



# COMMUNITY VOICES HEARD

fighting for our families, fighting for our communities, fighting for ourselves

9

[www.CVHaction.org](http://www.CVHaction.org)

Good afternoon. My name is Julie Wickware. I am a member of Community Voices Heard. I live in the North Bronx with my husband and 5 year old daughter. I am here today to speak about funding for transitional jobs for public assistance recipients.

There has been a lot of talk in recent months about the growing disparity between the rich and the poor- the “haves” and “have-nots.” America may still be a land of opportunity where people can rise above the economic circumstances of ones birth through hard work & initiative. For most poor people though, this remains nothing more than a dream that will never become reality. Some say to even speak of these economic divides is to encourage class warfare. However, for those of us-including myself-who live at or well below “poverty level” these are not revolutionary ideas; they are simply the reality of our lives.

In 2005 my husband Felix & I started our lives together. We had both made many mistakes & poor choices in our lives prior to meeting which had cost us each, not just materially, but emotionally, spiritually and socially in virtually every area of our lives. But, we had both turned our lives around despite overwhelming odds and paid our respective debts to society. I had faith that we’d been given another chance for a reason & that if we just did the “next right thing” that things would turn out ok. So began our education on the true cost of Public Assistance in New York City.

In New York City, 17,000 people, cash assistance recipients, are participating “work experience” (WEP). For example, my husband receives cash from public assistance. I know it bothers him greatly to not be able to support his family despite looking diligently for work. In the two years following the birth of our daughter even completing a VESID training in the medical billing field.

Since early 2009 he’s had 2 days of “job search” & 3 days WEP at NYC Department of Sanitation, totaling 35 hours per week. In the beginning, we were both optimistic & thought that it would lead to a job with the DSNY a “real” job with benefits, room for advancement & enough income for us to not be constantly worried about becoming homeless. After a few months it became clear that this

was never going to happen. The more I saw WEP in action, the more I was reminded me of the saying- "why buy the cow if you can get the milk for free?" In other words-what incentive would a business have to hire somebody into a permanent position for a living wage with benefits if they can get that somebody to work at NO COST to that business?

For those that argue that workfare is a "good thing", & "successful at putting people back to work", consider what it really does. Workfare forces people into providing their own families most basic needs through mandated work for which we receive no paycheck. We receive no sick or personal time off (even "unpaid time), no social security work credits, no training, education or hope for advancement. It also means we pay no taxes, aren't eligible for the EITC & certainly aren't stimulating the economy through disposable income spending. We even have to wear a tag or vest that identifies us as "non-employees." WEP workers are looked down upon and stigmatized by many of the paid workers yet are expected to do jobs that are actually the responsibility of those workers. In my husband's case cleaning up their (paid workers) break room. If my husband refuses to do any job assignment, for instance, he refused to go out to pick up garbage on a rainy day because he wasn't provided with a rain poncho & gloves; he can expect a "FTC" (Failure to Comply) which results in a loss of benefits. The choice facing WEP workers: having to accept any type of treatment in order to prevent loss of basic necessities (ie FOOD/SHELTER) for oneself & ones family. Working conditions such as these are usually referred to as modern day slavery or indentured servitude.

Those who talk about Public assistance recipients being lazy, not wanting to work and expecting something for nothing should spend one week in a WEP assignment & see just how hard doing "nothing" really is. We do not want a free ride. What we want is the OPPORTUNITY & MEANS to support ourselves & families. A truly comprehensive & supportive Transitional Jobs Program could create those opportunities BY:

- A. Creating temporary (12-18mo) paid positions coupled with training for Public Assistance recipients also known as long-term unemployed. If the position exists for workfare, then presumably it is a job that needs doing in NY and should be paid accordingly. We gain the habits and routines of real work including a pay check, acquire confidence in our success and the pride that comes with self-sufficiency. We're also establishing a recent work & reference history.
- A. Similar to Career Pathways, the training should help us acquire whatever skills are necessary for permanent employment within that field, with room for advancement. Matching people's interests to positions would enhance retention. Participants should be immediately informed of further training/education

opportunities as well as permanent job opportunities.

- B. While earning wages might help motivate people to move away from public assistance, Transitional Jobs should also address the very real barriers to this population retaining a permanent position in this Economy. Appropriate case management & adequate support to assist with any problems that might arise. Transitional benefits must remain until finances are stabilized. Real job placement assistance will be needed for those who aren't hired to build on the success and reach the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency.

While I'm sure we can agree these are worthwhile goals, without the necessary funding they'll be just another dream that will never become reality. With stimulus money in 2009, the state legislature budgeted \$5 million of the \$2.4 billion TANF funds the state receives. This was matched with stimulus funds and many counties across the state were able to start transitional jobs programs and see how effective they can be.

This year, 2012, moving money from the state Flexible Family Fund which goes to general local DSS/HRA budgets into a Transitional Jobs Program would be a real investment in strengthening NY's workforce into one of prepared and experienced individuals.

Additionally, an increase in low-income New Yorker's disposable resources would pump money into the economy through increased spending. The present system leaves people unable to provide adequately for themselves and their families. It leaves us without a viable pathway to a job that can lift us out of poverty. It leaves us outside the mainstream of society and it leaves us dependent. We may be poor, but we are not children & we are NOT slaves. Give us the chance to prove it.

Thank you

