



**THE FREEDOM
ARCHIVES**



The Welfare Rights Movement

September 2017

Curriculum Intended for High School or College Seminar

Curriculum Includes:

- Activities
 - Active listening
 - Active reading
 - Active participation
 - Persuasive writing
- Digitized audio clips
- Digitized archival documents

The Freedom Archives:

Located in San Francisco's Mission District, materials in the Freedom Archives chronicle the progressive history of the Bay Area, the United States, and international movements from the late 1960s to the mid-90s. We contain over 10,000 hours of audio and videotapes as well as thousands of historical documents that enrich our media holdings. We maintain an internship program, a digital search site and a presence on social media.

Purpose:

This curriculum is intended to encourage students to think about the impact of economic and social policy on poor women and children, investigate the causes of poverty and unemployment in the U.S., and reflect on the role of race and gender in shaping who is poor. It also asks students to think about what kinds of responsibilities we, as a society, have toward people in need. Finally, it helps students understand how, historically, people have organized collectively to improve the welfare system and to challenge societal assumptions about poverty.

This curriculum is particularly important at a historical moment when our social safety net is being shredded by politicians and corporations who take away health insurance and welfare benefits from those who need them most. These efforts are frequently accompanied by negative images of poor people that fail to show the deep historical and structural reasons why poverty exists. Exposing students to the voices, experiences, and viewpoints of welfare recipients can help them more fully understand current struggles over welfare.

Historical Background:

The welfare rights movement grew out of struggles in major cities across the United States. For example, by the early 1960s a dedicated group of civil rights and poverty activists had formed Citywide, which coordinated welfare activism in New York City¹. In Los Angeles, California, a group of mothers living in the St. Nicholas Projects in Compton came together as ANC (Aid to Needy Children) to challenge the dehumanizing aspects of the welfare system. They were single mothers, raising multiple young children, and trying to scrape by on small monthly welfare payments. They were tired of the harsh, condescending treatment they received at the welfare office, where they often felt that they were seen as criminals. In addition to poor treatment from social workers, they were treated by lawmakers, politicians, and the media as a burden on taxpayers, and were mocked as cheating “welfare queens” who were just too lazy to work.

¹ <http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/welfarerights.htm>

These women came together to start protesting at their local welfare offices. They demanded better treatment, guidance in navigating the welfare bureaucracy, and an increase in payments in order to achieve a decent standard of living for their children. By the early 1970s, their efforts helped create a national welfare rights movement, which included a major organization, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Active from 1966 to 1975, NWRO's primary goals were adequate income, dignity, justice, and democratic participation of people on welfare and their children. At various points the welfare rights movement intersected with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, as well as the Women's movement and the War on Poverty programs created by the federal government.

By the 1980s, however, many of the hard-fought gains won by families in the 1960s and 70s were rolled back as social, political and economic conditions shifted leading to benefits being cut and the reassertion of rhetoric demonizing people on welfare. Today, as income inequality is at its most extreme in US history, families on welfare continue to face many of the same challenges as they did in the 1960s.

How to Use This Curriculum:

This curriculum is highly flexible and can be used in a variety of educational settings. We suggest a number of options that help develop different skill sets, such as critical thinking, active reading, active listening and expository or persuasive essay writing, all with the intention of deepening understanding of this recent history and its lessons. You know your learners best. Mix and match and add your own lessons and approaches.

Table of Contents:

Cover Page: Page 1

Purpose/Background/How to Use the Curriculum: Pages 2-3

Table of Contents: Page 4

Take-A-Stance Activity/Active Participation: Page 5

Active Reading Activity: Page 6

Reading Comprehension Activity: Pages 7-8

Active Listening Activity: Page 9

Persuasive Writing Activity: Page 10

https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC46_scans/46.WelfareRights.Articles.Packet.pdf

1. Take-A-Stance Activity (Active Participation)

Overview:

Read one of the statements (a list is provided below) out loud to the class. The students will have to decide how they feel about each statement and explain why they strongly agree (always), agree (sometimes/more times than not), disagree (most of the time no, but there may be exceptions), or strongly disagree (never).

Purpose:

This activity will encourage students to examine their own assumptions about welfare and poverty. It could be useful as an introduction to the unit. It may also be useful to return to the statements at the end of the unit. After reading and discussing the primary sources, have students' views changed?

Materials:

4 pieces of butcher paper, or another way of identifying four distinct areas of the classroom, that individually read, "Strongly Agree" "Agree" "Disagree" "Strongly Disagree." Purpose: Students will explore and voice their opinions on social issues, listen to their peers' viewpoints and discuss opposing beliefs.

Instructions:

- 1) Place the 4 pieces of butcher paper on the walls around the room, with ample space between each piece.
- 2) Instruct the class that after hearing the statement they should decide whether or not they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.
- 3) After deciding, they will go to the piece of paper that reflects their feelings.
- 4) Ask them to chat with the others who came to that same decision.
- 5) After you feel the class has had enough time to discuss, ask each group to tell the class why or how they came to that viewpoint.
- 6) Read a new statement and the students will repeat the process.
- 7) Have the students write a short journal entry reflecting on their experiences.

Statements:

- Giving poor people welfare only encourages them not to work.
- Taking care of young children is a full-time job.
- You should not have kids if you are too poor to support them.
- Anyone can find decent work if they look hard enough. If someone is unemployed, it is probably their fault.
- Women and people of color experience significant discrimination when looking for work.
- The government should support single mothers when they need help paying their bills.
- The majority of people on welfare are African-American women with lots of kids.

2. Johnnie Tillmon, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” *Ms. Magazine*, 1972 (Active Reading)

<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/tillmon.asp>

More on Johnnie Tillmon: <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/tillmon-johnnie-1926-1995>

Instructions:

Read through the article. Answer the following questions, underlining in the article where you find your answers and share your answers with a partner or group.

Discussion Questions:

- A. In her essay, Johnnie Tillmon writes “we've been trained to believe that the only reason people are on welfare is because there's something wrong with their character.” How does Tillmon challenge this assumption? What reasons does she give for people needing to rely on welfare?
- B. The title of Tillmon’s article is “Welfare is a Women’s Issue.” Underline all of the places in the article where she discusses *why* welfare is a “women’s issue.” Then, explain the meaning of her title in your own words.

3. Becky Mills, “Welfare World,” *The Movement*, August 1966 (Active Reading)

https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC46_scans/46.Welfare.WelfareWorld.Article.pdf

Instructions:

Have the class read the article on the problems with the welfare system in the 1960s. Then have them write down and discuss their responses to the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions:

- A. The author discusses many of the problems that existed within the welfare system in 1966. Go through the article and underline each of the problems she points out. Then, list them below.
- B. Choose one fact from the article that surprised you or stood out to you. Copy it below, and explain why you thought so. Did this fact change any of your assumptions about welfare recipients and/or the welfare system?

4. Welfare Rights Organizing Articles (Reading Comprehension)

Jim Buckley, "Recipients Move for Power," *The Movement*, March 1967.

Bill Ayers and Terry Robbins, "Welfare Mothers and Students," *The Movement*, October 1968.

Black Panther Party News Service, "Philly Welfare Check Delay Protested," July 28, 1973.

https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC46_scans/46.Welfare.PhiladelphiaProtest.Article.pdf

https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC46_scans/46.Welfare.MothersandStudents.Article.pdf

Instructions:

Have the class read the three articles on welfare rights organizing. Ask them to identify the "who, what, where, when, why" in the articles. Then have them write down and discuss their responses to the discussion questions.

Reading Comprehension:

Underline the who, what, where, when, and why in the articles.

Who do you believe the intended audience of the article is?

Who is the article about?

What is the article about?

Where is the article referencing?

When was the article written?

Why is this topic important?

Discussion Questions:

Examine the methods used by welfare activists to change the welfare system in the three articles. What kinds of tactics did they use? What do you think were the goals of their organizing? What kinds of problems did they face as they tried to fight for change? Finally, what is your opinion of their organizing methods?

5. Black Panther Party News Service (Reading Comprehension)

Article: “State of California Executes Joyce Annette Henderson,” October 9, 1971.

https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC46_scans/46.Welfare.JoyceHenderson.Article.pdf

https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC46_scans/46.Welfare.JoyceHendersonCoverBackPage.pdf

Instructions:

Have the class read the article on Joyce Henderson’s death from medical neglect. Ask them to identify the “who, what, where, when, why” in the articles. Then have them write down and discuss their responses to the discussion questions.

Reading Comprehension:

Underline the who, what, where, when, and why in the articles.

Who do you believe the intended audience of the article is?

Who is the article about?

What is the article about?

Where is the article referencing?

When was the article written?

Why is this topic important?

Discussion Questions:

A. The article describes in detail what went wrong on the day Joyce Henderson died. Underline each time in the article when a government employee or medical professional responsible for Henderson’s care failed to do their job properly. What mistakes did they make, and what do you think they should have done instead?

B. The authors of the article believe that Henderson was treated badly at least in part because she was poor and black. Based on what you have learned so far in this unit, how do you think race and class might have impacted the quality of medical care Joyce Henderson received?

6. Recordings: Voices of the Welfare Rights Movement (Active Listening)

Instructions:

Have the class listen to the audio clips and answer the provided questions on their own or with a partner.

Audio Clips:

Ena Hernandez, interview on KPFA radio show Voices of Aztlan, special episode called “Welfare, No Fair,” on her experiences as a welfare recipient. (3 clips)

https://freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Mp3_files/WelfareRights.5thClassCitizenship.mp3

https://freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Mp3_files/WelfareRights.SelfDetermination.mp3

https://freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Mp3_files/WelfareRights.SocialWorkers.mp3

Mrs. Dawson, interview on Voices of Aztlan, “Welfare, No Fair,” on the history of the National Welfare Rights Organization. (1 clip)

https://freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Mp3_files/WelfareRights.MovtHerstory.mp3

Excerpts from episode of KPFA show Freedom Is A Constant Struggle, recordings from a General Assistance (GA) rally in San Francisco. (1 clip)

https://freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Mp3_files/WelfareRights.GARallySF.mp3

Discussion Questions:

1. During her interview, Ena Hernandez says that being on welfare robs a person of self-determination and pride. She also says that she is treated like a “fifth-class citizen.” Based on what you have learned about the welfare system so far, what do you think she means?
2. What does Ena Hernandez mean when she says that the welfare system is designed to “thwart the revolution?” Do you agree?
3. Listen closely to the speakers at the GA rally. Why are they demonstrating? What are their demands?
4. One of the speakers at the GA rally states: “You know who’s on welfare in this city? The people down on Montgomery Street!” Montgomery Street is the area in San Francisco where the city’s bankers and politicians work. What does she mean?

7. Final Activity (Persuasive Writing)

Instructions:

Have the students answer one of the final essay questions using evidence from at least three sources.

Discussion Questions:

- A. Why do you think that so many people in our society do not see housework and raising children as “real” work? Do you think that, as a society, we have a responsibility to support full-time mothers?
- B. How do factors like race, gender, and class affect the kinds of access people have to health and medical care? As a society, how could we make sure that all people have equal access to these things?