

Ellen Durant
Food Stamp Leaver

Ellen Durant is a white woman in her early 30s with two pre-adolescent children. She has been homeless for more than 2 years. Though technically a Food Stamp leaver for the purposes of this study, she has cycled on and off cash, Food Stamps, and OHP for approximately 10 years. She was unable to recall the exact circumstances of how she left Food Stamps in early 1998, but remembers that AFS cut her grant for noncompliance in late 1997. She received Food Stamps and, occasionally, OHP over the next few years until she was able to deal with her disqualification and receive cash again in early 2000 (right before Time 4).

Durant was plagued by a complex set of personal issues. Two years ago, an abusive relationship culminated with a severe beating, in which she sustained a head injury. She now suffers from symptoms which seems to be both physical and emotional remnants of the event — extreme anxiety, loss of control, confusion, and forgetfulness. AFS considered her to have mental health issues. For the time being, she is excused from participating in JOBS activities. Additionally, she disclosed that she had a 15-year history of methamphetamine use. It is difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, to sort out what is abuse, what is drugs, and what is mental health; Durant has a challenging set of problems for which she has not received adequate treatment or assistance.

She has worked a variety of jobs in the past — a clerk in a supermarket, manager at a fast food restaurant, in-home care giver, computer repairperson — but hasn't been employed in the last five years. At Time 1, she identified her health and housing problems as the main obstacles to her employment; these remained at the forefront throughout the study. Her situation was further complicated by legal issues, transportation problems, and the type of low-wage jobs which would be available to her with only a high school diploma. At Time 4, she sought and was offered a position as a caregiver. However, a misunderstanding with the shelter in which they were staying resulted in the family's eviction. Her potential employer was, thus, unable to contact her and she lost the job opportunity.

Her economic situation deteriorated throughout the study period. At Time 1, she was keeping house while living with a partner who had a job, her partner's child, and one of her own children. Her eldest child, a son, meanwhile, was living with his father. She reported that her family's situation was "better," but still "poor;" they were still relying on food banks, having trouble paying bills every month, skipping meals and medical care though they received Food Stamps. At this point, the family had already been experiencing housing difficulties.

By Time 2, she had broken up with her partner and been kicked off the property on which she had been living. She moved across the state to an urban area into the home of her new partner's sister, while her child remained with her parents until she felt more established. Neither she nor her partner had jobs but relied on Food Stamps, OHP, and child support. Soon after she sent for her daughter they moved with her partner to a rural area to live in the homes of various

relatives of his (this period coincides roughly with Time 3, for which data is not available for this individual). They traded cleaning and caregiving services for rent, still receiving Food Stamps, OHP, and child support. Her son came to live with them. Durant married her partner. The couple began to experience problems with his relatives. Soon after, Durant and her partner were accused of being accessories to a robbery.

To escape the harassment they felt in this small town at the hands of his relatives, they returned to the urban area where his sister lived and bounced between her home, a local homeless shelter, and an abandoned shed. At Time 4, after being kicked out of the shelter once and unable to find a spot in another and remain together, they were eventually re-admitted and settling in, having used up his sister's good will. Neither child was enrolled in school; her son had been suspended from his last school for hitting another child. He had been picked up for stealing during the fall of 1999. Durant was anguished over what the kids have had to deal with: "You know, everything's been just so criminal and horrid and such a struggle up until this point, and this is where it's left us and my children. My God, I love them so much, they don't deserve this. You know, they don't deserve the life that I had, at all, as a child." Despite the stress in their lives, Durant and the children seemed to share an open, affectionate relationship. She indicated that she was anxious for the family to leave the area and planned to do so once they could scrape up enough money for transportation. Unfortunately, their legal issues were not as resolved as they had assumed. A few days after the interview, Durant's husband was arrested; it seemed likely that he would serve several months of jail time.

Durant characterizes the "hard-to-serve" client. She has multiple issues, some of which have been broached by AFS. She had been offered inpatient drug rehab in the past but did not want to be separated from her children. She reported that AFS "hounded" her and eventually cut her grant when she would not comply. She and her son had access to mental health services in the spring of 2000; in fact, her grant had been reduced until she made contact with her new counselor in her new city. Housing and legal difficulties have taken priority while a lack of transportation has impeded her access to mental health services. After the second in-depth interview, Durant reported that she had her grant cut completely for missing an appointment of which she had no knowledge and for not reporting her recent marriage (though she claims she provided this information in an effort to combine their Food Stamp cases). Throughout four interviews, Durant made no mention of any assistance from AFS in securing housing, despite her long term homelessness. In general, Durant would benefit from a more amicable, less antagonistic relationship with AFS. She said that she and her children suffer from the agency's lack of organization and inefficiency and the poor training of its workers. She is often bewildered by their actions and feels harassed and overwhelmed by the extra burden their requests place on her already stressful life.

Adele Fenstermaker
Food Stamp Leaver

Adele Fenstermaker is a 24-year-old white woman with two children. Only the youngest child, a 4-year-old boy is in the home. This is a two-parent family of Food Stamp Leavers who seem to never have received cash benefits. In the first interview, her husband was present most of the time, but absent during the second interview. At the second interview, they had just separated and she had moved out, coming back to their home just for this interview. They lived in a pleasant, three-bedroom townhouse in a development close to a main intersection and a business area in an urban area. This development had a number of subsidized units.

Fenstermaker has never had a permanent job. She once worked in a bar and, at the time of the first in-depth, was doing maintenance in her housing development as well as baby sitting for a neighbor. She had never worked because she had become seriously ill when she was 15. A year before the first interview she had had surgery. This, along with medication, had greatly improved her physical condition. OHP paid for the surgery. In the meantime, both she and her husband had begun full-time study at a local college. They were subsisting on Pell grants and student loans. Both planned to transfer to a 4-year university when they finished their 2-year programs. Fenstermaker had a clear vocational goal - to become a school counselor.

Fenstermaker applied for Food Stamps when she became pregnant with her youngest child. Her husband was not included in the grant. She received Food Stamps for about eighteen months. Then she got a letter saying that she was being cut off. She said it was "like being stabbed in the back." She telephoned AFS and was told that she was disqualified because they traded their old car for a better one, but their payments were less. However, the new car was over the value allowed by AFS, so they were cut off. After being cut off, they applied again for Food Stamps, but were denied because they were college students getting loans. They were both upset by this denial and can't understand why the state should support other people who are not really trying to get ahead, but won't support them in their efforts to become self-sufficient. Being cut off Food Stamps has had a bad effect on their relationship - now they fight "every day about money" (first interview). They made one try for help at a local food bank, but were turned down because their income was too high.

At the second in-depth, they had applied again for Food Stamps and again had been turned down. They had also been off OHP for four months because they had failed to make the co-payment, but they were about to get back on. Fenstermaker said that people at AFS had been very rude to them. Fenstermaker has had contact with other agencies. She was involved with Head Start and for a time saw a counselor who was connected with Head Start. She very much liked this woman. Another issue with public authorities is around child support for her first child, who is now 8 and living with the father. Fenstermaker's EITC was taken last year to pay for back child support. She is now making a legal effort to get the child support amount reduced because she has not been able to pay it due to first, her illness, and now her student status.

Fenstermaker said that there is no way that she can work full-time and go to school full-time. At the second in-depth she had two terms left to finish her program at the college and was planning to transfer to another college soon.

At the second interview, her life was in flux because of the break-up of her marriage. She had moved out and was staying with a friend. She wanted a divorce, primarily because she had lost her feelings for her husband. This had been building for some time. He apparently became addicted to the internet - would get on the computer in the morning and stay there until 2:00 or 3:00 the next morning. He did not study, did not work much. He was dropped from his college program because he was not doing the work. She was very worried about how she was going to manage, where she was going to live, what the arrangements for her daughter would be. Everything was up in the air. She was borrowing from friends and from her father as well as occasionally selling things. She could turn for more help to her father with whom she has discussed her problems, but she doesn't want to do that. Her husband has a very supportive family who will probably help him. Neither family lives in Oregon, however.

Fenstermaker wants to work. She volunteers with several community agencies providing help to children and the elderly. All of these contribute to her preparation for a career in human services. She feels that she is working, just not getting paid, and that AFS should count volunteer work as work when they determine eligibility for Food Stamps.

Fenstermaker believes that AFS should do much more to support people who are in school. On the positive side, OHP has been essential for her in recovering from her illness and in providing her with the medications that she continues to need.

Jean Glass
Food Stamp Leaver

Jean Glass is a white woman in her mid-20s who has a preschool aged son. At the beginning of the study, Glass lived alone with her son in a low-income housing complex in an urban area on the I-5 corridor. By the end of the study, the boy's father had moved in with them and they had relocated to a spacious duplex. Glass first went on cash shortly after she gave birth to her son in 1996 under pressure from her mother, with whom she was living at the time. She received cash for five months but found work three months after her son's birth. She remained on Food Stamps until she went over income in early 1998. Her son received OHP through Time 1, then received insurance from his father's employer sporadically. Glass went without insurance from shortly after her son's birth through the study period, a situation which greatly aggravated her mental health condition. She relied on a HUD subsidy and WIC through Time 3, benefits which she reported helped her more than others she had received. Throughout the study, until her child's father moved in, she received a moderate amount (nearly \$400 per month) of child support on a regular basis.

Glass was trained and certified as a hairdresser — an occupation which she loved. She had worked in a few different salons before settling on the hairdressing job she held throughout the study period. She earned \$7.65 per hour plus tips and commission from products. Throughout the study, her monthly wage varied from \$600 to \$1200. She received no paid sick or vacation leave and the medical benefits offered through her employer were too costly for her to afford. She perceived few opportunities for mobility in this job, but by Time 4, was considering other offers from a few salons which would allow her to perform more varied duties. During the first in-depth interview, she disclosed that she was receiving substantial pressure from her employer to work overtime to compensate for under staffing. During this time, it was not unusual for her to work ten days straight, often late into the evening, leaving little time for her son. By Time 4, she was on temporary medical leave due to tendonitis, aggravated by the hair cutting technique promoted by the salon and the focus on customer volume.

At Time 1-Time 3, Glass was barely making it financially and working long overtime hours, causing her acute stress and exacerbating her haphazardly-treated mental health issues. She had trouble paying her bills most months, though she worked a second job 8 hours per week up until the Time 2 interview. She explained that went without food for days at a time in part to save money and in part because she was too stressed and depressed to eat. She had sought help at a food kitchen but was so shamed by the experience that she had been unable to eat the food. Arranging child care also caused her substantial stress. During this time, she relied on three different providers. Depending on the providers' availability, her son might be cared for by any two in the course of any given day or evening. Her irregular and ever-shifting schedule made it difficult to secure care when she needed it. The back-up care she had was very unreliable. At Time 2, she reported that she often was still struggling to find care late the night before a shift. The high cost of child care contributed to her difficult financial picture. Additionally, she rarely spent time with her child because of the constraints of her work schedule.

Most disconcerting, however, was the effect her lack of health insurance had on her everyday quality of life. Though she was able to obtain some basic medical care from a free clinic in the area, she relied on a rudimentary arrangement with a local psychiatrist to treat her mental health issues. The doctor consulted with her by phone on a pro-bono basis, then made free samples available to her. She had tried a variety of medications, none of which seemed to help. In fact, occasionally, the consequences were disastrous, causing extreme mood swings and violent dreams. For the majority of the study period, her financial stress, poorly treated mental health condition, logistical difficulties with child care, and general difficulties with raising an active and strong-willed child without any support network were taking their toll on Glass. Overwhelmed, Glass confided that she had looked into putting her son up for adoption earlier in the year.

She underwent a dramatic transformation through the course of the study. This change seemed to be due mostly to the extra income, extra hands in raising her child, and extra support network brought into her household by her child's father moving in with the family shortly before Time 4. He worked two jobs. She was on temporary medical leave from her job. Glass no longer had the headaches of arranging or paying for childcare while she was working; she and her partner were able to coordinate their schedules most of the time so that one of them was home with the child. They now only needed daycare one to two days per week. Interestingly, Glass's mother, who had been markedly unsupportive towards Glass earlier in the study, was now helpful -- providing care when needed, visiting, and assisting with finances occasionally. Though finances were still tight, Glass had fewer difficulties making ends meet, had a more stable demeanor, and reported that her mental health issues were mostly a thing of the past.

Glass's case speaks to the need for an expansion of safety net benefits available to those working in low-wage jobs who are unable to make ends meet. Glass would have benefited greatly from Food Stamps, OHP, and ERDC long after she became ineligible. However, she found it difficult to deal with AFS while she was a client. She found workers to be rude, condescending, and careless in their work. The JOBS program was "like I was back in high school or something, like I did not know how to go and get a job and do a follow-up phone call." She thought that three months after having a baby was too soon to be forced into the labor market or participating in JOBS. As she said, "... I always dreaded going into that office ... Because it's like, I think they treat everybody who goes in there like they are taking advantage of the system. And for those who are working and trying to provide a life for their children and their selves, I mean, and just want a little bit of help just to help pull them up and bring them up in life, you know and get on the right track and stuff. It's like, they weren't there for you ... It's like, it was just a waste of my time. It really was. It's like I would rather not even deal with it. It just made my life easier, to be honest (to be off benefits)."