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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2001

City Offering Work for Some On Welfare

Facing Federal Limit, Many Called in for Jobs

By NINA BERNSTEIN

The Giuliani administration is quietly offering thousands of city jobs paying more than $9 an hour to welfare recipients who are reaching their five-year limit on federal cash assistance just as the city's economy sinks into recession.

The workers' hourly wages — well above minimum wage — are to be paid out of New York State's $1.5 billion annual welfare windfall, money allocated by the federal government at the same level since 1995, but unspent because the welfare rolls have shrunk by almost half, state officials said. Many of the jobs are as seasonal laborers in the city's Parks Department, where city and union officials said they were prepared to absorb as many workers as the city's Human Resources Administration sends.

As 32,800 New York City families confront their five-year federal welfare limit on Dec. 2, more than 3,000 additional recipients who faced the same deadline are already working in the parks, officials from the parks workers' union said.

Job offers apparently have been made to many of the thousands of recipients called in by the Human Resources Administration in the past month.

"I can confirm that they are offering those jobs for the families that are coming up against those time limits," said John B. Madden, a spokesman for the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. "The state is very supportive of the city's efforts. But who and how many are getting the job offers — that's really up to H.R.A." He added, "I can't give you the numbers because I don't have the numbers."

Neither the Human Resources Administration nor the mayor's office returned calls seeking information about the program. Lawyers who have won federal court injunctions against some of the city's recent welfare practices said they had been frustrated in efforts to learn details of the job offers

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and conditions presented to recipients.

But Mark Rosenthal, president of the union local that represents seasonal parks workers, said 3,100 former welfare recipients are already in jobs that last 11 months and 2 weeks and can be renewed. They are doing work like cleaning parks and supervising playgrounds, he said, and most began in March in a test of the project. At least 1,000 more new hires are expected over the next four weeks.

"As many as they send, we'll take," he said. "We could have 10,000 very easy." He added, "You can have 20,000 in the park — we had that in the W.P.A.," referring to a public works program of the New Deal.

Under state law, recipients who run out their federal welfare clock are still eligible to apply for a state aid program known as Safety Net Assistance, financed without federal money. But any able-bodied person who refuses a specific job without good cause is to be denied that aid.

The financial advantages to the city are evident. After Dec. 2, aid to the 32,800 city recipients who run out the federal welfare clock would have to come from the state and city treasuries, rather than from the federal welfare block grant created when welfare legislation was overhauled in 1996. And at a time when city agencies are facing steep budget cuts and a hiring freeze, a corps of temporary, federally-subsidized workers could take up the slack.

But the federal grant is up for reauthorization next September, and the surplus could melt away if Congress reduces the grant, or if the welfare rolls climb in a recession, cautioned Douglas Turetsky, spokesman for the city's Independent Budget Office.

Most of the 32,800 who face the December deadline are single mothers. Some may not be suitable for available jobs because of health problems, or because of family responsibilities like caring for a disabled relative, Mr. Madden said. About 11,000 are working already, but earn so little that they still qualify for public assistance. Many others have worked at so-called workfare assignments — often in city parks — in exchange for their welfare checks.

"We're delighted that they're coming back with paychecks," said Mr. Rosenthal, whose union local successfully sued the city to get full pay for workfare recipients doing the same jobs as city parks workers. He noted that the new jobs were even better paid than those in a transitional jobs bill vetoed by the mayor.

In a city office on Schermerhorn Street in Brooklyn, where many of the recipients have been summoned since Oct. 1, three women emerging from interviews this week had absorbed different, even contradictory, information about their options, and showed widely divergent reactions.

Nancy Flores was near tears over the pressure to take a full-time job. "Sick child, autistic child," she said in broken English, gesturing at her 7-year-old daughter, and then turning to her 10-year-old, Erica, to translate. "They want her to leave the welfare and go to work," Erica said, tugging at one of her tightly braided pigtails. No one mentioned safety net assistance, they said.

Jobs financed by the state's $1.5 billion welfare windfall.

In the same waiting room, Tanya Jolly was overjoyed to be offered a job in a park near her home in the Bronx paying $9.38 an hour. Ms. Jolly, a mother of three, said she had spent two years working at clerical tasks in exchange for a meager welfare check and had come in expecting to be cut off without a dime.

"This is forever," she exulted, waving the sheet of instructions like a flag. "This depends solely on you."

A friend, Tawana McMillan, who also has three children, looked on with envy. She, too, is still on welfare, though she has been working for the last year and a half for a Nordstrom department store in White Plains. On Oct. 1 she was laid off, and so far has been unable to restore full public assistance or get unemployment benefits.

"I want them to call me in for one of those city jobs," she said.

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