

Local News

Welfare recipients urge reform of 'reprehensible' system

By Teresa A. Parsons

Diane Pitts and Linda Marsh, know all too well what it's like to depend on welfare. They also claim to know as much about the welfare system as any social services caseworker, and more than many. Most importantly, they're not afraid to say so.

But that wasn't always the case.

Marsh, a diabetic, has had her foodstamps canceled three times by a caseworker who claimed she was ineligible because she is a full-time student.

Pitts didn't realize until she gave birth to her third child that she was eligible for extra welfare benefits during pregnancy. Once she finally found out, it was too late to collect those benefits.

On the other hand, had either woman unknowingly collected more than the amount to which she was entitled, she could have been denied up to 10 percent of her benefits each month for as long as it took the welfare system to recoup the overpayment.

Once, like most of their counterparts, Pitts and Marsh would have been afraid to challenge such a one-sided policy. But that was before they met Robert Ingram.

Ingram is a social worker whose encounters with the Department of Social Services (DSS) have been professional rather than personal. He regards welfare as a "morally reprehensible" system that was created to help people, but which helps as little as possible and makes that help as hard to get as possible.

Together, Pitts, Marsh and Ingram form part of a rare alliance between economically deprived people and "middle-class do-gooders." The alliance is known as EMPOWER, and its aim is to promote the obsolescence of poverty through welfare reform.

Each week, the half-dozen volunteers who staff EMPOWER's tiny offices at 121 N. Fitzhugh Street field dozens of calls from welfare recipients who have gotten letters they don't understand from DSS, who can't get an appointment with a caseworker, or whose benefits have been cut off for reasons they don't comprehend.

Because they are welfare recipients them-

selves, volunteers understand the terror and frustration in their callers' voices. "People applying tend to take what the caseworker says as gospel, but that's not always the case," Pitts said. "They get intimidated when caseworker tell them, 'Look, it's my job to know about this.'"

Even when recipients understand their rights, they are often afraid to assert them for fear that their benefits will be cut off. "The reason they are afraid is that the Department of Social Services is their umbilical cord," Ingram said. "It's a terrifying experience to speak out against a system on which you are totally dependent."

That's where the confidence of "middle-class do-gooders" comes in handy. Almost two years ago, Ingram persuaded several of his clients to describe their struggles with the welfare office during a public affairs forum at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church where he worships.

Charlie, a World War II veteran, related how

he walked more than a mile during a snowstorm to the DSS office on Westfall Road to find out why his welfare check had not arrived. Unable to get either a check and/or answers, Charlie walked home again, experiencing chest pains along the way. He spent the weekend in bed, without money, food or medicine. The following Monday, he visited a clinic and was hospitalized for a heart attack. Shortly thereafter, he suffered three strokes that left him permanently disabled.

"When this nice guy told his story to these good-hearted but uninformed people, the magic happened," Ingram said.

The "magic" took the form of funding and other types of support. Downtown United Presbyterian Church's Session, or ruling body, approved a start-up grant of \$7,500 in January, 1986. The following March, several of Ingram's clients met with church, agency and institutional representatives and formed a board of directors. EMPOWER was underway.

Since then, the group has attracted addition-

al funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CHD) and Hands Across America.

From the beginning, welfare recipients have determined EMPOWER's agenda. Church members and other middle-class supporters have provided advice and transportation, accompanying recipients on legislative visits and exercising their own influence in support of recipients' aims.

Members quickly identified three major concerns, which became their first objectives. Telephoning DSS offices was almost impossible, they claimed. Lines were usually either busy or left unanswered. When an operator did answer, he or she usually responded that the recipient's caseworker was busy, then hung up. A second target was rent allowances, which EMPOWER members described as "grossly inadequate."

Monroe County's welfare recipients were

Continued on Page 6

Six organizations to help the poor help themselves

EMPOWER was one of six local organizations chosen to receive the proceeds of this year's National Campaign for Human Development (NCHD).

Groups that advocate for the rights of farmers and disabled people were also among the local recipients of 1987 CHD grants totaling \$71,438. The grants were announced by Bishop William H. Clark and Dr. Albert Bonak, president of the diocesan board of social services, at a public conference on Wednesday, Oct. 28.

At the same public conference, Bishop Clark and Father Albert LaForte, executive director of the National Campaign for Human Development, announced an award of \$10,000 to the New York State Farm Alliance's Farmer Advocate Network Project. The project attempts to build a network of farmers throughout the state that can advocate on farm issues with a strong and united voice.

Established by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1976, CHD provides financial support to self-help projects organized and managed by and for low-income people. The campaign is supported by an annual collection taken in most dioceses the Sunday before Thanksgiving. In the Diocese of Rochester however, the CHD collection occurs shortly after Easter. These quarters of the diocesan collection is sent to CHD offices in Washington, while the remaining two quarters is distributed locally.

To qualify for CHD funds, projects must benefit the poor, must be directed and managed by members of the low-income community, and must attack root causes of poverty.

The year's grants were awarded to: EMPOWER — \$6,000 for partial salary for a staff organizer to advocate for the rights of welfare recipients.

The Center for Local Food and Agriculture's Agria Project — \$3,560 to link mar-

ginal farmers in Tompkins County with low-income unemployed in a producer-entrepreneur relationship.

Community Action is Self-Help (CASH)'s Welfare Outreach Project — \$5,000 to organize welfare rights groups.

Group for Adult Physically Disabled \$1,700 for expansion of organizing and advocacy services to Seneca and Allegany counties.

New York State Farm Alliance's Farm and Rural Women's Organizing Project — \$6,954 to organize rural and farm women in Tompkins, Wayne, and Cayuga counties to advocate for federal and state policies to save family farms.

Politics of Food Program's Community Gardens Project — \$4,621 to develop vacant lots in Rochester's Upper Falls area as community gardens operated and managed by neighborhood residents.

Valley Cadillac's Markdown Sale!

Our Professional Sales Staff is qualified to handle your new and used car needs: Lou Belardino, Vic Carroll, Don Carrozzini, Ray Comins, Phillip French, Dick Gaffney, Ben Greco, James F. Kenny, John Knop, Dave Moffitt, Nate Ringer.

Table with 10 columns listing car models (e.g., '84 CADILLAC SEVILLE, '85 CADILLAC SEDAN DE VILLE) and their 'NOW' prices (e.g., \$13,668, \$11,956).

THE VALLEY CADILLAC CORPORATION 3100 Winton Road South 427-8400 The Cadillac of Used Car Dealers

Advertisement for General Weathermaster featuring services like Kitchens, Baths, Siding, and Vinyl Prime Replacement Windows. Includes phone number 647-1000 and address 110 Lake Ave., Rochester, N.Y.