

Do you know a poverty pimp?

Hurricane Katrina Version

(This article was first written almost two years ago and it received international attention and literally thousands of comments-many by homeless, ex-homeless and social workers. Many homeless and ex-homeless thanked me, and asked for an expansion of one of my 40 original points or just an addition of a new point. The majority of social workers denounced me or made accusations about my motivations. A few fervently agreed with me; many of them also had additions. I have since revised and expanded the original article in light of those comments. I have chosen to republish it at this time due to the current desperate needs of those who have been affected by the recent Hurricane Katrina disaster and the consequent devastation of much of the Gulf of Mexico and the need for examination of plans and actions taken. But readers should be forewarned that this should be considered a work in progress.)
by Jamie “Bork” Loughner

The winter holidays sometimes seem more like a time of greed for many charity and social programs than a time to redouble efforts to aid the poor. The poverty pimps put their hand out and look like every good and helpful program out there. And there ARE good, decent programs out there-it's just hard to distinguish them in the expanse of programs that are well disguised schemes to make exceedingly high livings off the poor. So how can you tell whom to support? And if you work or volunteer in a program how do you know if it or some the people in it deserve your support?

How can you make sure that your well intentioned efforts are not perpetuating many of the problems that you hope to help solve? Some ways are to define and criticize what you see in your program that is negative and either work to correct the problems and eliminate those who perpetuate them or work to dismantle those programs that are irredeemable and attempt to replace them with something better. Denounce them and try to eliminate the power structures that reinforce them.

The term “poverty pimp” is defined as a derogatory label for an individual or group which, to its own benefit,

acts as an intermediary on behalf of the poor. Literally, a poverty pimp is an individual or group who solicits for the poor, or it can mean, a welfare system procurer. Poverty pimps gain a higher quality of existence from exploiting the poverty of others.



As other critics of our current “aid” systems have stated: “Under the American system of inter-linked public and private social services the poor get helped but not in any effective way; the big bucks go for overhead. As always, a lot of anti-poverty money is going to people who are not poor. There are whole classes of people who live off the services provided to the poor. Most well-funded, charitable agencies that exist have a prime function of managing the poor; they do not question the inequalities which define our society nor do they serve to fundamentally change the lives of the poor they take ‘care’ of.” Often even the services they supposedly offer, at extravagant cost, are not adequate or even designed for the task of helping people rebuild their lives. Instead they exist to maintain and preserve “clients” in a state of poverty while providing a guarantee of employment, social respectability, and status for generations of college educated do-gooders.

Truly malevolent poverty pimps, however, are worse than those who just live off of “helping” others. They are the ones who actively perpetuate the poverty in order to keep their job. They add more bureaucracy and more program “hurdles” in order to expand their programs and their power. They are motivated to grant

“limited” charity to the less fortunate rather than practice solidarity and mutual-aid with the poor. They are the firms who purposely overcharge and pad the bills, wasting money supposedly given to help the poor. And poverty pimps tend to spend 90 cents [or 80 or 70] on every donated dollar on administrative costs and “business” advertising budgets. So perhaps the definition of poverty pimp should be people who make professional pay but do little to help their “charges”. As one homeless person put it “It’s not unfair to get paid to help others, but too often social programs do too little to end or even reduce poverty and homelessness. Homeless people need the power to decide which efforts to help us are worth funding.” Poverty pimps are the workers and administrators, many in the government, who keep expanding the public and private social services system, for the purpose of expanding their job and salary opportunities. They contribute more money to keep the cycle eternal. They are the ones who make the system so challenging that you practically need a college degree to navigate it, causing loads of frustrated poor people to opt out of the system and fend for themselves in the streets. They are the vast number of groups-government and non-profit’s and NGO’s-who work to foster dependency and rather than mutual aid and cooperative communities.

Poverty pimps are the originally well-intentioned workers who have lost sight of the poor as individuals and the ones who never really cared in the first place. Essentially, “poverty pimps” callously and purposely profit from the misfortune of others.

Every holiday season I think about the poverty pimps a little more. I, like the rest of the world, receive their “desperate” solicitations for funding. As an activist on housing and anti-poverty issues, I am often the target for their requests for aid. To my sorrow, much of the activist work I do often gets co-opted by these pimp thugs. I’m invited to speak at their fundraisers. But, if I ask them to provide details on where all their funds go, or how their budget is decided and by whom, they take offense at my simple questions. Or if I ask if the majority of their homeless clients were consulted in their decisions, or allowed to participate in the decision-making process, it is as chilling to my relationship with them as the kiss of death. Oh, don’t get me wrong. Many of the worst poverty pimp organizations have hard-working good people in them [often idealistic people wearing rose-colored glasses], numerous volunteers and organization benefactors with only the best in their hearts. [For one example of this, have we all heard the term “Starvation Army”-coined by the homeless so many years ago?]

So any criticisms are given by those who simply want to stop any organized societal aid of the poor; those people on both sides of the political aisle who simply don’t give a darn if poor people live or die as long as it doesn’t impede their “property rights and personal well-being. Those who in their class warfare simply want to shut off all programs and all aid to the poor, perpetuating much of the vilest inequalities in our society. To those who wish to see good programs for the poor flourish: the result of the lack constructive criticism is that in the name of goodness and help, the vulture pimps make away with much of the aid that can actually allow people to rise above their poverty and live with dignity and full interaction and contribution to society.

It really can be hard to evaluate if a group or individual is a poverty pimp. So here are 50 examples that my activist friends and I have seen of poverty pimps (taken from real life in every case).

You know you’re a poverty pimp...

1. When you are overheard saying that talking to the people you are supposed to be helping makes you physically ill.
2. When you start a series of for-profit ventures to “fund” your not-for-profit ...and you are much more involved in those to the point that your not-for-profit is essentially a front that provides tax-breaks and aid for your for-profit ventures.
3. When getting financial donations has become the vast majority of your effort and time and that if fine with you.
4. When you become really, really, really good at using race, class and gender discussions to prevent any criticism of what you are doing.
5. When your offices are furnished much better than anything your clients will ever own in their entire lifetime.
6. When you feed people far worse things than you yourself would ever eat or even give to your dog.
7. When that signed photograph of Billie Holiday is the only heroin addict ever willingly allowed into your presence despite your image of caring sainthood in regards to the poor.
8. When you are happy hearing about squatters getting evicted because you can get more funding for your housing program.
9. When you spend much more of your time making the poor people you “serve” jump through hoops and “hurdles” than actually filling their needs-which not only enriches you and your political cronies pockets, it also gives you quite a belly laugh.
10. When you leave your office in fear of the people you’re supposed to be helping.
11. When you don’t dare answer the phone that rings at 2 am as it might be one of your clients.
12. When you get that rush of fear from coming face to face with your hungry clients out in front of the hotel as you enter your \$500 dollar a plate fundraiser.
 13. A. When there is debate at your Conference of Homeless Service Agencies as to whether you will feed the homeless you brought in to speak at your \$200 dollar a plate banquet.
 - B. Or you don’t even bother to debate it. It simply never occurs to anyone while they are enjoying that wonderfully nourishing and expensive food to feed the homeless speakers anything other than the soup-kitchen slop they regularly get from some of those same service agencies.
 - C. Or you stand in front of that wet bar at your banquet while speaking with your alcoholic clients about whether or not they can stay.
 14. When you’re told to hide the city’s free guide to homeless services so that the clients have to come back over and over since your program gets money each time they sign up... and you do it.

15. A. When it deeply offends you that someone would even suggest that your “clients” might deserve [and might greatly benefit from] some input in the way your organization is run or programs it offers or the budget priorities for the organization.

B. And when some stupid activist or advocate actually gets a law passed requiring an actual homeless client to be appointed to the board, you conveniently “forget” to appoint any homeless clients to your board until those pesky homeless have the gall to actual fight for their rights.

16. When donated money is used politically to expand your non-profit operations allowing you to increase already exorbitant salaries and expand the organizational payroll to pay more pimps’ salaries resulting in even more political clout that enables you to get more public and private donation money.

17. When you’ve served as a shelter director for 21+ [or 10+ or 5+] years and, when asked, you have no real idea where the homeless could go or what happens to the homeless that you’ve turned away.

18. When you have to go to extraordinary lengths to keep those who are not poor [like wealthy financial contributors who volunteer one day a year or the politicians and media tours every holiday season that shows off your “good works”] from seeing what your soup kitchen really looks like on a “normal” day.

19. When you invariably cut services whenever decisions have to be made between retaining services and programs for the poor or laying off one or two of your well-paid college-educated social workers who own their own home and whose life-partners work.

20. When you find yourself thinking or saying that if one more homeless person would freeze to death this winter your budget for next year would be assured.

21. A. When you spend 20 minutes lecturing a homeless person about not selling goods you provide before giving them the single bus token they need to leave your facility. [Often making them late for that job interview, class, or soup kitchen meal they needed.]

B. You relish lecturing repeatedly; it is a majority of your work time. And you consider that a job well done, virtuous, and well worth that upper middle class salary of yours.

22. When you admit to having dreams about ways to make being poor as difficult as possible for your clients... and you think some of them are pretty good.

23. When your government funded housing program is designed with as many hurdles as possible so that the vast majority of the poor can’t qualify, letting you sell the units at market rate.

24. When most of the money for your “advocacy” group goes for four star hotels and platinum credit cards for your staff.

25. When you put barbed wire on your shelter fence and use the fear

of freezing to lock your clients in at night.

26. When you are asked to schedule your soup kitchen’s meal times so the homeless are less visible on the street to businessmen...and you do it.

27. A. When you don’t care that you tell your homeless clients to call other programs for help, despite the fact you know they don’t have 50 cents for the pay phone.

B. When you tell a client [with children] to physically go to several places in order for them to get the proper signatures so they can get the help they need, despite knowing they have neither gas money nor available transportation to complete all these tasks. And you know that the agencies you’ve sent them to wont be open by the time they get there.

28. When your advocacy group uses the threat of protests by the people you represent as a way of extorting donation money out of oppressive corporations.... and without getting them to change their policies.



Presidential photo op that happened when people were still being rescued from rooftops in New Orleans.

29. When you seek [usually white] middle-class prestige college-graduated applicants who have rarely seen and never experienced poverty to manage programs for the homeless rather than promote qualified [usually people of color] ex-homeless already within your organization.

30. When you lie, claiming you don’t have access to the keys, rather than let the homeless go to the bathroom outside of your shelter’s normal hours.

31. When you fire any of your employees who criticize the social services industry and your place in it.

32. When someone comments on how the numbers are declining at your shelter and the first comment is: “Well, we wouldn’t want to be out of a job or anything.”

33. When your job performance appraisal is tied to your willingness to remove children from the homes of poverty stricken parents.

34. When most of your events feature open or cash bars though most of your clients have drug or alcohol problems.

35. When you make over one hundred thousand dollars per year as your clients eat out of garbage cans yet you are always grateful when others point out your selflessness.

36. When the only decent food donations [say that really good steak that was donated by a local hotel chain for the homeless to have a better holiday season] ends up in your freezer and you justify this by saying there wasn’t enough to serve everyone so it might as well serve your holiday guests and not go to waste, despite the fact that there are almost always ways to stretch good nourishing food in some tasty way and your volunteer staff has told you they could do something special and nice with it.

37. When you physically attack or permit your employees to attack

your clients when they insist on their right to a drink of water.

38. When you could care less that a group of large violent men [many mimicking the institutionalized sanctioned guard violence from their experiences within the prison system] actually run the details of your shelter as you get paid well anyway and it saves you from having to interact with your clients.

39. When you collect donation money in order to collect more donation money.

40. When your primary concern when entering into anti-poverty coalition activities is who will get the credit.

41. When you are an ex-homeless person who knows better but you still want a \$100,000 plus [sometimes a lot of plus] for being the ex-homeless front personality for a wealthy board of directors of a “charity” or “advocacy” organization which knowingly feeds at the poverty pimp troughs-moving from being pimped to being a pimp.

42. When you would rather let a homeless man with badly bleeding feet stay outside on a cold night than take your homeless transport van the 3 1/2 blocks off your route needed to get him and take to shelter.

43. When your organization participates without the slightest thought or hesitation in a yearly city-wide fundraising event [say a homeless walk-a-thon] that is more and more designed to praise and perpetuate and fund the power structures and individuals that have repeatedly closed essential city services for the poor [such as public hospitals and shelters that are closed mid-winter after homeless have already frozen to death from lack of shelter] because your organization’s slice of that rich pie [and your exorbitant salary] might be endangered if you criticize the event in the slightest.

44. When you never even hesitate about those first class plane tickets your organization pays for you to go to many annual homeless events and conferences, despite the fact that, if you have to go, regular class tickets would allow you to double your food budget for your 200 soup kitchen clients and let them eat vegetables and a decent meat for that day.

45. A. When you dissemble that you don’t have enough money to adequately [i.e.- a living wage] pay, train, or even refrain from laying off your [frequently poor and many ex-homeless and ex-client] front line workers and that you need concessions to bring the books into the black when in reality even the “official books” contradict you.

B. But your salary is more than triple the average for your local community. And you can still sleep at night.

46. When you secretly or not so secretly express your contempt for your “sub-human clients” and make examples of every minor theft of extra clothing or a spare pair of shoes or attempt to get a double

meal at your soup kitchen but you actively divvy up the better donations for your own use or resale. After all, the sub-humans don’t deserve the best.

47. When your coalition of advocacy and service organizations for the homeless actively works to strip rights [such as rights to shelter or to easily protest service denial] from the homeless in whose interests you supposedly work for.

48. When your corporate [non-profit of course] offices have every luxury, right down leather chairs and expensive toilet paper to protect your bottom. But the “client” bathrooms don’t have any toilet paper-or you have the front line staff hand out the inferior quality materials in small measures as an act of frugality. And bathroom cleaning supplies are not to be found.

49. When you call the police to have that long-haired bearded guy arrested for trying to teach your clients how fend for themselves for free [and without your expensive help].

And finally:

50. When your “economic justice” or shelter/soup kitchen or other aid type non-profit or NGO or government agency sees every disaster, from blizzard to famine to flood, every tragedy as an opportunity to push forth YOUR group’s agendas and advance your personal political power and to fundraise and profit from the disaster. And you never ever contemplate allowing any access, control or voice, in allocating the resources and power that has come to you, to those whose needs you are supposed to address. Specifically:

A. When you are overheard to be [obscenely!] gleeful at the promise of a huge natural mega-disaster as the misery and added burdens the poor will face as the event will test out your expensive new “emergency” disaster relief program.

B. It will guarantee your salary and allow you lots more benefits and perks for several years!

C. It will certainly deflect any criticisms you’ve received for your organization’s spending priorities.

D. And you will gain even more ego-gratification, prestige and power from the public’s perception of your efforts-however much you waste and skim the moneys you receive.

And finally here is a poem I found on the internet that shows some of the Poverty Pimp’s attitudes:

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** Specific examples of poverty pimps come from directly witnessed behavior found in social service and charity programs in Monmouth County, NJ, New York City, San Francisco, and Washington, DC.

See also:
<http://maydaydc.mahost.org/>

THE POVERTY PIMPS’ POEM

**Let us celebrate the poor,
Let us hawk them door to door.
There’s a market for their pain,
Votes and glory and money to gain.
Let us celebrate the poor.
Their ills, their sins, their faulty diction
Flavor our songs and spice our fiction.
Their hopes and struggles and agonies
Get us grants and consulting fees.
Celebrate thugs and clowns,
Give their ignorance all renown.
Celebrate what holds them down,
In our academic gowns.
Let us celebrate the poor!**