

NY Daily News

Gov. David Paterson has a promise to keep: Increase the basic welfare grant

Errol Louis

Thursday, December 18th 2008, 4:00 AM

Nearly lost in [Gov. Paterson](#)'s bad-news budget speech was a long-overdue promise to increase the basic welfare grant given to the state's poorest residents for the first time in 18 years.

About 500,000 New Yorkers statewide receive the basic grant, which is the cash source of last resort for those who don't qualify for Social Security, disability or other benefits.

It's not a lot of money. A single person with no children gets \$215 a month for rent and \$137 for general expenses.

There's no place in the state, from the inner city to the most remote rural towns, where that meager allocation will cover rent, food, transportation and other day-to-day expenses. Even grant recipients who also get food stamps - \$176 a month in [New York City](#) - end up broke, hungry and on the verge of homelessness.

"Obviously, it's just not enough. People can't live on that," says [Doug Lasdon](#), executive director of the [Urban Justice Center](#) advocacy group. "Uniformly, people run out of their food stamps at around halfway through the month, and they run out of their cash grant literally within days."

When Lasdon visited a grant recipient in the middle of last month, the man showed him a refrigerator containing nothing but a package of chicken parts. "He eats one meager meal a day and spends his life hungry," says Lasdon.

Leaving hundreds of thousands of people on the brink of starvation, it turns out, isn't just callous - it's illegal.

Lasdon recently filed a class-action lawsuit against the state, arguing that refusing to raise the basic grant violates Article 17 of the state Constitution, which states, "The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state."

Article 17 was passed in 1938 after a lean decade of economic depression.

In 1977, our state's highest court reemphasized [New York](#)'s commitment to care for the poor, declaring in ringing tones, "The provision for assistance to the needy is not a matter of legislative grace; rather, it is specifically mandated by our Constitution" and "a fundamental part of the social contract."

But the grant hasn't been adjusted, even for inflation, since 1990.

Lasdon's lawsuit may explain why Paterson is promising, even in a tough budget year, to increase the basic grant.

I'd prefer to think Paterson is choosing to continue our state's progressive tradition of giving the poor and the unlucky a chance to survive and succeed.

That's not a popular view these days. A great many people take the shortsighted view that it's better to let people stumble and suffer than to help them.

These are the same citizens who howl about the idea of giving small amounts of aid to the able-bodied poor - not realizing, or not caring, that it costs everyone much more to provide services through homeless shelters, jail cells, hospital emergency rooms and other places where people land after falling through the cracks.

In January, I wrote about [Harold Gardner](#), a cab driver from [Dutchess County](#) who was unable to work due to an accident and ended up in a [Poughkeepsie](#) homeless shelter because the basic grant wasn't enough to cover the \$350 monthly rent in his trailer park.

The cost of the shelter, needless to say, was far higher than \$350 a month.

"If the assistance grant was higher, I would be able to get my own place and get back on my feet," Gardner said at a state hearing two years ago.

A sensible cash grant, based on the actual cost of living and indexed to inflation, would be a sound, compassionate and legally mandated way to begin reknitting a gaping hole in New York's social safety net.