The Importance of Services to an Action Program

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IN recent years there has been a renewed interest on the part of many private agencies and organizations in developing programs of social and community action. This interest has been demonstrated through the formation and development of social action "clubs" or committees within the existing structure of such organizations as synagogues and community centers; their sole purpose is to focus community attention on the unmet needs of a particular group, to work for the implementation of needed new services, and to work for the passage of legislation of benefit to a target population.

Nowhere has this renewed social concern been expressed more tangibly than in the area of services to the aging — where new, independent agencies and programs for the elderly have proliferated. Not only has there been, in recent years, a rapid development of programs for the aged at the national and regional level but, in addition, at the local level, where private agencies, volunteer organizations, and central planning bodies alike have implemented a wide variety of programs and services for older persons. This growth of new services for the aged has provided several models from which a community may choose in beginning a new program of services for the elderly; these include the multi-service agency created and funded by the central funding and planning arm of either the general or the Jewish community, the committee or commission created and staffed by the central funding body and

which is given the responsibility to plan for and to implement a coordinated array of functional services for the elderly (but which is not an independent agency), the multi-service program begun by one or another private voluntary agency or by several agencies jointly, and the program begun by the volunteer organization or a coalition of such organizations. While many of these are direct service programs, some have as their primary objective social and community action.

Conceptually, there has been a dichotomy between the action-oriented and the service-oriented agency, wherein the former has as its primary goal to point out the unmet needs of a particular target population and to work for the implementation of new services to meet those identified needs, while the latter has as its primary objective the actual provision of one or more direct services to the target population. This dichotomy often is characterized in such a manner that the provision of a direct service is deemed totally inappropriate for an action agency, and community or social action is likewise proscribed for a service agency.

It is the thesis of this article, however, that the boundaries between action and service are arbitrary, artificial, and self-imposed and that services, rather than being an obstruction to community action, can be, in fact, a necessary, proper, and natural component for any action-oriented program.

Problems of an Action Program

There are, however, several problems which face an agency or program which

is primarily or solely action-oriented which are not shared by service agencies. These include combatting a "troublemaker" image which accrues at times to that program which utilizes norm-testing community action techniques to achieve its goals, obtaining funding for a program whose benefits are not as tangible or as visible as those of a service agency, developing leadership and involvement on the part of a generation of older adults who may not be able to relate easily to the concept or methodology of community action and who may be reluctant to postpone the immediate benefits of a service for the benefits to be derived from a program of community or social action which may take months or even years to achieve. In addition, community action is impersonal and does not provide many opportunities for volunteers to help others in an immediate or individualized way, which reason is often given by older persons as their primary reason for joining a service organization.

A service agency or program does not, in most instance, face these problems. Its services are tangible, concrete, and visible. For this reason, older individuals seem more easily able to relate to the provision of a service. Because they can "get involved" in the provision of a service more readily, a service therefore encourages voluntarism on the part of the elderly, a major goal of many agencies. Finally, a service is more easily justifiable to a funding body.

In view of the above considerations, it almost seems doubtful that a purely action-oriented agency could survive.

An Action Program for the Elderly

Formation. The formation and development of the Older Adult Community Action Program (OACAP) has been described elsewhere.[1] This nonsectarian program, begun in the spring

of 1969 by the St. Louis Jewish Family & Children's Service, had the goal of affording the elderly living in a suburb of University City, Missouri the opportunity of continuing to participate actively in community life in the retirement years. One of the objectives of this experimental program was "to demonstrate that the stereotype of the older person as being too weak, too sick, and without the resources necessary to effect change that would have a positive effect on his well-being was false, and that, instead, the over-65 population could be motivated and stimulated to effect change in the community that would enhance its potential for continued active and independent living in the mainstream of community life."[2] This goal would be achieved by encouraging and stimulating the elderly to identify and share their common needs, to determine their priorities, and to work for the implementation of new and innovative services that would meet these needs. The philosophy of the program recognized and stressed that "older persons, simply because of advanced age, have not lost the resources, and therefore continue to have the responsibility, for determining their own fate and for participating in community change for the enhancement of their well-being."[3]

Evolution of the program. The Older Adult Community Action Program has undergone several distinct programmatic phases in its five years of existence. These have included a formative phase during which the office was established, needs of the neighborhood elderly were determined, and committees were formed to work for the implemen-

[1] Lawrence E. Blonsky, "An Innovative Service for the Elderly," The Gerontologist, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1973), pp. 189-96.

[2] Lawrence E. Blonsky, "Factors Affecting the Prospect for Survival of a Jointly Sponsored Program for the Elderly," (in press).

[3] Blonsky, op. cit., p. 189.

tation of supportive services to meet shared needs; a direct service phase, during which the emphasis of the program was upon the initiation and development of a number of innovative supportive services (including transportation, information and referral, and a food cooperative); an evaluative phase during which there was a recognition that continued emphasis upon the provision of services represented an increasingly large drain upon scarce resources (time, money, volunteers) and prevented the program and its leadership from devoting its full energies to the original objectives of the program; finally, in recent months there has been a renewed commitment to the original goals and objectives of the program, during which period the program has pointed out to the community the unmet needs of the elderly, has worked for the implementation of new and creative solutions to the problems of the elderly, and has worked for the passage of social legislation of benefit to the elderly. This latter, and perhaps more dynamic, phase of the program has resulted in a natural de-emphasis upon the provision of services.

Community and social action. Efforts of the elderly, through a community action methodology, have led to some notable achievements in the brief history of the Older Adult Community Action Program, including the creation of a senior center in quarters obtained from the local municipal administration, a retarding of the process of gradual deterioration of the neighborhood in which the program was begun through the formation and "watchdog" activities of a neighborhood improvement committee, convincing the local municipal administration to purchase a new bus for use by the elderly, attracting a grocery store into a neighborhood from which the only such store had moved several months earlier, and easing the tension in

the community resulting from the opening of a tavern in the neighborhood.

In recent months, following the commitment to community and social action objectives, the program has sponsored a series of public "meet the candidates" forums to demonstrate to candidates for election to local and county office that the elderly can be united into a major political force; it has worked for and was instrumental in the passage of a tax levy increase (the first successful increase in five years) requested by the local school district which had, in the past, supported legislation for the elderly; it has begun a campaign to redirect priorities in nearby communities so that the elderly will obtain a fair share of federal revenue sharing funds; it is working to have the laws pertaining to a new program of property tax relief for senior citizens revised so that it will be easier for the elderly to make application for their benefits next year; it is preparing to initiate a statewide campaign to work for the elimination of the sales tax on food and prescription drugs; it is forming a coalition of senior citizen groups and other organizations to work cooperatively for common goals; finally, it has presented several major proposals to the municipal administration for innovative solutions to community-wide problems.

The Importance of Services to Community Action

While the efforts of OACAP have, over the past five years, led to some notable achievements through the utilization of a community action methodology, the most dramatic achievements have resulted in areas where there has been a service component.

Transportation. OACAP pioneered a free transportation service for the elderly. After developing the service and determining that a new vehicle was

mandatory for continuation and expansion of what had evolved into a major community service, the program's leadership was successful in obtaining a new bus for use by the elderly from the city administration after the implementation of a carefully-planned program of community action.[4] This program included publicizing extensively the need for a new vehicle, pledging the support of the program to work for the passage of a bond issue — requested by the municipality for the construction of an ice- and roller-skating facility — in return for consideration of another bond issue that would (if passed) allow for the purchase by the municipality of transportation equipment to be used by the elderly and, when that offer was refused, stimulating an older adult to run for the position of city council-woman, using as part of her platform the need by the elderly for special transportation to meet their special needs.

In this case, a problem (lack of suitable public transportation) led to the initiation and development of a service, which led to the recognition of an unmet need (that for new vehicles) which led, in turn, to a program of community action (lobbying, petitioning, campaigning) which resulted in the provision of better service.

Legislation. As a second example, OACAP recently concluded a public education and information campaign to reach and inform all elderly in the community about their potential benefits under a newly-enacted property tax relief law. During the process of helping some 250 persons apply for more than $28,000 in these benefits, the volunteer corps experienced countless problems in helping older persons make application (forms and instructions complicated and confusing, too many steps in the applica-

[4] Lawrence E. Blonsky, "Community Action and Transportation for the Elderly," this *Journal*, Vol. L, No. 4 (Summer, 1974), pp. 313-21.

tion process). This led to a clear realization that certain revisions were needed in the law in order to make the process easier for the elderly for next year. Thus, the provision of a service (public education and assistance) by volunteers to their peers led to a recognition of a need (revisions in the tax relief law) which has led to the beginning of a campaign of community action which will, it is hoped, result in the provision of better service.

Community action. As one final example of the relationship between services and action, consider the following: when the only supermarket in a neighborhood of the community closed, the program began to provide emergency transportation to a nearby grocery, which happened to be located outside the municipality's city limits. Following a confrontation between the board of directors and the city council, in which the board was told that it could not use the city-owned vehicles (which it leased from the city) to take residents outside the community for the purpose of grocery shopping, there was a realization on the part of the board of directors that transporting the elderly to another grocery store was treating the symptom rather than the problem. Thus, the program began an aggressive campaign to publicize the need for another grocery store in the neighborhood, to focus community attention on the problems being experienced by those persons without transportation in obtaining groceries, and began contacting chain stores and independent grocers. After a number of months, the problem was solved with the attraction of a grocer into the neighborhood. Thus, again a problem led to the provision of a service, which led to the recognition of a new need, which led to a program of community action, which resulted in the provision of a service.

The model presented for the importance of services to action is: problem — service — recognition of unmet need —

action — new or better service. In other words, the recognition of a problem leads to the provision of a service to solve that problem, which leads to the recognition of a new or as yet unmet need, which leads to a planned program of action which, hopefully, results in the provision of a new or better service. Thus, it would seem that the provision of services is an integral component of an action-oriented agency, in that it provides food for thought, the raw material from which action can be originated.

The provision of a direct service can, in many instances, point the way to needed action, just as the original recog-

nition of the problem leads to the creation of a service. In fact, the provision of a service provides the action-oriented agency with several distinct advantages, including direct experience and expertise in the problem area and volunteers with which to engage in the action program. The major problem facing the action agency or program which utilizes services in this manner is to avoid becoming bogged down in the provision of the service which represents a drain on scarce resources and to motivate and stimulate the client population to relate to the concept of action and to the service as being a necessary adjunct to it but not necessarily an end in and of itself.