



## Monroe County Legislature

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LEGISLATOR – DISTRICT 21

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November 29, 2023

Dear County Executive Bello,

The purpose of this letter is to demand the immediate resignation of Director of Communications Gary Walker and an investigation into discriminatory and retaliatory conduct toward a recipient of public assistance.

### **Timeline of events:**

**Saturday, November 4:** A staff member at Cameron Community Members called me about a mother and three children placed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) at the Econo Lodge. The staff member said that Ashley Williams would have to leave the hotel at 11 a.m. because her emergency housing placement ran out that day, and no one was answering the social services “after hours” line. I called the line myself; no one answered and there was no way to leave a message. I sent an email to County officials, including Denise Read asking that this situation be addressed. The Cameron staff member replied all to my email and provided more information. Cameron covered the hotel costs for the remainder of the weekend.

**Monday, November 6:** DHS extended Ms. Williams’ stay at the hotel and reimbursed Cameron, according to the staff member.

**Tuesday, November 22:** The Cameron staff member hit “reply all” to the previous email chain about Ms. Williams. He shared that DHS sanctioned Ms. Williams. The email read in part:

*We are seriously perplexed and somewhat angry. Ms. Williams has received a notice that her Emergency Housing Assistance would be discontinued effective 12/1/23 for failure to comply with the task of containing in her ILP by not pursuing other housing instead of obtaining permanent housing.*

*The notice contained phone number for housing that connected her to a pet groomer and the Tint Shop of Rochester. Is this a joke? If not, it is pretty bad work on behalf of your office.*

*Please clear this up as soon as possible and we need this notice retracted immediately. Our next option is to hold a press conference from the Econo Lodge.*

**Tuesday, November 28:** Ms. Williams had not heard anything from DHS in response to the Cameron staff member’s complaint. Working with Cameron Community Ministries, we decided a press conference about her plight could force DHS to intervene and change its policies. We

gathered outside the Econo Lodge and shared the sanction letter she received from DHS with the media.

Walker issued a [statement to the news media](#) that read:

*Today's spectacle orchestrated by Legislator Barnhart was an unfortunate, self-aggrandizing exercise in exploiting a family in their time of need. In summoning the media rather than actually working to solve the problem, she managed to not only jeopardize the current housing of the family in question, but also imperil the relationship between the county and a much-needed emergency housing provider and doxx a county employee.*

*While we cannot comment on the specifics of this case, in operating the Temporary Housing program, Monroe County's hands are tied by the governing regulations outlined in New York State law. However, there are myriad reasons a placement may come to an end. For instance, often times when a placement is ending on the first of the month, it is because the individual is actively receiving other monthly public assistance benefits, such as SSI or a housing voucher, which must be used to meet housing costs. When any such income is exhausted, individuals can reapply for emergency housing.*

*The County provides case management support to eligible individuals to assist in locating housing and may pass on information about potentially available rental units, although under the state regulations, individuals are ultimately responsible for securing their own housing.*

*Rather than attacking the hard-working and dedicated staff at the Department of Human Services and exploiting the circumstances of families in need, Legislator Barnhart would be better served directing her concerns about the state's regulations to the state.*

There are numerous problems with Walker's statement. Instead of trying to solve the problem for an unhoused mother, he resorted to threats, stereotypes and misleading and false statements:

**Retaliation and threats:** Walker threatened to retaliate against a vulnerable mother attempting to provide for her children. By suggesting complaints jeopardize assistance, he is sending a chilling message to every public benefits recipient about what will happen if they speak out.

**Discrimination:** Walker revealed confidential information about Ms. Williams in the example he gave in his statement. By revealing that Ms. Williams receives SSI, Walker egregiously invoked racial stereotypes. Calling a homeless mother asking for help a "spectacle" was demeaning.

**Misleading and False Statements:** First, Monroe County knew about my efforts to assist Ms. Williams in previous weeks, but claimed I wasn't helping. Second, Ms. William's use of SSI is not relevant to this situation. She wasn't cut off from assistance because of anything related to SSI. She was sanctioned for not finding permanent housing. Further, Walker blames the state for Ms. William's situation, but does not mention Monroe County has flexibility in how it interprets regulations related to sanctions. Monroe County has been cited as having an [unusually high sanctioning rate](#) in the state. [The RASE Commission report](#) made the following recommendation: "End Monroe County's high use of financial assistance sanctions in human services to ensure individuals who need help can get it."

Walker's conduct in this situation, which included attacking a legislator advocating for a community member, is reprehensible and beneath his position. He should no longer serve in this role. Your office should conduct investigation into the management of DHS in Monroe County, including a culture that led to the sanctioning of Ms. Williams.

Ms. Williams has nowhere to go when her SSI check runs out next month. Please set aside animosity toward individuals who bring forward concerns and provide this mother the care she and her children deserve from our County government.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rachel Barnhart".

Rachel Barnhart – Legislator District 21

Cc:

State Comptroller Thomas Dinapoli

State Attorney General Letitia James

Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Commissioner Barbara C. Guinn