

The Privatization and Localization of Welfare: How the Social Safety Net Serves Florida's Big Bend

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review how, in the context of welfare devolution and privatization, the social safety net in Florida's Big Bend serves the region's food insecure population. It does not examine with precision *how well* the safety net serves the welfare needs of the region, but rather provides an illustration of how a "private" and "local" system makes food and housing assistance available to those in need. The focus of attention will be upon two of the region's most important nonprofit, nongovernmental providers of emergency services, The Shelter, the largest homeless shelter in the Big Bend, and the America's Second Harvest of the Big Bend (ASHBB), the region's largest food bank. The Shelter provides meals as well as temporary shelter for the most indigent of the region's residents and the ASHBB offers food and other household items to agencies (including The Shelter) that provide welfare services to the poor. The first section will propose a conceptual framework that specifies the make-up of the social safety net and that scale at which it operates, followed in the second section by a review of the effects of recent state restructuring on social welfare provision and the debate surrounding those changes. Following a brief description of poverty in the Big Bend in the third section, the fourth and fifth sections illustrate two major actors within the safety net that serves that region of need. Finally, in the concluding section, the efficacy and suitability of the region's safety net is considered.

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The American safety net: Questions of architecture and scale

The concept of the “social safety net” represents the network of institutions through which social welfare services are provided, including actors and programs that operate at different scales (local, regional, national) within the spheres of the state, capital, and civil society. Figure 1 provides a framework that can be used to locate the various actors in the social safety net in the American political economy. *State* actors include agencies, departments, and programs working at different levels of the governmental hierarchy who serve the welfare needs of the poor and food insecure. They are the most substantial and systematically involved participants in the social safety net at all scales, and, moreover, often serve as “silent partners” by providing funding and policy support to commercial and nonprofit participants (Poppendieck 1998). Actors within the sphere of *capital*, such as family farmers and corporations involved in food production, processing, distribution, retailing and other non-food related activities, are also significant contributors to the social safety net. Commercial actors exist to serve the effective demand of markets and not the needs of the food insecure and homeless, and this is reflected in their reasons

Figure 1

	State	Capital	Civil Society
National			
State			
Regional/ Local			

for participating in the social safety net. As Poppendieck (1998) has observed, the institutionalization of the social safety net has “proven extraordinarily useful to business[es]” (p. 159), which receive tax benefits, avoid dumping fees, and use their association with a “good deed” as a marketing strategy. Actors from the sphere of *civil society* constitute the so-called voluntary sector and include religious and “faith-based” organizations, nonprofit institutions and charity organizations. While these “voluntary” participants in the social safety net are not motivated by the public- and profit-oriented mandates of state and commercial actors, they often work in close partnership with them (Wolpert 1993).

These actors form a safety net that exists as a *geographically and historically specific configuration of state, commercial, and voluntary programs, policies, and organizations with different motives that operate at and across distinct scales*. The historical development of the social safety net reflects an ongoing and contentious search for the most appropriate jurisdictional location of the safety net within the American political economy (i.e. in the public or private sphere and at what scale—state/local or national). In the late nineteenth century outdoor relief (public assistance in the form of cash and food) gave way to “scientific charity” as the view gained strength that private actors could play a more effective (i.e. morally disciplining) role in the provision of welfare services (Katz 1996). The establishment of the American welfare state in the 1930s re-positioned public institutions at the center of the national welfare system and precipitated a series of conflicts over the scale at which particular welfare services would be administered (Handler 1995). While the American safety net operated almost entirely at the scale of states and localities prior to the New Deal, the Roosevelt administration reconfigured the safety net to include national level agencies and programs, most notably Social Security. Twenty years on, the War on Poverty reinforced the keystone role of the national state in the social welfare system that would, in the vision of President Johnson, provide services through federally-funded but locally-based and public “community action” (Katz 1989). The most recent period in the development of the social safety net began during the recession of the early 1970s when “Welfare became the centerpiece of an explanation for economic stagnation and moral decay” (Katz 1989, p. 139). Advocates of this view gained the initiative in the struggle over the configuration of the social welfare system, arguing on both philosophical and

political grounds that the national scale, federal state-led approach to poverty alleviation had failed. On these grounds, President Reagan initiated a reduction of the federal government's role in providing relief with an aim to reconfigure the social safety net around voluntary participation by private actors and to transfer its administration to local states and communities.

State restructuring and the privatization and localization of welfare

The degree to which a social safety net that relies on voluntary contributions (by private commercial and nonprofit actors) and local funding and administration has been achieved reflects the success of a political discourse that combines particular views about the causes of poverty, the function of government, and the scale at which it should intervene. The question of the role of government in the welfare system has been at the forefront of the broader debate in the United States over the "appropriate divisions of responsibility within and between the public and private sectors [that] is an ongoing process in the American federal system" (Kodras 1997, p. 79). Over the past two decades, the mantra of "less government" has summarized the prevailing, but contested, view that reductions in the scale and scope of the federal government's capacities would improve social welfare services. From this perspective, a greater reliance on "private initiative" and "local solutions" would improve the flexibility, efficiency, and precision of response. Since the era of Reagan's presidency, the doctrine of "less government" has been pursued and, to a substantial degree, achieved through the *devolution* of government functions from higher to lower levels of the federal hierarchy, the transfer of government functions to commercial firms or nonprofit organizations through *privatization*, and the *dismantling* of government programs by way of outright elimination or debilitating financial cuts (Kodras 1997, pp. 81-82). The state restructuring that occurred through these processes, highlighted by the passage of federal welfare "reform" in 1996 in the form of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, brought about a substantial re-location and re-constitution of the social safety net within the American political economy. Primary responsibility for the provision of social welfare was transferred from the public to the private sphere and from the federal to state and local levels of government.

As a putative strategy to improve the welfare system, the pursuit of “less government” has been given moral pretext by the revival of a view – longstanding in America – about the nature of poverty and its cures. In that view, poverty is primarily the result of individual behavioral deficiencies, such as a lack of work ethic and/or promiscuity, rather than structural processes, such as economic shifts, changing employment patterns, racial and sexual discrimination, and public disinvestment in education and social supports (Cope 1997). Remedies, from this standpoint, are designed to address the behavior of the individual rather than, for example, the lack of jobs and low wages. In the 1980s and 1990s, the strengthening of this view gave rise to a “symbolic politics” whereby the effects of poverty (i.e. the fact that individuals and families received low-income public assistance) rather than its causes were targeted as the objects of welfare reform (Handler 1995). Thus, for example, policies were designed to reduce federal cash supports for low income households as well as the numbers of poor people receiving them, while the economic and social causes of un- and under-employment, food insecurity, and homelessness were for the most part neglected.

Whether or not it was intended to alleviate poverty in America, welfare reform directly served the doctrine of “less government” by acting as a “a euphemism for cutting the cost of relief” (Katz, 1989, p. 138). Cope (1997, p. 186) explains the broader effect of welfare reform on the restructuring of the social safety net, “Individual responsibility [became] the catch phrase for welfare reform, which not only defuse[d] questions of the system’s shortcomings, but also [let] government, at all levels, off the hook.” This is reflected in program and funding cuts in all manner of social services, from public housing to food stamps to cash assistance (Cook and Brown 1997; Sard and Daskal 1998; Handler 2000).

The reduction of the scale and scope of the federal government’s responsibility to provide social welfare was intended, moreover, to enhance the roles of the market and volunteer sectors in the safety net in order to, in Reagan’s words, “rediscover America . . . the America whose initiative, ingenuity, and industry made this country the envy of the world, the America whose rich tradition of generosity began with simple acts of neighbor caring for neighbor” (Reagan, quoted in Poppendieck, 1998, p. 138). Reagan’s emphasis on private actors and the local scale expressed the view that federal bureaucracy necessarily suppressed such community action by inhibiting both the “initia-

tive, ingenuity . . . and generosity" of local actors in position to help and the work ethic of those "dependent" on welfare (Katz 1996). Reagan asserted that a reduction of the federal government's role would bring government "closer to the people" and create a social space in which private actors would be free to innovate and implement locally appropriate policies and, thereby, produce a safety net that was more efficient, accountable, flexible, and responsive (or "targeted") to those in actual need.

While the notion of a safety net woven out of neighbor-to-neighbor caring is politically, fiscally, and, for some, morally alluring, critics have endeavored to show that privately organized and locally administered welfare will not be able to adequately serve the needs of the food insecure and homeless. Based on a survey of state-level reports documenting the impacts of state devolution on social welfare, Nestle and Guttmacher (1992) concluded that neither the private sector (commercial and voluntary) nor local states had the capacity to provide food and income assistance to meet present or future levels of need. According to Wolpert (1997) the inability of charity to serve as the basis of the national welfare system derives from some of its basic features. First, only around 10 percent of total charitable contributions are given to support programs and services for the poor. Second, the geographic distribution of charities receiving those contributions does not match the distribution of communities in need, and "most charities lack the mechanisms to reallocate donations where they are needed most" (Wolpert 1997, p. 102). Third, because the charitable sector receives around one-third of its income from government grants and contracts, the reduction of government support for welfare translates as a substantial deterioration in what were already meager resources with which to provide social support for the food insecure and homeless. Thus, as Wolpert points out, in the most optimistic scenario, charity would cover less than 2 to 5 percent of the cuts in federal welfare support.

Cook and Brown (1997) provide a specific example of this in their study of the American Second Harvest Food Bank (ASH), the largest distributor of donated food in the United States. They calculate that by 2002 the expenditure cuts in the Food Stamp Program contained in the 1996 welfare reform bill will increase the unmet need within the ASH system from 726 million pounds of food to 24.5 billion pounds. Prior to welfare reform, ASH was able to meet only 83 percent of the needs of the food programs it serves through its network; after reform it will meet less than 30 percent

of those needs assuming an optimistic growth scenario. More likely it will achieve a level of service that is much lower.

The capacity of the voluntary sector to serve as the basis for the national safety net derives not only from income and resources garnered from donations but also from the supply of volunteers, personnel management, logistical coordination, physical access, and local governance. For example, in her study of “emergency food” (i.e. that provided by soup kitchens, food pantries, and food banks), Poppendieck bases her critique of a charity-based safety net on issues of cultural appropriateness, nutritional adequacy, stability of service, accessibility, and efficiency, in addition to adequacy of charitable giving. Underlying each of these, and especially the issue of efficiency, is the question of coordination among charitable actors and between supply and need over time and space within a decentralized and supply-driven system: “Emergency food quantity, quality, coverage or accessibility, predictability, and social cohesiveness are not determined by some sort of societal plan to meet basic needs; in fact, they are driven as much by supply—by available food resources, volunteer time, space, and the like—as by need” (Poppendieck 1998, p. 229). A fundamental concern is that private welfare is not legally responsible for the equitability of social support that would be required of a federally organized system in which recipients have citizenship rights to assistance or, at least, appeals to such rights.

The ability of local states to take on the social welfare responsibilities transferred to them by welfare reform has also come in question. It was pointed out above that one of the aims and effects of state devolution was to create a social space in which local initiative could flourish and provide welfare that was appropriate to local needs. To the extent that such outcomes will occur, local initiative requires a favorable institutional context defined by adequate fiscal resources, expertise, infrastructure, and political will, each of which varies considerably from place to place. While geographical unevenness is not a new feature of welfare provision in the United States, devolution tends to exacerbate the differences between places, as affluent and experienced localities are more able to take advantage of new “local powers” while those exhibiting a greater need for assistance often fail to realize these new capacities. In either case, however, the social space opened up by welfare reform is severely constrained by competitive pressures imposed by national or global forces that discipline “local initiative” to create a “favorable business climate” as a necessary

precondition, it is argued, to the community's ability to provide social welfare. Thus, "local states are left with less control . . . even as the national state passes off additional responsibility [to] them" (Kodras 1997, p. 90). In Tallahassee, for example, an attempt to establish health care service for the working poor – those earning too much money to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private insurance – was derided by the local business association and city boosters as an unfair tax burden that would disable attempts to attract capital investment to the city and county (Staff 2001).

Despite the merits of these fundamental critiques, processes of state devolution have transformed the safety net into one that resembles the privatized and localized system depicted in Reagan's vision of a "new Federalism". How does such a welfare system work in practice? Poppendieck (1998) has provided a comprehensive answer to this important question with respect to food assistance, while Handler (2000) has examined the efficacy of welfare-to-work schemes. The purpose of this paper is to begin addressing this question from the perspective of a particular region, the Big Bend region of Florida. The next section will provide a brief description of the region and its level of need for food and housing assistance, followed by two sections, each of which will describe a major actor in the region's safety net.

Poverty in the Big Bend

The Big Bend is situated in rural north Florida, taking its name from the north-to-west curve of the coastline that connects the peninsula with the panhandle. Made up of 14 counties, the region is one of the poorest in Florida, with inequalities in wealth and poverty tracing their roots to late nineteenth century cotton and tobacco plantations. More recently, the agrarian economy has shifted to diversified vegetable and nursery-plant production with labor supplied by migrant labor. In 1997 the median household income across the Big Bend was nearly \$10,000 less than the national average and \$5,000 less than the statewide average. The poverty rate in the Big Bend reached 20.5 percent in 1997, compared with rates of 13.3 percent for the nation and 14.4 percent for state. Based on the cost of a subsistence diet, the rate of poverty is the best measure of food insecurity at the *county level*² but it provides a rather inaccurate gauge of overall material deprivation and economic insecurity. This arises from its failure to incorporate

an appropriate model of contemporary household expenditure, namely the increasing share of household income consumed by the high cost of shelter. Thus, by considering housing costs, we can draw a more complete picture of poverty in the Big Bend. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, approximately 48 percent of people in the Big Bend are unable to afford a two-bedroom apartment at a Fair Market Rent (a rent estimate determined by Housing and Urban Development) (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2000). The comparable figure for the state of Florida is 40 percent.

The Shelter

The Shelter, established in 1991 on the northeast edge of Tallahassee's downtown, regularly provides three meals daily and temporary lodgings for 120 people, and serves meals only to an additional 30 people. The facility, which is open every day of the year, is within walking distance of a number of social services as well as the public library and various parks. This central location has at times elicited scorn from nearby merchants who have requested that The Shelter be moved out of the district. Lodgers receive basic accommodations, either double bunk beds or mats for sleeping on the floor, as well as toilet, bathing, and laundry facilities, support services, and referrals to a range of community services, including food stamps, housing placement, health care, counseling, legal aid, and employment and job training (The Shelter 2001). Space permitting, it is The Shelter's policy to refuse no one and those taken in can stay as long as they wish free of charge, provided they abide by its rules. In 1999 The Shelter expanded to open a women's shelter that offers services to homeless women. There are two other shelters in the city, both small compared to the Shelter and both operated by charities. Each charges long-term guests. One is only open five days a week.

The Shelter's operations are paid for by a mixture of charitable donations and federal, state, and local (county and city) government grants, with administrative and staff salaries consuming the largest portion of these funds. The City of Tallahassee provides no money for its operation, but provides the building. The meals that are served three times a day at The Shelter are in large part the product of local volunteers and the regional food bank. Breakfast (both food and service) is provided by either The Shelter or a

Hindu group, while Good News, a "faith-based" charity that receives public funding, provides lunch. The evening meal is provided by various organizations, most of which are religious groups representing the Christian, Jewish, Moslem, and Hindu faiths. Non-sectarian groups also provide meals, including women's groups, those formed within government agencies or private enterprises, and student groups from the two universities in Tallahassee (Florida State University and Florida A&M University). Each volunteer group agrees to obtain food and prepare and serve the meal on a specific day of each month, and several have done so for six or more years. Volunteer groups provide approximately 85 percent of dinners at The Shelter (The Shelter 2001). When no volunteer groups are available, The Shelter provides meals with food purchased from private sector retailers or from ASHBB (examined in the next section), a major source of inexpensive food.

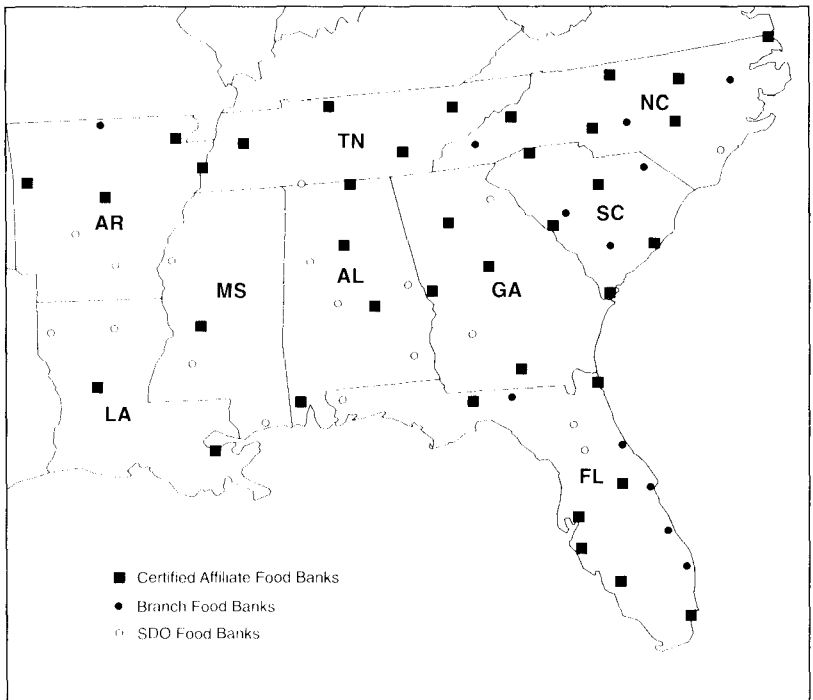
The Shelter exercises no control over the nutritional quality or type of food served by the volunteer groups on which it depends so heavily. To avoid scrutiny by the Board of Health there are no facilities for cooking at The Shelter. Food is brought already prepared to the serving area, which is equipped with a warming facility. Since all food is cooked elsewhere and brought to The Shelter, it is taken on faith by the management that the food is fresh and is prepared under sanitary conditions. The Shelter also receives an enormous amount of party leftovers, especially during the holiday and football seasons and graduation time at the local universities and high schools. This food is generally accepted without question and is used to supplement that which is brought by the scheduled providers.

Recognizing the overall lack of coordination within the local volunteer sector, in 2000 the City of Tallahassee budgeted \$100,000 to the recently established Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless. The money was to be used to complete a study to improve the articulation among local charities, including The Shelter, that offer emergency shelter, food, clothing, employment, and medical services. In addition to setting up a web site to serve as a central clearinghouse for relevant information on these services, the coalition has proposed the construction of a large multi-service facility, which has given rise to a contentious debate over the facility's location within the city.

American Second Harvest of the Big Bend

ASHBB is an affiliate of America's Second Harvest (ASH), a network of 200 food banks that distributes more than 1.4 billions pounds of food to 50,000 community agencies that serve 26 million people nationwide (American Second Harvest 2001). The ASH network is unevenly distributed across the United States. ASH food banks are located in every state, with the highest concentrations found in urban areas of the west and east coastal regions. The spatial distribution of ASH food banks in the southeast is characterized by a relatively even spread (Figure 2). In Florida there are seven ASH food banks, five of which are found in the southern half of the state. Founded in 1980 as an independent food bank, the ASHBB now distributes nearly 2.5 million pounds of food throughout its 14 county service area (American Second Harvest of the Big Bend 2001). While the total population of the Big Bend is not large

Figure 2
America's Second Food Harvest Bank Network in the Southeast



compared to the service areas of the other six ASH affiliates in Florida, a number of the counties in the region are among the poorest in the state. ASHBB is the major charitable food distributor (food bank) in the region, serving at least 190 non-governmental agencies. Five Big Bend counties are totally dependent on it, while in seven there is only one other source. ASHBB sponsors a variety of programs in addition to food collection and distribution, including advocacy and disaster relief. Today it maintains a large warehouse in a Tallahassee industrial park, equipped with cooler and freezer rooms. It also has a small branch warehouse in Madison, the seat of the like named county, located 60 miles east of Tallahassee.

ASHBB offers processed and fresh food and other household essentials to its member agencies, each of which is given access to the distribution network on the condition that products obtained from ASHBB are provided to poor individuals and families. Most agencies are associated with churches or other religious organizations, although there are many non-sectarian agencies, including youth groups and women's support centers. The selection of food available at ASHBB warehouses and outlets varies daily and is sold by weight to its members. Typical offerings include frozen and canned meats, fresh and canned vegetables, dry packaged foods, and kitchen supplies. Prepared foods, such as pastries and delicatessen items whose "shelf life" has expired, and aesthetically unappealing vegetables donated by supermarkets are often given away free of charge.

The volume of food products that pass through the ASHBB's warehouses necessitates a high degree of organization and logistical coordination. Deliveries must be appropriately timed, space in the warehouse requires careful management, and orders filled as accurately as possible. Seven full-time and four part-time employees accomplish these crucial tasks along with a group of volunteers. Inbound supplies are brought by trucks, most of them from private freight lines, that arrive constantly throughout the five-day work week. While these cargoes are unloaded and positioned in specific places in the warehouse, client agencies arrive at another entrance to pick up their orders. The ASHBB owns a small fleet of trucks that are used to pick up and deliver food within the local area.

ASHBB receives donations from the USDA and local and non-local private sources. The USDA is the largest single donor to the ASHBB, providing 916,000 pounds of food during the fiscal year

2000. Typically the ASHBB has at least 50 USDA products for sale, some in tremendous quantities if there is a glut in the national market. In the summer of 2001 there were 15 tons of canned fruit juices, eight tons each of frozen peaches and seedless raisins, two tons of corn grits, a ton of spaghetti, and two tons of canned and fresh cranberries.

Farms in the Big Bend are a significant source of fresh fruits and vegetables for the ASHBB. Growers occasionally decide they do not want to sell their produce, if, for example, they calculate that it will spoil before being sold or if the wholesale price has collapsed. In such cases they contact the food bank, which ascertains whether its agencies would be able to use the produce and then contracts with a freight line or uses its own trucks to pick it up. The ASHBB is presently trying to organize a "gleaner" program that would allow volunteers to collect produce from the fields of vegetable farms that farmers were not interested in harvesting. ASHBB also receives a great deal of fresh produce from farms outside the Big Bend region. Frequently growers in South Georgia and Central and South Florida will offer produce that they cannot sell profitably to the ASH affiliates, which notify the ASHBB when the volume is too large to be absorbed by their service areas. The ability of the ASHBB to retrieve such non-local surpluses is in jeopardy due to recent cuts in state funding for the transportation budgets of food banks outside of South Florida (Ensley 2001). Additionally, produce enters the ASHBB system from sources beyond the southeastern United States. In the winter of 2001 a cooperative of Idaho potato growers donated thousands of tons of potatoes to the ASH that had been held in storage to maintain a high retail price. The central office of the ASH coordinated the distribution of the potatoes to its members throughout the nation, including the ASHBB, which received several tons.

Donations from private corporations and cooperatives collectively account for a larger tonnage of food than that donated by the USDA. Food retailers, both local and national chains, donate a wide range of food and other items for all manner of reasons. For example, products may be donated if the packaging or ingredients are changed, if the expiration date is approaching or has passed, or if the producer is closing out the product. In 2000 the ASHBB received 400,000 pounds of "salvage" from its largest private donor, the Supervalu supermarket chain. The latter operates a reclamation facility in Quincy, located about 20 miles west of Tallahassee, where dented cans, damaged packages, returns and

other rejects are collected. These goods are often sent to food banks where they are inspected and, if deemed suitable for use, distributed to non-governmental agencies.

Conclusion

The previous two sections provide an illustration of the means by which private (commercial and volunteer) and local actors deliver welfare services to the food insecure and homeless living in Florida's Big Bend region. The Shelter and ASHBB, which serve as crucial knots in the region's social safety net, embody an impressive array of charitable and regional/local effort and resources. The Shelter could not offer its services on local government money alone; its operations are made possible by the generosity of community groups who donate time, money, and other necessary resources. Private donations supply ASHBB with more than half of its food; the food programs organized by its member agencies are conducted by local volunteers.

The decline of the federal government's role in the welfare system has pushed to the foreground issues involving the logistics of service delivery. As individual actors, The Shelter and the ASHBB have apparently confronted these issues with considerable success. Yet the creative energy and time donated by volunteers and staff (which are mostly funded by charitable donations) are largely consumed in the pursuit and delivery of supplies (money, personnel, resources), leaving scant time, energy, and resources to address the causes of regional poverty, hunger, and homelessness through, for example, advocacy and participation in policy struggles. Indeed, The Shelter and ASHBB provide temporary and emergency services but, while they endeavor to provide a comprehensive range of services, they do not possess the financial resources, personnel, and organizational mandate to apply themselves to fundamental problems such as the supply of low cost housing and issues of employment (job training, sufficiency of wages). Furthermore, the lack of central coordination among local and regional actors puts into question the ability of the region's welfare system, as opposed to the individual actors within it, to adequately provision the region's poor. For example, The Shelter has no control over the quality nor the quantity of food provided by the volunteer groups, and the ASHBB is dependent upon what the government or private corporations donate, which is not necessarily what their clients need. Two decades of state devolu-

tion have produced a welfare system that is driven by, and oriented according to, the vagaries of supply, rather than the demands of citizens with rights to basic social provision, which points, in conclusion, to the need for further research on the adequacy of voluntarism and localism as bases for the national safety net.

Notes

¹Dr. Winsberg is an active volunteer at The Shelter and in this role he also interacts frequently with the ASHBB.

²The Food Security Supplement included in the annual Current Population Survey provides a more direct and precise measure of the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger, but data are collected at the state level.

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