

A NEW LOOK AT COSTS IN FAMILY AGENCIES*

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Is the job of the family agency a necessary one? Is the family agency doing an efficient job? Are the services it offers to individuals and families effective? Are they costly beyond their worth? Is the family agency worth supporting? Can it offer service to more people at no increase in cost and at no sacrifice in quality? Can the family agency produce more in service than it is producing at present? In short, can the family agency do a better job? The social work world is proficient in asking questions. The questions which I have just posed are, however, far from simple to answer. They are uppermost today in the minds of boards, of executives and of staffs; they require serious thought and study. These questions currently represent the number one concern among the vast majority of member agencies of the Family Service Association of America. Additionally, in a canvass made amongst the membership by the Program Committee of this Conference, this subject also took priority over all others.

Is our concern for greater usefulness and the expansion of services, along with budget problems and staff shortages, peculiar or common only to social agen-

cies? Business organizations have always been concerned with costs and production because of the profit motive and the need to compete successfully. This concern is no less true of governmental agencies as reflected for example in a recent newspaper headline—"New Military Policy Puts on the Squeeze—Armed Services Will Be Required to Do More with Less Manpower."

To what extent can the practices of business contribute to social work enterprise? I would venture the assertion that businesses which are well run and efficient have certain techniques that are applicable to social agencies. In business the primary purpose is profit making, while the social agency measures its success by the effectiveness (quality) and extent of its service. Because of this fundamental difference, when borrowing or adapting business methods for social agencies we must do so with caution, being certain that the methods are related to agency purpose and program. The difference in purpose between business and social work does not, however, minimize the responsibility of social work agencies for making wise and economic use of their resources with no less efficiency and effectiveness. The social work agency, moreover, should have a deeper motivation to use its resources

with economy inasmuch as it is entrusted with community funds. With the ideal of a high quality of service, there is still the obligation to offer wide coverage and high quality at the lowest possible cost.

In business it is usually true that an increase in efficiency results in greater profits; in a social agency the result is likely to be greater coverage and a consequent upswing in cost. Since the social agency is free of a monetary profit motive, its increased efficiency has the one objective of giving the community a greater profit in the way of service.

Research and Cost Accounting are two of the most potent methods by which business management has achieved its present level of accomplishment. Most significantly, business has learned to use research as an integral part of its operations, not a luxury to be indulged in only when there are substantial profits. Industry's research efforts are not diminished during periods of low profits. One further fact that impresses us about business is its use of the results of research. This is most dramatically reflected in industry's tremendous growth.

Why have we been so hesitant to use research in social work in a way that it is used in business or medicine, or in the other professions? What seems to be inhibiting us in the use of research in social work? Are we emotionally blocked about its use? Are we too young as a profession and therefore too fearful of exposing weaknesses in performance? A community supported agency that serves a real purpose and has a sense of responsibility to itself and its profession must seek answers to these questions.

The research method and the casework method should have the same general goals. Our central purpose is to find out how people who turn to an agency can be helped more quickly, more efficiently and more effectively. To do this, it is necessary continuously to examine and evaluate methods and results. This pro-

cedure is vital to the sound development of any responsible professional field. In casework our tradition has been to examine and evaluate our work mainly through supervision, seminars and staff meetings.

As a growing profession, it is understandable why we in casework have been more preoccupied with qualitative standards of performance than with quantitative ones. It is indicative, indeed, of our own development that a definite shift has taken place in recent years and that we in family agencies find ourselves increasingly interested in establishing quantitative standards, particularly for caseworkers. From day to day experience, agency executives have found it more and more necessary to set norms as part of their working equipment in the planning for agency budget and staffing, for interpretation, for administrative control of program, for supervisors in enabling them to evaluate performance of caseworkers, and for caseworkers in knowing what is expected of them. In responding to the necessity of examining our production standards, we must squarely face the dilemma which arises in great part out of the following circumstances:

1. Increased applications for help, notwithstanding the decline in the request for help from the New American group with whom most Jewish family agencies have been preoccupied since 1947.
2. Failure of our financial sources of support, whether it be the Federation, Welfare Fund or Community Chest, to keep pace with the increasing number of requests for help for family service. Waiting lists are becoming a common phenomenon. And to make the picture somewhat bleaker, hardly anyone seems to be too optimistic about more money being raised in the next few years.
3. The dearth of trained people available for positions and the not too encouraging outlook for any increase in the proportion of trained people to available positions for the next few years. The situation is aggravated by an increasing number of Jewish

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caseworkers turning to nonsectarian family agencies.

4. The combination of the limited acceptance of social work as a profession in the community, its low prestige value, and its low, unattractive salaries serve to further complicate the situation.
5. The limited success we are experiencing in winning support for the activities which would help considerably in the solving of some of our problems. I am referring to the need for research in our area of service and for reaching out to larger groups through public relations programs and through a program of education for family living.

The combination of limited funds and limited trained personnel to serve the number of people who are knocking at our doors for service tends to have an overwhelming effect. We can either allow these circumstances to immobilize us or to challenge us.

The very fact that we are having this session is an indication that we are looking upon the problem as a challenge and regarding it as an opportunity to attempt to meet the challenge. It is heartening that we do not hear, as we have in the past, the gratuitous advice that we cut the suit to fit the cloth. Our intent is to get away from handling our traditional problems in the traditional way. I do not mean to imply that we should not continue with our traditional way of doing things when this seems best, but rather that we examine these problems in a new way. We may find and develop better ways of handling old problems and of attaining and maintaining our professional goal of effective and efficient service to individuals and families in our communities. We have it in our power to be more productive. We must continue seeking ways of doing so. Implied in our concern is the acknowledgment that we are not operating at maximum efficiency and that we are interested in finding or developing ways of attaining that goal.

At the beginning of this paper I posed

a number of questions relating to an agency's effectiveness and efficiency, to its productivity, to its cost of service, including the cost of a unit of service, and implied in this the question was the size of staff needed to meet the demands for service. Two non-sectarian agencies, the CSS of New York and the Family Service of Philadelphia, sought answers to these questions through their research activity and have made a very real contribution to this whole subject. The CSS took leadership in designing an instrument for measuring movement in cases and the Philadelphia Family Service in developing a method for analyzing cost of service by applying business techniques to a family agency. Results of service as well as cost of service are obviously related to size of work loads.

One of our major concerns at present is with the current level of casework interviews in family service agencies. If family agencies offer a service not to be obtained elsewhere—a service which the community needs and wants—it must be made more widely available. Knowing that we are not overstaffed, is our service sufficiently available, if the average caseworker holds only 2 to 2.5 in-person interviews per day, the median figure for some 60 representative family agencies? At this time, I doubt whether it would be possible to get unanimity of opinion with respect to the practicability of establishing national standards of production. A number of agencies, however, have set tentative operating goals and quantitative norms, so that their staffs may know what is expected of them in quantity as well as quality. There are also a number of agencies that have experimented with various modifications in their methods of operation in the interest of increasing casework service.

A cost study is one way of establishing a valid standard, because it involves an analysis of the entire program and oper-

ation of the agency. Through an examination of agency expenditures, the amount and proportion of the agency's resources going into each part of the program can be precisely known. This kind of analysis sheds light on the distribution of the agency's resources. By reducing all agency activities to a common denominator—dollar expenditures—the cost analysis provides a means of looking at the whole program, in all of its parts, with a new perspective. While the cost analysis is not intended to provide a standard or a scale of priorities by which to determine program emphases, it does help identify those activities of high cost which can then be examined in terms of their usefulness to the essential or basic activity. The agency can then better decide as to the most effective and economical use of its resources. On the basis of such a study, the agency can then determine whether more time is to be devoted, for example, to interviewing and less time to supervisory conferences, staff meetings, community committees and seminars.

Once unit costs are known, once those of us who have executive responsibility know more specifically the amount and proportion of the agency's resources going into each part of the program, we can determine what proportion of the work week should be allocated, for example, to direct interviewing. It is indeed our responsibility as administrators to set an expectation figure, or quantitative standard for the caseworker. A number of family agencies have conducted time studies in the past few years and have shared their findings with the FSAA. On the basis of these experiences, the FSAA has suggested as a guide to agencies in developing such norms a range of 60 to 80 in-person interviews with clients and collaterals per month as a reasonable expectation of a caseworker who works full time throughout the month. This range rep-

resents the expectation of 3 to 4 hours a day of interviewing or approximately half of the caseworker's total time.

The idea of the in-person interview as a unit of measuring a caseworker's load has gained increasing support in the past few years. The interview constitutes a more appropriate unit of measurement than the number of cases carried because of the variation in service required by individual cases. Telephone interviews are not included in the count, but are given consideration in setting the norm along with such implementing activities as reading of records, dictation, conferences, etc.

The suggested range of 60 to 80 in-person interviews makes possible the necessary consideration of the experience and skill of the caseworker and the nature of the case assigned to him. In approaching the problem of norms, additional consideration must be given to the variations in agency program and emphases. If the staff is inexperienced, if intake is relatively high, if the services require extensive home visiting, with extra time involved in home interviews as compared with office interviews, if the agency offers a homemaker service and if the agency works with the aged, then the number of interviews will tend to be low.

There are a number of other factors which may be listed as influencing productivity: (1) The nature of clients' needs requiring a variety of concrete services; (2) the psychological effect of a caseload of hardship clients in painful circumstances; (3) the psychological burden of a caseload of one interview, brief service cases, which in order for the caseworker to meet the minimum standard of 60 would mean he would have to be assigned 60 cases; (4) staff turnover as a factor affecting volume for the agency, for interviewing time is reduced both for the brand new staff member and for one completing his work

preparatory to leaving. Other factors affecting interviewing norms are recording, supervision, time given to consultation and staff development, extent of individual professional activity permitted on agency time, extent of staff participation in meeting on administrative matters, inadequacy of equipment, interviewing space and secretarial assistance.

Since interviewing is the essential activity, planning must be done so that non-casework assignments are not allowed to absorb time needed for this activity. The executive therefore has the responsibility to inform staff members of the proportion of time that each is expected to devote to the various activities of the agency. Accordingly, requirements for dictation, use of supervision, conferences, etc., must be met within the time made available for them. Case assignments and interview scheduling must take into account losses occurring as a result of the fact that a number of cases will not materialize and a number of appointments will be broken. If the norm is based on in-person interviews, it represents expectation of a worker on the job and would therefore need to be adjusted for absence, too.

In all of this there must be an underlying conviction that within reasonable limits quantity need not jeopardize quality. There is sufficient evidence to show that agencies have found it possible to increase their overall productivity as reflected in each worker's interview count without detriment to the quality of work. Indeed, often the most creative workers are the most productive. Moreover, there have been noted gains in staff morale due to satisfaction of greater achievement. There is also evidence of the fact that it is possible to have a greater volume of interviews not only without loss of quality, but the increased knowledge and experience make it pos-

sible to cope with a variety of situations with less fatigue. Moreover, the additional experience should help reduce the time needed in supervision. In view of the positive corollation between experience and productivity, the executive should go all out to maintain and to attract the best qualified personnel and to make all the necessary investment to increase the skill of existing staff.

Another essential step in achieving greater production with available resources is for the executive and supervisors to be able and willing to accept and carry out their administrative and supervisory responsibilities. All too often the executive is inclined to take a great deal for granted with respect to his supervisors, thinking that once he had delegated responsibility that it will be discharged with the expected dispatch and effectiveness, principally because supervisors are part of administration. This sometimes is wishful thinking because not unlike other staff members, supervisors too need to be helped and encouraged to move away from traditional patterns and work habits.

One of the most costly and time consuming activities that has been receiving increasing attention because it has stood in the way of greater production is case recording and preparation for this recording. Since case recording represents a substantial investment of clerical as well as professional time, we do not have any alternative but to examine critically our process of case recording. In doing so, we must ask such questions as to what extent is case recording a necessary part of orderly handling of cases? Has case recording really become a ritual that has become an accepted part of the casework process to the point that it would be sacrilegious to question it? Are we ready to give up the pattern of narrative and process recording? Why has recording continued to pose so many questions for agencies and workers? Many of the

problems inherent in the questions asked about recording seem to be the results of the several shifts that have occurred during the last few decades both in casework practice and the nature of supervision and administration. These shifts are marked by dramatic movement forward in concepts and principles, with inevitable lag in relating them to social work administration. Case recording as a segment of administrative responsibility reflects both these advances and lags.

When we raise questions about record keeping, it is not to deny the need for some kind of record or to determine whether or not we have the most useful instrument to serve the purpose for which records are kept. Casework recording is no frill or luxury which can lightly be dispensed with to meet the exigencies of budgetary allowances. Neither does the solution to our problem lie in an administrative dictum that sternly limits recording time or the number of cylinders the caseworker may use in a particular period. Such measures may cut the amount of recording, but it seems highly dubious that what is produced is the kind of record which a case record is needed.

What has been done to curtail recording? We find some agencies resorting to the use of wire recorders; some dictating brief contacts on plastic discs, with transcription not completed until the record is needed, either for future service for the client or for specific study purposes. Some agencies are recording identifying information only on those situations where at the time of the first interview the client decides not to return. These and related efforts seem to have been made out of necessity. Only time and continued experimentation will determine the soundness of these devices. Unfortunately, these efforts are still too few to form a basis for judgment of their value. Attention has been given, how-

ever, to various forms of summarized recording. This type of recording has resulted in a reduction of repetitiousness which has notably reduced the size of records.

Indeed, our efforts to modify the old methods and in some instances to try new ones are laudable, even though spasmodic, but as professionals we must devote time and attention to this time-consuming procedure in a more scientific manner. We need to use our creativity and ingenuity to improve and streamline recording and slant it so that it can facilitate service to the client. This can be done only if executives foster a spirit of experimentation and supervisors follow through in encouraging and enabling caseworkers to participate in experimental activity. There must also be a change in the teaching of recording by Schools of Social Work and training supervisors.

Whatever decisions are arrived at, productivity will not be achieved without staff cooperation. This can be enlisted by giving everyone a full understanding of the considerations upon which major administrative policy and decisions are based. We have found that when staff members fully appreciate the reasons for an undertaking and have a genuine sense of partnership in the agency, they will make their maximum contribution toward the success of the program and will take as much pride in the agency's progress as does the board or the executive. Any agency that embarks upon an undertaking of this sort must be prepared to face every aspect of this program with an open and critically questioning mind. No matter how deeply set or highly treasured a pattern or idea may be, it must not be regarded as sacred or unchangeable if new, more efficient and effective means are to be achieved.

After progress has been achieved in developing standards in comparable unit costs, it seems apparent that the cost of

casework service will still be considerably beyond the financial means of many families. This poses some knotty problems. The answer certainly does not lie in reducing the quality of service. Casework is not worth anything at all unless it is skillfully performed. Casework based as it is on the finest kind of individual consideration of each person and his problems, does not lend itself to assembly line method. Still, the future of family service, many believe, is in extending the service to large segments of the community needing the service and able to pay for it. But the cost must be within the means of the middle class.

As family agencies begin to serve increasing numbers of our middle class families, we must therefore begin to think seriously of some of the underlying reasons for the high cost of casework service, which, it must be recognized, will continue to be costly so long as we continue to do little, if anything, about the factors which make for these high costs. I would again like to highlight some of the problems which will require continuing attention as part of an effort to attain the goal of efficient and effective service to more and more persons:

1. How much effort is being made to pay higher salaries so that we can attract more men to the field, counting upon them for longer professional careers than women? This would help to reduce the high rate of professional staff turnover—a major problem in maintaining agency efficiency. A change in one staff member is roughly the equivalent of an estimated three months salary loss because of the tapering off of caseload for the person leaving and the gradual accumulation of caseload for the new staff member coming in.
2. Traditionally, family agencies have been used to gain experience from which to go forth into other specialties. This has attracted many new school graduates who require so much in the way of in-service

training. This is costly for an agency. It seems unrealistic to suggest a third year of professional training at a time when it is so difficult to recruit people for two years of training. An alternative would be to regard the first year worker as an interne, charging his salary to professional education rather than to direct service.

3. Recording and supervision are two very expensive activities. New methods of achieving no less effective but more economical results from these activities must be developed.
4. Ways must be found to delegate more professional responsibility to the mature, experienced caseworkers, keeping more of them engaged in practice so that their knowledge and skills are available to the client.
5. Use of research must be increased, its results exchanged and compared, so that more light may be cast on questions baffling agencies at any given time.

Regardless of the cause, whether it is the limitation of funds or the dearth of professional personnel, it is indeed a healthy shift in emphasis for the family agency to counterbalance its preoccupation of quality with quantitative considerations and efficiency at less cost. This interest is reflected in agency surveys being made by business consultants, in cost studies, in time studies, and the like. The aim of all this activity, of course, is to improve methods of operation so that the community can benefit through increased service. It is obviously too early to appraise the results of this shift in interest on the part of family agency boards and executives. When all is said and done, it is incumbent upon family agencies to begin to take this new look at themselves. We must, however, guard against lowering of standards of service while seeking ways of increasing productivity and efficiency. It is a most difficult task, but one we must undertake if we wish to prevent a shrinking service to the community.