

American Welfare: The Raw Deal

By Kathleen Franks

I ride the escalator up from the subway. The morning fog blows its cold gray breath in my face. What a way to start the day, if it's going to be cold, I'd rather have it be sunny and cold, like those crystal-blue mornings back home in winter when you wake up to fresh-fallen snow, when everything's all brand new. That's how to start a day.

I'm on my way to the county welfare department in Richmond, California. It's 7:45 in the morning on a late November day in 2011. I'm fifteen minutes early for my appointment. I can't help it. I'm from the Midwest. We're bred to be punctual. I've been out of work for a while and I'm ashamed to say for how long. People from the Midwest pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We're not supposed to be out of work, let alone be so down and out that we've got to go on welfare.

I walk three blocks to the county offices. A couple, maybe in their late seventies, stand at the door.

"It's locked?" I ask.

The wife looks at her husband. He leans forward on his cane and says something to her in Spanish. We exchange smiles.

More people gather near the entrance. I hear a click at the door to signal that it's unlocked. The Spanish husband pushes it open. The crowd surges inside. I'm in the first elevator group. It takes us up three floors and dumps us out directly across from a large open waiting room. A lady with a microphone announces loudly that we should not line up, but sit down until the call for either food stamps or general assistance is called.

Over the next few minutes, the waiting room fills to standing room only as more elevator groups emerge. Two black gentlemen in cuffed khaki slacks and polished shoes sit down beside me. I overhear one quietly say to the other, "I never thought I'd be here, you know, at welfare, needing a helping hand like this." His friend replies, "Yeah, I know. Worked hard all our lives, just to get kicked to the curb." The other responds, "When we were young, Roosevelt gave us a New Deal, now we're old and all we get is a Raw Deal."

I look around the waiting room. A silver-haired Asian grandmother cradles her granddaughter in her lap. A younger Asian couple sit beside her. A white woman, probably in her twenties, sits across from the Asian family. She clutches a big red leather book to her chest, with the words, "Holy Bible," facing outward. An elderly man in a crumpled hat hobbles into the waiting room pulling a metal cart behind him, stuffed to the brim with coats, sweaters, shoes and plastic bags. He leans against the wall.

A door opens and a worker shouts over the din of the room that the general assistance class should line up in front of her. I will have to wait for the next call. Today I'm here for food stamps.

Ten minutes later, the same woman appears and calls for the food stamp class to line up. A uniformed security officer escorts us through the back offices, past cubicles where photos of family and potted plants and sweaters hanging over chairs make it look like any other office, except for the armed guards. We're taken to a room where rows of long gray metal tables and chairs await us.

A woman, no more than thirty years old, stands in front. She wears narrow-legged tan slacks offset by red high heels. Her straight blonde hair cascades over a faded red sweater. She introduces herself as our class instructor and begins by telling us to put our identification documents and bank statements inside the file folder in front of us. She gathers them up and hands the folders to a lady sitting at a table in the front who disappears to make copies.

"Listen up! This is the class for food stamps. Please follow instructions carefully and don't jump ahead! You will make mistakes if you do, trust me, some of these forms are difficult to understand. There's always a few in the class who don't follow directions. Your group is no different from the others that fill this room every day."

The first paper we are told to take out of the white packet in front of us is the one entitled, "Early Fraud Prevention and Detection Information." The class instructor says, "This is the government. If you are caught trying to scam the system, you will be prosecuted up to twenty years in prison. Any questions?"

The room is silent. We are told to sign the document and put it aside.

"Now," she asks, "how many of you have a permanent address? Raise your hand!"

I raise mine and turn to look around the room. Less than a dozen hands are up.

“Okay,” the instructor responds while holding up a paper, “Take this one out of your white envelope now. It’s blue. This is the one for those who do not have an address. Those of you who do have a place to call home will have to be patient while the rest fill out this form.”

It takes several minutes while she makes the rounds to answer individual questions. Everyone has a different circumstance and needs help with the form. When all are completed, she announces, “You can use the county offices as your address now. Lots of people do. You can pick up your mail at the intake window between the hours of 8 to 5, Monday through Friday.”

The next form to fill out is titled, “Statement of Shared Housing.” The upper half of the paper has several boxes for putting in the names and relationships of everyone you live with. Questions follow as to how much you contribute for rent, food and utilities and if you share meals. Multiple lines skip across the bottom of the page for the signatures of anyone over the age of eighteen who lives in the household. We are told to bring the completed form to our next appointment.

The instructor holds up a double-sided yellow paper, “This one has questions about your health, your criminal history, your drug habits, and any school you may be attending, again, I ask that you follow directions. Don’t jump ahead.”

We get to a question about convictions for felonies including drugs. It’s a two-parter. The first has to do with felony convictions; the second part has several boxes to check with questions about drug rehab programs, possession charges, and other details. The instructor tells us to fill out the first part completely before moving on to the second set. She tours the room as we proceed and stops halfway to hold up an applicant’s paper.

“Here’s an example of what you were not supposed to do. Just because you have been in rehab doesn’t mean that you are a felon. But by checking the boxes under the question on felony convictions, you are placing yourself in that category. I told you not to jump ahead. So now, you have to draw a line through those answers.”

A collective groan circles the room.

“By the way, if you are accepted into the food stamp program you will be tested for drugs. If you fail the test, no food stamps for you. Oh, and just to let you know, the maximum benefit for food stamps is \$200 per month.”

We get to the question on school.

“If you are in school and not working, you will be automatically disqualified.” she explains, “I know that doesn’t make much sense, but that’s how it is.”

A young Latina raises her hand and says that she is in school and not working. She explains that she is diligently looking for a job but hasn’t found anything yet.

“Well, do you have a little sister that you can say you babysit for?” the instructor asks, and without waiting for the woman’s reply, tells her that she needs to find a way to truthfully answer the question. The solution invokes laughter from the back of the room.

We get through the entire packet of forms in about an hour and a half. Toward the end of the class, the instructor says, “I know you guys are getting tired of all this. I can’t wait to get out of here either. It feels like jail.”

A guy in the back row says, “Well, at least you got a job and with benefits, too.”

“Yeah, I got a job, but I don’t have benefits. They upped the premiums and I can’t afford ‘em anymore.”

The woman who had taken our documents to be copied steps inside the classroom holding the numbered file folders. It takes a few minutes while they are distributed to each applicant. Class is finally dismissed and we’re told to sit in the waiting room until our names are called to get our next appointment time. Mine is for Thursday of the following week.

At home that evening, I think about the instructor not being able to afford the cost of her healthcare premiums. Later I mention this to a friend.

“That’s probably her own damn fault for not managing her finances. I’m sure she could afford her premiums if she got rid of her cable TV, internet and cell phone,” my friend says.

I reply that healthcare coverage can be several hundred dollars a month these days, much more than the cost of cable TV, cell phone and internet service combined. My friend agrees that premiums are high, but sticks to her argument that the woman should be able to afford healthcare above anything else.

I leave the conversation at that. Maybe it's true. Maybe this woman is a lousy money manager, but then again, maybe she has a slew of bills that she's trying to pay off, or student loans, or maybe she's a single parent and has children to feed, or aging relatives who live with her, or disabled family members, who knows, all I know is that I've got to get my forms ready for my general assistance appointment on Thursday.

Once again, I'm fifteen minutes early. Sure, I could have taken a later train, but I didn't want to chance it. The packet for public assistance states in big bold letters, "IF YOU ARE LATE FOR AN APPOINTMENT, EVEN BY ONE MINUTE, YOU WILL FORFEIT YOUR APPLICATION AND HAVE TO START ALL OVER." For a person from Ohio where punctuality is prized, this is a fair warning.

It's another cold foggy morning. I walk the three blocks to the county office. I find a bench nearby. The drizzly dampness is not enough to drive me to the shelter of the doorway. A petite black woman in an oversized trench coat sits down next to me. I say hello. She returns the greeting while taking out a pack of cigarettes from her purse.

Almost immediately, a nice-looking Latino man with a neatly-trimmed mustache approaches her. I recognize him as one of the men from my food stamps class the other day. He sat right across from me. He was one of the homeless who needed help filling out the form.

"Can I pay you for a cigarette?"

"How much?" she responds.

"Twenty-five cents?" he replies with a winning grin.

She takes a long drag while he anxiously awaits her answer, "No, I don't think so," she replies.

"Fifty cents?" he persists.

"No, I really don't have many left," she says.

He smiles and wishes her a good day as he goes back to the growing crowd waiting at the door.

"I can't afford to share my stuff," she says to me, "I could use the cash. I only have a taxi voucher to get back, but fifty cents for a cigarette isn't gonna help me much."

“You live around here?” I ask.

“Umm... yeah,” she replies hesitatingly.

Just then a frail white woman whose weathered face alone tells of her worn-down life, approaches my bench-mate.

“Can I please have a cigarette?” she implores.

“Uhh .. no, I can’t. I don’t have many left.”

“Please? I can give you a bus pass,” she barter.

The black woman looks over my shoulder to the waiting crowd.

“Guess he won’t see this,” she says to me, then taps a cigarette out and lights it for the lady.

“Thank you, God will bless you, I know he will,” the woman says, “You’ve got a good heart.”

The crowd begins to shuffle toward the door. I get in line. A man with a bronzed face stuck under a cowboy hat steps in the elevator with me. His denim jacket and jeans look authentically faded and frayed, not like the fake ones bought by teenagers at the mall. I glance at his shoes. His boots tell a story deep as the wrinkles on his face. I suspect he’s not from around here, then he says, “Shit. This fog chills my bones colder than a well-digger’s ass in Montana.” I shoot him a knowing grin, not that I’ve dug any wells in Montana, but I have spent many a sub-zero day in that Big Sky Country.

The routine is the same as the other day. We are told to wait until the class for general assistance is called. I find a seat and pull out a book. I’m reading the former NEA chairman’s book, “Arts, Inc., How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights.” I have an earnest interest in promoting art as a way to alleviate societal ills. Call me idealistic.

I glance up to notice a woman with spiky blonde hair, maybe mid-twenties, in line at the intake window. She’s dressed in snug-fitting royal blue velour pants and a yellow hoodie. A toweringly handsome black man in a shiny-new Nike jacket, baggy jeans and unlaced athletic shoes, sidles up to her back, puts his arms around her waist and says, “Good morning, sweetheart.”

She elbows him hard and turns to give him a dirty look. He laughs and heads to the back of the line.

When she is finished at the window, she sits along the wall. After the Nike-jacketed guy gets through the line, he saunters to a chair, walking right by her without a glance. Two minutes later, she looks down the wall to see where he is, gets up and moves to the empty chair beside him, puts her hand on his leg and her head on his shoulder. I am surprised. What prompted all that? Has she decided to make a stab at a relationship with this guy? Does she already know him and they were just playing around the whole time? These and many other questions will be answered in the next episode of “The Waiting Room at Social Services.”

In the meantime, a woman announces the class for general assistance. As before, a security guard escorts us to the classroom. We check our names off on a sign-in sheet at the door and take a seat. The instructor, a lady with a close-cropped Afro and dressed in light gray sweats, gives the same speech on following directions and paying attention that we heard in the food stamp class.

Then she says, “Listen. I know this is a lot, you all being here, applying for welfare. I know it’s difficult. Life can get tough and that can be depressing. That’s right. We’re all depressed. You’ve got to be if you’re so down and out that you’re here today. Look, I’m depressed, too. My mama died eight years ago and I still miss her, so it’s nothin’ to be ashamed about, being depressed, it’s just part of life sometimes. I’m not sayin’ you’re crazy, I’m just sayin’ that you’re depressed. No offense. Okay, now that we’ve got that out of the way, I’m going to show you a video on the application process, then you’re gonna take a mental health test.”

An Asian girl sitting next to me raises her hand, “If we don’t pass the test, will we be disqualified?”

“No, the test is just to determine if you need to see the county psychiatrist or not. Don’t worry about it. Just answer the questions best you can,” she explains.

The video lasts ten minutes. Then the instructor passes out the test. It’s one of those where you have to fill in the little circle with a #2 pencil. Fifty-three questions. She tells us that we can jump ahead, rather than wait for the recorded monotone voice that slowly reads every question and repeats the same multiple choice responses after each one: never, hardly ever, sometimes, frequently or all of the time.

The questions cover a variety of issues. Here are some random examples: Are you afraid to ride public transit? Do you ever feel like punching someone? Do you think that God is punishing you for your sins? I get through them quickly, then sit there for a good twenty minutes trying to tune out the guy on the recording. Finally we are dismissed and told to sit in the waiting room until our names are called to receive our next appointment where we will meet with our intake worker to determine eligibility. We are informed to arrive an hour early for the interview.

My appointment is in the afternoon at 2:00. I arrive one hour early as instructed. This time I get out my notebook. In a few minutes, the door to the back office opens and an older black woman steps out.

“Okay, people, this is not welfare as you might think it is. This is a work program. If you can’t work, you should leave, go see your doctor and get a letter to verify your disability. Otherwise, stick around. Today we have five social workers on duty. There are twenty-six of you here. That’s not bad. Consider yourselves lucky. I’ve been here when only four workers have had to interview thirty applicants. If everything runs smoothly, we should get out of here before 5:00. Here’s how it works. We call your name in no particular order. Things don’t go alphabetical around here and you can’t take a number like at the deli. That means that you just have to wait. If you’re still here at 4:45, though, you’ll have to get a new appointment. We close right at 5:00. I’m sorry if you don’t get called today. On your way home, stop to buy a lotto ticket, your luck can only get better, honey.”

I settle back in my chair and continue writing. Other applicants pass the time on their cell phones. I wonder how people who are destitute can afford such luxuries, but then, this is America. We find ways to indulge. After a good twenty minutes or so, a social worker comes out to call the first person in for their interview. I see how this process could take a while. I figure I’ll get a fair amount of work done. In a few minutes the elevator opens and out steps the same couple from the waiting room scene of the other day. You know, the spiky blonde and the unlaced shoe guy. She approaches the intake window and plops down a stack of papers on the counter. Her man turns to look over the crowd in the waiting room and smiles as he finds a buddy of his leaning against the window sill. He ambles to the back wall.

The hum of the waiting room is pierced by the blonde shouting at the clerk, “What do you mean, I have to make a new appointment? I’m only a half hour late!”

The blonde’s main squeeze hears his woman’s protest and bolts to the front counter, “Look, I don’t have time to make another god damn appointment. I got more important shit to do than hang around here,” the boyfriend bellows. Then he looks

across the room toward his friend and says, “Shit, I’d still be asleep if it weren’t for havin’ to dick around here. What’s a hundred sixty dollars gonna get me?”

He snatches the papers off the counter and hurls them across the room, then saunters toward the elevator. His velvet girl scoops them up as he yells, “Leave that shit there. We don’t need it.”

The drama is interrupted by a cell phone ringing directly behind me.

“Hello beautiful daughter of mine. How was school today? Uh huh... that sounds good. Hey listen, I’ll call you back. I’m uh... I’m uh... in this thing right now. I’ll be home later. Daddy loves you.”

A couple hours pass without any further commotion. A few people come in to pick up their mail. I’m absorbed in my notes when my name is called. The same security officer from the food stamp class escorts me through the back offices. I am directed to the last cubicle on the right.

An Asian woman, smartly dressed in a navy pencil skirt and neatly-pressed tattersall shirt, stands up from her desk, extends her hand, asks me to please sit down. She looks over my application for a minute, then says, “You know, general assistance isn’t really much. The maximum award is \$158 per month which you can draw for nine months during one calendar year. After that, if you still require assistance, you must wait three months to reapply. And, by the way, the money is given out as a loan.”

“Oh, I had no idea that welfare is a loan,” I reply.

“Well, it’s not like anyone is going to come knocking on your door to repay it. However, it will be deducted from your tax returns.” she responds, “In order to receive ongoing benefits, you must show proof of applying for at least three jobs per week. We will issue a bus pass for you.”

“Okay, I understand.”

“Is this your first time applying for government assistance?”

“Well, it’s been awhile,” I answer, “about forty years.”

“I thought so. You seem disoriented. A lot has changed in forty years. Just to let you know how things work now, every county is different. If you lived across the bay, the

cash is not given out as a loan, but you are expected to work in exchange for benefits.”

“Doing what?”

She grins, “Well, you don an orange vest and clean the streets.”

My mind flashes on the image of myself in a day-glo orange vest, dirty jeans and clunky work boots, stooped over the gutter in San Francisco, picking up trash, “How many hours per week do you work and is the dollar amount the same per month?”

“I’m not sure about the hour requirements, but the cash benefit is about the same, “ she answers.

“I still have to get my landlord’s signature and a few other documents copied, then I will mail it all in. I appreciate you helping me today.”

“It’s my pleasure, and I wish you the best of luck,” she responds.

I dose in and out of sleep that night. Somewhere in my lucid dreams, Tillie Olsen’s opening line, “I stand here ironing,” from her story, ‘Tell Me A Riddle’, circles my mind like a ticker tape. I get up. Turn on my computer. Search for the story. Download a copy. Read it through. Lean back in my chair.

I stood ironing when my son was an infant, back in ‘71. I ironed his cloth diapers. The cotton flannel ones I sewed on that Kenmore machine whose bobbin never let a thread go by without puckering it. I stood there ironing dozens of diapers in my kitchen on the board that dropped from the wall. Daily pressing out the wrinkles of my crumpled life. Bearing down on worries. Will the water get shut off tomorrow? Will the landlord let us go another month? What to fix for dinner? That last one was easy. Never a need to survey my cupboards coming up with recipes. The sparse content dictated what to cook. I remember a time when all I had was a box of raisins, a sack of flour, a bottle of corn oil, and a cylinder of salt. My refrigerator’s interior gleamed white against the red cabbage living lonely with the quart of milk and a half dozen eggs. Dinner that night was a cabbage-raisin pie. I fluted the edge as lovely as my grandmother’s.

I close my computer. Head for my laundry room. It’s 2:00 a.m. I open the cabinet and pull down the ironing board. Plug in my iron. Fill it with water. Get out a stack of pillow cases. I stand here ironing. Without my children banging old pots and spoons on that kitchen floor. Without my husband hunched over his old chemistry books

preparing for the exam he never took. Without the hum of that old Kenmore stitching up all those baby layettes. I stand here ironing now. Pressing stories out, smoothing wrinkled seams, folded in - among the poor.