

Birth by Fire: Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG) Gives a Voice to West Virginia's Poor

Grassroots organizations are born from the fire of an immediate need, seen by a few who heed its call to action. The 1996 federal welfare reform legislation known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) birthed many new grassroots welfare rights organizations. These organizations formed to confront the distorted and stereotypical assumptions about poverty that provided the foundation for the new law. They give a voice to those affected by the policies and offer concrete solutions to the poverty faced by low-income families. For the past six years grassroots organizations have been organizing both to secure improvements in state and local welfare policies and to influence the PRWORA reauthorization that is occurring this year.

One of the newest organizations to emerge is the **Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG)** in West Virginia. Unlike its slightly older counterparts, DAWG has not had time to build organizational capacity before being thrown into the spotlight. In less than a year and without an office, a budget, or non-profit status yet in place, DAWG is becoming an important player in the welfare reform debate within West Virginia and nationally. As it has turned out, DAWG's birth occurred during one of the most critical times in welfare history, and the organization and its members had to learn to run before they had even learned to crawl! DAWG's activities have included: working to demand justice for low-income families in West Virginia through participation in a lawsuit challenging time limits, working with the state welfare agency to develop poverty solutions, creating a peer supported advocacy program, educating policymakers, and working with Senator Rockefeller's office to influence the welfare debate in Congress.

Like many grassroots welfare organizations, DAWG was formed by a group of current and former welfare mothers who met in a living room in a low-income housing project. These mothers met to discuss their all too familiar problems with the public assistance office. They soon learned that their power was in their numbers and their first hand knowledge of poverty. With this knowledge they set out to organize, empower, and educate themselves and their neighbors about their rights. Once the decision to form a group was made, DAWG moved quickly to identify a focus and goals for the organization. The crisis was so clear to the families that were living the reality of poverty that they were able to complete their mission, goal, and objectives in less than a month.

The DAWG objectives are to:

- Empower former and current welfare recipients and persons living in poverty by providing them with the knowledge and tools to change their lives;
- Educate current and former welfare recipients and persons living in poverty on their rights and how to advocate on behalf of themselves and other;
- Advocate for individuals who are living in poverty and dealing with poverty issues; and

- Educate the public and lawmakers on poverty and welfare issues from the perspective of people who are living with these issues.

With these objectives in mind, DAWG identified the following six local and national activities to concentrate on:

1. Obtaining information regarding Department of Health and Human Resources programs and getting that information out to the people who need the services;
2. Informing people of their rights as recipients of these services;
3. Identifying how the bureaucracy works and helping those in need of services find their way through the maze;
4. Working both state and nationally to ensure that work activities are defined as broadly as possible;
5. Working to create a more humane system in which low-income families are treated with respect and valued for the work they do raising their children in the best possible way; and
6. Bringing the true voice and experience of low-income families into government decisionmaking and the public eye.

After identifying its agenda DAWG was lucky enough to find an organization that believed in its work so intensely that it agreed to help support the infant organization. The Community Development Outreach Ministries (CDOM), a mission project of the West Virginia Annual Conference of United Methodist Churches, agreed to house DAWG and help it give voice to low-income issues. With the help of CDOM, the Direct Action Welfare Group embarked upon its first campaign and sent out its first newsletter.

DAWG's first campaign was to make the West Virginia welfare agency actively distribute the social service funds available to former and current welfare recipients. The agency had identified a portion of welfare funds to provide income supports to help families on, and recently off, TANF. This money could be used for items such as transportation, insurance premiums, and work clothing. However, the agency was reluctant to use this money, did not publicize its availability and was terminating the eligibility for many families in just months. DAWG notified all of its members, allies, and agencies about the availability of the funds. It distributed information about the program, organized families and encouraged them to apply for the funds. The families that subsequently applied received between \$350 to \$1500 in supportive services. DAWG's first campaign was a resounding success - delivering thousands of dollars to low-income families across the state of West Virginia.

Through the supportive service payment campaign membership grew. The community began to realize that West Virginia needed an organization such as DAWG. Phone calls for advocacy, requests for training, and conference invitations started pouring in, and petitioners in a lawsuit challenging time limits sought DAWG's participation in a friend of the court brief. Eventually groups nationally recognized that West Virginia would play a pivotal role in the federal welfare reauthorization debate, because West Virginia's Senator Rockefeller is a member of the Senate Finance Committee which has

responsibility for developing a TANF reauthorization bill. DAWG's allies encouraged them to share their expertise with their senator and help Senator Rockefeller promote positive TANF proposals. DAWG quickly developed an effective working relationship with the Senator's staff who frequently seek out DAWG's views on various issues.

The last few months have been active ones for DAWG members as they have been working to influence welfare reform on the local, state, and national levels. DAWG members believe that one of the best chances they have to affect welfare policy right now is through the group's participation in a pending court case challenging time limits. The class action lawsuit claims that the five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance violates the state constitution which specifies that the state is responsible for "overseeing the poor" and requires the state to provide subsistence necessary for their basic well-being and survival in a minimally humane manner. It also raises other claims, including claims based on due process and the state statute. A victory for recipients would change the face of welfare in West Virginia, and a favorable ruling on the state constitutional claim could be useful to advocates in other states.

DAWG sees its role in the lawsuit as providing an organized voice of low-income families in support of the claimants. DAWG submitted an amicus brief that outlined current reality for families denied benefits and offered solutions for the implementation of alternative policies. DAWG argues in its brief that the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHR) did not follow its own outlined procedure for time limit extensions, and that its extension policy is limiting and complicated for many families. DAWG asks the court to eliminate the six-month cap on extensions and create a working group that would include current and former TANF recipients to evaluate the time limit and extension policies. It wants the welfare agency to review cases individually to evaluate hardship factors and give families proper due process before cases are closed. Amicus briefs were also submitted by the United Mine Workers, AFL-CIO, the Welfare Law Center for the Southern Appalachian Labor School, and the West Virginia State Attorney General.

DAWG's early and visible participation in critical welfare policy matters is due, in part, to its current organizer and one of its founding mothers, Evelyn Dortch. Evelyn is a single mom who received welfare while she attended college. She was denied benefits during her last year in school due to changes in TANF policies. Nonetheless, she attained her educational goal, graduating at the top of her class with a degree in social work, despite the roadblocks that TANF placed in her way. Her commitment and dedication to her education was stronger than the imprisoning policies of welfare reform that would have limited her ability to complete a bachelor's degree and forced her to take a minimum wage, dead-end job.

Evelyn Dortch is not new to social activism. Her strength comes from her foremothers who fought social injustice. She is the daughter of a radical feminist and spent much of her childhood in the midst of the women's liberation movement, going to marches, rallies, and protests. Now, as a mother of four children, ages 11 to 16, she knows the importance of fighting to leave her children a more just world. She believes that DAWG can be the

vehicle to empower, educate and advocate for social and economic justice in West Virginia. She has dedicated her skills to ensuring that people living in poverty in West Virginia have a voice in decisions that affect them.

No one knows what the future holds for Americans living in poverty. Welfare is again being reformed by Congress. It is only with organizations like the Direct Action Welfare Group that low-income families will have a voice and a chance to secure economic and social justice for themselves and their families. For more information on DAWG contact Evelyn Dortch at itsdadawg@hotmail.com. For more information on grassroots groups in your area, visit the Welfare Law Center's LINC Project website: www.lincproject.org.

Wendy Young for the Welfare Law Center, July 2002