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First published 1986

Published by
MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Fimister, Geoff

Welfare rights work in social services.—
(Practical social work)

1. Welfare rights movement—Great Britain
2. Social workers—Great Britain 3. Public
welfare—Great Britain

I. Title II. Child Poverty Action Group

III. Series

361.6'14'0941 HV245

ISBN 978-0-333-36309-6

ISBN 978-1-349-18369-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-18369-2

To Anne

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Foreword

Poverty is widespread in Britain and it is on the increase – particularly among families with children. At the same time, cuts in the National Insurance scheme and higher rents and health charges have meant that means-tested benefits are playing an increasingly central role in our income maintenance system. According to one estimate, nearly a quarter of the population, over twelve million people, receive a means-tested benefit – five or six times as many as in the early years of the welfare state. Many more are entitled to such benefits but are not claiming them.

It is the means-tested benefits which provide the greatest problems for claimants. It is increasingly difficult to navigate a path through the complex benefits maze. The biggest nightmare is supplementary benefit, which is supporting over seven million people – or the equivalent of the population of London.

This is the dismal context in which social workers and others employed by social services agencies are working. Many of their clients' problems are problems born of deprivation and hardship. Social services agencies cannot eradicate poverty but they have, in welfare rights, an important tool for at least mitigating its impact. Theoretical distinctions between 'real' social work and practical welfare rights work are untenable and break down in the real world of social work practice. Yet it is clear that most social workers are singularly ill-equipped to provide their clients with the practical advice and help they urgently need. Evidence drawn together in this book confirms that social workers frequently lack training and information back-up in this complex area, even while recognising their clients' need for expert help and support and wanting to improve their knowledge and skills.

This book should be invaluable to the many social services staff who find themselves in this frustrating position. Geoff Fimister has many years' experience of welfare rights work in

a local authority context which inform the very practical advice he gives on how to establish a 'welfare rights resource' in social services agencies and on how a welfare rights input can reinforce and extend the role of the personal social services in confronting poverty. I hope that all those who read this book will be convinced of the necessity of such an approach and that it will encourage social services agencies generally to give higher priority to income maintenance issues. It is the very least that their clients deserve.

RUTH LISTER

Director

Child Poverty Action Group

ABBREVIATIONS

AMA	Association of Metropolitan Authorities
BASW	British Association of Social Workers
CCETSW	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work
CSS	Certificate in Social Service
CQSW	Certificate of Qualification in Social Work
CPAG	Child Poverty Action Group
CAB	Citizens' Advice Bureau
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
EEC	European Economic Community
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
LA	Local Authority
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers' Association
NHS	National Health Service
OT	Occupational Therapist
SCC	Specialist Claims Control
SSAC	Social Security Advisory Committee
SSD	Social Services Department (and Scottish Social Work Department)
WRO	Welfare Rights Officer

Preface

The question of the role of welfare rights work in social services is increasingly, and rightly, finding its way onto the agenda of social services agencies. This book aims to support and further such developments, to consider the issues and to outline the possibilities and pitfalls in a way which I hope will prove both of interest and of concrete use to practitioners, teachers and policy-makers alike.

I owe thanks to a number of people for their help in various ways. First and foremost, Newcastle upon Tyne Social Services Department has been a source of encouragement and practical help. I am most grateful to its Director, Brian Roycroft, for permission to use the Welfare Rights Service's facilities; to welfare rights officers Diane Jones, Iain Kitt and Bob Wellburn for various items of information cited in the text; and to Barbara Lumsden and Elaine Dodd for the skilful and speedy typing of spidery drafts. By way of reciprocation, papers based on individual chapters have been made available through the Newcastle Welfare Rights information service and seem to have met with a healthy interest.

A number of people have commented on drafts. I am especially grateful to David Bull and Quintin Oliver for their detailed comments on the whole of the first draft; while others who have made helpful observations on particular aspects or sections are Tony Bennett, Barry Clark, Anne Fimister, Pete McGavin, Steve McGrail, Roger Smith, Mary Widdes and John Veit Wilson. I would also like to thank Ruth Lister, who contributed the foreword; and all those who responded to requests for information and research findings cited in the text.

The end result is of course, for better or worse, my responsibility.

GEOFF FIMISTER