

WELFARE

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Story Sources

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Joseph,

You found a human face that challenges the stereotype about welfare recipients and you did an excellent job of reporting. It's quite an accomplishment to get comments from people in HRA.

You wrote a coherent, well-organized story. You have good quotes and the story flows well.

To improve the story, you need more in the lede about the fact that Rule has had extreme difficulty with the system. In the nut graf, you need to mention that people with less education also find the system extremely frustrating.

A little more detail is needed about how she ended up on welfare. Who did she work for before Sept. 11?

Over all, you've done a good job on this story. So keep up the good reporting.

Carla

Jenette Rule, ~~52~~, [AGE IS A DETAIL THAT SHOULD WAIT FOR LATER] lives on the affluent Upper East Side of Manhattan and takes her 14-year-old daughter on excursions to the Metropolitan Museum.

~~However,~~But when most of the people in her neighborhood wake up and go to high-powered corporate jobs, she said, she heads to the East End Job Center, ~~she said.~~

Rule is on welfare.

“It was definitely a little embarrassing turning to welfare,” ~~said~~ Rule, ~~52.~~ ~~said.~~ “I only needed a little to get by. I like to be self sufficient, but I didn’t have much choice.”

As a trained legal secretary with more than three years of college education, Rule acknowledged that she is not the typical person on public assistance. But, she said, circumstances sometimes arise in life and people need a hand.

The daunting part, she said, “is the system failed its mission of helping me get back on my feet, but it succeeded in frustrating me so much I want to go off.” [GOOD QUOTE]

Since April, Rule said, she has applied three separate times because of various internal Job Center processing errors. She said the staff ~~was~~ ~~so~~ frustrating because they treat applicants like they ~~do not~~ ~~don’t~~ [AVOID CONTRACTIONS] exist. They would ~~talk~~ gossip about her case to each other, Rule said, and they often would not pay attention while they were entering her information. She said the workers probably are not used to applicants with her level of education. ~~someone as educated as her.~~

Don Friedman, a senior policy analyst for the Community Food Resource Center who has more than 25 years writing and analyzing welfare law, agrees with Rule. He said about 50 percent of applicants for public assistance do not have high school diplomas. Even with the weak economy and the Sept. 11 attacks, cases like Rule’s are few, he said, because the system is not designed for people like her.

Rule found steady work for many years until the attacks of Sept. 11. [YOU NEED A BIT MORE DETAIL HERE. WHO WAS SHE WORKING FOR BEFORE SEPT. 11?] Then, because of layoffs and hiring freezes, she was forced to live off savings, she said. Luckily, her apartment, which was passed down from her deceased mother, is rent controlled and costs under \$500 per month. With \$60,000 of her mother’s savings, \$6,000 of her own savings, and a \$5,000 individual retirement account ~~IRA~~, Rule thought she would be OK. But the cost of a teenager, some chronic health problems, and the general demands of the city were too much for her, she said. She tried to find odd jobs, walking dogs and babysitting, but because of her health, she could not sustain them. ~~couldn’t sustain.~~ Eventually, she was behind a few months in rent, could borrow no more and had to turn to the government, she said.

“When I first approached the Job Center, I noticed the phrase, ‘Welcome to Hell’ scratched into the front door,” Rule said. “I didn’t think much of it at the time, but if I only knew then...”

Inside, the ~~C~~center is clean. ~~Flou~~rescent lights buzz over mumbles of applicant interviews. A few signs hang sparsely on walls telling applicants of their rights to speedy service and noting a few job openings, \$6.50 per hour is underlined on one.

At first, the process seemed to go well, Rule said. After a few trips to and from the ~~C~~center she produced the correct documentation and scheduled a time for a household

evaluation. She only had to wait for a **J**job **T**training placement letter and her \$250 in food stamps, \$250 for rent and \$100 in cash per month.

But nothing ever came, she said. She went back to the **C**center and was told she was sanctioned, or cut off the program because she never showed up for **J**job **T**training. After investigating, she found out her address was typed incorrectly into the system and her notices were sent to the wrong place, she said. Unfortunately, there was nothing the **C**center could do and she had to reapply from scratch.

“Our resources are limited,” said an eligibility specialist in the food stamps department who could not disclose his name because of policy. “We spend most of our time trying to catch people who abuse the system, not trying to help people abused by it.”

Rule finally made it through the second round and attended six weeks of **J**job **T**training, she said, but it ~~wasn't~~ was not very ~~too~~ helpful. With her secretarial background, she said she often found herself helping others in the program.

“I don't know if job training is the right term for it,” she said. “They teach you how to make a resume and interview, but they don't teach you any valuable skills for the actual jobs.”

New York City's Human Resources Administration spokesman David Neustadt said the training depends on who is being trained. “If the person doesn't have a high school education, we train them for a minimum wage job, it's a step toward a career,” he said. “If they are more advanced, we try to help them find better jobs.”

In her sixth week ~~of at~~ **J**job **T**training, Rule's anemia and asthma flared up and she missed a day. She called to tell the **C**center and they told her to produce a doctor's note, she said. She faxed one, but it ~~wasn't~~ was not in time and she was sanctioned again, she said. The stress from this, Rule believes, weakened her so much she caught pneumonia.

Now recovering, Rule said, she was granted a 90-day disability grant but has yet to see any money. She is worried her information is wrong someplace again.

“I don't know how much more I can take, I am depressed,” Rule said, wheezing a bit, optimism fading with her smile. “My extended family wants to meet with me to figure something out. They are ashamed.”

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Story Ideas:

COMPUTER SYSTEM: A recurring theme in my reporting this welfare story was data entry errors, which are rarely caught and cause applicants to be kicked off the dole. Speaking to some workers at the East End Job Center, they noted that the computer system is archaic and even when it undergoes upgrades, they don't get adequately trained so they are not surprised that there are errors. Interestingly, however, Alfred Dukes, an eligibility specialist, noted that the HRA is looking to put in kiosk computer terminals in

the waiting area so the applicants would be able to enter their own information. I would like to find out if this is true and at what stage the project is. [GOOD IDEA]

TUBERCULOSIS: In the 40s in Puerto Rico, my mother said that United States government officials came to the schools to give out shots to the kids for some kind of testing. Later, she found out that she was a tuberculosis carrier and she had been given the disease on purpose by the officials. She doesn't know much about the actual plan, but she said many people in Puerto Rico were part of this study. She moved to New York when she was a teen in the 50s along with many other Puerto Ricans who settled in East Harlem. I would like to try to find other residents who may remember this study and are also carriers. [COULD BE A MASTER'S PROJECT]

DEAD HOMLESS: As homelessness becomes a bigger issue, so will the number of homeless persons dying in the streets or in shelters. I would like to visit the shelter on Wards Island to find leads on what happens to the bodies. Also, find out if it's a concern to other homeless people who see their friends die and what happens to them.