

Pittsburgh welfare recipients confront state officials with concerns about the system

By HEIDI RUSSELL
Associated Press Writer

HARRISBURG — Lack of guidance from caseworkers and struggles to find child care plague those trying to move from welfare to work, a group of Pittsburgh-area welfare recipients told state officials yesterday.

About 30 members of the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee, which is studying the effects on people in Pennsylvania's revised welfare system, said they fear they will lose their benefits if they do not comply with a list of stringent rules designed to move them into the work force.

"I have to go to job training, or I get no benefits. I'm not allowed to bring my children, and they don't offer child care. So then I have to get someone to watch them, but I have to pay them. Add traveling time, too," said Sherry LaGrand, a single parent with a kindergartner and a toddler.

The committee collected testimony from 40 welfare recipients in the Pittsburgh region this month and issued a report to the Welfare Department outlining concerns over "rude" caseworkers and lack of child care.

Deputy Welfare Secretary Sherri Heller said caseworkers will undergo more sensitivity training this fall, and more child care should be available by January.

"The fact that you came here with practical recommendations means we will follow up. They seem practical and realistic, and you're not just whining," she told the group.

Under federal law, welfare recipients can receive a cash-assistance check for five years. But to remain eligible, they also must participate in work activities for a minimum of 20 hours per week after they have been receiving the assistance for two years.

From March 3 to July 31, more than 32,000 welfare recipients began the transition to the work force, according to the Welfare Department.

But caseworkers who are misinformed about the law's provisions actually have stymied the welfare recipients' efforts to find work, the group said.

Laura Parker of Pittsburgh said she found a \$10-per-hour job working with medical records, but it was only for three or four weeks. Her caseworker called the



Members of the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee of Pittsburgh leave the bus and enter the Welfare Building in Harrisburg. The group met with state welfare officials in Harrisburg yesterday to address concerns they and other welfare recipients have with the current system.

employer and incorrectly said she had to work there for three to four months in order to continue to qualify for welfare.

Parker lost the opportunity Monday, when she was to report for her first day of work.

"I was dressed up, ready to go to work on Monday when I found out the people found somebody else," she said.

In addition, the group said that when sin-

gle parents move from job training programs into entry-level, part-time jobs, they lose child care grants.

Heller agreed, saying that when a welfare recipient takes a job but is still accepting welfare, he or she no longer qualifies for a child care grant and must pay those expenses out of earnings.

Once the recipient gets off welfare, he or she qualifies for a grant that covers 12

months of transition time into the work force. After that year expires, the former welfare recipient goes to the bottom of a waiting list for child care grants for low-income working parents.

"New regulations for this would make it into a seamless system so that if you work more, you get more help with child care. Those regulations are going to be published in the next ... weeks," Heller said.

Man set to stand trial for alleged assaults

District Justice Bradley P. Lunsford ordered Gage J. Short of Clearfield yesterday to stand trial on counts of aggravated assault, simple assault, harassment and stalking and disorderly conduct, according to court documents.

Short allegedly kicked a victim in the head and stomach 15 to 20 times early Sunday morning in front of the Gingerbread Man, 130 Hiester St., according to court documents.

When police arrived, two victims were covered in blood and witnesses informed police of the direction in which the assailant was heading.

Witnesses told the officer the assailant was not wearing a shirt, according to court documents.

The officer then saw a man without a shirt walking down Wilson Alley.

And as the officer approached him, he and his companions began to run, court documents said.

Short was then apprehended and positively identified as the assailant by an eyewitness, according to court documents.

Cory Lynn Guisewhite of Millheim was ordered by District Justice Ronald J. Horner to stand trial on counts of aggravated indecent assault, indecent assault and corruption of minors, according to court documents.

The victim returned from a weekend visit with the defendant, Guisewhite, May 18 and reported to her mother that her vaginal area was sore, court documents said.

The victim was examined by Dr. P.J. Bruno at Sunbury Community Hospital, according to court documents.

Bruno reported after examining the victim, that his findings were indicative of sexual abuse.

—by Aimée Harris

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