



Fall Guy: Chris Mayo, a former tree-surgeon, has needed public assistance since falling out of a Chinese elm in his native Tennessee last summer.

Robert Schier

A New Job Description

County welfare agencies already have shifted their focus to provide education, job training and employment **By Kelly Luker**

THE ONE-STORY OFFICE complex on Encinal Street feels like a small campus. The computer labs are to the left, the college advisor is upstairs and the career library is down the path, right past child care—and the Santa Cruz County Welfare Department.

This is the new face of government assistance, where faceless check-cutters have been replaced by career advisors intent on providing one-stop service where folks in need can get on welfare—and quickly off.

Social workers in Santa Cruz long ago read the writing on the wall. Although the final details of the state's welfare reform package were still being hashed out in Sacramento last week, they had already begun reworking their programs, preparing for the inevitable. They knew they had to find a way for 3,500 families to become self-supporting by the summer of 1999. This change promised a seismic paradigm shift, and not just for welfare recipients.

"We are asking eligibility workers to change their jobs 100 percent," says Lynn Miller of the Human Resources Agency. "For over 50 years, AFDC was an entitlement program. Our [only] job was to make sure they got it and that they qualified."

The program Miller is referring to, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, has always been the backbone of the nation's welfare or "cash aid" programs. Its new name, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), reflects both the new limitations and the new perspective bureaucrats like Miller are expected to take.

Miller admits that the new requirements have fundamentally changed the way he sees his purpose. "We never recognized barriers before [to getting off welfare] because it was an entitlement," he says. "I think we enabled, to some degree."

Administrators point out that the majority of Santa Cruz County AFDC recipients used it as a "bridge." But a sizable number have collected benefits for six years or more, and some even land in the "multigenerational" column. The HRA estimates that 30 percent of welfare recipients here—about 1,000 adults—fit that category.

Now, everyone who receives TANF, Food Stamps or SSI (Supplemental Security Income) will have a maximum of two years to join a work program or get some education, a challenge that administrators are scrambling to meet.

Many are pinning their hopes on a program called GAIN (Greater Avenues for Independence). First begun in 1989, GAIN

WELFARE AS THEY KNOW IT

Born Into the System

A lifelong welfare recipient asks, 'What if you let one door close behind you but the one in front of you closes, too?'

'M'Y MOM WAS WHITE AND MY DAD WAS BLACK. They called her white trash for having a black man." Lorraine pauses and stares out the window. Her eyes, fringed with thick lashes and tilted up at the ends like a fairy's, remain blank. "I was raised by my auntie," she continues. "I ended up on welfare because my uncle told me I should get on it. I was pregnant with my second baby and working two jobs. I was 20 years old at the time."

That's how Lorraine, who despite assurances so fears government reprisal that she refuses to give her last name or be photographed, begins her life story. Her tale meanders through a landscape marked with heroin-addicted guardians, criminal boyfriends (one of whom left her when their daughter was two weeks old) and bad apartments.

Lorraine, 27, is slim and elegant even in a plain blue T-shirt and print leggings—and even after five children. She's been on AFDC and food stamps for seven years. She's been without a home since June and has no idea how she's going to get into one.

She can't work, she says, because she can't afford child care. Even if she did find work, the Temporary Child Care program requires payment up front which is then reimbursed. And the \$860 she receives each month from AFDC isn't enough to get her into a place or cover a first month's worth of child care, which could run to as much as \$2,000 a month for her five children.

Lorraine has been enrolled in GAIN (Greater Avenues to Independence) but she hasn't found a mother lode of opportunity in it. In the three years she's participated—the only years of her adult life in which she hasn't had a child under age three—she has completed her GED, but hasn't accomplished much else that could help her find work.

Even though Lorraine cautiously approves of the welfare-to-work concept that lies at the heart of California's new welfare reform proposal, she has doubts about what's really going to happen when the two-year limit is reached.

"What are they going to do when they reach the end of two years and all these people still don't have jobs?" she asks hesitantly, voicing with utter candor the same argument opponents of welfare reform have been sputtering at legislators since last August.

She fears that if she attempts to return to the workforce now, she'll find herself stranded in the no man's land between welfare and a livable wage.

"What if you let one door close behind you but the one in front of you closes, too? Then you have nowhere to go." She adds under her breath, "I already have nowhere to go," and shakes herself the way people do when they hear ghost stories.

In spite of the severity of her situation, Lorraine still clings to what she calls "majority dreams"—aspirations to be a part of corporate America and to someday send her grandchildren, if not her children, to private school. She's also a writer—having kept journals since she was 11 years old—and would like someday to write for a living.

As far as she's concerned, where she comes from doesn't determine who she is. "Even though I was born in the ghetto, it wasn't born in me," she says. "I don't feed it. I could have been a hooker, a real bad thief, a drug abuser. I am an alcoholic and an addict, but I'm not active. I choose to be dry. I choose to be clear-minded."

Her exquisite face is glowing as she says these words, but the most poignant thing happens when I ask her the next question.

Statistically, the welfare stereotype of a single woman with a large family doesn't hold water. The average Santa Clara County family receiving AFDC has only 1.9 children—two-tenths of a child fewer than the overall American average of 2.1. But statistics won't help Lorraine feed and clothe her kids, so in the kindest way I know how, I pose the question that's always on people's minds when they read about women like Lorraine: "Why do you keep having children when you can't afford to raise them?"

Something like a veil drops over her shining eyes, and the blank look returns. "Since I was young I always wanted a big family," she replies. "Three boys and three girls."

And that, somehow, brings our conversation to a close.

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was designed to help welfare recipients identify and overcome obstacles to employment, professional or personal.

Now folded into TANF, the workshops have also been retooled to meet the needs of the new reform.

Pam Davinson manages the self-sufficiency programs which operate the GAIN workshops weekly in both North and South County. Her agency is preparing to get busier.

Everybody Wants to Work

BEGINNING LAST YEAR, the agency shifted its focus to finding job for the people who came in the doors. GAIN has tripled the number of clients it serves and now boasts an 80 percent job placement rate.

Davinson says that this success is owed, in no small part, to the way Santa

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WELFARE AS THEY KNOW IT

Not out of the Woods Yet

GA checks and food stamps either make or break ABAWDs

CHRIS MAYO'S ONLY 42, but his hands look 30 years older. They're swollen, discolored by years of sun and mottled at the wrists with a bright blue web of broken veins—testimony, explains the native Tennessean, to his angina, a three-pack-a-day cigarette habit, and a lifetime of hard living that at various times has included heroin addiction and nightly dates with a fifth of Old Charter.

Listening to Mayo now it's hard to imagine those days. Since his arrival in Santa Cruz this past April he's quit drinking, cut back his smoking to half a pack a day and joined the Seventh Day Adventists. Heroin he kicked years ago with the help of his wife, a nurse. Now sober, blessed with a new outlook on life, and dressed carefully in a striped shirt and clean jeans, he's also homeless, three time zones away from his estranged wife and teenage children and about to lose half his monthly income of \$248.

"Yes, I am worried about it," he says seriously in a soft mountain twang. "If I lost my food stamps I'd have to use my GA [General Assistance] to eat. That's about four dollars a day. A bus pass costs three dollars, so there you go."

Mayo receives \$128 each month in GA and \$120 in food stamps. He will soon exhaust the three months' worth of food stamps allotted to him under reformed welfare guidelines, and it will be three years before he can collect them again.

Able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs in social services parlance) are targeted by the new eligibility laws. Under the new policy, most ABAWDs can collect food stamps only three out of 36 months.

Mayo, who's of average height, with hazel eyes and a neat, graying beard, speaks deliberately and without self-pity about his predicament. "I try to find work, but I haven't been very successful," he says. "One-fifteen Coral [the Santa Cruz shelter] is a known address, and people shy away when they see that. I do know how to cook, but I have hepatitis C, so no restaurant will hire me."

Back in Nashville, Mayo had a tree-trimming service until a 55-foot plunge from a Chinese elm last July laid him up with multiple breaks of his ribs, arms and legs. Now saddled with a heart condition and armed with only a ninth-grade education, Mayo just hopes his doctor will determine he's disabled so he can keep getting food stamps. His appointment is on the last day of July.

"This is either gonna make me or break me, you know what I mean?" he says.

A freckle-faced redheaded kid who looks about 16 has been waiting nearby anxiously, skateboard in hand.

"You almost done, Pa?" he asks, jittery.

"Be with you in a minute, Red," Mayo answers quietly. "They call me Pa," he says, turning back to a visitor, "I guess 'cause I'm the elder of the camp."

Until he became too ill to make the three-mile uphill trek, Mayo lived in the woods in a camp that is home to many of Santa Cruz's teenage homeless population: the runaways. There, he says, he tried to stretch out his food stamps and GA allowance to feed groups of two to six teenagers—kids too young to get food stamps themselves.

"There's a whole big picture to this," he observes thoughtfully, watching the morning activity at the Homeless Community Resource Center. "Me, I'm just a little speck in the corner."

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Cruz social service agencies are changing their perspectives. "We saw [welfare recipients] as 'less than.' But when we saw them as capable, functioning human beings and told them, 'Go out and get the best job you can,' things changed."

But even with access to training, single-mother families—which characterize almost 80 percent of area TANF cases—must still find a way out of what has long been a Catch-22: child care.

The state has helped fund child care for fewer than one out of four dependent families over the past two years. At this point, no one knows for sure whether a reform bill will come out of Sacramento with increased funding for child care.

However, every program administrator agrees that developing self-sufficient families in this county provides a daunting challenge.

"We have a lot of small businesses, [which means] less pay and less opportunity to get ahead," Miller says.

Miller hopes for a reform law that allows her clients to make a living.

"That minimum-wage job is going to have to move to a self-sufficient job," she says. "Getting a job, then getting off welfare is not enough. We want it so you can be self-sufficient in Santa Cruz."

According to a worksheet provided by Californians for Family Economic Self-Sufficiency, a women's advocacy program, a single parent with two school-age children would need to make an hourly wage of \$14 to meet the basic needs of housing, food, child care and medical care in Santa Cruz County. With three preschoolers, that hourly wage jumps to around \$27.

Those figures have people like Chris Lyons-Johnson, executive director of the Santa Cruz Community Action Board, worried. "Our worst fear is that persons aged and disabled, as well as families with children, will be forced into poverty and homelessness," says Lyons-Johnson. "The realities of the job market in Santa Cruz County are a major obstacle. There aren't enough jobs now for people looking for work."

Legal immigrants face the most severe cuts. Under the new federal guidelines, they will lose access to food stamps and SSI benefits next month. At press time, the governor is negotiating with the Assembly over a proposal that would have the state provide \$160 million to replace the cut-off federal money. According to Will deBroekert, district manager of the Social Security Administration, that could affect 3,000 county residents.

Although Santa Cruz has struggled to meet the coming welfare reform changes, administrators are concerned that recipients will not avail themselves of the services in time. "We're afraid that people aren't going to come in until it's really late," says Davinson. "We want everyone to know to use as much of our services as you need to."

Without a crystal ball, no one can predict who will gain and who will lose in the following years. The "campus" may be nothing more than a school of hard knocks for some. But others predict that it will offer what campuses traditionally have provided: education, a widening of horizons and a fresh opportunity.



Off The Ground: Tammy Gilmore's optimism and drive will be aided by increased support for a government job training and education program.