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Interview with Jill Schlosser

Jill Schlosser

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OG: This is Ondine Geary. I'm talking to Jill Schlosser, November 13, at the Department of Human Services. So I guess just to being with if you'd tell us how long you've been in Mt. Vernon.

JS: We live in Knox County, but my actual address is Butler, Ohio, right on the edge of Knox County. Lived in the Belville-Bulter area most of my life. Going to be seven years.

OG: And what's your job here at the Department of Human Services?

JS: Case Manager, east unit.

OG: What does that involve?

JS: Formally, it was the Jobs unit. It's now called the east unit. Assessing clients when they come in to see what their employment barriers are, see if we need to refer them out for alcohol counseling or mental health issues, things like that, before they're ready to be employed.

OG: What do you feel like is the feeling of the outside community towards welfare recipients?

JS: That's a tough one. I'm not real sure on the outside community, how they feel about it because when I'm off work I don't really talk about it to find out how they feel about it. And to tell you the truth, a lot of my clients, if I passed them on the street, I wouldn't know if they were receiving public assistance. Sure, there's some that are stereotypical, but a lot of them, you wouldn't guess.

OG: Do you get a sense of the attitudes in general in maybe talking to people about what you do?

JS: I hear a lot of good comments about the welfare reform, about how people now have to do something in order to receive their public assistance. It's a lot different than what I remember it being before. So that's a good point. People are happy to see that that's changed, that you just don't sit home a draw the check and don't do something to earn it.

OG: Have you ever witnessed or heard of a recipient being treated any differently because of his or her status?

JS: No, I can't say that I have. We try to treat them all just like--when they come in here, we get some that come in here with attitudes of course, but I'm sure we'd get that even if we were interviewing or assessing the general public. I don't think it has to do really with their receiving public assistance.

OG: Do you get the sense that the community tries to offer support in any way?

JS: I think so. I think maybe the problem might be that they don't know what all's available to them which when they come in we try to let them know what help is out there, but I think that there is a lot of community support.

OG: In what way?

JS: Different referrals we can make: Freedom Center, Mound Builders, Salvation Army, InterChurch, a lot of different ways we can refer them out to get extra help.

OG: What's the main reason that people come in here in need of welfare, what events usually...

JS: There are many, many. Lack of education, lack of motivation, barriers could be drug use, alcohol use, domestic violence where the woman's coming from the shelter. We have gentleman that are sole caretakers of children under one because the mother of the child has left the home. Just across the board, you name it, it could be anything. Loss of a job because of an injury and workers comp hasn't kicked in yet, lay-off, lots of different things.

OG: DO you get a sense of the biggest barrier to achieving self-sufficiency?

JS: For the clients I see, I'd say lack of education and skills, lack of skills. Not only education but actual job skills. And a lot of times we see too that it's generational. They've seen Mom and Dad go once a month, pick up their check and that's what they think is, for some, they think that's normal.

OG: So, you've been working here since January?

JS: Yeh, I was here before and I worked downtown at Opportunity Knocks, that's part of what this unit is, and that was when we were downtown, and then I left for two years and worked for a surgeon, and then came back in January.

OG: How has working here affected how you understand welfare recipients or how you view welfare recipients?

JS: I think I have a lot more understanding because you can sit down and talk with them and see exactly what their issues are, and helping them to work through them, it has helped me to understand them a lot better. You know, it's not just lazy people wanting to sit home, and eat bon-bons, watch soap-operas and draw a check. It's not what it is. A lot of people with some serious stuff going on.

OG: What do you think about the level of support that's available through the welfare system, either monetary support or services? Do you think they're adequate or inadequate?

JS: I think they're adequate. Surely, you don't live high on the hog living on public assistance, but I don't think you should be able to. I think you should be motivated to get out, and get a job, and support your family. But I think it's sufficient. It's right on the line, I'd say. You'd have to really develop a budget and stick to it in order to live, in order for it to be sufficient.

OG: Do you have any idea of why some people come in and get jobs right away and some people...

JS: I think it has to do with why they're coming in to begin with. If it's the one's that have been laid off, you know, they've worked for 20 years, just laid off, and they're ready to get right back into the work force. Whereas the other ones, maybe there's a woman that has no plan of going to work. She's going to have her kids and not be required for our program until the child turns one year old. There's a big difference.

OG: How do you feel like the reforms have changed the nature of the welfare system?

JS: Well, now there's a 36 month time limit, so that's waking--I hope that's waking a lot of people up because they say it's going to stop after 36 months; the cash assistance is going to stop. And every time I have a client in here, I'm telling them that, "Make sure you're looking down the road, because it's going to fly." I mean it just seems like yesterday, I put my Christmas tree away, and here it is time to get it back out again. It's just, the time flies.

OG: Does that scare people?

JS: I think a lot of them it does. It makes them, it challenges them to look ahead and see, you know, where am I going to be 3 years from now when my cash assistance stops. So it helps me to get them into JobSearch. It puts them in the frame of mind that "I really do have to do something now." I think that's helped.

OG: Does it worry you?

JS: Yeh. Yeh. Because I have some people in here and you wonder, you know, with their situation are we going to be able to help them to be ready in 3 years, to be off. Especially if they don't keep their appointments, if they don't follow through with what we're asking them to do. You know, we're trying to help them and they won't--it's like we put the ball in their court and they just drop it. There's a lot of them that just don't follow through.

OG: What do you think might happen?

JS: I don't know. It's kind of scary to think that if the assistance does stop in 3 years--you know, what are these people going to do--I don't know. I can't imagine, I can't imagine that it will really--I mean, they say it's going to, but in my mind, I can't imagine it happening. It'll be interesting to see what happens.

OG: I don't know if you have a feel for this or not, but I'm curious about how particularly mothers, single mothers, stretch the monetary benefits to make it adequate.

JS: How do they do it? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if there's other money coming in, or--you know, it's not my job to determine. I don't know. When I hear of \$296.00 for a mother and a child for a month, I don't know how you would stretch that. You would have to take advantage of everything else that's available to you, you know, with the WIC and the other things that are available, I can say that would be very tough.

OG: Speaking of the \$296.00 a month, how do you think that this idea of the welfare mother sitting at home eating bon-bons developed--because it's certainly not an easy--

JS: No. I think it's because nothing was required of people before, and that was just the picture that a lot of people got. "Well, they're just sitting home doing nothing, and going to the welfare office once a month and picking up their check and their food stamps. I think that's why, because nothing was required before whereas now it is. Many people that I talk to, that's very positive. You know, you'll be going to work to earn your income, I have to do that. And I think it's good that people are actually doing something in order to receive public assistance.

OG: What about what's available in the labor market?

JS: I don't get into that very much from my office because when they leave my office, I'm either sending them to a work site or I'm sending them to Mark. Most of them go to Mark, and then he works with them on the job end of it. He seems pretty excited about what's available on the job end of it.

OG: Do you stay with them through their time on--with the same clients?

JS: It depends on what happens. If they happen to go off of assistance, say they get a job through Mark, go off of assistance for a couple of months, come back on, then I see them again. Generally, once I've assessed them and sent them either to Mark or to a WEP site, or to Mound Builders anything like that, generally I do kind of follow along with them on the computer to see what's going on with them, but as far as monitoring, no I don't.

OG: Bringing up the cycles of going on and off, what's your sense of why that occurs?

JS: I think it's pretty much, well, some of them--I mean, as much as Mark teaches them about absenteeism and calling in when you can't come in, and "Johnny's got a runny nose" is not a good excuse to not go in to work; I think that's been with them probably since they were little kids and saw it happening. I don't know how you would get, in the one month we have them in here, how you would train them otherwise--or how you would undo that thinking they have. I don't know. I mean, if we knew that, we could fix it.

OG: This is kind of an abstract question, but what do you imagine that the goal of public assistance should be, or what role should it play. What ways should it help?

JS: I like the idea of the mothers that have the babies--I don't like the one year. They have one year before they're required to do anything for their public assistance, I don't like that. I don't like that. Cindy, our clerical specialist, she had a baby in February, she was back in 6 weeks. She was expected to be back to her job, which is normal. Maternity leave is usually 6 weeks. I don't like that idea. I wish that they were required after 6 weeks. I mean, we can help them with day care. Just like a real job, you go back to work after your 6 weeks is up. That I would like to see different. Actual hands on work experience, I think, would help us. Mark helps a lot of people into factories. We don't have a worksite that you get in and actually learn how to work in

a factory. That might be helpful to have a worksite, something like that. Education I guess. Not necessarily school education, just common-sense how to keep a job, how to get a job, like Mark's doing, just more of it. And of course, GEDs. We're working on that or high school diploma. We've got that new program going here which is really good. A lot of people don't even have their GED. That makes it difficult. Yeh, I don't know what's down the road after that 36 months. It'll be interesting to see what happens.

OG: If there was anything that you would like for the community to know about your experience here or what you have seen by working with--

JS: They're just not any different from--really not different. I mean, to meet them on the street, like I said, you wouldn't know a lot of them are on public assistance. A lot of them are going through tough times. A lot of them are on and off assistance. I mean, they come on, get their lives in order, and are back off, which is wonderful. And then there are the few hard core that are just generational, that are going to need some extra attention I suppose.

OG: If you could imagine some percentage of the number of people who are generational, how many do you think--

JS: Gee, I don't know. I say, we deal mostly with them now because the other ones have awoken and said, "Fine, I'm going to get a job. I'm not going to wait for the 36 months." Another thing I was going to say, a lot of people are 2 pay checks away from being right where these people are, I mean, I am. If my husband and I lost our jobs, we would be up the creek. I mean, we'd be heading to the welfare office because you just--I mean--you can't just live on nothing. So it's just a lot of matter of circumstances. I don't know. There's no magic answer, how to fix everybody.