

An interview with Florida attorney Viletta Coombs

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At the recent National Energy and Utility Affordability Conference (NEUAC) in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, WSWs reporters attended various lectures concerning utilities, social programs, and the needs of the poor. In a lecture entitled “Loss of Utilities: the Socioeconomic Impacts,” Florida attorney Viletta Coombs discussed how utilities are “integral to basic human needs such as food, shelter, and clothing.”

She discussed how many families that have their utilities shut off face devastating consequences, including a loss of subsidized housing, leading to forced homelessness, and parents’ loss of their children due to failure to provide adequate housing.

Virtually all social programs face the budget axe of Democratic and Republican administrations at the state and federal level. Protections and standards put in place by legislation and court cases are being rolled back under the austerity programs being enacted across the country. One such legal standard under threat is *Goldberg v. Kelly* (1970), in which the US Supreme Court ruled that the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment required an evidentiary hearing before a recipient of welfare or other government benefits could be deprived of such benefits.

In her lecture, Coombs quoted various government and economist statistics that exposed consequences of cutting funding to these programs. The ongoing theme was that benefits programs such as unemployment compensation, SNAP (food assistance), the WIC nutrition program, the TANF welfare program, SSI (Supplemental Security Income), Medicaid, and LIHEAP (heating assistance) are established to help families in need. During this time of economic downturn, any reduction in funding to these programs,

and/or reduction in services, will have a devastating impact on the increasing number of families in their greatest time of need.

The WSWs spoke with Coombs following her lecture to gain more insight into the social crisis in Florida and throughout the nation.

Lawrence Porter: In your report you reviewed the impact of the loss of utilities on families. You said it is one of the basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing. What do you mean by that?

Viletta Coombs: Those particular needs are fairly useless without utilities. If you have food, you need utilities to prepare/preserve it. You can’t just have food alone, you have to have utilities. If you have shelter, your shelter is useless unless you have utilities, because you need the shelter to protect you from the heat and cold—you can’t do that without utilities.

And clothing, your clothing’s fairly useless without utilities, because of the temperature control that the utilities provide and also the ability to maintain and sustain clothing. And the public benefit programs recognize how utilities are integral to human needs. That’s why they factor in these utility allowances, because they know you need them in order to survive.

LP: Would you say it’s a life and death question?

VC: Yes, absolutely! And that’s why I quoted from the source indicating that utilities are integral to health. Utilities mean the difference of whether or not you keep your housing. It means the difference of whether or not your medically necessary equipment works; and medication is perishable, so you have to have utilities to preserve it. You know, life just actually doesn’t work without them.

LP: I wasn’t aware that the SNAP program benefited 40.3 million people. That’s one of every eight people in the country.

VC: And that number's going to increase, because the needs of people are increasing—the situation's getting worse and worse and worse. So there are going to be even more people that need those benefits—and those are the folks that qualify for benefits. Imagine all the people who've applied and actually didn't qualify.

LP: That's similar to LIHEAP, which last year only provided services to one out of every five people that qualify for the program. What is the relationship between utility shutoffs and nutrition?

VC: That is a good question. There is a gentleman by the name of Dr. Cook; he's here presenting on that issue. But I can tell you, I know from my own personal experience just how important this is. Without access to food and proper nutrition, it particularly causes development problems in children, but also other organic disorders.

The families that are actually qualifying for food assistance are finding that it's just not enough, because we're talking about \$70 for an entire month for an entire family. There are a lot of hungry families, and the public benefits programs are meant to be supplemental. But if it's your only source of income, it's not enough, because it's not supplementing anything—it's *everything*. You can't live on it.

I'm not sure if you saw this bit on the news about the free lunch program. We have so many folks that are newly poor who are not aware of the free lunch program. They were sending their children to school, and the families weren't paying for lunches, and the school districts became upset and weren't allowing the kids to eat for free, saying they couldn't afford to allow it. So some districts have embarrassed kids publicly in order to shame their parents into paying for lunches with money they do not have. This is wrong on so many levels.

LP: On the question of government aid, it's something that is needed now when so many people are unemployed. But at the very time when this is most necessary, cuts are being carried out.

VC: All of these programs—unemployment compensation, SNAP, WIC, TANF, SSI, Medicaid, and LIHEAP—are going through significant reductions in funding. I was saying in my presentation that without the proper support people are set up to fail. Without the proper support people are no longer in a position to meaningfully contribute to the economy.

Cutting these programs—as much as government officials would complain that they are throwing money away by funding these programs, and they don't have the money to fund these programs—is a mistake. I purposely quoted the secretary of labor, and a study from the Bush administration, indicating how these programs are actually economic stabilizers. They are putting dollars into the economy that actually help the economy, that help businesses, that help individuals. We need to keep that money flowing in order to help the economy.

LP: Many people voted for Obama because they thought he was someone who would help address the real social problems that people are facing. I think that there is a lot of disappointment.

VC: Florida recently passed legislation, HB7005 and SB2156, that is cutting benefits, changing benefits and is a reduction in unemployment benefits. It's not going to help; it's just going to make a bad situation much worse. There's a continuation of this concept that folks shouldn't get any relief from these programs. Instead people are supposed to be self-reliant, this concept of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” There is no acknowledgment that people are barefoot and they don't have any boots!



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