

Being Black in the Welfare Office

Miriam

I am from Honduras, and I am black. I have been in the U.S. for five years, and for the last two years we've been living in a shelter. A shelter is a place for homeless people. Because I am homeless and because I am an unemployed single mother, I need help from social services.

My social worker is a white woman from Puerto Rico. Unfortunately she is very rude to me.



very unfriendly and rude to me. Finally, I started to ask myself, what is the difference between other clients and me? We are all poor. We are all single mothers. And we all need help. So, what could it be? The only thing I could think of is: I am black, and they are not.

Later, I got a new social worker. She has helped me to find permanent housing in a beautiful apartment with my children. Now I

know how helpful social workers can be, and this has given me hope!

In the end, I don't know if my first social worker was racist or only a bad social worker. What I do know is: if you are in the U.S. and you are a poor, homeless, single mother and you are black, you really need help, and sometimes it's hard to get it.

We are all poor. We are all single mothers. And we all need help. So, what could it be? The only thing I could think of is: I am black, and they are not.

For example, she told me I must go to her office to speak with her. I tried to make an appointment, but I couldn't because she never answered the phone. When I got the answering machine, it said I

couldn't leave a message because it was full. Believe me, I tried calling many times. Finally, I went to the office without an appointment. She was very angry. "Why didn't you make an appointment?" she asked me. She didn't even wait for my answer. I asked her some of my questions, and she answered in a way that was so brief and unfriendly that I was too afraid to ask more. Instead, I started to cry. I was unable to fight for my rights.

Over time, I saw her with other clients. She seemed to be very friendly. She was making jokes and they were laughing together. I noticed that these clients were white people. Perhaps some were from her country. I tried to change my behavior. I was very friendly and polite. However, her behavior didn't change at all. She was always

Miriam (not her real name) is a Garifuna woman from Honduras. She is a student at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, MA. She has two children. She is currently focusing on learning English, and she plans on studying criminal justice in the future.

What Could Miriam Do?

Have you ever worked with a professional who did not act professionally or who behaved in a racist manner? Write a description of the situation and share what you did about it.

Research how you could file a complaint in your city or state. What are the channels for holding government employees accountable? What about private employees? Remember: discrimination is against the law.