

# The Welfare-to-Work Program

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FILE

**T**hree days a week, she sweeps, cleans and scrubs the tiles in Manhattan and Bronx subway stations. Her name is Sharon Deas and she is in the welfare-to-work program. The program provides subsidized wage-paying jobs with training for low-income families in New York City, who are having the most difficult time finding employment

Deas is a 35-year-old single mother of five. She leaves her apartment at the Pelham Fritz Apartments, a Tier II transitional housing facility and rushes off to work at 8:30 a.m. "I must be on time," she says. "The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) does not tolerate lateness."

The New York Times Magazine reported that when Mayor Giuliani took office in 1993, the city had more than one million people on public assistance - one in every seven New Yorkers. A December 28, 1999,

press release from the Human Resources Administration (HRA) office said that the number of public assistance cases has decreased by 49 percent from its peak in March 1995. More than 400,000 recipients have been dropped, one in 20 of the city's residents, during Giuliani's office. The reduction saves taxpayers more than \$1.3 billion per year.

Deas, along with twenty other women, who are in the welfare to work program, work together in the subway station. She has to clean graffiti off signs, scrub the platform tiles to disinfect the area. "The supervisors are fair with their evaluation," Deas said she was very happy when her supervisor evaluated her and said she had learned to do everything very well.

Deas was very optimistic even though she has faced a number of adversities. She has been in a drug rehabilitation program, she lives in a Tier II transitional shelter, and her children were in Foster Care for three years. Even though they were living with her mother, she was unable to see her children on a regular basis.

Deas says that although she is living in the Pelham Fritz Tier II housing shelter in Harlem, she can only stay for six months; currently she is very busy going to school, working and looking for an apartment. Luckily she has some help, there is an apartment finder at the Pelham Fritz Apartments. This apartment finder is someone hired to help the residents of the shelter find permanent housing.

Asked if she is having any problems with

any of children now that they are back with her, Deas said "They were spoiled while they were at my mother's house and now they complain about me not being around as much as she was but they are happy that we are all together."

Debbie Greene, has worked as Case Manager at the 125th Street HRA for eight years. "I've been spat at, yelled at and called all kinds of names; it's not any easy job, it requires patience and understanding." When asked if the clients have changed for the better since work fare was introduced, she said that most of the clients believe that cleaning streets, parks, subways, and empty lots is demeaning and as a result, take out their anger on the workers at HRA.

Deas, an exception, thinks of her job as an opportunity to get a permanent job with benefits at the MTA. In order to keep those benefits Deas must get her GED, so she has been taking math classes twice a week to improve her chances.

Nina Bernstein of The New York Times, reported that soon all homeless families in the New York City shelter system will be warned that if they fail to work or meet other shelter and welfare requirements, the city may seek foster care for their children.

Workfare gives Deas an opportunity to become a productive member of society. It is also an opportunity to be seen as a positive role model in the eyes of her children. Deas is very optimistic about her future. She believes that with hard work and perseverance she will be fine.

At the same, on March 29, 2000 The New York City Council enacted the Transitional jobs Program and overrode a mayoral veto. "By overriding Giuliani's veto," said New York City Council member Stephen DiBrienza, "The City Council is sending the message that our low-income families deserve the best chance to develop their skills and move onto succeed in good paying private sector jobs." That's what the transitional jobs program is all about. It's the next wave of welfare reform, a chance for those most in need to really make it in the job market.

The New York City Program is the result of a broad-based community campaign. According to Lee Saunders, The Administrator for District Council 37, (AFSCME), District Council 37, the city's largest public employee union, has witnessed first hand the failings of the current workfare program. We joined up with a broad alliance of community-based organizations and the City Council to help develop the transitional jobs program-a program that puts people to work in real jobs. This is a positive alternative to the present dead-end workfare program. DC 37 will do everything in its power to make sure this program succeeds. "We believe that the campaign for a transitional jobs program in New York City will serve as a model for other cities and states on how the labor movement and the community can join together in a grassroots effort too make a difference in the lives of low-income families."