

## **"WEAP is on a mission,"**

The Oakland Tribune, October 25, 1999, Editorial by Ethel Long-Scott and Johnnie Lewis

There are 3 main reasons why the Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) has taken to the streets to vehemently protest new East Bay billboards offering \$200 in cash to drug addicts who agree to get birth control or be sterilized.

First, it sends the wrong message about what the real problem is. The billboards are going up in low-income neighborhoods, and many studies show that poverty does an extraordinary amount of damage to people who fall into it. These billboards are right in line with the national war on the poor that is increasingly criminalizing people for being poor, and is denying low income people the help they need to get to the point where they can help themselves.

Second, it diverts attention from the real needs. The experts say most addicts need help to begin a recovery from the super-potent drugs that flood low income communities today, and low-income people who are drug addicted find it next to impossible to get that help. Like so many other things in the richest country the world has ever known, drug treatment programs are available primarily to people who are high income or above.

Third, it is a cheap and callous way to kick people when they are down, to continue destroying the lives of the people it is aimed at. \$200 won't help an addict get treatment, or get medical care, or plan better nutrition, or get better housing, or do any of the other things that would make a real difference in the lives of people trapped in drug addiction. About the only thing an addict can do with \$200 is buy more drugs.

That's why other community groups concerned about the plight of drug addicted low-income individuals (groups like S.I.S.T.E.R.S., (an organization headed by Sister Johnny Lewis to aide addicted women in recovery and their children) helped mobilize the protesters against the billboards on Tuesday.

That's why low-income people from around the country are in the middle of a month-long march from Washington D.C. to New York City, to support the 50-year-old declaration by the United Nations that makes poverty like we have in the United States a violation of Economic Human Rights.

That's why fundamentally middle-class organizations as different as Planned Parenthood and the Catholic Church oppose Barbara Harris' plan to continue luring low-income people deeper into trouble, to continue chipping away at the human dignity of people whose troubles stem not from being bad people, but from being poor.

That's why Barbara Harris, the Orange County woman behind the billboards, is trying to push her group called C.R.A.C.K. (Children Requiring A Caring Kommunity) into neighborhoods from which East Bay cities have withdrawn most of the public services so badly needed by the residents. She knows that neighborhoods with few services and drug infestation are vulnerable to being preyed on by all sorts of opportunists out to make a buck' or a name.

That's why we oppose this most recent attempt at stereotyping and further marginalizing the poor and low wage workers. This is one more assault on this country's large and growing poor and disenfranchised population, found not only in Oakland, but nation wide. This is not addressing the issues that keep addicted people in trouble. It is aimed at making taxpayers feel 'wrongly' that something is being done, even though it's not about treatment, prevention, or education<it's about annihilation.

That is why we stand with the Recovery Community in its assertion that when we have a person in recovery it's a dollar well spent. The dollars that Ms. Harris is siphoning into the non-profit group she has set up should be directed to the underfunded, overcrowded, overworked treatment programs throughout our city, state, and country. These programs work at giving women and their families viable choices for assistance, support to make those choices work, training to enable them to become better parents and to get a living wage job. Together with community based groups like ours we work to get them medical care to enable them to keep their families healthy, and life skills to handle those daily and environmental stresses that overwhelm, and ultimately, deteriorate their lives.

WEAP has been a staunch supporter, advocate, and visionary in the area of living wage job training. WEAP also provides life skills training to address the complex and mitigating circumstances of our constituents. The circumstances that they face often prevent them from realizing lives that could otherwise be filled with rewards and successes. Our assistance not only provides them with job training, but with job placement services, access to child and health care, and assistance with understanding and addressing issues (such as domestic violence, growing up in poverty, verbal and physical abuse, molestation, etc.) that lead to drug use. Drug use is not the problem, it is a symptom that points to the problem.

With our protests, our marching, our education, and our organizing we will continue to oppose the newly packaged death plans. WEAP is on a mission to eliminate poverty and all the suffering and misery it causes. We are dedicated to building a mighty movement for economic human rights for all people. This is for the children, the babies, the families and our community.