

FOREIGN-BORN FEAR WELFARE REFORMS

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Byline: By JOYCE SHELBY

Body

One by one, four immigrant women came into the Caribbean Women's Health Association office in Far Rockaway, Queens, and asked for documents they had entrusted to CWA's staff birth certificates, Social Security cards, passports, green cards.

The women, all of whom were pregnant, had planned to use the documents to apply for Medicaid since, under current welfare regulations, they were entitled to government aid.

"But with all the changes being made under the welfare reform law, and each state doing something different, it's hard to know what to say right now," said Adrienne Mercer, who is in charge of CWA's maternal and children's program.

As a result, the women who came into the association's offices that day weren't taking any chances, even though New York State is likely to continue to make Medicaid available for permanent residents.

"Immigrants fear they will be hounded, tracked, detained and deported. It's open season on them," said Marco Mason, assistant executive director of CWA. "They want to become invisible.

"Even in our program for moms, they are not coming back. They are refusing services. They are documented, but hiding more than ever."

Yvonne Graham, the executive director of CWA, said the agency has been swamped with calls from nervous immigrants and new citizens, concerned that when welfare reform changes go into effect in January, they'll be adversely affected.

"The citizens who haven't assimilated into the mainstream because they don't know the language or culture well, want to know how to access services that are available . . . before the new laws go into effect," Graham said.

Founded in 1982, CWA assists men and women from all boroughs at six community centers in Brooklyn and Queens. They offer an array of health care services, as well as help with immigration and citizenship. About 80% of the agency's clientele are immigrants, from as many as 120 countries worldwide. The largest number comes from the Caribbean.

Mason said the agency has a reputation of "fighting to the death" to protect clients and will continue to do so through advocacy, the immigrant service center and a health clinic. CWA also conducts research, citizenship and voter registration drives.

Mason said CWA would join with other groups to address the debacle that the new welfare laws will create. "We're going to be devastated," he predicted.

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Meanwhile, the agency will continue with its plans to build a primary-care facility in Brooklyn and serve, among others, mothers and children.

CWHA caseworkers visit homes to check that landlords are maintaining them, that smoke detectors have been installed, and to look for peeling paint and signs of lead poisoning. They make sure children visit their doctors regularly and that the mothers learn to advocate for themselves in housing and employment issues.

"Through CWHA, I got free legal advice. They told me my rights in court. I got an order of protection and food stamps," said one young mother who asked that her name not be used because she is involved in a custody dispute with her child's father.

Carla Selby and Wendy Edwards, both of Trinidad, said CWHA was instrumental in helping them get health services during their pregnancies, and infant formula afterward.

Some clients, who asked not to be identified, said they are worried sick because they don't know what they will do when government assistance is cut off.

One woman, who said she could not return to her native country because the economy there was lagging and she could not find a job, summarized:

"It's bad all over. [There] used to be a time everyone could come to the United States and work together to make one great nation. Now, it seems, nobody wants us anymore."

Graphic

MARK BONIFACIO HELPING HANDS at Caribbean Women's Health Association (from l.): Nelly Morales, Lorie Von S. Brown and Adrienne Mercer talk to clients Wendy Edwards and Carla Selby.

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