

A Rehabilitative Program for Troubled Jewish Youth

HAROLD M. KASE, ED.D.

Executive Vice President, Altro Health and Rehabilitation Services, Inc., New York

A significant problem confronting the general and the Jewish community is the noticeable disaffection of many young adults and adolescents from family, community or cultural ties and values. Many Jewish family service agencies, particularly in large urban centers are well aware of this situation and over the past few years have established special programs and outreach projects to provide counseling and therapeutic services to such youth and their families. It has not always been easy to offer such traditional services to these youth.

Dr. Helm Stierlin¹ reports that between 600,000 and 1,000,000 teenagers run away from home. "Most of them are from the white suburbs." Stierlin states that, "The counterculture or runaway culture seem total strangers to their elders." Among Stierlin's categories of "runaways" is the lonely schizoid type. They differ from most other runaways. They may loiter around hippie hangouts, or lonely parks or public squares. Often their runaway moves are abruptly aborted. Some lonely schizoid runaways act so bizarrely or self-destructively that they are quickly institutionalized. There are some others who have done their parents' bidding and enrolled in college but do not attend many classes and rather use the campus community as their "hangout" locale. They are drifters who are alienated from family and soci-

ety, purposeless in activity and experimenting with so-called soft drugs, i.e., amphetamines, barbiturates, hallucinogens and etc. They are often fearful and suspicious of work and structured vocational programs.

Altro Health and Rehabilitation Services, Inc., and its vocational training affiliate, Altro Work Shops, Inc., have had a growing experience with such Jewish youth and young adults. Referred for rehabilitation counseling and vocational training by state hospitals and community mental health centers, Altro staff and board came to the opinion that too many of these referrals were "dropping out" of the vocational training program because of its structure, demands for production to meet customer schedules and general business orientation, which these alienated young people were unable to face and which indeed frightened them.

Altro, a constituent of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, was founded about sixty years ago as the Committee for the Care of Jewish Tuberculous. The agency and the workshops have long histories in the development of methods and techniques which are designed to help patients with chronic and exacerbating illnesses to acquire or regain work skills and attitudes. In recent years, Altro's services have been extended to serve patients who suffer psychiatric, psychological, emotional, cardiac, visual and/or economic handicaps. Last year, the agency served in excess of 1000 patients of whom more than 90 percent had mental or psychological handicaps and disabilities. These patients are for the most part young adults or older ado-

lescents referred to the program by the psychiatric or community medicine services of Federation's hospitals, mental health centers, state hospitals and social agencies.

The vocational activities and training programs at Altro Work Shops include a fully equipped garment manufacturing plant for design and production of hospital and industrial uniforms; a job machine shop and a mechanical assembling plant; a service bureau, which consists of a general clerical and direct mail service; an offset print shop capable of preparing and printing multi-colored letterheads, newsletters, brochures and pamphlets (including some of the publications of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service); and an electronic data processing and computer service with a range of activities from key punching, verifying, tabulating and console operations to computer programming.

The Altro rehabilitation method is characterized by:

1. A concern for bringing patients with chronic illness and/or handicapping conditions to the highest level of functioning that is possible for them.
2. The provision of a network of medical, psychological, social and vocational services to help patients reach their potentials and return to either the "world of work," school or college, or independent living.
3. The availability of a range of work opportunities and skill training at Altro Work Shops, from the simplest tasks to relatively sophisticated operations.

However, something more had to be done for the increasing numbers of Jewish young adults who were to say the least suspicious of social workers, counselors and "shrinks" and who would not consider, or if they did so, continue travelling to the "factory" in the Bronx, where Altro Work Shops is located.

Recognizing that there was a need to serve this increasing group of Jewish youths, Altro, with the help of a special grant from the Federation started a small, special program in May of 1972 for these young people.

The agency headquarters are in mid-Manhattan and so it was decided to house the program at the agency's central location, not far from Union Square to the South and only two subway stops from Grand Central to the North.

The Altro Board Room was converted into a pre-vocational evaluation program with furnishings and equipment deployed from Altro Work Shops. The equipment includes office machines, audio-visual vocational testing devices, key punch and electronic data processing machines, etc. There are no production demands; hours of attendance and programs of activity are flexible. This is an essential difference from other sheltered workshops and/or vocational training programs.

The Altro Pre-Vocational Evaluation Program or "Prep," as it is commonly known, is an eight-week program of pre-vocational or extended evaluation and work adjustment activities for Jewish young adults or older adolescents in an unstructured and non-production oriented milieu. It is staffed by an educational therapist and an occupational evaluator. They provide one to one instruction in a variety of subjects. These include the use of business machines, English, mathematics, composition etc. The patients or clients are encouraged to type their written material. Compositions and essays are discussed in small group meetings led by group therapists, who also use these sessions for "rapping" about school, work, families, marriage, sex, use of drugs, Jewish identification, meaning of holidays and planning for the future. Each patient or client also has immediately but not obviously available a full range of professional or clinical ser-

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, San Francisco, California, June 2-5, 1974.

¹ Helm Stierlin, "A Family Perspective on Adolescent Runaways," *Mental Health Digest*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (October, 1973), NIMH, Bethesda, Md.

vices including a psychiatric caseworker, psychologist, vocational counselor, psychiatrist, physician and registered nurse, since the "Prep" program is located in the center of the agency's clinical headquarters.

The setting and appearance of "Prep" is that of an informal office or library which has a variety of literature and technical material at hand plus the availability of office machines, data processing consoles and audio-visual vocational evaluation and testing equipment. These are all laid out in a "non-threatening" manner. Much of the informal ambiance is further generated by the warm, supportive and casual teaching techniques employed by the educational therapist, who has a professional background in business education, had worked abroad and is accomplished in music and the arts as an avocation. She employs all of her talents and experiences in her work with the patients and clients. The occupational evaluator similarly employs his talents in popular music, knowledge of sports and vocational skills in establishing relationships with patients and thereby helping them to participate in vocational assessment activities and programs. These frequently lead to a feeling of positive accomplishment by "Preppers." Both of these professionals are knowledgeable in Jewish history and culture and integrate these values into their teaching activities and programs.

In short, Altro "Prep" is a work-oriented informal classroom, library or vocational laboratory for troubled Jewish youth. While the focus is on vocational goals, it provides individual and group educational, social, psychological and medical services and counseling to its participants for relatively short periods of time. To date, it has served as a prelude to entrance into the structured vocational training program at Altro Work Shops, jobs in the community and/or a return to school or college.

The emotional problems, the personal adjustment problems, or the developmental disabilities of many of these young people coupled with familial or social tragedies have often contributed to their fear of and anxiety about facing up to the responsibilities of living.

Sonia L. is a sweet-faced, 20 year old young lady who was born in Poland. She had spinal meningitis when she was a year old. This evidently caused some brain damage, which has created learning difficulties for her. She and her parents emigrated to the United States in 1970, as Polish refugees. They are presently receiving public assistance. Sonia attended a special program in a local high school but was unable to continue because of her inability to learn in an academic setting. Her parents have always overprotected her, not permitting her to do anything on her own. Sonia is a very immature, dependent, frightened and isolated young lady. Her parents are now ill and elderly and are very concerned about their *tochter's* future. They turned to the Jewish Family Service for help. The Jewish Family Service caseworker thought that vocational evaluation and training were indicated, and Sonia was referred to the Altro "Prep" program as part of the special project.

It took three months of contacts with Sonia and her father by both the Jewish Family Service and the Altro caseworkers before she was permitted to start attending "Prep." The father insisted on accompanying Sonia to "Prep" during the first week. However, with support and counseling by the Altro caseworker, he was able to accept the fact that she could travel by herself from Brooklyn to Manhattan.

As part of the initial diagnostic evaluation; psychiatric, psychological, medical and vocational evaluations were given. These demonstrated that Sonia was of dull normal intelligence with perceptual analytic difficulties. It was felt that Sonia could benefit from a long-term structured work setting. The Altro social worker devoted considerable time with the family at their home and counseled in Yiddish and literally took both Sonia and her father by hand to demonstrate that she could get to the Workshops in the Bronx. The father saw Altro as a protective, caring, non-threatening Jewish setting, and Sonia was permitted to move on to vocational training at Altro Work Shops.

Sonia now attends the Shop regularly, travels by herself, has begun to socialize with her Workshop group members, and is progressing in her training as a key punch operator. Her parents are accepting casework counseling by the Altro caseworker, as it relates to their daughter and her habilitation.

The Jewish ambiance and milieu of both "Prep" and also of the Workshop were important adjuncts and aids in helping Mr. L. feel secure enough to test loosening his reins on his daughter. The "Prep" Program's unpressured environment, coupled with the instant availability of professional social, psychological, and medical services along with remedial educational and vocational assessment services provides an intensive, individualized and coordinated service to troubled Jewish youth.

The close cooperation between the Jewish Family Service and the Altro caseworkers is illustrative of another characteristic of this approach to service. There was constant sharing and "feedback" of information through a structure of scheduled joint meetings which included in addition to the caseworkers, the remedial teacher, vocational counselor, evaluator, psychologist, consulting psychiatrist and the Altro nurse.

The medical, psychiatric and nursing services of Altro are inherent in all programs and have become of special importance in the supervision of medication and ataractic drug regimens for many clients of the agency. In addition, preliminary medical assessments help to identify untreated physical disabilities and more recently, help clients to confidentially share problems of drug abuse. These assessments provide important information in developing treatment, counseling and vocational rehabilitation plans with the client.

George B., a 19 year old young man, was referred to Altro 'Prep' by Jewish Family Service. George has an older sister, who is

married and has a child of her own. He is a lean, tall young man who lives with his mother and stepfather, two stepbrothers and a young stepsister. His father died when he was nine years old. His mother's remarriage was followed by many problems in the family. The stepbrothers and George did not get along. The mother is overburdened with her 'new family' and cannot give George the attention she knows that he needs.

George's experiences in school have been consistently poor. He was forced to leave a vocational high school when he failed five courses. He took up with a group of friends who are identified as "beatniks" and who like George had either dropped out or failed at school. They began to experiment with pot smoking, "uppers" and acid dropping.

After several interview sessions by the Altro and Jewish Family Service caseworkers with George and his mother, he agreed to give the "Prep" Program a "whirl."

In "Prep," George began to identify with other Jewish youths in his group. Discussions around the meaning of the holidays, Jewish values, the importance of work and self-worth and the recognition that George received for his successes at certain simple office tasks helped him to agree to try vocational training at Altro Work Shops.

At Altro Work Shops, he was trained in the offset print shop where he quickly began to display leadership characteristics. In the meantime, his rehabilitation counseling concerned itself with this inter-personal relationships, especially with girls, his drug-abusing activities, which were identified during his medical assessment, and his stated desire to "get a job and become independent."

After about nine or ten months in the Workshops program, he was referred to employment as an offset printer earning \$115 per week. Almost immediately thereafter, he bought a used car. Two months later, he was "laid off" due to a decline in business. However, with the continued counseling of his Altro caseworker, he overcame this setback and secured another job at \$130 per week. A year later, George is still working, has received a salary increase, and is 'going steady' with a Jewish girl.

Since the Altro Prep Program started in May of 1972, 143 clients have been served by it. Of this group, 40 went to work directly from "Prep." Forty-five

were referred to Altro Work Shops for vocational training, 10 returned to school after completing the "Prep" Program, and 35 continued in rehabilitation counseling with the agency after completing "Prep."

The program is an attempt by a Jewish vocationally oriented health and rehabilitation agency to "break away" from the structure and stricture of Workshop contract production pressures, OVR procedures and policies and Mental Health Board regulations and catchment areas. It is at present a small effort to offer service to a Jewish population that is frequently overlooked as part of the poor because it is neither very young nor very old; it is adolescent and young adult. The program is hopefully preventative of both poverty and severe mental illness.

It has demonstrated that Jewish family agencies and Jewish rehabilitation and vocational service agencies can work closely together in providing fuller and more meaningful assistance to young adult members of Jewish families. This has been done through collaborative approaches without necessarily relinquishing professional responsibility for the client and with mutual respect for each other's area of specialization and competence. It is pointing up the need for an increasing recognition of the fact that for some Jewish clients, in the constellation of services available through the agencies of the local Jewish Federation, there is a better hope for help than through the currently modish, catchmentized, regionalized, districted and bureaucratized comprehensive service centers run by the government.