

# Recipients Of Welfare Need 'Voice'

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(Second of 5 parts)

As the controversy about welfare fraud has escalated during recent weeks, worry about the plight of those on welfare has been relegated to the sidelines.

"Most people — especially those that complain about welfare fraud — don't know what it's like to try to live on \$250 a month." The speaker was Jenny Dario, who as a worker at the Welfare Education and Legal Assistance Center (WELAC) of Santa Cruz comes face to face with life's dispossessed every day. "People get so concerned that someone might be cheating that they forget about what life is like for those on welfare. Assessments are up, and that drives up rents; that cost gets passed along to the welfare recipient."

Gary McNeil, also on the WELAC staff, said that in his mind, the number of welfare recipients that cheat is a small percentage. Asked about the ease of lying to obtain more money, he said, "People can lie about anything they want — not just for welfare."

Members of the WELAC staff, generally, work where they do because at some time during their lives, they or a loved one have fallen on tough times and received welfare.

Welfare money has been a thin cushion, and lack of money to them is more than a statistic on the business page.

WELAC was formed in 1973, and since then has been an advocate for welfare recipients. Any recipient may contact WELAC for assistance with any welfare problem that might arise. In fact, McNeil urged all welfare recipients to make their presence known to his office, located at 341 Ocean St.

"As far as I'm concerned, one of the biggest problems facing the welfare system is that the forms are overwhelming. The questions they ask for verification of statements made violate a person's privacy, but the court has held that the public has a right to that information.

"A lot of figures about welfare fraud have been batted around. But you never hear about mistakes by welfare workers to the disadvantage of the recipient."

He said that many welfare recipients have not received adequate explanations about what they deserve. McNeil said that the lack of explanation is not the welfare worker's fault; it's just that each worker carries too many caseloads to spend enough time with each client.

At times, he said, people on welfare will needlessly falsify information on the welfare forms, and then get caught in a trap of lying to cover up previous, needless lies. Had they

been aware of the money due to them in the first place, he said, such a snowballing effect would not occur.

What does WELAC do when they realize somebody has cheated? "If it's a case where they have been making up names of family members to increase their payments; we tell them to see an attorney. Sometimes, people will admit what they have been doing, and we tell them to make a complete disclosure to the welfare department. That way, they can make restitution without being prosecuted in many cases."

Dario said that being on welfare is not the soft life that some might contend. "It's a matter of gearing your life to bureaucracy. The forms, regulations and lists are foreign to most people."

Both Dario and McNeil feel that welfare recipients are the target of unfair criticism and prejudice. "Welfare recipients are easy targets," said McNeil. "They are not an organization or anything, so there is nobody going to speak up for them. We try to ..."

His voice trailed off, and then he continued. "There are government subsidies being paid to all kinds of people. Even peanut farmers receive government subsidies."

(Tuesday: Ways to defraud the welfare department.)

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