

Some Malingerers Take Long Rides on Relief

Caseworkers Tire of Hounding Them To Look for Work at N. Y. State Employment Office

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 officials who are struggling to confine welfare to the needy and thus benefit the taxpayer. All names of clients and places are fictitious to comply with New York State law.

By ED MAY

"You think I like to take your money? I'd rather be out workin'. This sittin' around the house don't do nothin' for you. You know that."

The voice was firm. It came from a strong body used to hard work when it could find it. And in this case I did "know that."

Joey P. had been on welfare for a month. He filled out job applications at half-a-dozen Buffalo plants, hitched a ride to the Niagara Power Project and visited the N. Y. State Employment office regularly.

What he told me, as a caseworker for the Erie County Department of Social Welfare, could almost be a recording of what other workers hear repeated day after day, week after week.

Home Relief Costs Soar

In many cases it's true. But when it comes from men who have a two- or three-year relief ride, then the record sounds as if the needle got stuck.

The Niagara Frontier's unemployment problems—greater than the national average and aggravated by a long steel strike in 1959—undoubtedly have echoed through the halls of the Welfare Department. In 1957 Erie County spent \$1,685,521 on home relief—the category which includes able-bodied men. Last year that figure stood at \$6,060,520.

But economic causes sometimes are overloaded by statistical results.

Recently these two headlines appeared in The Buffalo Evening News two days apart:

Industrial Jobs Here Rise 2000 In Month to a Two-Year Peak.

County Spending on Welfare Rises During February.

Largest Single Inventory

Contradictions like this are not new to the welfare story. Raymond W. Houston, state welfare commissioner, not long ago told the New York State Society of Newspaper Editors:

"When work opportunities arise, people 'leave the rolls in droves.'"

Recently in an Associated Press interview, this sentence was used:

"Houston said few employable persons were on the relief rolls."

However, home-relief cases represent the largest single

category in Erie County. Last year the monthly average was 5171. Most of the homes contain at least one adult who is able to work.

This is one manpower list where seniority is not a factor. Three-year relievers and those who have been on the rolls for only a few months get the same treatment.

Tired of Hounding Them

There is no difference between men in their 20s and those in their 50s, whose employability is more limited because of age.

There is no special plan for the malingering and, for that matter, there is no time either.

Many caseworkers have become tired of hounding some of these work-shy veterans into monthly trips to the New York State Employment Office. When I insisted one of my clients go there after his registration card showed no visits for four months, he had this to say:

"Boy, oh boy, I can see right now, buddy, you an' me ain't going to get along at all."

Persistence Doesn't Win

Because in some cases an Employment Office stamp on the registration card has become nothing but a paper ritual, a few caseworkers, on their own initiative, have asked clients to bring written statements from personnel managers saying they have been interviewed.

Sometimes a caseworker can convince a client who wants to help himself that persistence may find him a job.

"Why don't you go down to the Employment Office as often as you can?" I told Joey P. "If they see you every day they might get so tired of looking at you that they'll direct you to a job just to get rid of you."

Joey P. did. Four times a week he walked more than 2 miles from his home to the office. And they got "tired of looking" at him, all right.

A receptionist told him:

"Don't come back any more until you're supposed to."

Can Be Put to Work

Technically, today there is in the Welfare Department a "work-referral" unit. However, this operation primarily handles the county work-for-relief program.

They assign men receiving welfare aid to work for it in a variety of county departments. In March, for example, 248 of welfare's 5246 home-relief load was put on work relief.

In the same month the City of Buffalo spent \$5300.71 for 180 emergency laborers hired for snow removal.

Last week the Common Council's Legislation Committee rejected a proposal as "completely inadvisable" that would have put welfare recipients to work on city projects.

More Trouble Than Worth

A new law now allows towns and cities to use welfare help.

Privately, some county department heads are less than enthusiastic about this "free" labor force. Said one:

"Every now and then you might get a man who really will work. I'm afraid the majority are more trouble than they are worth."

One of these "more trouble" cases is the story of Howard F., one of my clients who hasn't worked since November 1957.

On June 2, 1959, Howard was assigned to county work relief with the notation "man has shown no indication of seeking employment."

On June 29 the case worker was notified Howard had failed to keep the appointment for the work relief interview. Howard claimed he had been sick, called the case worker about it, but didn't leave his name.

"Serious Health Problem"

The following October his work report showed this:

July, 10 days; August, 7 days; September, 0 days. Remarks: "Claimed missed work in August due to looking for job."

Because the Welfare Department can stop aid when a man fails to report for county work relief, a conference was held with higher officials.

Since earlier in Howard's welfare history a case worker thought he looked "cadaverous" and placed that descriptive adjective in the case record, the decision was to continue his checks because Howard "indicates serious health problem."

He was asked to take a thorough physical examination and the report came back shortly before I left the Welfare Department.

It said Howard was fully able to work and under the heading "When?" the doctor's answer was brief:

"Now."

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NEXT—The blot of cheating.