

## Abuses Are Outlined

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# How They Cheat On Food Stamps

(First of 5 parts.)

By TOM HONIG

Sentinel Staff Writer

Lo, the poor welfare system. It has been knocked and batted around from all sides: from recipients, the public, politicians, bureaucrats and special interest groups.

A rather strangely-built animal in the first place, rather top-heavy from all the forms and regulations, welfare's plight is further weighted down by the emotion attached to its very existence.

"Welfare chiselers are robbing the taxpayers!" cry some critics.

"The poor welfare recipients aren't receiving enough money to live on," moan others.

At the center of the controversy lie two welfare programs, both administered in this county by the County Social Services Department: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps. According to Social Services Director David Singleton, some \$930,000 is paid by the county each month for the AFDC program. About \$500,000 in food stamps are issued each month, but of that, food stamp recipients finance \$200,000 of that by themselves.

About a month ago, Lee Collins, a food stamp eligibility worker, caused a bit of a furor by telling the board of supervisors that the county's food stamp program is so rife with fraud that the entire program was out of control.

His charge didn't sit well with two supervisors, Gary Patton and Ed Borovatz, who said he shouldn't make such comments without proof.

Contacted later at his office, Collins gave more details about the situation.

The food stamp recipient, he said, is required to provide only one form of identification. He is not required to show his social security card (the most easily traceable form of identification).

"From there, he can give us a fake name and make up a phony wife with four kids. Then if he says that he and his family are in immediate need, he can have his food stamps the same day.

"The only way that we can check up on somebody adequately is if he's being honest with us."

Collins said that 70 per cent of his 350-person caseload say that they have no income — a claim that he often doubts. "Sometimes I'll see one of those persons at a show, up buying beer or something. Yet they say they have no income at all."

"It's impossible to say how many people are cheating," he continued. "The other day I saw one guy who is on my caseload visiting another worker. It turned out that he was receiving stamps under two names."

Another time, Collins said, eligibility workers discovered that 35 food stamp recipients had given the same one-bedroom house as their permanent address.

Until earlier this month, the only food stamp fraud cases prosecuted were those that were linked with other kinds of welfare fraud. On July 8, a woman pleaded guilty to food stamp fraud, and became the first food stamp defrauder to be convicted in Santa Cruz County.

Carol White, an assistant district attorney, said that the procedure for investigating and prosecuting food stamp cheaters is only now being worked out. Investigation of food stamp fraud is done by the district attorney's office — one inspector works on the cases on a part-time basis; it is not done at the welfare department, where the sole staff investigator is confined to investigating other types of welfare fraud.

"We have been ordered not to ask for the investigator," Collins said.

SEE BACK PAGE

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FROM PAGE 1

"When we have pretty solid evidence of fraud, the state allows us to discontinue issuing the stamps. But the county says we can't."

That seemed to remind him of the board of supervisors, because he added, "Gary Patton could put on a head band and say he is Joe Smith, and he'd get food stamps."

When it comes to AFDC, the aid-to-families program, the situation is more complicated. For one thing, recipients receiving this type of aid must provide their social security numbers. That means that if they earn a salary, it will show up on a computer printout, and

the special investigator will discover any unreported income.

Under this program, a woman and child receive \$273 a month — up to \$716 a month for a woman and 10 children.

Workers at the social services department who did not wish to be named said that insufficient staffing has caused such a backlog of potential fraud cases that investigation has bogged down. One source said that the investigator — the only one in the office — at any one time is faced with between 350 and 700 questionable cases which bear investigation. That means that between 10 and 20 per cent of the

county's 3,500 AFDC recipients are being investigated. Of course, most of those persons are not guilty of fraud, but they still require examination.

One source said that the investigator currently has received 155 citizen's complaints regarding welfare fraud, and has not had the time to open the files on any of them.

A second investigator was approved by the board for this fiscal year, and he or she will be hired before by autumn.

Tomorrow: Another side of the story; a discussion with those who aid the welfare recipient.