

Case Study

The Dallas Jewish Coalition for the Homeless: A Community Response to Child Care Needs of Families Living in Shelters

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The problem of homelessness has been viewed as symptomatic of the broader crisis of affordable housing that creates economic, domestic, and psychological stress for many low- and moderate-income Americans (Reamer, 1989). Social work and other human service professions have focused increasingly on the plight of the homeless, especially the unemployed and the mentally or physically disabled (Bassuk, 1986; Connell, 1987). From the social work standpoint, inadequate shelter can interfere with an individual's efforts to handle other problems. In order to address the needs of homeless families effectively, social workers and community leaders require accurate knowledge about the economic, political, and social determinants of housing problems (Dluhy, 1987; Reamer, 1989).

According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1987, one-third of all homeless people in the United States are children.

Children constitute the fastest-growing sector of the homeless and poor population; for example, in New York City 700,000 children live in poverty and 100,000 have no health insurance.

Homeless children face a variety of serious problems, including poor nutrition, lack of medical care, and inadequate education programs. Over one-third of the pregnant women living in welfare hotels do not receive prenatal care; such conditions result in a high infant mortality rate and low birth weights (Margolies, 1989).

Homeless children living in shelters and welfare hotels experience a variety of health problems, including anemia, ear infections, chronic diarrhea, upper respiratory problems, and high levels of lead in their blood. Problems often occur because mothers lack the facilities to sterilize baby bottles or keep infant formulas from becoming spoiled. In addition, lack of adequate facilities makes it extremely difficult for families to prepare proper meals for their children. The special problems of homeless parents and their children have been widely publicized in the media and poignantly described by Jonathan Kozol (1988).

Child care programs for homeless children have been plagued by high burnout rates and teacher attrition. Lacking child care, mothers often bring their children with them as they interview for jobs, seek housing, and collect their welfare checks ("Where Do the Children Play," 1989). In order to break the cycle of homelessness for families, parents must be given access to employment opportunities and other supportive programs that can enable them to function independently. Proper child care appears to be a prerequisite to providing parents with the time and opportu-

nity to seek job training and employment.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimated that more than 40,000 Texans are without homes (Rome, 1989). One out of every five Texas households lives in poverty, which represents a 42% increase since 1980. The typical homeless person in Texas is a person cycling through a series of jobs that provide insufficient income to obtain adequate housing. Many homeless individuals suffer from poor nutrition, dental disease, and cardiovascular disorders. The most important need of homeless people, according to a recent survey, was for employment or employment training. Priorities in this area included appropriate referral to employers and retraining programs for those with skills but who were in a current tight job market.

A JEWISH RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

A guiding value for many Jews is *tzedakah*, the *mitzvah* or commandment to do justice (Rubinstein, 1984). *Tzedakah* therefore goes beyond charity to represent an obligation to perform actions that are considered to bring about a just, desired state of affairs that meets the needs of the community.

The Dallas Jewish Coalition for the Homeless, Inc. (DJCH) is a citizen-based effort of the Dallas Jewish community to help solve the problem of homelessness in Dallas. It evolved from the deliberations of the Social Action Committee of Congregation Shearith Israel, a conservative synagogue in Dallas. Concerned about the estimated 3,000 homeless men, women, and children in Dallas, the committee in May 1986 decided to sponsor a project to address the significant problems of homeless families. The committee invited the first author of this paper to help facilitate the conceptualization, organization, and development of the project. He agreed to contribute his professional expertise in community organization and planning as a volunteer.

In order to investigate problems of homelessness, discussions were held with knowledgeable community leaders and professionals. Based on this information, the committee formed five task forces: child care, housing, jobs, health services, and hunger. The task forces were assigned to study their respective areas and report their recommendations to the committee.

The committee recognized the need to expand the participation and support of the Jewish community in addressing problems of homelessness in Dallas. In June 1986, the committee established a structure to include representatives from 21 synagogues and Jewish organizations. Its aim was to establish a project to serve the homeless that would have a broad constituency and would not be identified with any single synagogue or institution. The project was named the Dallas Jewish Coalition for the Homeless. Membership in the Coalition was formalized by a \$50 annual fee for each group. The project was publicized by its leadership as an attempt by the Jewish community of Dallas to mobilize its volunteer and fund-raising resources to affect homelessness as a major social problem of the broader Dallas community. The advantage of the Coalition was that it provided a structure through which organizations could consolidate their individual resources to interact and work toward a common purpose (Roberts-DeGennaro, 1987).

In November 1986, a vote was taken to select the focus of the proposed project from the five areas investigated by the task forces. The members of the DJCH selected child care for homeless families as the project focus. The rationale for this choice was that, by providing day care and after-school care for infants and children living in the Downtown Dallas Family Shelter, the parents of those children could concentrate their efforts on job training and employment.

After selection of the child care project, the DJCH developed a mission statement: "to help break the cycle of homeless families in Dallas County through sponsoring

programs that serve the needs of families." Two major goals were established to pursue this mission: (1) to provide quality transitional child care for homeless families so that parents can obtain employment and housing, and (2) to inform and involve the Jewish community in the programs of the homeless in collaboration with the larger community to provide solutions to the problems of homelessness.

PROJECT INITIATION

The DJCH contracted for services with Child Care Dallas, (CCD), a local community-based child care agency. Although there was some brief discussion about the members of DJCH providing the child care services themselves, it was soon acknowledged that such services could be best provided by child care professionals. Because of licensing and insurance requirements, the avenue of contracting with established service providers was pursued.

In March 1987, the Alcove program was initiated at the Huvelle Center, a CCD facility, to serve preschool-aged children (infants through 5 years old) from the Downtown Dallas Family Shelter. The DJCH also established programs at various branches of the YWCA of Metropolitan Dallas to provide supervision after school, and during the summer and holidays for school-aged children living at the Family Shelter. In addition, child care staff and volunteers were provided by DJCH at the shelter in the evenings for children of parents enrolled in training classes and counseling sessions. The second author of this paper played the primary role in negotiating and establishing the YWCA programs sponsored by the DJCH.

The CCD and YWCA child care programs were designed to help the children deal with their experience of change, homelessness, confusion and stress. Both agencies employed professional staff members to supervise the programs designed to meet the social and developmental needs of homeless children. Key elements of the

program included the grouping of children according to families to minimize further separation, a focus on establishing warm, positive relationships between the children and caregivers, allowing children to express their feelings in an accepting environment, and a structured program of daily activities.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

The story of the DJCH was featured in both the major city newspapers and in the Anglo-Jewish press. As the activities of the DJCH became better known in the community and received increasing attention from the local media, contributions in the form of voluntary service and money were made by a wide range of interested Dallas citizens. Guided tours of the shelters and child care services educated dozens of potential donors and solidified the financial base of the DJCH. Synagogues, youth groups, and fraternal organizations supplied funds, volunteers, food, clothing, personal hygiene articles, and transportation on an ongoing basis. A proposal funded by a private foundation added impetus to the fund-raising campaign. By April 1989, over \$400,000 had been raised to support the DJCH child care services with about 50% of these funds coming from the Jewish community. The tremendous success of DJCH's fund-raising efforts can be attributed to the skills of its first coordinators and to a sophisticated campaign that was timed so as not to conflict with the federation's annual campaign.

The DJCH has been represented on every city committee and agency addressing the needs of the homeless, including the Dallas Association for Services to the Homeless, the Food Bank, and the Day Resource Center. DJCH is now recognized as an organization that must be included when the problems of the homeless are considered. The *Dallas Morning News* selected the DJCH in 1988 and 1989 as one of the major recipients of its annual charity drive.

The first author of this paper chaired an

evaluation committee that specified objectives and measurement criteria for the goals of the DJCH. A reporting committee, including staff from the Downtown Family Shelter, Child Care Dallas, and the YWCA (represented by the second author), met with the DJCH's evaluation committee to report monthly data related to its goals and objectives.

The monthly report meetings of the referral agencies translated the turbulence of the homeless experience into numbers, ages, and ethnicity of children and into problems associated with the intake process, school assignments, transportation, and funding. During the first year of operation (1987-1988) Child Care Dallas served 283 children, ages 2 weeks to 61 months, and the YWCA provided child care for an additional 509 children, ages 3 to 15 years. By May 1989 a total of 1752 children had been served. Based on these figures the DJCH made a decision to expand services to agencies serving families in crisis and enlarged the list of referring agencies to include two shelters for battered women.

EVOLVING PROJECT ISSUES

As the DJCH rapidly developed from a grass-roots planning organization to a major sponsor of child care services for homeless families, it became necessary to introduce greater formality into the organization. A by-laws committee was established in September 1988 to elucidate the major tenets and principles of the DJCH. This move was prompted by the tragic death of Thelma Vogel, the project coordinator and prime mover of the DJCH, in the Delta 1141 plane crash on August 31, 1988. The national media coverage of the plane crash included accounts of the DJCH's innovative child care programs.

Doris Budner, who had served as co-coordinator with Mrs. Vogel, became the president of DJCH. In that role, she recruited additional volunteers to focus on fund-raising efforts and strategies to meet the growing child care needs among home-

less families in Dallas. Under her leadership, the DJCH made a major decision to expand the child care project. In June 1989 the DJCH acquired its own building in downtown Dallas that was centrally located near the homeless shelters and agencies providing transitional housing. A dedicated corps of volunteers renovated and equipped the child care center, which was officially named the Vogel Alcove. The opening celebration was attended by major community leaders and city officials. The Vogel Alcove was designed to serve 100 children ages 6 weeks through 14 years in a quality licensed program. After considering several competitive bids, the DJCH selected the YWCA to operate the child care programs at the Vogel Alcove. These programs developed and funded by DJCH are all provided free to clients of eight shelters.

CONCLUSION

DJCH has received national, state, and local recognition as an innovative citizen-based community response to problems of homeless families living in shelters. Community agencies have recognized the DJCH as a primary resource for meeting child care needs of homeless families. The dedication of the DJCH volunteers was demonstrated in securing funding, participation, and community-wide support for the project. Social service professionals also contributed their expertise through every phase of program planning and development.

The DJCH is currently evaluating how it can respond to such additional service needs as health care, social services, and parent education. It is considering the possibility of expanding services in collaboration with the Downtown Dallas Family Shelter to provide child care for as long as one year, a time period that substantially exceeds the current 30-day limit and would provide families a more feasible period in which to gain independence.

Families with children have been identified as the fastest-growing sector among

the homeless, comprising more than 40% of the homeless population (Reder, 1988). More than 3 million men, women, and children are homeless according to the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), and that number is expected to increase as much as 25% each year (Stoner, 1989). Citizen-based groups, such as the DJCH, can play an important role in developing creative and effective responses to help to meet the challenge of child care needs for homeless families.

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