

Early News - 2/11/83

STL 2

U.S. is sued on the cutoff of \$ for mentally disabled

By BELLA ENGLISH

A year ago, social workers found Mike in Central Park, sleeping on a park bench in freezing weather. He was cold, filthy, hallucinating. His body was covered with gaping sores from lice.

It took workers from Project Reach-Out in Manhattan six months to convince Mike to take a shower and receive treatment. With their help, he began staying in city shelters, and eventually got a room of his own, paid for with welfare benefits.

Mike still talks to himself—and answers himself. He can't open his own mail, manage his affairs or participate in group activities. He is, his psychiatrist says, "floridly psychotic."

BUT THE GOVERNMENT has slapped another term on him, one that is as depressing as the medical diagnosis: 'employable.' It means that Mike is fit for work—and therefore unfit for federal disability benefits.

Mike is one of six plaintiffs who have joined with the city and state to sue the federal government on behalf of 5,200 mentally disabled New Yorkers who have had their benefits cut off under strict new eligibility requirements.

Many of the plaintiffs, city and state officials say, are extremely sick, obviously unemployable and unable to defend themselves. Officials believe the federal government's crackdown is one of fiscal—and not humane—concern. Last year, the city and state spent \$10 million in assisting those who had been cut off the federal benefit rolls.

IN MIKE'S CASE, HIS illness is well-documented. Although he was able to graduate from college and work until 1976, he had a complete nervous breakdown and has been in and out of psychiatric

hospitals. Doctors have diagnosed him as a chronic paranoid schizophrenic.

Last June, the Social Security Administration sent Mike a letter telling him he wasn't eligible for the federal benefits. "We realize that your condition prevents you from returning to your usual job," the letter stated. "However, there are many other jobs you can do."

The federal government said it based its decision on a letter from Mike's psychiatrist. However, the doctor's letter stated that Mike hallucinated, talked to voices and responded to them when he was not being watched.

AFTER CASEWORKERS at Project Reach-Out appealed his case, Mike was once again turned down for benefits, despite a letter from the director of a psychiatric program that Mike was enrolled in—for three days.

"We found him too severely disturbed to attend any activities or socialize with other clients," the letter stated. "He was constantly hallucinating... talking to himself, screaming and growling. This occurred so frequently that we had to ask him to leave our program after three days. He is suspicious, frightened and confused. He is not stabilized enough to even attend a structured day treatment program, much less to work."

Those who help Mike can hardly believe that he has been deemed employable. "If it wasn't for us, he'd probably still be out in Central Park," says Cindy Scharf, assistant director of Project Reach-Out.

"His living skills have vastly improved, but he can't even sit still here and fold fliers for 10 minutes," she says. "He loses focus. Who in the world would hire him?"