

# Storming Caesar's Palace



**DISCUSSION GUIDE**



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## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

On the surface, my life is banal: I'm a Colombian American woman who grew up in New York City. But beneath lies a more complicated story: As an infant in Bogotá, I was left in an orphanage for abandoned children. I don't harbor any resentment against my birth mother—to the contrary, I am grateful for her decision. I believe she did what she thought was best; she gave me away so that I could have a life that she felt she couldn't provide. Her selflessness has driven my desire to examine the lengths to which mothers in marginalized communities will go in order to provide for their children, especially as they fight to dismantle intersectional discrimination both historically and today.

Ruby Duncan provides an answer: "A mother will do anything for her children." I began filming with Ruby, Mary Wesley, and Alversa Beals in 2007 after receiving ITVS Diversity Development Funds. Over the years, as Ruby and I got to know each other better, she began to trust me more, and she recognized my commitment to sharing her story. As a result, she began to reveal personal experiences that were not included in Annelise Orleck's groundbreaking book, which this film is based on.

***Storming Caesars Palace*** centers around one of the most unpopular and misunderstood groups of women in the United States: Black mothers on welfare. Yet the story of the little-welfare-rights-organization-that-could fueled by Ruby, Mary, and Alversa's determination to provide for their families is undeniably universal, and this film shifts the narrative. It shows that low-income mothers are visionary political strategists who are the experts on fighting poverty.

It is my hope that this film sparks dialogue about who we are as a society. Are we ready to recognize the contributions made by poor women of color that pushed our democracy to live up to its promises? How do we want to value mothers, children, and caregivers—are they people our government should invest in? In the wealthiest country in the world, is a living wage or universal basic income a privilege or a basic human right?

—Hazel Gurland-Pooler, Director/Producer, ***Storming Caesars Palace***



## ABOUT THE FILM

### Film Synopsis

After losing her job as a hotel worker in Las Vegas, Ruby Duncan joined a welfare rights group composed of mothers who defied notions of the “welfare queen.” In a fight for guaranteed income, Ruby and other equality activists took on the Nevada mob in organizing a massive protest that shut down Caesars Palace.

### How to Watch the Film

INDIE LENS POP-UP SCREENINGS:

**February 18–April 3, 2023**

INDEPENDENT LENS PREMIERE  
([CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS](#)):

**March 20, 2023**

STREAM ONLINE AT [VIDEO.PBS.ORG](https://www.pbs.org/video):

**March 20–June 17, 2023**

### Screening Objectives

*“You’ve got to get out and talk about your problem.”*

— Ruby Duncan

The goals of the film are to:

- Counter the erasure of Black women’s contributions and restore dignity, celebrating their role in historic anti-poverty movements
- Foster dialogue around efforts to transform the low-wage economy
- Forge intergenerational connections among BIPOC and women-led organizations and communities
- Empower a new generation of grassroots leaders





## DISCUSSING THE FILM

The women in ***Storming Caesars Palace*** demonstrate that no one is alone when facing hardship. Whether someone is receiving temporary or long-term public assistance, is seeking support, or has no firsthand experience, a screening of ***Storming Caesars Palace*** presents an opportunity to have a conversation about economic justice, the value of the social safety net in our democracy and in society, and the need for visionary action to help struggling families today.

### Tips for Framing the Conversation

Talking about being poor in the United States is complicated and often painful for persons who have faced or are currently facing financial hardship. The fear of being “outed” about one’s real financial situation and the social stigmas around receiving public assistance are very real. The U.S. culture embraces the “rags to riches” story coupled with platitudes like “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” and “take personal responsibility.” This language puts the focus and blame on individuals who struggle despite best efforts, rather than on the structures and systems that contribute to the economic disparities that keep people poor.

Here are **tips for facilitating the discussion**:

- Remind participants to listen actively.
- Be mindful of language and social stigmas. Talking about being poor is difficult for many people.
- Establish agreements with participants before the conversation. For example:
  - If you are recording your event, be sure all participants are aware of that, know how the recording will be used, and agree to be recorded.
  - Ask participants to agree to frame their comments in first person (i.e., “I feel that ...” not “Everyone knows that ...”).

- Allow participants to choose whether to share their stories, and make it clear that there is no shame and no blame.
- Avoid giving advice. Instead, “What do you need?” is often a helpful response.
- Invite people to your event who can counsel, who know systems, and who have access to resources that can help people in need.
- Welcome audiences who need help in navigating systems.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Parker, Priya. 2018. *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Hahn, Heather, & Sims, Margaret. 2021. [\*\*“Poverty Results from Structural Barriers, Not Personal Choices: Safety Net Programs Should Reflect That,”\*\*](#) *Urban Wire*, February 16, 2021.
- The Ad Council’s [\*\*“Language Matters: Words to Avoid When Talking About Poverty in America.”\*\*](#)





## TOPICS AND THEMES

The film touches on many issues, so to help you, this discussion guide offers detailed guidance on facilitating discussions on these three topics:

- **Celebrating Ruby Duncan and Black Women Change Makers**
- **Building Understanding of and Dispelling Myths about the Social Safety Net**
- **Organizing for Change—Yesterday and Today**

For each topic, you will find the following:

- **Overview and background information:** Framing language and helpful insights about the topic
- **Discussion questions:** Guided prompts to help get the conversation started
- **Resources:** Organizations to reach out to and sources to research to help you prepare for your event
- **Potential partners:** Community groups and partners that can contribute additional knowledge during moderated conversations
- **Engagement activities:** Ideas to promote active participation in the film topics and discussion questions that support in-depth conversations and personal reflection





## Celebrating Ruby Duncan and Black Women Change Makers

*“My God, people doing this all over the country.”*

—Ruby Duncan

When talking about the anti-poverty movement in the United States, the primary reference point is often the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign, also known as the Poor People’s March, in Washington, D.C., organized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and carried out by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy after the assassination of Dr. King.<sup>1</sup>

However, southern Black women who migrated to cities like New York, Watts, Chicago, Washington, and Las Vegas in the 1950s and 1960s brought valuable strategies to the Poor People’s Campaign and the anti-poverty movement based on their personal experiences with inadequate state-run welfare and other public assistance programs.<sup>2</sup>

As seen in ***Storming Caesars Palace***, Ruby Duncan, Mary Wesley, Alversa Beals, and their cohorts used their “mother power” to build an anti-poverty, pro-family movement in Las Vegas that became part of a national movement and helped create a coalition with the National Welfare Rights Organization, unions, activists, and economic justice organizations.

Each screening of ***Storming Caesars Palace*** is an opportunity to celebrate the stories of the Black women leaders and activists of the welfare rights movement, who are often left out of this civil rights narrative.

<sup>1</sup> [kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/poor-peoples-campaign](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/poor-peoples-campaign)

<sup>2</sup> [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/mlk-last-march/555953/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/mlk-last-march/555953/)

## BLACK WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN THE FILM

**Ruby Duncan** (1932–) Duncan left Louisiana for Las Vegas in the 1950s to escape the racial violence of the Delta region and to seek opportunities for better-paying jobs. She worked in low-paying service jobs in hotels on the Las Vegas Strip. After suffering a debilitating work-related accident, Duncan applied for and received welfare benefits, but the amount of public support was inadequate for Duncan and other women like her to support their families. Beginning in 1967, Duncan became active in the Clark County Welfare Rights Organization (CCWRO) and eventually became president of the CCWRO. In 1972, Duncan and others founded Operation Life, one of the first woman-led community corporations in the United States. The organization remained in operation for 20 years.

**Mary Wesley** (1937–2016) Wesley was born in 1937 in Quitman, Mississippi, where the Ku Klux Klan murdered her father in 1941. She left Mississippi for Las Vegas when she was 16. Wesley married, and the couple had eight children, but the marriage ended in divorce and Wesley was left raising eight children on her own. She and others, collectively known as the “Westside mothers,” founded Operation Life, and she was on the front lines with Duncan and others when mothers and children stormed the Caesars Palace gambling pits on March 6, 1971, shutting down the casino.<sup>3</sup>

**Alversa Beals** (1933–2018) Beals was living in Louisiana with her husband and children, but the marriage was falling apart due to her husband’s alcoholism. So she left Louisiana with her children and joined her brother and sister-in-law in Las Vegas in 1955. Beals got a job as a maid on the Strip, learned union basics from her sister-in-law, and registered to vote. For years, Beals wanted to stop having children, but over-the-counter birth control was not available to her. A doctor finally agreed to tie her tubes. But the law at that time required the husband’s permission for the medical procedure; they contacted her husband, Ed Beals, who gave his permission. Beals, who had an elementary school education, designed the bookkeeping system for Operation Life that enabled her to keep accurate accounting within pennies.<sup>4</sup>

## BEYOND THE FILM:

### WOMEN OF THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND NATIONAL WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

**Storming Caesars Palace** is part of the larger story of the anti-poverty welfare rights movement. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) evolved from a coalition of local grassroots welfare rights organizations led by women in various U.S. cities. The film is an opportunity to highlight these women who were organizing in their home cities in addition to taking on leadership roles in the NWRO.

Here are some of the women who led the movement:

**Etta Horn** (1928–2001) Horn lived in Washington, D.C.’s Barry Farms Dwellings public housing complex and was the leader of the Band of Angels, a tenants’ council, when it negotiated a \$1.5 million renovation. Horn co-founded the NWRO in 1966 and headed the Citywide Welfare Alliance.<sup>5</sup>

**Johnnie Tillmon** (1926–1995) In 1963, Tillmon founded ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous, one of the first grassroots organizations for welfare mothers. The organization, which was centered in Watts, California, merged with the NWRO.<sup>6</sup> Tillmon later became chairperson and director of the NWRO.<sup>7</sup>

**Beulah Sanders** (1938–1984) Sanders moved from Durham, North Carolina, to New York City and organized a citywide welfare movement. She also organized for tenants’ rights, built the largest welfare rights coalition in the nation, and fought against “workfare” when New York attempted to impose work requirements for welfare benefits. Sanders was appointed vice-chair of the NWRO in 1967.<sup>8</sup>

3 [lasvegassun.com/news/2016/sep/16/mary-wesley-whose-social-activism-brought-hope-to/](http://lasvegassun.com/news/2016/sep/16/mary-wesley-whose-social-activism-brought-hope-to/)

4 [books.google.com/books/about/Storming\\_Caesars\\_Palace.html?id=KhhzYVfwQO8C](http://books.google.com/books/about/Storming_Caesars_Palace.html?id=KhhzYVfwQO8C)

5 [womenshistory.si.edu/object/acm\\_2014.0028.0018](http://womenshistory.si.edu/object/acm_2014.0028.0018)

6 [msmagazine.com/author/jtillmon/](http://msmagazine.com/author/jtillmon/)

7 [www.nytimes.com/1972/12/17/archives/welfare-activist-plans-new-group-will-leave-rights-post-for.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1972/12/17/archives/welfare-activist-plans-new-group-will-leave-rights-post-for.html)

8 [books.google.com/books/about/Storming\\_Caesars\\_Palace.html?id=KhhzYVfwQO8C](http://books.google.com/books/about/Storming_Caesars_Palace.html?id=KhhzYVfwQO8C)



# OPERATION LIFE

A COMMUNITY PROJECT  
CLARK COUNTY WELFARE RIGHTS



## POTENTIAL PARTNERS / SPEAKERS

- **Historians from universities and colleges**, who specialize in American labor history, the history of grassroots movements, African American studies, gender studies, and economics
- **Oral historians, archivists, and librarians** who collect stories similar to those in the film
- **Persons who run community healthcare centers, childcare centers, and workforce training programs** in your community
- **Grassroots organizations** that provide services similar to Operation Life
- In the Rhode Island area, the [George Wiley Center](#)

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BEYOND A PANEL

- **Initiate an oral history project** as part of your event screening. [Claytee White](#) (seen in the film) is a Nevada oral historian. Partner with [StoryCorps](#) and [state humanities councils](#). Check with your local library to collect stories about persons in your community who have had an impact on the lives of others.
  - [StoryCorps | Great Questions](#) – Suggestions for getting a good conversation going
- **Create a virtual exhibit** featuring the names and photos of grassroots organizers in your community who have been active participants in anti-poverty, pro-family, social, and economic justice initiatives for your community. This can also be a “Mother Power” exhibit. Invite attendees to submit photos and a brief description prior to the event. This can be a Women’s History Month or Mother’s Day activity.
- **Combine art and activism.** Are there events, persons, or themes that can inspire a music performance or other creative tribute? Bring these to life at your event through music, dance, visual arts, poetry, and theater.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What makes the history of the welfare rights movement a civil rights story?
- Would you describe the welfare rights movement as part of the women’s or feminist movement?
- Three of the co-founders of the NWRO were academic professionals (George Wiley, Frances Fox Piven, and Richard A. Cloward). Many of the women who led the grassroots movement did not have a college education or a high school diploma or GED. What does it take to build coalitions between persons from diverse education backgrounds into a grassroots movement? What can each contribute to building a movement?
- How would you describe Mother Power in the film? Why is Mother Power effective in advancing a cause? What qualities did the Westside mothers have that made them a powerful force? Do you have a story of Mother Power from your life?

## RESOURCES

- Orleck, Annelise. 2005. *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Nadasen, Premilla. 2004. *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- [Storming Caesars Palace Flash Cards](#)
- Germain, Jacqui. “[The National Welfare Rights Organization Wanted Economic Justice for Black Americans.](#)” *Teen Vogue*. December 24, 2021.





## Building Understanding of and Dispelling Myths about the Social Safety Net

*“Most of the women in the project didn’t want to say they were on welfare, because being on welfare always felt like it’s just demeaning.”*

—Ruby Duncan

The U.S. Census defines the U.S. social safety net or public assistance as “a complex combination of programs administered by local, tribal, state and federal agencies that together assist tens of millions of Americans annually.” During and since 1935, eligibility for public assistance has shifted with the political winds including new programs based on the current needs of the population, or the fiscal philosophy of state and local politicians.

In addition to confusion stemming from navigating the social safety net, there are many misconceptions and myths about public assistance. Your screenings are an opportunity to share resources and dispel these myths.



## HISTORICAL TIMELINE:

# RUBY DUNCAN AND U.S. PUBLIC ASSISTANCE BENCHMARKS

The timeline below highlights U.S. Public Assistance programs created and restructured that had an impact on Ruby Duncan's life and activism to make public assistance programs work for women and children living in poverty.

### JUNE 7, 1932

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Ruby Duncan is born in Tallulah, Louisiana. Her parents were Black sharecroppers and died when Duncan was a young child, after which she lived with relatives.\*

### AUGUST 14, 1935

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act into law, creating systems to provide old-age benefits to workers, as well as benefits for victims of industrial accidents, unemployment insurance, and aid to persons with disabilities. The act also establishes Aid to Dependent Children (renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1962), cash welfare benefits to children who had no parental support.

### 1952

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Ruby Duncan migrates to Las Vegas, Nevada, from Tallulah, Louisiana.\*

### APRIL 11, 1953

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President Dwight D. Eisenhower creates the cabinet-level U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to administer federal and federal-state programs in public health, education, and social and economic security. (In 1979, the Department of Education was created, and HEW became the Department of Health and Human Services.)

### JANUARY 8, 1964

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In his State of the Union address, President Lyndon B. Johnson announces a war on poverty and his vision for The Great Society, a vision that would result in legislation for a wide range of programs, including early childhood education, Medicaid and Medicare, job training, urban renewal, beautification, conservation, anti-poverty, and voting rights.<sup>9</sup>

### JULY 2, 1964

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President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964 built on the late President John F. Kennedy's prior proposal to Congress to outlaw segregation in businesses and public places and discriminatory practices in employment.<sup>10</sup>

### AUGUST 31, 1964

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President Johnson signs the Food Stamp Act of 1964,<sup>11</sup> making permanent the Food Stamp Program (now the Supplemental Assistance Nutrition Program, or SNAP), which was introduced in 1939 by the Department of Agriculture and ended in 1943.<sup>12</sup>

### JULY 30, 1965

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President Johnson signs the Social Security Amendments of 1965, creating Medicare and Medicaid, health insurance programs for persons aged 65 over and for those getting public cash assistance, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

### SEPTEMBER 9, 1965

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President Johnson signs the Housing and Urban Development Act, which creates the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to administer programs that provide housing and community development assistance and which works to ensure fair and equal housing opportunity for all.<sup>14</sup>

### 1967

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Duncan suffers a work-related injury in the kitchen of the Las Vegas hotel where she is working and is disabled. Welfare benefits are her only option for income.\*

<sup>9</sup> [www.hhs.gov/about/historical-highlights/index.html](http://www.hhs.gov/about/historical-highlights/index.html)

<sup>10</sup> [www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act](http://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act)

<sup>11</sup> [www.usda.gov/media/blog/2014/10/15/commemorating-history-snap-looking-back-food-stamp-act-1964](http://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2014/10/15/commemorating-history-snap-looking-back-food-stamp-act-1964)

<sup>12</sup> [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1939](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1939)

<sup>13</sup> [www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/medicare-and-medicaid-act](http://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/medicare-and-medicaid-act)

<sup>14</sup> [www.hud.gov/about/qaintro](http://www.hud.gov/about/qaintro)

\*Source: Orleck, Annelise. 2005. *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. Boston: Beacon Press.

## APRIL 11, 1968

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President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968, commonly known as the Fair Housing Act. The act expands the policies of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by prohibiting discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, and sex and amended to include disability and family status. After two failed attempts, in 1966 and 1967, at getting such legislation through the Senate, the act finally passed in 1968 in response to the urban unrest following the assassination of Dr. King.<sup>15</sup>

## 1968

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Congress requires states to set up a work and training program called Work Incentive (WIN) for “appropriate” Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients (AFDC).<sup>16</sup>

## 1969

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Duncan contacts Las Vegas Sun reporter Mary Manning to talk about her dilemma around having a disability and Nevada’s conflicting job training rules for welfare recipients. Manning publishes Duncan’s story, titling it “Welfare Mother Wants to Work.”\*

## LATE 1960S

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The Westside mothers form the Clark County Welfare Rights Organization, and the group elects Duncan president.\*

## 1971

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Nevada state welfare chief George Miller cuts approximately 75% of women and children from the welfare rolls without a hearing.\*

Duncan and the CCWRO launch Operation Nevada with acts of civil disobedience. Operation Nevada engages a coalition of national and local welfare rights, religious, civil rights, feminist, and anti-poverty organizations in its demonstrations.\*

On March 6, several thousand protesters, led by Duncan and others, march on the Las Vegas Strip and shut down the gambling pits at Caesars Palace. Weeks later a federal judge orders Nevada to reinstate welfare benefits to persons who were cut from the rolls.\*

## 1972

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On February 8, 240 Westside mothers and their children have an “eat-in” in the Palm Restaurant at the Stardust Hotel to protest the state’s opposition to food stamps by making hungry children visible. Duncan sends the restaurant check to George Miller. A month later, the governor recommends emergency appropriation monies to reopen its relief office.\*

Operation Life, a nonprofit community development corporation, is founded by Duncan and the other Westside mothers.\*

Duncan is elected as a convention delegate to the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Miami. She and other anti-poverty, pro-family, civil rights advocates promote the Poor People’s Platform.\*

## 1973

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Through lobbying efforts, Duncan helps make Nevada bring in the federal food stamp program, the last state in the country to do so.\*

## OCTOBER 17, 1979

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President Jimmy Carter signs the Department of Education Organization Act, which dissolves HEW and creates two new federal agencies, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>17</sup>

## SEPTEMBER 24, 1979

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President Carter appoints Duncan to the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity.\*

## 1980

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Ruby Duncan is elected to serve as a Nevada delegate at the Democratic National Convention in New York City.\*

## AUGUST 13, 1981

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President Ronald Reagan signs the Economic Recovery Tax Act, enacting cuts to social welfare programs and public assistance for the working poor.

<sup>15</sup> [www.hud.gov/program\\_offices/fair\\_housing\\_equal\\_opp/aboutfheo/history](http://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/aboutfheo/history)

<sup>16</sup> [aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/167036/1history.pdf](http://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/167036/1history.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Weisman, Steven R. 1979. “Carter Signs Measure Creating a Department of Education.” New York Times, October 18, 1979.

\*Source: Orleck, Annelise. 2005. *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. Boston: Beacon Press.



1990

Ruby Duncan is forced to retire from Operation Life for health reasons.\*

AUGUST 22, 1996

President Bill Clinton signs the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The bill implements major changes to U.S. social welfare policy, replacing the AFDC program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

\*Source: Orleck, Annelise. 2005. *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. Boston: Beacon Press.

## PUBLIC ASSISTANCE TODAY

There are two major types of public assistance programs in the United States today: 1) **social insurance programs** and 2) **social welfare programs**. Both programs and additional public assistance programs are outlined in more detail below.

### SOCIAL INSURANCE PROGRAMS

Social insurance programs are financed through dedicated state and federal taxes collected from worker pay and employer payrolls. They are usually based on eligibility criteria, for example, age, employment status, or being a veteran and available to persons who have paid into the system. The most familiar include the following:

- **Social Security** is part of the retirement plan for almost every American worker. It provides replacement income for qualified retirees and their families.<sup>18</sup>
- **Medicare** is a health insurance program for people aged 65 or older. Certain people younger than age 65 also qualify for Medicare, including those with disabilities and those who have permanent kidney failure.<sup>19</sup>
- **Unemployment insurance** is a joint state-federal program that provides cash benefits to eligible workers. Each state administers its own unemployment insurance program, but all states follow the same guidelines established by federal law.<sup>20</sup>
- **Workers compensation** provides wage replacement benefits, medical treatment, and vocational rehabilitation for persons who have been injured or become ill as a direct result of their job.<sup>21</sup>
- **Veterans' Affairs (VA) benefits** include health, education, housing, financing, and more for persons who are actively serving or who did serve in the U.S. military, including the National Guard and Reserve. VA benefits do not include pensions.<sup>22</sup>

18 [www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/](http://www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/)

19 [www.ssa.gov/benefits/medicare/](http://www.ssa.gov/benefits/medicare/)

20 [www.dol.gov/general/topic/unemployment-insurance](http://www.dol.gov/general/topic/unemployment-insurance)

21 [www.dol.gov/general/topic/workcomp](http://www.dol.gov/general/topic/workcomp)

22 [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)

## SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS

Social welfare programs are funded through the collection of state and federal taxes, including sales tax. The benefits are usually based on low-income means-tested eligibility criteria. According to a project report by the Urban Institute, “Most state and local public welfare spending is financed by ... federal intergovernmental grants to state and local governments.”<sup>23</sup>

- **Medicaid** – Medicaid provides health coverage to millions of Americans, including eligible low-income adults, children, pregnant women, elderly adults and people with disabilities. Medicaid is administered by states, according to federal requirements.<sup>24</sup>
- **Children’s Health Insurance Program** – Commonly referred to as CHIP; low-cost coverage for children in families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid.<sup>25</sup>
- **SNAP** – Formerly the Food Stamp Program. SNAP provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency.<sup>26</sup>
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children** – Commonly referred to as WIC; federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant and postpartum women and infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk.<sup>27</sup>
- **TANF** – Monthly cash assistance payments to low-income families with children; provides states with the flexibility to design and operate programs to help low-income families with children achieve economic self-sufficiency; replaced cash “welfare” payments with temporary benefits tied to a work requirement or job training.<sup>28</sup> Exemptions may be made for persons who are in a domestic violence situation.<sup>29</sup> [Learn more at Health and Human Services: About TANF.](#)

- **HUD Public Housing and Federal Housing Choice Voucher Program** – For very low-income families, the elderly and the disabled:

- [HUD Housing Choice Vouchers Fact Sheet](#)
- [HUD Public Housing Fact Sheet](#)

- **Supplemental Security Income (SSI)** – For aged, blind, and disabled people who have little or no income; SSI provides cash to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter.<sup>30</sup>

## ADDITIONAL PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Additional public assistance programs are available for education, disaster relief, mobile and internet access.

- **Public assistance for personal communications** – Cell phones and online access are now a necessity. The Federal Communications Commission has partnered with providers to make mobile and internet service available to and affordable for low-income individuals and families.
  - [Lifeline Communication Services](#)
  - [Affordable Connectivity Program](#)
- **Find more public assistance programs at [benefits.gov](#)** – Note that the availability, criteria, and administration of public assistance programs vary from state to state and are subject to change.

23 [www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/public-welfare-expenditures](http://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/public-welfare-expenditures)

24 [www.medicaid.gov/](http://www.medicaid.gov/)

25 [www.healthcare.gov/medicaid-chip/childrens-health-insurance-program/](http://www.healthcare.gov/medicaid-chip/childrens-health-insurance-program/)

26 [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program)

27 [www.fns.usda.gov/wic](http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic)

28 [www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf)

29 [www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/policy-guidance/tanf-acf-im-2014-03-domestic-violence-awareness-month-opportunities-and-tanf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/policy-guidance/tanf-acf-im-2014-03-domestic-violence-awareness-month-opportunities-and-tanf)

30 [ssa.gov/ssi/](http://ssa.gov/ssi/)



# WELFARE MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Personal responsibility and “bootstrap” attitudes stigmatize persons who are struggling to make ends meet or simply survive. The word poor is also used as code for “Black” and as a race-baiting tactic to drive a wedge between people of all races, regions, and gender identities who are facing the same and similar economic difficulties. Here are some of the myths, misconceptions, and realities about public assistance that are often inserted into conversations about being poor in the United States, particularly conversations around welfare benefits.

## MYTH: “A BLACK THING”

The city-dwelling Black single mother has served as a political trope for welfare opponents since the 1950s and 1960s when more Black women were applying for welfare benefits. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, however, 65% of TANF recipients were white, 26.6% Hispanic, 24.3% Black, 6.9% some other race, and 3.2% Asian. The majority of the recipients are children and women. The census also shows that the poverty rate is higher in rural areas than in cities; according to a report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the majority of rural residents living in poverty in 2019 were African American, followed by Native Americans.<sup>31</sup>

This racialization of poverty has fueled resentment toward funding social safety net programs. The nonprofit organization Confronting Poverty, from the School of Social Work at Washington University, states, “The myth that poverty is confined to a particular group of Americans, in very specific locations, is corrosive because it encourages the belief that poverty is an issue of ‘them’ rather than ‘us.’”

## MYTH: “WELFARE QUEEN”

The term welfare queen became a political trope in the 1970s and continued to be used through the 1990s to gain traction for cutting government public assistance programs and budgets, especially welfare benefits to single Black women with children. It arose from the story of Linda Taylor, whom Ronald Reagan, in his 1976

presidential campaign, referred to as “the woman from Chicago.”<sup>32</sup> Taylor created an elaborate scam involving welfare benefits, extortion, and kidnapping. Taylor was biracial (her mother was white, her father was Black); she identified as “white” in the 1930 census, but often changed her name and race depending on the circumstances. She drove a Cadillac and owned a fur coat. Taylor was ultimately charged with and convicted of welfare fraud, and when covering the story, the press began to refer to her as “the welfare queen.” Taylor died in 2002,<sup>33</sup> and although her name and story faded, the “welfare queen” racial stereotype had been burned into the imaginations of the American public.

## MYTH: “WORK WILL KEEP YOU OUT OF POVERTY”

In a 2022 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 6.3 million (4.1%) Americans were among the working poor” in 2020.<sup>34</sup> The working poor are people who spend 27 weeks in the labor force (working or looking for work), but their income falls below the poverty level. Women were more likely than men to be among the working poor; Latinos and African Americans were more likely to be among the working poor than white people or Asian Americans; and persons employed in a service industry were also more likely to be among the working poor.<sup>35</sup>

31 [www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/05/who-is-receiving-social-safety-net-benefits.html](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/05/who-is-receiving-social-safety-net-benefits.html);  
[www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/#demographics](https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/#demographics)  
[confrontingpoverty.org/poverty-facts-and-myths/](https://confrontingpoverty.org/poverty-facts-and-myths/)

32 [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/06/09/730684320/the-mothers-who-fought-to-radically-reimagine-welfare](https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/06/09/730684320/the-mothers-who-fought-to-radically-reimagine-welfare)

33 [www.nytimes.com/2019/05/20/books/review/josh-levin-queen-linda-taylor.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/20/books/review/josh-levin-queen-linda-taylor.html)

34 [www.bls.gov/opub/reports/working-poor/2020/home.htm](https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/working-poor/2020/home.htm)

35 [www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/temporary-assistance-for-needy-families](https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/temporary-assistance-for-needy-families)

## MYTH: “MAN IN THE HOUSE”

“If you were married, and the husband couldn’t find a job, he had to leave. So the children could have food. It was horrible,” says Ruby Duncan. The Man-in-the-House rule for mothers receiving welfare benefits was grounded in a patriarchal stereotype that able-bodied men are the breadwinners of the household and/or de facto substitute fathers who could financially support the family. The presence or even hint of a man in the house, whether a husband, regular visitor, or cohabitating partner, could disqualify the mother from receiving public assistance. The rule also imposed a moral double standard for mothers who were having sexual relations with men without being married. The reality is poor single and two-parent families with children struggle because of low-wage work, lack of health care, a chronic ailment or work-related disability, and rising costs for housing, utilities, transportation, and food. Under these circumstances a “man in the house” makes little financial difference. The Man in the House rule was overturned in a Supreme Court case in 1968 (*King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 309, 88 S. Ct. 2128, 20 L. Ed. 2d 1118). The challenge was brought to the court by the four children of Mrs. Sylvester Smith, a widow, against the state of Alabama.

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS / SPEAKERS

- Invite a **public official** or representative from a relevant local or state agency. In particular, consider inviting the person in charge of **constituent services** because they are on the front lines for sharing information and responding to constituent needs.
- Invite a **faculty member** from a school of social work or public health. Use this [Social Work Guide](#) to find a school in your area.
- Find a chapter of the [National Association of Social Workers](#) near you.
- Contact [Black Girls in Social Work](#), a support and networking organization for Black women pursuing, studying, and working in social services.
- Invite **someone from a mutual aid group** to talk about how they organize to carry out their work. “Mutual aid” is a self-supporting grassroots movement composed of volunteers who provide resources to persons in need during a major crisis. This [Mutual Aid Hub map](#) can help you find a group in your area.

- **Women’s resource centers (WRCs)** provide multiple services to women and gender minorities. Many offer educational, healthcare, and wellness programs as well as physical and emotional space and support. Do an online search to find a WRC near you. Many are connected with universities.

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BEYOND A PANEL

- **Resource fair**—Create a tabled event for participants to access information about social services offered by your state and local governments as well as by local organizations.
- **Skill sharing**—Invite individuals who know policy and how to navigate local and state public assistance systems to share their knowledge and research skills. Invite people experienced in the services as beneficiaries who also have systems knowledge. Include union representatives, who also often have a knowledge base around public services.
- **Social work college and career fairs**—Invite faculty from regional university and college schools of social work to set up a higher education and career fair to share information about their programs and about social work today. Invite people who are working in social services, including caseworkers, to talk about the field and their reactions to the stories in the film.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Identifying needs is the first step toward activism of the women in the film. What do you see as basic needs that must be met in order for families to survive and thrive today?
- What do you see as the impact and purpose of the social safety net?
- What did the recent pandemic emergency reveal to you about the social safety net? About the large economic gaps in your community and the United States?
- Why does poverty affect women and men differently?
- Labor Secretary Patrick Moynihan’s controversial 1965 report, “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,” was grounded in a theory that racial inequality is exacerbated by a breakdown in traditional two-parent African American family structures and an increase in single-parent households headed by women. Many of the women in the film were separated or divorced from husbands and male partners due to domestic violence, alcohol, gambling addictions, and/ or systemic strains on the marriage. How does the narrow definition of “traditional family” and gender roles do more harm than good for women, men, and children? What is the impact of racial inequality on domestic relationships and families?



- How are social workers and caseworkers portrayed in the film?
  - How did the Man-in-the-House rule affect their work?
  - What can social workers and caseworkers learn from the film? What are some changes that need to take place to improve social work?
- Alversa Beals says, “You don’t get nothing but that little crumbs of money, and they gonna talk to you and treat you so bad.” What does Beals’ quote say to you about attitudes toward people who receive public assistance?
- Mary Wesley says she was “so ashamed” of receiving welfare benefits and “wanted to get off of welfare quick.” Why do you think there is shame around accepting welfare assistance? Which social or cultural influences trigger feelings of shame when it comes to public assistance?

## RESOURCES:

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [Poverty Guidelines Computations for 2022](#)
- [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) (CBPP)
- CBPP [“TANF in the States”](#)
- CBPP Map [“Despite recent increases, TANF benefits still leave families well below federal poverty line”](#) (July 2021)
- CBPP [“Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go.”](#) Updated July 28, 2022
- [Congressional Budget Office interactive](#)
- [Urban Institute Welfare Rules database \(by state\) through 1996–2020](#)
- [Man-in-the-House Rule \*King v. Smith\* 392 U.S. 309 1968](#)
- Moynihan, Patrick. 1965. [“The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”](#)
- [Annotated version of the 1965 Moynihan report in \*The Atlantic\*](#) (September 2015)
- Lawrence, Sharmila. December 2002. [“Domestic Violence and Welfare Policy Research Findings That Can Inform Policies on Marriage and Child Well-Being.”](#) National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University
- [Resources from the Urban Institute’s Child Welfare Evidence Strengthening Team \(CWEST\) for conducting child welfare evaluations](#)

# Organizing for Change— Yesterday and Today

*“You’ve gotta get out and talk about your problem.  
You gotta be strong. Don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”*

—Ruby Duncan

Women have long been a mobilizing force in major movements and on the front lines for social justice, labor rights, environmental justice, peace, education, voting rights, pay equity, economic justice, civil rights, public safety, and anti-violence.

In ***Storming Caesars Palace***, we see Ruby Duncan and the women of Operation Life organize to empower one another through their shared experiences. The Westside mothers recognized each other’s unique talents and gifts for building a movement and running a community organization and transformed empowerment into power over their lives that would have an impact on the lives of others. Operation Life had a lunch program, a childcare center, a library, and a clinic. What models did the Westside Mothers create for anti-poverty and pro-family activism and organizing today?

*“Every movement I can think of comes out of one person saying something they think only happened to them, and 6 or 12 other people say, ‘Oh, that happened to me too’ ... and if you come together you can change it.”*

—Gloria Steinem

Grassroots and community organizing is a necessity when systems are broken for people who don’t have direct access to the people in power to fix them.

There are basic organizing strategies that apply today as much as they did when the Westside mothers and other anti-poverty activists were organizing. Some of these strategies are being adapted in the digital space. Here are examples of what the Westside mothers’ did to fix systems that serve poor families, as seen in the film ***Storming Caesars Palace***, that are still applicable to organizing today.

- **If you have a problem that needs to be solved, you have a cause.** Ruby Duncan and the Westside mothers were very clear about their cause. The problem was Nevada’s public assistance did not meet the basic needs for their families. Organizing for this cause was a matter of survival.
- **Who has shared experience with the problem? How will you work together? Where will you gather?** Duncan, Mary Wesley, and Alversa Beals came together by sharing their experiences with Nevada’s welfare system. They found other women like themselves who shared the same or similar experiences and were ready to do something about it.
  - **Find a place to meet** where people can plan and feel safe to speak openly.
  - **Set guiding principles for working together inclusively and effectively.** A code of conduct or community agreement helps to keep the community accountable to each other and the cause.
- **What is your goal? What are you demanding?** The women of the CCWRO established clear goals in response to actions and inactions by Nevada’s welfare department. In ***Storming Caesars Palace***, Erma O’Neal, vice president of the CCWRO, articulates the demands of the Westside mothers following the purge of welfare recipients without prior notice:
  - A copy of the budget sent to every welfare recipient in Las Vegas
  - A right to a fair hearing
  - The removal of George MillerEstablishing clarity around goals was the start of something bigger—Operation Life—which gave the Westside mothers expanded services and more autonomy in caring for their families.
- **Find the talent around you.** Everyone has something to contribute. For example, Beals had an elementary school education, but she took charge of the bookkeeping for Operation Life. When Nevada’s Welfare Department charged Duncan and Operation Life with welfare fraud, the audit found only 4 cents missing thanks to Beals’ outstanding bookkeeping.



- **Know systems.** Nothing can be fixed without being understood. People must educate themselves on how systems work. How do different systems connect? Who do they benefit or exclude?
  - **Set up power mapping.** The Westside mothers were able to connect their cause with the people who make decisions and have power over public assistance administration and systems. Their movement connected with organizations, institutions, and people who had influence and power. Find out more from [The Commons Library](#).
- **Build a coalition.** If your coalition isn't diverse, it's too small. The Westside mothers couldn't accomplish their goals on their own. In addition to a coalition of women like themselves, they needed to be part of a large, diverse coalition of civil rights activists, religious communities, lawyers, academics, entertainers, and business owners from inside and outside Las Vegas.
- **Determine your media strategy.** Ruby Duncan made a cold call to Mary Manning, a *Las Vegas Sun* reporter at large, to get her story out, and Manning was open to hearing Duncan's story. She wrote the article "Welfare Mother Wants to Work," which was published in the newspaper. Today, however, with more digital outlets for news, a press strategy has to be more deliberate. Research the topic to find feature writers or journalists (television, cable, radio) who cover the issue or cause on a regular basis. Find the connection between a community issue to a national issue that's getting attention. Don't rule out "vloggers" (video bloggers), bloggers, and podcasters. You never know what goes viral! And finally, it's worth noting that a press strategy can be more effective when someone other than the organizer is telling the story.
- **Take direct action.** Direct action involving a mass gathering is a visual representation of the urgency of your cause.
  - When the Westside mothers launched Operation Nevada, their goal was to disrupt business as usual in the casinos and on the Strip. The strategy included a march down the Strip and into the gambling pits of Caesars Palace to shut it down.
  - To make the case for bringing the Food Stamp Program to Nevada, the mothers and their children staged an "eat-in" at the Palms Restaurant and the Stardust. They sent the bill to George Miller.
- **Find your boldface allies.** Many of the casinos and hotels on the Strip were owned by the mob. Duncan and others received death threats for their plan to shut down Caesars Palace. Having no resources for private security or guarantees of protection from local police, the coalition of organizers included celebrities Jane Fonda, Sammy Davis Jr., Donald Sutherland, and civil rights figure the Rev. Ralph Abernathy in the march. Having prominent allies march down the Strip not only brought attention from the local and national press, raising awareness, but also provided security for the marchers.
- **Get political.** Welfare rights activists worked to have their issues and priorities added to the Democratic Party's platform for the 1972 presidential election. During election years, meetings would take place, small and large, with organizers from political party campaigns to craft a platform for the election and to craft future legislation.
- **Take good care of your organizing community.** Grassroots organizing is strenuous, time consuming work. Every movement needs a support system. Everyone needs a moment to catch their breath. The Westside mothers built a movement and a support system for each other and their families.
- **REMEMBER:** Grassroots organizing requires people power, time, patience, and persistence. Most of all persistence. Not all demands will be met, but all victories, large and small, should be celebrated.

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

- Which **organizations are dedicated to fighting poverty** in the United States? Do a search using "antipoverty." You may find groups like the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#).
- Is there a **mutual aid group** in your community? If so, invite someone from the group to talk about how they organize to carry out their work. This [Mutual Aid Hub map](#) can help you find a group in your area.
- [Mutual Aid for Disaster Relief](#)
- The [Poor People's Campaign](#) is a national call for moral revival that picks up where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's 1968 work left off. The organization has committees across the country to give all poor people voice and power as a collective to make change.
- Invite a union representative to speak at your event:
  - [Hotel, Entertainment, Restaurant Employees Union](#) (HERE)
  - [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#) (NDWA)
  - [Culinary Workers Union](#) (UNITE HERE)
  - [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU)

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BEYOND A PANEL

- Host an “organizing how-to” (see “Resources” below for ideas and trainings)
- Create a power map to show attendees who has influence and is making decisions that have an impact in their community.
- Host a workshop or webinar with grassroots organizers who can share tips for digital organizing. Include organizers who are also effective “on the ground” to share their stories and tips for mobilizing people for change.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Closing down Caesars Palace and the Palms Restaurant eat-in were direct actions that got the attention of business owners, state officials, and the nation. What makes civil disobedience, demonstrations, and marches effective? To this day, why does it take a mass demonstration of people to bring attention to a particular issue? What are some other people-power strategies at work in the film?
- Each woman in Operation Life brought unique organizing and leadership skills. What can you draw from the film about leadership models? What are some of the skills applied to achieving their goals?
- The first task of organizing is to identify the need or a problem that needs to be fixed. What is a need in your community and why? Who is being affected? Who would you contact to organize and begin the work to address it?
- How do you build a diverse and inclusive coalition? Duncan’s coalition included persons with lived experiences working with persons from academia, philanthropy, law, business, government, and media as well as youth and other grassroots activists. How does a diverse inclusive coalition work together? What are some recent examples of coalitions actively and successfully collaborating around a common cause?
- Why do you think stories about women like Ruby Duncan and others in the welfare rights movement are rarely told? What can be learned from past movements that can be applied to current activist work?
- Have you been part of a grassroots organizing or volunteer effort? What’s your story?

## RESOURCES

- [The Highlander Education and Research Center](#)
- AFL-CIO [How to form a union](#)
- ACLU [Know Your Rights | Protester’s Rights](#)
- The Midwest Academy [organizing training](#)
- Garza, Alicia. 2020. *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*. (One World, New York, 2020)



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## INDIE LENS POP-UP

Indie Lens Pop-Up is a neighborhood series that brings people together—virtually and in-person—for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Featuring documentaries seen on PBS's Independent Lens, Indie Lens Pop-Up draws local residents, leaders, and organizations to discuss what matters most, from newsworthy topics and social issues to family and community relationships. Since its inception in 2005, more than 6,700 Indie Lens Pop-Up events have brought an estimated 400,000 participants together to discuss issues that impact local communities. For more information visit [pbs.org/indielenspopup](https://pbs.org/indielenspopup).

## INDEPENDENT LENS

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10 p.m. ET. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit [pbs.org/independentlens](https://pbs.org/independentlens).

Join the conversation with  
#StormingCaesarsPBS on Twitter, Facebook,  
and Instagram at @IndependentLens.

## ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for more than 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Rescue Plan, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit [itvs.org](https://itvs.org).

## BLACK PUBLIC MEDIA

Black Public Media (BPM) supports the development of visionary content creators and distributes stories about the global Black experience to inspire a more equitable and inclusive future. For more than four decades, BPM has addressed the needs of unserved and underserved audiences. BPM continues to address historical, contemporary, and systemic challenges that traditionally impede the development and distribution of Black stories. For more information, visit [blackpublicmedia.org](https://blackpublicmedia.org).

## CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress in 1967, is the steward of the federal government's investment in public broadcasting. It helps support the operations of more than 1,500 locally owned and operated public television and radio stations nationwide. CPB is also the largest single source of funding for research, technology, and program development for public radio, public television, and related online services. For more information, visit [cpb.org](https://cpb.org), follow us on Twitter @CPBmedia, Facebook and LinkedIn and subscribe for other updates.