Waiting in the Welfare Office

Forrest Walter

The department of welfare is crowded and hot. I can’t leave my seat or I’ll lose my spot. Some will be helped and others will not. Shopping bags everywhere but nothing is bought.

Seconds to minutes, minutes become hours. Waiting and waiting the faces look sour. Behind each desk are the people with power. The paperwork stacked all around into towers.

My name is called finally and I take my seat. “Why do you need shelter? When did you last eat?” Are the questions she asks me without losing a beat. My documentation in a bag at my feet.

“Do you have...” she begins as she checks off her list, The documents required for her to assist. A photo ID, and Notice to Quit Bank statements and a birth certificate?

Child immunization required by law Doctor’s reports, which WIC office you call And did you receive any counseling at all? Some towers of paper are beginning to fall.

I pull out each document and add to the stack. Pulling them out from this old paper sack. The keyboard clickity, clackity, clack. “I’m sorry,” she says. “You’ll have to come back.”

One sheet of paper is all that I need One stupid document for me to proceed. I’ve been sitting here patiently from 7 to 3. Only to find that today they can’t help me.

Forrest Walter based this poem on the stories of women in adult education classes at Project Hope.