> **" I am sorry, but as your eligibility technician I must facilitate the inter-face between our human services components and your proximate employability or reprocess your claim for remuner-ative assistance. "**

By Rachel C. Kranz

THE BUREAUCRATIC JARGON OF THE WEL-fare system is an easy mark for most of us. Even a television sitcom can rake up a sure laugh with a passing reference to the welfare department's self-avowed "facilitation of an ameliorated level of interface with the human services component of the eligibility technicians' input."

But it struck me recently after conducting a bewildering set of interviews about the WIN program (forced work for women on welfare with children over six years old), that simply to laugh at the absurdity of such involutions is to miss an important point. Welfare jargon is not simply grammatically dubious, long-winded, and difficult to understand. It is confusing in a very specific way, perpetuating several key aspects of the welfare system.

Welfare language creates a world of its own, a world in which it is very difficult to question the underlying assumptions of the welfare bureaucracy. The language used in the interaction between client and social worker is an integral part of the relationship that the welfare system attempts to establish between worker and client, between client and system. The vocabulary for questioning these relationships does not exist within the welfare language.

My use of the social service term, "client," has already begun to define the woman (or man) who comes into the welfare office. A client is a customer. The term implies that she herself has chosen to depend on the welfare system for support, a construct which allows social workers to deny the power they wield over recipients. I'll never forget the comment of one "eligibility technician": "If the client doesn't agree with our training guidelines," she said, "she can always choose to take herself off the grant."

Having been defined as a free agent, then, the recipient sits down in front of the social worker's desk and is overwhelmed with a barrage of unfamiliar words— "eligibility technician," "human services component," "interface," "OJT." Absurd they may be, but when you're sitting in front of the person who's going to determine your income for the next three months and you don't know what she's talking about, absurdity is a serious business.

The plethora of words represents the plethora of services and agencies that combine to form the WIN program. Just as a new recipient has trouble finding her way through the maze of agencies, so does she find it difficult to wade through the language used to represent the maze.

If she doesn't understand the language, she can't decipher the services; if she can't use the language, she can't ask for her rights. But the use of a highly "technical" language masks that fact, just as the use of a highly complicated system of forced-work requirements masks an economy that can't provide enough decent-paying jobs. The fundamental issue—a recipient's right to services, a worker's right to a job—is displaced into an intricate network of welfare mechanics.

Beyond its ability to confuse, social service language's peculiar syntax mirrors another aspect of welfare ideology—its image of the world as uncontrollable and unchangeable. Nowhere in the welfare world can you find a shred of evidence that any person ever played a part in creating it, or that any person might ever be able to change it.

Welfare language favors abstract nouns, "dead-end" words that cut off all sense of process or motion in the world. A favorite of the WIN program is "employable," as in, "We'd like to make our clients employable."

Such a construct allows very little room for debate. What can the recipient say—that she doesn't *want* to be employable? That she is *already* employable? But look what happens if the social worker uses a more dynamic transitive-verb construct: "We'd like to make the people who come to us *able to get jobs*." Then the recipient could reasonably respond, "Oh, really? What kind of jobs?" or "But there *are* no jobs!"

The abstract noun contains its own beginning and end—a "dead-end," with no way out—implying that both the source and the solution of the problem are contained within the "non-employable" recipient herself. The transitive phrase "to get a job" implies motion towards a particular goal—a job—a goal that, once clearly expressed, can be questioned.

For a recipient to challenge the welfare system, she must first translate their language into her own language, then formulate her challenge in her own language. If she's lucky, her challenge will be heard, if she's not, it won't. But there is almost no way she can formulate her challenge in the language of the system. There are no words for it.

Worse, even when you come into the system with a clearly thought out set of criticisms and demands, you find that the very effort of understanding welfare language saps your energy to challenge it. It's hard to translate everything; it begins to be easier simply to think in the dominant language.

Fortunately, the women who are condemned to spend a large part of their lives fighting the welfare system do maintain their own poetry to help them see clearly, to survive. One woman's description of WIN has nothing to do with employability plans or training guidelines: "I thought the days of slavery were over," she says, "but WIN is worse than slavery! You might as well say, WIN is your master, I'm coming from WIN and I'm WIN.' " Fighting to understand WIN's language while maintaining her own is part of her struggle to be something more than WIN. ∎

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