Rhonda Long
Food Stamp Leaver

Rhonda Long is a 45-year-old white woman with five children: a son age 21; twin daughters aged 18; another daughter age 11; and a baby son age 1. Also in the household is her partner, the father of the baby. They live in a small town on the Oregon coast. During the study, they moved from a fairly spacious but run-down house to a newer house that she is buying and renovating with her partner. The new house is in a pleasant area with many trees. It is an obviously long-established neighborhood. Long says that she likes her new neighbors, they are friendly and quiet, and she feels very safe here. This home is also much closer to both her and her partner’s jobs. At the time of the second in-depth, Long’s oldest son was living with her mother and going to college. The other children were living at home and all (except the baby) were in school.

Long has a long work history, 14 years of it spent working in the lumber industry as a manual worker. At present she is working about 8 hours per week for a state agency as a substitute maintenance person. This job has a beginning wage of $12.87 per hour, but no benefits until her time goes up to more hours. She thinks that the chances of getting on a regular job are good and that she will stay there. The pay is much better than many jobs, but not any better than the mill jobs she has had. However, the work is much easier and she thinks she is getting too old for mill work. Her part-time schedule makes it easy for her to work when her partner is home to do child care and to be there for the children the rest of the time. She has made the decision to concentrate on the caring work while her youngest child is still so young. The other children also require a lot of time. Although the twins both have driver’s licenses, they can’t drive because the insurance is too expensive. Consequently, she does a lot of chauffeuring.

Long’s recent experience with AFS is tied to difficulties at work. She first received AFDC and Food Stamps in 1980 when her first child was born. She was on and off assistance for about three years at that time. She returned to full-time work when her twins were 3 years old, and continued until 1997. As she says, she was self-sufficient during that period, supported her children by herself and bought a house. She had no child support from the father of her three oldest children, but did get a small amount for the fourth child. She has a large family in the area and both her mother and some of her sisters helped with child care, so she never had the expense and worry of buying child care.

Her troubles began with sexual harassment at work from a much older man. When it didn’t stop, she reported it to her supervisor. The supervisor was a friend of the harasser and she became the object of suspicion. She went to the employee assistance program in the company, but that didn’t help. Then she went to state agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and got no help. “I think they treat people who are being harassed like dirt, basically,” she says. Also, she got no open support from co-workers who were too afraid to back up her story. Finally, she was so upset that she quit the job.
When she applied for unemployment compensation and was denied because she didn’t have a valid reason for quitting, she fell apart, had anxiety attacks, and ended up in a hospital. All of this led to great financial problems. She was able to sell her house just before she was to be foreclosed, she declared bankruptcy, and went to live with her mother. She had eight jobs during that one year 1997-98, but could not stay with any. She had applied for and had received Food Stamps during these events. (She was also referred to some JOBS Plus positions.) However, she went over income because she was working and was living rent-free with her mother. That is how she came to be a Food Stamp Leaver in the first quarter of 1998.

At the time of the first in-depth, she was receiving Food Stamps again. However, the family had gone over-income by the time of the second interview. During this whole period they had been on OHP. At the second interview, Long was not on OHP any longer, although the children were, because family income was too high. She was the only one in the family without health coverage.

Long met her present partner at the last place at which she worked. She quit that job to have the baby and decided it would be just as well not to work in the same place as her partner, but to just stay at home. They manage, but with difficulty. Her partner contributes, but not as much as he once did because he is paying child support. Long thinks that is good because she knows what it is like to be without support. Long manages by clipping coupons, returning cans and bottles at the end of the month, robbing the piggy bank, and borrowing from her kids. She occasionally sells things. She also occasionally borrows from her mother - a bit of money or a stick of butter. She also does work for her mother in her large garden, that supplies Long with some of her food. Long also has a sister who buys much of the clothing for the children.

Long feels lucky to be able to buy this house even though she went bankrupt. A friend of her father is selling it to her on contract. She and her partner are remodeling it, buying supplies on sale. Long is anxious to get back to work for more hours so that they can manage better. She has one big outstanding debt, $1,200 for emergency dental work for her son. Her wages are being attached for this debt. It occurred due to a lack of information. Her son had been on her insurance from work. After she left the job, she applied for OHP for him, not knowing that the other insurance would not be in force until OHP coverage began or that OHP has a waiting period of several months after someone has been on other insurance. She thought he was covered, so authorized the dentistry. She tried to get help from OHP and the former employer, to no avail. This is a good example of how people get caught in complicated rule systems that further disadvantage them.

Long likes to work and has no desire to be a stay-at-home mom for any extended period of time. Work is important to her self-confidence. In addition, she likes to have time for herself and time away from the house. She likes some mental challenge. She has thought about getting training to do something different. When she was quite young she had started to college, but had to give it up because she had money problems caring for her first baby. However, she doesn’t think she would like just sitting in classes, but rather would like some sort of active, practicum
training. She reads newspapers and books, and talks about the more general problems of poverty and inequality much more than other interviewees.

Long has had good experiences with AFS. However, the excessive paperwork bothers her. Also, she thinks the JOBS workshops are useless. Other bureaucracies, such as the Labor Dept., the EEOC, legal aid, etc. to which she has turned for help have disappointed her and failed to help.
Ellen Martinez
Food Stamp Leaver

Ellen Martinez is a mixed race woman in her mid-twenties with a four year old daughter. She lives in a large urban area. She has a high school education. She recently moved into a nice duplex with a man she has been seeing for over half a year. For over two years she has worked as an in-home care provider for the State of Oregon providing services for a woman with a chronic, debilitating illness. She first received Food Stamps and OHP coverage when she was pregnant with her only child. She was then living with the child’s father. They cycled on and off Food Stamps. She and her daughter were covered by the Oregon Health Plan. At the time of the first telephone interview she had gone off Food Stamps and was receiving only medical assistance from OHP for herself and her daughter.

Martinez and her daughter experienced some very difficult times about two years ago when she and the baby’s father split up. The next year was hard. She moved two or three times, finally living with her sister, also a single mother. They both worked part time and she received Food Stamps intermittently. She was able to cover her most basic expenses by living with her sister and working part-time. But she accumulated considerable debt, including nine thousand dollars of medical debt from an orthopedic injury that required extensive surgery. This occurred when she was not on OHP. She counts herself lucky to have found a supportive relationship with a man with whom she now shares a small duplex.

Martinez earns $7.94 an hour working for a state agency doing in-home care. She works at least 35 hours a week. She receives no benefits: “Almost two years now. They don’t give no benefits or nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing, through the state. I don’t understand that. I mean, the state.” She did get a raise that she said was associated with the rise in the minimum wage. She loves the care-taking part of the job and is committed to the woman to whom she has provided care for over two years. They have a strong personal relationship. This woman allows her to occasionally bring her daughter to work because she enjoys seeing her. That saves her child care expenses and means she can be with her more than would be the case otherwise.

But she is critical that the state of Oregon treats workers such as her without regard for their needs: “I just wish some of the people from the state would come in and look to see what we do. And maybe they would feel, maybe these people deserve a little higher pay. Maybe let them work one day. On a swim day. Because that is the hardest day. Maybe they would know. Because I know they sit there at their desk and have no idea. I mean they work hard too, but they have no idea what we do.” She received a raise a year or so ago when the state minimum wage went up, but Martinez knows that the only way to get a significant raise is to get a CNA license. But according to her, two things stand in the way of her being able to do that: “Money and time.” She cannot imagine how she could take time off work, or leave this particular client, to get the CNA license. Moreover, she is so physically exhausted at the end of the day – after work, getting dinner on the table and taking care of her daughter—that night
classes seem out of the question. Besides, she does not have the money it would take to pay for the course.

Martinez’s ex-partner has a good relationship with her and his daughter. He spends time with his daughter and helps with some of her expenses. Martinez has not sought a support order against him because she prefers this informal, voluntary relationship. He usually pays half of her child care expenses each month, and helps with other expenses when he can. Martinez is happy with this arrangement. She feels it is best for her and her daughter if her ex-partner helps voluntarily. In fact, she feels so strongly about this that she has decided not to re-approach AFS for help with her child care or Food Stamps for fear that the Child Support Enforcement Division will get involved and ruin what she believes is an excellent relationship around mutual support of her daughter. However, she could really use the ERDC program and would apply if it did not mean subjecting her ex-partner to the Child Support Enforcement Division. She recognizes that some “dead beat dads” need the prod from the state, but that is not her situation. “It all depends on if the father is helping on his own or if the father is a deadbeat dad and just ran off. Those type of dads, I believe to force, yes. But the type of dad I am dealing with, I don’t believe in that…I mean if they’re willing to help, and that’s an effort that’s coming out of them, not being forced to come out of them.”

Going off Food Stamps was a struggle. It meant that is was harder to put food on the table. But Martinez is a strong believer in only using public assistance when one really needs it, and she and her daughter can make it on her income and some assistance from the WIC program. She does, however, need medical coverage for herself and her daughter. Although she is eligible for medical coverage through her job, the premiums make it out of her reach. She was on OHP until just a month before the first in-depth interview. However, one quarter she went just a few dollars over income for eligibility for OHP and was cut off. “I don’t know how they expect anybody to live off of $922/month [the limit for a family of 2] with rent and car payment and insurance and a child. I don’t understand it. So they cut me off.”

Martinez went over income that month because the agency was short-staffed and her hours were increased. When she received notice that she was cut off OHP she and her boss wrote a letter explaining the situation, but the following month her hours went over again, for the same reason. Martinez is not anxious to refuse work when it is offered to her, and she is unwilling to leave the woman she cares for uncovered when there is a staff shortage simply because she fears that her income will be a few dollars over the limit. But she is facing a situation of having to refuse work and assistance to the woman she cares for because of this situation. On the other hand if she refuses too many hours she does not have the money she needs to pay her other bills.

Moreover, the strain of trying to figure out just how many hours she could work in a month to provide her the income she needs to pay her bills while still staying below the income limit for OHP is too stressful and unwieldy. She feels caught between a rock and a hard place: “I was letting some of the girls take my Mondays and Fridays so I could cut down my hours so I could
get back on medical. But then I had small checks and that cuts what I can pay on my bills. So I am not going to do it anymore. I just quit trying…I mean I don’t know how I am going to get my bills paid when I get sick and have to go and owe medical bills again, you know. But I can’t make less than what my rent is, and care insurance, my car payment, everything…I mean I just wish they would bracket it a little higher…I don’t mind paying into insurance $18.00, $20.00, whatever.” But without health coverage she has had to suffer through illness without seeing a doctor, and she fears getting so sick that she will have to seek care and accumulate even more debt.
Anne Meyer  
Food Stamps Leaver

Anne Meyer is a 30 year-old white woman who is married but not living with her current husband. She has three children: two boys 9 and 11, and a 3 year-old daughter. They live in a rural area.

Meyer first was on cash assistance when she had her oldest child and was off and on assistance for the following nine years. During this time she also worked for short periods in the fast food industry, canneries and as a motel maid. Meyer has a high school diploma and was able to get her CNA while working for a nursing home just over three years ago. During this time she became pregnant with her youngest child, left the nursing home job, and again had cash assistance for a few months. At the time of the first interview she had been off cash for two years. Since this point, except for a brief period when she was out of the state, Meyer has had a combination of Food Stamps, medical assistance through the Oregon Health Plan, and ERDC while she has been working. Meyer was part of the JOBS Program while she was between jobs, and got her present position as a home care aide through a newspaper ad she saw in a JOBS workshop. The JOBS Program helped her with some clothing and gas money but no cash while she was searching for work. Meyer also feels that AFS staff gave her the confidence to apply for her current job: “they helped me out a lot with the steps, and helping with me – going out there and saying, ’I can do it’”.

Meyer provides in-home care for a disabled adult, which means long hours. She often does a 40 hour work week in three days. Typically Meyer’s hours are two shifts from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. and one shift from 2pm until 10pm. She does this work as an independent contractor and does not work for an agency. She has had a lot of difficulty finding adequate child care and her parents have helped with looking after the children during her long work hours. “Right now my parents help taking care of her (the 3-year-old daughter) … I do have a lady and that’s (been) a problem … trying to find someone who would watch all my kids, and the hours I needed.” Meyer said that one benefit of compressing the work week into three days is that it gives her time with her kids during her time off.

By the point of the first interview Meyer was homeless and had been living with her parents for six months, something she has done several times when times were hard for her family. Meyer and her three children were sharing one bedroom of her parents’ trailer. While she appreciated this help, the family’s living space was cramped and the situation stressful. “It’s just really stressful to try and do everyday life things … I try to find time to be by myself … time just for me… but it’s hard.” Meyer was looking for alternative housing, but was unsure of how living on her own would mesh with her work hours and child-care arrangements, since she thinks it unlikely that she would be able to get housing in the very small community where her parents are living. She was also having great difficulty finding suitable housing, particularly since she wanted her older children to stay at their present schools. They had switched schools frequently as Meyer has moved around, and now Meyer believed their school situation was good.
Meyer was also having difficulty making ends meet and was only doing so because she lived with her parents. Even with this help, and receiving Food Stamps, she has had to rely on food boxes from time to time. She has a lot of debt that she is trying to pay off and her income is below poverty level. Meyer does not receive child support for any of the children. She did get some support briefly from the father of her two sons, but he is currently unemployed and she said that it is not worth pursuing. We could not schedule a second interview with Meyer, probably because of her work schedule and child-care difficulties, but we know from the second survey that by early this year she had moved from her parents’ house. At this point she was still employed as an aide but reported that she was economically worse off, most likely because with her own place she now had to find money for rent and utilities.

Meyer would like to further her education. She likes caring for people and wants to be a nurse. She did not see this as a possibility until her youngest child is older and her income and housing are stable and improved. Though it’s important for Meyer to “do it on her own,” and she appreciated the help she did get from the JOBS Program, she said that people “who are making an honest effort” should get help for a longer time and get assistance and more services after they go off cash assistance. She also feels that people should not have to wait to get on cash, and should get assistance even though they may have had it for long periods at prior times: “they shouldn’t say, ‘well you’ve been on it, you can’t be on it for another three or four years.’ I don’t think that’s right.” Meyer is aware that people’s circumstances change, they lose jobs or get divorced, need help, and they should in her view get it. “I’m making an honest effort. I’m working …and if for some reason my job falls through or the gentleman moves away and I can’t find the good pay to where I have to lower myself … I don’t want to lower myself I want to better myself. I think they should help a person like that…no matter how long they were on it to begin with. That’s what I feel.” Meyer herself would have benefited from some time on assistance to stabilize her living situation and work out adequate child-care before returning to work.