

A Walk Through *The People's Guide: The Sally Cordova Story*¹

Dedicated to the memory of Sal Cordova, an extraordinary advocate at Community Legal Services in Compton, California.

This exercise introduces you to *The People's Guide to Welfare, Health & Other Services*. *The People's Guide* describes the major public benefit programs from a client perspective—a good first step for advocates to learn benefit law.

Learning about the legal requirements gives a glimpse into low-income people's lives and their struggles for the "help" that is available to them.

You can find *The People's Guide* [here](#).

Most of *The People's Guide's* information applies throughout California, except for the material on Los Angeles County specific programs such as General Relief and county Health and CalWORKs welfare to work programs.

Scene 1

An early afternoon finds you sitting in your office gazing at a poster of moonlit beach. You take a deep breath. You read on the intake sheet that the next client is "Sally Cordova, age 36, needs food and money." The phone rings, "Your one o'clock is here." You walk to the waiting room and escort Ms. Cordova to your office,

chatting about the weather as you go. You both sit. You ask: "How can I help you?"

Sally says: Two weeks ago I left my husband, Joss, for a lot of reasons really. Right now he's in county jail (located in Weaverville, 50 miles north of here, where we lived for 10 years). It seemed like the best time to just go. Besides, the kids are out of school for summer vacation. I've got my four kids with me — little Tony and Emily, ages 8 and 2, they're my babies. Also Alton and Donna, my older ones.

By the way, Donna's pregnant. She won't tell me how far along, but I think it's probably about six months. Anyway, we've been staying with Beth, a cousin of mine, she works as a maid. Her place just has two bedrooms and she's got two kids of her own, so it's tight. I've got an old car, not worth much, and I got about \$50, borrowed. Sally takes a breath. I guess maybe the first thing I need to get for me and the kids is some food. Got any ideas?

1. List all the food assistance programs that Sally and her children might be eligible for. Note any additional information you might need to ascertain her eligibility.

¹ Thanks to Daphne Macklin, attorney at CCWRO who authored the story, and Kate Meiss, Neighborhood Legal Services of LA County, and her 2011 class at USC Law School who added more mystery and intrigue.

Sally continues:

I also need gas money for the car and some clothes, especially shoes for me and the kids. I'd like to give cousin Beth something for letting me stay there. That \$50 I have isn't going to last very long. Well, about my marriage, I'd have to say it's pretty much over. I can't say that I'm not going back to him, but he'll have to change a lot. Joss and I were both working before the last bad fight (about a month ago), the one that put me in the hospital with a busted hand. I had been working at Happy Burger for two years but the doctor said I couldn't use the hand for at least three months so I figured I should quit.

About a year and a half ago, Joss lost his job as a sheetrock hanger. We lost our house this Christmas because we couldn't keep up on the note and the bank accounts got taken by the county for Joss' court fines.

Alton's 18, almost 19. He finished high school and worked for about a year doing construction work as part of some kind of training program. About a month ago, the place closed down before he got his last paycheck. Alton told me last night that he's probably just going to go off on his own. I don't like that idea; I really need him around. Donna's talking about getting her own place too, may be even giving her baby up for adoption.

I think they're thinking up ways to be on their own because it's so hard to make ends meet right now. Can you help us?

2. List the kinds of public benefits income and employee assistance programs that Sally and her kids might be eligible for. (You do not need to list food, housing or health care programs). Note any additional information you might need to ascertain their eligibility.

Sally: Joss is an army vet and I think that has a lot to do with his drinking and bad temper. Joss used to say that what happened to him in the war was the reason that Tony's.... well, you know, "slow" and in those special school classes.

3. List any other kinds of income that Sally and her kids might be eligible for. What programs might help Tony? (Don't include Medi-Cal, Health or Food) Note any additional information you might need to ascertain their eligibility.

Sally: The little kids used to go to the children's clinic at Weaverville General. I think they need to see someone now because of their colds. Donna has been having some pains, so I know she needs to see a doctor. I had a hard time with all my pregnancies so I bet she's going through the same stuff. Except that she won't talk to me about anything. Bothers me. Actually I guess I'm pretty depressed about it. Also this right hand, the one Joss broke, well it gets real swollen and hot. Sometimes the fingers go numb and I can't grasp anything.

4. List the kinds of health care assistance that you think Sally and her family might be eligible for. Note any additional information that you might need to ascertain their eligibility.

Scene 2: Several Weeks Later.

Sally: My Donna had her baby last week, a little girl, Sally Marie, named after me. They're both fine. But with a newborn it's obvious that the two-bedroom apartment we're sharing with Beth and her two kids is just too small. The social worker at the hospital said we may qualify for Homeless Assistance, emergency public housing assistance or even shelter assistance for domestic violence victims. The social worker is right, isn't she?

5. What housing assistance might Sally and her family be eligible for? Can Donna get her own place or must she stay with Sally? Note any additional information that you might need to ascertain their eligibility.

husband and said that because we're an "intact family" I can't get any CalWORKs. Because of his income she also said that the baby and I aren't eligible for Medi-Cal or CalFresh. Whatsup?

Alton: They're also saying that I could be liable for child support for the baby. Can you believe it, I'm the kid's uncle not her father. Is there any way to straighten this mess out?

6. Is Donna eligible for CalWORKs even though she's living with her brother? Is she eligible for CalFresh? Will Alton have to pay or contribute anything? What steps can you take with the welfare department? Note any additional information that you might need.

Scene 3

Donna and Alton, Sally's older children come to see you several weeks after Sally's last visit. According to Alton things are better on one hand and worse on the other.

Alton: Thanks for that lead about the Labor Commission. The company that closed down sent me \$1500 once I filed my complaint. That was enough to get my own place, a studio. I got a job, but because I'm out of town on construction jobs, Donna's come to stay at my place. It's quieter and a lot nicer neighborhood for her and the baby. Lord knows what mom's up to these days, she's even talking about getting back with dad.

Donna: The problem is this. I went down to tell my worker that I was moving from Mom's and wanted to get my own grant of CalWORKs and CalFresh. The worker made this stupid mistake. She put Alton on as my

Donna: I have one more question. I met another girl with a little baby at the hospital. We had our babies on the same day and were roommates. Her name is Sinead. She's come over to visit with her little boy a couple of times. She finally told me that she's not a citizen and that her tourist visa ran out two years ago. She gets Medi-Cal and WIC and is afraid that it will get her in a lot of trouble. Can you help her?

[Checking with the experts, you find that an expired tourist visa means that a person's technically in the U.S. with knowledge of Citizenship and Immigration Services, INS' successor. A child born in the U.S. is a U.S. citizen.]

7. Are Sinead and her son eligible for Medi-Cal or WIC? Can your organization offer her services? (Take a guess on the second question. It's not in the People's Guide). Note any other information that you might need

Scene 4:

Alton returns to your office two years later.

Alton: I lost my last job and can't find anything – there's nothin' out there, absolutely nothin'". No more unemployment either. But you know I'm real good and strong, so I think I'm being blacklisted from construction. I dunno why ... I did get into a couple of fights, but who doesn't?

I lost my apartment and am mostly on the streets. I get some food stamps but that's it. Do you know any way I can get money for a roof over my head?

(You find out that no more unemployment is available for him and that he has not earned enough credits to get Social Security Title II benefits.) You also discover he has been diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder and was hospitalized twice last year by the police because he was hearing voices.)

8. List the kinds of income assistance programs that Alton might be eligible for. Note any additional information you might need to ascertain his eligibility.