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LOOKING FOR A SAFETY NET AND FINDING 'INITIATIVES'

Two new reports on the city's poor offer divergent views: one of unceasing need, the other of small-scale innovation. > *By Neil deMause*

When elected officials and nonprofit advocates gathered on the steps of City Hall last Wednesday to announce the release of a new Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies report, "[The State of New York's Social Safety Net for Today's Hard Times](#)," it marked the culmination of a season of reports criticizing the city's policies toward the poor.

"Despite an increase in the need for public assistance a year into a deep recession," declared FPWA executive director Fatima Goldman, "the welfare rolls in New York City have actually decreased in 2008 by nearly 70,000 recipients." Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and Queens City Councilman Eric Gioia (who is running for Gotbaum's seat) stressed the need for reduced red tape as more and more people lose their jobs; Manhattan Councilwoman Gale Brewer left a hearing on the city's "Back to Work" welfare program for long enough to decry how only 2.7 percent of welfare recipients in the program are pursuing college degrees, yet "if one is going to get out poverty, education is the best method."

It was a stark contrast to the report issued a week before by Mayor Bloomberg's own Center for Economic Opportunity, which claimed that the mayor's much-publicized anti-poverty initiatives are starting to bear fruit. "[Early Achievements and Lessons Learned](#)" cites 11 new programs as having been proven successes, with Bloomberg writing in an introductory note, "By keeping our focus on innovation and accountability, we can continue making the fight against poverty more effective than ever."

It's nothing new, of course, for the mayor and advocates for the poor to disagree over the merits and outcomes of city policy. But a look at the two reports reveals the depth of the schism over whether to view the city's treatment of its needy as a success or a failure.

The FPWA report, which consolidates the results of recent reports, such as critiques by the grassroots group [Community Voices Heard](#) and [Gotbaum's office](#), as well as its own data culled from state and city documents, paints a picture of a welfare bureaucracy that presents unnecessary roadblocks to those seeking government aid. In addition to the usual horror stories of government red tape – including the [previously reported](#) story of a woman who had to make three separate trips just to file an application for food stamps – the FPWA report reveals one remarkable new statistic: According to official figures from the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, while the welfare caseload in both the city and state have plummeted over the last decade, that's not true of welfare applications. In fact, notes the FPWA study, the number of applications for welfare in New York City rose from 221,895 in 1999 to 341,635 in 2007, a 54 percent increase.

What's kept the rolls down has been an equally dramatic rise in application denials and withdrawals. While the OTDA data doesn't break down the reasons for denials beyond "non-compliance" with various program rules and regulations, several welfare experts speculate that they could be the results of such policy changes as the requirement that anyone applying for welfare spend 45 days doing "job search" activities in the city Back to Work program before their benefits can begin.

"The increase in withdrawals, we believe, has to do with people going to apply and saying, 'I really need this while I'm looking for another job, I've got a couple of interviews, I want to do some networking,'" says FPWA policy director Bich Ha Pham, co-author of the "Social Safety Net" report. "And then HRA saying, 'Oh, you can't go network. You've got seven hours a day of activities that we tell you you need to do.'" Those who balk at the requirements, she notes, get listed as "withdrawals"; those who just stop showing up are listed as denied for non-compliance.

HRA spokeswoman Barbara Brancaccio says that her agency believes the FPWA's application denial numbers are "flawed," but that they are still reviewing the data. OTDA spokesperson Anthony Farmer confirms that the FPWA's figures were accurate, but says it would require a "much more in-depth" analysis to determine the reasons behind them.

The mayor's report, meanwhile, assumes a different focus: not the public benefits system, but the new programs launched under the auspices of the interagency Center on Economic Opportunity created by Bloomberg in Dec.

2006. (Welfare policy, in fact, was **specifically excluded** from the CEO's mandate.) Of the 40 officially counted CEO initiatives – the center has its own director, Veronica White, but largely relies on other city agencies and nonprofits to fund and implement programs – 11 were marked as either successful or "promising models" for future policy. These included programs ranging from the city's **much-touted** mailing of pre-filled-out Earned Income Tax Credit forms to eligible taxpayers; the expanded child care tax credit; healthy food policies, including the NYC Green Carts that have recently begun popping up in neighborhoods underserved by grocery stores; job training programs for high-demand careers such as nursing; and the **new poverty standard** introduced by Bloomberg last year. Six programs were eliminated as either unsuccessful or too limited to be worth continuing.

While the 149-page report is packed with charts and data, the evidence for success is stronger for some programs than others. One standout is the intensive GED program CUNY Prep, boasting a 76 percent graduation rate against a citywide rate of 44 percent. For other programs, "success" was gauged as meeting self-imposed program goals: The city's new Office of Financial Empowerment, for example, gets credited merely for successfully coming into existence. And while a program to have local nonprofits refer people in the city's poorest neighborhoods to city Workforce1 small-business job sites placed more than 4,000 people in its first 21 months of operation, it's not clear whether those individuals would have found their way to the centers regardless, or just displaced other poor job seekers: Overall Workforce1 job placements actually dipped slightly in 2008, according to city figures.

The mayor's office stresses that it's still too soon to tell whether the new programs have lifted anyone out of poverty, and that the important thing is the commitment to experimentation and accountability. "Noting that 11 initiatives are considered successful or promising and six are discontinued is a critical part of this ongoing process of evaluating what is working and what is not, making decisions based on lessons learned and continuing to move forward," Carlson wrote in an e-mail.

Mark Greenberg, director of the Georgetown University Center on Poverty, Inequality and Public Policy, says there's not necessarily a contradiction between the two reports' findings. "Cities and states around the country really do look at what New York City has accomplished here, and see that this has been a significant positive effort." But while he says the CEO's accomplishments "are positive and important, it's also crucial to be addressing the basic issues of access to benefits for families who are without work or have very little income. An overall strategy has to be looking at both."

For FPWA director Goldman, who was a member of the commission that helped establish the CEO, the two reports merely show two different sides of the same overall picture. "What FPWA was trying to do was make sure we hear the side that isn't working for people in need," says Goldman. "It's not launched as an attack [on the mayor's policies]; it's launched to give the information that's important if we're going to indeed take seriously the many more people we expect to access services."

"We're not criticizing the mayor's program," echoes Gotbaum. "What we're saying is, take a look at these recommendations, and ease up on the restrictions and the barriers that you're putting on people trying to get assistance."

In an interview with City Limits, however, HRA executive deputy commissioner Seth Diamond didn't sound enthusiastic about that advice. "I certainly don't think we think it's difficult or unfair," he said of the benefits application process. Requiring people to do HRA's job search activities before having their benefits approved, in particular, he called "integral" to the city's "work-first" welfare program, as well as a way for "taxpayers to know that people who get public assistance are eligible."

Said Diamond, "Nobody wants to be on public assistance if they don't have to be, and even in a minimum-wage job you'd be better off than on public assistance, so we want to do this as quickly as possible."

As for expanding educational options in response to the federal government's recent decision to allow as much as 30 percent of those receiving welfare to be in education or training programs, Diamond was likewise unenthusiastic. "No one is arguing that there shouldn't be education and training as part of a plan that includes other things. What we object to is people being in education and training to the exclusion of work. We don't think that's successful – it hasn't been shown to work in New York." HRA makes individual determinations of what's best for each client, he says, and will continue to do so: "I could see it changing if we got different people who came on public assistance, who needed other skills less, and education and training was more appropriate."

The calls for the city to change its policies only seem likely to intensify, though, especially if the economic downturn worsens. Wednesday's Council hearing presented a steady stream of **criticism** of HRA policies, including a new Independent Budget Office **report** finding that only 9 percent of those in the Back to Work program were placed in jobs that lasted six months or more – higher than the figures **found by** CVH last fall, but still insufficient, according to Councilman Bill de Blasio, chairman of the General Welfare Committee, who commissioned the analysis.

FPWA's Pham says just streamlining the application process would make a huge difference in easing access to

benefits. "You can't leave to go to the bathroom for seven hours, or to get lunch, because if you leave and then they call your number, that's it," she notes. "It's just a system that from the entry point makes it very difficult to submit that application, to get that interview, and then to be processed."

- Neil deMause