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# Entertaining Angels: Homelessness and the Hospitality of Faith in Adams County

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# Entertaining Angels: Homelessness and the Hospitality of Faith in Adams County

## **Abstract**

I first volunteered at a soup kitchen in the frigid depths of winter in very late 1981 or very early 1982, in the heart of the Rust Belt in the midst of a terrible recession. I should emphasize right from the onset that I didn't want to be there: I was next to useless and very intimidated, forced to be there by the tradition of service at my all-boys Catholic high school. Still, the experience made quite an impression on me, and I tell that story to my students so that they will understand that I know what's like to be afraid of homeless people. When I looked at the people in line I saw a hungry mass clamoring for food—a collective threat—rather than a great number of struggling individuals in need—my brothers and sisters I was called to love—and that was my mistake. It's a common enough error, however, and if there is one great irony about the fear in American society of the stereotypical homeless person, it's that very many people who find themselves suddenly homeless are, themselves, terrified of homeless people; they've been conditioned to be so, and finding themselves in the midst of other homeless folks can seem like descending into a nightmare. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Soup Kitchen, Homelessness, Service Learning, SCCAP, Campus Kitchens, Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S.

## **Disciplines**

Community-Based Learning | English Language and Literature | Inequality and Stratification | Service Learning | Social Work | Sociology

## **Comments**

The Collinge Lecture was presented by Christopher Fee at the Xavier Center at St. Francis Catholic Church in Gettysburg, PA, on Wednesday, June 22, 2016.

***Entertaining Angels: Homelessness and the Hospitality of Faith in Adams County***

C. Fee

Collinge Lecture

Xavier Center

St. Francis Catholic Church

7:00 p.m. Wednesday, 22 June 2016

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Hebrews 13:1-2 (NRSV)

Simply put, this passage from Hebrews calls us to offer hospitality to all, and challenges us to seek the messengers of God in even the most unlikely faces.

I first volunteered at a soup kitchen in the frigid depths of winter in very late 1981 or very early 1982, in the heart of the Rust Belt in the midst of a terrible recession. I should emphasize right from the onset that I didn't want to be there: I was next to useless and very intimidated, forced to be there by the tradition of service at my all-boys Catholic high school. Still, the experience made quite an impression on me, and I tell that story to my students so that they will understand that I know what's like to be afraid of homeless people. When I looked at the people in line I saw a hungry mass clamoring for food—a collective threat—rather than a great number of struggling individuals in need—my brothers and sisters I was called to love—and that was my mistake. It's a common enough error, however, and if there is one great irony about the fear in American society of the stereotypical homeless person, it's that very many people who find themselves suddenly homeless are, themselves, terrified of homeless people; they've been conditioned to be so, and finding themselves in the midst of other homeless folks can seem like descending into a nightmare.

If we believe that the average homeless person is represented by the raving lunatics and drug-addled or booze-soaked down-and-outers all too common in

the American imagination, we'd have good reason to be concerned, although as Christians we are called to love all our brothers and sisters, not just the non-threatening ones. If a hulking man such as myself might be intimidated by the thought of a collective mass of angry, pushy pan-handlers, how much more so must the single mother of three who has lost her apartment and over-stayed her welcome at her cousin's house feel when she realizes that she and her kids will be on the street or in a shelter tonight? I pose that question not because it is rhetorically powerful, but because, in fact, that's a much more accurate picture of the trends in American homelessness, even right here in Adams County.

For the last fifteen years, I have been privileged to be able to teach a service-learning course on Homelessness in America to first year students at Gettysburg College. This course combines the traditional academic component with experiential education through a number of Service-Learning opportunities. Each student participates in regular service commitments in the local community throughout the semester. To date, members of this class have put in a total of more than 4,200 hours of service in the local Adams County community, working at agencies including our local Soup Kitchen, the SCCAP Homeless Shelter, and the Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S. Emergency Shelter, amongst many other opportunities, including the food-rescue Campus Kitchens Project at Gettysburg College, which was founded in large part by students from this class.

A keystone of this course is a four-day group trip based at N-Street Village at Luther Place in Washington, DC. This trip has become something of a Gettysburg College tradition over the years, and has involved approximately 210 students in over 55 days of service in our nation's capital. Most importantly, students in this class meet and work with many people who are or who have been homeless, as well as quite a few who have dedicated their lives to serving those less fortunate than themselves. The combination of the local experience in Adams County and the city experience in Washington allows the students to compare the situations challenging people experiencing homelessness in both rural and urban environments, and thus gives them a sense of the depth and breadth of issues surrounding homelessness in America.

"Homelessness" is a term that conjures up unsavory images in the popular imagination, flat, generic, clichés that owe as much to fear as to fact. The truth is that children account for a shocking proportion of the homeless in America today, as do women fleeing abuse, as do the working poor, many of whom find it impossible to secure affordable housing in many of our cities. As a matter of fact,

both national and local studies indicate that the greatest single cause of homelessness today is a lack of affordable housing. That flies in the face of the accepted narrative of the drunken, drug-addled, unemployed lunatic, but it's none the less true for that.

Studies vary widely, but as a general rule, something like a third of those people experiencing homelessness at any given time fall into the common stereotype; unfortunately, because it is a highly visible third, that is the image seared into the consciousness of most Americans when they think of homelessness. This is also the population most likely to be amongst what is termed in studies the “chronically” homeless, that is, those who stay on the streets for extended periods of time. Most people experiencing homelessness, however, may cycle in and out of housing over the course of a finite period of time as they confront and surmount various economic challenges in their lives. Many people experiencing homelessness also go to great lengths to hide the fact that they are currently homeless, both because of shame and as a means of self-preservation; this is especially true amongst homeless women, school-aged children, and families with children. Thus these populations are both under-represented in the common American perception of homelessness, and can be under-counted in surveys.

Indeed, while most Americans tend to associate the term “homelessness” with living rough on the streets of our big cities, as well as perhaps including those currently residing in designated homeless shelters, it is more properly understood as something of an umbrella term comprising a range of non-standard housing options, including living in designated campgrounds, camping illicitly in hidden locations, living in residential motels, living in vehicles, and “couch-surfing,” or doubling-up with friends or relatives.

Actually, the notion of “couch-surfing” is a crucial element in changing trends in American homelessness, and it represents just the kind of web of formal and informal relationships—often known to sociologists as a “kin network”—which catches many Americans on an otherwise unobstructed fall into homelessness. For some such a network is enough, and they are able to bounce back up, while for others the strands of the web become frayed, and they end up without a traditional domicile. All of us understand the fundamental principles of the kin network: If one of our own is in trouble, we lend a hand. The problem is that the kin networks of many of our less privileged neighbors are under a great deal of economic and social strain before the added burden of additional family members, and so sometimes these networks collapse under this added weight.

Therefore, while extreme poverty and homelessness are not one in the same, they are closely related, and thus it is in a strong network of privilege and connections—even more than in fluid assets—that the more affluent members of our society differ most starkly with those most precariously housed, that is to say, those most likely to fall into homelessness.

There are a couple of different ways to try to count the number of homeless folks in America, and various government agencies provide varying estimates; still, regardless of fluctuations, the patterns are generally instructive. The two main ways that homelessness is quantified in the US are the Point-in-Time Count (PIT) and more cumulative counts. The Point-in-Time Count works by going out and counting every person who can be found on the streets, in shelters, or otherwise identified as homeless all across America on a given night on one of the coldest nights of the year. The data I have is from the 2015 count on January 26-27 of that year.

The strength of the PIT Count is that it minimizes double-counting, and gives us an effective snapshot of visible homelessness for a given year; comparing PIT counts from year to year gives us a way to gauge certain trends in homelessness “apples-to-apples,” as it were; it gives a consistent baseline. Some weaknesses of the PIT Count are that it doesn’t count the “invisible” homeless or the precariously housed. It won’t count street people or campers we can’t find, it will overlook those in motels or cars we haven’t identified as homeless, and it generally excludes or under-counts many of those who are “couch-surfing” or “doubled-up” with friends and relatives, which studies indicate is a significant and growing population amongst the homeless.

- In January 2015, 564,708 people were homeless on a given night. Most (69 percent) were staying in residential programs for homeless people, and 31 percent were found in unsheltered locations.
- Nearly one-quarter of all homeless people were children, under the age of 18 (23 percent or 127,787). Nine percent (or 52,973) were between the ages of 18 and 24, and 68 percent (or 383,948) were 25 years or older.
- Homelessness declined by 2 percent (or 11,742 people) between 2014 and 2015 and by 11 percent (or 82,550) since 2007.

- Despite improvements in employment, the number of people in poverty (4.8 million) and the poverty rate (15.8 percent) remained relatively steady. 26 states saw an increase in the number of people in poverty; 25 saw a decrease.
- The number of people in poor households living doubled up with family and friends grew to 7.7 million people, an increase of 3.7 percent from 2012 to 2013, with 39 states seeing increases. Since 2007, the number of people living doubled up has increased 67 percent.
- The number of poor renter households experiencing severe housing cost burden, those households in poverty paying more than 50 percent of their income toward housing, total 6.4 million in 2015, decreasing by 2.8 percent nationally from 2013 with 37 states seeing a decrease. Since 2007, the number of poor households with severe housing cost burden has increased 25 percent.

That data mainly summarizes the most salient information from the 2015 Point-in-Time Count; if you look at cumulative counts—that is, the number of individuals seeking assistance for homelessness or otherwise identified as homeless over the course of a year, the numbers go up substantially. Some such counts may include individuals identified more than once, of course, but there are other indicators of disturbing spikes in homeless numbers. For example, the US Department of Education tracks the number of students identified as homeless at the start of each school year; the number for 2013-2014 was 1,360,747.

Indeed, even as recent federal numbers suggest a drop in overall numbers nationally, the number of homeless people continues to surge in cities such as New York. Most studies indicate that there are between 500,000 and 1 million homeless children in America at any given time, which is believed by many to be a conservative estimate. If trends continue, half of all people experiencing homelessness may be in families which include children.

If working men and women and school-attending children number among the homeless, why do the stereotypes of the pushy panhandler and the drunken skid-row bum continue to dominate our collective vision of homelessness? Is it simply easier to reason that “it’s their fault,” and shoulder past frightening reminders of the threat of the failure of the American Dream? What can be done to alleviate the circumstances surrounding homelessness in America? Should we act? Should we care?

Here in Gettysburg, a historic town of only 7,608, visited by a couple of million Americans a year, dozens of our most challenged neighbors, nearly a third of whom are children, bedded down last year in church basements when our one small homeless shelter was fully booked. Moreover, I regularly hear of families with children living in their cars; more make do from time to time in cheap motels, and even more “couch-surf” or double-up with relatives and friends. Some folks camp out. Many of these folks work hard, often at more than one job.

The need expressed by the numbers seeking services in our own community provide a microcosm of the issues resulting in hunger, homelessness, and poverty in America. In 2015, The Gettysburg Community Soup Kitchen served 16,178 meals; since 1991, the total is 239,484. That’s the number of discrete “first servings,” excluding seconds, once per guest per day. The number who avail themselves of these meals speaks not only to those who are homeless, but to those who may be on the edge of homelessness, those we might refer to as the “precariously housed.” The cyclical patterns of use of the Soup Kitchen indicate that people utilize that service to help make it through each month.

The Point-in-Time Count for Adams County for 2015 identified nearly 100 (96) homeless people in our community on that single January night: There were a total of 18 households which included children; one of these families was designated “chronically homeless.” A total of 9 individuals were found to be without any shelter at all that winter night. Of the total 96 people identified, 6 were classified as mentally ill, 2 as chronic substance abusers, 11 as disabled (including the mentally ill & substance abusers), 1 as a veteran, and 15 as victims of domestic abuse.

According to the most recent data available to me, there are at present 128 students identified as homeless in the Gettysburg Area School District, mostly of elementary age. In my own Upper Adams School District, the number of students we identified as homeless spiked as high as 21 this year before dropping down to the current level of 12.

Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S. is a collaborative effort by local churches and community members to provide emergency shelter to those without housing of any kind during the winter months. Churches take it in turn to host the guests for two weeks at a time, and volunteers spend the night with the group each evening. The Soup Kitchen provides its facilities so that the guests may have breakfast each morning, and the Resource Center, next door to Saint James Lutheran Church,



provides a place to do laundry, take a shower, and use computers for job searches and related needs. Support Services Coordinators work with the guests to identify and achieve relevant goals to help them achieve stability and rise out of homelessness. Guests who are not working during the noon hour may attend the Soup Kitchen for lunch, and all guests are provided with a bagged dinner meal at the Resource Center before heading to the shelter for the night. From October 19, 2015 through April 30, 2016, C.A.R.E.S. provided a warm, safe place to bed down for the night for a total of 92 of our most challenged neighbors, 27 of whom were children in 18 family groups. 27 of the guests were working, 5 were of retirement age, and 14 were identified as disabled. When one considers the alternatives available on a frigid, arctic night, one shudders. At the end of the season, unfortunately, 5 guests remained unhoused.

Mary Stevenson from Gettysburg C.A.R.E.S. commented to me on how working with that program has touched her faith. She says that, “[m]y experience is that you can meet Christ in the homeless and hungry.... I am always amazed at how quickly the homeless at C.A.R.E.S. form a community that care for each other. The young children adapt quickly to the shelter environment, [while] the older ones (teens) have a harder time. All are grateful for a warm, safe place to stay.” Unfortunately, as Mary also notes, the “C.A.R.E.S. population continues to increase each year.”

Mary also praised local citizens for pulling together in support of this program and its guests, noting that, “[t]he Gettysburg community, especially the churches, have been very supportive by providing shelter space and donations/supplies. We have trained 500 volunteers.... The Gettysburg Community Soup Kitchen does a great job providing a noon meal and supplemental groceries. The numbers of meals served, [unfortunately, also] continues to grow every year.”

“The biggest concern,” for Mary and many others of those working to empower local folks experiencing or at risk of homelessness, however, “is the lack of affordable housing in Gettysburg. The Housing Authority’s statistic is that only 53% of those approved for Section 8 housing can actually find an apartment/house in Gettysburg. There may be units available outside the Boro [sic] [,] but no transportation [is] available.”

I should explain what I mean by Section 8 housing; the Housing Choice Voucher program is meant to assist individuals with no or low income to get into better

housing situations and to become self-sufficient. The idea is for voucher recipients to become financially stable so that they can become independent.

Even when there are available funds for vouchers and clients qualify for them, however, there are many factors at play, including finding suitable landlords that are willing to participate in the program, finding enough affordable apartments, and finding clients who will see the process through to the end; thus, it can be difficult to house everyone who gets the green light on a voucher. Apartments (including older ones) also must be up to code in order to qualify.

Whatever weaknesses there may be in the voucher system, however, I should note that we are very lucky to have what we do have here in Adams County in terms of vouchers. Waitlists for vouchers were closed for a while; I believe that in many places around the country they still are. At the same time, there is no denying that there clearly a great need for decent, safe, and affordable housing in this area.

In addition to the paucity of affordable housing in Adams County, according to Mary Stevenson, “the job market is lacking jobs that pay a realistic living wage.” For the sake of reference, I should note that the Federal Poverty Line for 2016 is \$11,880 for a single person, and \$24,300 for a family of 4. [For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$4,160 for each additional person.] This is a national figure, and is not indexed to the local average cost of living, so it may be instructive to take a look at the MIT Living Wage Calculator, according to which a single adult working full-time in Adams County would need to earn at least \$10.27 an hour to get by [for an annual pre-tax income of \$21,361.60]; the minimum wage is \$7.25. For a family of 4 with one adult working full-time, \$21.73 an hour would be a living wage [for an annual pre-tax income of \$45,198.40], allowing for average expenses and taxes at local rates and calculating at 40 working hours per week for 52 weeks.

Many folks, of course, work at much lower wages for many more hours per week. In any case, this is not the forum for discussing whether higher wages should be mandated; the point is that, allowing for reasonable minimal living expenses, many working folks in Adams County simply cannot or, at best, can barely afford the cost of housing. Whether or not one wishes to raise the minimum wage, in other words, this measure gives a localized indicator of the reality of the cost of living, and how the rising cost of housing has far out-stripped rising wages, both locally and nationally. Mary put a human face on this stark reality when she

lamented that, “[w]e have a couple with two children who were at C.A.R.E.S. He is working full-time (minimum wage) but doesn’t make enough to pay rent. They are living in a van and will probably be back in C.A.R.E.S. in the fall.”

Mary cited to me the words of Ecclesia Ministries, a Boston street outreach program the mission of which is to “seek to take the gifts of church out to people who, for whatever reason, cannot come inside to receive them.”

The mission of Ecclesia is founded upon the premise that, “[i]f you want to get close to the heart of God, get close to the poor in your midst.” Ecclesia also underscores a spirit of reciprocity I am always emphasizing to my students when I note that the dichotomy between the “servers” and the “served” is a false one:

I myself often gain more from those with whom I come into contact than I give, regardless of any expectations to the contrary. Though those of us whom society favors may seem to have more to give, scripture warns us against putting too much stock in worldly trappings of wealth and power. As Ecclesia frames the issue, “[d]oing good’ in the spirit of God’s love for all must be mutual. In order for it to be mutual, we have to be as aware of our own needs as we are of others’. We have to be as ready to receive from the other as we are to give.” I know that this can be far easier said than done, especially for those of us of a certain age who have achieved even a modest level of status and recognition. Thus I think that it is at times easier for my 18-year-old students to assume that they have much to gain and to learn from the life experience of those they meet on the street than it is for those of us who are older and more accomplished to acknowledge. I therefore make it a point to try to see each experience through the fresh and unjaundiced eyes of my students, as well as searching for what we Quakers refer to as “that of God” in each person I meet.

And “that of God” is all around us, everywhere, even—or perhaps most especially—amongst those who have the least. It’s not hard to see Christ in those around us if we try, but it can be difficult to discern how best to embrace and celebrate our common humanity and link to the Divine. To aid in this attempt, I turn once more to the words of Ecclesia, which I believe phrase the issue powerfully:

“[W]e are all made in the image of God. Because of this shared identity, we do God’s work when we recognize our sacred relationships with others and offer them the same respect and friendship and encouragement we want for ourselves.

Inviting and maintaining those spiritual connections with each other requires us to know the truth about ourselves and to be open to listening to the truth about others.”

Indeed, Christ teaches one to love the Lord with all one’s heart and soul and mind (Matthew 22:37), but also commands that “[y]ou shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Dorothy Day put it succinctly when she noted, “[w]e cannot love God unless we love each other” (Eichenburg 84). It is thus through manifesting our love for our brothers and sisters that we truly show our love for God. As Christ makes clear in Matthew 25, what we do for one another through love we do for Him, and He emphasizes love for those less fortunate:

40 And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

My dear friend Jan Guillory, the Director of the Soup Kitchen, put it another way to me when she cited the prophet Isaiah:

“If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” (Isaiah 58:10)

“...this is our calling,” Jan said, “I think it’s happiness.” Taking joy from the simple act of caring for another human being seems to me to be the very foundation of the Gospels and the living breath of our Faith, as the letter of James makes clear:

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” (James 2:26)

“Entertaining Angels” is thus more than an evocative intellectual concept; to me it’s a fact of life suggestive of powerful responsibilities towards our brothers and sisters. Even from a less altruistic point of view, the economic realities of modern America suggest that even those of us with some financial stability are not nearly so far from the edge of the abyss as we’d like to imagine. Most Americans don’t have much in the way of savings, and a lost job, a massive medical bill, or the sudden loss of a spouse can have devastating consequences, even amongst those in the middle class. This is undeniably true in a statistical sense, but I’m here to tell you that it’s a part of my lived experience, as well.

A couple of years ago I was working as an overnight volunteer at the C.A.R.E.S. shelter, and I greeted a guy wearing a Cleveland Browns sweatshirt. Since there

are not that many of us Browns fans in this area, I asked him about his sweatshirt, thinking that perhaps he had got it as a donation. It turned out, however, that he was a rabid Brownies fan, and was in fact from Cleveland. This was a first for me, so I pressed him further, and discovered that he was in fact from the same suburb as I am; a little further conversation revealed that he was from a few streets away from me. It also turned out that he is also a proud alumnus of my high school, and followed St. Ed's sports quite avidly on line.

Since he was a few years older than I am, we at first assumed that we didn't have friends in common, until he mentioned the rather distinctive name of a pal with whom he had been in his first high school band. It turned out that his friend was the older brother of a guy in my wedding, and that we had both spent our formative years hanging out on the same porch on Grace Avenue in Lakewood, Ohio, although separated by a few years. Health problems had landed my new friend and his wife out of doors, although they generally camped out when it was practical, and only came in to the shelter when the weather was particularly bad, or they were feeling ill. I'm happy to report that they are back up in their own place in Cleveland and doing well; we keep in touch on Facebook, and on Monday he shared with me his joy because of the Cavs' victory. The point of my story, though, is that, quite literally, there but for the Grace of God go I.

Giving back to our community is both an article of Faith and a responsibility of citizenship, but volunteering is not enough. We must have sustained and meaningful conversations about how these problems arise and how they may best be addressed. We must act upon our Faith in our own lives and hold our elected representatives to be accountable for appropriate policies which align with that Faith on both a regional and a national level. We must seek, discern and speak the Truth, and not allow fear and shame to encourage us to deny poverty, homelessness, abuse, and addiction in our lives, in our families, and in our nation.

We must face up to painful truths, and we must believe that "we the people" includes those less fortunate than ourselves, even those who frighten us or who have made poor choices. The best way to learn that "they" are in fact "us" is to get out and meet "them," not simply to do good and to feel good, but actively to seek that of God in our most marginalized brothers and sisters, and therefore to develop meaningful human and spiritual relationships with those most touched by America's social programs and least in touch with her promise.

Thank you.

### Sources & Resources:

US Interagency Council on Homelessness 2015 Report (*Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*):

[https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/USICH\\_OpeningDoors\\_Amendment2015\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OpeningDoors_Amendment2015_FINAL.pdf)

HUD 2015 PIT:

<https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2015-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

South Central PA 2015 PIT Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc. (Housing and Urban Development Consultants for PA):

[http://www.dma-housing.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/PITS-Data-South-Central\\_RHAB-2013-2015.pdf](http://www.dma-housing.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/PITS-Data-South-Central_RHAB-2013-2015.pdf)

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### Key Findings of HUD PIT Report of 2015:

- In January 2015, 564,708 people were homeless on a given night. Most (69 percent) were staying in residential programs for homeless people, and 31 percent were found in unsheltered locations.
- Nearly one-quarter of all homeless people were children, under the age of 18 (23 percent or 127,787). Nine percent (or 52,973) were between the ages of 18 and 24, and 68 percent (or 383,948) were 25 years or older.
- Homelessness declined by 2 percent (or 11,742 people) between 2014 and 2015 and by 11 percent (or 82,550) since 2007.

National alliance to End Homelessness Executive Summary of 2015 HUD findings:

[http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/Executive\\_Summary\\_online%20.pdf](http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/Executive_Summary_online%20.pdf)

**Key Points to Ponder:**

- Despite improvements in employment, the number of people in poverty (4.8 million) and the poverty rate (15.8 percent) remained relatively steady. 26 states saw an increase in the number of people in poverty; 25 saw a decrease.
- The number of people in poor households living doubled up with family and friends grew to 7.7 million people, an increase of 3.7 percent from 2012 to 2013, with 39 states seeing increases. Since 2007, the number of people living doubled up has increased 67 percent.
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MIT Living Wage Calculator:

<http://livingwage.mit.edu/>

*Marketplace* Story on the current state of Welfare Reform:

<http://features.marketplace.org/yourstateonwelfare/>