

Beyond the rules

Hackensack agency failed James Brady

IT WOULD have been so easy for James Brady to just pick up the money he found in April on a Hackensack street, put it in his pocket and be on his way.

After all, he was living in a homeless shelter. But despite life's misfortunes, Brady's basic honesty was intact. He took the money — some \$850 — to the police station. When no one claimed the cash after six months, the money came back to Brady, who was lauded far and wide for his integrity.

The feel-good story soon turned sour.

The city's Human Services Department decided that Brady, 59, was temporarily ineligible for the General Assistance and Medicaid benefits he had been getting, because he didn't report the money he found as income. That assistance included a housing allowance that has permitted Brady to move out of the shelter and into a city apartment.

If you think this tale sounds like a bureaucratic mess out of the pages of a Kafka novel, you're right. In short, Brady's benefits are being suspended through the end of the year because he was forthright enough to tell police he had found nearly a thousand dollars in cash on the street. There are many non-homeless individuals who might not have done that.

Rules are rules, says Agatha Toomey, the city's human services director. We understand that. But we also understand that just about everyone who enforces rules, the police included, is able to use discretion during unusual circumstances. That's what should have happened here.

Brady says he didn't know his windfall had to be reported. Not knowing the law is no excuse, but what is more relevant is that Brady did nothing to conceal the fact that he had found the money. He was publicly honored

by the City Council.

On Monday, the mayor and council said they were unhappy with Toomey's decision regarding Brady and that they will try to rectify it. Councilwoman Rose Greenman noted that Brady "showed uncommon honesty and integrity and should not be punished for it."

Whatever the council does may not be necessary. Bergen County's United Way has set up a fund specifically to assist Brady, and many who read about Brady's plight over last weekend are offering donations to help him.

There may be cynics who will say Brady's misfortune is being exaggerated given the fact that his benefits are being suspended for less than two months — until Dec. 31. Others may see the original assistance for Brady as an unfortunate symbol of the expanding welfare state.

That may be a debatable point, but this is not the time to make it. Let's not forget the bottom line. Brady's most recent troubles arose simply because of his honesty. Persons of integrity need no praise for displaying honesty; it's something that is expected. But at the same time, honesty should not be penalized.



BRADY

