

Fraud of the Recovery by Joyce Fredman

Working and hungry

"It is the nature of food emergencies that they are recurrent. As family funds dwindle during the month, food emergencies increase."—A food distributor.

Soup kitchens, a term that harkens back to the Great Depression, brings to mind homeless vagabonds, people with nowhere to go and nothing to eat. But the 1980s have seen a whole new clientele lining up at emergency food centers across the country.

The "working poor," those whose poverty results primarily from low wages, constitute the fastest growing segment of the impoverished population. The number of adults who work but are still poor has increased 50% nationally since 1978. Most of these people have homes, and families as well. They just don't have enough money to feed them.

A reflection of the inadequacy of the minimum wage to support a family is the fact that two-worker families with children have increased 50% in the past 10 years. The consequences of this are seen in the growing numbers of workers seeking emergency food aid in Boston, Pittsburgh, New York, and elsewhere. The average increase in requests for emergency food assistance in the past year was 18%. That increase was comprised of families with children requesting food assistance.

Governor Dukakis take note! Hunger in Massachusetts has been increasing over 13% per month for the past two years. In Massachusetts, at least half a million people live below the poverty line and experience hunger at some point every month. Moreover, 28% of the free food pantries surveyed said they cannot serve everyone who requests it.

In Boston alone, there are 89 pantries and 26 soup kitchens. The pantries are serving over 8,700 families a

year, up 21% from last year. The soup kitchens last year averaged over 1.5 million meals a year.

Only 27% of the requests statewide came from the unemployed. The shipbuilders who once worked for General Dynamics at Quincy shipyards, or the autoworkers who made an adequate living at General Motors in Framingham, both now closed, are now out of luck. They must take pay cuts of \$20/hour and more. If they're lucky enough to get a job, it will most likely be at MacDonald's.

According to the hype of Reagan and Bush, Pittsburgh's unemployment rate has gone from 15.7% in 1983 to 5.8% as of April 1988. What is not mentioned is that the non-manufacturing jobs created in the region have lower wages and reduced benefits compared to the steelworkers' jobs they replaced. In fact, many are part-time jobs.

In 1961, there were 269,000 manufacturing jobs in the Pittsburgh region. That has declined 55% to 122,600 currently.

In the 20-county area surrounding Pittsburgh, there are 200 soup kitchens. That is not enough to deal with the problem. In Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) alone, 200,000 people, or 16% of the population, goes hungry every day.

One of the most dramatic examples of poverty is New York City. This is neither surprising, nor a new phenomenon. What is shocking, is the level of devastation to which the poor have been recently subjected.

The most conservative estimates of the number of people dependent on emergency food in New York are in

the vicinity of 1.5 million a month. More realistic approximations are 2 million—over 25% of the population!

The question of how 1 person in every 4 is placed in a circumstance in which he or she cannot feed themselves or their families is one of the harshest indictments of the recent period of "recovery." It is now an indisputable fact that minimal necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter are out of reach of the poor and near-poor. This was not the case historically.

As recently as 1975, public assistance could lift a family somewhat out of poverty. Today, a family on public assistance would require a grant increase of 33% just to reach the poverty line.

In New York, as in the rest of the country, the most disturbing trend is for those that do work. Because the minimum-wage scale has been frozen at \$3.35/hour since 1981, a family of four, with one full-time and one part-time wage-earner working at the minimum wage, lives below the poverty line.

Twenty-nine percent of the meals provided in New York City are served in soup kitchens, where one can walk in without referral and eat a meal on site. Food pantries, on the other hand, usually require referral and provide a short-term supply of canned and non-perishable items that are taken home. Most serve families. Seventy-one percent of the meals provided in New York City are provided by food pantries.

The fact that the largest amount of emergency food is distributed through pantries gives the lie to the prevailing myth that emergency food is mostly for the homeless.

In each of the four boroughs outside of Manhattan, over three-quarters of the emergency meals served are food pantry meals. Over two-thirds are to families with children.