

Welfare Rights Group Calls for Resignation of State Officials

By MICHAEL WILLIAMS

SACRAMENTO (Capitol) — A group called the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations is calling for the firing of Social Services Director Marion Woods because they believe Woods is negligent in his duties as overseer of California's welfare system.

In an impromptu press conference in Governor Brown's outer office, a group of about 20 people, many of them children, demanded Woods' firing along with the dismissal of Finance Director Mary Ann Graves and Health and Welfare Director Mario Obledo because the group feels "hundreds of thousands of children" are going hungry and homeless because Woods and the others are ignoring state laws governing the distribution of immediate-need welfare benefits.

Kevin Aslanian and Josita Thomas did the speaking for the coalition, which they say encompasses about 10 welfare rights organizations in California.

"During a given year, about 600,000 needy children in dire need of food and housing are denied (those benefits)," Thomas read from a prepared statement. She and Aslanian said they arrived at the figure by projections made from Department of Social Service (DSS) statistics.

According to the statement given to reporters, the coalition says this comes about "because the state ... refuses to obey the laws passed by the Legislature (which) requires the issuance of aid to children immediately."

More Compassion for Dogs

Aslanian said, "The people of California have more compassion for their dogs than for poor people. People go into welfare offices without food or a place to stay and they are told to come back in 30 days."

According to the coalition, state statutes mandate that cash assistance be granted to those in immediate need while the paperwork dealing with the welfare request is being processed. Aslanian claims county welfare departments across the state are negligent in this regard and do not give immediate cash but instead tell the applicants they must wait.

Aslanian, along with the California Legal Rural Assistance League, filed a suit against DSS Director Woods three years ago charging Woods and the state with violation of the immediate needs statutes. That case is still in court and Aslanian says Woods and DSS are "playing games" to keep the suit tied up in court.

Dan Murphy, the attorney handling the case for Aslanian, also said Woods and DSS

were "fighting it tooth and nail."

Woods told Capitol News Service that, "I've known Kevin (Aslanian) a long time and he's made maybe 100,000 suggestions to me. Some I've taken, others I haven't. I have an open door I don't know why (Kevin) would want to create a spectacle."

Woods called Aslanian a "dedicated advocate" but said, "I serve many publics — the clients, counties, and the taxpayers. I try to run the department in the spirit of giving people what they need and want but this is an era of resource scarcity."

Not Aware of Suit

When questioned about the lawsuit directed against him, Woods said, "We have lawsuits every day around here. I don't know that particular one."

When told of Aslanian's charge that he allows the county welfare offices to turn away immediate-need clients, Woods said,

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"Maybe some offices might not be following all the regulations as much as some people would like them too, but when people come in with needs the offices try to meet their needs. Some counties do it with \$100 payments, some give out baskets of food and some refer the clients to other agencies which can help. The thing is, we have to maintain public trust by not giving out (money) without any criteria. We need criteria (to maintain taxpayers trust)."

Aslanian and Thomas told stories of families sleeping cars and in empty lots while waiting for immediate benefits from various welfare offices. Aslanian singled out Alameda county's welfare system as the worst in California.

Aslanian and Thomas also complained about the Legislature's recent decision to cut back the Aid to Dependent Families with Children cost-of-living raises. "(The Legislature's) christmas present to poor people will be cuts in their benefits," Thomas said.

The coalition has sent letters to about 100 foreign countries asking for aid for California poor people, they said.