

# 'We Care' Sunday

## Elmira

By Martin Toombs,  
Southern Tier Editor

Elmira — "We Care" Sunday received an ecumenical push at the Southern Tier Office of Human Development May 28, as representatives of local churches and human service agencies explained their perspective on the statewide drive to get public assistance grants increased.

"We Care" Sunday was a special observance in the Rochester diocese last weekend. A letter from Bishop Clark asked pastors to educate their parishes about the need for an increase in public assistance, or welfare, grants in the state.

The move for the increase is being sponsored statewide by a variety of groups, including all the state's Catholic dioceses, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, the state Association of Jewish Federations, the state Council of Churches, the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the United Way of New York State.

Since the effort began, the state Assembly has approved a 10 percent increase in basic grant levels. That proposal presently is sitting in a Senate committee, with the legislature expected to adjourn soon for the summer.

Materials distributed to the parishes explain that due to the food stamp program, funds available to public assistance recipients have increased by 18 percent since 1974. But during that same period, the consumer price index has increased 46 percent, eroding the purchasing power of grants which were considered to be at a survival level in 1974.

The materials also state that 70 percent of those receiving public assistance are children.

Alan Smith of Tri-County Action Council, a housing agency, pointed out that the state's housing allowances are substantially below actual housing costs. The situation means that families on public assistance must live in substandard housing, or take money from their already inadequate living allowance to make up the rest of their rent payment. For Schuyler County, he noted, the maximum rent allowance for a family of four is \$177 per month. But surveys his agency conducts indicate that housing for such a family would cost \$58 more than that.

Rev. Clint Barlow of the First Baptist Church of Elmira reported that while his church, like the others downtown he expected, has always had many persons call on it for assistance, where previously they needed food, they now need money to pay their rent. The grants, he said, have become increasingly inadequate, and the churches are unable to provide the additional assistance families on public assistance now need.

Giovina Carosio of the Office of Human Development (OHD) pointed out the opposition to a grant increase by the local state senator, William T. Smith of Big Flats,

who is the deputy majority leader in the Senate. She noted that points he has made in opposition to the increase in a letter to his fellow legislators have been refuted by the state Catholic Conference, and by the state Commissioner of Social Services.

Father Neil Miller of OHD

noted that the drive's purpose is to get people to write their legislators in support of an increase.

In his letter to the diocese's parishes, Bishop Clark asked that petitions be distributed, and offered a resolution for discussion and possible adoption by parish councils in support of an increase.



Photo by Terrance J. Brennan

In conjunction with We Care Sunday, the parishioners of St. Joseph's in Penfield, along with other churches in that area, joined in a canned food drive that culminated with a caravan to the Food Bank on Clinton Avenue in Rochester. Some of the 3,200-plus cans of food are being loaded by Carol Lehr and Sue Costich into one of the vehicles which proceeded downtown in a caravan.

## Rochester

At a press conference last Friday, a group of area religious leaders, including Bishop Matthew H. Clark, called on the State Legislature for an increase in the public assistance basic grant level.

The leaders of eight religious denominations called upon their flocks "during this season of Pentecost to live out the message of the Christian Gospel and take action on behalf of the poorest people of our community."

They pointed out that the monthly public assistance levels have not been adjusted since 1974 and that the current monthly cash assistance of \$258 is based upon prices of January 1972.

"Inflation," they stated, "has eroded the value of the public assistance by more than 50 percent since the last adjustment."

A fact sheet they released stated that "there are 9,976 public assistance cases in Monroe County, involving a total of 27,300 persons. 66 percent (about 18,200) are children; the remainder are their mothers or single or married adults who fall into the 'Home Relief' category."

The fact sheet declares that the "Monroe County Department of Social Services handles 1,900 Home Relief cases serving 2,300 persons. Fully a third of them are

considered unemployable because of (1) language difficulties, (2) mental or physical impairment, (3) lack of education, (4) lack of vocational training."

Even with food stamps, public assistance recipients receive just "slightly over \$2 per day per person for food."

In a joint pastoral letter, the leaders of eight religious bodies told their flocks, "We write to you in the conviction that concern for the poor and the hungry is not an optional issue for Christians. We close with a statement from the 1978 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion which we heartily endorse and commend to you:

"We have no doubt that, like Christ and in his Name, the church today should take its stand alongside the deprived, the disadvantaged and the oppressed, in the strong solidarity of love. We also believe that it is a legitimate — even an obligatory — extension of Christ's compassion that Christians involve themselves with others in the quest for better economic and social structures. Unjust structures dehumanize people; that is why Christian compassion demands justice for them. Christians are not as powerless as they often think. In some situations only by prayer, suffering and the silent exhibition of a better way, but

in others by the resistance and denunciation of evil, by fearless witness to truth, righteousness and freedom, by pressure on public opinion and in other ways, it is possible for Christians to help bring about social change, thus acting as the salt and light which Jesus said his followers should be.

"So it is today. So will it always be. Amen."

In addition to Bishop Clark, the pastoral letter was signed by Bishop Robert R. Spears Jr. of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester; The Rev. Dr. John Beeg, dean of the Genesee Valley District Lutheran Church in America; the Rev. Margrethe B.J. Brown, executive presbyter of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.; the Rev. Jack Cassidy, area conference minister of the United Church of Christ; the Rev. Raymond Graves, president, United Church Ministry; the Rev. Dr. Richard W. Harrington, district superintendent, Rochester District, United Methodist Church; the Rev. Hugh Q. Morton, executive minister, American Baptist Churches of Monroe Association; Mrs. Isabel, president, and the Rev. Lawrence E. Witmer, executive director, both of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries, also signed the letter.



The caravan of food heads for the Food Bank.

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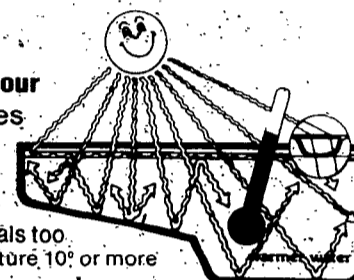
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