I Handed Out Relief

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I WAS an investigator for the Emergency Home Relief Bureau for two months. Then I quit. I couldn't stomach it any longer. And here are the reasons why.

New York boasts of one of the highest relief scales in the country It amounts to this: Food allowances covering a two-week period range from $3.50 for an adult male to $2.00 for a child of six—but this $2.00 must provide the child with everything it needs in the way of food for two weeks. Can you picture what a one-dollar-a-week diet does to a growing child in New York City? I have seen what it does and it's not a pleasant sight.

Rents paid by the Bureau run from a low of $4.70 every two weeks for a family of two, up to a high of $8.10 for a family of nine or more. These figures are for unheated, unfurnished apartments. In heated apartments the allowance is from $1.10 to a $1.70 higher. If the family owns no furniture it is in even a worse state. The allowance for a couple living in an unheated furnished room is $2.60 per week. Where such rooms are to be found in New York the Bureau does not state.

In addition to these fundamental items our family will receive 60 cents for electricity and 70 cents for gas (in unfurnished apartments) and, if the apartment is unheated, a $2.00 coal ticket every two weeks during the winter months. Even this is not all. The poor must be well scrubbed; therefore the Bureau grants to each one of those whom it chooses to call its "clients" the sum of one nickel each week —for soap. Tooth paste, tobacco, papers, carfare, etc., are not, of course, "necessities."

As for clothing, this item seems to be regarded as more or less of a luxury by the E.H.R.B. and no provision is made for it in the budget. But once in a blue moon an appropriation for clothing does come through. Not enough, to be sure, to provide a pair of shoes or a coat to every child who runs shivering to school without one, but enough for a noble gesture. One such appropriation, and one only, has been allotted to my borough in the past four months. Each investigator was allowed to select the fifteen neediest cases from his case load of from eighty to 130 families, and to distribute to these, fifteen clothing orders for not more than $10 each.

Most unfortunate of all is the poor devil out on the fringe of the city who owns his own home. Take the Constanzis, for instance, whom I "investigated" last week. Mr. Constanzi is a short and stocky Italian in his late fifties, his body warped and twisted by a lifetime of heavy work. For nineteen years he worked as a laborer for the Tidewater Oil Company, but they laid him off four years ago—too old they said. He and his wife had a few dollars put by and they cashed in Mr. Constanzi's insurance for $106—about one-third of what he had paid in on the policy—and managed somehow to squeeze through the first year of unemployment. Since then Mr. Constanzi has been on work relief, twelve days' work a month—if it doesn't rain or snow—at $4.00 a day.

Even though it was hard going they still felt better off than their neighbors, for didn't they own their own home? Mr. Constanzi himself had built it twenty-one years ago. "Ah!" he told me, "plenty strong them days. Work all day for company. Come home and work on house until too dark to see. Sometimes my wife hold lantern and still I work!" Of course he had put a mortgage on the place, and before the house was finished he owed the bank $2,300. The three children died one by one and there was the matter of their funerals. And then the taxes and water bills, $124 a year right there, to say nothing of special assessments when the sewers, and later the sidewalk and curbing, came through. So, try as they would, it was all husband and wife could do to pay the interest on the mortgage, to say nothing of a bit now and then on the principal. For twenty-one years they have been paying on the mortgage, $138 every single year. The bank has received the total value of the mortgage and an additional $500 in interest payments alone in the course of those twenty-one years, but still that debt of $2,300 hangs over their home—it has not been reduced a nickel.

Now they are two years behind in taxes and one year behind in their interest payments and the bank is threatening to foreclose if they fail to meet the quarterly payment in April. They went to the Home Owners Loan Corporation last summer and, of course, they were refused a loan because they had no income aside from work relief and, therefore, no possibility of paying it off. I saw the letter Mrs. Constanzi wrote to the President himself when they got this news. It was signed, "Your humble subject." I saw, too, the official reply enclosing her original letter and referring them back to the same local agency of the H.O.L.C. which had already rejected their application.

And now I had come to tell Mr. Constanzi that he was laid off from work relief. Three months before, a general order had come through the central office stating that for reasons of economy all single men and heads of families with less than two dependents were to be dismissed from work relief and transferred, where absolutely necessary, to home relief.

Forty-eight dollars a month isn't much, but by skimping right and left they had been able to live after a fashion and even make some payments on the mortgage. At least they had the hope of saving a home they had toiled a lifetime to maintain. How would it be on home relief? Mr. Constanzi looked up at me hopefully. He knew that his neighbors on the relief got rent money every month; surely he would get rent money also and apply it on his interest payments. There was no use beating around the bush. I had to tell him the truth; that the Home Relief Bureau will not allow a home owner a single penny for mortgage payments even though his home is to be foreclosed tomorrow for lack of a few dollars to make a payment.

They sat there silently and at first I thought they didn't understand. Then I looked at Mrs. Constanzi and I knew they did. She didn't move or change expression but slowly her soft eyes filled with tears. I stood up quickly and motioned Constanzi to come with me outside. As the door closed behind us I heard the first sob from the woman by the table. I tried to stammer out some words to him there on the porch but I could see he wasn't listening.

"So, they take my job and they take my home," he said real low. He flung out his hands in a hopeless gesture and raised his face to mine; the face of a broken man. "It's finish. I care nothing what happen now. Let Relief take the house. I sign it over to them, maybe then they take care of Maria and me. I don't care no more."

But the dollars and cents figures of what a "client" receives do not tell the whole story. Before he may receive anything he first has to get on the relief rolls, and this is far from the easy job it might appear. Walk into any precinct office between the hours of nine and five and you'll see a long line of anxious-faced men and women strung out along the wall waiting for their turn at the receptionist's desk. Usually you'll find the line doubled back on itself two or three times like a coiled snake, for the E.H.R.B. offices are invariably crammed and overcrowded as well as understaffed. It is two o'clock now and many of these people have been in line since ten this morning, and more than one of them is weak from lack of food.

But all things end and at last our prospective client reaches the receptionist's desk and the welcome chair beside it. The receptionist is overworked and tired; she fires the questions at him rapidly. Name, address, number in family and their ages, when and where last employed and salary earned, receiving aid from any other charity, insurance carried, property, relatives with means, and so on down the line. The bewildered client answers as best he can and if it finally appears that he is absolutely without any means of support he is handed a four-page application blank.

Back he comes next day with his filled-out application and hands it in. Then begins a period of nervous waiting. For days he dare not leave the house, for should the investigator call and find him out his application may be rejected and he must go through the whole business again. Perhaps he waits a week and perhaps he waits two weeks and every hour of waiting soon becomes an hour of torture. At last, when he has given up all hope, the investigator comes.

Then begins an inquisition compared to which the interview with the receptionist was nothing. The investigator must fill from four to five pages with the history of this family —most of it a duplication of what is already on the application—but no matter, he must ask the same questions and write down the same answers once more if he wants to hold his job. He must include such pertinent information as the maiden name of the client's wife, the date and place of their marriage and the birthplace of the parents of both husband and wife. He must have the name, address, employment and probable income of every relative on both sides of the family. He must have a record of the client's employment for the past five or six years (if any) and must know why he quit or was fired from each job; his union, fraternal, and church affiliations. And, if the investigator has learned well the philosophy that guides the Bureau as a whole, he will look on each client as a tricky customer at best, who undoubtedly has assets concealed about him somewhere or some deep and guileful plan for cheating the E.H.R.B. Therefore he will watch with a hawk's eye for the smallest discrepancy in the story and will demand to see every member of the family, from the baby to the oldest son, to assure himself that there has been no padding of the number of mouths to feed. All this because the investigator knows full well that his value to the Bureau (and hence the continuance of his job and his prospects of advancement) are judged above all by the number of cases he can close.

In view of Mr. Corsi's recent public statement that the relief budget is designed to provide only a bare subsistence level of living, one would think that the Bureau would be only too happy to see its clients supplement their meager dole with what few odd jobs they might possibly pick up. In theory the clients are encouraged to take a day's work whenever they are lucky enough to find one.

A typical example: A Mr. S——, a dress cutter by trade and long a client of the Bureau, informed his investigator shortly before Christmas that he had an opportunity to get a week's work during the holiday rush in a shop where he had formerly worked. Mr. S——, being an honest man, wanted to take this job and thus relieve the E.H.R.B. of the burden of his support while it lasted and for a couple of weeks thereafter; providing, of course, that he could return to the relief rolls without difficulty two weeks after the job ended. The investigator assured him there would be no difficulty about this and Mr. S—— took the job. He earned $19 for his week's work. That kept his family going for the next two weeks, after which he confidently expected his relief would be resumed. But three weeks passed and still the investigator did not appear.

When their last penny was gone and their diet reduced to potatoes and bread Mr. S—— went down to the precinct office to make inquiries and after several days of being shunted from one person to another he found that his case had been closed. Reason: "Has found employment." And once a case is marked "closed" nothing in God's world can open it again but another application and another complete investigation. Therefore Mr. S—— once more had to wade through the whole long rigamarole of filling out an application, waiting day after day for an investigator and all the rest of it. Seven weeks later he was at last returned to the relief rolls. I dare say it will be some time before he accepts another temporary job.

There is one other aspect of the supplementing of relief income that is worth mentioning. Clients on work relief jobs earn $48 a month. With a family of five, let us say, this is somewhat below even the standards set by the home relief budget. Therefore such families are entitled to supplementary relief from the E.H.R.B. equal to the difference between their income on work relief and the allowances prescribed by the budget. But each investigator, I repeat, realizes that if he wants to keep his job he must protect the E.H.R.B. from every possible expenditure, even at the expense of his clients. One finds comments of this character in the report of an investigator on a family which had requested supplementary aid, and which, according to the budget figures, was clearly entitled to it. I quote one of them:

> This is a clean and orderly family. There are no signs of table economy and I suspect [note that "suspect"; it sums up the whole attitude] that the father is getting occasional jobs beside his C.W.A. job. . . . This family will soon be getting their vegetables from their own garden, and since they do not see fit to economize to fit their income to the budget . . . I do not feel inclined to recommend supplementary relief.

Several months later this family again applied for supplementary relief and another investigator visited them. She also decided, "Suggest not supplementing.... Family shows no sign of want. Woman had excellent lunch ready for children, boiled asparagus, etc."

The total income of this family is $48 per month.

All of New York City was shocked a few months ago when two infant twins, children of a relief worker, were found frozen to death in their beds on Staten Island. The family had no coal. This family also was entitled to supplementary relief in the form of coal or cash, even according to home relief standards. Mr. Coyle's friends say he applied for it and it was refused. E.H.R.B. officials declare that he had never applied for supplementary relief. Yet it is unchallenged that an investigator of the E.H.R.B. visited this family within one week before the twins were found frozen.. I can only assume that the investigator did not inform the family (and frequently families are in ignorance of this) that they were entitled to supplementary relief if they needed it and applied for it.

I've said, or at least implied, some harsh things about the investigator, but in simple justice it must be said that he, as well as his clients, is the victim of forces he cannot control. The average investigator is a youngster in his (or her) early twenties. Frequently this is his first real job. As a rule he is a college graduate and today he must have something of a college background to be hired. From the moment he goes to work it is systematically instilled in him that his first duty is not to his clients but to the E.H.R.B.

He may wear a Phi Beta Kappa key but his wages are beneath those of the average unskilled laborer—$4.58 a day. He is so consistently overloaded with work (case loads of 120 to 140 are not unusual) that it is physically impossible for him to make his rounds and complete his reports within the limits of a normal working day. The average investigator goes home night after night to spend from one to five hours filling in endless duplicate forms and writing up endless case histories. So accepted a thing is this overtime work that investigators are instructed as a matter of course to spend an entire afternoon on new investigations and hand in the complete histories and worked-out budget cards for these cases at nine the next morning.

But perhaps most important of all, the investigator works in an atmosphere of constant fear, mistrust and insecurity. He sees investigators arbitrarily transferred to less desirable jobs or fired outright for minor infractions of the rules or for no stated reason, and he knows that frequently the actual reason has been some overheard remark in criticism of those in his precinct. He sees those advance to better jobs who best know how to keep a close tongue in their heads and curry favor with their superiors. Never does he know when the blow may strike. He is in perpetual fear for his job.

Recently, however, there has been some change. Less than a year ago a small group of socially conscious investigators launched the Emergency Home Relief Bureau Employes Association, with a militant program of struggle for higher wages, improved working conditions and better treatment of clients. As a result of several partially successful struggles in defense of wages, for a two-weeks' vacation with pay, etc., the Association has experienced a rapid growth until today it embraces almost one-half of all E.H.R.B. employes.

It is primarily to this organization, together with the Unemployed Councils and the Relief Workers League, that we must look for action to remedy the present intolerable situation for both client and investigator.