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To Avoid Deficit, Michigan Ends Welfare to Some Adults

By DON TERRY
Special to The New York Times

DETROIT, Oct. 4 — For Ruth Williams, a middle-aged grandmother who says she has asthma, high blood pressure and phlebitis, the welfare check for \$27.50 she received twice a month from the State of Michigan "was like a life raft."

"I'm poor, very poor," she said. "The check wasn't much, but it gave me a chance to feel like a human being."

On Tuesday, the checks stopped coming.

Faced with a budget deficit and hoping to end "welfare dependency," the State Legislature eliminated the general assistance welfare program for more than 80,000 adults who are so poor that they can typically have no more than a car worth \$1,500

Aid for Able-Bodied

Most states have some form of general assistance welfare program for poor, able-bodied adults without children. Now Michigan, after years of providing some of the nation's broadest welfare coverage, has rescinded welfare benefits for such people, joining a small but growing number of states that deny them aid.

"We don't have the money to pay for everything anymore," said John Truscott, a spokesman for Gov. John Engler, a Republican. "And it's forcing us to make some very painful and difficult decisions."

It is a refrain that can be heard across the country. Next month, Maryland, faced with budget problems of its own, will also

eliminate its general assistance program, cutting off payments to 24,000 adults.

Many recipients of general assistance, experts on welfare issues say, are the walking wounded of society. They fall through the cracks of other programs; either they are too young for Social Security or too healthy for disability. They are often homeless, and many have been in and out of mental institutions or drug treatment centers.

Typically, recipients are single men with poor educations and few job skills, the experts say. But in Michigan, 46 percent of the recipients were women, many of them divorced or widowed homemakers in their 40's and 50's.

'Program of Last Resort'

As the economy darkens, many recipients are low-level workers, like Richard Burnell, 49 years old, a Detroit florist's assistant, who have lost their jobs and have exhausted unemployment benefits.

"A lot of people coming into welfare offices are people who have never been on aid before," said Julie Strawn of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a not-for-profit research organization in Washington. "They're not necessarily all people who fit public stereotypes. But I don't think the public really understands how important G.A. is as the program of last resort. There is nothing else for people when G.A. goes

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To Avoid Deficit, Michigan Ends Welfare for Able-Bodied Poor

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away. Nothing."

Governor Engler's Administration, which pressed for the elimination of the general assistance program, repeatedly uses the words "able-bodied" and "employable" to describe those who have been taken from the welfare rolls. But Mr. Truscott acknowledged that not all recipients fit into those categories; he said several thousand former aid recipients could start receiving checks again if they were determined by a doctor or psychiatrist to be physically or mentally unable to work. The state's average monthly payment for general assistance was \$144 plus food stamps.

New Jersey's general assistance program provides a maximum income of \$270 a month, said Winnie Comfort, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey Department of Human Services. If the recipient is employable, job searches and, in some cases, training are offered.

New York State's program, called economic relief, provides up to \$352 a month, said Patricia Smith, deputy commissioner for income support programs. If eligible, a person can also receive additional food stamps of about \$100. Most can also receive medical benefits, she said.

No Programs in 6 States

Before Michigan and Maryland eliminated their general assistance programs, the Federal Health and Human Services in 1990 listed six states that pay all benefits to single adults: Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, West Virginia and Louisiana. In the past year, several other states have debated reducing their welfare programs. Illinois and Ohio have either cut or limited their general assistance programs to reduce costs and to help balance state budgets. And in Massachusetts this spring, the Legislature reauthorized its general relief program and significantly reduced its scope. Officials there are still haggling over the program's budget but it appears it will be reduced by nearly \$60 million, to \$60 million from \$220 million.

Ending the program in Michigan is expected to save the state \$240 million. In addition, the Legislature, in which Democrats control the House and Republicans the Senate, cut \$260 million



Photographs by Tracy Sater for The New York Times

Faced with a budget deficit and hoping to end "welfare dependency," the Michigan Legislature eliminated the general assistance welfare program for more than 80,000 adults. Richard Burnell, left, and Jessi Young are two unemployed workers who were cut from the program.

from other social service programs. Saving money is only one motive for eliminating the general assistance program, which has long been a target of conservatives. Mr. Truscott said the Governor hoped to end "welfare dependency" by forcing "thousands of able-bodied people to find work."

"The jobs are out there," he said. "They may be minimum wage, but most people will be able to find one. And if they work full time at just minimum wage they could make twice as much as they did on G.A."

Currently, there are more than 400,000 unemployed people in Michigan, a rate of 9.7 percent.

Adding to Those Seeking Work

"The state has just increased the number of people looking for work by a fourth," said Sharon Parks of the Michigan League of Human Services in Lansing. "And this is during a recession when jobs are scarce. It's crazy."

The public perception of general assistance, Mrs. Parks said, is of welfare rolls filled with able-bodied people too lazy to work.

State Representative David Jaye,

Experts say people whose aid was cut now have nowhere to turn.

that the poor are powerless." Down the street from the church, one door down from a plasma center where type A-B negative blood, a relatively rare type, will fetch \$15 to \$20 a pint, Jessi Young, a former welfare recipient, stood in a dimly lit homeless shelter and watched the place fill up with men, women and children.

"You think it's crowded now?" he said. "Wait a couple of days. Then it'll be packed because of these cuts. We can spend a trillion dollars fighting a war in some third world country."

Mr. Young, 40, dropped out of school after the 10th grade. He said he had a ruptured disc in his back from a work accident in 1973 and a steel plate in his left hip after he was shot by a stray bullet a few years ago.

"With my present-day education, I guess I could get a job distributing hand bills," he said. "Cutting grass, washing windows. This is a slow death."

Mr. Young and his family moved to Detroit from Mississippi when he was a baby. His father had a third-grade education but quickly found a job at the General Motors Corporation, where he stayed for 40 years.

"Those days are gone, long, long gone," Mr. Young said. "Those jobs are gone. Robots do that work now." Evert Vermeer, director of social services in Kent County in western Michigan, said it was too early to judge the full impact of ending the general assistance program. He said more than half of the 80,000 recipients were "bilateral," if there was anything out there for them to get.

"Here isn't," he said from his Grand Rapids office.

On the streets of a dilapidated Detroit neighborhood, Cass Corridor, the other day, rumors were running fast about evictions from apartments and about former welfare recipients sitting their wits to avoid becoming homeless again.

People say they are selling their food stamps to pay telephone bills and rent. Others mumble about "doing whatever it takes to survive."

Shirley Johns, director of the Community Service and Referral Center in Lansing, recently told the A.P. the advice she gives to those left without food or shelter: "I tell them to commit a simple larceny. Especially if they're sick, I tell them to do that. I explain to them it's a roof over their head. It's free food, free medical treatment for their pneumonia."

As a drizzle fell over the city, Mrs. Williams and several other former recipients talked about "how we're ever going to survive without G.A."

"I'm going to pray," Mrs. Williams said. "I'm also going to fight back. I'm willing to go to jail over and over until we get treated right. G. A. was all we had to get by."

Joyce Pelcher, 62, said: "If I have to, I'll sell my food stamps to pay my rent. Then when I run out, I'll go to the mission to eat."

"No, you won't," Mrs. Williams said. "The missions are turning people away. The missions are chising, too."