

## **Brief Communications on Services to Older Persons**

### **Reaching Out to the Aging Through Vocational Services\***

**Claudia Fogel**

*Supervisor, Work Center on Aging, Jewish Vocational Service of Metropolitan New Jersey*

*. . . Through vocational services we do indeed not only reach the elderly, but make a substantial impact on their lives . . .*

The Jewish Vocational Service Work Center on Aging of Metropolitan New Jersey was conceived and designed to meet the employment and vocational rehabilitation needs of the disabled aging. The concept is not unique. What makes this program unique and increasingly successful is important to consider, for it has implications for ongoing service delivery as well as future planning.

#### **Historical Perspective**

In 1965, the JVS of Metropolitan New Jersey developed (and continues to operate) a Work Activity Center in the Daughters of Israel Pleasant Valley Home, a home for the aged in our community. It early became apparent that remunerative work of this program provided the residents of the Home an enriched service addition to the pattern of traditional services offered at the Home. This venture continues to be a cooperative one. Work and professional supervision are provided by JVS; space and production personnel are provided by the Home. The program started with 16 client residents and now serves more than 100 a week with astonishing cost benefits in addition to the human benefits of mental and physical well being. It is reported

to us that this is the most popular activity at the Home.

At about that same period of time, the local Federation convened a Committee on the Aged comprising lay and professional leadership. This committee directed some of the beneficiary agencies, including JVS, to develop "some objective measurements of the needs of their aged clients, both met and unmet." In 1971, JVS began an intensive study of the needs of the aged poor residing in a Public Housing Project in Newark. A vocational counselor developed and administered a questionnaire in a one to one interview format over the course of several months. Critical areas of need were revealed, medical services being the most immediate and urgent. Very shortly thereafter, a complete medical screening with follow-up services was coordinated by the JVS at the local Federation—sponsored hospital, with the cooperation of a general hospital unit of the U.S. Army Reserve. This resulted in ongoing medical services for Jewish aged poor and other residents of the housing project. The coordination of this program was taken over by the Jewish family service agency.

#### **Growth of Services**

Many other individual critical areas of need were uncovered by the JVS counselor. Once trust had been established tenants of the housing project eagerly awaited her visit. As

---

\* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Toronto, Canada, June 5, 1979.

many as 20 older people often stood in the lobby of each of the three high rise buildings with individual problems related to themselves, their neighbors, their friends. Referrals were made, agencies were contacted, and all the while valuable data were being collected. A virtually abandoned synagogue was found by the JVS counselor in the midst of this area. Many meetings were held with an advisory group of Senior Citizens, the vocational counselor and a Senior Group Worker from the Y. Information and reports were submitted to the Jewish Federation. The synagogue was repaired and cleaned, and today it is a bustling Center, with Y programs and free lunches offered six days a week.

While initially involved in areas unusual for JVS, crucial problems were solved as a result of this involvement and cooperation with sister Jewish agencies. In the meantime, a further result of this valuable investigation was the realization that older individuals were interested in some form of work, provided it was accessible and appropriate. Because of long standing relationships and previously successful programs with the state VR agency and the regional SRS office, HEW funds were made available for a three-year grant for a Work Center on Aging. New partnerships were also formed with the Office on Aging.

The JVS Work Center on Aging of Metropolitan New Jersey opened its doors in November 1973. The program has undergone many changes—political problems being what they are, many frustrations were encountered and funding sources have shifted. But the administration of the Agency and the staff of the Work Center have continued to seek out and maintain community involvement, by sitting on the advisory boards of many organizations and such local agencies as CETA and RSVP, by participating in hearings and conferences on the aging, and by communicating with local politicians and legislators. This helps us to advocate for our older adults and to continue to maintain visibility. The program itself has grown, and older disabled persons previously thought

unable and unsuitable for work have either been successfully rehabilitated to jobs in competitive employment or remain in permanent long-term sheltered employment. Local DVR offices, at first reluctant to refer and/or pay fees for rehabilitating older disabled workers, now do so unhesitatingly, although often admittedly surprised at the successful results. With the continued support of our Jewish Community Federation, the DVR fees for service, and a now well cemented relationship with the N.J. Department of Human Services (Division of Youth and Family Services), the program continues to grow and flourish with a rich professional staff consisting of a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a floor counselor, a supervisor, and a part-time Social Service Coordinator.

Clients served in the program range in age from 55-92. In addition to the vocational rehabilitation which results in enhancement of self-esteem and a return to the mainstream of life, there are other benefits. Clients benefit from counseling with regard to Social Security, SSI, Food Stamps, and Welfare. They are assisted in applying for housing, rental subsidies, pharmaceutical assistance, discount fares; they are informed about nutrition, safety, health and legal affairs, and receive consumer education by means of lectures and/or full semester college courses given at the Work Center. Exercise classes are conducted during break time. Clients are provided with annual free eye-examinations, psychiatric consultation if needed, and are required to obtain medical examinations, annually at the very least, more often if it is deemed necessary and appropriate. When clients suffer traumas such as the loss of a spouse or a sibling, or are themselves afflicted with serious illness, they are able to remain in the community, possibly postponing or averting total isolation or perhaps even institutionalization, because of the support system offered by Work Center staff and peers. Referrals are made and communication maintained with the Jewish Counseling and Service Agency (the local Jewish family service), medical resources,

mental health clinics, the Y, etc. When clients are placed on jobs, follow up contact is maintained for a minimum of three months.

There are less severely disabled elderly who do not require the comprehensive services of pre-vocational evaluation, work adjustment training and job seeking skills which are provided Work Center clients. When the initial government funding was available, a placement counselor was added to the staff to assist those older adults in finding jobs by being advocates for them in job development. A three-year grant was not renewed and the position was lost. As of last year, however, a contract with CETA has enabled us to provide once again this valuable service to the older persons in the community.

The foregoing details that through vocational services we do indeed not only reach the elderly, but make a substantial impact on their lives, and also that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do this alone. Relationships and partnerships with government and other agencies must continue to be formed and maintained. But we have other partners, in a sense, namely our boards. It is also our responsibility to educate and interpret to the lay leadership, because it is they, after all, who are the policy-makers and the decision-makers.

But what of the future? With those partners, planning should begin now. The older generation of tomorrow will be healthier, better educated, and, one hopes, somewhat more economically secure. It is not too early to begin to think about how we will serve that generation. Should we plan differently for

what Bernice Neugarten of the University of Chicago terms the young-old (55-75) and the old-old (75 and over). Should a JVS provide preventative programs such as pre-retirement counseling, or planning a second or third career for the young-old? The mandatory retirement age in this country has been raised to age 70. Should those of us in the vocational field be advocating "flexitime" and eased retirement, combining part-time employment with partial pensions? Perhaps innovative programs can be planned in projects cooperative with industry. This agency is currently involved in such a program with Prudential which hires mature workers on a temporary basis in various unskilled clerical areas. Office managers are supportive in allowing the older workers time off for medical reasons, visits to children out-of-state, etc. They are also mindful of maximum allowable earnings for people on Social Security. Working conditions are pleasant, free nutritious lunches are provided and the people placed there are thrilled with their new roles.

Should we plan neighborhood workshops within our Y's and Federation Housing Projects for the old-old with more non-traditional ancillary services such as college courses, physical fitness and lectures to enhance the work program? If communal living arrangements for the non-institutionalized frail elderly become a reality, should part-time work activities be available? The services and the programs of the future must continue not only to reach out to the aging, but to meet their changing needs.