

# Behind welfare mothers stands a fighting optimist

By Lynn Orr  
staff writer

The day after Thanksgiving in 1965, Selma Goode sat down with a welfare mother to talk about her problems. The meeting stretched to four hours, and the Redford Township mother of four was appalled at the problems confronting the woman trying to raise her children on welfare.

Concluding that such mothers needed an organization, she proceeded to organize Westside Mothers. Sixteen years later, Mrs. Goode, never a welfare mother herself, remains committed to the welfare-advocate organization, based in Madonna Church in Detroit.

But membership has expanded to include a variety of members, including the unemployed, disabled and blind who are dependent on some form of social welfare.

Last week, Westside Mothers won a significant battle for their membership and welfare recipients across the state when Gov. William Milliken asked to meet with those who had marched 100 miles to Lansing to protest welfare cuts.

About \$50 million was "found," enough to save about \$20 a month for welfare families, said Mrs. Goode, one of the 10 women who marched the entire trip.

Her involvement with numerous organizations in the years since Westside Mothers was founded and the present anti-welfare mood of the nation has not dimmed her original enthusiasm.

"I'M A VISCERAL optimist," said Mrs. Goode. "I personally get a great deal of satisfaction of helping a family save their home. As long as I can help on a personal level, it's enough to keep me going."

Her satisfaction ranges from finding emergency food with the help of churches to a few success stories in the membership of Westside Mothers, such as the wife of a drug addict who fought



Selma Goode  
A visceral optimist

her way through law school and is now a practicing attorney.

Enthusiasm, however, will not improve the current welfare situation, which Mrs. Goode believes is deteriorating. She quickly points to how Congress slashed funding for legal services for the poor by one-third.

"The only way poor people can ever affect the system is with the assistance of the legal system in our country," she said. "This (the cut) is going to hurt any kind of progress in welfare reform."

Without legal assistance, she claims Westside Mothers would never have achieved one of its most significant victories, a change in the way federal free lunches were distributed to school children in the state.

In the late 1960s, Westside Mothers sued Detroit schools in federal court, challenging the practice of allowing school principals to determine eligibility in the free lunch program. The court agreed with the group, and the program was changed throughout the state to determine eligibility on an unbiased basis.

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— Selma Goode

Today 90 percent of the group's efforts are geared to solving personal problems of welfare recipients with the state Department of Social Services (DSS) and utility companies.

"When you see a problem repeated and repeated, you realize a systematic change is necessary," she said, pointing to the group's unique fuel bill program. Westside Mothers campaigned with Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. for the program, which required federal approval.

Under the program, welfare recipients

pay a flat \$59 monthly fee. The DSS picks up any amount over that figure at the end of the year, while welfare recipients receive any surplus, an energy-incentive feature, Mrs. Goode said.

THE ORGANIZATION is not a charity, Mrs. Goode stresses. Members pay \$2 a month in dues to cover the costs of three phones, office costs and the expenses of volunteers. Area churches contribute to the group, but it receives no state or federal funding.

The name of the organization is misleading. The group has many Wayne County members and a few from Oakland and Macomb counties.

Equally misleading are the stereotypes about welfare recipients, according to Mrs. Goode. Admitting that she works with among the most responsible segment of welfare recipients, she does come in contact with about 2,000 welfare recipients every year.

"I don't believe there's anyone who likes being on welfare. The work ethic is much more imbedded in our society than most people realize," she said.

"I'm surprised that so few people cheat or become alcoholics or drug addicts. What I see much more is the system cheating the person."

Persons eligible for \$70 a month in food stamps may be getting only \$50. She said the turnover rate for DSS employees is 40 percent annually, leading to inexperienced workers who are not

very knowledgeable of the complicated formulas for welfare. And the caseload is so heavy that "just a little bit of laziness means you don't get service."

Glen Townsend, director of the office of personnel services for DSS, disagrees with that figure. Although the department does not monitor turnover regularly, he said the department's rate was high years ago but was at 9.1 percent in 1978, on a par with other agencies.

But Mrs. Goode believes the attitude of the entire department is police-oriented, rather than service-oriented.

"The system is so degrading. Many people who are receiving welfare would accept almost any kind of job. If it's a family, the job has to be enough to keep up with the house payments, but what happens so often when the male wage earner loses his job is that the family falls apart."

THE CUTBACKS at both the state and federal level will drastically affect the system, she predicts.

"Most people are down to where they can eat or buy clothes, but they can't do both. They are getting less money per family than they were in 1979."

The average welfare family in Michigan, one adult and two children "despite the myth" Mrs. Goode said, receives about a monthly stipend of \$219 for personal needs, a maximum of \$130 for rent, \$59 for gas and \$24 for electric service.

DSS officials confirm Mrs. Goode's figures, including the average family of one adult and two children under Aid to Dependent Children (ADC).

The upcoming 7 1/2 percent cut slashes that to less than \$400 per month plus food stamps, which also are expected to be cut.

"The decade of the '70s saw so much progress in welfare reform. I find it hard to believe that the U.S. can go back to the dark ages," she said, adding that the leadership "panders to our worst instincts."

"The bulk of people don't have strong opinions. They trust the leader's opinions. If the leadership is very harsh, they end up accepting a harsh judgment. When I read about what the Reagan administration is doing, it doesn't matter that Michigan is so much more a humane state. There's only so much you can do."

AN ACTIVIST in many arenas, Mrs. Goode is employed part-time by the Jewish Labor Committee, where she acts as liaison between the trade union movement and the Jewish community, usually to coordinate political endorsements on specific legislation or efforts.

She is the chairperson of the Michigan District of Workmen's Circle, a Jewish fraternal organization, and serves on the executive boards of the Coordinating Council on Human Relations and the Michigan Housing Coalition.

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