



# Brave New Welfare

**Georgia officials lied to Gabby's mom**

**to keep her from getting a \$100 monthly check.**

**From red tape to dirty tricks and outright abuse,  
here's what awaits if your luck runs out. BY STEPHANIE MENCIMER**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT EICH**

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**Two-year-old Gabby and her mother are among thousands eligible for welfare who have been denied benefits as states push to trim the rolls.**

until a friend helped her secure a place to stay.

Desperate, with her due date fast approaching, Clark decided to apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), better known as welfare.

But when she went to the local Division of Family and Children Services office, a caseworker told her—wrongly—that she couldn't apply until after the baby was born. "They basically said, 'Go get a job,'" says Clark. "I was eight months pregnant."

Gabby arrived by C-section a month later, and Clark brought the chubby newborn home to a sweltering trailer with a busted fridge, no air conditioning, and no running water. (Her ex had reneged on promises to get the water turned on.) Clark got by with help from her church and her landlord, who let her stay for free until she was able to move. Later, she found a job in a day care. But the center docked her paycheck for Gabby's care, an expense the state would have picked up had she been able to get on TANF. Sometimes she'd go home with just \$20 at the end of the week.

Clark patched things together with food stamps and \$256 a month in child support. But after nine months, Gabby's father stopped paying just long enough for Clark to get evicted. She went back to the welfare office, where caseworkers turned her away, saying—falsely again—that because she'd been getting child support she was ineligible for TANF.

What Clark didn't know was that Georgia, like many other states, was in the midst of an aggressive push to get thousands of eligible mothers like her off TANF, often by duplicitous means, to use the savings elsewhere in the state budget. Fewer than 2,500 Georgia adults now receive benefits, down from 28,000 in 2004—a 90 percent decline. Louisiana, Texas, and Illinois have each dropped 80 percent of adult recipients since January 2001. Nationally, the number of TANF recipients fell more than 40 percent between then and June 2008, the most recent month for which data are available. In Georgia last year, only 18 percent of children living below 50 percent of the poverty line—that is, on less than \$733 a month for a family of three—were receiving TANF.

Plunging welfare rolls were big news in the wake of Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare re-

form, which limited benefits and required recipients to engage in "work related" activities. Those declines coincided with record numbers of poor single mothers heading into the workplace and a significant drop in child poverty—proof, supporters said, that the new policy was a success. But the reform took effect at a time when unemployment was at a historic low—there were actually jobs for welfare moms to go to. In recent years, by contrast, TANF caseloads have been falling even as unemployment has soared and other poverty programs have experienced explosive growth. (Nearly 11 million more people received food stamps last year than did in 2000.) With the economy settling into a prolonged slump, this trend could be devastating.

Welfare is the only cash safety-net program for single moms and their kids, notes Rebecca Blank, an economist at the Brookings Institution and one of the nation's leading experts on poverty. "One has to worry, with a recession, about the number of women who, if they get unemployed, are not going to have anywhere to turn."

No longer the polarizing, racially tinged political issue it was when Ronald Reagan attacked "welfare queens," the welfare system today is dying a quiet death, neatly chronicled in the pages of academic and policy journals, largely unnoticed by the rest of us. Yet its demise carries significant implications. Among the most serious: the rise of what academics call the "disconnected," people who live well below the poverty line and are neither working nor receiving cash benefits like Social Security disability or TANF. Estimates put this group at roughly 2 million women caring for 4 million children, many dealing with a host of challenges from mental illness to domestic violence. "We don't really know how they survive," says Blank.

Women turned away from TANF lose more than a check. TANF is a gateway to education, drug rehab or mental health care, child care, even transportation and disability benefits—tools for upward mobility. Without those options, some women are driven to more desperate measures. In one of the towns in Georgia where I traveled to research this story, arrests of women for prostitution and petty crime went up as more and more families were pushed off welfare. And women are increasingly vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation—

**IN 2006,** Letorrea Clark was 22 years old, unemployed, and living with her boyfriend in Homerville, a tiny town near the Okefenokee Swamp in southern Georgia, when she discovered she was pregnant. The timing wasn't ideal. Her boyfriend's job at the local can-manufacturing plant supported them both, but his largesse came at a price. The man was controlling, unfaithful, and jealous, a problem only enhanced by the wide array of drugs that filled his freezer. Clark had hit the stash, too, but the pregnancy pushed her to get clean and get out. She slept on a park bench

sometimes, as I discovered, from the very officials or caseworkers who are supposed to help them. In the worst cases, they are losing custody of their children, precisely what TANF was designed to prevent. "I worry a lot about the kids in these families," Blank says. "We don't know where the kids are going."

**ONE GOOD THING** did come from Letorea Clark's final attempt to get on TANF. Federal law requires caseworkers to ask applicants about domestic violence, and when Clark mentioned that Gabby's father was stalking her, a concerned caseworker sent her to a shelter in another city. When the ex found Clark there, she was transferred to a shelter an hour away in Albany, a midsize town nestled among some of the nation's most impoverished rural counties.

The shelter staff did for Clark what the TANF office would not: extended her a lifeline. With their help, Clark and Gabby moved to a dingy one-room apartment in a low-slung brick complex filled with ex-cons and drug addicts, clients of the non-profit group that runs the building. This is where I found them during several visits over the summer. Mother and daughter slept on a donated mattress; crates set in-

One day when she was five, she told me, her mother whipped her back with an extension cord and then made her stand in a corner all night long. In kindergarten the next day, a concerned teacher lifted up her shirt and fell to her knees at the sight of so much blood. Social workers investigated, but didn't take Clark away from her mother for another six years of crushing abuse.

In school, she languished in special education classes; her behavior turned violent. At 11, the state finally put her into foster care, and later, when foster families wouldn't have her, a mental hospital. Eventually she was returned to her mother, who coveted her monthly disability check. "When I turned 18, my mom wanted me to stay home to live off my tit," she says. Instead, "I saw an ad on TV for Job Corps and thought that was my ticket out." After she got her GED and became certified as a nursing assistant, Job Corps helped her find work in a nursing home, but the death of a woman she cared for left her rattled. She quit and was soon homeless. Somewhere along the way, she lost the disability benefits she'd received since she was a child. After she was raped in a crack house, Clark sought refuge in the only safe place she

only slightly. Despite the addition of an aquarium and civic center, the downtown looks much as it must have when Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed here after a civil rights protest in 1961. The main drags offer gas stations, dollar stores, and an out-of-fit advertising \$99 headstones. More than one-fifth of Albany families live below the poverty line—nearly twice the national average. About one in three adults is illiterate. Nearly 16 percent are unemployed. Eighty percent of children born here in 2007 had single mothers, many of them teenagers.

Despite those dismal demographics, in July 2006, only 143 adults in the 14 surrounding counties—some of whose demographics make Albany look downright prosperous—were receiving TANF benefits. The number had fallen 96 percent from 2002, according to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, though not because poverty was on the retreat: During the same period, unemployment in the area shot up 15 percent and food stamp use increased 24 percent.

After interviewing dozens of clients of Liberty House, the Albany domestic violence shelter where Clark sought refuge, I discovered that getting TANF in Albany

## Caseworkers have been telling women they must be surgically sterilized to get welfare, or that the state could take their children if they apply.

side an oversize, listing four-poster frame served as the box spring. Free rent made the roaches tolerable, but there were other liabilities. Upon Clark's arrival, the non-profit group's caseworker asked her for sex. "He said, 'You ain't got nothing; you might as well,'" she said.

As we spoke in July, Clark sat in an overstuffed chair holding Gabby, a vivacious toddler whose head sprouted with braids. Clark was worried. She needed to get a job so she could keep food in the house; she was haunted by the possibility of losing Gabby if she didn't. But there were serious obstacles. She's been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and ADHD; "I don't like to be around a lot of people," she said. She can't drive and fears the bus because "I suffer from paranoia. I always think I'm going to fall off those seats."

Born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, one of six children, Clark barely knows her father. She suspects both her mother and grandmother suffer from mental illness.

could think of: jail. "I hadn't ate in like two weeks," she says, so she went to Wal-Mart and started taking things off the shelves—a sandwich, soda, candy. "I knew I was going to get caught, but I just kept eating. I kept thinking that if I went to jail I could sleep."

After her sojourn in lockup, she met Gabby's father and moved in with him. While her pregnancy was unplanned, Clark believes that Gabby saved her life. "If I didn't have her, I'd have probably lost my mind," says Clark. "She's my pride and joy."

**IN HIS 1903 BOOK** *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois described Albany as the capital of Georgia's "Black Belt." At the time, the area was home to 2,000 white people and 10,000 blacks; the cotton trade had collapsed, and Albany was a landscape of decaying one-room slave cabins occupied by tenant farmers eking out a meager existence from the depleted soil.

Things have improved since then, but

is virtually impossible. While most of the women were eligible for benefits under state rules, many had been turned away for some reason or another. A caseworker incorrectly told one woman that she didn't qualify because her three kids—all under 15—were too old. Another, a 30-year-old with six kids between the ages of 2 and 12, had been in the shelter for a month after the district attorney from her hometown drove her there from the hospital. ("The guy that I was dating tried to kill me," she explained matter-of-factly.) She'd applied for TANF to get subsidized child care and go back to work. But a four-hour visit to the welfare office produced nothing but a promise that she'd receive a letter with an appointment date. A month later, she still hadn't gotten the letter. She says the county offered her three weeks of child care with the warning—false—that if she didn't find a job during that time, she wouldn't be eligible for TANF. "But if I find a job, I don't need TANF," she said with a laugh.



The new face of hunger, experts say, is working people like Wal-Mart associate Aubretia Edick.

## Will Work for Food America on \$195 a week

"I'LL TAKE A SANDWICH TO WORK, and that's about it," says Aubretia Edick, who is 58 and works in the pharmacy department of a Wal-Mart in Hudson, New York. "I drink a lot of tea. Once in a blue moon I'll go into Save-a-Lot and I'll get some meat. Eggs is kinda like a luxury kind of thing."

While researching my forthcoming book on hunger, I met plenty of people like Edick—full-time workers just barely making it. When we spoke this past June, her manager had been trimming her hours; she was earning about \$297 a week (\$195 after taxes and deductions). Rent and utilities run her about \$112 per week, gas and car insurance another \$40. Then there are doctor visits, covered only after a \$1,000 deductible, and medicines for a thyroid problem, anxiety, and osteoporosis.

Some weeks, Edick spends as little as \$10 on groceries, patronizing the grimy discount stores whose prices run even lower than Wal-Mart's; she can tick off a list of notable sales going back for months. "I had some oranges," she recalls with a self-deprecating smile. "A couple of months ago they had grapes on sale." As for meat, "If it's less than three dollars for a package of six steaks, that looks like a good deal to me." Her staples include PB&J, canned ham salad, soup: "I'll get chicken noodle or Campbell's Chunky. There's meat in there. You can pour it over noodles and put butter on it. It's like a delicacy."

Edick hasn't yet resorted to handouts, but food charities that once catered primarily to the destitute report a flood of working-poor clients. An estimated 28 million Americans were on food stamps as of last April, up from 17 million in 2000. "There's times I'm hungry, and I'll look in the refrigerator for something—I'll find a snack pudding. Some leftover rice," Edick says softly. "I'm not starving or anything like that." —*Sasha Abramsky*

In 2006, the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence conducted a survey to figure out why so many women were suddenly failing to get TANF benefits. They discovered that caseworkers were actively talking women out of applying, often using inaccurate information. (Lying to applicants to deny them benefits is a violation of federal law, but the 1996 welfare reform legislation largely stripped the Department of Health and Human Services of its power to punish states for doing it. Meanwhile, county officials have tried to head off lawyers who might take up the issue by press-

ing applicants to sign waivers saying they voluntarily turned down benefits.) Allison Smith, the economic justice coordinator at the coalition, says the group has gotten reports of caseworkers telling TANF applicants they have to be surgically sterilized before they can apply. Disabled women have been told they can't apply because they can't meet the work requirement. Others have been warned that the state could take their children if they get benefits. Makita Perry, a 23-year-old mother of four who did manage to get on TANF for a year, told me caseworkers "ask you all sorts

of personal questions, like when the last time you had sex was and with who." Elsewhere, women are being told to get a letter proving they've visited

a family-planning doctor.

Simply landing an appointment with a caseworker is an ordeal that can take 45 days, according to some of the women I interviewed—and applicants must clear numerous other hurdles, including conducting a job search, before being approved. Few complete the process. One study found that in April 2006, caseworkers in Georgia green-lighted only 20 percent of TANF applications, down from 40 percent in 2004. The lucky few who are accepted must often work full time in "volunteer" jobs in exchange for their benefits, which max out at \$280 a month for a family of three.

Even as it blocks potential applicants, Georgia is also pushing current TANF recipients off the rolls at a rapid clip. Sandy Bamford runs a federally funded family literacy program in Albany where single mothers can get their GEDs. TANF allows recipients to attend school, but Bamford says officials routinely tell her clients otherwise: In a single month, one caseworker informed three of her students (incorrectly) that because they had turned 20, they could no longer receive benefits while completing their degrees. One was about to become the first in her family to graduate from high school. She quit and took a job as a dishwasher. Students as young as 16 have been told they must go to work full time or lose benefits. The employee who threatened to drop the students, says Bamford, became "caseworker of the month" for getting so many people off TANF.

**AS WELFARE** officials go, B.J. Walker is something of a rock star. Appointed commissioner of Georgia's Department of Human Resources in 2004, Walker quickly became famous for her push to get virtually every adult off the state's public assistance rolls. By 2006, the state claimed Walker's agency had produced an astounding increase in the work participation rate of its TANF recipients, which in four years had jumped from 8 percent to nearly 70 percent.

Those numbers caught the attention of the Bush administration, which was in the midst of writing strict new regulations

to require states to put 50 percent of their TANF caseloads into work activities, a target that only a handful of states had ever met. To unveil the new regs, administration officials brought Walker to Washington for a photo op and declared Georgia a model for other states.

To researchers, though, Georgia's rosy statistics looked too good to be true—especially given that Walker's own agency had found that the collapse of Georgia's textile industry and other manufacturing sectors left former TANF clients with far fewer job opportunities. In fact, even as the number of TANF recipients fell nearly 90 percent between January 2002 and November 2007, unemployment jumped 30 percent.

So how did Georgia put all those welfare moms to work? It didn't. As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' Liz Schott explained in a 2007 paper, "the increased work participation rate is primarily a factor of fewer families receiving assistance."

As for that "work participation," Stacy Haire, an outreach worker at Liberty House, says it's unlikely to help recipients find actual jobs. "They will put you at a police department. You'll be cleaning up behind toilets, picking up trash," she says. The TANF office once sent a client of hers to see a local government official about a job. The official told her he'd be glad to help out if she'd have sex with him. The woman filed a police report, but the man was never prosecuted. "That's what they can do in these towns," Haire says. "I see some sickening stuff."

Georgia isn't the only state that's found that dropping people from TANF is the easiest and cheapest way to meet federal work requirements. Texas reduced its caseloads by outsourcing applications to a call center, which wrongfully denied some families and lost others' applications altogether. In Florida, one innovative region started requiring TANF applicants to attend 40 hours of classes before they could even apply. Clients trying to restore lost benefits had once been able to straighten out paperwork with the help of caseworkers. In 2005, officials assigned all such work to a single employee, available two hours a week. The area's TANF caseload fell by half in a year.

Walker admits that Georgia has actively

discouraged people from getting on TANF, primarily by emphasizing how meager the benefits are. "Two hundred eighty dollars a month does not make for a very good life," she told me. "This is really in the best interest of the children."

Walker acknowledges that some people struggle. "A lot of the people we see on TANF have made a mistake in choosing to have children," she offers. "We meet them at the front door and try to make sure that from day one they're engaged in some sort of productive activity." As for people like Clark who can't seem to get and keep a full-time job, Walker responds simply, "Can't? Won't."

**WHATEVER THEIR** philosophical convictions, officials have another incentive for paring the TANF rolls: money. That's because the Clinton-era welfare reform turned what had been an entitlement program like Social Security—the more people needed help, the more money was spent—into a block grant, a fixed amount of money given to the states, regardless of need. The money, \$16.5 billion a year, came mostly unencumbered by regulation. States could divert the funds to any program vaguely related to serving the needy.

Not only did the block grant doom the program to a slow death by inflation (by 2010, it will have lost 27 percent of its value), it also encouraged states to deny benefits to families, since they'd get the same

amount of federal funds regardless of how many people received assistance. Georgia's share of the federal grant is nearly \$370 million a year. "Even if caseloads go to zero, they get the same amount of money," notes Robert Welsh of the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.

Some states have used surplus TANF money to expand child care, job training, and transportation to help recipients find jobs. But Georgia didn't use the bulk of its money for those programs—instead, it cut spending on child care and put the money into child protective services in the wake of a lawsuit against the state over the mistreatment of children in foster care. "The feds are just fine with that," Walker insists. "We use our block grant to support other vulnerable families. That was the intent of the block grant."

Georgia is not alone in shifting its TANF money to other areas. The Government Accountability Office found in 2006 that many states were moving federal welfare funds away from cash assistance to the poor, or even "work supports" like child care, to plug holes in state budgets. Yet over the past 12 years, federal regulators have cited states only 11 times for misusing their TANF block grant, and only two suffered any financial penalty, according to Ken Wolfe, a spokesman for the Administration for Children and Families, which oversees the program. "As far as the federal government's concerned, it's not a big problem," he says.

On the run from an abusive boyfriend, Letorrea Clark struggles to keep food in the house for her daughter.



**TERRELL COUNTY**, population 10,260, covers a rural corner of southwest Georgia not far from Jimmy Carter's boyhood peanut farm. Forty percent of the children here live below the poverty line; since the civil rights era the place has been known as "Terrible Terrell" because of the racial violence that erupted in the area. When I visited the Martin Luther King Jr. public housing project in the town of Dawson, a cluster of postwar-era brick buildings in the shadow of the Golden Peanut factory, three women sat in folding chairs drinking Miller Lites under a big oak tree, bird-dogging the gaggle of children darting through the shirts flapping on laundry lines. One of them was a sturdy 30-year-old

outer Mongolia for someone with no car and no money for gas. "I get on my knees and pray to that man above to make things change," she says.

In the meantime, she's getting by with help from her mom, and the man who slips in and out of her house when the kids aren't home. "I keep it on the down low from them," she explains. When she has bills due, her friend will give her \$200 or \$250, just about what she used to get in TANF benefits. "If he wants some and I need some money to keep the lights on, he hands out a pretty good penny," she says with a laugh.

Her experience isn't especially unusual. Toni Grebel, a relief worker at the Lord's Pantry, an Albany food bank, says she's

organizational skills. Medicaid doesn't pay for all her drugs, so when her child support money runs out, she doesn't always take the medication that keeps her stable. Finding no food stamp card at the post office, Clark fell apart. She was such a pathetic sight that a woman handed her \$40. A weepy Clark got back in the van, consoled only after Folmar rounded up some emergency food from the shelter to tide the family over. "I got gravy!" Clark exclaimed with delight as she examined her bounty.

Back home later that week, Clark was happily entertaining a fellow Jehovah's Witness, who had a daughter Gabby's age. Gabby danced around the tiny space in her princess nightgown while Clark made the

## Police data show a jump in arrests for prostitution in 2005—shortly after Georgia began dumping its welfare caseloads.

in a yellow T-shirt with three children, 13, 11, and 10, no husband, and no job.

The woman, who did not want her name used, had her first baby at 17, dropped out, and moved into the three-bedroom apartment where she's been ever since. For a decade, she had help from her children's father, who worked at the peanut factory. But three years ago they broke up, and he hasn't been heard from since. Not long ago, she got a letter from the state saying it had seized \$900 from his tax refund for child support, but rather than sending it to his kids, the state would keep it as "back pay" for TANF checks she received years ago. She long ago exhausted her TANF benefits, which Georgia limits to 48 months over the course of a lifetime. She and the kids get \$542 a month in food stamps; her electric bill alone runs \$265 a month when the air conditioning's on.

So, as some women have always done in desperate times, she gets help from men. "Shit like that happens," she says. "If it was me, I probably wouldn't do stuff like that, but I got three babies to care for." She has held down jobs in the past, at Dawson Manufacturing, which made auto parts, and the Tyson chicken plant. But Dawson closed in 2007. Tyson won't rehire her because she had too many write-ups on the job. The only other major employer in town is Golden Peanut, right next door, but applying requires a trip to a temp agency in Sylvester, 45 miles away with no bus connection, which might as well be

heard many similar stories from her clients, who, at one time, were virtually all receiving TANF. Stacy Haire, the domestic violence outreach worker, says, "A lot of my clients, they're resorting to favors from men to get money." Albany police data show a sharp jump in arrests for prostitution and other crimes committed by women in 2005—shortly after the state began dumping its TANF caseloads.

Other women are turning to various illicit schemes: trading food stamps for cash to buy diapers; selling their kids' Social Security numbers to people with jobs, who use them to collect the Earned Income Tax Credit. One woman told me she got \$800 each for her children's Social Security numbers, which she used to buy her kids summer clothes and new beds. "That money comes in handy. If you're not using it, why not help someone else?" she said.

**ONE AFTERNOON** last fall, Letorrea Clark's caseworker from Liberty House, Ellen Folmar, stopped in to give her a ride to the post office. For a while, Clark had landed a job as a nanny, but that ended when school started. A Legal Aid lawyer helped her try to regain her lost disability benefits, but the appeal had recently been denied. Now, she'd lost her food stamp card. For the past few weeks, Gabby had subsisted on little but eggs and rice, and Clark was frantic.

Clark's life is a string of these sorts of crises. Mental illness wreaks havoc with her

girls a brunch of eggs, bologna slices, tortilla chips, and apple juice cut with water to make it last longer. She put the paper plates on a plastic crate serving as a table. Clark was hoping her friend would get a job so that she could babysit her daughter. "Even in high school I worked with kids. That's my niche," she said. "That's the only thing that makes me happy. If it paid better, I'd be real happy."

As she talked, Clark stuck some donated chicken nuggets into the oven. She joked that her ADD was showing as she burned the first batch. As she started over, the two women swapped stories about ringing doorbells for the Lord. "I get a better response rate with Gabby," Clark said with a laugh. The Witnesses' generosity was on display in her apartment—a donated microwave, the TV, curtains, toys. Clark had piles of religious tracts in the apartment, some in Spanish, a language she was trying to learn from CDs, "so I can find me a Spanish husband," she joked.

The happy scene was but a temporary respite. Gabby's father had found Clark again. Two weeks later, her nonprofit landlord would tell her she had to move, citing budget woes. Shelter workers would search frantically to find her somewhere else to go. (They eventually found a place in yet another town.) Right now, though, Clark was focused on the chicken nuggets, and on Gabby, who climbed up, kissed her mother, and erupted into giggles. "I'm doing a good job with her," Clark said. ■