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Op-Ed Contributor

A Homespun Safety Net

By BARBARA EHRENREICH

IF nothing else, the recession is serving as a stress test for the American safety net. How prepared have we been for sudden and violent economic dislocations of the kind that leave millions homeless and jobless? So far, despite some temporary expansions of food stamps and unemployment benefits by the Obama administration, the recession has done for the government safety net pretty much what Hurricane Katrina did for the Federal Emergency Management Agency: it's demonstrated that you can be clinging to your roof with the water rising, and no one may come to helicopter you out.

Take the case of Kristen and Joe Parente, Delaware residents who had always imagined that people turned to government for help only if "they didn't want to work." Their troubles began well before the recession, when Joe, a fourth-generation pipe fitter, sustained a back injury that left him unfit for even light lifting. He fell into depression for several months, then rallied to ace a state-sponsored retraining course in computer repairs — only to find those skills no longer in demand. The obvious fallback was disability benefits, but — Catch-22 — when Joe applied he was told he could not qualify without presenting a recent M.R.I. scan. This would cost \$800 to \$900, which the Parentes do not have, nor has Joe, unlike the rest of the family, been able to qualify for Medicaid.

When Joe and Kristen married as teenagers, the plan had been for Kristen to stay home with the children. But with Joe out of action and three children to support by the middle of this decade, Kristen went to work as a waitress, ending up, in 2008, in a “pretty fancy place on the water.” Then the recession struck and in January she was laid off.

Kristen is bright, pretty and, to judge from her command of her own small kitchen, capable of holding down a dozen tables with precision and grace. In the past she’d always been able to land a new job within days; now there was nothing. Like most laid-off people, she failed to meet the fiendishly complex and sometimes arbitrary eligibility requirements for unemployment benefits. Their car started falling apart.

So in early February, the Parentes turned to the desperate citizen’s last resort — Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Still often called “welfare,” the program does not offer cash support to stay-at-home parents as did its predecessor, Aid to Families With Dependent Children. Rather, it provides supplemental income for working parents, based on the sunny assumption that there would always be plenty of jobs for those enterprising enough to get them.

After Kristen applied, nothing happened for six weeks — no money, no phone calls returned. At school, the Parentes’ 7-year-old’s class was asked to write out what wish they would ask of a genie, should one appear. Brianna’s wish was for her mother to find a job because there was nothing to eat in the house, an aspiration that her teacher deemed too disturbing to be posted on the wall with the other children’s.

Not until March did the Parentes begin to receive food stamps and some cash assistance. Meanwhile they were finding out why some recipients have taken to calling the assistance program “Torture and Abuse of Needy Families.” From the start, the experience has been

“humiliating,” Kristen said. The caseworkers “treat you like a bum — they act like every dollar you get is coming out of their own paychecks.”

Nationally, according to Kaaryn Gustafson, an associate professor at the University of Connecticut Law School, “applying for welfare is a lot like being booked by the police.” There may be a mug shot, fingerprinting and long interrogations as to one’s children’s paternity. The ostensible goal is to prevent welfare fraud, but the psychological impact is to turn poverty itself into a kind of crime.

Delaware does not require fingerprints, but the Parentes discovered that they were each expected to apply for 40 jobs a week, even though no money was offered for gas, tolls or babysitting. In addition, Kristen had to drive 35 miles a day to attend “job readiness” classes, which she said were “a joke.”

With no jobs to be found, Kristen was required to work as a volunteer at a community agency. (God forbid anyone should use government money to stay home with her children!) In exchange for \$475 a month plus food stamps, the family submits to various forms of “monitoring” to keep them on the straight and narrow. One result is that Kristen lives in constant terror of doing something that would cause the program to report her to Child Protective Services. She worries that the state will remove her children “automatically” if program workers discover that her 5-year-old son shares a bedroom with his sisters. No one, of course, is offering to subsidize a larger apartment in the name of child “protection.”

It’s no secret that the temporary assistance program was designed to repel potential applicants, and at this it has been stunningly successful. The theory is that government assistance encourages a debilitating “culture of poverty,” marked by laziness, promiscuity and addiction,

and curable only by a swift cessation of benefits. In the years immediately after welfare “reform,” about one and a half million people disappeared from the welfare rolls — often because they’d been “sanctioned” for, say, failing to show up for an appointment with a caseworker. Stories of an erratic and punitive bureaucracy get around, so the recession of 2001 produced no uptick in enrollment, nor, until very recently, did the current recession. As Mark Greenberg, a welfare expert at the Georgetown School of Law, put it, the program has been “strikingly unresponsive” to rising need.

People far more readily turn to food stamps, which have seen a 19 percent surge in enrollment since the recession began. But even these can carry a presumption of guilt or criminal intent. Four states — Arizona, California, New York and Texas — require that applicants undergo fingerprinting. Furthermore, under a national program called Operation Talon, food stamp offices share applicants’ personal data with law enforcement agencies, making it hazardous for anyone who might have an outstanding warrant — for failing to show up for a court hearing on an unpaid debt, for example — to apply.

As in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the most reliable first responders are not government agencies, but family and friends. Kristen and Joe first moved in with her mother and four siblings, and in the weeks before the government came through with a check, she borrowed money from the elderly man whose house she cleans every week, who himself depends on Social Security.

I’ve never encountered the kind of “culture of poverty” imagined by the framers of welfare reform, but there is a tradition among the American working class of mutual aid, no questions asked. My father, a former miner, advised me as a child that if I ever needed money to “go to a poor man.” He liked to tell the story of my great-grandfather, John Howes, who worked in the

mines long enough to accumulate a small sum with which to purchase a plot of farmland. But as he was driving out of Butte, Mont., in a horse-drawn wagon, he picked up an Indian woman and her child, and their hard-luck story moved him to give her all his money, turn his horse around and go back to the darkness and danger of the mines.

In her classic study of an African-American community in the late '60s, the anthropologist Carol Stack found rich networks of reciprocal giving and support, and when I worked at low-wage jobs in the 1990s, I was amazed by the generosity of my co-workers, who offered me food, help with my work and even once a place to stay. Such informal networks — and random acts of kindness — put the official welfare state, with its relentless suspicions and grudging outlays, to shame.

BUT there are limits to the generosity of relatives and friends. Tensions can arise, as they did between Kristen and her mother, which is what led the Parentes to move to their current apartment in Wilmington. Sandra Smith, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, finds that poverty itself can deplete entire social networks, leaving no one to turn to. While the affluent suffer from “compassion fatigue,” the poor simply run out of resources.

At least one influential theory of poverty contends that the poor are too mutually dependent, and that this is one of their problems. This perspective is outlined in the book “Bridges Out of Poverty,” co-written by Ruby K. Payne, a motivational speaker who regularly addresses school teachers, social service workers and members of low-income communities. She argues that the poor need to abandon their dysfunctional culture and emulate the more goal-oriented middle class. Getting out of poverty, according to Ms. Payne, is much like overcoming drug addiction, and often requires cutting off contact with those who choose to remain behind: “In order to move from poverty to middle class ... an individual must give up relationships for achievement

(at least for some period of time).” The message from the affluent to the down-and-out: Neither we nor the government is going to do much to help you — and you better not help one another either. It’s every man (or woman or child) for himself.

In the meantime, Kristen has discovered a radically different approach to dealing with poverty. The community agency she volunteered at is Acorn (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), the grass-roots organization of low-income people that achieved national notoriety during the 2008 presidential campaign when Republicans attacked it for voter registration fraud (committed by temporary Acorn canvassers and quickly corrected by staff members). Kristen made such a good impression that she was offered a paid job in May, and now, with only a small supplement from the government, she works full time for Acorn, organizing protests against Walgreens for deciding to stop filling Medicaid prescriptions in Delaware, and, in late June, helping turn out thousands of people for a march on Washington to demand universal health insurance.

So the recession tossed Kristen from routine poverty into destitution, and from there, willy-nilly, into a new life as a community organizer and a grass-roots leader. I wish I could end the story there, but the Parentes’ landlord has just informed them that they’ll have to go, because he’s decided to sell the building, and they don’t have money for a security deposit on a new apartment. “I thought we were good for six months here,” Kristen told me, “but every time I let down my guard I just get slammed again.”

Barbara Ehrenreich is the author, most recently, of “This Land Is Their Land: Reports From a Divided Nation.”

