

# The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

## A Longtime Volunteer Helps Others Cut Red Tape

By Jennifer Mascia

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*Every year since 1911, The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. Articles will appear daily through Jan. 30, illustrating the difference that even a modest amount of money can make in easing the struggles of the poor.*

Seven years ago, when Maria Castro was told she had breast cancer, she was terrified by more than the thought of death; she was afraid her illness would put her in financial jeopardy. A native of the Dominican Republic, she did not speak English, and the pain from her tumor and subsequent mastectomy prevented her from continuing her duties as a packer at a factory and from completing her cosmetology training. She had “zero” dollars, she said.

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*Richard Perry/The New York Times*

For the past 24 years, Eleanor Rainford, 83, a volunteer with a Community Service Society program called ACES, has been helping low-income and elderly New Yorkers apply for social service benefits.

The oncology staff at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center, where Ms. Castro, 52, was being treated, referred her to a volunteer social worker who was partly deaf in one ear and did not know how to use a computer.

It was the best thing to happen to Ms. Castro.

“She was praying to God, ‘Give me someone compassionate,’ ” said Yvonne Peña, a program specialist at the hospital who interpreted for Ms. Castro. “When she first saw Eleanor’s smile, she said, ‘Thank God for this angel.’ ”

“Eleanor” is Eleanor Rainford, 83, a 5-foot-tall force who may not know how to Google herself, but is adept at navigating the bewildering and changing bureaucracy of social services.

For the past 24 years, Ms. Rainford has volunteered with a [Community Service Society](#) program called ACES, or Advocacy, Counseling and Entitlement Services, at Presbyterian/Columbia. In her role, Ms.

Rainford had to familiarize herself with every entitlement program available to those in need, as well as master their guidelines, which change often. When benefits become available to vulnerable populations, information on how and where to get them is not trumpeted on billboards. A single error on a time-sensitive form can cause benefits to disappear and applicants to be pushed to the back of the line. If Ms. Rainford is not on her game, clients suffer.

“She’s pretty good; she knows her stuff,” said Rebecca Haase, the ACES program director.

Ms. Rainford, who is the oldest volunteer at ACES, said easing the fears of her clients was key. “For a person who’s already not feeling that well, it’s overwhelming,” she said. “When you see you have 28 pages to fill out, it’s a lot.”

“Every time she comes to Eleanor,” Ms. Peña said of Ms. Castro, “she’s confident everything will be correct.”

“Going through that process, she was scared, having worked all her life, that she’d get rejected,” Ms. Rainford said, gently stroking Ms. Castro’s hand.

ACES is supported by the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven beneficiary agencies of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Every month, Ms. Rainford receives a small transportation stipend from the fund. Ms. Haase estimated that Ms. Rainford had received \$1,674 since February 1987.

The daughter of storekeepers from Adams, Mass., Ms. Rainford, a widow and a mother of five, was a schoolteacher in New York City who spent “a few interesting years” in Harlem, where she witnessed the experiment with community control of schools and devised what she said was the first black-studies curriculum at a local elementary school.

Ms. Rainford retired in 1987. When she applied for [Social Security](#) and [Medicare](#), she discovered a six-week training course for people who wanted to volunteer to explain government benefits to other new recipients.

“She thought, ‘I need to learn this myself, so let me check this out,’ ” Ms. Haase said of Ms. Rainford.

Six weeks became 24 years. When Ms. Rainford began volunteering, the AIDS epidemic was at its peak, and her patients were sheathed from head to toe and sequestered on their own floor.

For five hours a day, Ms. Rainford tells people exactly what they need to do to receive the money due to them. Though she is the only volunteer who does not use a computer, she is a meticulous organizer, with nary a form out of place.

For Ms. Castro, staying on top of her government benefits means freedom. She has not been able to return to work, but she visits Ms. Rainford a few times a year for help with reapplying for benefits. It helps that Ms. Rainford speaks fluent Spanish — a skill she picked up while caring for AIDS patients all those years ago.

Ms. Rainford is not considering retirement. She would leave her post “when they find somebody who can help people who speak Spanish — and who can use the computer,” she said, jokingly.