

# REMARKS OF A FORMER WELFARE RECIPIENT ON SELECTED STATE LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN WELFARE

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## MY EXPERIENCE IN THE NEW YORK WELFARE SYSTEM

Good afternoon everyone. I am going to start from the beginning, from my experience within the New York welfare system, and then I'm going to describe my awareness of why things are the way they are. I'm a product of a broken home, also the oldest of six children. My mother came here from Puerto Rico and could not find a job because of the language barrier and we were too many for her to consider baby-sitting. I didn't blame my mother for the things I had been denied. My mother was not a bad mother, but there were situations imposed on her, just like I later learned were imposed on me.<sup>1</sup> I didn't appreciate that until after I broke up with the father of my children. I had my children before I broke up with him; I

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\* Ms. Vera is a former welfare consumer and currently serves as Community Liaison of the Family and Community Enrichment (FACE) program at Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association, a grassroots, South Bronx community development corporation founded, owned, and governed by local residents. Ms. Vera is presently a Board Member of the National Welfare Rights Union; a Council Member of the National Organizing Committee; Co-founder and Chairperson of the Coalition for Welfare Rights of New York City; a member of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger; and a member of Ruth Messingers' Task Force on Welfare, Employment and Education. Ms. Vera coordinates monthly workshops for community residents on community-related issues and provides resources, information, and training for residents in South Bronx Tenants Association meetings and workshops. In recognition of her service to the community, Ms. Vera received a 1994 Lifetime Achievement Award at the request of New York State Senator Pedro Espada, Jr.

Ms. Vera was as a panelist at *The American University Journal of Gender & the Law* symposium "Gender, Family and Change: Developments in the Legal Regulation of Family Life" on April 9, 1994. These opening remarks introduced a panel discussion on recent legislative and legal developments in welfare.

1. In a personal statement submitted as part of a college application, Ms. Vera wrote of the "situations", "I wear the hat of a former welfare recipient, working poor head of household, . . . national activist, and last but not least, a Puerto Rican woman destined to make it."

didn't have my children to get on welfare. I decided to leave an abusive relationship and, then, went on welfare out of need.

I didn't know what my rights were, but I got on welfare. I remember feeling inadequate in the sense that I had to justify and prove to a welfare worker that I was who I said I was, that my children in fact were my children, and that we actually had no source of income and no relatives around to help us. My life stopped being personal and private at that moment. As they kept dissecting me as a person, piece by piece, I felt that I was unable to speak up because I believed I would put in jeopardy my children's next meal or the roof over our heads, which we eventually lost anyway. I was served with a dispossession<sup>2</sup> because of course the amount of shelter allowance was inadequate. I was so traumatized by the way the worker treated me that I refused to go back to the welfare center for rent money. I started cleaning neighbors' apartments and baby-sitting in order to get our daily food.

Eventually, we were evicted. The day before the marshall came, I went to the neighborhood parish and I asked the priest to please help me—to help me find a solution so my children wouldn't experience strangers coming into our home and taking our things into the street, disrupting what we called "home." The priest agreed to help, but I never knew about foster care before. The next thing I knew, the police came to our house and took us down to the precinct. That's when I found out I was *voluntarily* placing my children in foster care. Since I was so vulnerable, I didn't dare ask, "What is voluntary placement?" Anyway, the fact was, I placed them. So to prepare my children emotionally—because I loved them so dearly and we had never been separated—I told them that Mommy was sick and she was going to go away for awhile and that she would visit them, that I would leave the hospital and go visit them. My youngest at the time was two and the oldest was only seven.

Because of the separation from my children, I became chronically depressed and went in and out of mental hospitals for emergency services because I couldn't cope. I was literally sleeping in parks and in cars. Those who had called themselves "friends," as I later found out, were not my friends, because, in exchange for me staying at their house one night, I had to baby-sit and clean. I thought it was kind of cruel to expect for me to hug someone else's child when I couldn't

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2. Dispossession is a legal summons issued for the nonpayment of rent for a dwelling. In my area, the average shelter allowance for a family of three is \$286.00 per month. When you don't pay your rent for more than one month, you are given a dispossession.

even hug my own. That was very distressing, so I chose to sleep in the park.

Two and a half years later, I got a job and my children back. We were all in a one-bedroom apartment, my four children and me. I found out that with \$180 a week and having to pay \$100 a week for a baby-sitter, that left only \$80 per week for rent, light, food, etc., we were going toward homelessness once again. So a year after that, again my children went into foster care and I was homeless. It so happened that I came across a community-based agency that helps poor people and there I learned what my rights were as far as being on welfare. I was able to get my children back and to get a job on the side to pay for the baby-sitting. When that didn't work out, I had to clean houses again.

Years earlier, I said to myself, "Something's got to change. I don't know what, but there's got to be a better way." I became employed at that community-based agency in an entry-level position and within less than two years, I got promoted twice. I was at the point of running a whole city-wide welfare advocacy program, all on a ninth grade education. I thought they knew I had a ninth grade education, but I guess I had enough knowledge of my rights that they assumed I had a degree. It didn't come up until I told them I wanted to get my GED. I devoured an old GED book before I went for the test. Not realizing what level I was supposed to get to, because I never went to high school, I was surprised when I went to get my GED papers and found out I could read at the college level.

At that point, I got a little more confident and became aware of how good and charged up the organization was. They were well-intended. They hired me to fight for welfare rights later on with my second promotion. Then I discovered that in another one of their sites they had "WEP workers" [Work Experience Program], which means that you work for your welfare check and if you miss one day, they can cut off your assistance.<sup>3</sup> I asked my supervisor, "How could you hire me to fight for welfare rights, and I think I am one of the best welfare activists in all of New York, and I'm on the Board of the National Welfare Rights Union, but at another site you're exploiting these women. When a position comes along you don't offer it to them and many times they don't even know it exists." So I started

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3. WEP workers are given an assignment to work at an agency in exchange for welfare benefits. After a certain amount of time, the agency shifts the worker to another assignment and then another. You are supposed to get enough experience to locate permanent work, but it is difficult when you are not given enough experience to go on interviews or enough money to even buy the clothes for an interview.

questioning. Since I kept pushing the issue I got demoted on the excuse that there were no more funds. But there is still someone there—who was supposed to be temporary, but they're still on—so that made me question more.

I guess I'm thankful because while working there I went through all the policy books that they use to train welfare workers in New York, and every time a problem came up I would look in the policy books. Instead of telling the clients or the recipient, "These are your rights," I would tell them, "Here, read that, then you call the worker. If the worker doesn't comply then you go to the supervisor and up the chain of command all the way to downtown headquarters. *You* do this. Don't come to me, don't go to any other worker." I realized that even though the agency said, "Don't give [out] this [information]," (I mean even we were supposed to use discretion in calling downtown), but then I thought, these are public workers. They're the public and this is public information. This was *my* logic and what helped me assist other women in getting out of there. I thought at home how, as a mother on welfare, I was made to feel degraded and demeaned. I felt like a failure as a mother even though when I brought in that illegal \$20 from cleaning a neighbor's house it was to put extra food on the table. When I went to see the welfare worker, I felt like I was hiding something—like I was cheating and this was disgraceful. Besides the fact that my kids couldn't go on trips, I couldn't get them new clothes for the first day of school. I couldn't get them special projects that their peers participated in. I couldn't pay for them to be part of little meetings that evoked civic duties and responsibilities within the community, because I couldn't afford it. If I paid for their yearly school pictures, this would mean we would have to eat fried eggs for a week. *That was the choice.*

#### STATE LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Two weeks ago, I went to a welfare reform hearing in Albany, New York.<sup>4</sup> I went out on a limb and said [legislators] have to know this is what is going on. In my testimony, I stated that when I was on welfare I had to make the choice of going to jail every month, even

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4. Ms. Vera presented testimony for welfare reform hearings held by the New York State Puerto Rican & Hispanic Task Force, Hearings on Welfare Reform, on March 17, 1994. In concluding her testimony, Ms. Vera provided an honest reflection of her role within the community,

As a role model in the community I've lived in for over 20 years, the people look up to me to reach their goals to better the quality of their lives. The reality is, that it is becoming harder when they come to me for advice, to give them hope for tomorrow.

though thank God I didn't. But every month I would have to take a risk of going to jail because, I thought, if I change \$60 of food stamps into \$50 cash to complete my rent, at least my family wouldn't become homeless, but then I'd have to scatter around and look for food until the food stamps came in, which were always for rent. So I stood there and told the state senate this is [the reality of] what people are going through; this is what we're up against.

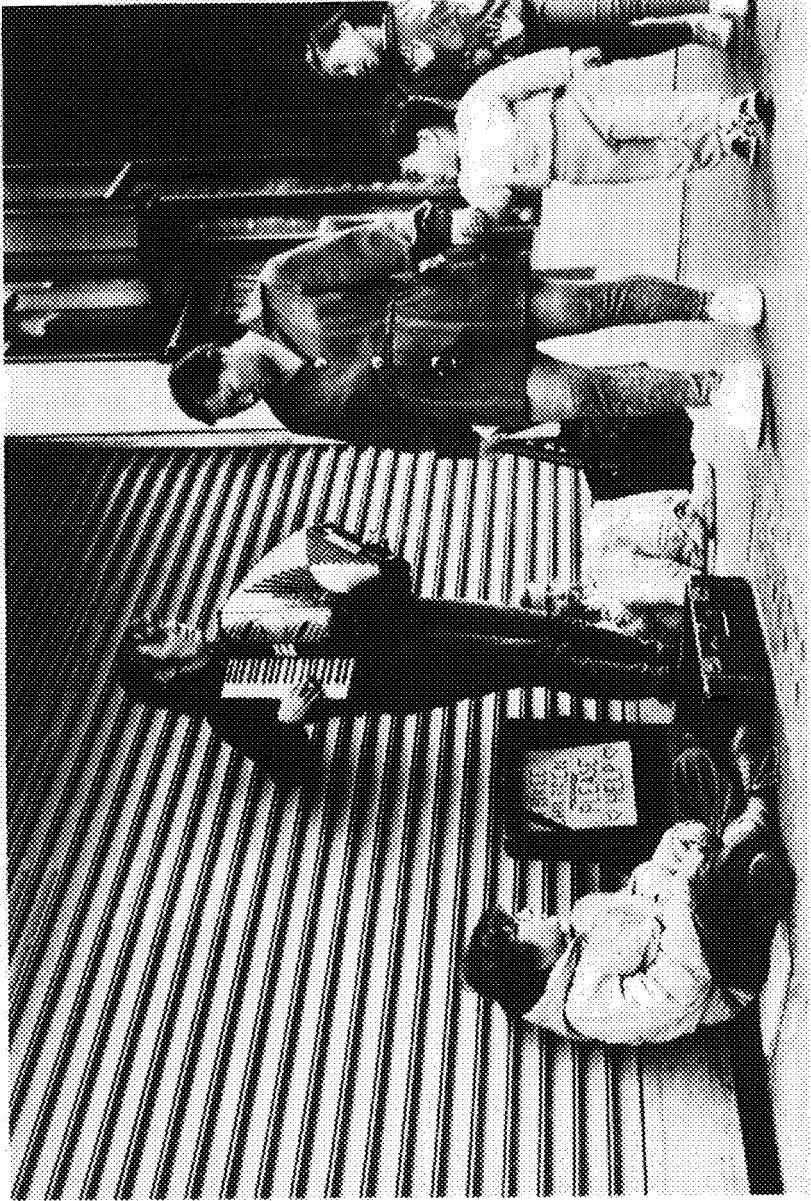
[Another issue is mandatory fingerprinting as a requirement for receiving state welfare assistance.] I suggest that everyone watch out because in New York they've implemented it as a pilot program in two counties.<sup>5</sup> What I see is, for example, last year I had a domestic violence client [who] was in battered women's shelters all over the city. Her boyfriend always found her, so it got to the point where we figured she had to be telling him. What it actually boiled down to was that her boyfriend, who was the abuser, had a friend who had access to the computer system; since she was on welfare, he just pressed a button on the computer and the boyfriend could find her. This is exactly what's going to continue to happen with the fingerprinting pilots.

When I was on welfare, they took everything but my fingerprints. If I had to go on welfare again, I'd refuse to give them my prints. This is discouraging parents who are either undocumented or refuse to give their fingerprints from getting benefits that their children are entitled to and need. It is impacting children; but because children don't vote, there is no voice. That is what I really think is the underlying issue.

Thank you.

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5. Los Angeles County pioneered computer fingerprinting in 1991. In October 1992, Rockland and Onondaga counties implemented pilot programs for the state of New York. See N.Y. SOC. SERV. LAW § 139-a (McKinney 1992 & Supp. 1995) (providing special provisions for pilot programs within several New York counties to determine the cost-effectiveness of the use of a fingerprinting system to prevent abuse of state welfare assistance); *Welfare Fraud Weapon: Fingerprints Opponents Blast Practice as an Unproven Method That Invades Privacy*, CHI. TRIB., Jan. 23, 1994, at 8.



Motherhood in a Glance, Photograph by BARBARA CONNOLE ©