

A Weakened Social Safety Net that must be Mended

By Bich Ha Pham

In the midst of the Great Depression, an Article was added to New York State's Constitution providing that the state will care for all in need. Our state's forebearers thus recognized the need for a strong social safety net. Today, as we face what is soon to be the longest recession since the Depression, a new report released by the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA) reveals that for many New Yorkers, the safety net system is anything but.

The 765,900 New Yorkers statewide who have lost their jobs in today's recession and the 2.6 million who live in poverty must be able to access the public assistance program for food, shelter and other necessities. Unfortunately, the restructured welfare system is difficult for many to access. The city and state must move quickly to improve access to this vital program and remove the barriers that impede its utilization.

Despite an increase of 213,000 applications comparing 1999 to 2007, the number of people receiving public assistance during the same period actually *decreased* by 59 percent. A contributing factor was an increase in application denial rates in New York State, which went from 26 percent in 1999 to 42 percent in 2007 — despite a 35 percent increase in applications. Why are so many qualified applicants being denied? The most common reasons were compliance issues: New York City's denials based on non-compliance went from 18 percent in 1999 to 50 percent in 2007 – in other words, paperwork, procedures and requirements.

The nation has officially been in a recession since December 2007, and, predictably, welfare rolls have climbed in at least a dozen states. In New York City, however, the public assistance caseload has barely moved, going from 182,537 to 182,823 cases between December 2007 and December 2008. Obviously, many needy New Yorkers are falling through the safety net.

Hispanics in New York City are particularly hard hit. Of the 2.2 million Hispanics living in the city, 27 percent were living below the federal poverty threshold in 2007. In the Bronx, it is even worse, with over 33 percent of Hispanics living below poverty. Moreover, in this recession Hispanic immigrants have suffered more job losses and earned less than average workers.

At a period in history when the need is the greatest that it has been since the Great Depression, the city and state must improve access to assistance and work to ensure that people who need help get that help in a timely manner and with fair treatment. This includes providing access to vocational training and education for the unemployed and moving quickly to create jobs for the jobless.

Bich Ha Pham is Director of Policy, Advocacy and Research at the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA) and co-author of FPWA's report released today, "The State of New York's Social Safety Net for Today's Hard Times" available at www.fpwa.org.