

INTERPRETING COMMUNITY SERVICES

by CHARLES MILLER *

Federation of Jewish Charities, Philadelphia, Pa.

INTERPRETATION of community and agency activities is a continuing process carried on in many ways. We are all familiar with the normal interpretation efforts in which many of us are constantly engaged—the speaker, the annual meeting, the radio and television program, the brochure, the special program at a Board meeting—all of these techniques are utilized with greater or lesser emphasis. We also know that no matter how intensive a job we do, especially in the larger communities, we constantly encounter ignorance and indifference in relation to community and agency programs and problems.

As we saw the problem in our community, the challenge was to develop an intensive, all-year round program of interpretation which was more meaningfully directed. Too often the interpretation effort was directed toward a group who requested a speaker, but who were not necessarily significant from the viewpoints of agency clientele or community support. Just as often our efforts were with people who were already close to

the community and its agencies. Many important groups and individuals were not being reached. Because of many pressures we tended to rely on mass media, which lack the impact of face to face interpretation efforts.

We finally crystallized the primary objective of an intensive, all-year-round program which would reach a large number of influential groups and individuals, and which would involve special efforts directed towards organizational leaders and program chairmen, particularly of women's organizations.

We saw the women of the community as having the kind of interest, ability and time to do an organized job of all-year-round interpretation; to help create and develop community "climate," to bring "community" and "agency" into the home, to the wives of contributors, workers, leaders and future leaders.

To achieve these objectives, we developed a permanent, all-year-round organization known as the Women's Service Group of the Jewish Community Council of Essex County. We were mindful of the fact that in our Women's Division Campaign we already had a vehicle for the recruitment and development of leadership among women. The need was for a mechanism which would

maintain, on a year-round basis, the interest and participation of able women leaders. In discussions with leading women, they responded eagerly to the suggestion of taking responsibility for an intensified and continuous interpretation program.

Although it is a functional arm of the Jewish Community Council, the Women's Service Group has a clearcut identity and structure. A full time worker serves as director for the Women's Division of the campaign and as permanent staff secretary to the Women's Service Group. All of the Community Council's staff and administrative resources are available to the Women's Service Group as needed.

The Interpretation Bureau of the Women's Service Group has the following responsibilities:

1. To develop one or more major interpretation events each year which are directed toward large, representative groups of women.
2. To interest Presidents and Program Chairmen in the Program Service to Organizations.
3. To provide a series of varied and interesting programs to the larger and more important organizations in the community.

Launching the Program

Each year the Women's Service Group officially launches its interpretation program with an annual interpretation meeting. This meeting is widely advertised and promoted, particularly among organization leaders.

These meetings have become major events in our community. They have been attended by audiences of between 500 and 1,200 women from every social, geographic and economic sector of the community. They have had a great impact upon community thinking and feel-

ing, and have provided a topic for discussion for many weeks after they occur.

A major reason for this impact is that the special feature of these meetings is a dramatic presentation by the Women's Service Group Players. This drama group consists of about 15 able actresses who are themselves leaders in community work. They have presented specially prepared scripts on such subjects as the aged, child care, community relations and others. The dramatic presentation is followed by a discussion in which the audience is free to discuss the subject, and to ask questions of a panel of professionals who act as consultants.

Another important feature of these annual interpretation events is co-sponsorship by other groups of women's organizations. The Women's Service Group felt that each year a selected group of women's organizations should be given an opportunity to share responsibility for the program. One year it was the major Temple Sisterhoods; the next year Hadassah and Council of Jewish Women, and so on. These organizations featured the event in their own meetings and publicity, sent special invitations to their members, and generally helped promote interest and attendance.

These annual meetings have brought home to thousands of women the story of human need and community services in a way which has been dramatic and emotionally meaningful. We have even had the unusual experience of individuals offering to make financial contributions at these meetings.

We recognized that large meetings of this kind, no matter how effective, were still limited in value. We therefore viewed these meetings as springboards for an intensified program which would reach down into the grass roots—to the people who supported and used our community services. Our Women's Service

* At the time of writing, Mr. Miller was Associate Director of the Jewish Community Council of Essex County. He is now Social Planning Associate of the Federation of Jewish Charities of Philadelphia.

Group therefore developed a year-round "Program Service to Organizations."

The Program Service

In developing a program service, we adopted the following principles and procedures.

1. *Coordination and Promotion.* There was general agreement that interpretation of agency services was primarily the responsibility of the agencies themselves. A number of them already had active interpretation programs. For example, our Jewish Education Association had available a number of programs of Jewish cultural subjects; our Community Relations Committee had a well developed program service; we had an extensive film library. Other agencies had speakers and discussion leaders. There was no reason why these resources should not be used as fully as possible. Experience demonstrated, however, that the agency was not always in the best position to know who wanted the program, and what were the best ways to bring groups and programs together. The central community agency, with its overall view and relationship to the total community, had many resources and points of contact which could be helpful. Our Women's Service Group saw itself as making a primary contribution by stimulating interest in and knowledge of programs available to organizations.

It was recognized at the outset that special techniques would be needed to interest the major women's organizations in the Program Service. Agendas are often crowded, and programs planned far in advance. Any approach from the organized community was often met with reluctance, because it usually implied fund raising or an appeal for a special cause. There was no reason for most organizations to assume that the organized community could help enrich or-

ganizational life with meaningful, stimulating programs which were different and instructive, and at the same time had entertainment appeal.

It is an established principle in community organization that it takes a community leader with status to involve other community leaders. A committee of leading women personally contacted organization presidents and program chairmen, and invited them to a tea in the home of a prominent and influential woman. At the tea, which was very well attended, there was a frank discussion of the objectives of the Interpretation Bureau with particular emphasis upon the program opportunities for the organizations. Specific programs were discussed in some detail.

The same group of leaders were then invited to a Presidents' tour of service agencies. This affair too was given appropriate status and publicity. The tour included a sample case presentation by one of the agencies being visited. The entire experience met with enthusiastic response. Each year the Women's Service Group conducts special events of this type for leaders of organizations. The response is invariably positive.

The Program Service to organizations is now an established feature of community life. We are sometimes unable to meet the demand for programs, and a number of organizations have learned to reserve programs as far as 8 months in advance.

One of the most interesting developments has been the way in which our agencies have been able to reach out into every sector of the community. They are now telling the story of their services to groups and individuals who had been completely removed from the agencies in every sense. It is particularly significant that our major casework agencies have for the last two years rendered service for the first time in every one of

our 21 affiliated suburban communities.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments has been the tremendously increased awareness on the part of the agencies themselves of the value of a consistent and meaningful interpretation program. They have been challenged and stimulated by the meaningful community response they have encountered. With a growing recognition of and response to their efforts, they have been able to gradually develop a philosophy and conviction about the crucial importance of interpretation efforts. Our family agency, for example, now offers on its own a fully developed program service which includes 5 different types of programs.

Promotional aspects were related to carefully organized coordination. The Community Council became the one central resource which was aware of all the programs, and could offer a variety to meet differing program needs. With the cooperation of the agencies, we established a central service in the office of the Council. Brochures were printed and distributed, and organization leaders were encouraged to contact the central service. This eliminated "shopping around," and insured that a program chairman would be given intelligent guidance. The service is free, and has proved to be a real boon to organizations, as attested to by its extremely active use.

Another element in central coordination is the fact that the program has behind it the status, influence and resources of the central planning agency. It gives the program a community-wide character, and helps to create an aura of importance around it which would not otherwise be possible.

2. *Programs Must Be Entertaining as Well as Instructive.* The need on the part of many organizations is to provide programs which will interest and entertain their members. They often pay sub-

stantial amounts of money for something "different." They are tired of "just a speaker." We attempted to design programs which would have some emotional impact and would stimulate discussion and participation.

It might be added that this was not quite as simple as it sounds. Professional social workers are not particularly well known for the simplicity of their language, or for special skills in the field of promotion and public relations. The preparation of materials, particularly in agency "case presentations," therefore involved careful thinking through on the part of the agency, with advice and consultation of the central agency professionals, including the publicity specialist.

3. *The Program Must Be Continuous.* It is an axiom in the advertising world that repetition makes for sales and profits. Social workers are frequently criticized for a lack of a promotional sense, for insufficient aggressive activity in "selling" their services; for being too removed from the communities they serve. Too often interpretation activities are limited to the campaign period. Many agencies are content to send a speaker when requested without actively stimulating interest in their services.

Like everything else in our culture which has to be "sold," experience demonstrates that our community services must call themselves to the attention of the community in a continuing way. Too often it has been wrongfully assumed that promotional and interpretation activities, particularly if they take place too often, may tend to lower the dignity and professional character of the agencies. That has not been our experience. On the contrary, our community has been developing a positive awareness of our agencies as never before. The agencies are really serving the middle and upper income brackets they have been trying for so long to reach. For the first

time, many people are beginning to think of our agencies as community services for all the people, regardless of social or economic status. We believe that these developments are a direct result of our continuing program.

4. *The Program Must Be Professionally Directed.* A major key to the success of the program is the fact that it is directed by a community organization professional whose work cuts across the total community. This professional, who is the permanent secretary of the Women's Service Group, is thoroughly familiar with all of the available programs. At the same time, his work in the Women's Division of the campaign gives him contact with many organization leaders. It is therefore easier for these individuals to call on him for help, and for him to feel free to make program suggestions. We found, for example, that there are many organizations in the community who desperately want programs, but who felt the need to discuss the various programs in detail in order to make an intelligent selection. Such a discussion at the office, rather than the usual telephone call, often resulted in an organization requesting several programs.

Another by-product of this procedure was an increasing awareness on the part of organizations that the community and its agencies had an important service which they could use as organizations, free of charge and without many of the usual programming problems. From a public relations and fund raising viewpoint this was a factor of considerable significance.

5. *Interpretation Efforts Must Be Selective and Meaningful.* Ours is a community of some 90,000 people, living in a tremendous geographic area including 23 separate municipalities, and containing literally hundreds of Jewish organizations of all kinds. It was obvious that a "broadside" approach to such a com-

munity would overtax our resources, and would not necessarily make the best use of our efforts.

At the outset, the Women's Service Group Interpretation Bureau decided on a policy of directing promotional effort to the larger, more important and representative organizations in the community. For example, a small suburban community might have several women's organizations with overlapping memberships. In the same community, the Temple Sisterhood was the most representative women's group. A special effort was therefore directed toward the sisterhood. Another approach was to interest key regional or council leaders of such groups as Hadassah and B'nai B'rith.

This selective approach has made it possible for us to reach a much larger number of geographic and social groupings in the community, and to reach the larger organizations for the most part.

Some Typical Programs

1. *Agency Case Presentations*

In accordance with our objective of having programs which would be more interesting than just a speaker, our agencies developed "case presentations" which have proved to be extremely popular. Instead of the usual speaker, the program consists of several professional members of the staff making a presentation of what was actually done in a case which came to the agency. These programs then provide the basis for audience participation and discussion. These programs are offered under such titles as "The Marriage That Didn't Break Up" and "Life With Your Child."

These presentations were carefully prepared in simple, non-technical language. Although full of "human interest," they were careful to describe clearly the services of the agency through

the role of the caseworker. Audience response has been unusually meaningful, and it is our impression that this type of presentation has been unusually successful in interpreting agency services.

2. *Tours*

Tours of agencies have been extremely successful in interpreting services. The tours are so organized as to provide ample time for discussion and questions. The agency executive and other staff members act as discussion leaders. Sometimes lunch or tea is served to help create an informal and relaxed atmosphere.

Because tours can serve only a limited number of people, and are expensive activities in terms of staff and agency time, they are for the most part directed toward selected individuals who are particularly important from an interpretation viewpoint. These individuals include organization presidents and program chairmen, campaign leaders, leadership training groups, and suburban community representatives.

3. *Films*

In recent years there have been produced a number of excellent films and television cinescopes which do a brilliant job of interpreting agency services in dramatic fashion. We have used them very successfully with qualified discussion leaders.

4. *Community Relations Programs*

There has been considerable interest in a number of programs developed by the community relations field for organizational use. Some of these, such as "Rumor Clinic" and "How to Answer a Bigot in Public" are designed for a maximum of audience participation, and have been extremely effective in inter-

preting community relations objectives and methods.

I should like to emphasize our conviction that no interpretation program of a community-wide nature can be a substitute for the day to day job of training new leaders, developing strong financial support and building active boards. These are the concentrated activities in relation to leadership groups which demand the maximum of professional knowledge and skill, and which largely determine the nature and extent of community support. We see our community-wide, year-round program as an additional and supplementary activity, helping to shape community attitudes, as developing greater understanding, and as broadening the base of participation and support.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of our program is the way in which it demonstrates effective cooperation between the central planning agency and the service agencies in the field of interpretation. Beginning with a firm conviction on the part of the Council and the agencies that interpretation is everybody's job, we were able to work out respective roles and responsibilities which were valid and complementary. The primary responsibility for interpreting its services remains with the agency, with the central agency using its resources to promote and coordinate the program.

In the final analysis, support for community services must depend upon the degree of understanding and conviction which the community has about our services. Adequate interpretation activities must therefore necessarily become a priority of community and agency activity. We feel that our experiences in the last few years demonstrate some of the ways in which a community can develop a coordinated and meaningful program of community interpretation.