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The Tennessee Department of Human Services reports that in August of this year, 657,736 Tennessee families received SNAP benefits, up from 435,209 total families in 2011. Photo by Alvine

DEPENDENT?

Food Stamps, Welfare and the 'Culture of Dependency'

By JESSE CALL
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As the U.S. presidential election approaches, many of the issues that divide the nation are being elevated as fodder for the back-and-forth banter between the two major party candidates and their supporters. With the economy on center stage, the candidates have had to balance garnering votes with adequately addressing the problem of how best to help Americans struggling to retain or regain their jobs and housing.

GOP candidate Gov. Mitt Romney recently faced criticism for his statement that he doesn't plan to court lower class voters who do not pay income taxes because he presumes they are already dedicated to voting for President Barack Obama because of the President's support for tax cuts and government assistance programs. Throughout the campaign, Romney has repeatedly asserted that the best way to assist people experiencing poverty is to increase job growth by lowering the burden of taxes and regulation on corporations. If jobs are available, the

argument goes, there will be less need for people to seek out help from the government. Romney's statements also indicate that he believes many Americans are losing the initiative to go out and find work because they can rely on government programs instead—a signal for Romney that America is falling into a "culture of dependency."

Two of the programs that have received significant criticism from a variety of political perspectives over the years are America's food stamp program—known today as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—and the country's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, known as Families First in Tennessee. These programs are designed to help individuals and families struggling to make ends meet cover some of the costs of food and other living expenses so they do not have to choose between a meal and a roof. According to many, however, government assistance programs like these should only serve as rescue programs designed to help families out of emergencies, rather than as a long-term means of assistance.

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New prison policies lead to increased violence, group reports

By JESSE CALL
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The Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC), which oversees all of the state's private and public prisons, says it has designed new policies to help those incarcerated "increase positive commitments to their communities," but local advocacy groups contend that TDOC's new policies make it more likely for those incarcerated to become victims of violence. Consequently, the rehabilitation of those inmates may be impaired by the fear and frustration those incidents create.

The number of incidents of violence in Tennessee prisons has "substantially in-

"In January 2001, Governor Bill Haslam appointed a new TDOC commissioner, Derrick Schofield, who instituted a series of new policies related to prisoner behavior."

creased" in the past two years, to about 367 incidents per month, according to the Human Rights Defense Center (HRDC), which collaborated with other advocacy organizations to examine public records between January 2010 and June 2012. Comparatively, in 2010, there was an average of 294 incidents of violence per month. The data indicates that violence increased in three key areas: prisoner-on-staff violence, prisoner-on-prisoner

violence and institutional disturbances.

However, according to TDOC spokeswoman Dorinda Carter, this rise in violence is not as consequential as HRDC would like people to believe. In a statement, she writes that the rate of change in violent incidents in Tennessee prisons is not statistically significant. "While some critics may contend the steps have led to escalating violence in prisons, data points to the contrary," she said.

Nonetheless, there were more victims of violence during that time period, and for HRDC, the reason for the increase in incidents of violence seems clear.

In January 2001, Governor Bill Haslam appointed a new TDOC commissioner, Derrick Schofield, who instituted a series of new policies related to prisoner behavior. These changes included: requiring inmates to line up and stand outside no matter the weather conditions to wait for their turn to enter the dining facility; forcing prisoners to leave their hands out of their pockets during cold weather and not offering them gloves; daily cell

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ON THE INSIDE...

In this issue's Vendor Spotlight, Robert Lancaster shares his story of becoming homeless and his experiences selling *The Contributor*.

Homeless, formerly homeless and non-homeless writers explore faith, the sci-fi future and breaking stereotypes surrounding homelessness.

Join *The Contributor* at its costume benefit party on October 25 beginning at 6:30 p.m. See our backpage for more details! And buy tickets online: www.thecontributor.org/thepaperball

News Briefs...

Metro Homelessness Commission seeks new chair

NASHVILLE, Tenn – Nashville's Metropolitan Homelessness Commission (MHC) is seeking a new chair after Erik Cole stepped down in September due to anticipated time constraints from a new housing trust fund venture he hopes to help develop. Cole will remain on the Commission but will no longer serve as chair. "Erik Cole has been a great chairman who is dedicated to the cause of finding solutions to homelessness, just as his predecessor Howard Gentry was," said Bonna Johnson, press secretary for Mayor Karl Dean. The mayor will be responsible for appointing a new chair, which he hopes to have ready to announce at MHC's monthly meeting in October. "We are looking for someone who is dedicated to working in a collaborative effort with the community on the issue of homelessness," Johnson said, adding that they would be taking a recommendation from members of the Commission. Prior to stepping down as chair, Cole admitted the MHC was in a phase of transition as it worked to solve logistical issues after its major fundraising apparatus, The Key Alliance, lost most of its board and staff. He also says he was unsure how long MHC would continue to operate, as it was hoped the Commission could complete its ten-year comprehensive plan to end homelessness on schedule in 2015. Johnson says it will be up to Metro Council whether the work of the Commission will continue after that date.

Man arrested in murder of homeless woman

NASHVILLE, Tenn – An arrest has been made in the murder of Stephanie Alexander, a 39-year-old woman who had experienced homelessness in Nashville. Police say Napoleon Harvey admitted to killing Alexander during an argument. Her body was found in a North Nashville alley on September 5. Harvey was on parole after being sentenced in 1983 to 50 years for robbery.

America demands Homeless Bill of Rights

USA – In protest against new laws targeting the homeless, advocates and homeless organizations across America are calling for the creation of a nationwide Homeless Bill of Rights. Existing laws known as "quality of life" or "nuisance crimes" predominantly affect homeless people as they criminalize sleeping, standing, sitting and even food-sharing in public places. In June, Rhode Island took a stand against this criminalization by passing the first state-wide Homeless Bill of Rights in the USA. The Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)—a West Coast grassroots network of homeless people's organizations—is now launching simultaneous campaigns in California and Oregon. With the number of homeless Americans increasing, homelessness has become a "crime wave" in recent years. A recent study by WRAP found that out of 700 homeless people in 13 cities, 77 percent had been arrested, cited or harassed for sleeping, 75 percent for loitering and 73 percent

for sitting on a sidewalk. Such citations often harm people's chances of securing benefits, housing and employment.

—*Homeward Street Journal*

Social media gives voice to Berlin's homeless

GERMANY – A homeless man in Germany has been using social media to help members of his fellow homeless community. Helmut Richard Brox, who has been intermittently homeless for 26 years, set up his own website and blog in 2008 with the help of people he met at an internet café. Through his websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts, he identifies safe homeless spaces and support centers throughout the whole of Germany, writes about his life and offers advice to other homeless people. The maintenance of his website is paid for through donations and out of his own pocket and he currently has 119 followers on Twitter, 31 Facebook subscribers and receives 40 emails a day.

"So many people living on the poverty line are isolated and feel embarrassed—I want to give them a voice. With my website everyone should be able to find a way back into civic life," says Brox.

His efforts have now earned him a nomination for the 'Deutschen Engagement Preis' (German Prize for Civic Engagement) making him the first homeless man to receive such recognition.

—*Strassenfeger*

Thousands of Malawian teenage girls die while giving birth

AFRICA – Teenage pregnancies are on the rise in Malawi as dire poverty drives young girls into prostitution and abusive marriages. According to the United Nations Population Fund some 7,000 women are dying of maternal related causes every year, many of whom become pregnant very young. Rates of HIV and AIDS among girls in Malawi are also increasing. Other health issues prevalent among young mothers include obstructed labor, obstetric fistula and permanent damage to reproductive organs. The women's problems are exacerbated by poorly equipped health facilities and a lack of drugs and sex education.

"These problems are escalating due to lack of information among the girls on effects of premarital sex and early pregnancies hence the need for government to bring nurses closer to people in communities," says Dr. Isabera Msisi, former president of Malawi's Nurses and Midwives Organization. She adds that the government must urgently improve the living conditions of young women.

—INSP

The International Network of Street Papers (INSP) supports over 120 street papers in 40 countries on six continents. Over 200,000 homeless people have changed their lives through selling street papers. The briefs above was first published by INSP. Learn more at www.street-papers.org.



Letter to the Editor

People lack understanding of the importance of cell phones for those living on the streets

I read your front-page article about homeless people and the necessity of having a cell phone. Your article is absolutely correct. I know from experience. I was homeless myself. There is no more that I can add to what you wrote on that subject; you said it all. I would say this to those who have such a misunderstanding of homeless people and such hostility towards them. Follow the old saying: "Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes." I think it would be quite interesting to see their change in attitude if they were dropped off at random in a strange neighborhood with no money, nowhere to sleep (or sit without being harassed), no job and no food. No friends or family to call to bail you out, just the clothes on your back, your wits (if you still have them) and your survival skills. And it doesn't count if they know beforehand that it's just a few-days-long experiment. If they believed that their life from then on had taken a drastic change for the worse, and they had to do everything possible to try to live day-by-day and claw their way back out of the pit while enduring ignorance and hostility from those more fortunate than them—it would surely be enlightening!

C. SMITH

Formerly Homeless Nashvillian

Prison violence on rise

[Prison Policies, From Page 1]

inspections; and new restrictions on the kinds of property prisoners may have and the kinds of arts activities in which they can participate. During most of these activities, prisoners are prohibited from speaking.

Schofield says these new enhanced security measures—or transformations, as he calls them—will make it easier for inmates when they are released.

"Transforming program services builds offender accountability while providing an opportunity to change. The results can be lower rates of return to prison and increased positive contributions to their communities," Schofield said in a statement. "Strengthening security, developing a more sustainable mechanism for program delivery, and creating a consistent manner of handling offenders from admission to community supervision have been at the forefront of our agency's reorganization."

HRDC writes in its letter to Schofield that these "militaristic" policy changes may be leading to the increase in violence, as people incarcerated become frustrated with what they perceive to be punitive, and not preventative, measures.

"We believe that the policy changes you have implemented may have significant unintended consequences," the organization wrote. "[I]f the policy changes are intended to improve safety and security at TDOC facilities, they may be having the exact opposite effect."

HRDC also points to national research that shows these tactics do not help prevent recidivism. "Research by the National Institute of Justice, among other agencies, has found that boot camp type programs generally fail to reduce recidivism. This is in part because the strict discipline and militaristic policies imposed during

incarceration are absent after prisoners are released, when they return to an unstructured environment."

HRDC adds that it is not alone in its concerns. "At least four wardens have resigned or retired since you were appointed Commissioner, some due to the implementation of your new policies," the organization said.

HRDC contends that even if Schofield is right about his claims, his plans have yet to decrease violence in Tennessee's prisons.

"Questions that need to be answered include why levels of violence are increasing, whether that increase is a result of the new policies implemented by Commissioner Schofield, and if not, what is behind the escalating violence. Also, most importantly, why the Commissioner apparently has been unable to curb violence in state prisons, particularly against staff," said Alex Friedmann, HRDC associate director, who served time in Tennessee prisons in the 1990s prior to his release in 1999.

TDOC maintains that its new standards are not only the way to go, but are being developed into a national model. "The Department [of Correction] is making good progress in building a set of procedures that will become national industry standards and have the greatest potential for both taxpayer savings and successful outcomes," spokeswoman Carter wrote.

HRDC is requesting that Schofield sit down with HRDC and other organizations to discuss the impact of his new policies, a request he has yet to accept. The organization also seeks to increase government oversight of TDOC. In 2011, the Tennessee General Assembly dissolved the Select Oversight Committee on Corrections, leaving supervision to the Governor's office and the time-consuming Judiciary Committee.