

SEARCHING FOR AMERICA'S HEART



RFK AND THE RENEWAL OF HOPE

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been accomplished. It turned out that sanctions and terminations, combined with rejection of new applicants, did the trick, leaving us with 3 million "disappeared."

The Human Side

WE NEED TO understand this in human terms. We need to appreciate the real stories — the heartening ones, the sad ones, and the exasperating ones. The people involved represent every tale one can imagine. It is important not to forget that this is about real people.

Our disappeared are no longer listed as welfare recipients, and since they are not employed they do not show up in unemployment-insurance records either. Some married or moved in with a man (all too often one who is abusive to them or their children, or both), some moved in with extended families (in crowded circumstances that often lead to new upheavals), and some are homeless. They piece together an existence with casual earnings, food stamps and Medicaid (although many who are eligible are getting neither), maybe housing assistance, visits to food pantries and soup kitchens, help from family members, and, for some, selling drugs or selling their bodies. Some give up their children to foster care.

We can find them one by one. I have talked to some of them. They have names and faces, and children they love dearly. They have stories that testify to the bad effects of current policy and give flesh and texture to the statistics.

Boston

SANDY, WHOM I met at a transitional shelter called Project Hope at a former convent in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, was in her mid-twenties and had three children, who were five, four, and one when we met in late 1999. We talked around

the kitchen table with others pulled together by Malikkah P. and Betsy S., who after being on welfare now have jobs as advocates for women like Sandy.

Sandy's baby has asthma, which is ubiquitous in the inner city. He is in and out of the hospital frequently — "like every other week," Sandy said. She worked fairly regularly until her third pregnancy, but she was sick a lot during that time and had to quit her job at Walgreen's. She never wanted to go on welfare, but did so to get income "to take care of the kids." It was never enough to live on.

Sandy had been homeless for several months and had recently gotten an apartment, thanks to a housing voucher. She said her life had become "a little raggedy." She was being treated by a psychiatrist for depression. After we talked for an hour or so, she said she was having stomach pains and needed to go home. When Malikkah came back from taking Sandy home, she said she thought Sandy might have an ulcer from all of the stress in her life.

Sandy had hit the two-year limit for welfare in Massachusetts. Her food stamps were also cut off when she hit the limit, even though that is illegal under federal law. These actions rendered her homeless. A state with a national reputation for liberalism, Massachusetts in fact has one of the toughest welfare policies in the country. Even before the 1996 federal law was enacted, Republican Governor William Weld got the Democratic legislature to enact a new system so stingy it was illegal under the old federal law. Weld had a national reputation as a "liberal" Republican because of his positions on abortion and the environment, but when it came to poor people the reality was quite different. It was a mark of the position of the poor in our political pecking order that few people noted Weld's views on welfare when judging his record.

People who hit the initial time limit can come back on the system in three years, because Massachusetts has a lifetime five-year limit, but it allows only two years at a time. Extensions are possi-

ble but very hard to come by. As of June 1999, eight thousand Massachusetts families had hit the time limit and only five hundred extensions had been granted. Sandy asked for an extension and was told she had to go into a training program to get one. She signed up, but then a required tuberculosis test came back positive. It took two more months to determine that she didn't have TB, and Sandy finally received an extension, a mixed blessing since it counted against her lifetime limit. When I met her, she was getting limited child support from the father of her baby, plus Medicaid and a housing voucher, not enough to live on.

It was hard for Sandy to see a state welfare worker personally about the food stamp cutoff, because her son was quite sick. She tried calling her assigned worker every day but the worker never called back. She finally went downtown to see the worker and was told that she couldn't see a worker without an appointment.

It was not clear what will become of Sandy, just as it is not clear what will become of all the other Sandys out there. She has family in a nearby suburb who give some help, but their resources are limited. Her depression is probably not serious enough to warrant a finding that she is legally disabled. She is a high school graduate, is literate and articulate, and wants to work. She does not want to be on welfare. But she has young children and emotional problems.

Malikkah and Betsy said they were seeing more and more women with children and no income of any sort coming into the shelters, some for the second and third time, after being evicted for nonpayment of rent. How do they survive when they are not in the shelters? "They beg, borrow, and steal," said Sister Margaret Leonard, who runs Project Hope. "People will do anything to feed their children," Malikkah added. "Before, they did prostitution to pay for drugs. Now they're doing it to feed their kids. Just the other day I saw a girl out there who I went to school with." Davena A., another former welfare recipient who joined the discussion later on, said, "There are a lot of women on

the street who look so brand new. Their faces look so scared, so immature.”

Dr. Deborah Frank, who sees low-income children at Boston Medical Center, told me she is seeing increasing numbers of malnourished children, because of the time limits and because Massachusetts is a “family cap” state — no welfare for children born to a mother already on welfare. (Sandy’s third child is a family-cap baby.) Dr. Frank said a typical pattern is that the baby is well-enough nourished but the next child up in the birth order is malnourished, because of the mother’s desperate efforts to stretch her check far enough to feed something to all of her children.

Malikkah and Betsy took turns telling me stories of women who had jobs and were laid off or had to quit because of their own or a child’s health, and had either exhausted their time limit or were simply told by the welfare people to look for another job.

The one thing Sandy and a limited number of others have going for them is Project Hope. Presided over by Sister Margaret, whose caring and savvy infuse every inch of the place, Project Hope means survival for hundreds of women and their children in Dorchester. The nuns and the other wonderful women who work there convey an infectious warmth and positive spirit.

Supported by federal, state, and city grants, diverse religious groups, the United Way, local foundations, and private contributions (think of the skill required to piece all of that together every year), Project Hope has a complex mix of activities. There is transitional living space for homeless women and their children, where a fortunate few live for six months to a year while they put the pieces of their lives back together — getting work, housing, child care, and anything else needed for a decent chance of avoiding further disaster. The average residence is now eight months, up from three months a few years ago because of a huge and worsening shortage of affordable housing in the Boston area. Massachusetts actually has an extra two thousand housing vouch-

ers under a special federal program, but they do not help as much as they should, because there is so little housing available.

Project Hope has a licensed and nationally accredited (a rarity) child care center for twenty-six children age zero through six, unusual both in its provision of infant care (there are hardly any infant slots available around the country, even though many states require women to work when their children are three months old) and in its willingness to take a few children whose mothers have no voucher from the state to pay for the care. There is an adult learning program that serves twenty to thirty women a year, many of them immigrants, and sends many of its graduates on to higher education. There is a community organizing unit that reaches out to build civic awareness and political participation in the neighborhood, which helped to triple local voter turnout in 1998 and elect a dynamic young Haitian American lawyer to the state legislature. There is a food pantry open three days a week for neighborhood families. As is typical throughout the country, demand for its assistance has increased substantially over the last few years. And there is a transition-to-work collaborative, where Malikkah and Betsy work, involving a number of local homeless shelters.

Project Hope is unusual in that Sister Margaret and her colleagues are also effective policy advocates, bringing an authentic message to decision makers who know and respect (but don't necessarily heed) them. Project Hope residents and staff are frequent witnesses at state legislative hearings.

The Dorchester neighborhood has more services than most, but the large numbers of people hurt by current welfare policy swamp its ability to cope. When we think about the even larger numbers — block by block and neighborhood by neighborhood — affected in places like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Philadelphia, we can begin to appreciate the magnitude of the crisis. There are marvelous helping organizations and advocates

in all these places, but their efforts are dwarfed by the numbers needing help.

Malikkah, herself a success story of the old system, said she was not sure what would have happened to her if she had hit the time limit earlier. In her late twenties when we met, with four children, she was on public assistance for eight years, but she always had a part-time job, and sometimes two. For her, welfare was always a small supplement, never her only source of income. While on it, Malikkah got her high school equivalency and graduated from Bunker Hill Community College, and now was pursuing a B.A. at the University of Massachusetts College of Public and Community Service (which I helped to found as vice president of the University of Massachusetts). Her children are doing well. Her twelve-year-old, she said proudly, had been on the honor roll since fourth grade.

Welfare was an important help, but there were other factors. Malikkah's parents, her grandmother, and her whole family always pushed her to finish her education, in contrast to many families she knows "that give women a hard time for going to college." And, she said, "I was lucky. I met Sister Margaret."

Not that welfare was any bed of roses for Malikkah. The welfare people tried to push her out of community college, and refused to pay for full-time child care while she was there. Because benefit amounts were based on her previous month's earnings, the welfare check didn't reflect her current earnings, and it was hard to manage. Nonetheless, she had the extra funds to help keep things together. Under the new system, welfare payments to supplement low wages, if offered at all, are subject to time limits unless a state uses its own money to fund them. The federal Earned Income Tax Credit helps, but not enough. Malikkah, who now has a job, a car, and child support, would very possibly not have been able to finish college if she had hit a time limit. Besides, Massachusetts has been in the forefront of states that force

women on welfare to drop out of college and go to work or participate in a work program.

Betsy, who when we met had three years of credit toward her degree at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, said she "would still be in retail" if she had been subject to a two-year time limit. She was no longer receiving cash assistance but was still getting child care help. Like everything else in the world of public help for the poor and near poor, this is intensely bureaucratic business. Betsy had to turn in her pay stubs regularly to prove that she was still qualified for the child care help. She lost a pay stub once and was cut off. "When you lose the slot," she pointed out, "you go to the back of the waiting list, and it can be two years before you get back on. You have to go to the child care office in person to fight them, because they don't return phone calls. So you have to have a sympathetic boss. A retail store wouldn't let someone do that."

Another bureaucratic absurdity in Massachusetts and many other states is that child care help is not available while a woman looks for a job. Even worse, in some states vouchers are not provided until the woman produces her first pay stub. This can mean that a woman obtains a job, can't get child care before she is to start work, and then loses the job before she starts because she has no child care. One of the four women profiled in a Connecticut public-television documentary for which I was interviewed had exactly this experience. As Malikkah said in our conversation, "If your child care isn't right, nothing's right."

The whole welfare-to-work structure in Massachusetts is unsatisfactory, according to Malikkah and Betsy. Malikkah reported "awful experience with all of the welfare-to-work programs. Only one or two out of three hundred women we've sent have completed the programs and found jobs." Women find jobs, but not because of help from the system.

Betsy was receiving child support from the father of one of her

three children (she is married to the father of the other two) — but in fact the state was getting the money and keeping all but fifty dollars a month to offset the benefits it gave her in earlier years. (Many men pay more than fifty dollars directly to the mother, because it is less than what a court would order. Mothers strong-arm this money out of them by threatening to report them to the welfare authorities.) Betsy said that when she started getting the fifty dollars, the state took away seventy-five dollars of her food stamp allotment. When I protested that you're only supposed to lose thirty cents of food stamps for every dollar of additional income, Malikkah interrupted and said, "We're not talking about the law, we're talking about the practice."

Publicly funded support has always been meted out grudgingly, with crackdowns running in cycles. If you go back to before the sixties and the advent of legal-services lawyers, sympathetic courts, and welfare rights organizers, there was broad local discretion to decide who deserved to get help. The 1996 law took us back to that time in many ways. With a federal entitlement (at whatever meager level) repealed, many states have chosen to turn away as many applicants as possible and to terminate people when they fail to show up for an appointment or are late for a workfare job. These people can typically apply for reinstatement in a month or two but they may not be approved, and by then they may be homeless.

Malikkah said many of the women she knows have left welfare for "administrative reasons," as the classification jargon puts it. They are told that they missed an appointment or didn't file a required form, often when they didn't know they had an appointment or actually did turn in the form. Malikkah continued, "You have to hunt your worker down. They have often moved to another office. It's always the client's fault. People finally say, 'Okay, I give up.' The only light we have through the tunnel of welfare is Greater Boston Legal Services. They can get things done. But their caseload is outrageous."

Front-line workers are sometimes explicitly told to be extremely stingy with food stamps and Medicaid, even though these benefits are still federally guaranteed. More often the antiwelfare message confuses both workers and computers, resulting in erroneous terminations or denials of food stamps and Medicaid, or failure to tell people they are immediately eligible for food stamps and Medicaid. Further, applicants often don't know the rules. For such reasons, food stamp and Medicaid rolls are down by far more than one can attribute to economic conditions. This is one of the reasons why food-pantry and soup-kitchen business is on the rise in so many places.

Debbie G. and Davena A. joined the conversation. Debbie, who was in her forties, moved back to Boston from Atlanta with her five children in the early nineties to get away from a violent relationship. She went into a battered-women's shelter and was there for eleven months because, even though she had a housing voucher, she got the runaround looking for housing outside the inner city. I asked if she thought it had been for racial reasons. She looked at me patiently and said it could have been the fact of her race, the fact that she had five children, the fact that she was renting with a housing voucher, the fact that she was a single parent, or all of the above. She finally found a place in Dorchester.

With three years of college and after going through a training program at Roxbury Community College, Debbie was able to get a job as a family advocate. But one of her children had mental-health problems stemming from the domestic violence, and when Debbie started missing work to deal with her child's situation, her employer started docking her pay. Debbie decided to quit the job and finish college. She went on welfare, but the welfare people wouldn't let her go to college. What saved her was Americorps, which placed her for two years at a place called Connecting the Dots for Boston Tots, paid for child care, and enabled her to get her B.A. In late 1999 she was working to help other women develop their skills. "I'm giving back," she said proudly.

She was still struggling with depression, but was proud of what she had accomplished.

Debbie said the significance of her experience is that "community support can help women who are transitioning. It helped me as an older woman. They say everybody can do it," she continued. "That's not true. The ones with high school diplomas or GEDs [high school equivalencies] and work experience, okay. But the ones with a third grade education, the ones with language problems, the ones who don't say anything, they get terminated. Emotional problems? The welfare people don't take those into account."

Davena was in her late twenties, and lived at Project Hope for six months in the early nineties. She and her daughter (she had two daughters when we met) had been living with her mother and sisters and brother, but she felt overwhelmed and constantly undermined by others in the household. She was a high school graduate who had worked in convenience stores and at a yogurt shop, and she "was going to prove to my mother that I was not going to be someone on welfare," but she fell apart with the stress of working, parenting, and going to a computer-learning center. She ended up on welfare and at Project Hope.

A social worker named Nina began working with Davena, who ignored her at first. Nina would push notes under her door, and finally they connected. Davena was given a job as a resource coordinator at Project Hope, and then went to Bunker Hill Community College when Nina pushed her to apply for a scholarship. She remembers Nina's support when she got a C-plus on her first paper, which came back all marked up with a red pen. She was the first in her family to get an A.A. degree, and when I met her was going to UMass Boston while working at a settlement house to "help clients who need extra help" with family reunification, getting drug treatment, or finding housing. She said, "School is my second love. They can't stop me now. And my mother is proud of me now." She believes Nina "made all the difference."

Many of the mothers who end up homeless are not that different from those who don't. When a two-bedroom apartment costs almost all of a minimum-wage paycheck, it is not that hard for things to fall apart. More and more women who could make it with a low-paying job if they received some extra cash help beyond their wages are showing up in crisis. And women with particular problems and limitations are even more likely to hit the wall.

While women in crisis have the most dramatic stories, the workers emphasized to me that, as Malikkah said, "There is a second layer — the people who get jobs but can't support their families, especially the ones with four or five kids. It's a treadmill, like the hamster. They have to get a second job, they never see the kids, and the kids start acting out." Betsy said, "Once you're on the right track you start losing all the various kinds of help you were getting. But you're still not out of the woods." Davena said, "I still owe money." "So do I," said Debbie, "from three years ago. I couldn't pay all the bills while I was on welfare."

Chicago

MY VISITS IN Chicago were to the far southwest and the far southeast parts of the city — miles of neighborhoods that house masses of low-income people and offer few supportive services. The southeast side was once working class, with nearby steel and other heavy manufacturing jobs, but the jobs are long gone.

Compared with Massachusetts, Illinois is not exceptionally punitive, although policies vary around the state and their application varies from worker to worker. Illinois uses the federal five-year time limit and, on paper at least, has made a good investment in child care.

The places I visited in Chicago were transitional shelters for women with children, run under Catholic auspices. One was in a former convent and the other in a former rectory. Both were