A Poorhouse in California, 1983: Oddity or Prelude?

Over the hill to the poor-house I'm trudgin' my weary way—
1. a woman of seventy, and only a trifle gray—
2. who am smart an' chipper, for all the years I've told,
3. as many another woman that's only half as old.

What is the use of heapin' on me a pauper's shame?
4. Am I lazy or crazy? am I blind or lame?
5. True, I am not so supple, nor yet so awful stout;
6. But charity ain't no favor, if one can live without.

Over the hill to the poor-house—
7. my child'm dear, goodby!
8. Many a night I've watched you when only God was nigh;
9. And God'll judge between us: but I will al'ays pray
10. That you shall never suffer the half I do today. . . .

In August 1982, the Board of Supervisors of Sacramento County, California, amended the county's general assistance (GA) policy to provide some GA recipients with in-kind benefits consisting of shelter and food instead of cash grants. As of October 1, 1982, these in-kind benefits were being provided by Volunteers of America at the seventy-two-bed Bannor Street Shelter, which is in the City of Sacramento. At that time, the county contracted with Volunteers of America for thirty beds for GA recipients at a cost of $18,624.80 a year.

The rationale for requiring eligible GA recipients to accept in-kind aid at the shelter in lieu of the cash grant was, in the Board of Supervisors' words, "budgetary limitations" that required the "cost-effective utilization of all available resources." However, the introduction of in-kind services is not "cost effective" on a per capita basis. The annual cost of $3,954 per bed for GA recipients at the shelter is 44 percent higher than the GA cash grant of $184 per month given to GA recipients who are not in the shelter ($2,208 per year) if all the beds are occupied; for each bed unoccupied, the per-person cost rises proportionately.

Dennis B. Hart, director of the Sacramento County Department of Social Welfare, has stated frequently in the media that the county program has been successful in discouraging people from applying for GA. "Our welfare budget was accelerating rapidly, up 59 percent over the last two years," Hart said in one newspaper report. In the first five months of the program, he added, the number of welfare applicants dropped by more than half. Hart estimated that the county was saving about $100,000 per month.

If all California counties had poorhouses and saved approximately $100,000 per month ($1.2 million per year), the poor people of the state would be deprived of tens of millions of dollars in GA grants; nationally, the figure would be in the hundreds of millions. Thus, it is evident that a lot is at stake.

On March 1, 1983, attorneys from Legal Services of Northern California (Sacramento) and the Western Center on Law and Poverty (Los Angeles) requested that the Superior Court of California issue a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction to prevent the county from denying in-cash GA benefits to five plaintiffs and from continuing to re-
meeting the needs of the unemployed. Sutherland and Locke, who were sociologists, contributed to the demise of these shelters by writing extensively about the detrimental effects of these facilities on the residents. The nation seemed to have learned the important lesson that individuals and families need social insurance and public assistance to protect them from fluctuations in the economy. Social reformers and social workers identified and made the public conscious of the special needs of particular populations to maintain independent living situations in an unrestricted environment as possible.

Under the New Deal, the government responded by creating federal programs to help special categories of needy people: thus, Aid to the Aged, Aid to the Totally Disabled, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children took up the functions of the poorhouse, enabling people to meet their needs for food, clothing, and shelter while maintaining their independence.

This brief history of the demise of the nineteenth century poorhouse illustrates why Sacramento's Bannon Street program is an anachronism. Over the last one hundred years, Americans have learned that it is better for dependent populations—the frail aged, dependent and neglected children, the physically handicapped, and so forth—to live in the community with their own families if at all possible. Deinstitutionalization is the thrust of current social policy. Community care and independent living are the preferred modes of care for dependent persons. However, unlike the vulnerable populations just mentioned, some of whom may require institutionalization, GA recipients are distinguished only by their financial need, which is tested stringently and vigorously by Sacramento County. Financial need is the sole basis for receiving GA benefits.

Under the Workfare program, those GA recipients who receive a cash benefit ($184 a month for a single person) are required to work seven days a month for Sacramento County—and the work is not pleasant. (One major work project is to clear brush around county facilities.) In addition, recipients must report changes in their eligibility status immediately. Failure to do so results in suspension from GA for thirty days.

Although some social welfare analysts are critical of workfare programs, in the authors' interviews with GA residents at the Bannon Street Shelter and in the many statements filed by the residents against the county, no one complained about the work requirement. The residents' major complaint was the loss of freedom and dignity they suffered by being compelled to live in the poorhouse.

**IS BANNON STREET A POORHOUSE?**

At this time, the only people eligible for GA who are compelled to accept residence at Bannon Street (if a bed is available) in lieu of a cash grant are English-speaking, employable, unmarried men and women without children under age 18 who do not own a home. (If all the beds are filled at Bannon Street, they will be given a cash grant.) Largely, the people who are eligible for GA are not a transient population of drifters, hoboes, alcoholics, or otherwise marginal people, most of whom could not meet the eligibility requirements for GA. But what most qualifies the Bannon Street arrangement as a poorhouse is that it compels people without financial means, who are otherwise able, to live in humiliating circumstances in which they are stripped of their identity and made dependent on keepers appointed by the state.

Residents cannot come and go freely at Bannon Street. A staff member must give them entry at all times. They must be up at 6:00 A.M., and curfew is at 9:00 P.M. There is no privacy in the shower or anywhere else. Residents live in a dormitory next to whomever the county chooses.

The staff members decide when the lights go on and off. (The lights are dimmed but never actually turned off because the dormitories must be policed by the staff.) Because residents receive no cash allowances, many sell their blood to obtain money for personal items.

Bannon Street Shelter is "over the hill"—literally "on the other side of the tracks"—and surrounded by factories and a mission for transients. At all hours, the men from the mission litter around the shelter. It is in a dangerous-looking environment.

Before the first court hearing, forty-two of the seventy-two beds at Bannon Street were used for transients. In addition, men from the mission next door were allowed to use the showers, toilets, and other facilities at the shelter during the day. Residents had to bring their toothbrushes to the staff to receive their allotments of toothpaste, there were no doors on the toilet stalls, and toilet paper was distributed by staff because residents had been known to jam toilet paper rolls into the bowls. (This behavior is common among people who resent their jailors.)

Since the first court hearing, the county has "improved" conditions. All the beds at Bannon Street are now used for GA recipients, thereby eliminating the transients. And the total number of beds has been reduced to sixty-seven to conform to regulations of the county Department of Health. (The transients now have nowhere to stay. They sleep on the pavement outside the County Office Building.) The transient men from the mission can no longer use the facilities at Bannon Street during the day. Residents are now issued their own personal tubes of toothpaste, a kind of toilet paper dispenser has been installed that will deter residents from jamming the toilets, and doors have been put on the toilet stalls. County officials are eager to meet any criticism regardless of cost because they want the program to continue.

The county has mustered a flock of administrators and agency functionaries to testify that Bannon Street is a fine place. For example, Jim Sawyer, an associate administrative analyst for the Sacramento Department of Social Welfare, answered some of the concerns raised by the court observers and the plaintiffs as follows:

It has been complained that insects have been found in the food. The staff at Bannon Street has never heard of such a problem, and no report has ever been made of such a problem to the management of Bannon Street.

It has been complained that people fight, get drunk. No one is allowed to drink in the facility at Bannon Street. If someone be-
comes disorderly he is required to leave the facility.

It has been complained that the lights are left on all night in the dormitories. The only lights which are left on are safety night lights which are required for safety regulations.

It has been complained that personal belongings are not secure and that thieving occurs at Bannon Street. The management is aware of very little thievery occurring at Bannon Street because of the many security measures taken by the staff.7

Thus, the county disposes of problems by decreeing that they do not exist.

Vicky Russell, who works for Catholic Community Services (CCS) of Sacramento to find shelter for transients, said she was "pleasantly amazed at the services rendered to the residents." She "never heard that anyone lacked privacy." The women's quarters," she said, "reminded me of my college dorm, but with more services available." (CCS received at least $48,502 from the county last year.)

A GOOD PROGRAM?
The purpose of all California social services, as stated in California's Welfare and Institutions Code, is "to provide for protection, care and assistance to the people of the State in need thereof, and to promote the welfare and happiness of all the people of the State by providing appropriate aid and services to all of its needy and distressed." The California legislature has expressed its specific intent that "aid shall be so administered and services so provided, to the extent not in conflict with Federal law, as to encourage selfrespect, self-reliance, and the desire to be a good citizen, useful to society." To achieve this purpose with the GA recipients—able-bodied individuals capable of employment—social service administrators are faced with translating these laws into a practical and just program that meets the legislature's intent but which protects the community's interest as they interpret it (minimizing welfare costs by discouraging people from applying for GA). The county's choice of the poorhouse as a solution leaves no doubt that its primary concern is not to protect the interests of people who are eligible for GA. The issue is not whether to require people to work if they are to receive welfare benefits: the GA recipients have no complaint about the workfare requirement. The issue is not the size of the grant; $184 is about what they would earn if they received the minimum wage for working the required seven days. The issue is not whether shelters such as Bannon Street should exist: people may need or choose to use such a shelter. The issue is one of choice, of control over one's life.

By using the poorhouse as a deterrent to those who would otherwise apply for cash benefits, the county claims it has achieved its purpose of eliminating from the GA rolls people who are not truly needy. But the deterrent of in-kind aid does not rationally discriminate among those who are truly needy and those who are not. The people who are most reluctant to accept cash welfare benefits are those most likely to be deterred from accepting "help" offered in a demeaning fashion. It cannot be assumed that a reduction in the number of applications for GA bears any relation to the real needs of those who do not apply.

Thus, the decision not to apply is not a sufficient indication of the absence of need. To avoid the poorhouse, the needy who attempt to retain their pride may choose to sleep under a bridge or outdoors or to leave the county in which they have lived for a long time, thus contributing to a national problem of homelessness. Moreover, people who are forced to move to avoid the poorhouse may become needy in other ways with which the community will have to deal. For example, homeless persons are likely to develop major health problems requiring medical services that are considerably more expensive than GA.

In addition, homeless people lose what social scientists call "social margin"—family relationships, friendships, possessions, skills, and personal attributes that can be used, sold, or bartered in return for necessary assistance. Social margin is an aid in times of need: it protects or softens the fall of the downwardly mobile. People who apply for GA are usually neither transient nor disabled. Their application for welfare, often for the first time, is a desperate attempt to retain whatever social margin they have left and to bring themselves back into the working mainstream. By offering a form of aid that is unacceptable, the county forces these people to exhaust all social margin, making it more likely that they will become part of a chronically poor population incapable of restoring themselves to independent living. Unable to repay small loans or return favors from relatives and friends, they lose whatever contacts and help they may depend on from their social network to maintain an independent existence. Some of these individuals may come to accept in-kind aid on their path to chronic poverty. (The people who come to the poorhouse in the future are more likely to be chronically dependent.)

In the long run, the community may suffer from the resultant crime that is an alternative means of survival. Thus, although the poorhouse requirement initially may reduce the number of applications for GA, it may, in the end, push the truly needy into a more desperate situation, creating more severe problems for the community. And, it is ironic that the creation of a chronically dependent population eventually will lead to increased costs for the social welfare system.

IS THE POORHOUSE UNLAWFUL?
Two major legal issues are involved in using the poorhouse as a form of aid. The first is whether the Bannon Street solution conflicts with the law's intent to "encourage self-respect, 7 All statements by county personnel and the plaintiffs cited here and in subsequent paragraphs, including dates and names, are sworn testimony by way of declarations that are part of the court record. See Superior Court of the State of California, in and for the County of Sacramento, Arthur Robbins et al., plaintiffs, v. County of Sacramento et al., defendants. No. 306473.
8 Ibid.
9 California Welfare and Institutions Code, 10000.
10 See Rosas v. Montgomery, supra, 10 Cal. App. 3d at 88.

Comments on Currents 321
self-reliance, and the desire to be a good citizen, useful to society." The second issue is whether, according to the law, an individual has a right to GA benefits that are provided by the state without having to forego the rights of privacy, free association, travel, and liberty.

**Self-Respect and Self-Reliance**

It has been amply demonstrated that institutionalization in controlled environments defeats the objective of encouraging people to maintain "self-respect and self-reliance." Research on the effects of institutionalization has shown that living in a structured and regimented environment, although beneficial to some, has a harmful impact on many people. Institutions that impose strict routines and regimentation on residents create a syndrome of apathy and passive compliance that has been referred to as institutional dependence.

Moreover, institutional dependence occurs in persons with no other handicap than poverty, as Sutherland and Locke discovered in a 1934 study conducted for the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission Authority. In that study, Sutherland and Locke considered the life situations of unemployed men who were forced to accept in-kind aid ("lodging, meals, facilities for cleanliness and recreation") in twenty government-run shelters in Chicago during the depression. The purpose of the study was "to secure better understanding of the life experiences and attitudes of the sheltered men and their reactions to the relief policies which were being used." Sutherland and Locke noted that an unemployed man "does not choose, but is forced to enter the shelter because he is destitute and homeless." They then described a phenomenon they called "shelterization":

After a period of time, a man becomes less sensitive. . . . He shows a tendency to lose all sense of personal responsibility for getting out of the shelter; to become insensible to the element of time: to lose ambitions, pride, self-respect and confidence: to avoid former friends and to identify himself with the shelter group.

The residents who were the most vulnerable to shelterization were those for whom the change in circumstances was the greatest. The transients ("hobohearians" as Sutherland and Locke termed them) were not as greatly affected and were much less likely to deteriorate because they experienced relatively little change in going to the shelter. There is every reason to assume that most of the persons who are forced to live at the Bannon Street facility are employable but unable to find jobs and that they will suffer the most psychological harm from institutionalization.

Contrary to assertions in the declarations submitted by the county, the length of time that an individual resides in an institution does not determine whether the person will develop institutional dependence. For example, Sutherland and Locke wrote about "two roads to dependency"—a long one and a short one. They found that shelterization could occur after a few months and that transients precipitously declined into shelter dependence. These individuals experienced a "personal crisis" and felt they had suffered a "social death" because they were forced to identify with persons from the lowest social strata and life in skid-row or ghetto areas.

It is clear from the social science literature cited earlier that taking away the "locus of control" from the residents of institutions results in a loss of initiative: institutionalized persons effectively lose the capacity and inclination to care for themselves. Once individuals have settled into institutions, it becomes more difficult for them to resume independent lives in the community. Routine daily decisions become more difficult to make and are likely to be avoided. Thus, institutions like Bannon Street achieve exactly the opposite of what is intended: their residents become more dependent and needy and thus continue to require institutionalization. That this is happening at Bannon Street is confirmed by many of the residents' statements: "There are so many rules that I can't control my own life.", "I lost the desire to participate in that rigorously controlled environment"; "I think I'm becoming a different person in this environment. I'm losing control of my emotions."

**Right to Privacy and Free Association**

The right to privacy is especially protected in California. In 1972, it was specifically added to the "other inalienable rights of individuals" enumerated in Article 1, Section 1, of the California State Constitution. The California Supreme Court concluded that the right to live with whomever one chooses is also a constitutional right. But, at the Bannon Street facility, people are forced to forego their privacy and the right to free association and must live by standards imposed by an agency of the state. For example, Douglas Donovan, a resident at Bannon Street, had maintained an apartment until he was forced to move to the shelter. He had no choice but to abandon his furniture and to place his clothing and other possessions in storage: however, because he receives no cash benefits, he is likely to lose the little property he owns because he will not be able to redeem his possessions. In addition, according to Mr. Donovan, he has been deprived of contact with his friends and the woman he dates because he believes the area is unsafe and because there is no privacy at the poorhouse. He is embarrassed for people to know he is there. He cannot visit friends outside the facility because he receives no allowance for travel.

---

12 California Welfare and Institutions Code.
15 Sutherland and Locke, Twenty Thousand Homeless Men.
WILL BANNON STREET SUCCEED?

The Bannon Street Shelter will succeed—if the courts and community permit it. But viewed as a long-term solution to the problems of unemployment and financial need, the poorhouse is inadequate. In the short run, departments of welfare may see it as a means to reduce their budgets because they will save the initial money formerly paid as cash benefits. But, in the long view, the Sacramento poorhouse is the equivalent of jumping off a building into a safety net whose bottom is on the ground. The poorhouse is not only a violation of individual rights; it is a poor solution to the needs of poor people and eventually may enhance the skepticism of the American public about welfare programs that do not work. The solution to Sacramento County’s financial problems does not lie in Sacramento County. California’s tax-cutting Proposition 13 and federal reductions in allocations for welfare programs, along with the high rates of unemployment in the state and in the country as a whole, are the sources of the financial problems being experienced by many counties in the United States, including those throughout California. The solutions to these problems do not lie in county programs that shift the poor people of one community to seek refuge in another. For that reason, the state and the nation cannot ignore the Bannon Street Shelter. Local communities must not be encouraged to dig through the dustbin of the Victorian past for discarded solutions to contemporary problems.

Postscript

On May 23, 1983, the Sacramento trial court refused to grant preliminary relief to the GA recipients who challenged the poorhouse requirements. The denial of a preliminary injunction dissolved the temporary restraining order that granted cash assistance to the first five plaintiffs on March 24, 1983. An appeal is planned. The case will proceed to trial in the Sacramento Superior Court by fall 1983.

Steven P. Segal
Harry Specht
School of Social Welfare
University of California
at Berkeley

Mrs. Smith Goes to the Poorhouse

NOTE TO THE READER:

Recently, I came upon the following piece in a casebook compiled by Charlotte Towle sometime before 1946. It held me as tightly as if it had been written today. Its glimpses into an old person’s efforts to cope and adapt, of the systems that “supported” and undermined her, and of the tasks and the attitudes required of a caseworker dealing with the aged seem as telling now as they were many years ago when this vignette was turned in as a class assignment. I cannot help but be thankful to this now-anonymous caseworker for a touching and still-pertinent piece of teaching material and for the sensitive understanding and compassionate help she gave to this old woman—whose name is Legion.

Mrs. Smith was receiving Old Age Assistance (OAA) and was living with her niece and nephew-in-law who were managing to live just above the poverty level. As a caseworker in a rural county welfare department, I did not know Mrs. Smith well.

Early one morning, Dr. N phoned to say that Mrs. Smith, who was 81 years, had to be taken to the county infirmary at once because her heart was failing rapidly and her kidneys were malfunctioning. No ambulance service is available in this county, but Dr. N thought Mrs. Smith could withstand the trip in my car. I went to the niece’s home at once. (She had no telephone.) The niece met me at the door, obviously upset. She had not been able to bring herself to tell her aunt what was to happen. [The worker noted that she omitted discussions she had with the niece and that she would focus only on the transaction between herself and Mrs. Smith.]

Mrs. Smith expressed surprise that I was visiting so soon after my last call. She apologized for not being dressed and said she had been feeling so sick that she had not gotten dressed for days. I assured her that I understood and explained that Dr. N thought she needed hospital care at once. She seemed relieved and replied, “Oh, I do feel so sick—I would like to get some good medical care! And I am such a burden on my niece now!” I said she was wise to know the value of medical care. She would, I told her, be going to the county infirmary.

When she heard where she was to be going, she became upset and cried out that she did not want to go to the county infirmary; it was just the Poorhouse. She wanted to go to the regular hospital. I told her that I knew it was hard; however, the OAA policy was to send patients to the county infirmary if a bed was available there. Mrs. Smith began to talk in an agitated way (as if thinking out loud), saying over and over again: “I don’t want to go there! I can’t! What will people think? I don’t want to die there! How can I ask my friends to visit me there? How can I let my church group know I’m at the Poorhouse?”

Mrs. Smith called to her niece, who came in uneasily. She said she no longer wanted medical care. “Please! Can I just stay where I am?” she pleaded. Her niece began to cry. The niece said she did not want Mrs. Smith to leave either, but the doctor said she must have medical care, and they could not afford to send her to the hospital. Then Mrs. Smith turned to me. “Please tell me more about all this,” she said.

I explained about the type of care people get at the infirmary, about life there, and about visiting hours. Mrs. Smith listened carefully and said, “I would like to think about it.” I said I knew it was a difficult decision, and she ought to have time to think. The niece left the room, but Mrs. Smith asked me to stay.

During the next half hour, neither Mrs. Smith nor I spoke. Then she began to whisper to herself, wringing her hands and rocking or leaving the rocking chair to take another one across the room. Suddenly she spoke in a soft but determined voice. “I shall go. I need care, even if it is in the Poorhouse. There is nothing wrong with being poor. I’m sure this is what Christ would want me to do.” Then she said she wanted to tell her friends where she was going, but hoped the entire church would not need to know. I suggested that her niece
could notify her close friends and explain the visiting rules to them. She then repeated several times, "I will go!"

Mrs. Smith insisted that I, not her niece, stay with her while she dressed and packed. This process took a long time because she had to rest between each small exertion. She kept emphasizing that she wanted to look her best and take her nicest things with her. "If I must go, I want to be proud, do my best, and act as a good Christian should."

By the time she finished dressing and packing, she was gasping for breath. I suggested that she eat something and lie down before leaving. She refused food but said she would like to rest and asked to be left alone. I helped her to bed, and left the room.

A half hour later, Mrs. Smith said she was ready to go. She asked her niece several times if they (the niece and nephew-in-law) would come to see her and pleaded with her to "make it soon!" Although the niece seemed choked with emotion, she simply said they would visit when her husband was not working and needing the family car. Mrs. Smith's face, wrinkled and tired looking, did not change expression. As Mrs. Smith and I got into the car, she and her niece did not look at each other, touch each other, or say goodbye. She did not look back but said quietly, "They won't come."

We traveled for many miles without talking. Then Mrs. Smith murmured: "This is so hard. I wonder if my friends will come to see me. I wish I didn't have to die at the Poorhouse." I told her I understood how she felt. Then she asked about church at the county home and I told her about Protestant services on Sundays and that visits from the chaplain could be arranged when she asked for them. This information seemed to relieve her.

As we approached the county infirmary, Mrs. Smith laughed lightly. She repeated the following ditty she had heard when she was a child:

Rattle, rattle, rattle, skin and bone
As you roll along to the county home!

She laughed quietly to herself until we arrived. As we reached the door, she looked panicked. A nurse came out, and we helped Mrs. Smith into a wheelchair. Mrs. Smith grabbed my hand and said, "Please, Don't leave me!" I reassured her, saying I'd see her as soon as I checked her in.

When I arrived in the ward where she was staying, Mrs. Smith was smiling. She introduced me to an "old friend who will be in the next bed," and said she would be fine now.

I phoned the next morning and spoke to the nurse in charge. She told me that Mrs. Smith had a pleasant evening talking with the other women in the recreation room and seemed to have slept well during the night. The following afternoon, Mrs. Smith died of a heart attack.

**Natural Helping Networks**

*A Strategy for Prevention*

by Alice H. Collins and Diane L. Pancoast

Natural Helping Networks: A Strategy for Prevention demonstrates how social workers, and others in helping professions, acting as consultants, can enter into mutually valuable alliances with the "natural neighbors."

Price: $6.95

Order from
Publication Sales
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF SOCIAL WORKERS
7981 Eastern Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910

(Add 10 percent postage and handling charges)

---

**poetry**

COVER STORY

When people want to know
About me,
To really know the scoop,
What do I say?

That my real mama
(A woman of means)
Tried hard to keep me
But cracked up and
Couldn't cope
So...

She freed me
To claim my right
To be a person
Of integrity
And vast dimension.

Or
Do I admit aloud
That she despised me
And desperately hoped
To make it with
Her new man
So...

She dumped me
In a beer truck
Headed toward Buckhead,
Hoping I'd make it
(her style was sink or swim).

Candace Mast

---

THE BOWERY

A fetal curl of filth,
Cuts and bruises,
Creases of grime in pasty flesh,
The smell of Bacchus,
His clothes, crumpled stains,
Drunken Death lies in the doorway.

Robert Whelan

---

Candace Mast, MSW, is Principal Caseworker, Adoptions, Fulton County Department of Family and Children Services, Atlanta, Georgia.

Robert Whelan, M.Ed., is English Coordinator, Union County Regional High School, District No. 1, Spring- field, New Jersey.

---

Social Work / July-August 1983