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THE MESS IN HEW

What is the biggest mess in Washington today? Some say it is the high-crime areas. Others say it is the postal system with its increasing deficits, higher postal rates, and decreasing service.

It is more probable that this dubious title belongs to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It costs the taxpayers $118 billion a year, more than a third of the entire Federal budget.

In public assistance, 25 percent of the recipients are either ineligible or overpaid, costing us $6 billion annually. In the new adult welfare program called Supplemental Security Income, 7.7 percent of recipients are not eligible and 11 percent are over paid. Overpayments have already topped a half billion dollars.

A partial HEW audit made public on February 24 revealed hundreds of errors in Supplemental Security Income checks: 89% of the checks sent into Delaware had errors, and 55% of the checks to California recipients had errors.

With all that money to spend and 120,000 employees to keep track of, wouldn't you think that HEW would have developed a first rate system to guard against fraud and error? Well, it hasn't. A year ago, there were only ten investigators and a ten-year backlog of uninvestigated cases. Since then, HEW has added only another ten investigators.

But there are more serious shortcomings with the HEW self policing system than merely a scarcity of personnel. First, the

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investigators are under the supervision of HEW officials who have a vested interest in not finding out mistakes. Second, there seems to be a strange attitude that it is somehow unhumanitarian to hunt for cheating beneficiaries and incompetent bureaucrats.

In addition, a House Government Operations Subcommittee found that there evidently is "an unwritten agreement" that the Office of Investigation and Security shall not investigate the Social Security Administration, which accounts for 80 percent of all HEW expendi tures.

Quite apart from the waste of the taxpayers' money built into the HEW budget is the fact that this prevents the Department from financing many worthy and needed projects. For example, last year Congress authorized HEW to set up a Parent Locator Service to help families locate runaway fathers and require them to support their abandoned wives and children. When women have appealed for help under this law, they are told that HEW does not have the money to pay for this project.

Meanwhile, according to Senator Charles Percy, HEW did have the money to pay for 10,800 abortions in Illinois in only one year at $180 per abortion. Another example of a project HEW found money for is the $339,788 it granted in 1974 to the Gay Community Services Center of Los Angeles for "human services specifi cally designed for the gay community."

The time is ripe for a fullscale investigation of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to eliminate the ripoff of the tax-payers money. It would probably also be a big improvement to separate this unmanageable mess into three separate departments of Health, Education, and Welfare.

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