

# Institutionalization of Political Action Among Senior Adults in a Community Center

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## Introduction

SOME sociologists suggest that the aged have not developed sufficient consciousness of themselves as a distinctive group to enable them to enter the arena of politics as a bloc.<sup>1</sup> Others hold that the major question is not whether the aged as a social category will become an effective political force but rather under what conditions and among what segments of the elderly is such an occurrence likely to take place.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will describe and analyze the efforts of the Jewish Ys and Centers of Greater Philadelphia (J.Y.C.) to institutionalize\* political action\*\* among that segment of the elderly population which participates in the agency's age segregated program. We will also examine the change in the role of staff when the target of political action by

older adults is the agency which sponsors the older adults and employs the staff.

## Which Direction?

Efforts to institutionalize social action among older adults affiliated with the JYC confronted the agency with constraints and choices.

The older adult services which the JYC promoted and the image which it conveyed to the public attracted individuals interested in the opportunities for socialization, recreation, education, etc. While the agency's public relations image may not have repelled older adults interested in political action, neither did it serve to attract them.

One of the choices the agency considered was to promote and develop an older adult organization committed to social action in the hope that the more sophisticated and politically motivated older members of such a group would serve as leadership corps to the other 2000 older adult members of the agency. While the choice seemed to have merit, it was rejected in favor of working directly through the 20 clubs affiliated with the agency.

The agency conceived of two other avenues toward the politicization of the membership. One approach consisted of the slower educational process of building a structure (a council) to deal with program issues of more immediate concern to the older adults. As members would acquire skill in using the council

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Smith, "The Group Status of the Aged in an Urban Social Structure," *Social Aspects of Aging*, Simpson McKinney *et al.*, ed. (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Cutler, "Perceived Loss and Political Attitudes Among the Aged," *Gerontologist*, Spring, 1973, pp. 69-75.

\* By "institutionalize" we mean to develop structures in the agency's program for senior adults which make political action a continuous, operational aspect of the program.

\*\* We use political action in its broadest sense. It refers to organized efforts to achieve institutional change in the public area as well as the private sector.

structure to deal with program issues, they would gain the confidence and knowledge to make the leap toward broader political issues. The other approach consisted of rallying the members around a major social issue, i.e., reduction of public transportation fare for senior adults in the hope that through the ad hoc committees developed to deal with these issues, leadership would surface and a political structure would emerge.

In the first approach political action follows structure; and in the second approach structure emerges from political action. The approaches are not mutually exclusive. It is a question of where to place one's emphasis at a particular point in time.

The agency chose the former course because it felt that neither full time professional staff nor the part time club advisors to the 20 senior adult clubs possessed sufficient expertise in political action to risk the latter approach which would immediately catapult senior adults and staff into political action before they had an opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge and experience. Secondly, the agency realized that political issues are resolved by power, and it did not know what kind of power senior adults possessed. The major source of power for social change consists of money, prestige, influence, legitimation, communication, threats to property, backing of solidarity interest groups either as voting blocs or as potential votes.<sup>3</sup> The major source of power which the older adults seemed to possess were potential votes and some ability to attract publicity. Thirdly, the agency felt that part time club advisors would be threatened by the need to give leadership in the field of

<sup>3</sup> George Brager and Harry Specht, "Social Action by the Poor: Prospects, Problems, and Strategies," in *Community Action Against Poverty*. Edited by George Brager and F. Purcell, New Haven, College University Press, 1967.

political action. Fourthly, a weak Council structure existed, consisting of representatives from each senior adult club.

The agency therefore concentrated upon building the prestige and influence of the Council through a Sunday concert series, and the development of a summer program and a number of other projects in the hope that as the Council gained experience, success, and a status in these areas, it would acquire the confidence and interest to include political action as a legitimate arena of Council concern.

### The Development of the Council

The Council was able to gain the support of the entire membership and by the third year was able to raise a net income of \$1000 per year through the concert series. As its treasury grew so did its prestige. As a result the Council was able to sponsor and coordinate the annual Allied Jewish Appeal Drive among the members of its affiliated clubs. It raised \$3500 the first year, \$4500 the following year, \$5500 the next year. Its current goal is \$8000. Community recognition for the Council's efforts resulted in further prestige and representation on a number of community-wide committees (Federation Council on Aging; Boards of Directors of several branches of JYC).

As the Council gained confidence it initiated negotiations with the agency on the development of a summer resort for older adults to enable them to enjoy a reasonably priced summer vacation. They requested the agency to include a summer resort for older adults in the agency's impending capital fund drive for the construction and renovation of several agency buildings, pointing to the inequity inherent in a community which had constructed six camps for youth and none for older adults. They forced the Board of Directors to include the sum-

mer resort for older adults in the forthcoming capital fund campaign. They used the tactic of requesting the right to run a capital campaign among the senior adults to raise seed money for a summer resort with the understanding that the Board of Directors would raise the balance of the funds. The agency Board found it difficult to refuse the request and by agreeing, committed themselves to including the older adult summer resort in the capital fund campaign. The Council succeeded in raising \$10,000 in seed money and is now pressing the agency to meet its commitment.

### Knowledge Acquired

These developments took place over a three year period. A brief description of the process which took place and the knowledge gained follows:

First, the development of the Council structure, leadership, knowledge, and prestige, took precedence over the achievement of goals. Staff work with Council members was based on "citizenship" model which is characterized by open dialogue between the citizen and the professional agent. The professional focusses on helping the citizen enter into the service development and service management system of the agency. Problems encountered in program development and management were openly discussed and solutions jointly explored but decision making power rested with the Council.<sup>4</sup> Staff pursuit of the Citizenship model resulted in transferring the power of policy determination from the agency to the Council in several areas. Consider the following examples:

a) The amount of the camp fee for the three weeks of overnight camp for older adults was jointly determined by the Council and the agency.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kornblum & I. Kaufman, "Choice & Implications of Models for Working with Active Older Adults," *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Winter, 1972, pp. 393-397.

b) Council entered into negotiations with the agency in the determination of senior adult membership fees.

Second, it became increasingly clear that as with most adults, Council members preferred to achieve their objectives by persuasion rather than conflict, by reliance upon morality and rationality rather than the power of their numbers. The issue of a summer resort for older adults involved a redistribution of community resources from youth and middle-age members to older adult members. The redistribution of resources generally arouses strong resistance and active opposition on the part of those who may be called upon to relinquish some of their resources. Although persuasion is preferable to conflict, the potential utilization of available power may even the scales and aid the negotiating process.

The power which Council members possessed consisted of the possibility of adverse publicity for the agency if the debate regarding a summer resort for older adults was brought to the community via mass meetings and appeals for support from other community agencies. Fearing the hostility of Board members, which might result from the implied use of power, Council members preferred to rely upon arguments based on morality, humanity and equity. They rested their case upon a reward for past services, pity for their current situation, and a sense of fair play by agency Board members. (Similar appeals were successful in persuading Congress to support Social Security and Medicare by these appeals were also backed up by the combined voting power of middle-age and elderly citizens.) The reluctance of the Council members to make use of the limited power they possessed affected the issues Council could deal with and suggested the agenda for staff efforts to strengthen the Council.

Thirdly, it also became increasingly clear that it was incorrect to conceive of the part-time club advisor engaged on a session basis as a generalist who could provide staff leadership to club members in a variety of areas including political action. As a session worker with limited time, the club advisor was compelled to give priority to the on-going social activities program of the club. Besides it became clear that staff leadership in the arena of political action could not be achieved by increasing their responsibility to include political action. Diffused responsibility would be no one's responsibility. The agency had to make a decision to allocate adequate staff resources to political action. It seemed that the most effective way to do so was to assign this responsibility to a staff member with expertise in political action and to allocate a major portion of his time to the political action function.

Finally, the agency recognized that before the Council could undertake major forms of political action it needed a sufficient number of older adults to make an impact upon the political decision-making process and a sufficient number of past successes to enable it to risk failure.<sup>5</sup>

#### Successful Experiences in Political Action

During the fourth year a social work graduate student was assigned to work with Council members to help them plan and implement a proposed trip to Washington, D.C., for the purpose of meeting with legislators to lobby for is-

<sup>5</sup> Zena Blau points out that people who possess the security of successful social relationships can more easily accept the risk of rejection as they reach out for new social contacts than those who do not have such assets. We are suggesting that the willingness to risk failure in political action may be based upon similar dynamics. (See Zena Blau, *Old Age in a Changing Society* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973).

suces of major concern to the membership. A brief review of the process which became a major step in politicizing senior adults, is presented below:

Council decided to finance the trip by distributing the cost equally among Council, Senior Adult Clubs, and the senior adult lobbyists. Council also appointed a Political Action Committee to plan the trip. A thorough process of membership involvement was undertaken.

Staff members of the National Council of Senior Citizens gave guidance re timing of the lobbying trip and the salient issues which required senior adult pressure. A local university professor, knowledgeable in both political action and the concerns of older adults, reviewed with members of the Political Action Committee whom to meet with, how to present demands, what to expect, and how to follow up. It was a learning process for staff as well as older adults.

Based upon recommendations from the National Council of Senior Citizens, the Political Action Committee planned two workshop days for the forty delegates regarding Social Security benefits and Medicare services. Lectures, discussion groups, and role play were utilized to provide information regarding substance and tactics.

In Washington the forty senior adult lobbyists met with the staff of the National Council for Senior Citizens for a final briefing and then with Congressman Green, Senator Scott, social security technical assistants of the House Ways and Means Committee, and several other local Congressmen. The trip represented a minute but timely portion of the nationwide pressure which had been building up to secure a substantial increase in social security benefits. One week after the trip, legislation was enacted providing for a sizable increase in social security cash benefits. At the evaluation session following the trip, the

political action committee recommended additional actions to the Council. These plans included a membership campaign for the National Council of Senior Citizens with JYC Senior Adult Council subsidizing two-fifths of the cost of every new member; a letter to Governor Shapp requesting the establishment of a State Commission on Aging; a letter writing campaign to members of the House Ways and Means Committee; and a trip to Harrisburg in the fall of the ensuing year.

All of the above suggestions were implemented within a month's time with the exception of the proposed trip to Harrisburg to lobby for reduced fare for the elderly. It was set aside until such time as it could be undertaken by a broad city-wide coalition of older adults.

The decision of the Senior Adult Council to work towards the formation of a city-wide coalition of older adults took place in conjunction with several developments in the community which interacted with the growing interest of Council members in the political action.

The engagement at the beginning of the fifth year of a specialist in political action on a half time basis, as advisor to the Political Action Committee, was of great help. The Political Action Committee was enlarged and strengthened by requesting each member club to appoint a political action chairman who would serve on the Political Action Committee so that ties between the Committee and the clubs would be strengthened and the scope of action would be expanded. These commitments by the agency and Council defined political action as an appropriate and necessary activity for its affiliated clubs. Political involvement by the clubs attracted new members with a political orientation. These two factors reinforced one another and tended to establish political activity as an accepted and valued role in the range of club activities.

However, socialization remained the primary objective of most clubs. It was therefore necessary for the Political Action Committee to balance its demand for action by club members with their desire for social activity, lest political action be viewed as a competing rather than a complementary club activity.

Council became increasingly aware of the need for a city-wide coalition of senior adults as the Political Action Committee actively participated in a variety of State Commission hearings regarding the cost and effectiveness of Blue Cross and Blue Shield insurance, increases in telephone and electric rates, and the elimination of state maintained milk prices. Participation in political action made it increasingly clear that knowledge alone was not sufficient to influence the decision-making process. Knowledge had to be supported by power.

#### Building Power Through a City-wide Coalition of Older Adults

By the middle of the sixth year a city-wide coalition of older adults called the Action Alliance of Senior Citizens (AASC) was successfully organized, representing over 150 Senior Adult organizations and approximately 25,000 senior citizens. Several conditions for the organization of the AASC were present in Philadelphia. Since these seem to represent generalized dimensions of a model for organizing a coalition of older adults, we will describe them briefly.

A sufficiently large number of older adults representing most of the ethnic groups comprising the older adult population in the city were organized in age-segregated groups. The existence of such an infra structure of age-segregated groups permitted age to become a significant reference point from which older adults could define the political problems confronting them and

legitimize collective action. The significance of this factor is suggested by the work of James E. Trela.

Trela studied the relationship between affiliation or non-affiliation with organizations and the predisposition towards joining a political organization of older people. He found that aged individuals having exclusive membership in age segregated organizations indicated a greater predisposition towards joining a political organization of older people than either aged individuals having no organizational affiliation or those having exclusive affiliation with age integrated organizations.<sup>6</sup>

An additional factor leading to the organization of the AASC coalition was the availability of a community organizer who could devote full time to the organizing task and who was perceived as being completely independent of any existing network of older adult organizations. Time and trust were key components in the organization of the coalition. The organizational task demanded more staff time than a service organization could make available unless it was prepared to sacrifice a significant aspect of its service function. However, had any existing network of older adult service organizations made staff available for this purpose, the organization might have been perceived as attempting to control the coalition. Equal opportunity for input into the determination of the goals and structure of the coalition, and equal opportunity for access to power via leadership of the coalition seemed to be essential conditions for welding diverse groups together. These conditions could not be met if one of the major networks in the coalition provided the staff to organize it since that would make it first among equals.

<sup>6</sup> James E. Trela, "Some Political Consequences of Senior Center and Other Old Age Group Memberships," *The Gerontologist*, Vol. II, No. 2, Summer, 1971, Part I, pp. 118-123.

The Council on Community Organization (COCO) met these specifications in Philadelphia. COCO was initiated by the Council of Churches. COCO was established to organize the middle-class consumer. It was funded by several foundations. It did not provide direct social services. It did not have a membership constituency. COCO funded two full-time community organizers who addressed themselves to the task of organizing a city-wide coalition of older adults with the understanding that once the coalition was established and had acquired sufficient resources to engage its own staff, the community organizers would terminate their relationship with the coalition and move on to organize another middle class consumer group.

#### **The Impact of the Action Alliance of Senior Citizens on the JYC Senior Adult Council**

The JYC Senior Adult Council played a vital role in the formation of the AASC of Philadelphia. One of its members served as chairman of the Coalition nominating committee; another member was chairman of the Coalition constitution committee. Three Council members sat on the twenty-one member Executive Board of the Coalition. All of the clubs affiliated with the JYC Senior Adult Council have joined the Coalition.

JYC Senior Adult Council members have been immersed in a learning experience as they joined forces with the trade union network of senior adults, the Black network, the Catholic network, the settlement house network, etc., in winning the battle for free public transportation during off peak hours and \$.10 fare during peak hours, in obtaining free checking accounts for senior adults, in persuading the city housing authority to introduce additional security measures to protect older adult tenants in public housing. They are now engaged in a

struggle with the Governor and State Legislature to allocate \$4,000,000 of state revenue sharing funds towards the funding of multi-service centers of the elderly, and with the Mayor of Philadelphia to obtain a reduction in gas rates for senior citizens.

In the course of these struggles they have developed an appreciation of their power and its limits. They have become familiar with a broader range of political action tactics. They are now more comfortable about requesting individual legislators to meet with them, and holding agencies accountable for delivering services. They have experienced a shift from relying exclusively upon persuasion and rationality to complementing these approaches with the power of their numbers, the use of confrontation techniques and the use of public relations. It has encouraged their use of power to effect change within JYC itself.

As the JYC Senior Adult Council acquired experience and maturity in political action it resumed negotiations with the agency regarding the development of a summer resort for the elderly. It challenged the decision of the JYC Board of Directors to give priority to the construction of two new branch buildings. While recognizing the right and responsibility of the JYC Board of Directors to decide among competing needs, all of which were legitimate, it has also developed a beginning awareness that the decision making process was influenced by a mix of knowledge, values, power, and pragmatism. It therefore decided to apply power to the decision making process by confronting the Board of Directors via a series of tactics which would result in involving larger segments of the community with each step. As soon as Council members started to picket the monthly meetings of the Board of Directors, the question of staff's role in aiding senior adults to challenge the decisions of the Board of Di-

rectors required clarification.

#### **Staff Role**

The agency agreed that the Council had a right to challenge the decision of the JYC Board of Directors and to appeal to the broader community to intervene in the decision making process. It also agreed that staff had a responsibility to help members of the Senior Adult Council to consider alternative tactics and the costs and benefits of each approach. However, the agency drew the line at staff publicly joining forces with members of the Senior Adult Council in opposing Board policy. In essence the Board was prepared to accept a staff enabling role but not a staff advocacy role with reference to agency policy.

The agency created a strained situation by conceding to Council the right to openly challenge the Board's position while enjoining staff from doing likewise. Council members would have felt betrayed if staff had attempted to maintain a neutral position when the issue of a summer resort for senior adults was finally joined and Council was ready to pick up the challenge. In order to maintain its commitment to Council, staff was compelled to engage in political and manipulative behavior.

Brager points out that the advocacy role inevitably requires that the practitioner function as a political tactician.<sup>7</sup> Political and manipulative behavior represent a necessary aspect of advocacy but an aspect which does not require open confrontation. The role of political tactician does not require staff to be in the forefront of the conflict. It may enable him to serve behind the scenes to help plan tactics which are implemented by the clients. Political and manipulative behavior consists of throwing sand in the eyes of the opposition.

<sup>7</sup> George Brager "Advocacy and Political Behavior," *Social Work*, April 1968 (Vol. 13, No. 2), p. 6.

Brager defines political and manipulative behavior as "the conscious rearranging of reality to induce a desired attitudinal or behavioral outcome."<sup>8</sup>

Staff members who make the most effective case for the clients' position rather than the most complete or reasoned one are engaged in political behavior. Encouraging service beneficiaries in the process of bargaining to ask for more than they are ready to settle for, or creating the appearance of greater strength and influence than actually exists are common aspects of political and manipulative behavior. The tactic by which the Council moved the agency to commit itself to the development of a summer resort for older adults is a good example of political behavior (as indicated above). Through political and manipulative behavior, staff could work with the Council to develop appropriate tactics for pressing the issue without publicly confronting the Board.

The role of political tactician may be the most appropriate means to maintain staff commitment to the client group in those situations where the agency, which is the target of change, sponsors the client group, which is the beneficiary of change, and the worker, who is the staff agent of change. Brager indicates that the morality of political and manipulative behavior should be assessed in terms of who benefits, the significance of the issue, the disparity of influence between the contending parties, and the nature of the act, itself.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

Clearly, the experience of the JYC Senior Adult Council suggests that the question is not whether, but how the aged will enter the arena of politics as a distinctive group. Time, agency resources, and staff commitment were key

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

advocate for the aged. But a staff advocacy role is not always acceptable to agencies. The acceptability of a staff advocate role is inversely related to the closeness of the relationship between the institutional target of change and the action agency (the agency employing the staff advocate). The closer the relationship between the action agency and the

target agency the less acceptable is the staff advocate role. The staff advocate role is least acceptable when the target agency and the action agency are identical as suggested by the experience of JYC. The role of the political tactician may be the most appropriate role to employ in such a situation.

factors in the institutionalization of political action among the older members of JYC.

### Time

The decision to develop political action by first building a sound structure rather than rallying members around a specific issue resulted in the slow incremental development of political action by older adults over a six year period. Allowing structure to emerge from dealing with a political issue might have speeded up the process but it could have been less reliable because failure to deal successfully with the issue before a sound structure existed might have destroyed the ad hoc organization. The process could have been speeded up had the political coalition of older adults been in existence when the attempt to politicize older adults was undertaken by the agency. The existence of a highly regarded, active coalition of older adults would have provided a reference group which would have established political action as a norm and as an expected form of behavior.

### Agency Resources

The development of political action as an operational aspect of an agency's services for older adults requires the investment of staff resources. The engagement by JYC of a political specialist with sole responsibility for the development of political action not only provided the necessary expertise but demonstrated the agency's commitment to political action and established it as an accepted and valued role.

### Staff Commitment

The development of political action not only requires political expertise, it also requires that staff see their role as an