

## Taking a stand for the homeless

Good Samaritan is overwhelmed by public support

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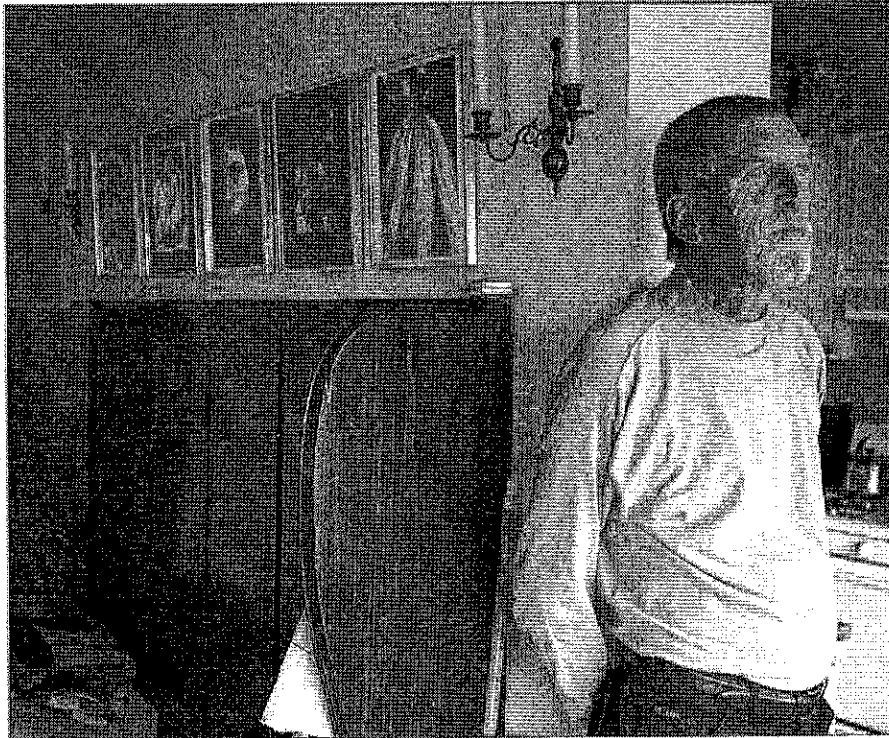
For James Brady, the decision to speak publicly about turning in \$850 he found on the street — money that that later led him to lose welfare benefits — was not an easy one.

A private man who was homeless when he found the money in Hackensack, Brady said he felt the time was right to take a stand. And that's just what he did Tuesday night at the City Council meeting.

"I wanted to go public with it because we have issues in the town with the homeless and the way they've been treated," Brady told council members. "Homeless' and 'criminal' are not synonymous."

Brady's honest act in turning in \$850 to police made headlines, but the story grew into a phenomenon when the Hackensack Human Services Department denied him welfare benefits last week because he failed to report the money as income. People from around the nation lauded his honest act, and

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THOMAS E. FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

James Brady said returning \$850 he found was a chance to show homeless are not all criminals. "When they're not doing something wrong, they should be treated with the same respect as anyone else," he said.



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lamented the bureaucratic ordeal that led him to lose benefits, while hundreds of people donated to a fund set up for him by the United Way.

A handful of residents defended the city's director of Human Services during the meeting, saying she had been unfairly criticized for doing her job. But the point could be short-lived. City officials said they submitted a plan to the state on Tuesday to close the department in a bid to save about \$400,000 a year. Officials say the move, which had been discussed for months, was unrelated to Brady's case.

Brady, a 59-year-old former news photographer and data analyst who fell on hard times, was outspoken about the treatment of the homeless even before his brush with fame. He reached out to The Record last summer to raise concerns about their treatment by police during a quality-of-life initiative in Hackensack.

He repeated those concerns last night before the council.

"I have no problem with cracking down on homeless when they're doing something wrong," he said. "When they're not doing something wrong, they should be treated with the same respect as anyone else."

He said he didn't know he had to report the \$850 that he received as lump-sum income. Brady, who now lives in an apartment in the city and is aided by a county rent assistance program that covers all but \$5 of his \$1,095 rent, lost \$210 monthly general assistance as well as Medicaid benefits, which he was using to pay for psychiatric care, from Oct. 18 through Dec. 31. Brady has suffered from depression.

Agatha Toomey, the Human Services director, has said she was following the rules, which require any lump-sum income such as lottery winnings or inheritance to be reported and factored into benefits. She did not attend the meeting.

"Mea culpa on me if I made a mistake, but I think it could have been handled in a more compassionate fashion," Brady said, noting that city officials knew about the \$850 and could have reached out to him.



MARKO GEORGIEV/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

James Brady on Tuesday night showing the Hackensack Council the resolution it gave him for turning in \$850 he found.

Three people spoke at the meeting in Toomey's defense, saying she was compassionate and caring. "She is fair with all her clients. She follows the rules so as not to disparage one person over another. These rules were not put in place by Agatha," said Nancy Wueste, Toomey's sister.

If the city's plan to abolish the department is approved by the state civil service commission, which must sign off on layoffs, Toomey and three other workers in the Human Services Department could be out of work in about 75 days, officials said. Toomey earns \$133,000 a year and has use of a city car. Cases handled by the department would be shifted to the county.

Jeanne Baratta, chief of staff for Bergen County Executive Kathleen Donovan, said at the council meeting that she was assured that state officials would take steps to fill in the gaps in Brady's benefits. A spokeswoman for the Division of Family Development, which oversees state welfare programs, said Tuesday she could not comment on the case because of confidentiality laws.

"Everything was done by the

books, as it should have been done," Baratta said. "But could it have been handled better? Yes."

Brady said he was amazed by the public response.

"One of the things is: I didn't ask for any of this. I was just putting myself out there because I wanted to help homeless in Hackensack.

"To see it get picked up by so many papers and the response — it's tremendous. People are very sympathetic."

The spotlight has been a bit stressful, Brady said Tuesday.

"I stopped answering my phone on Saturday," he said, noting all the unfamiliar numbers and media requests for interviews, "but I'm in good spirits."

He said he's grateful to the public who have rallied to help him.

Bergen County's United Way received 241 online donations totaling \$6,336 by Tuesday afternoon, said chapter president Tom Toronto.

Toronto said the money would be used to help Brady with basic needs and that he would work with officials to make sure Brady wouldn't be harmed further by loss of benefits. Brady said he does

not know how he wants the donations to be spent.

Julia Orlando, director of Bergen County's homeless shelter where Brady has stayed, said she also hopes the publicity will help change opinions about homelessness.

The shelter residents, she said, come from all backgrounds and shouldn't be painted as criminals.

Even with the loss of benefits and all the spotlight on him, Brady said he wouldn't have done anything differently.

"I've had people tell me: 'You should have just pocketed the money.' Nah. That's not the right thing to do," he said.

Brady said he was proud to turn in the money to police because he wanted people to know that the homeless men and women in the city were "good, decent people."

"It's something to demonstrate that homeless and criminals aren't synonymous; for people to see that homeless people can do the righteous thing. We're not criminals. We're just down on our luck," he said.

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