a story about it. She told the paper that she was really upset about the tip sheet and that the woman setting next to her at a workshop was brought to the point of tears while reading it. “You're already at mud-puddle level, and it's like they're saying, ‘Now we're going to teach you to roll around in it,’” she said.

In the 1990s, Oregon saw two right wing-inspired tax revolts aimed at cutting taxes for the rich and gutting social services for the working class and poor. In addition, the US Congress, along with then President Bill Clinton, devolved many social services previously funded by the federal government to state and local governments with vastly reduced funding.

Oregon has been very aggressive in cutting people off welfare. Currently fewer than 17,000 families receive welfare benefits, a more than 60 percent reduction since 1993. The drop in enrollment does not reflect any drop in poverty, but rather the policy of the DHS to push people off welfare and into low-paying poverty-level jobs. The poverty rate in Oregon has remained the same during this period while the number of people living in poverty has gone up, despite an economic boom and a small decline in the poverty rate for the nation as a whole.

“The strong economy has been the only thing that has saved people,” said Sheketoff. “When it ends things are going to be very difficult for a whole lot of people.”

Oregon has not raised its income eligibility requirement since 1985. A family of three must earn below \$574 a month before it can qualify for any cash assistance. In other words, a person earning just over \$145 a week would not qualify for any benefits. A

monthly income of \$574 is not enough to pay the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment, let alone buy food, clothing, health care and pay for utilities.

The maximum cash assistance for a family of three is only \$460 a month, and has not been raised since 1991. The Oregon state legislature is currently working on its upcoming budget. It proposes a reduction in cash assistance, an increase in the cost of child care and the cutoff of many families from programs that supplement low wages.



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