

As a part-time advocate, I have accompanied people to their welfare and food stamp interviews. I have seen them treated like potential criminals, heard workers imply their stories are suspect, and listened to the less-than-respectful tone of voice used to question them.

I have accompanied homeless men and women to the emergency room of the hospital when they were so ill there was no other option. The way they were spoken to was shameful and they were not treated, just given a prescription that they could not afford to fill. (One woman had blood and pus draining from her ears.)

In the case of Child Protective Services (CPS), we will have to add to our clients' burdens that agency and their use of the flimsiest of evidence against poor and homeless parents in court, the faulty diagnoses of marginal providers, and just plain bad social work. The damage done by CPS is permanent to entire families.

In interviewing providers and clients in Santa Cruz, they expressed insightful ideas as to how to promote the dignity of those who willingly or unwillingly come to the attention of the system. The people I have chosen to interview work, for the most part, for government agencies and asked not to be identified by name. I did not include anyone in law enforcement, no judges nor any public defenders as examples of those committed to protecting the dignity of people they come in contact with. I have not met anyone in

these groups that I admire. But let's get to the good stuff:

SOCIAL WORKER: "One of my main thoughts I have when dealing with clients is that no one has all the answers to life. Who am I to come along and tell someone with completely different life experiences how to live their lives? I try to give them the benefit of my experience when I see them in a downward spiral and forewarn them of the consequences. I never tell them what to do, even though I may feel they are handling things badly. I really want for things to turn out well for all my clients. However, the minute I feel ownership of the end result, it means I am in over my head and I know I must stand back and even pull away to let them guide their own way."

SERVICE PROVIDER SUPERVISOR: "In government, there are fraud units to deal with clients who are running a scam. Those who are determining eligibility are to report anyone they suspect of fraud to that unit. They are not supposed to treat anyone like a criminal. I personally try to impress upon those providing direct services to clients that our job is not to add to their humiliation, but to support them until they can get on their feet. Workers who are offensive are often very difficult to get rid of because they have been with the agency for so long. A bad attitude is often the result of the cynicism that accompanies burnout. I follow up on all client complaints."

HOMELESS MAN: "I just got a ticket

from a cop for selling *Street Spirit* newspapers. Even though it is not against any law to sell it, it is my second ticket for this. The cops won't leave you any part of your dignity. When I sell *Street Spirit*, I am trying to support myself. I know I am dirty and ugly to some people. Do you think I don't know that? But I am still a person, a person that is dying a little every day from the withering looks and hateful things said to him by passers-by and the constant harassment by law enforcement. I have no money for the doctor or the dentist. If I get sick, I will just have to get well or die. I have lost 32 pounds in the last year and a half. Look at me, I am just bones. The way that I preserve my dignity is to share what I have with others in my position. In my small way, I try to make the world a better place and treat others as I would like to be treated."

COUNSELOR: "The system itself is humiliating and intrusive. I try to communicate with the 'best selves' of all my clients. They are usually forced to see me to get their children back and are so traumatized they can't even remember who they were before the separation of their family. I begin by working to calm their fears, and to treat them with the utmost dignity. Some have been accused of things they can't even imagine doing to their children. The indignity and embarrassment that anyone thinks they are that low overwhelms them. Those that have done abusive things are also

struggling with personal dignity issues that often go far back into their pasts. Throw in some incredible grief, aggressive social workers, and restoring parents to some semblance of their former selves so that they can benefit from my services is a huge challenge. It takes a lot of patience, support, and, not to sound schmaltzy, love and commitment on my part. Depriving someone of their dignity and personal power can represent personal damage to some. Providers who use their power over people to humiliate and get them into line are playing a dangerous game."

ACTIVIST/ADVOCACY WORKER: "When I work on behalf of an individual or family, the final approval of our course of action is in their hands. I am making a point of this because empowering and supporting people in their solutions to their problems or their attainment of victory is my only true role as I see it. My clients are often desperate and it makes them prey to being used by those who claim to want to help them. If they change their minds as to how they want their case handled, I honor their wishes immediately. It is their life! Their problems do not represent a way to change the world for others in their position until after they have won their victory or are secure in having their lives and problems made public. Although my personal belief is that the more you publicize the wrongs done to you the more power you have, I do not force this way of thinking on the people I help."

SOCIAL WORKER: "I never know who I am going to meet. I do not have any preconceived notions of a client when I am given a new referral. Each person, each case is fresh and new to me. I take people for who they are. They are different from me and that is okay. I have been doing social work for over 20 years and this has kept my outlook from becoming jaded and cynical. It makes coming to work each day joyful. When I meet them, I minimize their faults and maximize their positive traits in my reports. That is just who I am. All people have incredible value. To me, true love is treating everyone the same, not judging and categorizing people when they are down and out and unable to put their best foot forward. I love their life stories — oh, face it — I really like people! I also minimize my importance in a client's life. I think the best ration is 75 percent client effort and