

## THE NEEDIEST. Also: City-Wide Task Force On Housing Court Still Alive

by Linda Ostreicher

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The United States has had a social welfare system for over 70 years, but each Christmas the New York Times continues to print heartbreaking stories intended to inspire contributions to its Neediest Cases Fund.

In 1912, when Times publisher Arthur Ochs established this tradition, there were no food stamps, no social security for the elderly and people with disabilities, no school breakfast or lunch programs, no Medicaid or Medicare, and no Section 8 housing. Federal income taxes would not begin until the next year. New York City had a public-private system of poorhouses, outdoor relief, settlement houses, tuberculosis sanatoria, insane asylums, and orphanages, yet many of the poor lived in conditions so pitiable, Ochs thought they would no longer be tolerated if the Times made them known.

The first Hundred Neediest Cases were peopled by widows, orphans, and sick or disabled fathers. Mothers were often invalids, too delicate or devitalized to hold jobs or do housework. Hunger, cold, and the death of family members were dreaded not only for their direct effects, but because they could bring on tuberculosis.

More than a third of the cases arose from a father's death; today widows and children can receive Social Security survivors' benefits. Another quarter of the cases, in which the father was sick or disabled, might now be prevented by disability payments and better medical care. Public assistance or child support payments could now support the 13 cases where the father was in jail, had deserted, or was not mentioned. The few cases of impoverished old people would be resolved by Social Security. The remaining 17 cases involved children, mostly orphans, who had no adult to care for them. These would now be steered toward the still-controversial child welfare system.

By 1921, the annual collection for the Hundred Neediest Cases had become an institution. The Times pledged to make the nature of poverty "clearly known and to drive it home," because New Yorkers were "cut off by the conditions of life from channels of information as to the conditions of neighbors, channels of information which bring help and sympathy immediately." The Neediest cases were still dominated by sick, absent, and dead fathers. Mothers might work, but they earned too little to live on, or collapsed from overwork. A system had evolved to deal with such families by taking children away from their mothers. The Hundred Neediest Cases Fund provided an alternative: enough money to keep the family together.

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The New York Times was careful to distinguish its 1931 collection for the Neediest Cases Fund from the "Emergency Unemployment Relief Fund," explaining that the donations for the Neediest helped "those who cannot be helped by employment because they are too old, too young, or too sick to work." Another difference was that the Emergency Unemployment Relief Fund had collected \$18 million, while the Neediest Cases Fund was unsure it would reach its 1930 total of less than \$348,000.

Pearl Harbor was bombed on the opening day of the 1941 appeal. During the next week, enough money was donated to take care of the Hundred Neediest Cases, so on December 14, a collection was launched for a second 100 cases. The nation had been in the Depression for over a decade; no explanations were needed for fathers being out of work. The Times promised its readers their donations would "mean the turning of the tide toward health and self-reliance."

Some cases were receiving "public aid," but had additional needs, while others were not eligible because a family member worked part-time or at a low salary. There was cash assistance for dependent children, the elderly, the blind, and those needing "home relief." There were WPA jobs that could be held for up to 18 months, after which workers had to go back on public assistance, in a cycle some tried to break through training for higher-paid, permanent jobs.

Medical care now offered answers to many physical and mental problems, if the Neediest Cases Fund could pay for it. Donations began to buy "guidance" and "counseling," as well as rent and food. When a mother was dead, absent, or too weak to take care of her children, a housekeeper might be provided to avoid separating children from their families and homes.

The Hundred Neediest Cases of 1951 and 1961 show the success of the social safety net then in place. Hunger and absence of income were no longer prominent. Stories gave detailed explanations of why their subjects were in need. The new cases required counseling to lead them to solutions that they would otherwise not know about or accept, such as living with a disability, or moving to a nursing home. Parents and children who were "nervous" or "near breakdown" needed care to return to mental health. Delinquency had become an issue, as was living in crime-ridden slums.

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By 1971, the "Hundred" part of the fund's name was dropped, and cases no longer were given numbers. Counseling was still the prescription for many, and drug use emerged as a problem.

The landscape of need looked much like today's by 1991, with homelessness, AIDS, and substance abuse becoming familiar elements in cases. The 2001 campaign for the Neediest features lengthy stories about outstanding cases. Aaron Donovan has written these stories for three years, but is "still surprised at the wide range of things that cause people to be needy."

Some cases fall through the cracks between social service programs: he recalls a child living in a homeless shelter who needed cabfare to and from chemotherapy treatments. Other people need emergency support while applications for public benefits are being processed. "Charities have an advantage over government," Donovan says. "They can get money to people right away."

According to David Jones, President and CEO of the Community Service Society, "government has abdicated substantially from case management." Instead of doing social work, employees at the city's public assistance agency are now charged with weeding out clients who fail to comply with convoluted application and recertification procedures.

The Community Service Society still gives cash grants to needy families, as it has done since 1912. However, Jones finds the agency has shifted its focus to a blend of the welfare poor and the working poor, as well as immigrants no longer eligible for Medicaid and public assistance. More time is spent, for example, on helping welfare recipients to regain benefits after inappropriate sanctions.

Aaron Donovan's story of Jasmine Tolentino, published on November 25, 2001, illustrates both the value of existing social programs and their limits. One of her sons has lupus, a chronic illness for which he was recently hospitalized. Tolentino lives with five children and a grandchild in a two-room apartment. Thanks to the social safety net, her son received the medical care he needed, and the family survives on public assistance, food from a local church, and food stamps. Because of the limits of public assistance, they cannot afford to move to a larger apartment, and were sleeping without sheets, blankets or pillows until the Children's Aid Society bought them with money from the Neediest Cases fund.

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In "[Behind the Hundred Neediest Cases,](#)" published in the City Journal in 1997, Heather MacDonald argued that their history illustrates a change in the "elite" view of charity. It was once reserved for the deserving poor; now the recipient's moral character is "all but irrelevant."

However, the same history can be interpreted as the opening chapters of a still-unfinished success story. In this reading, the early years of the Neediest Case Fund showed government the necessity of meeting basic material needs. Then the charity tackled those needs that remained unfilled. As our collective knowledge evolves, private donations support the application of new solutions to both old and new problems. And where bureaucracy fails, there is no substitute for direct compassion.

### CITY-WIDE TASK FORCE ON HOUSING COURT SURVIVES BUDGET CUTS

Last month I incorrectly reported (See "[A Rocky Season,](#)") that the City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court was planning to lay off its entire staff and close down in December, due to state and city budget reductions. According to Larry Wood, President of the Board of Directors, the 21-year-old coalition is still very much alive. "We are determined to stay together even if we were to lose all our government contracts," he says. State cuts of close to 45 percent of their income forced the task force to lay off eight of 18 staff members, with the remaining employees agreeing to take a pay cut. The agency's information tables at housing courts are open fewer days each week, with only one paid employee instead of two. Volunteers and employees of other housing-related organizations will still help to staff the tables.

The task force's cash flow is threatened by city cutbacks stemming from the World Trade Center disaster. Fortunately, late in November, it received approval for a grant of \$100,000 from the Nonprofit Finance Fund, through its Nonprofit Recovery Fund. While this amount does not return the coalition to the level of funding originally expected for the current year, it ensures their ability to provide uninterrupted services at a time when they are seeing escalating demand for housing court assistance.

Linda Ostreicher, a former budget analyst for the New York City Council, is a freelance writer and consultant to nonprofits. She is currently on the staff of Bronx Independent Living Services.