

# Many Families on Relief Permanent Public Wards

## Some Know More Than Caseworkers About Welfare Procedure; Their 'System' Works

This series of articles on public welfare follows six months of research and study by the staff of The News, including service by a reporter as a caseworker for the Erie County Department of Social Welfare.

The welfare problem, not confined to Erie County, is growing more costly each year. This series, spotlighting the system, is intended as an aid to the many dedicated persons who are struggling to confine welfare to the needy and thus benefit the taxpayer.

By ED MAY

"My gas has been shut off," the voice said through the receiver one morning while I was a caseworker for the Erie County Department of Social Welfare.

"Did you call the gas company to ask what you could do about it?"

"No, I thought you'd take care of it."

The woman received \$306.20 that month to take care of herself and her eight children.

Another woman's voice told how "we've been off the welfare" for seven months since her husband found a job.

"He's been sick for three days. And he doesn't get no pay. I was wondering if you could help?"

### The "Unseen Angel"

Phone calls like these to the Erie County Welfare Department are repeated every day. They signal that the Welfare Department may have become the head of these families—like an unseen angel behind a Broadway play, its presence is always there.

As a group, many of the relief recipients have become a dependent society.

During the three months I was a caseworker I gave your tax dollars to children who are fourth-generation welfare cases.

"Don't let them scare you," was the advice I received when I first started. "Some of these people, you'll find, know more about welfare than all of us. They've got every angle."

One of my colleagues who started with me in the department, told of this incident when he and a senior caseworker called on a new applicant in a well-furnished home that included a color telephone:

### Stands on Rights

The caseworker asked how many rooms the man had and if he could see them.

"You don't go into these rooms without a search warrant. I know my rights . . . My parents were on welfare and nobody asked them to see their rooms."

One of my co-workers asked a client who had been on public assistance since 1957 and was physically able to work:

"Don't you think it's time you got a job?"

"There are others who've been on longer than I have," was the answer.

Another man who had a four-year uninterrupted dole record was missing his county work for relief assignments.

The reason? He lacked shoe rubber protection.

To all this the State Department of Social Welfare has a statistical contradiction.

### Key Word Is "Closed"

In an article published recently in The Buffalo Evening News, State Welfare Commissioner Raymond W. Houston had this to say:

"Even today our caseloads aren't static, as some imagine them to be. The average home relief case is closed in six months; the Aid to Dependent Children case average 18 months . . ."

The key word is "closed."

I have closed cases after 15 days because the client was then eligible to collect New York State unemployment checks . . . after 30 days because the client qualified for New York State disability benefits . . . and after four months because the client got a job.

The filing cabinets in the office where I worked with hard-hearted, conscientious people contain numerous folders inches thick—mute records of on-again, off-again rides on the welfare wagon.

### Nearly Half Re-opened Cases

A report of the January applications of the Erie County Department of Social Welfare had this to say:

"Of the accepted applications, 51.5% or 418 cases were new and not previously known to the department. At the same time, 48.5% or 394 cases were re-opened with a previous history in the department."

Many of these repeaters come from other government payrolls—particularly from the unemployment insurance lists.

Ironically, a man who tells his boss off and quits his job without cause now is penalized by the unemployment insurance laws: No checks. But if he's broke, the Welfare Department picks up the tab right away.

Until last May 16, when a new law went into effect, he could have started on welfare and then

switched to unemployment checks after six weeks of his quitting date.

### Third Source of Aid

A few parlayed this routine into a merry-go-round of public finance.

They began by collecting unemployment and when that ran out, presented themselves at the Welfare Department. After a year or two they got a job long enough to become eligible for unemployment compensation again and the ride at public expense began once more.

One client whose government-supported life was on file in our office even managed to collect a little workmen's compensation pay as a third revenue source. All of this, by the way, is tax-free.

But why does this happen?

For an answer, take as an example, Mr. B:

He last worked in April 1958 as a stockboy, a job he held since the previous Christmas. His weekly salary was \$51 before taxes.

### Has Money but No Luxury

Two years later he gets \$51.47 a week for not working, but tax-free.

With his welfare dollars Mr. B, must support himself, his wife and three children. He doesn't live in luxury. But all he has received is money.

There hasn't been time to give him the counseling that could take him away from comparing a pay stub with a welfare check and coming to a false, but rather obvious conclusion.

As another example, this is what happened to Mrs. D.:

Until last February she worked fulltime, but needed some welfare help because her salary wasn't high enough to support her 5-year-old son and pay \$10 a week for his baby sitter.

The baby sitter quit and she said she couldn't get another so she left her job.

### Grant Makes Up for Pay

There are 20 other welfare clients within three blocks on the street where she lives. A number of them also are on the aid to dependent children program and are home taking care of children.

The caseworker agreed that if he had time he might have been able to help her make some baby-sitting arrangements.

Because the Welfare Department now has to add \$115.18 a month to her grant—the same money she previously made working—the caseworker believed it's highly unlikely Mrs. D. ever will return to the job.

In one year this additional cost amounts to \$1382.16.

This condition could stay the same until Mrs. D.'s son reaches the cut-off age of 18.

The lack of one baby sitter then would have cost not only one useful, producing member of society, but \$17,968.

NEXT—Procedure in getting welfare relief.