Homeless Shelters: A Feeble Response to Homelessness

written by Betty Reid Mandell | March 9, 2009

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE SOMEONE to say to you, "Come with me into the bathroom? I want to watch you pee into this paper cup to see if you have been taking drugs." That is what is happening in some shelters for homeless families in Massachusetts. Steve Valero, a lawyer at Greater Boston Legal Services, is indignant about this and has been telling shelters that it is an illegal practice. Some shelter directors claim they had no idea it was illegal. They thought it would be better to have all residents tested for drugs rather than singling out one person. Valero said that he tells those directors they have it backwards. It might be legal to single out a person whom you suspect of being on drugs if that person was behaving as if she is drugged — for example, if she seems completely stoned and is neglecting her kids. But to test everybody routinely is an illegal invasion of privacy. One shelter resident said that she had to undergo drug testing every week for over 40 weeks, with a staff member watching her pee, even though she has never taken drugs. The war on drugs has invaded shelters for the homeless, treating homeless people as criminals. In this article I discuss the causes of homelessness, how the shelter system, which was presumably a temporary response to homelessness, has become institutionalized as the dominant response, and how it is used for social control. I discuss the various approaches to ending homelessness, many of them distractions from the main cause — poverty.

Structural Causes of Homelessness

ALTHOUGH THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN some homeless people, their numbers increased dramatically during the Reagan Administration. The federal government cut back on building houses and subsidizing housing for low-income people as well as social assistance programs. Urban renewal and gentrification forced people out of low-rent housing, and wages declined with deindustrialization and outsourcing. Cities used land use policies to help corporations and real estate interests squeeze out the poor.[1] A study by Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies documents that as housing costs have risen, wages have declined, increasing numbers of people cannot afford housing (including the middle class), and more jobs pay low wages. Hurricane Katrina made matters worse for poor people:

> In New Orleans, losses are estimated at over $100 billion, more than 50,000 homes have suffered severe damage, and hundreds of thousands of residents are still waiting to return. . . .With the enormous political and logistical obstacles to rebuilding that now exist, it will be years before the Gulf region of the country works through the disruption to human lives and the destruction to the built environment."[2]

Even with low wages, many poor people could afford housing if they had access to government-subsidized public housing. However, the federal government has been cutting back on building housing and providing subsidies for housing since the early 1980s. There is a 10-year waiting list for Section 8 vouchers in Massachusetts, and no more are being given out. The federal government chose to subsidize private housing for poor people through Section 8 vouchers rather than build housing because it did not want to interfere with private real estate interests. Real estate interests have decimated rent control in most cities, as rents continue to rise beyond the ability of low-income

people, and even middle-income people, to pay them. The Western Regional Advocacy Project documents federal cutbacks in housing:

- From 1976-1982, HUD (Housing and Urban Development) built over 755,000 new public housing units, but since 1983, HUD built only 256,000 new public housing units.
- From 1976-1985, a yearly average of almost 31,000 new Section 515 rural affordable housing units were built, but from 1986-1995, average yearly production was less than half that of the previous decade and from 1996-2005, Section 515 built an average of only 1,700 new units per year.
- In recent years, over 200,000 private-sector rental units have been lost annually, and 1.2 million unsubsidized affordable housing units disappeared from 1993-2003.
- HUD budget authority in 1978 was 65 percent more than its 2006 budget.[3]

While the federal government has been cutting housing for the poor, it has increased housing subsidies for the affluent through tax benefits for home ownership.

> Over the last 30 years, annual tax expenditures for home owner subsidies have grown from less than $40 billion to over $120 billion per year. Every year since 1981, tax benefits for home ownership have been greater than HUD's entire budget and have dwarfed direct expenditures for programs that benefit low-income renters.[4] Those benefiting the most from this tax program may actually be banks and real estate corporations that make their largest profit margins on high-end housing.[5]

As the federal government cut funds for housing, it increased military spending. "The U.S. government plans to spend more money on *one* destroyer than it spent on *all* 2005 capital expenses for public housing; more on *ten* F-22 fighter jets than on *all* 2005 operating expenses for public housing; and *twice as much* on a *single* submarine than on *all* McKinney-Vento Act homeless assistance."[6] President Bush proposed further cuts in housing funds in his 2008 budget plan, and proposed to increase the defense budget by 11 percent, an increase that does not include funding for the Iraq war.[7]

Homeless Shelters

BEGINNING IN 1983, emergency public shelters for the homeless began opening in cities nationwide. Over the next couple of decades, shelters grew from being a temporary emergency response to become a permanent shelter industry. There were 62,000 homeless shelters in the U.S. in 2002. Most homeless shelters for individuals allow people to stay only at night to sleep. A reason frequently given for not allowing people to stay during the day is that the homeless are expected to spend their days looking for work and housing. There are a few day shelters, such as St. Francis House in Boston, where homeless people congregate and eat their meals. There are specialized shelters for victims of domestic violence, for teen parents, for substance abusers, and for persons with HIV/AIDS. Some shelters provide services, such as a soup kitchen, job seeking skills training and job training, job placement, support groups, information and referral services, substance abuse treatment, early intervention programs, parental skills training, training for the GED, playrooms for children and volunteers to staff them. Haley House in Boston, a shelter for individuals modeled after the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, trains residents to be bakers and they sell their products to the public. Kip Tiernan, a radical feminist who founded Rosie's Place, a shelter for homeless women in Boston, also founded a shelter for women with AIDS and a homeless women's chorus that performs at fund raisers. There are flowers on the table at the women's shelter, reflecting Kip's belief that people need beauty as well as bread ("Give me bread and give me roses.") Many shelters

do not provide storage space for people's belongings. While I was doing outreach in a welfare office, I met a woman who was crippled with severe arthritis and had stayed overnight at a shelter for individuals. The shelter had no lockers, and she was carrying her belongings in a plastic bag. There was no guarantee that she would get a bed for that night because the shelter required people to line up at 4:30 p.m., and those who were first in line got priority for shelter. Many homeless individuals will not go to a homeless shelter because they are crowded and dangerous. If there is no place to store belongings, they often are stolen. Some of the residents have emotional problems which are exacerbated, or caused by, their homelessness. To avoid these dangerous conditions, some people sleep in the streets, in parks, in their cars, RVs, or in train or bus stations. Some live in tents in the woods or build temporary shelters in out-of-the-way spaces in the city, which are often torn down by the city. Some homeless people prefer the freedom and privacy they have in their own encampments to rigidly controlled shelters.[8] Some families are lodged in hotels or motels. At one time Massachusetts paid motels $100 a night to house families, but stopped that practice when legislators complained about the expense. The motels were costing the state $36,500 a year for each family. For that money, the state could have rented three apartments. The motels were located on highways where there was no easy access to grocery shopping and if there was a hot plate, families were prohibited from cooking meals on it. (Some did, however, as there was no other way to prepare hot meals for their family.) Some motels had roaches, lice, or rats. Couples on one-night stands, as well as prostitutes and pimps frequented some motels. One woman complained that there were keg parties all night, and banging on the walls. Parents complained that it was an inappropriate environment for their children. Yet some parents preferred staying in the better motels rather than in a congregate shelter because they had more privacy and less inspection. Some families are sheltered in private apartments, an arrangement called "scattered site shelters." Families prefer these to congregate shelters, although their freedom is restricted even in these apartments because they have strict rules, such as not allowing visitors, telling parents to keep their children quiet, imposing curfews, not allowing any alcoholic beverages, and making unannounced visits to check on housekeeping. During my outreach work at the welfare office, I met a man who lived in one of these apartments. He said, "They can inspect your apartment any time they want, without prior notice. They are very fussy about housekeeping. If you don't have the corners of your sheets tight, they can sanction you. After three sanctions, you have to leave." He was angry at the way he and his wife were treated, but he had to hold it in because there is no place else to go. He said, "They force you to save money in the shelter. When I was working I was earning $800 a month, and they tried to force me to save $500 a month, which was completely unreasonable." One woman who lived in a scattered site shelter was resentful about being constantly nagged about housekeeping. She said, "When I get my own place, I will leave it messy for a week, even though that's not my nature, just to celebrate not having anyone checking on me."

Access to Shelters

MOST SHELTERS FOR INDIVIDUALS operate on a first-come-first-served basis, although most refuse people who are drunk or abusing drugs. Family shelters have eligibility criteria that vary from agency to agency, and from state to state. In Massachusetts, the eligibility criteria stipulates that a family should have no more income than 130 percent of the federal poverty line ($12,740 for 1; $17,160 for 2; $21,580 for 3). The legislature lowered it to 100 percent a couple of years ago, but advocates lobbied aggressively to bring it back up to 130 percent. If a family has $1 over that amount, they are not eligible. The program is called Emergency Assistance, and is funded by the state Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA, a.k.a. Department of Welfare). Undocumented immigrants are allowed access to shelters only if a child was born in the U.S. and is therefore a citizen. For legal immigrants to be eligible, at least one family member must be a citizen or a legally present immigrant. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which turned welfare over to the states and made it no longer an entitlement program, also made

sweeping changes in the rules governing immigrants' eligibility for federally funded public benefits. The law denies most immigrants, including lawful permanent residents, access to many federal public benefit programs, and gives states the option to adopt similar restrictions for state-funded benefits. A list of family shelters published by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless[9] shows that some family shelters do not accept adolescent boys. The age limits they set vary from 12 to 18. Some accept women and children only. One shelter accepts women and children only, but no boys over age 9. The welfare department accepts men as part of the family only if the man is the father of the children. No boy friends allowed. The application process for admission to a family shelter is grueling. Most family shelters in Massachusetts are funded by the state DTA, and workers are obsessed with documents. Applicants must produce a document to prove they have no place else to stay. The goal is to keep people out, not to let them in. One worker told a mother to look through her high school yearbook and ask anyone she knows to give her a place to stay. Workers ask endless questions, some of them intimate. One of the worst application interviews that I witnessed occurred between a stylishly dressed African-American worker and an African-American mother of five children. I was so outraged by the worker's insensitivity that I wrote a letter to the worker and the director of the homeless unit, also sending a copy to the director of the state DTA. The director of the homeless unit was angry at me for going over his head by sending a copy of the letter to the central office, but shortly afterwards the state director put an article in the workers' internal newsletter urging workers to treat clients with respect. The client thanked me for sending the letter and expressed her disappointment that a fellow African-American had treated her so badly, saying, "We're supposed to stick together." She said her children (who accompanied her to the interview) were shocked to witness such insensitive treatment of their mother. Here is the letter that I sent:

Dear Ms. (worker): It was clear that you resented my presence when I accompanied Ms. X (client) to her interview with you. Ms. X told me that you advised her to not listen "to those people out there," as "they don't know what they are talking about." I would like to establish my credentials for advocacy work. I am a retired professor of social work, having taught in several colleges including Bridgewater State College. I have co-authored a human services textbook, *Introduction to Human Services: Policy and Practice*, 6th edition. I have also written numerous articles on social work and social welfare. I attend the benefits trainings sponsored by Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, and I frequently consult the DTA Client Services Hotline, the DTA web site, and lawyers at Greater Boston Legal Services, to keep up to date on regulations. However, my credentials are not the issue. The real issue is that clients have a legal right to have an advocate accompany them to interviews. The advocate need not know anything about DTA regulations. A friend can accompany the client simply to provide emotional support. Anyone who asks for help at the DTA is in a stressful situation, and an insensitive interviewer like you makes it doubly stressful. We advise people to *always* take someone with them when they go to an interview. In the interview with Ms. X, you took issue with my telling you that you have a responsibility to help the client obtain verifications. I suggested that since Ms. X did not have two of her pay stubs, you might call the employer to verify the pay for that period. While Ms. X initially seemed to agree with this, she later said that she did not want her employer to know that she was homeless, so in this case your refusal to call the employer was the correct action. Yet the way you refused indicated that you did not believe the worker has a responsibility to help the client obtain verifications. The client said you later told her, "I'm not going to fetch anything." As evidence for my claim that you have a responsibility to help the client obtain verifications, I am enclosing page 84 from the *TAFDC Advocacy Guide* published by Mass Law Reform Institute and Greater Boston Legal Services regarding obtaining verifications. You told Ms. X that school records would not suffice as proof of the children's birth, and that she had to bring in either birth certificates or baptism certificates. According to the *TAFDC Advocacy Guide*, school records or a statement from someone who knows the family will suffice. You told Ms. X that she was not eligible for food stamps, yet you did not explore her eligibility. I don't know whether she is eligible, but if she and her children live with her sister and she buys and prepares her family's meals separately, she would probably be eligible. You told Ms. X that if she were placed in a shelter far away from Boston she very likely would not be able to get her children transported to their home school in Boston. When I pointed out that the McKinney-Vento Act specifically insures the right of homeless children to remain in their school of origin, you brushed off this information as being more or less irrelevant, since many superintendents simply won't do it. You didn't tell her that there is an office, run by the Department of Education that is charged with the task of statewide implementation and enforcement of the McKinney Act. For your information in future work with clients, the number is 781-338-3000. I am enclosing some information on the educational rights of homeless children. You told Ms. X that one infraction of shelter rules would result in her losing eligibility for Emergency Assistance. This is not what is said in State Letter 1247 of February 3. According to CMR 309.040, the EA assistance unit will be sent a warning notice if they are "cited for accumulating three or more violations of reasonable rules established by the temporary emergency shelter, other than a hotel or motel." For the first instance of noncompliance, "the EA assistance unit may be placed in another approved temporary emergency shelter as a result of the noncompliance." I am enclosing the relevant passages. If you had looked at Ms. X during the interview, which you seldom did, you would have seen tears rolling down her cheeks. You conducted what sociologists call "a successful degradation ceremony." You seemed unable to feel anything in common with Ms. X and to identify with her situation as a fellow human being in need of understanding and some warmth. If one of your friends were homeless, would you treat her the same way you treated Ms. X?

One man living in a shelter had this to say about the application process: "When I was working I didn't want my boss to know I was in a shelter because he was a Bush guy, hard nosed and beer drinking. However, the worker insisted on contacting my former employer. It didn't matter at that point because I no longer had the job, but workers do what they can to humiliate you and take your dignity." When a family has been accepted for shelter, they have to wait in the waiting room to find out what shelter they have been assigned to. This can take hours. The wait to see a worker in order to apply can also take hours. One shelter worker told me that the hours of waiting for a family to be told which shelter they are going to is not necessary because shelters phone the central office of DTA at 10:00 in the morning to notify them of vacancies. According to DTA regulations, families should be placed within 20 miles of their homes, but if there is no shelter available within that distance, they can be placed hundreds of miles away. If a closer shelter becomes available later, they are supposed to be moved to that shelter. A placement far from home means of course that they are removed from family and friends, from familiar or specialized medical care, from jobs, and from school. Victims of domestic violence are always moved far from home in order to escape the victimizer. Families with a compelling reason to stay close to home, such as need for specialized medical treatment, can be placed in a hotel or motel temporarily until shelter space opens up. As part of the application process, mothers are required to be interviewed by a DSS (Department of Social Services) worker who assesses their situation in relation to the children's welfare. Mothers are terrified of this, fearing the possibility of having their children taken away and placed in foster care. I never saw a case where this interview resulted in taking the child away, but it always creates anxiety in parents, and gives them continued anxiety while in shelter about the possibility of being charged with child abuse or neglect. One mother who was applying for shelter told the DSS worker that she and the child had slept in a car last night. The worker said this constituted child abuse and could result in the child being placed in foster care. However, the mother was given shelter. (Many of the children in foster care have been placed there because the family had no home.)

Life in the Shelter

THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION applies mostly to homeless shelters in Massachusetts. I have not studied shelters for individuals or battered women's shelters intensively nor have I studied shelters in other states. However, Massachusetts has the reputation of being one of the better states in shelter provision. Most of my information has been obtained through six years of doing outreach in welfare offices and from interviews with shelter staff and residents; legal services lawyers, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless staff, welfare staff, and observations of shelters. Shelter programs are shaped by prevailing views of the poor, who are considered to be generally inadequate and incompetent and in need of reform. In "*A Roof Over my Head,*" Jean Calterone Williams expresses this well:

> By making many aspects of their programs mandatory . . . shelters give the impression that homeless people will not take the initiative on their own to look for work or housing, enroll their children in school, or keep their living spaces clean. They must be forced to do so. By mandating budgeting classes, shelters suggest that people become homeless in part because they are irresponsible with their money. It is in a sense a symbiotic relationship: shelter programs influence the ways housed people think about homelessness, the views of the housed public — whether ordinary citizens or policymakers — affect the formation of shelter programs and how such programs treat homeless people.[10]

Once a family is placed in a family shelter under the DTA Emergency Assistance (EA) program, they must follow certain rules to retain shelter. If a family does not follow these rules, they receive a

notice of noncompliance. A family is terminated from EA shelter after two noncompliances and they are not eligible for shelter again for a year. These are some of the expectations placed upon families after they enter shelter:

- *Develop and comply with a self-sufficiency plan.* Some of the goals included in self-sufficiency plans include housing search, work requirements, resolution of outstanding arrest warrants, and savings requirements. Parents are required to save a certain percent of their income for an apartment, ranging from 30 to 50 percent. When they are allowed to keep their food stamps, they are expected to save more toward an apartment. If the family does not meet the goals in the self-sufficiency plan, they can lose shelter.
- *Accept any offer of safe, permanent housing*. A rejection will result in the family being cited for non-compliance, with a few exceptions.
- *Follow TAFDC (Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children) work requirements.* Families receiving TAFDC benefits must work or participate in a job or a "workfare" placement from their first day in shelter in order to avoid losing their TAFDC benefits, unless they have a "good cause" reason that prevents them from working, such as a disability or caring for a child up to the age of 2. Unless they are exempted from work requirements, parents of children 2-6 work 20 hours a week. Parents of children 7 or 8 work 24 hours. Parents of children 9 or older work 30 hours. Advocates succeeded in getting a year of housing search as well as a year of higher education to count for a year of work, but it has to be in a vocational program. If teen parents up to age 20 do not have a high school diploma or GED, they are required to attend school for 20 hours a week, with few exceptions. Many are "sanctioned" for absenteeism.
- *Comply with shelter rules.* A family can lose shelter if it has broken three shelter rules. The family will not be terminated for rule violations until the second citation of noncompliance. DTA must provide an alternate placement for a family that has been asked to leave a particular placement but has not been terminated.
- *Maintain employment.* If a family has quit a job or reduced income while in shelter without "good cause," they can be terminated from shelter.

Families can appeal unfavorable decisions and sometimes win, although they lose more often. Shelter rules vary, but all have curfews. The most lenient curfew cited in *Down and Out*[11] was 9:30 weekdays, 11 on weekends. The strictest is St. Ambrose Family Inn, which has an 8:00 p.m. curfew every night of the week. When I asked a worker there why they weren't more lenient on weekends, she said that it is a dangerous neighborhood and it is not safe for people to go out at night. Unless the shelter gives permission, a parent is unable to work after these hours. Shelters allow overnight absences only with written permission. An unauthorized absence can result in losing shelter. All shelters require sobriety on the premises; one requires a minimum of 6 months sobriety before being accepted for shelter. Most shelters require residents to help with housekeeping. In some shelters, women buy and cook their own food. Some shelters allow visits by fathers, but don't allow fathers to live there. Some shelters require residents to attend church on Sunday. Here are some items taken from the 14 pages of rules in the "Family Guide"[12] given to residents of St. Ambrose Family Inn in Boston, a shelter for 15 families run by Catholic Charities:

- Residents are required to give the following documentation to St. Ambrose upon entry to the shelter: DTA transfer/acceptance notice; Social Security cards; birth certificates; health insurance cards; physical exam records; TB test results. (Children may be given a TB risk assessment test); verification of all income; immunization records; school/daycare enrollment verification (if applicable).
- Residents are allowed two luggage items per family member upon entry to the shelter according to DTA policy.

- Personal belongings may be inspected prior to room assignment and at any time during residency at St. Ambrose.
- Residents may be required to copy their passport for St. Ambrose records.
- St. Ambrose will conduct a CORI (Criminal Offense Record Information).
- When applicable, drug-screening verification will be required.
- If a room becomes cluttered, the resident will be asked to remove any excessive items within 24 hours.
- Wall hangings are not allowed in resident rooms or bathrooms.
- Residents are not allowed to lie on or place their feet on the TV room couches or chair.
- A towel wrapped around a person is not appropriate. Robes with undergarments must be worn if a resident is walking from her bathroom to her room.
- Residents are not allowed in other residents' rooms at any time.
- Residents are required to attend all meetings with the Family Advocate or Case Managers as scheduled.
- St. Ambrose reserves the right to schedule a mandatory house meeting or training at any time.
- *Staff members are required by law to report any abuse or neglect of a child to the Department of Social Services. All residents and parents should be aware of this type of report, which is called a 51-A.* (Emphasis in the original.)
- All St. Ambrose Residents are required to leave the building and grounds from 9:30 AM – 3:30 PM Monday through Friday. Residents may return for lunch during the time period of 12:00 PM and 1:00 PM.
- All children are required to be off the first floor by 8:30 PM and all residents in their rooms by 9:00 PM seven days a week.
- By 9:00 PM everything should be quiet in the building. Noise should be kept to a minimum after this hour. Music, radios, and TVs should not be heard outside the rooms in which they are playing.
- FOOD IS ALLOWED IN THE DINING ROOM ONLY. FOOD IS NOT ALLOWED IN THE RESIDENTS' ROOMS, TV ROOM OR HALLWAYS. ONLY WATER IS ALLOWED IN THE RESIDENT ROOMS (NO JUICE, SODA, SWEETENED MILK, etc.) (Emphasis in the original.)
- Families are required to keep their rooms clean. The rooms may be inspected daily by the St. Ambrose Shelter staff.
- It is recommended that residents not lend money to or borrow money from other residents who live at the shelter.
- Shelter staff is not allowed to lend money to or borrow money from a resident. Any failure to the above may result in a written warning with the possibility of termination of shelter placement at St. Ambrose. *A resident is allowed three written warnings before restrictions are imposed and/or termination procedures from St. Ambrose may be put in place. A resident may be terminated at any time for Health & Safety reasons. Copies of all warnings are sent to the local DTA office for review.* (Emphasis in the original.)

In other words, anything that makes you feel at home is forbidden. During my outreach work in the welfare office, I heard a variety of opinions about shelters from the residents and ex-residents, ranging from "It's like a prison" to "It's pretty good." Here are some of the comments, taken from my log:

- One woman told me that shelter staff threaten mothers with filing a petition of abuse against them for minor things such as letting a baby sleep in a baby swing. Her toddler had a minor fall on his bum and the staff said she had to take the child to the emergency room; even though there was not even a bruise. The doctor ridiculed her for bringing the child into the hospital when there was no evidence of injury.
- A woman is living in a Christian shelter. She has two young children. She fears that her

children will catch an infection or get lead paint poisoning. Another resident sued the shelter because her child ate lead chips, and the director of the shelter asked all the residents to sign a statement saying they won't sue them. This woman refused to do it. The shelter is very controlling, won't let anyone go out of the house unless a staff member goes with her. The woman works and says they can't control her. The only thing she likes about the place is the prayer meetings. She is here to request another shelter.

- A woman in the homeless unit had been kicked out of the shelter in the YMCA because she was in the hospital in a coma and hadn't been able to call them. She said, "I couldn't even call myself; I was in a coma."
- A woman has been kicked out of a shelter for burning some toast in a microwave. Another was kicked out of a shelter a year ago and can't get into a shelter for another several months. She hadn't realized that you couldn't get help for another year.
- A woman is in Pine Street Inn (a shelter for individuals). She has a 14-year-old son but they couldn't find a shelter that would take her son. She is on the waiting list for one, but has to find someone to take care of him soon because her sister can't do it any more.
- A young woman was in a teen shelter and was sanctioned because she didn't attend school daily. She couldn't attend daily because she had various appointments to keep, and because she was depressed. Being homeless made her more depressed. (Studies show that a large proportion of shelters residents and welfare recipients are depressed.)
- A woman said that being in a shelter is like being in prison. They keep checking up on you, criticizing your housekeeping, the children's noise, etc. They treat you like a child. She has had to move several times, and this isn't good for the children. Yesterday she was running around all day looking for furniture, getting documents, etc., and she is exhausted. She is lucky in having a good support group, including good doctors, and relatives that help her out.
- A man with a boy about 8 or 9 wanted to talk with me privately so other people wouldn't hear. Although he is not the father of the boy who is with him, he has custody. The child was sexually abused in a shelter and is terrified of going back to any shelter. He does not want to live with his mother because the mother has abused him and her boy friend smokes crack. He lived with his grandmother for a while but his uncle, who lived there, used heroin. Both the court and DSS are involved. The DTA worker said they want to place him in Springfield, but the boy needs to stay in the Boston area because he is disturbed and is in counseling and is also in a special school. He has attention deficit disorder. The worker also offered to place him in Stoughton, but that won't work either.
- I accompanied a woman appealing termination of her shelter to her hearing. The DTA worker and DTA lawyer were also at the hearing. The woman had asked to have 3 nights off to stay with a cousin in Brockton who was in the hospital. She was under the impression that the shelter granted permission, but they said they had not. DTA terminated her EA (shelter). The woman said that after visiting her cousin she was unable to return to the shelter when she expected to because the ride she had coming to Brockton wasn't able to take her back. When she went back to the shelter they had packed her stuff in a box and told her she couldn't stay. She said, "They put my baby on the dirty floor. I was so upset." The woman said it was hard to make herself understood because no one at the shelter spoke Creole. I raised the issue of possible faulty communication with the shelter because of the woman's language. The DTA lawyer asked if she had complied with the shelter's routines and done what she was supposed to do when she lived there. The woman said she had. The lawyer used that as proof that there was no communication difficulty. Nevertheless, the hearing officer listened to this exchange with interest and it may have helped the woman to win her case.
- A woman in the Homeless Unit had been kicked out of her shelter today, accused of swearing at a staff member. She was extremely upset, insisting that she hadn't sworn and they admitted they would believe a staff member rather than her. Other women waiting in the Homeless Unit sympathized with her.

Some mothers generally liked their shelter but didn't like some of the staff:

> A woman likes the director Lara, thinks she is on the side of the women and really wants to help them. But she doesn't like David. He tells her that she can't "just sit around doing nothing." She said that one young woman in the shelter who "was raised in the streets and has street toughs" lost it one day and told David that she was going to kill some people around here, meaning David. David told all the other residents to get in their room "just in case," but the woman pointed out to me laughingly that she didn't want to kill them, she wanted to kill David. She said that while she has learned to hold herself in, she does enjoy watching someone else express the anger that all of them feel. The woman says this is one of the better shelters. She has her own room, comfortably furnished with a couch and a refrigerator. There is a common kitchen where the food is delivered and you can either eat there or take your food to your room. The food isn't all that great, but is o.k. sometimes. Curfews are 9:30 on weeknights, 11 on Saturday. The woman has been here for 3 months. Some people stay a year. She longs to get her own apartment, and dreams that she has one.

Some people understood the need for rules. One man said, "They have to have rules, otherwise people would be going in and out all night and they couldn't handle it." He felt it was a small enough price to pay for getting shelter and he appreciated the help. Conflicts often arise over the work and the housing search requirements. Housing workers are sometimes merciless in hounding women to find an apartment, even though there is little that the women can do to find affordable housing when it simply doesn't exist. One shelter director said they have a grievance policy, but residents are not allowed to grieve any shelter policies. (That struck me as an Alice in Wonderland sort of grievance policy.) She claimed that they promote resident participation by having weekly meetings, with rotating elected representatives.

Race

THE STAFF OF SHELTERS are most often middle class and white while the residents in Massachusetts's shelters are predominantly people of color, especially in large cities. People of color make up the majority of the homeless nationwide. A survey by the U. S. Conference of Mayors in 2004 estimated the homeless population to be 49 percent African-American, 35 percent white, 13 percent Hispanic, two percent Native American and one percent Asian.[13] A black woman who worked in one of the better shelters, run by Catholic nuns, reports that the condescending attitudes of staff toward the black residents drove her nuts. Jean Calterone Williams studied shelters in Phoenix, where the majority of shelter residents were white, and found a great deal of racism toward Chicana women. One woman complained about an employee who "used to whisper in the women's ears who couldn't speak English, saying they need to go back to their own countries." (The woman was evicted from the shelter for complaining.)[14] Williams says that white workers sometimes gave preferential treatment to white residents. White homeless women often attempt to distance themselves from women of color in an attempt to appear more "deserving." This reflects the views of housed white people. Williams says that in Phoenix, where racism runs high, "white housed people perceive Latinos — in particular Chicanos — as too 'different' to be considered American, regardless of their citizenship status. . . These housed people claim that poor or homeless Chicanos are to blame for their own circumstances because they do not want to work to climb the social or economic ladder."[15] Williams found that in Phoenix, which has a large Spanish-speaking community, most shelters lacked even one Spanish-speaking staff person and did not offer programs for women who are in the country illegally. Because monolingual Spanish-speaking women often could not find a battered women's shelter with a Spanish-speaking staff person, a local Chicano/a advocacy group established

La Casa, a Spanish-speaking shelter for battered women. La Casa and Rose's House, another shelter for battered women, treated women more compassionately than did other shelters for the homeless, and had a more home-like atmosphere. "La Casa seems less interested in keeping residents under constant surveillance than is the case at the homeless shelters."[16] (Probably shelters that were established because of the women's movement and the civil rights struggle are more compassionate.) Women of color who apply for shelter cannot necessarily count on getting more sympathetic treatment from a worker of their own race. Workers sometimes distance themselves from clients because of their anxiety about status, their contempt for people they view as "lower class," and their fears about their own fragile economic status.

Shelter Workers

Some middle class shelter staff has an attitude of "noblesse oblige" reminiscent of 19th century "Charity Ladies." They assume that homeless women need to change, and they have been entrusted with the mission of changing them. Most of the shelter staff that I talked with had a victim-blaming attitude. One shelter director said, "They all come from dysfunctional families, but they are capable of change." One shelter in an affluent community assigns a volunteer "mentor" to each resident. These are upper-middle-class women whose goal is to help the residents change; thereby conveying the message that their mentor assumes something is wrong with them. Some of these women do have valuable things to give the residents, such as help in locating financial aid for college, giving rides to job interviews, caring for their children while the mothers rest or take care of errands, tutoring children or tutoring the mother for a GED, or teaching computer skills. But to call them "mentors" rather than "community resources" implies that they are on a superior plane. Some shelter workers are genuinely caring. One resident said that the shelter director "is like a grandmother to me." Such workers help women find and use resources and help them with personal problems, and sometimes follow up with them after they leave the shelter. Many shelter residents are grateful for the services offered by the shelters, but they are always aware that the main goal of the shelter is to get them out of there and to get them off welfare. Even staff members who are aware of the structural problems that the residents face nevertheless consider it their job to enforce the rules. Yet some are flexible in the way they enforce the rules and bend them as much as possible. Some, however, deny that there are major structural reasons for homelessness. When I asked a shelter worker what she thought was the cause of homelessness, she said that some women who refuse to follow rules, such as meeting regularly with the housing search worker, just prefer to be homeless. They like being taken care of in the shelter without any responsibilities, and would rather be homeless than to follow rules. A director of a shelter for teen parents expressed her frustration with her inability to help residents find housing and pay for it when they found it. She said, "They just go from a teen shelter to an adult shelter." While she enjoyed her work with the residents and they liked her and liked the shelter, she felt hopeless about the job as it felt like putting Band-Aids on a gaping wound. I empathized with her and said that I often feel the same way. I told her that it helps me to get involved in some kind of social action that might help to change the situation, such as a forthcoming lobby day sponsored by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. She planned to attend and bring some of the residents with her. I put her in touch with a local organizing group, the Coalition Against Poverty. (Interestingly, she is the daughter of a woman who was in my social work class when I taught at Bridgewater State College.) Shelters may ultimately be more expensive than permanent housing. Many people believe that in spite of that, cities rely on shelters because building housing would compete with the real estate industry and would establish government responsibility to provide housing for people. And there is money to be made in the shelter industry. "In the mid-1980s, one-third of New York City's welfare hotel business went to two separate business partnerships that together grossed $25 million in rents."[17] New York City sold some welfare hotels that the city owned, and contracted with the owners to house the homeless, "paying them $1.2 million a year to house families in a hotel that it had owned outright just four years earlier."[18] Most

family shelters are run by nonprofit agencies, and they get much of their funding from the state through the welfare department, as well as from private sources. Churches run many of them. Most are scrambling for money, and are consequently eager to please funders. This often results in "creaming" the population, i.e. accepting people who are most likely to change in desired directions. It also results in adhering to the status quo rather than trying any radical change. Vincent Lyon-Callo tells of organizing the homeless and their allies in western Massachusetts to take over buildings of an abandoned state mental hospital in order to create housing for the homeless. Organizing for the action took place under the auspices of a local shelter for the homeless. Several local politicians were quite upset by this event and attendant media coverage. They reacted by blaming the shelter staff for stirring up trouble and portrayed those involved in the takeover as "outsiders." People connected with the shelter received threats of decreased support and funding for the shelter from local business and political leaders. A few months later the staff learned that funding from the state had been decreased by almost 20 percent for the coming year, and they had to cut staff.

> Most significantly, however, was the imposition of awareness among remaining staff that their assigned role was clearly limited to that of reforming homeless people and managing homelessness if they wanted to keep their job. Consequently, most staff members returned to the more familiar roles of treating deviance and surveillance of homeless people.[19]

Welfare Workers

THE WORKERS in the welfare office are overworked and underpaid, although they are paid more than workers in the private sector (as in shelters) because they have a union. The leadership of the union is relatively progressive. Robert Haines, the director of AFL-CIO in Massachusetts, grew up in a family that received welfare, and he mentions this in speeches to welfare recipients and advocates.* He opposed the harsh welfare reform bill in Massachusetts, but the union did not exert much pressure to lobby against it and most welfare workers do not engage in activism to change welfare policy. Yet two union leaders who were welfare workers joined in an alliance with recipients called Working Mass. The union and welfare rights activists have joined in struggles where they have a common interest such as getting lower case loads and resisting the closing of welfare offices. But there are issues where their interests diverge. When clients and their advocates complain of nasty treatment by workers, welfare directors claim that, while they can talk to disrespectful workers, they are unable to fire them because the union protects workers. Most of the workers perform like automated bureaucrats. They conduct the interview in a routine way. They enter data into the computer, often with difficulty because the intricacies of their computer program, named Beacon, elude them and they must call a supervisor in to figure it out. They sometimes make mistakes and sometimes lose documents, but they seldom apologize. They often keep clients waiting, even when the client has an appointment. One woman said, "They act like it's their own money they're giving out." Some workers are genuinely friendly and helpful, and the clients appreciate having one of those. One client said, "My worker is wonderful. She really helps me." A few will bend the rules as much as possible. During one interview when a client was told that she earned too much to be eligible for shelter, I suggested to the client that she lower her working hours. The worker said, "I didn't hear that." But there are a few really nasty ones, like the one described in my letter of outrage above. Here are clients' comments about unsympathetic workers:

- This man had a worker who was "right out of Beavis and Butt Head. He looked just like Beavis, with a pointy head." The man gave a letter to the worker from his grandmother that said he could no longer reside with her and the worker said, "I want a letter in lay language." The man

was amazed and angry because the letter was perfectly clear, but he had to get another letter from his grandmother.

- A woman was angry with her worker and said, "He has a bad attitude, and talks down like you're stupid. A lot of people complain about him. I had a worker before who was o.k. He understood my problems of having no car and no phone that made it hard to get in for appointments. I am trying to get medical disability and the doctor is filling out the form, but it takes time and this worker doesn't want to wait."

Even when workers do not agree with welfare policies, they feel that it is their job to follow them. Here is an example of such a worker:

> The client's 18-month-old child is a Family Cap baby** and she has a 9-year-old daughter. The worker had her sign the form from DOR (Department of Revenue, which enforces child support) that asks about sexual intercourse with the child's father. She was deeply offended by the form, and I agreed with her. I asked the worker if she would jeopardize her benefits if she refused to sign it. He said she could write a statement saying she refused to sign it and he would send it to the central office, and it wouldn't jeopardize her benefits. However, the woman decided to sign it "and get it over with." The worker also didn't like the form, and he didn't agree with the Family Cap. He asked me who brought in that policy and I told him that it was President Clinton who signed the bill. He was surprised, but we agreed that Clinton was more a Republican than a Democrat.

The Myth of Altruism

MICHAEL LIPSKY points out "Virtually every commentary on welfare practices draws attention to the degradation of clients."[20] Poor people receive a qualitatively different kind of treatment than middle-class people. "The ideology that street-level bureaucrats' intervention is in the interest of clients appears to be a particularly important instrument of control."[21] Lipsky calls this "the myth of altruism. . . This myth is usually unexamined. Social workers believe they are helping others and clients are encouraged to confide in and trust strangers and permit themselves to be manipulated and ordered about in the expectation of receiving help or fair treatment."[22] Yet social workers† are thrown into the most difficult work without the resources to adequately accomplish that work. In order to cope with the stress of being unable to individualize clients and respond to their needs, "street-level bureaucrats develop conceptions of their jobs, and of clients that reduce the strain between capabilities and goals, thereby making their jobs psychologically easier to manage."[23] Workers often begin the work as idealists, but end by getting burned out. The antidote to this is not to train the workers, but to change the conditions of work. Liberation of the client would also mean liberation of the worker. Michel Foucault also discusses the social control aspect of "helping." His history of discipline and punishment traces the gradual widening of the function of the prison to incorporate the so-called "helping" professions, under the rubric of "normalization."

> The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the "social worker"-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. The cerebral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power.[24]

Scratching the surface THE SHELTER SYSTEM only scratches the surface of the problem of homelessness. There are never enough shelters to house the homeless even temporarily, and practically everyone prefers to live in her or his own home rather than in a shelter. One count of the homeless in 2005 estimated that 44 percent of homeless people were unsheltered.[25] This was a rough estimate, as are all estimates of the numbers of homeless people. Counting the homeless has been described as a "high-stakes numbers game." Officials want the numbers to be low; advocates want them high, and there is continual debate about them in academic circles. It is impossible to count all of the homeless because many are not found and many are doubling up with relatives and friends. Many are homeless for only a short time. It is a revolving population. A study in 2005, based on counts of homeless people from a sample of homeless service providers from across the country, found 744,313 people in the U.S. who were homeless in January. This study counted how many people were homeless at a specific point in time, so did not count how many were homeless during the year. The researchers extrapolated the number and estimated that between 2.3 and 3.5 million people are homeless in a given year — nearly 1 to 2 percent of the total population. Approximately 59 percent of the homeless population counted in 2005 were individuals and 41 percent were persons in families with children. The percentage of families with children has increased since a survey in 1996, when 35 percent of homeless people were persons in families.[26] Over 600,000 identified homeless students were enrolled in public schools in the 2003-2004 school year.[27] In twenty-seven major cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 2004, requests for emergency shelters went unmet for an average of 23 percent of homeless people overall and 32 percent of homeless families alone. In 81 percent of the cities, emergency shelters had to turn away both homeless families and individuals due to lack of resources. People stayed in shelters for an average of eight months, which was longer than in the past year. In 56 percent of the cities, families may have to break up in order to be sheltered. In 52 percent of the cities families may have to spend their daytime hours outside of the shelter they use at night. Lack of affordable housing led the list of causes of homelessness identified by the city officials.[28]

Blaming the Victim

I AM BEMUSED by announcements that come over the radio from time to time by foundations or institutes saying they are studying the causes of homelessness and seeking cures. In fact, the causes are quite simple and have been studied quite enough. Homelessness is caused by poverty, insufficient affordable housing and insufficient money to pay for housing, and a weak or nonexistent safety net of income maintenance and support services. It is true that many of the homeless are alcoholics or drug addicts, but they need a home while they are coping with their problem, and they need treatment programs, and both are in short supply. It is also true that many of the homeless have emotional problems. Who wouldn't have emotional problems if they were homeless? But they need a home while they are coping with their problems and they need support services. Both are in short supply. A disproportionate number of foster children who have "aged out" of the foster care system are homeless. A disproportionate number of veterans are homeless. It is the fault of the government that they are in this condition, but the government has deserted them. A large percentage of homeless women have been abused.[29] While they may need a temporary refuge to escape the abuser and counseling to help them heal, they also need permanent housing, childcare, a job that pays a living wage, and social supports. The focus on individual problems shifts attention away from structural problems and obscures the real causes of homelessness. It leads to stereotyping of homeless people as deviant and degenerate, drunk or drugged, or crazy. When these stereotypes are embedded in people's minds, they view every beggar as a scammer. Stereotyping leads to criminalizing the homeless, allowing cities to sweep them from the streets.[30] It gives implicit permission to delinquent thugs to beat them up. One man made a series of documentaries in which homeless men fight each other, while being plied with liquor. Reality show producers took the homeless on shopping trips as a subject of amusement. On the Boston radio station WBCN-FM, DJs

Opie and Anthony ran an event called the Homeless Shopping Spree, taking street people to a high-end shopping center, giving them liquor and money to shop, and ridiculing their purchases for the amusement of their listeners. Boston's Mayor Menino publicly expressed his outrage at the show. Stereotyping leads to ever-changing policies geared to fixing different target sub-populations of homeless people. There are "periodic calls for local homeless plans based upon the newest policy flavor (and) temporary and local responses to homelessness that fail to address its systemic causes."[31] The public stereotypes become internalized by the homeless, causing them to try to distance themselves from the "undeserving Other," however they visualize the "Other." I met many people in the welfare office who told me that they were "not like those others" who are lazy and don't want to work. I told one woman that what might look like laziness is actually depression, and she admitted that she was depressed. Homeless men resist being categorized as "homeless" because that conjures up the image of a drunken bum. Homeless women resist being categorized as "homeless" because that conjures up the image of a crazy disheveled "bag lady." Battered women resist being described as "battered," preferring to see themselves as "survivors." There is a hierarchy of deserving vs. undeserving in the public's mind. Battered women are seen as deserving because they are victims. Parents and children are more deserving than single men because children are innocent victims. Homeless men are the least deserving, because they should be working. These "social imaginary significations," as Castoriades calls them,[32] help to shape the way shelters treat their residents and the way the residents view themselves. Even though many women who have been victims of domestic violence are not in battered women's shelters, the women in battered women's shelters often see themselves as superior to homeless women in family shelters. Battered women's shelters usually get more funding, have less strict surveillance, have more amenities, and are more likely to be in residential areas. In her comparison of battered women's shelters with homeless shelters, Williams says that the battered women's shelters require residents to engage in several hours of counseling and attendance at support groups, but give little support to working or looking for housing, in contrast to homeless shelters that require housing search. One battered women's shelter had an outdated resource list that was more frustrating than helpful. Some women appreciated the counseling and said it helped them to stabilize their lives. Others would have preferred to spend more time in working or looking for housing.[33] Arlene Avakian discusses how battered women's shelters changed as they became professionalized:

> Like many other grass roots movements, the battered women's movement changed drastically when it stopped relying on volunteers and raised funds to hire professionals who no longer aimed to empower women to overthrow patriarchy but helped them adapt to a bad situation. While the battered women's movement has helped thousands of women get out of abusive situations as well as raised the general awareness about domestic abuse, it has also changed from a movement for social change to a social service agency with all the pitfalls accompanying the distance between the worker and the client.[34]

Federal Housing Programs

AS HOMELESSNESS SURGED in the 1980s, organized groups of homeless people, advocates, service providers, charities, lawyers, health professionals, and churches brought the nation's attention to homelessness. Mitch Snyder's Community for Creative Non-Violence engaged in confrontations with federal officials in Washington, DC and encouraged the homeless and their advocates in other cities to mount protests. These groups lobbied and brought lawsuits, demanding a federal response to homelessness. The federal government initially responded to homelessness through small-scale funding for shelters, rather than by addressing the systemic need for affordable

housing. "Over the next couple of decades, shelters grew from being a temporary emergency response to a supposedly momentary problem to become institutionalized as a permanent tier in the housing market of many localities," [35]creating a large shelter industry. In 1987, Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the first and only major federal legislation devoted solely to addressing homelessness. "A small portion supported some transitional housing and mobile health care programs, (but) Federal funding of HUD's low-income affordable housing programs . . . continued to be cut."[36] In the 1990s, the federal government funded "supported housing" programs, which focused on "chronic homelessness" of severely disabled people. Rather than funding new housing, it leased hotel rooms, replaced current residents with homeless people, and installed a few caseworkers in the front office. The federal government created a program in 1993 named HOPE VI. This involved destroying much existing public housing and replacing it with housing that encouraged middle class people to live there, on the theory that contact with middle class people would be good for poor people. While the program created some housing for poor people that was arguably more attractive than large housing projects, it also created more affordable housing for middle income people. When one of these developments was built in Boston, I read in the *Boston Globe* that two women who lived there said it would be good for their poor neighbors to see them go to work in the morning. The program was named "community building," which aimed to "weave positive ties among public housing residents, neighborhood associations and community institutions."[37] In addition to housing, some sites included social services such as childcare, after school programs, computer labs, employment services, training, recreation and health care. One of the goals of HOPE VI was to get residents off welfare and into work. Here is the government's official version of the goals of the program:

> HOPE VI occurred in the context of welfare reform. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act changed the old welfare system. Operating in this new environment, a central focus of HOPE VI projects is to help residents overcome obstacles to work, and placing residents in employment.[38]

Much of the public housing that was destroyed for the HOPE VI program was not actually "severely distressed." A 1992 commission report found that only 6 percent of the total public housing stock was severely distressed. The HOPE VI program often did more harm than good. "It resulted in the forced displacement of tens of thousands of families and the permanent loss of large amounts of guaranteed affordable housing."[39] Recently the federal government has invited local communities to apply for McKinney funds to draw up 5-year "Continuum of Care" plans and 10- year planning bodies to "end chronic homelessness."

> These planning and granting procedures have led to intense competition among local service providers across the nation, pitting communities against each other in the constant scramble for pieces of a federal funding stream that is only a tiny fraction of what used to be spent on affordable housing production and subsidies before the cuts of the 1980s . . . (These local communities) are competing for the same small pool of McKinney homeless assistance funding. They are told that the small pittance the federal government currently allocates to address homelessness is ample if used in 'efficient and innovative' ways.[40]

It is a cruel hoax. These people who are fighting for a piece of a very small pie are being fooled into the belief that they can end homelessness, while they are being denied the resources to make real progress toward that goal. It is similar to officials forcing welfare recipients to get a job and housing,

while not providing affordable housing or jobs that pay a living wage. It is yet another part of the conservatives' goal of privatizing all of the safety net, which they have accomplished with welfare and are trying to accomplish with Social Security.

Resistance

IT IS DIFFICULT, if not impossible, to organize shelter residents. Shelter directors are reluctant to grant outsiders access to residents. It is very hard for women in a shelter to develop the solidarity necessary for collective resistance because of the close surveillance they are subjected to and because they are kept constantly busy at required activities. Despite their resentment of onerous rules and staff attitudes, mothers depend on shelters to meet their basic needs. When women do resist by defiant acts, that behavior is defined as "deviant," and is generally met with repression. Yet shelter residents do engage in covert collective resistance. Williams tells of an incident where residents were resentful of one particularly nasty staff member. "Residents held an ongoing contest to see who could spend the least amount of time in his office for their weekly appointments (supposed to last an hour). The record was three minutes."[41] There are many advocacy groups in the nation trying to solve the problem of homelessness. Most do not actively involve many homeless people. The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless does not do grassroots organizing of the homeless. They are a coalition *for* the homeless, not *with* the homeless. They lobby for increased state money to prevent homelessness, i.e. to prevent eviction or to pay up-front expenses for renting an apartment, or to get more state-subsidized vouchers, and have won some victories. They lobby for more flexible eligibility rules for access to shelter and eviction from shelters. Lawyers across the nation have documented violations of the rights of homeless people and sued institutions, states, and cities for those violations.[42] The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty has said that homelessness is a violation of the international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and submitted a "shadow report" that documented these violations to the Human Rights Committee on May 31, 2006.[43] It is a radical statement to say, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights†† does, that every human has a right to housing. If housing becomes a universal right, then poor people who need housing will not be stigmatized. As the late British social welfare scholar Richard Titmuss said, "Programs for the poor are poor programs." When a program like Social Security, Medicare, or the G. I. Bill is universal it is no longer stigmatized. Since the federal government has abdicated its responsibility for building housing, states and localities and non-governmental agencies are trying to take up the slack, but they cannot possibly meet the need without federal help. The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, some community development agencies, and some social agencies have built affordable housing. Since the 1980s, organizers have made a few courageous forays into grassroots organizing that involves setting up tent cities or resisting arrests for camping in public spaces. One of the most highly publicized occurred in August 1988 in New York City when the police attempted to clear the Tompkins Square Park of homeless people and a riot erupted, which was labeled a "police riot." At least one case went to trial, but no police officers were punished."[44] Since the Tompkins Square protests, there have been periodic militant protests by homeless people in Seattle,[45] Northampton, Massachusetts,[46] Springfield, Massachusetts (organized by ARISE for Social Justice), San Jose, Chicago, and Philadelphia (organized by the Kensington Welfare Rights Organization). In his book *Checkerboard Square,*[47] David Wagner describes the organizing done by homeless people in Portland, Maine. They put up a tent city and used it, as well as a drop-in center, as a base for organizing. Wagner shows that poor people "are not just acted upon or just passive victims of society (but) develop their own self-consciousness, culture, and alternative community."[48] He raises the possibility that street communities can develop into loosely organized social movements that can develop "collective approaches to poverty that build on existing social networks to assist poor people in obtaining housing and other benefits *collectively*."[49] Homeless people are challenging society's norms of family, work, and institutions. Talmadge Wright, analyzing tent city protests in San Jose and Chicago, says that squatters who choose encampments (i.e., tents and huts)

as opposed to shelters in their organizing "speak to the desire for community, autonomy, and privacy."[50] Talmadge says that whenever homeless groups actively organized with political organizations, the response was swift and repressive, but "for a brief moment . . . the San Jose encampments offered utopic spaces for reimagining a different social identity for the homeless and very poor."[51] A majority of the participants in the protests described by Wagner and Talmadge were single men. They were joined by college professors (Wagner and Talmadge), college students, and church members. Women are less likely to join street protests. They are more vulnerable to violence and rape, and mothers fear that their children might be taken away if they join street protests. However, women make up the majority of welfare rights activists because the majority of welfare recipients are mothers. Twenty years ago I worked with welfare recipients at UMass/Boston to found a welfare rights organization, called Survivors, Inc. The organization publishes a newspaper called *Survival News*, for which I write a section called "Survival Tips" that tells people about resources and benefits and gives advice about resisting repressive policies. It is translated into Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Vietnamese. Members of Survivors, Inc. have given speeches to groups, churches, conferences, classes, shelters, and radio and TV stations. They have written letters to the editor and met with the news editor of the *Boston Globe* to try to persuade him to give more coverage to poverty issues. They helped produce a Canadian documentary about welfare and homeless shelters. They do outreach at welfare offices to help people get access to benefits. At the welfare office, we recruited 15 welfare recipients and homeless women to attend the March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC in 2004. Ten members of Survivors, Inc joined them. A WIC‡ outreach worker went, as well as my Haitian outreach colleague and her niece. After the march, her niece gave a speech about the march to her college class. An African-American woman legislator had given money for 3 buses to the march for black women (but not excluding white women). We filled one of those buses. At the march, I wore a sign that said, "Welfare reform kills babies." The director of the homeless unit of the Boston DTA, an African-American woman, works to create as humane an atmosphere as possible in the office, and had no objection to our talking informally with the clients. The Haitian outreach worker, and the WIC worker, who is also Haitian, have become well known in the Haitian community and can often be seen in the waiting room talking with a group of Haitians and helping them to access benefits. In tracing the history of poor people's movements, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward conclude that the only power that poor people have is the power of disruption. Therefore, they argue, the role of organizers is not to try to form permanent membership organizations but to mobilize the poor for disruptive action when the time is ripe. Membership organizations, they argue, always end up by losing their base in their struggles to get funding and to hold on to leadership roles.

> Organizations endure . . . by abandoning their oppositional politics. . . . Organizers tended to work against disruption because, in their search for resources to maintain their organizations, they were driven inexorably to elites, and to the tangible and symbolic supports that elites could provide. Elites conferred these resources because they understood that it was organization-building, not disruption, that organizers were about.[52]

During the Great Depression, there were rent riots when small bands of people prevented marshals from putting furniture on the street. People also stormed the relief offices demanding relief.

> As the unemployed became more disruptive, even cherished procedures of investigation and surveillance of recipients were relinquished . . . As indignation mounted . . . some people not only defied the prohibition against going on the dole, but some even began to defy the apparatus of ritualized humiliation that had made that prohibition so effective.[53]

People began to shake free of what William Blake described in his poem *London* as "mind-forged manacles," which had locked them into submission and into internalizing their oppressor's view of them as not deserving of respect and equal rights. The general population also began to shake those mind-forged manacles when they understood that structural reasons created poverty, not people's individual failings. The playwright Jean Racine expressed it well in his play *Brittanicus*. Narcissus says to Brittanicus:

> As long as you are seen as a mere suppliant,
> Uttering complaints but not inspiring fear;
> While your resentments spend themselves in talk,
> No doubt of it, you will complain forever.[54]

Piven and Cloward conclude:

> One can never predict with certainty when the "heavings and rumblings of the social foundations" will force up large-scale defiance, although changes of great magnitude were at work. Who, after all, could have predicted the extraordinary mobilization of black people beginning in 1955? Nor can one calculate with certainty the responses of elites to mass disruption. There are no blueprints to guide movements of the poor. But if organizers and leaders want to help those movements emerge, they must always proceed as if protest were possible. They may fail. The time may not the right. But then, they may sometimes succeed.[55]

In *The Fiddler on the Roof* (based on Sholem Alaichem's *Teyve's Daughters*), Pertschik, a university student who is the husband of Teyve's daughter Hodel, is a young firebrand revolutionary who wants to turn the world upside down. Teyve tells him that he would do better to fix the leaking roof on the women's bathhouse and leave the revolution to the future. Until the heavings and rumblings of the social foundations force up large-scale defiance, we will continue to patch the roof. But we know that another world is possible. Finland does not believe that families should be in shelters, and they provide them with apartments. France endorsed housing as a legal right in January 2007 after an organizing group calling itself "The Children of Don Quixote" (les Enfants de Don Quichotte) set up 100 red tents on the Canal Saint-Martin in Paris and moved into a vacant office block to draw attention to the homeless sleeping outside. "The issue has dominated the news and forced politicians from all main parties to promise more help for those without a roof over their heads."[56] By the end of 2008, the right to housing will apply to homeless people, impoverished workers and single mothers. The new legislation is designed to put housing in the same legal category as education and health in French law. After the Katrina hurricane, the Housing Authority of New Orleans closed down all the housing developments. It scattered the residents across the country and barricaded their homes. Some residents of those housing developments have reoccupied their units, with the support of volunteers and friends. The People's Organizing Committee has sent out a nationwide S.O.S. for solar panels and electricians. They can be reached by e-mail. [57] These brave people survived disaster and resisted an indifferent government to reclaim their homes. Maybe the "heavings and rumblings" are beginning.

Footnotes

* It is important for people who hold high positions to talk about having received welfare, as it helps

to reduce the stigma of welfare. The recently elected governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick, said that his family received welfare when he was a child.

** The Family Cap policy states that a child born while a mother is on TAFDC is ineligible for cash benefits. This results in the family grant being reduced by $90 a month. The federal government does not mandate states to enforce it, but encourages them to do so.

† Although Michael Lipsky uses the term "social workers," the people who work in welfare offices are generally not professional social workers and are not accepted by the social work profession as such. (It probably wouldn't make much difference if they were professional social workers, as they would still be forced to take the same repressive measures, although perhaps with more finesse.) Workers now are not expected to provide services, but only to investigate and administer financial assistance. Prior to 1974 workers provided both services and investigation, but those functions were separated in that year because welfare rights activists saw the services as attempts to "reform" them with the goal of getting them off welfare, and demanded that services be separated from eligibility investigation. They did not want reform; they wanted cash. This separation of services from investigation actually resulted in officials cutting out the few services that were previously offered — yet another example of the unintended consequences of reform.

†† The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the United States voted to support when it was ratified by the United Nations in 1948, states that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 217A (III), www.un.org/Overview/rights.)

‡ WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) is a federal food program for young children and their mothers, and for pregnant women.

Endnotes

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