



Public Benefits Programs Can Help You

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The US economy faces a recession approximately every 8 2/3 years. Each time, there's a new batch of recently unemployed people who need help from our programs, but don't know what's available, or where to look. Our current situation is statistically similar to the recession of the early 1980s when the steel industry collapsed. But the public thinks it's worse because, this time, it affects white-collar workers more deeply. Every time we have a recession, the American middle class gets an education.

Contrary to common belief, the United States does not have a welfare system. We have an unrelated batch of social assistance and income security programs, designed separately over several decades to help people facing hard times. If you lost your job, or are unable to work, or earn less than a living wage, and need some help, you have to apply for aid from individual programs in many separate agencies. Yet people can't apply for help if they don't know what programs exist. You may find the help that you need, and you may not.

The federal government sponsors dozens of public benefit programs. Each one addresses a specific need and each lives in a separate bureaucratic pigeonhole. Government officials are just beginning to learn what social service advocates have always known. Unemployed people don't need help only with mortgage payments, or buying food, or paying for utilities.

Individually, each program helps to ease poverty. However, we could multiply that effect. I've worked with and for nonprofit social service agencies as a volunteer, staff, manager, board member, consultant, and commentator for more than 26 years. I can tell you from experience. The United States desperately needs a consistent, coordinated method to deliver social services. Since human needs are connected, we should develop a single program, operated through a single agency. The program could be flexible enough to accommodate varying degrees of need.

People often hesitate, or even refuse, to accept help from social service programs because of rumors, myths, and misconceptions. Others are too embarrassed to accept help. Here is some basic information.

First, the myths. There is not, and has never been, an unlimited barrel of welfare cash freely available to anyone who wants it. Every program has strict eligibility requirements. Some benefits are only available for a limited time. You must prove every bit of information on your application. You do not have to be on welfare. You can be working. You can own a home, and a car, and have some savings. You do not have to repay the assistance. There will not be a lien on your property. The fact that you receive assistance is confidential. It does not appear on your credit record. It is not reported to your school, or your employer, or your neighbors, or anywhere else. In fact, most healthy adults who receive benefits do work, and pay taxes. The programs are available throughout the US, not just in certain neighborhoods.

Please don't be embarrassed to receive services. You've worked and paid your taxes so that these programs can be there when you need them. If someone stole your car, you wouldn't hesitate to ask the police for help. This is no different. It's like having money in the bank.

Pennsylvania residents can apply for most health and human services through the state's online COMPASS system, operated by the Department of Public Welfare since October 2001. Of course, the physical welfare offices are also still open for business.

You can apply for cash and medical benefits, food stamps, heating assistance, childcare, free and reduced-price school meals; aging, mental health and disability services, and other programs. Apply for the Women, Infants, and Children's Nutrition Program through the Health Department.

Apply for unemployment and workers' compensation benefits through the Department of Labor and Industry. You may be able to receive unemployment compensation even if you are still working part-time. Contact information is listed below.

If you don't know whether you qualify, file the application. You have nothing to lose but some time. You can learn more about the history, requirements, and statistics of the programs from their Web sites.

To apply for services, go to www.dpw.state.pa.us. Click "Online Services" and then click "COMPASS". Or call the PA Department of Public Welfare HelpLine 800-692-7462.

For the WIC Program, call 1-800-WIC-WINS.

For some reason, the Department of Labor and Industry refuses to list its address and phone number on its Web site.

For general information, go to www.state.pa.us. Click "PA State Agencies". From there you can get to the Aging, Education, Health, Labor and Industry, Public Welfare, and other departments. Or go to www.usa.gov. Click "Benefits and Grants".

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