

Local News

Wayne activists challenge practices of county welfare office

By Lee Strong

Based on the results of a recently completed survey, welfare rights activists in Wayne County claim that the county Department of Social Services' policies concerning security deposits make it difficult for public assistance recipients to find and afford adequate housing.

The survey results were released at a community forum held Wednesday, May 18, in the Lyons Community Center.

The survey — conducted in March and April by the Welfare Rights Organization of Wayne County — revealed that two-thirds of the 100 county landlords contacted by the organization would accept only cash security deposits, not the security letters that the county offers in lieu of cash deposits.

For the survey, the organization contacted landlords in the county known to rent to public assistance recipients.

The landlords surveyed cited several problems with security letters, according to Mona Jimenez, an organizer for the welfare rights group and one of the survey coordinators.

The landlords claimed that when they submitted the letters to the county for reimbursement, the county was slow or reluctant to pay. In addition, they asserted that the amount allotted by the county was inadequate to cover the entire security deposit, and complained that the county will only compensate for non-payment of rent, not for damages to property, Jimenez said.

"(The landlords) didn't think they were worth the paper they were printed on," Jimenez said.

But Wayne County Social Services Commissioner Rita Otterbein contends that her office is doing exactly what state regulations require.

"Several years ago the state regulations effectively eliminated cash security deposits and introduced security letters," Otterbein said, adding that the amount stipulated in the county's letters is the maximum permitted for shelter allowance by the state guidelines.

Otterbein acknowledged that the county's letters are intended to secure against unpaid rent, not to cover damages to the property. She said she was not aware of any difficulties with the landlords because of this distinction.

Otterbein also said that she could not adequately respond to the survey results because she had not seen them or the survey itself. She speculated, however, that some of the land-

lords' complaints may be due to the tenants and not to the social service office and its policies.

"We have to face a fact that when a landlord has a problem with someone getting social services, they blame the department," Otterbein said. "The people who find it difficult to find apartments are people who have been evicted for non-payment of rent."

According to Renee Johnson, spokeswoman for the New York State Department of Social Services, state regulations support the use of discretion and judgment on the part of local commissioners in deciding — within limits — how to operate their offices and disburse assistance. Such judgments are also dictated by local practice, Johnson said.

When landlords refuse to accept welfare recipients as tenants unless some provision is made concerning damages, state regulations do allow damages to be covered if no other rental properties are available, Johnson said.

She pointed out, however, that ultimately, the decision about whether to include damages in the letter is up to the judgment of the local commissioner.

Johnson also noted that the state does not place a limit on the amount to be given for a deposit, again leaving the decision to the discretion of the local commissioner.

The welfare rights group conducted the survey in response to the way that the Wayne County social services office has handled security letters — and the office's claims that rental units are available for the amounts the county makes available.

Public assistance clients formed the activist organization — which is funded in part by grants from the Diocese of Rochester's Campaign for Human Development — in 1983 to voice their complaints about the system.

The organization concentrates on developing local groups and on providing support for their attempts to improve the operations of the social service system. Currently, affiliated groups exist in Lyons, Sodus, Newark, Williamson and Wolcott.

The activists opted to release survey results in a public forum in order to elicit support from church groups and such organizations as the Red Cross and local food pantries that are familiar with the problems public assistance recipients face, according to Julie Kline, who works for Community Action in Self Help, a

group that works in conjunction with the welfare rights organization. The welfare groups also hope that the forum and the resulting publicity will lead to cooperation between a variety of county groups concerned with human service issues.

"The point of doing this is to get a broader base of support so that it's not just a group of welfare recipients," Kline said.

"We want Wayne County to know exactly what we're doing," said Ella Dilworth, a trainee with the activist organization. "This will be our introduction of what we are doing."

Even before the May 18 forum, the group had already received some public notice. Print and broadcast media focused on the organization March 29, when members of the group staged a protest in the social service office's waiting room by serving tuna sandwiches, apple juice and cheeses to visitors.

The unusual demonstration was designed to focus attention on the lack of vending machines in the office. The group claimed that people waiting to see their social workers often had to wait several hours, and were reluctant to leave the building to eat for fear of missing their turns.

On April 20, representatives of the group traveled to Albany to meet with Kathleen Walsh, assistant director of the state's Food Stamp Department to complain that the county did not have an expedited food stamp program.

Expedited food stamps are issued without the usual delay required to begin receiving regular monthly allotments of stamps. The expedited stamps can be approved within two

days, and are intended to meet emergency food needs.

Although the federal government created the expedited food stamp program in 1977 — and the state last year required all counties to make them available — Wayne County did not implement the program until May 2 of this year.

Otterbein acknowledged that the program "was supposed to be in place before we put it in place," but noted that the county was in the process of implementing the program before the protests began.

Jimenez said the county might eventually have implemented the program on its own, but suggested "that probably the process was speeded up by our drawing attention to the issue." She hoped that attention to the question of security letters will produce similar results, adding that the group had received encouragement from the state as a result of the April 29 meeting.

"The state told us that they have been involved with the problem and are monitoring the situation," Jimenez said. In fact, Walsh gave the group a direct contact in the state office, she reported.

Jimenez also said that the social service situation in Wayne County seems to be improving.

"The feeling in the group is that the social service office is willing to change," Jimenez said. "(Commissioner Otterbein) recently wrote requesting regular group meetings.

"We're hoping that it's a long-lasting change," Jimenez added. "For now, we're in a wait-and-see position."

Father Curran rejects conditions on CUA pact

Washington (NC) — Father Charles E. Curran announced Tuesday, May 17, that negotiations over a teaching position for him at The Catholic University of America have come to an impasse.

The moral theologian said at a Washington press conference that he would turn to the courts in his effort to regain a teaching position in his area of academic competence.

Father Curran and the university's board of trustees had reached a tentative agreement last month that would have allowed the priest to teach social ethics outside the school of theology.

The Washington Post reported Tuesday, May 17, that the agreement had collapsed because of two stipulations Father Curran could not accept: that he not be allowed to teach about moral theology; and that no theology student be permitted to take his courses.

Father Curran plans to pursue a lawsuit filed with the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, charging Catholic University with breach of contract.

Nearly two years ago, Vatican officials declared Father Curran, a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, unsuitable to teach moral theology at the pontifical university.

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