

THE PLACE OF RELIEF IN A FAMILY AGENCY*

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THE subject of "Relief" frequently provokes a gamut of feelings, expressed or unexpressed, on the part of many people involved with the services of a social agency—whether we are on the giving or receiving end. From the person who expresses his need in the form of money, to the lay Board and supporting community who decide on agency budgets and broadly for what purposes, the word "money" tends to envelop us in a flood of conflicts—some stemming from within ourselves and some created from without. And those of us who are professionally engaged in helping, can find ourselves deeply enmeshed in such conflicts—out of our own confusions, external pressures, or lack of direction and purpose—if we permit it.

This is particularly true in the setting of the private family agency. For many years, the family agency, sectarian and non-sectarian, has constantly had the professional responsibility of self-search and self-examination in evaluating its relief practices and skills, and in formulating its relief policies in the light of other existing resources, community needs and goals, and community support. This has come into focus even

more sharply within the last few years, as our greater professional knowledge and skills, together with our broader visions, has challenged us to develop counselling services, with the need for this becoming increasingly expressed by many people, regardless of income. In addition, of no small importance, has been a problem in public relations, as it emerges from and surrounds the question of relief. This problem has found its nourishment not only within the lay community as a whole, but unfortunately at times, within our own professional social work family, both within the family agency as well as in other social work settings. This problem, emerging from the lacks or deficiencies of our existing social structure, has not infrequently placed upon the family agency, in a most distorted fashion, the responsibility of bearing the hostility and frustrations resulting from such lacks—whether it is a referring source from another social work setting, an interested community person, or the client himself. And we in family agencies have contributed to such confusions by our failure to interpret our function responsibly. It therefore becomes our serious task to constantly clarify our function and purpose, examine our goals, and point our direction.

Let us first examine the basic purpose

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of family agency service. Although it may be said in different ways, I believe that most voluntary private agencies, sectarian or non-sectarian, have in their stated purpose something similar to what we in the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Pittsburgh believe is the function of our agency: Maintaining and strengthening family life, or preventing family breakdown, through professional casework service designed to help individuals better understand themselves and their relationships to others, so that they may use their strengths more effectively to achieve satisfactions in living. Within this framework, financial help can be given with the goal of promoting and conserving wholesome individual and family life, if the person can make himself eligible for such help, and if no other resources exist.

Historically, the family agency has often been the repository, stop-gap, or catch-all for existing deficiencies in our general social structure. In the past this was natural and perhaps even valid, for in the early development of organized social work, the family agencies in many communities had the function now carried in community organization or by public agencies. In the beginning, the people who came to the family agency, by and large, were of the underprivileged economic group. Their needs, in most instances, were expressed in concrete terms—money—job—or other—and we related to them primarily on the concrete basis on which they came. At times, money even became our admission ticket to the family. But even with lesser knowledge and skill, we knew that although the need for money was real, it also often symbolized more deeply rooted psychological needs, which had their effects on the emotional health of the individual and his family, just as did the external deprivations. In the 1920's, we entered a period in our professional development which was characterized by

something new and deeper in our efforts to learn how to help people—the family agencies throughout the country took on a “new look” under the impact of psychiatry. As we began to acquire a greater body of knowledge about the inner psychic forces of human beings and the motivations of their behavior, we attempted to incorporate this new learning, embracing it in our own professional content. Relief continued as a function in the family agency during this time and as we learned more and more about the individual, we began to understand him within the realities of his surroundings—socio-economic, cultural, physical, as well as the influences of his family relationships. Then followed the depression years in the early '30s when the responsibility of meeting the problems which emerged from a breakdown of our national and economic structure first took root in the setting of the family agency. As the problem became more universal and the responsibility more total, the development of the public agency took its form; and private family agencies throughout the country provided professional leadership in meeting this national emergency. As the public agency grew and developed on a state and federal basis, the family agency resumed its basic primary function with deeper experience, fuller knowledge, and greater balance. People continued to come to the family agency, at times with needs created by external pressures and at other times with some awareness of problems within themselves which were disturbing to them and their families.

Following World War II, a new mass need arose—the resettlement of displaced persons from Europe to this country. In most communities around the country, the Jewish family agency became the designated agency to help the newcomers with maintenance relief and problems of adjustment. We can well be proud not only of the responsibility we took, but

of the fact that the lay supporting community *charged* the family agencies with this function. Relief giving was not divorced from, but a part of the total service in helping the newcomer get settled here. The community recognized that we knew how to help people—that it took not only money to meet maintenance needs but also knowledge in understanding the individuals whom we were serving. The community also recognized that it required professional skill in administering relief, with the kinds of controls and limits which would be helpful to the individual receiving it and responsible to the community providing it. During this time, the Jewish family agencies were entrusted with the administration of hundreds of thousands of dollars raised by the communities. It was also clear that this kind of service was most appropriately within the area of *family casework* and that the basic premise was *family-centered*. It is true that in a mass program such as this, the goals of the agency were more limited as it related to the supporting community; in many instances, quantity—the settlement of as large a number of newcomers as a community could financially absorb—became not only a guide but sometimes a pressure, not easy for the professional practitioner to accept. In addition to the more limited goals, we were confronted with a group of people whose needs were very total, often reflecting many distortions from current realities, and frequently bringing with them deep anger toward authority, which became more provoked as we involved them in discussions of budgets, limits, agency requirements. But despite the many problems posed in such a program, we always attempted to retain as our basic premise the purpose of family agency service, utilizing our generic professional knowledge and adding new understanding and skills from our experience.

This brings us to the present. Where are we in 1955? What is the place of relief in private family agency work today, now that the mass responsibility of resettlement is nearing its end in the Jewish family agencies and more and more people from all walks of life with financial independence are seeking counselling services with their problems in family relationships? It is my firm conviction that rather than viewing the family agency's function from the premise of “counselling *or* relief,” that we begin to see that in varying degrees at given times, the nature and scope of family agency work always has and I hope will continue to include as its *major* service helping people who are distressed by problems stemming from within themselves or created from without, but with which they need professional help in finding their own strengths. This may or may not require relief in given situations, but it will always require casework as the vital and necessary artery in the life of a family agency. Each family agency must decide for itself its relief function and policies within the framework of existing community resources; but when relief is granted in the family agency, it is our responsibility to provide this out of our professional knowledge, understanding and know-how. This principle must underscore all professional services within a family agency, whether of a tangible or intangible nature. *How* we help, *how and when* we set the limits and toward what *goals*, are as essential in our understanding of the family in giving relief as it is in any other form of casework.

Mrs. R, a widow in her 40's, and her semi-invalid mother of 75, came to this country a little over five years ago. She came of a low-income family and had no formal education. Her father died before the war; her husband and siblings were killed by the Germans. Mrs. R has not yet learned sufficient English to gain citizenship nor has she become self-supporting. She has resisted this with anxiety and hostility,

placing the entire problem of the family's self-support upon the fact that her mother cannot be left alone; nor has she been able to accept planning for her mother, separate from her. Mrs. R has also had a syphilitic condition, which although it has not affected her employability, has added to her generalized state of anxiety and which she has used in her expressions of helplessness. In the interest of brevity, I will not detail the facts which led to a diagnostic evaluation that Mrs. R has been suffering from a vague form of depression over a period of a few years. It became clear that she could be best helped through a direct, realistic approach to her concrete needs, using our understanding and application of limits as a means of helping her in a realistic way, rather than feeding into her vague emotional needs. The following are excerpts from a rhythm of weekly interviews which the worker has held to consistently with Mrs. R.

Interview of 12/21/54. . . . Following a rather lengthy discussion with Mrs. R in which she asked for money to pay for moving in connection with a plan in which we had neither had any part or gone along with and for which we refused her the money, she expressed a good deal of hostility saying that she would speak to someone in the Federation office to force us to pay for this. . . . The worker said "she could try that, but I again pointed out that Mrs. R is using every method she can to force us to do things for her and not using us in a way in which we can be most helpful by working together on some of her problems. . . . I also made it clear that I was still holding her to a discussion of what she is doing about the language and helping herself around the area of her eligibility. She resentfully said she has been so busy moving and has felt so ill that she hasn't had time to study or go to school recently. Although I accepted that Mrs. R has been greatly troubled and tied up, I still felt the major question was what she wanted for herself. . . . She stated that I didn't understand what she goes through with her mother and her other worries. It was true I would like to understand that better and also try to help her more with those problems, but frankly she was stopping me from helping her. It seemed as though Mrs. R simply wanted to continue with the agency as she has for over five years now and we did not feel that was possible." . . .

In the interview of 12/28/54, the worker records that Mrs. R arrived quite upset as usual. She brought out a great deal of fear that she would be left alone. She referred to her mother who had had a minor operation recently, express-

ing fear that her mother would die and leave her. She mentioned that a relative was leaving the city very soon and that another good friend may also be moving from the city. She expressed hostility towards the community: saying that there were very few Jewish people from the Mediterranean area, accusing the agency for not bringing more of them to the city. Following the worker's recognition during this interview of what this felt like to her and what this may have reminded her of her past, she spent a lengthy interview sharing this with the worker. . . . "She found some meaning in my pointing out that the agency is still willing to be with her and help her and therefore she won't be alone even if all these other people do leave her." . . . This led to some discussion of what we were expecting from her in which she expressed much more positive interest this time. She was able to state directly that she understands our expectation of her learning the English language and although she raised objections and pointed out the obstacle to this, she was able to look at them together with me more than before.

In the interview of 1/4/55, Mrs. R continued to express her fears of being left alone. She brought out that if she had a child, she would not be alone, she would have support when she became older. . . . She continued to berate the agency for not bringing more Jews from the Mediterranean area so that she could feel more at home. During this interview the worker says "it was beginning to sound to me as though Mrs. R was waiting and expecting the United States would be transferred into her native country. She smiled uncomfortably and withdrew into silence. I said this is the way she acts especially in learning the language. She is waiting for the United States to speak Greek and Italian instead of vice versa. She remained silent, smiling and fidgety. I pointed out that her solution is one way of doing it but there was also another way which might be easier—if she learns better English she would automatically broaden her contacts and therefore would not have such a fear of being left alone. I also put in some recognition of her ability to relate to people and to make friends, which pleased her. She mentioned something at the end about continuing her attendance at school and that she feels more comfortable about that now. It sounded as though she was getting some enjoyment out of this, which I was happy to hear."

In the interview of 1/11/55, Mrs. R expressed a good deal of anxiety about her mother's health and some planning for medical care for her.

She shared her pleasure around her teacher's giving special attention to her and the fact that an 8-year-old son of a friend of hers comes to her home occasionally and they study together. She expressed much more positive interest in learning the language and felt that this was because the worker "encouraged her." The worker indicated that this had some part in it but he was certain she also had a lot to do with it.

On 1/19/55 Mrs. R had mentioned during this interview her resentment about still needing a coat and the fact that we had not helped her with this. The worker discussed it, indicating that on the basis of her finally beginning to do something for herself, she was eligible for the coat and told her the amount the agency could grant. She seemed threatened by the worker's recognition that she was doing something for herself and began to give credit for this to God. She accused the worker of being atheistic when he questioned whether this was really credit due God. She remarked with a smile that she is aware that God helps those who help themselves.

Interview of 2/23/55. . . . She moved happily on to talking about her plans of resuming school this week. She looks forward to it and again proudly told me of various words and phrases she has learned. She indicated that she feels freer while in school to concentrate on her studies there (previously having indicated that her worry about her mother is with her all the time and kept her from concentrating in class, and during which worker helped her see what she had a right to for herself). The worker asked how she had accomplished that since "I knew from what she had told me before that her mother's influence made her concentration very difficult in school." She brought out that her mother still complains but it is not the strong pressuring that it once was. She was very eager to say that she wrote a letter to her sister-in-law in Europe herself. Previously her cousins or friends had written for her and this was the first time she had ever done it herself. She giggled and squirmed with delight at my recognition and then added further that she also wrote to her relative in the east. With the worker expressing recognition of her accomplishment, she felt the need to test him by disparaging her accomplishment. When the worker refused to accept that, she seemed satisfied and revealed her pleasure at her relative's praise of the letter. This had tremendous meaning for Mrs. R. The worker reminded Mrs. R that it wasn't too long ago that she was afraid that she would be lost without her cousin

and now she is not only not feeling lost but actually able to do some things for herself that she had never done before. Although she still needed to disparage her accomplishment, there was considerable evidence that she did feel differently about herself. During this interview, she moved on to a discussion about marriage possibilities. She seemed threatened by her discussion of this but interested. The worker added that if she continues trusting herself, she certainly can accomplish something such as marriage if she wants to. More than that, she will find life different in many ways as she already has. Mrs. R attempted to give credit to the worker for this but this was more in the form of going through the motions. She accepted, without verbalizing too much, her own strength.

In the interview of 3/2/55, Mrs. R had a strong need to credit the worker with much of the difference in the way she was feeling and able to do things. When the worker minimized his role, she expressed some resentment. In response to this, the worker says, "I recognized that and felt that perhaps we could say that I did a certain small percentage and she did a much larger percentage. She accepted that readily. She eagerly stated that she wished she had some of my patience. She was startled when I shared with her that she has the capacity for it too and that perhaps some of the problems that concern her prevent her from being patient at this time. She could accept that and then went on to state, with considerable conviction, that she feels now that she could do even more for herself than learn English if again she did not have so many worries. She even mentioned something about using the summer in some way after school is out."

Although time has limited me to presenting only pieces of the casework process, I believe the above situation illustrates how Mrs. R. is beginning to take hold of her problems realistically, through the agency's expectations of her in granting her assistance.

Each agency at given times and within each community must also decide for itself what structure can be most useful, and how its staff can best be trained and specialized in rendering its total service to the community. In our agency, we found it helpful and necessary, for casework as well as community reasons, to

separate our departments in such a way as to establish a separate Counselling Center on a fee basis, which would deal with people coming to us with problems in their individual and family relationships, which were not related to a need for money. It also made it possible for us to reach certain segments of the population in a way which otherwise might not have been so. Such a plan must always be geared to the specific picture of a community at any given time, with the recognition that no structure needs remain permanent. However, within our experience, we believe that separate departments makes it possible for us, at this given time, to provide a more effective and fuller service to the community. Evidence of this lies in the fact that both our Family Service Unit (which provides financial help and other concrete services) and our Counselling Center have been steadily expanding with increase in applications at both spots. In the first place, there are many who come for counselling service who are financially independent. We have also learned that in some situations, the person may be more accessible for help with his psychological problems in an atmosphere not weighted with relief needs and conditions of eligibility; while in still others, the authority which accompanies the relief-giving process can frequently be the very milieu by which the client works on some of his basic problems.

Relief giving in the family agency should not be geared to meet need alone because of the failure or deficiency of other existing resources, but as a piece in the casework process, in helping a family toward a specific goal, within the framework of agency policy. This brings us to the place of relief in the voluntary private family agency against the background of public assistance. This is a knotty problem whether we are affiliated with a sectarian or non-sectarian agency.

But the problem becomes somewhat more sharpened, although essentially not different in the Jewish family agency. Our old heritage and tradition of helping still makes certain segments of the community feel a rather total deep responsibility. Sometimes a referral to the public agency, even at this late date, makes us a target for the client's projected feelings of his own inadequacies which he often expresses in terms of "a Jewish agency should take care of its own." However, it is my firm conviction that we should not become the substitute for the public agency, nor allow ourselves to pick up the slack and meet the gaps *per se* without clear-cut goals. But I am not ready to say that we should eliminate relief entirely. There are those of the profession—and I was one of this group not too long ago—who believed that *any relief* by the private agency acted as a deterring factor against the public agency assumption of its more rightful and fuller responsibility. Although this is perhaps theoretically true, it is a rather naive, idealistic, ivory-towered position, far removed from the realities of the needs of people in our existing public assistance structure. For example, in the State of Pennsylvania, aliens cannot receive assistance unless old enough for Old Age Assistance under federal funds; non-residents are ineligible except under certain reciprocal arrangements; supplementation from any source including the private agency is deducted from the public grant. These are only some of the facts about the present public assistance law or the interpretation of the law in the State of Pennsylvania. Some states have more liberal public assistance laws than others, but in almost every state, some parts of the public assistance program can bear improvement. Recently in our community, we set up a series of meetings between the administrative personnel of private family agencies and the public agency under the

auspices of the Health and Welfare Federation. Such meetings are intended to share our common experience and problems and hopefully to work toward a more liberal interpretation of the Pennsylvania Assistance law which will come closer to meeting the needs of the people.

Mrs. T is a good example of a person ineligible for public assistance in my community at the present time and to whom our agency is giving maintenance relief. She is a widow in her 60's, physically ill, a somewhat limited person intellectually, but with some capacity to manage fairly well on her own. Although she has several married children, her relationship with them is not too close and she prefers to live alone. Realistically, except for one son who helps her with a small monthly contribution, the others are unable to help financially. Mrs. T has not been able to pass the necessary test for citizenship. As it stands now, until she reaches 65 and becomes eligible for Old Age Assistance, she cannot get public assistance. There is a slight possibility of an "Aid to Disabled" grant under federal funds which does not require citizenship, but her eligibility for this is quite uncertain at this point. Mrs. T's needs are very simple. She uses the clinic and other resources responsibly and wants to continue living in her own apartment. Without financial help, she would be unable to do this.

This is a situation which definitely should be the responsibility of the public agency and not the private family agency. Hopefully, professional and lay people will continue working together for social legislation which will improve and extend the public assistance programs throughout the states, so that people like Mrs. T can receive public assistance.

I believe there are three major areas which appropriately belong to the private family agency today in relief giving: (1) *The continuation of the job started a few years ago in the settlement program of New Americans.* This, of course, is primarily related to Jewish family agencies. Although the number of newcomers now arriving is small, all of us are faced with a residual group of hard-

core situations which require the greatest competence in either helping them become self-supporting or eventually eligible for public assistance. These include people who have a stake in not becoming Americanized, in not gaining citizenship, in not going to work because of their particular psychological disturbances, as well as those with realistic problems of health or age. It takes the greatest degree of professional skill and knowledge to help this group. Until we do, our job is really not completed. Although I can proudly say that in our agency, out of a group of about 400 families whom we have resettled, we have approximately only 30 remaining on assistance, I believe that these 30 provide the greatest challenge yet which we have to face. Relief is an essential and vital part in helping these families but we must be clear in our goals and purposeful and knowledgeable in our application of our skills. (2) *Financial help in individual situations where such help either for a limited period of time or in terms of a one-time grant is geared to greater rehabilitation of a family or geared to preventing serious family breakdown.* This means that if supplementation of a family's budget for a limited period of time, or assistance with a particular plan of an emergency or non-emergency nature, will help a family maintain its stability, prevent breakdown, or achieve greater independence, the private family agency should have the funds and the freedom, without restrictions from the public agency, to use its money and casework skills in a way which will be most effective with a given family. We should be called upon for this form of relief rather than for meeting gaps in the public assistance program for isolated items of assistance. (3) *Relief as it is needed in new programs, particularly at this given time in pioneering and experimenting in providing additional resources for older people.* This includes relief for such

resources as boarding homes, housekeeping services, and others. It is my feeling that this belongs within the province of the private family agency at this given time, geared toward eventually becoming the responsibility of the public agency. In some communities this has already been accomplished; in others not yet so.

Two serious problems currently facing many family agencies today—and I speak from direct experience in my own community—are (1) the deficiencies in the public assistance program and (2) the lack of freedom which private agencies have either by limitations within their own budgets or by restrictions placed upon them by the public agency, to give relief in a way which encompasses and utilizes our knowledge and

understanding of individuals and families whom we are trying to help and the goals toward which we are working together.

In conclusion, I believe that the family agency has a vital place in relief giving not as its primary function but as one part of its total service, as it is appropriately needed in helping people with the problems which confront them as individuals or as families, geared toward strengthening their capacities to function more adequately. The place of relief in a family agency is not answered in terms of "yes or no" but rather "how and when." The basic answers will also come from competence in our knowledge and skills, clarity of purpose and goals, and vision in our direction.