

'Slave Labor' Tag Levelled At Workfare

By LAURA RODRIGUEZ

The scope of Solano County's welfare fraud investigations and its workfare program, in which general assistance recipients are required to work for the county, were targets at Saturday's meeting of the fledgling Welfare Recipients League at the Vallejo Community Center.

Charges of "slave labor" and overzealous prosecution of suspected welfare fraud were voiced at the gathering of about two dozen people.

The county's welfare chief, contacted later Saturday, denied his department is anti-poor and said prosecutions are up to the district attorney's office.

Pat Nichols, league organizer, said, "People are having a lot of problems being charged with welfare fraud when the district attorney is continually getting people for just anything."

Assemblyman Tom Hannigan, D-Fairfield, told the gathering, "Most of us in the legislature don't believe people on welfare are fraudulent. All interests, such as welfare recipients, should become organized and aware because it is the unorganized that get trampled on the most in our society."

City Councilman Lionel Hodge and county

Board of Supervisors candidate Lee Sturn also appeared at the meeting, during which several speakers compared the workfare program to slave labor and said assistance applicants are being harassed and persecuted.

Frank Epstein, litigation coordinator for Solano County Legal Assistance, said, "There has been a big switch in Solano's Social Service Department in the last year. We almost see it now as anti-poor and as trying to find ways to deny services to people."

Epstein said general assistance applicants are interrogated and threatened by the county welfare department with warnings that any false information provided, even accidentally, can result in their prosecution for welfare fraud.

"The district attorney prosecutes people for false statements at the drop of a hat," Epstein said.

Epstein said that criminal prosecutions for welfare fraud in Solano County outdistance those of any other county in the state.

"When you have a criminal conviction on your record for welfare fraud, no one will hire you and you will remain on the welfare rolls. That

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kind of short sightedness will eventually cost the county a lot of money," Epstein said.

David Monthie, director of Solano County Legal Assistance, said the county welfare department's primary concern is saving the county money and intimidating people out of getting public assistance.

"They're trying to use welfare recipients now as a replacement for hiring people at higher wages in order to save the county money," Epstein said.

Solano County Welfare Director Don Curry later denied that his department practices intimidating procedures or that it is anti-poor.

"We have a job to do and we get it done. We're not there to intimidate. My workers don't have time to intimidate people," Currey said.

"A special investigation unit is paid for by the state and federal government and we have a mandate to pursue fraud like any other mandate. Every district pursues it with a different intensity and that is the district attorney's decision and not mine," Currey said.

Legal Assistance Chief Monthie said that welfare recipients can be prosecuted for situations in which a welfare worker simply could not get positive information from a potential employer as to

whether an applicant had asked for a job or not.

Monthie also charged the county's welfare program is unfair in that it requires general assistance applicants to work five days before receiving payment. If they are found to miss five minutes of work, even due to sickness, though they have worked many hours, they can still be denied payment, he said.

"I don't think that there is any doubt that what the county is doing here is illegal," Monthie said, explaining the Los Angeles district court has ruled that requiring work be done before any assistance payments are made is illegal.

Kevin Aslanian, coordinator for the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, agreed that people are hurt, angry and frustrated over the situation in Solano County.

"The welfare department should treat its customers like Macy's treats its customers, like human beings and not like animals," Aslanian said.