

IMPROVING QUALITY OF SERVICE IN THE SMALL AND INTERMEDIATE FAMILY AGENCY* (A PERSONAL CHRONICLE)

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THE purpose of family agencies is to strengthen family life; to help families and individuals better to cope with interpersonal problems, and to help families lead an enriched, wholesome life. How we accomplish this purpose in Scranton and a personal account of the experience of the family agency director are the general text of this paper. Perhaps precepts can be derived for guidance of others.

Scranton has a small community of 6,500 Jewish people out of a total population of 125,000. The history of the agency is probably not too different from that of any other Jewish family agency in the United States. The agency is 43 years old. Its primary service was in meeting some of the financial needs of the community. Until I came, about eight years ago, the agency had not been staffed with a professional person. Generally speaking, the board and community leaders had been interested in providing adequate and professional services, but had no leadership or guidance in that direction.

The previous professional experience I brought with me to the job had been in two relief giving agencies. The *attitudes*

I brought with me were multiple and shaped in part by the past backwardness of the agency, making me eager to professionalize it. Another important factor was that this one-man agency was small in comparison to other Jewish and non-Jewish agencies in the community. I felt belittled because I was being requested to serve but a very small segment of the general population of the community. This situation created a great deal of insecurity for me and spurred me to attempt to get recognition and acceptance.

I have since learned that some of these attitudes have helped, and some have hindered me in the solution of agency problems.

Financial Assistance Problems

One of the first problems to face in the agency was in its program of financial assistance. The agency had a long history of giving relief, and there were many cases that had received assistance anywhere from ten to twenty years. I was disturbed that the agency had fostered this kind of dependency. My experience in giving financial assistance in an agency in New York City had been based on a policy of maintaining a minimum assistance level. I had student training in another agency in New York City which had almost completely dropped the financial assistance function as it was taken

over by Public Assistance. As I look back, I think at the outset my objective was to de-emphasize relief-giving functions to the extent of perhaps doing away with them completely. I embarked on this program, pursued it vigorously, and met with quite a bit of success. One day I discussed this with one of the leaders of the community who agreed with me that financial assistance had previously been poorly handled by the agency, but wondered whether doing away with it or being so restrictive was the solution to the problem. He felt it would be possible for us to do away with the relief function of the agency, but that another organization or agency might arise to meet this particular need in the community. This made me stop to examine both myself and the relief-giving function more thoughtfully. I realized that there was a need in the community for some form of financial assistance and I began to grope for a policy and plan which would be more realistic and helpful.

In a small community the agency represents in effect the comprehensive force to help Jews in the community. Whenever anything goes wrong, whenever any type of help is needed, the community turns to the Jewish family agency. Another important factor is that the board is close to the community and the clients know the board members personally and tell them of their needs. This created pressure on me as a worker since dissatisfied clients could go directly to board members. Many board members have been active in the agency for a number of years, and not too long ago participated in decisions as to whether a person received assistance or not. This carry-over of the past intensifies the pressure on the professional. It was impossible, with these pressures, for me to rest on the fact that I was a professional person and, therefore, what I was suggesting in service was "ipso facto" right. I had to face up to the fact that certain services were

being demanded of the agency by the community. I had also to handle my own attitudes in the situation.

Another problem which exists in a small community (it exists in the larger community as well, but is not so obvious) is that of private drives of well-meaning individuals and small organizations who become interested in helping families outside of the social-service community. Such drives always have an effect on the family agency. It is remarkable how in a small community people rally to the support and aid of others in distress. The community is both generous and well-meaning. However, during the course of one of these drives I learned that as a method of raising money for a particular family in distress, the Jewish family agency was being referred to in a derogatory way. A self-appointed solicitor of funds spread the impression that the family agency would refuse to help in this client situation. Not only was this a distortion of the function of the agency, but it impaired its public relations.

My first experience with a private drive occurred when I was in the community about a year. It had to do with a New American family. A child was seriously ill and a sum was being raised to obtain special medical care in a nearby large city. The agency medical consultant had felt that the child could receive the medical care locally and that the fund was unwarranted. The physician who was also a member of the board felt his professional competence was under attack, that funds raised would be misused, and insisted that the agency do something to stop the drive. My approach was to attack the people who were involved in this private drive on the basis that they did not know realistically how to help this family, and should defer to the agency. My assumption was that as a professional I had superior knowledge of what to do. By pressure, the drive

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was halted and the family continued to receive medical care locally with final success in the case. However, from the point of view of community relations, we had lost. I learned from the underground that it appeared to those we thwarted that we had blocked them simply because we were not really interested in helping.

Contrast this situation with one that occurred last year when I had achieved more maturity of understanding as to what was involved in helping people both by community-interested people and by the professional agency. Another serious family financial situation arose in the community. This was a family whose breadwinner was chronically incapacitated. The family was heavily in debt due to his gambling and now was faced with crises including foreclosure. Some leading citizens in the community had begun a drive to raise money to take care of the mortgage and other debts. One of the leading citizens of the community informed us of the situation. At this time we suggested a meeting of all interested parties. It was amicably agreed that the drive continue to raise funds for specialized needs, and the agency would undertake to work out a realistic budget with the family and to give financial assistance for on-going needs. Our recognition of the positive motivation of the interested community people and willingness to work alongside them led to their acceptance of the agency function, improved public relations, and much more effective assistance to the family in distress.

Let me interpolate here that it is generally conceded that the State of Pennsylvania does not have an adequate assistance program. Moreover, the laws of Pennsylvania do not permit supplementation by private agencies for items for which allowance is included, though inadequately, by the Department of Public Assistance of Penna. This has created a

great deal of difficulty in the Jewish community where it is felt that the agency should supplement items which are inadequate. In addition, many requests come from Department of Public Assistance clients asking us to intercede for them with the Department of Public Assistance. We believe that this is a service that we can give to the community if we can avoid becoming a pressure group on the public agency. Towards this end we offer the service of inquiring into the situation and helping the client to understand what is involved in the Public Assistance Program.

The entire problem of transiency is quite important and has tremendous community relations aspects in a small Jewish community. At first we felt that since these people who were traveling from town to town really were chronic transients, they therefore should not be receiving any financial assistance from the agency. This was based on the fact that they really had no valid plan nor were they anxious to accept rehabilitation help from the agency. Unless the transient had a valid plan for achieving independence, any material aid amounted simply to a "handout." In evaluating the situation, we have found that the community is not ready to accept this kind of thinking. Thus we now have an interview with the transient in which, however, we usually find that the transient does not respond to our offer to help him work toward a different way of life. He merely wants temporary assistance until he reaches the next town, and usually we give financial assistance on as realistic a basis as can be found.

Other Concrete Service Problems

The Jewish family agency in a small community is also responsible for the administration of other material services. Local facilities are usually limited and it, therefore, is necessary for the small

family agency to make use of regional facilities in the areas of child care, adoption, service to unmarried mothers and psychiatric treatment. There are many problems inherent in this; areas of responsibilities need to be defined between client and agency and between the two agencies involved. For example, when a child needs placement in a residential treatment institution, it is necessary to find a facility in many cases quite a distance away from our own community. We have made use of an institution several hundred miles away. In one situation I found when I came to the agency, we were paying for the care of a boy who was placed for residential treatment many miles away and though a caseworker relationship was maintained by the worker in the residential treatment center, little contact was had with us because of distance. Emotional confusion had resulted for the boy. Our worker was responsible for his placement in the residential treatment center, authorized the payment for such care, and yet had no further relationship to the boy nor to the treatment plan. The parents of the boy resided in our community. The treatment center did not know exactly how much authority it could assume with the boy. In addition, since the institution's treatment plans and the family agency's superior knowledge of the parents' situation were not continuously interchanged, many realities were overlooked in the treatment of the child. It was finally agreed that the boy would be making regular visits to his parents and at the time of his visits would see the family caseworker so that a relationship would be established between the worker at our agency and the boy. The relationship would help to clarify our role in the situation and what was expected of him at the residential treatment center. This was tried and was fairly successful. It permitted the worker to operate more responsibly in the situation and clarified

for the residential treatment center and the boy their respective roles and responsibilities. As a result the boy began to work through some of his problems and really to accept treatment at the treatment center.

In the area of service to unmarried mothers and adoption work, our agency has very limited services available. In general we have made use of regional facilities fairly successfully in these areas.

The Problem of Staff Development

Professional family counseling was unknown in my agency whose primary function up to eight years ago was relief giving; it is a new function, not the least part of this connects with the proposition that counseling is for the whole community regardless of financial status and that members of the board as well as leaders in other avenues of community life can also make use of these services. Therefore, it has been necessary for us to do extensive and intensive interpretation of family counseling. It also was a source of a great deal of anxiety and insecurity for me because my own training in counseling was limited. As is well known, one of the best sources for referrals is the former client who has had a helpful experience at the agency. Very practically then, it behooves a worker in a small family agency to be extremely skillful and helpful with the clients he works with. This need to prove the validity of the service sometimes kept me from really helping the client to face his problems because of the fear that such a move would elicit his negative feelings and rejection of the agency and me.

As time goes on and more interpretation is done concerning this function of the agency, more clients come to the agency for help. Many of these clients come with complicated familial problems which require both professional skill and security. At the beginning of this paper

I made mention of the fact that in the small community the worker in an agency feels that he isn't quite accepted because of the smallness of the agency. This feeling invades many of the worker's attitudes. There is another important phenomenon that exists in the small and intermediate city that also shapes the attitude of the worker, and that is the feeling of aloneness. This is especially true in one-man agencies or small agencies where there are only a worker or two, because for many complicated situations which arise there is no professional staff with whom to consult. It has been suggested by "Guidelines," issued by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, that the small family agency might consult with, and take part in the seminars given by, the non-sectarian agencies. In terms of maintaining the independent status of the Jewish Federation's service, this would not appear as a comfortable solution.

As time went on I began to have an increasing feeling of this aloneness and lack of consultation; yet I felt that if I sought consultation elsewhere it would in some degree mean to the board and to the community that the executive they had hired was not adequate to handle cases on his own. Furthermore I had to admit that in order to help people effectively and skillfully I needed to have a case consultant to deepen my understanding. Despite these risks and feelings, I decided to work out a system of consultation that would be most helpful to me, and most effective to clients that made use of the agency's services.

I reviewed the problem of consultation with my board. I had anticipated their resistance since it did involve both money and a great deal of my time to be spent in going for consultation. The presentation to the board emphasized that consultative service would help the agency in giving more skillful and effective service to people who were seeking

family counseling services from the agency. I also pointed out that the demand for family counseling had increased and would probably continue to increase from year to year. Interestingly enough, the board was quite ready to accept this plan, primarily on the basis of more effective service to the community. My board president was in favor of consultation and made mention of the fact that it reflected well on myself that I sought consultation to obtain more skill in helping people.

The agency now uses a consultant who has had many years of supervisory and casework experience. The consultant is seen twice a month and case material is sent to her prior to our consultation with her.

We have now used this form of consultation for four years. We have found it quite satisfactory and we feel that it has improved my skill and has resulted in more effective counseling service to the people in the community. This form of paid consultation permits a free exchange of ideas and feelings since the consultant is an employee of the agency and does not have any control over me in matters of dismissal, retention, or increments. As a matter of fact, it was made quite clear from the very beginning both to my board and consultant that no evaluations were required. It has given me tremendous professional security and has removed some of the feeling of aloneness that a worker in a small community has in his work. I use the consultant not only in relation to casework technique and method, but also to discuss community relations, interpretation, administration and other problems that come up in the agency.

Problems of Confidentiality and Personal Acquaintance

The maintenance of confidentiality is somewhat of a problem in a small community. In our city, the Jewish com-

munity is located in a very small, compact area. It is a very closely integrated community and most people know each other. In addition, there is a great deal of inter-relationship of families. News spreads like wildfire. Because of this, it is extremely important and essential that the agency maintain strict confidentiality. This at first was difficult for my board to understand and to accept. In the past the board was the actual dispenser of funds to people in need. A great deal of interpretation was necessary to the board in explaining the need for confidentiality and in maintaining it. We have been rather successful in having the board accept this. The next step, of course, was to get the community to accept that confidentiality was being maintained at the agency. This presented problems since it was a new departure. Gradually, however, they have come to trust the agency's maintenance of confidentiality and to accept the fact that this is for their own benefit.

Another problem faced by the worker in the small family agency is that many of his clients may be known to him socially. This cannot be helped in a small integrated community like our own, and the worker must face the problems that are inherent in such a relationship. As soon as both the worker and client are able to bring feelings about this out into the open, the relationship becomes established on a firmer basis, and the worker can be professionally helpful to the person who is also known socially to him. The effectiveness of such help depends upon the comfort of the worker and the client in the situation. I have found that in most cases involving such clients I have been able to help them successfully. As a matter of fact, in many such situations, the process of helping was speeded up because of the worker having known the client socially. First of all, the worker was aware of many things before the client came to

the office, and therefore little time had to be spent in getting some kinds of background material. Secondly, the worker made use of some of the events that took place in the social situation to show the client some of the things that were actually happening, and this cut through the client's need to project and deny his role. I think that it is important to mention, however, that seeing the person whom you know socially in a professional relationship may strain the social relationship thereafter for a while at least. This, it would seem, is an occupational hazard for the worker in a small family agency.

Interpretation of Services

Interpretation of the services of a family agency is an extremely important part of the operation of an agency. This is especially true in a small and intermediate city because family counseling programs are new in these communities and there is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding as to the kind of service a family agency can give in this area. Furthermore, the rabbi seems to hold a unique position as a counselor. Part of the interpretation function is the delineation of the role of rabbi and agency. It is extremely important in the small and intermediate city for the family agency to establish a good working relationship with the rabbis. They are an important referral source and can be very helpful to the family. This has been the most difficult area of interpretation and has had to be done on an individual, personal basis in an attempt to mitigate feelings of threat to the rabbi's stature as an advisor to his congregants in trouble.

I have learned, too, that the clearer the interpretation of the counseling process, the more expeditious is the treatment. If the client knows what is expected of him in treatment and what he can expect of the agency when he comes

for help, the process of helping is speeded up and the treatment relationship is established quickly. For all these reasons, it is important that an adequate interpretation program be accepted as an on-going function of the agency.

We have tried various methods of orientation with different degrees of success. We have given direct talks to various Jewish organizations in the community dealing specifically with the services of the agency. This has not proved too successful. We have found instead that giving talks dealing with problems of everyday living and introducing at such times some facts about the agency, citing from various cases of the agency as they relate to the topic under discussion, is the more effective way.

We have also used mental hygiene films and plays, and led discussions afterwards. This, too, has been an effective method of interpreting the agency's service. For a number of years we made use of Annual Meetings to interpret the agency. The people we reached at these Annual Meetings were the same group year after year, and this kind of sophisticated audience predicates a different kind of interpretation to insure a going interest and to stimulate more advanced thinking about the agency.

We have learned after some experience that rather than to attempt to interpret to the entire community at once, it is worthwhile to intensify interpretation to more specific referral sources. This has been done by speaking to groups of doctors, lawyers, etc., as well as to key individuals in these professions.

Our Family Life Education program is in its infancy. In addition to its educational value, it has some value as an interpretative source for the agency. In addition to our own programs on Family Life Education, we have established an annual Family Life Education lecture given by a prominent person from out-

side the community. In the past three years we have had lecturers from different fields related to social work. In addition to the presentation of their work, they have helped to interpret the agency. We have opened this kind of lecture to the entire community and it has had a considerable interpretative and public relations impact.

If I were to state simply what I consider the best method of interpretation, it would refer to the fact that everything a worker or an executive does while on the job has interpretative value. A simple telephone call, a collateral visit, a treatment plan, and certainly the case-work interview, all involve interpretation. I think that in a small community it is extremely important that the worker or the executive use every opportunity possible, even outside his job, to interpret the services of the agency. Many times individual relationships can be used for extremely effective interpretation. Of course, constant interpretation to board and committees of the agency is essential in a family agency. Case illustrations have been used extensively at board meetings. Most recently, however, a situation arose where I was able to do what I would like to term "live" interpretation.

It was common knowledge that a Jewish family was interested in placing a child whom they had adopted thru private sources about a year ago. They had sought the counsel and help of a well-known attorney in town. Eventually as a result of my suggestion my board president contacted the family and offered them the services of the agency. The family did contact the agency for service but was reluctant to discuss their problem freely. We learned in the course of our contact that they felt obligated to the attorney for past favors and he was pressuring them to use his services. We saw that we had to

interpret the service of the agency to the attorney before the family could be helped. The board president and I discussed the matter with the lawyer, who was able then to accept the role of the agency in this matter. The family was then free to work with us and a placement was made. I believe that this type of interpretation is best, but we do not always have the opportunity to interpret in this manner.

In the foregoing I have traced the development of service at my agency over the past eight years. I have attempted to show how we have improved the quality of service rendered to the com-

munity, and some of the difficulties we encountered in the process. Our fundamental goal, in addition to giving adequate and skillful service to the community, was to educate the whole community to the acceptance of the agency as a place to which any one in trouble should go. We believe that we have gone a good distance towards our goal. People of the community now accept that the agency renders effective professional service in helping with some of the personal and familial problems that come to all people in the course of managing this complicated thing called human relations.