

**A STRATEGY FOR AN AGENCY RESPONSE TO THE CONTRACT  
FOR AMERICA'S DISMANTLING OF HUMAN SERVICES  
Gil Villagran, MSW**

My internship was with the Alameda County Social Services Agency under the Director Roger Lum, Ph.D., and Luann DeWitt, Administrative Assistant to the Director. I sincerely wish to thank Dr. Lum and Ms. DeWitt for their time and kind attention to making my internship a learning experience. I also wish to thank my own agency Director, Richard R. O'Neil, Deputy Director, John Oppenheim, and manager, Zonia Sandoval Waldon, of the Social Services Agency of Santa Clara County, for the opportunity and their support to participate in the Executive Development Training Program. I am in deep gratitude to the faculty, guest speakers and coordinators of the Training Program, who gave so much of their vast knowledge and experience.

The Congressional election of 1994 brought a sea change to the 40 year Democratic majority in the United States Congress, which is much more than merely a Republican Party majority in both houses. As the GOP takes command of all congressional committees, many Democratic leaders have begun to shift to the right along with the GOP. All advocates of progressive human services must take note of this and realize the epochal challenges ahead.

The conservative to draconian rhetoric which identifies any form of government intervention in the "free market of every man (and woman) for themselves and too bad for those left behind," has been kept in check since the New Deal programs to deliver the country from the Great Depression of the 1930's. But the social Darwinism of the far right of the Republican Party is finally about to spill into reality. The latest cycle of this public discourse includes discussion of "ending welfare as we know it," orphanages for the children of unwed teen mothers and other dependent children, and a solution to the problem of undocumented immigrants with the passage of Proposition 187 in California.

While we hear the daily pronouncements of politicians, talk radio hosts and editorial gladiators from a limited range of the political spectrum (who are often funded by the Heritage Foundation, the Pioneer Fund or other ultraconservative elitist organizations), the public discourse on the op ed pages of our daily newspapers, the political periodicals, television news broadcasts, Nightline type programs, and talk radio is often devoid of critical reality-based information on these issues. Though almost everyone has an opinion on these issues and pundits are plentiful, the professionals who operate the governmental agencies mandated to deal with these concerns are almost never represented in these media venues.

This phenomenon of Big Name commentators has been identified as the Golden Rolodex syndrome which narrows the "expert" guests to a few men from elite institutions (including Congress) who pronounce ever shorter sound bites which limit the public discourse to statements such as:

- Welfare has become a multi-generational lifestyle, passed on from parent to child.

- Teen girls have unprotected sex (solely) to live on welfare (in poverty) for the rest of their lives.

Illegal aliens come to California to live (an easy life) on public assistance and free medical care.

We who work in the public agencies, the bureaucracies, which implement services of government know that:

- Welfare (AFDC) is the whipping boy of many critics of assistance to destitute families, yet Federal outlays for AFDC amount to less than 1% of the national budget.
- Existing laws regulating public assistance mandate that parents must seek employment. Average time on AFDC is 6.6 years, not a lifetime. Almost half of all AFDC families become dependent due to a marital separation, divorce, or death of a spouse.
- Due to national economic conditions, training for a job with a livable wage is not always available for these parents to enable them to become employable. In Santa Clara County where a successful GAIN program trains AFDC parents for employment, there are still 15,000 parents on a waiting list for GAIN training slots.
- Too many entry-level jobs lack health care benefits which any responsible parent knows is vital to their child's welfare. Affordable child care is very limited for the low wage earner, and market-rate child care costs as much as \$500 per month per child.
- Unavailable or unaffordable health care and child care keep many "wanting to work" AFDC families on public assistance.
- Undocumented aliens stand on street corners seekin day labor. These refugees from intolerable political or economic conditions come to work, not to live the easy life. They are ineligible for AFDC and other public assistance except for emergency medical care and other very limited assistance.

Yet the public does not know these limitations and protections which are in place to prevent abuse and fraud. The public does not know because the Golden Rolodex commentators either do not know themselves or do not wish to tell the whole truth. Rather, only a limited truth is told, which is often in the same territory as a falsehood.

It seems to me that we who work in the bureaucracies of government must stand up and join the public discourse on these vital and volatile issues of our time. We must stand tall and speak truth to power.

Therefore, I suggest the following strategy: An organized campaign to educate the public on a recognition that human services are a necessary infrastructure of society. Such education would include:

- Commentary and op ed articles in the media (National Public Radio, Public Broadcasting System, The New Republic, Atlantic Monthly, Time, Newsweek, New York Times, Washington Post, and print media wire services)
- Public testimony at local, state and national legislative bodies, and other open forums where public policy is discussed in a rational manner ( as opposed to shout contests such as The McLaughlin Group)

- Reports and implementation commitments to local government which are not studies so much as prescriptions for improving human services
- Television newsmagazine format programs where in-depth analysis and personal examples of how public assistance and other human service programs actually work (or do not work) effectively to help families to become successful and independent
- Local community based public education forums on human services, sponsored by local universities or reputable democratic institutions such as The League of Women Voters. Such forums would provide for thoughtful discussion and freely given testimonials from families who have been served successfully by human service programs.

The people should know that human services are a vital part of the fabric of our society, the infrastructure that enables us to all live in a humane society. Like city streets, highways and public transportation, utilities, fire and police protection, human services such as health care, child welfare and public assistance are part of the social fabric. Without such protection, curable diseases would become epidemics, many children would suffer inhumane mistreatment, and homeless families would stare us in the face at every storefront and roadway intersection. In short, without human services, our nation would resemble third world nations with extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Some might say that we have this now, but a visit to most cities in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe will show inequity to such extremes that we dare not allow this to happen to our county.

The people should hear from we who provide human services what it is we do that is successful, and why we do not succeed at other times. The people should know what prevents families from working, from nurturing their children, and which services work and which programs do not work.

The people of America should know, and we should be the ones to tell them. If we do not take on this task, we will become the administrators of the dismantling of the human services infrastructure built over the last sixty years.

The following is an example of one such Op Ed editorial submission completed during my internship in Alameda County.

April 21, 1995

Dear Sir or Ms:

We would like to submit the attached essay for the Op ED section of your publication. We are Social Services Agency professionals. Roger G. Lum, Ph.D., is Director of the Alameda County Social Services Agency in Oakland, California. Gil Villagran, MSW, is a gang prevention social worker in San Jose, California. We have worked with AFDC families, teen mothers, abusive families and other troubled youth, families and adults for the last 25 years.

We hope that you will print this essay before the U.S. Senate votes on the Contract. This essay is written by two of the many Americans working in administration and on the front lines of the war on poverty, but with limited ammunition/funding. Now we hear that the war is over, but the bodies pile higher each day and night.

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## **CONTRACT WITH AMERICA OR CONTRACT ON AMERICA'S CHILDREN? Roger G. Lum, Ph.D. and Gil Villagran, MSW**

Save Families from Poverty, Yes! But poverty is the cause of welfare dependency, welfare is not the cause of poverty. Welfare is a humanistic set of programs which provide subsistence and health care to the children of the poor, the un-employed, the under-employed, and those who are unable to work due to physical or mental incapacity, or to provide in-home care to a disabled child.

Those who call welfare a trap which keeps parents from working (Newt Gingrich) or a hammock used by the those too lazy to work (Pete Wilson), should examine the facts before they recite their sound bites.

In 1992, 4.7 million American families received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the major category of welfare. Ninety percent of these families were headed by a single parent, usually the children's mother. Children made up 66% of these welfare recipients. Another 16% of these recipients were over 65 years of age, often a grandparent. Thus 82% of these welfare beneficiaries are unable or unexpected to be employed due to age (under 18 or over 65 years old). This means that only 18% of the recipients are employable adults.

Let's explore why these employable adults are receiving AFDC. Two thirds are mothers with children under five years of age, living in communities with very limited affordable childcare. Almost half are providing care to a disabled child. Those parents providing affordable childcare. Almost half are providing care to a disabled child. Those parents remaining on AFDC are mothers who are trapped between welfare, which currently includes Medicaid, and low paying jobs without health insurance. Any parent who has had a sick child without access to health care knows the agony of such choices--food for the children or heat in the winter, or payment for the rent or payment for the doctor and medicine for a sick child. These are choices that most Congressmen, Governors, Media pundits, corporate lobbyists and CEO's never have to make.

Yet many of these parents currently await limited training slots in programs which are also in jeopardy of reduction or elimination.

What about all these teenage mothers, having babies in order to live a lifetime on welfare? Yes, teenage motherhood is a problem, since most teens are ill prepared to be responsible parents. However, the facts are that only 1% of AFDC parents are under 18 years of age. More than a third of these teen mothers have been sexually exploited by adult men an average of 6.5 years older than these high school and middle-school aged girls. Under the Contract with America plans, whether by incest or rape or seduction, the babies of these teen mothers will face a lifetime penalty of ineligibility for assistance regardless of the circumstances of the mother, unless paternity can be established by a responsible adult male (which is unlikely if that male had committed rape, incest or at the very least sexual exploitation) or they are adopted by a male who would assume financial responsibility for the life of that child until age 18.

What else do we know about the fathers of these welfare dependent children? Less than 1 % of AFDC recipients are able-bodied men. But most alarming is the fact that 41% of these fathers

cannot be found. Yet some of these absent fathers can be found in the halls of Congress (one such one-time deadbeat dad now sits in the Speaker's chair), in the U. S. military, and among the 1 million incarcerated men in our nation's state and federal prisons and local jails.

It is a national shame that we have so many irresponsible fathers in our nation. But this shame is not the fault of the children who, without AFDC or some other program, will live their lives in the streets of our cities, surviving by their wits, if they do survive at all, and likely to become the next generation of adults lost into the streets, the prisons, or the psychiatric institutions.

What is needed is honesty and not demagoguery. Our nation's economy, the globalization of capital and the declining number of well-paying, life sustaining jobs have much more to do with welfare dependency than the choices made by parents who "might prefer the soup kitchen, because they don't want to cook tonight" as Reagan's Attorney General, Ed Meese, surmised in the ignoble 1980's Era of Reaganomics. At least 6 million American workers are unemployed, due in large part, to policy decisions of the Federal Reserve Board to "cool the economy, lest inflation heat up."

Welfare is not a trap but rather the so-called "safety net" for families with children who would otherwise live in the streets and eat out of trash cans as children do in many countries Americans call "underdeveloped" and "third world." The contract with America will take our country to the level of the third world. Homelessness and malnutrition will condemn at least 5 million children to a loss of the civilizing process of a home, security, nutritious meals and the education needed for the 21st century. In Guatemala and Brazil, homeless children are killed by death squads, which are linked to the civil police and the military. Will our nation, the world's first modern democracy, which has sought to correct our own historical wrongs, which include the genocide of Native Americans, the slavery of Africans, mass deportation of Mexican-Americans, the Chinese Exclusion Immigration Law, and concentration camps for Japanese-Americans, enter the 21st century with children living in American versions of Guatemalan shanty towns and Brazilian favelas?

Newt Gingrich spoke (seriously?) about subsidized laptop computers for the homeless. Marie Antoinette in a previous turn of the century suggested that the poor, rioting for bread, should eat cake. I envision a malnourished child in tattered clothing, standing on a traffic island, holding a sign, "Will trade laptop for food." The problem is, what can the child trade once the laptop is gone? In Thailand, children sell their bodies for food. Is this the future of Newt's American? Is this the future you want for your children? Is this the future you want for any child in America?