

Welfare Rights Initiative

ANNUAL REPORT

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A project of the
Hunter College Center for the Study of Family Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI) is a student activist organization whose primary purpose is to serve the Hunter College campus. Its educational, legal, social service and advocacy programs help students to become informed about local, state and federal anti-poverty, social welfare and higher education policies; provide students with the opportunity to participate in organizing and leadership development activities; and facilitate their interaction with faculty, as well as community advocates, activists, service providers and policy makers. In all of its activities, WRI seeks to inject the voices of students (especially those with firsthand experience of poverty) into relevant program and policy-making processes.

Located at the Hunter College Center for the Study of Family Policy, WRI has grown out of three troubling aspects in the debates over welfare reform: the absent voice of welfare recipients; the negative stereotypes of poor women that dominate decision-making, and the failure to envision reforms that are humane, realistic and constructive.

At WRI, we believe it is necessary for those who have firsthand experience of poverty to be included in the planning and design of a better welfare system. We further believe that welfare reform is largely an educative task requiring a strategy that engages people to confront the complex challenges of poverty. To this end, WRI is providing articulate, motivated students with a means to gain analytical, political and economic literacy. We are doing this work at CUNY—a public university whose low tuition draws many students from the New York area that could not otherwise afford to attend college—where more than 10 percent of the student body are recipients of Home Relief and AFDC. The current attack on welfare has opened students' eyes to the ways in which their lives are linked to public policy and mobilized them into action not only to defend their ability to get a college degree but also to promote economic justice for others.

Numerous studies have documented the impact of higher education on labor force participation, earnings and long term economic independence. We know, for example, that 87% of people on welfare who attain Bachelor's degrees are able to move permanently off welfare. And we know that historically, those with the least education have always been the hardest hit during economic downturns. Yet, in the past two years 10,000 students at CUNY have been forced to abandon their studies to participate in workfare.

There remain approximately 18,000 extremely hard-working students at CUNY who receive public assistance and who attend college full time in spite of poverty and in spite of obstacles put in their way by the welfare system. Ninety percent of these students are women. Welfare Rights Initiative has created several means of engaging students in proactive education and community organizing strategies to promote access to higher education for poor families and influence constructive welfare reforms. All WRI programs have been designed to reach and engage the population of students at Hunter College (where we are located among more than 900 welfare recipients), before extending outreach to other CUNY campuses for the purpose of building at WRI a powerful advocacy force in city, statewide and national reform discussions.

reduction of the welfare rolls—absent any planning for poverty reduction or supportive services to move people out of poverty. Efforts to reduce the welfare rolls would force impoverished students to abandon their studies to participate in the city's Work Experience Program (WEP). Short-sighted, politically charged decisions could mean the elimination of access to higher education as a route to adequate income and family sufficiency. Students enrolled in two year programs would be required to do concurrent WEP, while maintaining 18 credits per semester and coping with the demands and daily stresses of living on a welfare income 27 percent below poverty. The doors of CUNY's senior colleges would likely be barred to recipients pursuing a Bachelors degree.

This is why WRI was created and why it has evolved as a student driven, community empowerment model, staffed and organized largely by the students for whom it seeks to examine stereotypes, influence realistic, useful social policy, and demand a more democratic, participatory process for social change.

III. OVERVIEW OF WRI PROGRAMS

WRI is currently funded by a combination of private foundations and student fees. The private foundation funds, from Child Welfare Fund, New York Foundation, Jewish Fund for Justice and North Start Fund, support course instruction, including the director's salary. Funding from the students of Hunter College (via a referendum passed in May, 1996) supports the part-time salaries of three students and the majority of OTPS expenditures.

WRI programs and activities are organized by current or former students of Hunter College who, with only one exception, have firsthand experience of poverty and welfare.

WRI's existing strategic programs include:

- **Community Leadership Training.** WRI is tapping the resource represented by 18,000 CUNY students who are themselves recipients of public assistance, by providing a Leadership Development Seminar at Hunter College, to equip student welfare recipients as organizers, trainers and agents of empowerment on college campuses and in their own communities. This two-semester, credit-bearing training program includes an introduction to social welfare policy, past and present; a skill-building component encompassing meeting planning and facilitation, active listening, public speaking, coalition building and fundraising; and a four month internship. The aim is to foster leadership (defined as service to the common good) and facilitate the development of a visible and effective student organization, to support and defend educational access and to work for more just and effective public policy. All CUNY students on welfare are encouraged to apply for participation in WRI's intensive leadership development program, although WRI upholds a commitment to a seventy percent minimum Hunter student enrollment. By offering college credit and transportation expenses WRI creates a space in students' schedules for them to pursue this interest. Without WRI, few would be able to overcome the barriers to education and personal empowerment (not to mention organized political activism) placed in their way by poverty and the welfare system.

training and to coordinate a city-wide rapid response advocacy team to oppose unjust or ill-considered reforms. WRI's interest in developing its capacity to provide legal services is to empower welfare recipients to continue their studies, become economically self supporting and engaged as advocates. WRI's legal advocacy component also aims to pressure the city to follow existing state regulations about education and training. As funding and time permit, we hope to develop a system for tracking, locating and facilitating the re-enrollment of students who have been forced to leave college because of workfare conflicts or poverty. WRI's collaboration with CUNY Law School will be expanded, beginning in August, 1997, to also engage 2nd year student interns from the Hunter College School of Social Work.

- **Employability Assessment.** The Work Experience Program in New York City has recently placed more than 40,000 welfare recipients in workfare positions primarily with the Sanitation and Parks Departments. Although state regulations require that an employability assessment be undertaken prior to workfare assignment, the New York City Human Resources Administration generally has not inquired about work and education history, special skills, goals and aspirations of welfare recipients. WRI is developing a model employability assessment to discover and highlight truths about students on welfare at CUNY. Our hope is to first administer the assessment to the 900 Hunter College students who receive public assistance, and ultimately CUNY-wide to 18,000 students on welfare. This will involve one-on-one interviews through which WRI staff and student leaders will also encourage students to join WRI's public education, organizing and advocacy mobilization campaigns. Data will be used in legal challenges on an individual basis, and in broader political advocacy to bring attention to the successes and potential of this student population while substantiating our claim that all welfare recipients should be assessed upon application for public assistance. Besides preserving (and following) the law as it currently exists, WRI asserts that only through utilizing such an assessment can clients be directed to relevant programs that will enable their advancement out of poverty and permanent removal from the welfare rolls.

WRI's multiple, coordinated strategies are designed to foster proactive collaboration among Hunter College students, public assistance recipients, scholars, advocates, union members, service providers and policy-makers who seek an inclusive, participatory process of policy-making and a more just and realistic social welfare system. WRI promotes welfare reform that grants equal opportunity for people who are poor to acquire and develop a variety of skills, including literacy, Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, vocational training, a high school diploma or GED equivalent, two *and* four year college degrees. Welfare policy must permit access to education and training for the safety net to be used in a productive way, to gain knowledge, skills and credentials that will enable economic self support.

Development Corporation (WHEDCO). Their reputation has spread out of state, as well, signaled by invitations received from the Women's Centers at Yale University and Dartmouth College. One highlight in the current fiscal year involved WRI leadership student, Rosie Martinez, who is the first in her Dominican family to attend college. Speaking in public for the first time, Rosie contributed powerful testimony (bringing the 200 member audience to its feet) at the 11/20/96 Workers' Rights Board Hearing, held at Judson Memorial Church. Since this time, the Workers' Rights Board and WEP Coalition have worked closely with WRI, advocating for welfare reforms that include increased college access.

Without WRI, few of these places would know where to turn to include the voices of welfare recipients in forums on issues of welfare, economic justice and higher education access.

The media regularly seeks out the ideas and concerns of WRI student leaders. They have appeared on a variety of television (over the air broadcast, cable, network and public access stations) and radio programs. In addition to being guests on many news and discussion programs, WRI student leaders are producing two shows. Judy Pittman, a second year student leader, has been trained by Manhattan Neighborhood Network and begun her own live, cable access program, "Making A Difference" which can be seen monthly on Channel 34. Maureen Lane produces a biweekly program on the same channel called, "Student Rap" which, like Judy's program, regularly focuses on welfare, child care, workfare and education issues and features students from throughout the University. We have also been pleased that an interview of two WRI student leaders appeared in the February, 1997 national edition of the *Women's Review of Books*. Articles about WRI were featured in the Fall, 1996 issue of *CUNY Matters*, the December, 1996 issue of *Brooklyn Bridge Magazine*, and the Fall/Winter 1996 edition of *Brooklyn Metro Times*.

B. Providing Direct Services for Retention and New Enrollment at Hunter College

A major new undertaking at WRI this year has been the provision of legal services to impoverished students whose opportunity to continue their college studies is threatened by workfare. In response to the loss of enrollment of 10,000 student welfare recipients at CUNY due to the city's workfare practices, WRI has initiated its Advocacy Training Mobilization Project, and established a partnership with CUNY Law School, as described above. Beginning in March of 1997, WRI began operating a 24-hour hotline, and canvassed the University with flyers alerting students to this service. Our crew of three paid student staff, eighteen Hunter students interning with WRI, and one second year Hunter social work student staffed the hotline, conducted intakes and in depth interviews with welfare recipients who called or visited seeking assistance. WRI then forwarded the intakes to CUNY Law School. The law students, supervised by two attorneys, followed through to resolve the cases. Specifically the law students are representing undergraduate welfare recipients in the fair hearing process. We have tried to structure this program to serve the maximum number of students and to track outcomes, while recruiting "clients" to WRI and citywide welfare reform organizing work. The WRI/CUNY Law School collaborative has provided legal advice to nearly 200 CUNY students in its first three months, and begun the process to represent more than fifty students in fair hearings. Funds are sought to continue and expand the clinic next year to include 2nd year students from the Hunter College School of Social Work who will do their field placements at WRI. We are very excited about the potential of this project for keeping welfare recipients in college. At the same time, we anticipate

1) Legal Advocacy. WRI is working with attorneys from Legal Aid Society, Legal Services, National Employment Law Project and Welfare Law Center, to train CUNY welfare recipients for lay advocacy and expand the pool of lay advocates capable of representing and assisting students. WRI staff and student interns conducted advocacy trainings on a weekly basis this year, alerting students to their rights to education and training, and teaching them how to protect their rights by staging mock fair hearings. In December of 1996, WRI student leaders organized, publicized, produced and emceed a training in clients' rights to education and training, in Room 217 West, at Hunter College. The event was co-led by WRI student leaders with Ricky Blum of Manhattan Legal Aid and Marc Cohan of the Welfare Law Center. Every seat (approx. 80) was filled by students, lawyers and advocates seeking to better assist students through the fair hearing process. The training included a mock fair hearing, videotaped for mass distribution. In a WRI mock hearing, attorneys usually enact the roles of administrative law judge and city representative, and students practice the roles of lawyer and informed client.

2) Legislative Advocacy. WRI supported an effort of Welfare Reform Network to send a team of four or five constituents to visit each NYS legislator in their local office a number of times between December and July, 1997. WRI conducted several CUNY and borough-wide trainings in legislative advocacy and assisted in the organization of two major trips to Albany during which CUNY students could practice their skills while attempting to influence the policy decisions that affect them. On May 6, 1997, WRI recruited Hunter College students to participate in a Lobby Day action that was organized by Welfare Reform Network. On June 10, 1997, WRI cosponsored a follow-up visit to Albany, with University Student Senate, NYPIRG and the CUNY Child Care Center. Combined, fourteen buses and six vans transported (more than 600) participants to make their voices heard in Albany. WRI also set up a telephone advocacy station at Hunter College during final exams week this year. Student leaders staffed a table near the cafeteria, where they invited students to sit with them, be trained and coached to place telephone calls to their legislators. This experimental peer support project proved quite successful in alerting students to the importance of speaking up for CUNY and equipping them to do so.

3) Media Advocacy. The WRI office receives several calls weekly from reporters, research journalists and broadcast producers, seeking interviews with students who are being forced out of college by welfare reform. It takes a great deal of time to train a student to handle the media and to sufficiently prep them for these challenging interviews. WRI offers a media training in its leadership seminar. In the Spring 1997 semester, WRI also began developing a joint media bureau with the Urban Justice Center Organizing Project, to improve our shared capacity for making public the realities of welfare reform for those pursuing college degrees, as well as those participating in workfare. WRI and Urban Justice Center sponsored the first of these public "how to get your message across with the media" trainings at Hunter College, April 19, 1997. Role-playing with journalists and reporters on video is included for students to practice their communication skills and critique the results. WRI hopes through this work to formalize and institutionalize a mechanism for infusing citywide legislative and media campaigns with voices of welfare recipients enrolled at CUNY and participating in the city's Work Experience Program (WEP).

E. Networking and Establishing Linkages Beyond the College

The first semester of WRI leadership training includes a requirement that students participate in

VI. SUMMARY OUTCOMES

The leadership development seminar is the mechanism through which WRI's philosophy for social change is broadened, where community is created among 12 - 15 student welfare recipients per semester, and where a collective system of democratic, common good values is developed to undergird and drive all WRI programs and activities. The Speakers Bureau is primarily the program through which WRI reaches several hundred students (including public assistance recipients) every week, as well as many recipients who do not yet attend an institution of higher learning.

WRI begins at the individual level, with intensive personal mentoring, coaching and support, to help each student transcend her identity as welfare recipient and adopt an identity as leader. While building knowledge and self esteem, and developing shared values and a shared mission in a safe classroom environment, WRI equips students with basic organizing skills and professional tools to develop partnerships that can influence social change beyond the classroom. While our location in the college has made fundraising a challenge, it has been extremely beneficial to use the classroom community as a base for building students' capacity to collaborate with citywide advocacy groups.

At the outset, WRI was designed to become a university-based, leadership training institute for participant driven organizing in the community. The program would provide practical tools for leadership (defined as service to the common good), and encourage students to apply their skills in activities with community-based organizations. WRI has, in this way, made significant contributions to progressive social change efforts beyond the walls of CUNY. However, it was not predicted that WRI would also rapidly evolve as an activist organization itself, within which our students would be daily challenged to test and develop their skills. WRI has become uniquely both a training institute and a training ground. When select students register for the WRI Community Leadership Seminar, in effect they also become members of an acclaimed student activist organization. As previously noted, this year WRI student leaders completed their second semester internships working as a team, supervised by WRI. Our students have endured a great deal together, not just to complete the rigorous WRI coursework, but working collectively in struggles to keep the doors of CUNY open to poor families, to influence alternative visions of income support, to protect their rights and those of their peers, and to keep the WRI program afloat at the same time.

For Hunter College and the diverse communities from which our students come, the project is developing policy expertise, advocacy skills, organizational resources and a viable "voice" in policy and program planning. For the larger welfare reform community, including advocacy groups and labor union organizers, WRI is producing a source of informed and articulate public assistance recipients to provide a reality perspective and a greater sense of legitimacy to the ongoing debates, not to mention a natural pathway for outreach into poor communities. By providing direct, in depth training, training future trainers and taking direct action to influence social policy, WRI hopes to become a major educational resource for other groups doing empowerment training, public education, advocacy and community organizing for economic justice.

Everyone at WRI is extremely proud of all the organization is managing to accomplish with its tiny staff and small army of concerned, student volunteers. Our creative work in each area--student

a steering committee was established to include Hunter College Professors Jan Poppendieck, Mimi Abramovitz, Ruth Sidel and Joan Tronto, with Director Melinda Lackey.

WRI is currently moving toward the formation of a WRI Advisory Board that will be inclusive of community advocates, activists, service providers, Hunter faculty, staff, students and WRI student leaders. The first meeting is scheduled for September 30, 1997. Since these participants may not be connected to funds, a separate development committee is being formed to focus on fundraising.

WRI has not yet been around long enough to assess its long-term movement-building capacity, i.e., it is not yet possible to determine the degree to which our student leaders will stay active after mechanisms for obtaining college credit for participation are exhausted. But the outlook is hopeful. Several pilot year students have found ways to continue as interns for additional semesters. Alumni student leaders are also staying active through WRI's Speakers Bureau that provides continued training and compensation for their ongoing demonstration of leadership. In addition, a Student Advisory Committee to be formed in the coming year will offer training and practical experience in board membership to our alumni students. These students will be a major asset to planning and evaluation of WRI programs. A representative of this body will serve on the WRI Advisory Board, as noted above.

Special Events Development. Child Welfare Fund will this year increase its support to WRI, providing a \$120,000 endowment grant, earmarked for scholarships to support WRI leadership trainees. WRI will be required to raise a \$60,000 match within two years, creating a \$180,000 scholarship endowment for impoverished Hunter College students selected for WRI leadership training. WRI's development committee will solicit individual donations. Meanwhile, WRI staff are planning a series of special events to support WRI's endowment and program funding needs.

Campus Expansion. WRI will continue taking small steps this year to increase its power and effectiveness through establishing WRI-type formations on several CUNY campuses and fostering collaboration among them.

VIII. FUNDING SOURCES

WRI has been difficult to fund precisely because of our location within the City University system. The program is often considered too grassroots by institutional funders, and perhaps not grassroots enough by funders of community organizing projects. Being based at Hunter College, it is often assumed that WRI can access funds from the University, when in truth, aside from small office space, we presently get no financial support whatsoever from the University itself. We must rely on private solicitations to cover everything but rent.

Fortunately, during the Spring, 1996 semester, WRI student leaders organized a campaign to pass a referendum for funding through student activity fees at Hunter College. In one week's time, WRI staff and student leaders managed to solicit more than 2,300 signatures from Hunter students (one in six