

# **Beat the System: Surviving Welfare**

Workshop presented May 3, 2003 as part of the *Pavilion Skillshare, Forum and Picnic*, Troy, NY  
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## **Workshop Agenda**

- Introduction to WYMSM (5 minutes)
- Small group skit preparation (20 minutes)
- Skit performances (20 minutes)
- Large group discussion (15 minutes)

## Summary Points: Welfare “Reform”

- A key premise of “welfare reform” in 1996, which ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, was that state governments, if given appropriate discretion, are best positioned to ensure the well being of low-income families with children. This is reflected in the design of Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), which allows states broad flexibility in the expenditure of federal and state welfare funds.
- One of the harshest aspects of the TANF program is the lifetime limit (60 months) on the receipt of federal welfare benefits.
- Many families with children who are eligible for help from TANF are not getting it. In the first two years after welfare reform (during an economic boom), the number of people eligible for TANF dropped only 5%, but participation in TANF dropped 23%.
- Despite all the rhetoric about “marriage,” 16 states and the District of Columbia retain policies from AFDC that discriminate against two-parent families and effectively exclude them from the welfare safety net.
- Despite all the rhetoric about “work,” welfare rules in most states create an incentive for parents to leave their jobs in order to access food assistance, subsidized housing, and healthcare for their families.
- Large number of immigrants are effectively excluded from the welfare safety net.

### Sources:

“Kicked Off, Kept Off: How TANF Keeps Low-Income People Poor.” 2/14/2002. Washington, DC: The National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support.

“States Behaving Badly: America’s 10 Worst Welfare States.” 2/22/2002. Washington, DC: The National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support.

## **Skit Preparation Instructions**

1. Read your composite story, and note down the main points and whatever themes you see.
2. Discuss the small group discussion questions to identify one point or theme to illustrate in your skit.
3. Develop a plot and characters for your group based on that point or theme.
4. Decide who will take on which character and how the action will unfold.
5. Gather any props you might need.
6. Rehearse once!
7. Don't worry, we love improv! But remember that each group will have only 3-5 minutes to present!

## Composites

**S**andra is a 34-year old mother of three who is reapplying for assistance just after TANF's five-year lifetime limit was put into place. Although she had been briefly on public assistance prior to 1996, she finds herself entrapped by the bureaucratic requirements this time around. First she had to travel to another city to get her first child's birth certificate within a 10-day time period. Second, when she asked her landlord for documentation of her rent receipts, she learned that he did not take DSS so she realized she would have to find another place to live. Because of lead exposure restrictions, she had to find a place built after 1976, which she had difficulty doing giving the housing stock in her area. Third, she had to produce the names of her children's fathers. Lastly, she had to document proof of income, but she had to leave her job because she had left so often to do errands related to her attempt to access public assistance. She ends up in a homeless shelter with her children.

**M**aria, a 42-year-old recent immigrant, received her medical degree in her home country of the Phillipines. She has taken the most available job she can find -- as a live-in nanny in Westchester County -- hoping to find time to study for her US medical board exams. She sends a large portion of her salary back to the Phillipines to support her three children, who remain there under the care of their grandmother. She is afraid that she won't be able to afford to redo her internship and residency after she passes her exam.

**H**arry is a 45-year-old factory worker who was laid off when his employer moved offshore. When a relative refers him to unemployment, he is denied for not filling out the paper work correctly because he is functionally illiterate. He doesn't understand why he was denied unemployment compensation after working many years for the same employer. The denial comes in the form of a lengthy, legalistic letter that he gets a friend to read. Understanding that his options with unemployment are exhausted, he then tries to apply for assistance through DSS. Having no previous experience with social services, he is unaware for which programs he might be eligible—such as emergency food stamps. No one informs him about his eligibility because they figure he will be able to find the information himself or will just go out and get another job. Nor does anyone figure out that he is not literate. He is again denied benefits, thus falling between the cracks of the two systems. Out of pride, fatigue, and frustration, he does not return to either system, but instead becomes homeless. He does not seek a homeless shelter, we he might have obtained advocacy and support, but instead lives on the streets. This causes him to fall into a depression, and he begins to show symptoms of mental illness.

**K**aren is a 52-year-old woman who has struggled with mental health issues (particularly depression and bipolar disorder) for twenty years. Though

she has suffered several nervous breakdowns, she managed to maintain state employment as a keyboard operator and in data entry/forms processing for much of the past thirty years. Recently, though, she was institutionalized for nine months, and is trying to re-enter the workforce. She finds an advocate from outpatient referrals and goes to the department of social services to apply for unemployment, Medicaid, and food stamps. She becomes increasingly frustrated with DSS after a five-hour wait to see a case worker, the depersonalized treatment she faces when she finally gets to see someone, and her general feelings of dependency and helplessness. The advocate does her best to help her navigate the system, but Karen is certain that she is being discriminated against because of her mental illness.

**R**ebecca, a 19-year-old mother of one child, dropped out of high school in tenth grade during her pregnancy. She has been living with her parents, and she is thus ineligible for aid until age 21 unless she is legally emancipated, her parents go onto public assistance, or they pass away. However, her father is abusive towards her, and her parents become unable or unwilling to support her and her child. At this point in her life, Rebecca wants to complete her GED and seek higher education in order to better support herself and her son. Because she can document the abuse she is put in a temporary group home, where a sympathetic caseworker refers her to Community Maternity Services in Albany, informing her that this agency is one of her best options because it comprehensively serves people in her position. In this highly structured program, she finds not only housing but childcare, job training and life skills classes, and a GED class.

**A**ndrew is a 33-year-old intravenous drug user recovering in a MICA program. He has hepatitis C. Although he receives Medicaid, the federal health insurance program for indigent people, his bills exceed what Medicaid pays for the expensive pharmaceutical drugs that are essential to his liver functioning. His drug bills run about \$4,000 annually. Seven months into the year, his Medicaid coverage runs out and he is denied for the rest of the year. He has to switch to one primary care physician who works for a clinic that will accept just what Medicaid pays and not bill him for the balance, and drop all his other specialists.

**B**illy is a 22-year-old high school dropout who works full-time on the night shift at Burger King. His live-in girlfriend, Peggy, is 4 months pregnant. He is hoping to become a welder, so he contacted the Capital District Educational Opportunities Commission (EOC) to enroll in a 10-week course, which should make him employable a month or two before his girlfriend gives birth. Unfortunately, when he arrives at his first class, he learns that he needs his GED before he can take the welding course, and is referred to another organization, where he is told it will take him from 3 - 6 months to complete GED training and testing. If he doesn't find a higher paying job, he and his girlfriend will have to move into separate apartments so that she can apply for Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) to get the support she needs to raise a child.

**J**ane, a 22-year-old single mother, has one child, Johnny, who develops RSV, goes to the emergency room, and is hospitalized. When he leaves the hospital, the doctor says he must stay home a couple of days. Jane works 20 hours a week at a new job at CVS. She doesn't have anyone she can depend on to help her by watching Johnny while she is at work. When she calls her new boss to explain her situation, she is told to come in or she will be fired. Jane feels she has to make a choice between her job and her child. She chooses to stay home with her child and is fired. She goes to Project Hire to tell her caseworker that she lost her job. The worker informs her that they have to sanction her for 90 days. By law they cannot sanction her child, but she is left with no cash benefits and no support to seek more sustainable employment.

**D**aleesha is 16 years old and has an infant daughter. She lives with her 42-year-old father, who works a full-time second shift state job in the capital, and is able to cover the mortgage and include Daleesha in his health insurance coverage as a dependent (until she is 18). Daleesha's high school has recently started an experimental teen parenting program that provides daycare so that she can stay in school, and though she sometimes struggles to stay focused with very little sleep and more responsibility than her friends, she is maintaining a 2.8 GPA. She hopes to apply to colleges in the Fall, but she's heard recently that because of budget cuts put into place by the new Republican city council, the teen parenting program may be discontinued in her final year.

## Discussion Questions

### *Small Group Discussion Questions:*

1. What options does your character have?
2. How well is the system supporting a sustainable life for your character and her or his family?
3. What decisions might your character make, and why?
4. What might be the consequences of these decisions?

### *Large Group Discussion Questions:*

1. How well is the system supporting a sustainable life for the people represented in the composites?
2. How well does this arrangement allow your characters to take care of themselves, their family, and earn an income?
3. What about independence and self-respect? Any trade-offs?
4. How can these characters organize to get a better deal? What governmental and social supports do they need?

## **On the Composites: WYMSM's Research**

During the last several months, WYMSM has been using an interviewing and compositing method to gather and combine information from a wide variety of people about their experiences with the human and social service systems. The composites you read today are a product of that research, and have been distilled from weeks of interviewing and discussion by the WYMSM team.

These stories, based on people's real lived experiences, will be used for a variety of purposes, including workshops like today's. We will also use the composites to help us develop characters and scenarios for the board game we are creating called *Beat the System: Surviving Welfare*.

*WYMSM is a collaborative community group that uses technology as a tool of social change.*