

under the sun

He Tracks Down Clients Who Get What They Don't Deserve

BY SUSAN USHER

Wayne Campbell describes his job as fraud investigator for the Brunswick County Department of Social Services as "busy, but profitable."

Busy, yes. His one-man office is charged with investigating charges of alleged client abuse of all social services programs. These include Medicaid, Aid to Families With Dependent Children, Food Stamps, Special Services and Low Income Energy assistance.

An aid recipient may have forgotten—or deliberately failed—to report an increase in household income or a decline in family size. Both affect the amount of assistance a family may receive.

Profitable, yes—for the taxpayers, says Campbell. In his work, Campbell emphasizes repayment of money due the agency, not prosecution. But occasionally it takes one to get the other; the department has and will go to court to collect the money due it.

"Welfare fraud is probably a little more widespread than I had thought," Campbell said after eight weeks on the job. "But there's also a lot of erroneous allegations made."

Often, he said, people call and report that someone is getting benefits they don't qualify for.

"At the time the alleged fraud took place," he said, "it often turns out the people were not on assistance then and were therefore not violating welfare fraud statutes."

While local fraud cases appear to be "pretty evenly divided" between Medicaid, AFDC and Food Stamp programs, Campbell said, the commonest cause tends to be failure to accurately report household income.

In Brunswick County, where seasonal work is common, proving a client earned money but didn't report it gets difficult at times.

"One of the headaches you've got is that it's extremely hard to prove income from the river because of the lack of records," he said. "Most are most reporting for tax purposes."

He encounters similar problems in dealing with farm laborers.

Campbell, a longtime law officer and former Shallotte police chief, believes his work is important—and that it more than pays for itself in the sums collected and the reputation of the agency.

"It's the taxpayers' money out there. It's money out of their pockets when people are defrauding welfare," he said.

In the eight weeks since he began work July 8, Campbell has worked on cases that involve \$29,960.15 in benefits received by clients who weren't eligible. Between July 29 and Aug. 26, his office collected \$2,273.50 in repayments.

Last week, he sent out letters concerning \$5,594.81 in Medicaid program overpayments alone.

When questions arise concerning a client's file, Campbell discusses the matter with the one or more social workers involved. Then the client is first called in for a conference with an eligibility specialist.

"If we confirm that the information is true—that deception or fraud has occurred, we give them two options," Campbell said.

If it appears the overpayment resulted from an oversight or a client's accidental failure to report information, the agency first tries to work out a voluntary repayment agreement. All funds are to be repaid within 36 months from the time the overpayment occurred, not from when it was discovered.

Usually the matter is settled during the conference; if not, the case may be turned over to Campbell for further investigation.

Clients who don't agree to a voluntary repayment or fail to maintain payments, or those who the agency believes willfully committed fraud, face a possible felony charge for welfare fraud if the sum owed is \$400 or more.

Since the emphasis is on repayment, said Campbell, plea bargains are common when a case goes to court. Then, if the money still isn't paid back, the client faces an active sentence for violation of probation.

"They usually find the money to pay it off," he added.

Welfare fraud of \$400 or more is a felony, but with the emphasis on repayment, plea bargains are common.

Campbell follows the advice of the social services board and attorney and the district attorney's office in determining whether to prosecute a case.

His first case, now being readied for court, originated in 1978 and involves multiple fraud—a total of \$1,151.91 owed to the AFDC and Medicaid programs. Since many clients receive services from more than one program, when fraud occurs it often involves more than one program and more than one caseworker.

A fraud investigation can originate from varied sources—a call from a concerned citizen; during a routine case review in which employment, vehicle registration and other data is cross-checked; or when another agency working with the same client does some cross-checking of its own.

Surrounded by paperwork around his own desk, Campbell added, "Sometimes it takes two years for the paperwork to catch up with a client. With Medicaid, it may take up to 12 months to get a true picture of overpayment since they have a year in which to file."

Seventeen of Campbell's 21 years in law enforcement



FORMER LAW OFFICER Wayne Campbell pursues clues of a different twist in his work as fraud investigator for the Brunswick County Department of Social Services.

were spent in investigations, including vice and narcotics.

"That experience has helped me know where to find the information I need, how to obtain it legally and how to follow up on leads," he said.

It didn't prepare him for the other half, the most difficult half of his new job: learning about basic elements

of each social service program, the requirements for obtaining benefits and keeping up with the related paperwork.

Pulling the information together to make a case, he said, is like piecing together bits of a jigsaw puzzle. "It's a challenge; I like it."

NOTICE

There will be a public meeting for all who have an interest in the Holden Beach West End barricade Saturday, Sept. 14 at 10 a.m. The meeting will be held at Eugene Cope's residence, located in Mariner's Village, off Hwy. 130. Turn in front of Jane's Seafood #1, beside Ocean Aire Campground. Corner of Harbor Drive.

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