

# GOING IT ALONE

*Low-income single moms struggle to find help, escape judgment*

By Jennie Dorris  
PublicSource

Rochelle Jackson had three kids and was pregnant with a son. She was also scared. Her boyfriend, the father of her children, had grown increasingly abusive during her pregnancy.

It was 1998 when she decided to press charges for physical and sexual assault, and her boyfriend went to jail. She was finally free, but now she was on her own with a growing family.

She quit her full-time job as a records clerk at St. Clair Hospital in the suburbs southwest of Pittsburgh. It paid well — about \$12 an hour — and she was proud of having gotten it after earning a health information associate degree while raising her children.

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But the trauma of abuse was haunting her; she worried about the health of her unborn baby and wanted to focus on caring

for her other children.

In 2000, she met with a caseworker to apply for

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the formal name for welfare. But she was surprised to find the caseworker judging her clothes and manicure.

“There’s an assumption of, ‘You’re beneath me; you’re guilty; you’re lying about something.’ You’re made to feel like a criminal when you haven’t done anything wrong,” said Jackson, who just turned 45. That unborn baby is now 16, about to be a junior at McKeesport Area High

School.

Single moms — and there are at least 318,500 of them in Pennsylvania alone — have become a scapegoat for a variety of social problems. Their children are presumed to inevitably face bleak futures simply because they aren’t part of a nuclear family.

The stereotypical narrative is rooted in a damning Venn diagram that overlaps race, gender and class. A significant share of single mothers and women of color hold minimum-wage jobs without stable work schedules or sick days. Many come from families without means, so grandparents can’t readily step in to help with raising the children.

And, for many like Jackson, who dropped out of college when she had her first child, it’s a challenge to get an education while raising children and holding down a job.

“I want to be poor. I want to be on welfare.” Nobody says that,” Jackson said. She currently holds a full-time job with Just Harvest, two part-time jobs, and is working on a master’s in business administration at Carlow University.

## The new face of welfare

About 40 percent of single moms in Pennsylvania are in poverty; more than 30 percent of women going it alone are unemployed, according to census data.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, signed by President Bill

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Clinton in 1996, limits welfare recipients to five years of assistance, and mothers are required to look for work.

Society was moving on from seeing mothers as simply the homemakers who could be devastated financially if their partners left them, said Lisa Brush, a sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh. Now, women needed to be worthy of the assistance.

But many of those mothers go on to hold low-paying jobs; 40 percent of single mothers across the U.S. are working minimum-wage jobs.

They also have to manage evolving expectations: Many workplaces expect employees to be available around the clock at the same time mothers are expected to be increasingly hands-on with their children.

"Single mothers are screwed because there aren't enough hours in the day to do all these things," said Brush, author of "Poverty, Battered Women, and Work in U.S. Public Policy."

Shannon Spano, a 20-year-old from Scranton, has a son who is almost 2 years old. She graduated from high school seven months pregnant, and became a certified nursing assistant while her son was a baby. She now works full time at the Jewish Home of Eastern Pennsylvania, a nursing home, while raising her son on her own.

"I haven't slept in four days, but I'm still going. I don't know how physically I'm doing it. I just think that no matter what happens, I'll try to get through the day," Spano said.

Single moms not only have to do it all — they often have to do it all under a microscope. They are "shoved under the rug, but

also hyper-scrutinized and hyper-surveilled," Brush said.

Arlee Rowley, a Pittsburgh resident, felt that surveillance extend right to the inside of her house. While raising three young children on her own in the 1970s, she suddenly lost her assistance because the welfare office had heard there were extra people — seven men, to be exact — living in her home.

They suggested that she was using her welfare money for the men. Rowley knew this was false and decided to get their attention.

She dressed her young boys, took them to the welfare office and sat them on the counter.

As she left, she said, "Y'all ain't giving me nothing to take care of them, so y'all take care of them."

When she returned home, there was a message waiting for her to come and get her kids, as well as her benefits.

Rowley, now 59, returned and told them, "I thought you might see it my way."

### Scattered help

For moms who need assistance, there's more than the struggle of judgment by those doling out the resources. There's also the limitations of support services.

A family of three gets \$403 a month at most from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. For those who qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps), that family could receive up to \$511 more a month for food.

The rules limit how much income and resources a family can have. To qualify for TANF, bank accounts and properties must amount to \$1,000 or less, and for SNAP, a family of three can

make \$2,640 a month at most.

Other resources exist, but they are fragmented.

"Parents have to find these things out for themselves. It's really difficult. You have to have the will and the know-how to navigate who to call or where to call," Jackson said.

Spano's high school referred her to St. Joseph's Center in Scranton after she revealed her pregnancy to her mother, who kicked her out of their home because she didn't want her to keep the baby.

Spano was one of four women who lived in St. Joseph's Walsh Manor, which houses pregnant women. They provided diapers and a crib, among other things, when her son, Carson, was born, and later helped to furnish her first apartment.

After Jackson pressed charges against her boyfriend, she found her way to the Duquesne Family Support Center along the Monongahela River; it's one of 32 state-funded hubs of resources for families with young children around the state.

It was there that she met social workers from Just Harvest, a Pittsburgh advocacy group that seeks to eliminate hunger and poverty. They offered a training program to teach mothers to identify problems in their neighborhoods that impact them and their community. This appealed to the "natural activist" within Jackson, who took what she learned to help form a group that got a Women, Infants, and Children office back in the Duquesne community.

WIC helps low-income pregnant women and mothers who have kids under 5 with food stipends, nutrition classes and health referral services. Jackson

had used the WIC office; without the Duquesne location, she had a half-hour bus ride to the nearest office. She knew moms who went off WIC benefits because of the local office closing.

Jackson's involvement caught the attention of Just Harvest, and they hired her to do welfare advocacy for them.

"From that very start, she was clearly a key leader," said Ken Regal, executive director of Just Harvest. "She was right out there being a spokesperson on these issues." He still has the newsletter that shows Jackson at the Duquesne WIC's ribbon-cutting, standing with her children.

That was 15 years ago. Now, her co-workers joke, single moms who need guidance can "just call Rochelle."

### Connecting the dots

One of the most expensive parts of the process for single mothers is health care. At the UPMC Matilda H. Theiss Child Development Center, they offer health services to moms and children, regardless of insurance, through a federal grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration.

Currently, 80 percent of their patients are uninsured. Expectant moms can get free bloodwork, and sonograms are discounted up to 70 percent (a full-price sonogram costs between \$1,500 and \$1,900). Medications are on a sliding scale — meaning pay what you can — and there is no copay for visits.

They offer a free monthly prenatal group to anyone in the community, which serves to answer pregnancy and health questions.

The Women and Girls Foundation is also trying to

fill the gaps by cataloging services for single mothers.

"The first step is basically trying to map out where all the services are," said Heather Arnet, the foundation's chief executive officer. "There are many services, but it's very disconnected. Each mom has to navigate a complex system on her own."

She's named the project "femisphere," and she wants to create a community where women can have a one-stop shop approach to resources, whether organizations are physically under one roof or digitally connected via an app.

By the end of this year, Arnet said they plan to have finished their initial survey and will be looking at how they can connect services to each other.

### The policy fighters

Jackson uses her own story to try to enact change.

"Most of our legislators and policymakers are white men who haven't had the experience of poverty, let alone as a single woman in poverty. I try to connect them with the real stories," Jackson said.

Arnet recently announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination in the special election for the state Senate's 37th District, where she hopes to continue her support of bills that increase minimum wage and require paid sick days.

On July 16, U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, D-Scranton, announced a plan to close the "WIC gap," citing that some children lose WIC benefits before they enter school, because of their birthday determining when they can start attending. His plan would extend WIC benefits for children until age 6.

Other efforts by state legislators to improve

outcomes for single moms include an outreach group investigating the state's poverty trends and the Earned Income Disregard program, which helps people on assistance receive benefits for a short period after they get a job, making it easier to transition to self-sufficiency.

Some cities are making waves, too. Philadelphia passed a paid sick leave law that took effect in May. A state Senate bill has already been written to try to overturn the law. On Aug. 3, the Pittsburgh City Council passed a law requiring all businesses in the city to offer paid sick leave.

Arnet said withholding paid sick leave from a single parent puts them in an unreasonable situation.

"You don't have to be a statistician to know the people who currently have paid sick days are often those who least need it," she said. "A single parent raising young children on their own — they often have a minimum-wage job, no paid sick leave and no safety net."

"Do we want moms who are thinking about leaving their young child with a fever home alone versus losing their job?"

## **STATE-FUNDED RESOURCES FOR SINGLE MOTHERS:**

**TANF:** Temporary Assistance for Needy Families is meant to help single mothers and other low-income families find and maintain employment.

**SNAP:** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits can be used at grocery stores, convenience stores and some farmer's markets and co-ops.

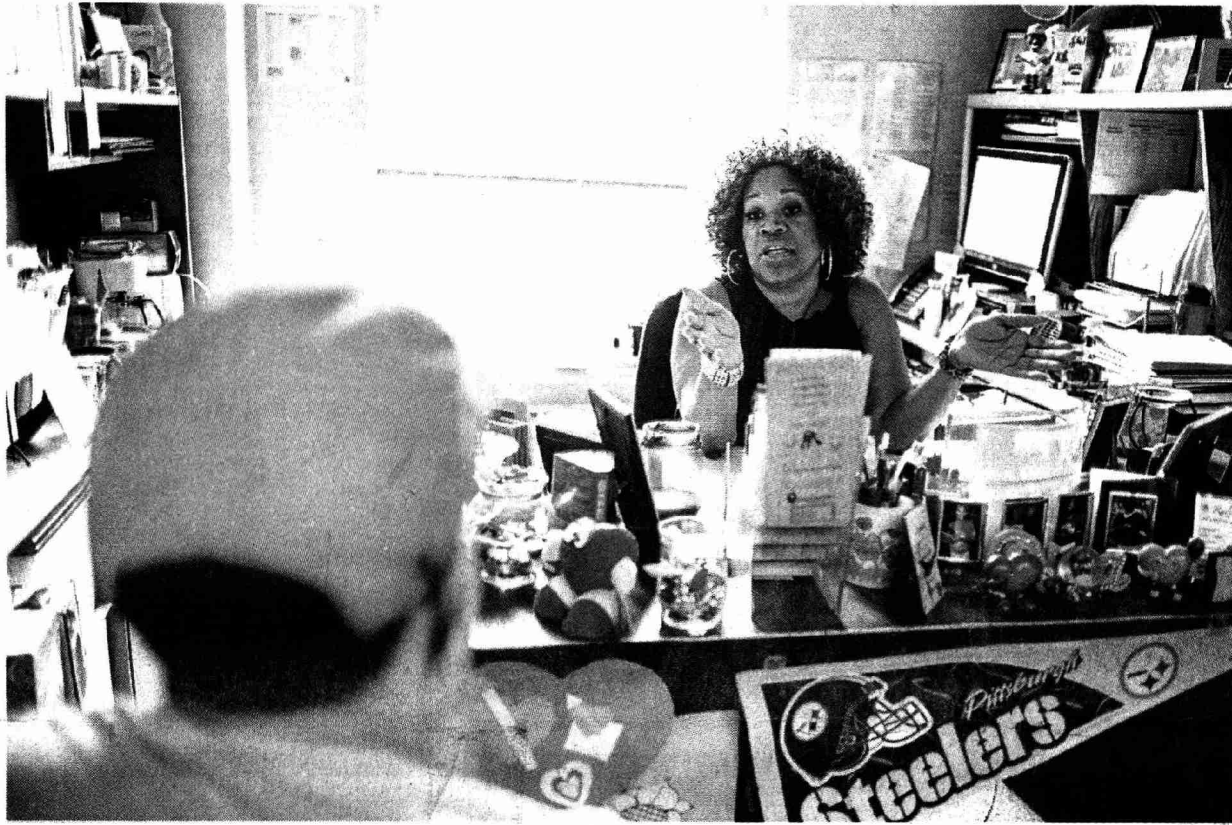
**PA WORKWEAR:** For those on TANF, it provides professional attire for job interviews, employment and training.

**KEYS:** The Keystone Education Yields Success program helps TANF and SNAP recipients attend community college. To sign up, visit [www.ccac.edu](http://www.ccac.edu).

**ELECT:** Education Leading to Employment and Career Training helps people up to 22 years old who receive TANF or SNAP benefits to remain in or return to school to complete secondary education. Diana Fishlock, deputy press secretary at Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services, says the best way to get connected to the ELECT program is through a high school's nurse.

**EARN:** The Employment, Advancement and Retention Network coordinates welfare recipients with existing employment and training programs.

To get more information on the above education and work programs, call 717-787-1302. For more information on all assistance available to single mothers and low-income families, find your local county assistance office.



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**Above:** Rochelle Jackson, a single mother of four children, works in welfare advocacy for Pittsburgh nonprofit Just Harvest. She has two other part-time jobs and is working to complete a Master of Business Administration at Carlow University. **Below:** Jackson keeps pictures of her children on her desk at Pittsburgh-based Just Harvest, where she works in welfare advocacy.

