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Women on Relief Would Like a Raise

By NANCY BURDEN
Of The Bulletin Staff

"OUR meetings are open. A bum off the street can walk in and sit down. Anyone's welcome," the woman chairman said.

What the lady, a sunny, ample-figured Negro in her 40s, was talking about was the new-style women's organization she heads called the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization. It was formed officially last May.

Three things set WRO apart from other women's clubs: Members have to be poor. It's a club you'd really rather not be in. And, more than an organization that does good works for others, it's one that's formed to go to bat for itself.

Chairman Mrs. Hazel Leslie, 1233 N. 6th st., is on relief as are the majority of the regular 330 dues-paying members. WRO is primarily an organization of welfare recipients. And all but a handful of these recipients are women, mostly women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

If you're a woman on AFDC, this means that the father of your children is dead, absent from the home, incapacitated or unemployed and you are left with no means to support the family.

AMONG WRO's goal are higher public assistance grants that will bring recipients up to the minimum standard of health and decency set by the state (now AFDC grants are only 71 percent of the state standard), better treatment by public assistance caseworkers (the women claim that the attitude of some caseworkers is demeaning to them), and reform of the whole relief application process that now can keep applicants waiting for weeks.

One of the self-help group's functions is to act as a grievance board for people on public assistance. The leadership listens and then takes action where needed. The women bring in experts on housing and other areas to speak to recipients.

Anyone with a problem is welcomed at the meetings and the old and young of both sexes show up. "Sometimes they are just upset and don't really have a problem," said Mrs. Leslie.

Since they've been organized (Mrs. Leslie has a cartoon in her handbag that shows a group standing around a leader who's saying "Now that we're organized, what the hell shall we do?"), WRO women have been meeting, rallying, travelling and talking more than most women's clubs do in several years.

And they've gone about it with virtually no incident through a racially tense summer. This isn't a black wompower group.

A PEACEFUL rally of 300 was held last June in the courtyard of the State Office Building, Broad and Spring Garden sts. At the time a petition for rights and respect was presented, to the County Board of Assistance.

Last August, members took part in a national "Mothers' March" in Washington. And, more recently, a contingent met with State Welfare Secretary Dr. Thomas W. Georges. The appeal was for a clothing allowance of \$75 for school children whose families are on relief. Dr. Georges made no promises but held out hope for a smaller grant.

Mrs. Leslie, shakes her head and says that the relief checks just don't stretch to meet the needs.

"A number of people cook



OFFICERS Mrs. Hazel Leslie (left), chairman, and Mrs. Myrtle McCullough, treasurer, confer before meeting of Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization. Citywide meetings are held twice a month.

Bulletin Staff Photo by Joseph Waske

dered by a doctor to stop work as a waitress because of diabetes and other complications, has been on relief for eight years. She cares for a nine-year-old niece she has reared since the girl was 4-and-a-half days old. Her husband is not living with her in her Ludlow apartment and does not support her.

"I love relief," says Mrs. Leslie, in an effort to shock. What she means, she says, is that without that check twice a month she would have no independence, would be forced to put up with the charity of a relative.

She gets \$142.40 a month from welfare. On that amount, which includes money for a special diet and care to go to and from the doctor's, she cares for herself and her niece and pays \$59 a month rent.

Mrs. Leslie does much of her WRO work by phone, but when she's on the scene she really makes it.

In Washington last summer she chaired the first day of the founding conference of the National Welfare Rights Organization — and she managed quite capably without aid of parliamentary procedure. "I just ignored it," she said of the book of Robert's Rules.

WELFARE Rights groups, like Philadelphia's, have been springing up throughout the country. Thirty-one states and some 67 cities were represented at the conference.

The only white officer of the Philadelphia club is Mrs. Myrtle McCullough, 410 Dickinson st. An AFDCer with one child, she's the treasurer. The other officers are Mrs. Martha Melton, 715 Dudley st., vice chairman, and Mrs. Margaret Campbell, 1958 N. Mervine st., secretary.

All wear the WRO yellow and blue button with the slogan "Welfare is a right not a privilege." Mrs. Leslie says "I feel light on one shoulder when I don't wear it."

Mrs. McCullough served on the goals committee at the Washington conference and was so pleased with the results that she quipped at a report meeting back home: "If we get everything that's listed, we'll be above middle class." Everyone laughed.

City-wide meetings are held twice a month at the United Church of Christ, 1520 Green st. Headquarters are here, too.

ment by relief recipients here and is comprised of some 30 neighborhood units, operates with impressive sponsorship. Among its backers are the Health and Welfare Council and the Greater Philadelphia Council of Churches. Health and Welfare has lent a member of its staff fulltime to the women.

THE maximum dues a member is charged is \$4 in one year. This pays for a membership card, the buttons and a newsletter called "Straight Talk."

Major support comes from financially better off citizens in the city and suburbs who join for from \$2 to \$5 as associate members, or for \$25 as contributing members. There are donations, too.

Philadelphia lawyer Frederick L. Ballard, vice president of the Health and Welfare Council, is a contributing member. The Rev. Jerry E. Carpenter, director of the Greater Philadelphia Council of Churches, is on the associate member list and sometimes accompanies the women on official trips.

WRO here has had some significant successes and

bears out Myrtle McCullough's boast that this is a group whose members "don't let any grass grow under their feet."

The women have helped untangle "hundreds" of problems for recipients, a Health and Welfare Council spokesman said. "In fact," said the spokesman, "most of the 330 members joined after being helped by WRO." Also, the women have helped get some 50 eligible families on assistance.

PERHAPS most importantly WRO enjoys official dialogue with the local administration of welfare—the County Board of Public Assistance.

Since June, Hazel Leslie and her officers have been meeting monthly with a member of the board and the executive staff of the assistance board. Also, the assistance board has appointed liaison people to the seven district offices to work with WRO representatives.

Mrs. Doris Woolfolk, administrative assistant to William Sailer, executive director of the assistance board, calls the WRO members she's worked with "very capable women" who are able to

"articulate their feelings and thoughts."

"Philadelphia WRO is a constructive force," she said. "Many of the things they're asking for are the same things that we've seen as a need for welfare recipients for many years."

Mrs. Woolfolk (as do most welfare department people) feels that relief grants should be higher. She calls the present checks "insufficient to meet basic living necessity."

On Nov. 10, Philadelphia WRO members will meet with Dr. Georges, Public Assistance Commissioner Chauncey Gunderman, and representatives of assistance boards in other counties in an effort to create more WRO groups in the state.

Pittsburgh has a group now and so does Lancaster. It's reasoned that the more widespread the organization, the more effect it will have on the legislators.

Philadelphia WRO women feel that achievement of all their goals is within reason.

"I think we will achieve them," said Hazel Leslie. "We're going to give it a heck of a try," said Myrtle McCullough.

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"A number of people cook on hot plates so they can buy clothes for their children," she said. "There's just not enough to go around."

In Hazel Leslie, the new organization has a spirited leader who usually laces her observations with humor. Most of the fun-poking is at herself.

"I JUST talk more, that's why they elected me," she'd say. She maintains with a grin that she got "rooked" into taking the top office.

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Washington conference and was so pleased with the results that she quipped at a report meeting back home: "If we get everything that's listed, we'll be above middle class." Everyone laughed.

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THOUGH they laugh easily, Philadelphia WRO members know they're faced with no laughing matter and a tax-paying public that's hostile to them.

Sixty - million - plus dollars from the state is needed to bring assistance grants in all categories up to standard. Nationally, AFDC makes up the largest assistance category and in almost every state is the lowest paying. Ironically it's the category that involves children. In Philadelphia, of the 122,503 people on public assistance, 69,645 are on AFDC.

The feeling is that tax payers don't mind paying assistance to the blind or the totally disabled, but they're resistant to the AFDC recipient whom they think, for one thing, has illegitimate babies to increase her welfare grant.

A brochure put out by the female relievers calls the babies charge "fiction." As every welfare mother knows, it states, the extra money for each new child is insufficient and each new baby only means increased deprivation for the family. Anyone who would make such a charge doesn't know what it means to be a welfare mother, says the brochure.

Philadelphia WRO, which grew out of the successful Crusade for Children move-