

MACRO-LEVEL ADVOCACY Refugees, Welfare Reform, and Issues of Concern to Nonprofits

RONALD H. FIELD

Senior Vice President for Public Policy, Family Service America, Inc.

As community needs grow while government funding decreases, public policy advocacy is increasingly essential. It is needed to combat proposed changes in tax cuts and a movement to silence the human service sector. Welfare reform, which will have a profound effect on all poor families, is a prime example of why Family Service agencies must be alert to political mood swings and advocate ceaselessly for the needs of their clients.

Advocacy is "active support, as of a cause" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1978, p. 19). That is the way my desk dictionary defines it—as active support. It is especially interesting to note that this noun is defined almost as if it were a verb, a word connoting action.

The dictionary authors add the phrase, "as of a cause." Our cause—to promote the well-being of America's families, children, elders, and those who serve them—if acted upon, requires that we stand up for what we do and the people we serve. Macro-level advocacy therefore is an extension of our case advocacy for families. It is active support in the political sphere.

The nonprofit sector began with the compassionate practices of ancient religions and classical civilizations, providing both assistance to the frail and indigent and civic advancement (Vallone, 1996). In recent decades, the nonprofit sector and especially family service agencies—both sectarian and non-sectarian—have grown to fill an important and expanding role as service providers and community resources. Jewish agencies, once thought of as serving only the Jewish community, especially in the areas of refugee resettlement, rescue, and migration, now reach out in much broader ways to their communities-at-large with the same concern and caring, while not giving up their traditional roles and values.

In fact, that outreach might serve to protect those roles and values. For Jewish Family

Service of Greater Miami (Florida), for instance, the last fifteen years has seen a broadening of community-wide services and concerns, which has been important for preserving gains already made. We are now "more a community resource so to preserve services for the Jewish community," says David Saltman, executive director. Given the aging of our society and the traditional lead role Jewish agencies have played in advocating for the elderly, a broadened perspective results not only in maintaining services but also in expanding them.

But expansion of perspective comes at a cost, and not just in terms of needing more funds with which to provide services, although that is becoming increasingly important as government recedes and pressures on the nonprofit sector grow. With expanded roles come expanded responsibilities—shared responsibilities with other communities of interest to speak out on behalf of a broad community of need. Complicating that process, as the pressure grows to do even more, are new political forces calling for fewer resources (except from private philanthropy) with which to provide services and for greater restrictions on the ability of nonprofit service organizations to speak out on behalf of the families and communities they serve.

Nonprofit family service agencies are deeply concerned about suggestions from some in Congress that we develop new private funding to pay for a substantial share of the social programs traditionally financed by the federal

government. Charitable nonprofits have long been partners with government in the delivery of social services, and increasingly since World War II, federal, state, and local governments have relied on nonprofits to provide such services. Jewish, other sectarian, and nonsectarian family service agencies have histories of community service that long predate the existence of the national organizations that represent them. And long before governments involved themselves with welfare assistance, family service agencies were there to help poor families make it through the worst of times.

Now, however, there are those in Congress who would change the tax code as it affects charitable contributions and deductions, ostensibly to free nonprofits from the yoke of government interference, and return the handling of our nation's social problems to "charities," which after all, know better than anybody how to deal with these problems. The most prominent proposals would replace the current charitable deduction with a tax credit for contributions to private charities who primarily serve the poor. To cover the loss of tax revenue, these proposals would reduce funding, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, for such important federal resources as the Social Services Block Grant and the Community Development Block Grant. As most people in family services know, funding provided by such federal resources are an essential source of revenue for many social services the states could not otherwise afford.

Clearly, the structural tax reform debate comes at a time when funding challenges and service demands on charitable nonprofits are greater than ever. The charitable nonprofit sector is only 14 percent the size of government; there is little likelihood we could assume major governmental responsibilities. A report prepared by Independent Sector (1996), in response to various proposed reductions in federal spending in the 104th Congress, concludes, "To offset the entire reduction in federal spending in fields where nonprofits are active, private giving in the year 2002 would have to increase by nearly 174 percent, or 35

times greater than it has been in recent years" (Salamon & Abramson, 1996). Including contributions by foundations and corporations, bequests, and gifts by living individuals, the average annual increase between the years 1988 and 1993 was only 1.2 percent, and in that same period average household contributions declined by an astonishing 23 percent!

Coupled with these proposed changes in the tax code is the movement to silence the human service sector. Both houses of Congress have caucuses called Conservative Action Teams (CATs) that have in their agendas such items as balancing the budget, entitlement reform, tax cuts, and "defunding the Left." The last time that phrase was used in the Congress, it manifested itself in a bold attempt to muzzle the advocacy voice of the nonprofit sector. That the phrase continues to be used means that we need to be alert to the threat of continued attack from those whose ideology overcomes their ability to understand the indispensable role that nonprofits play in advocating for vulnerable populations and the politically weak. For the broad family service field, advocacy is an integral part of our culture and tradition of valuing families. "Active support of our cause" is an essential component of what we do that is recognized and protected by law.

At the national level, macro-level advocacy to affect the formation of public policy through legislation and regulations is not new to Jewish Family Service organizations, nor to the family service field in general. For Family Service America (FSA), it is a significant part of its mission; for the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA), it is a growing part of a mission that has fostered a close collaboration with Family Service America and the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF). That collaboration has resulted in a heightened national presence for AJFCA through the good offices of FSA and CJF, and AJFCA now has contractual relationships with both organizations. With CJF, AJFCA is able to tap into a strong presence on more traditional Jewish issues, especially immigra-

tion and aging. With FSA, it has an opportunity to help frame public policy on a broader set of issues that AJFCA members share with family serving agencies everywhere.

Advocacy for families in some form has long been in the mission of many agencies, although it might not have been practiced as broadly nor as politically as is the case today. The Hebrew concept of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, one family at a time, does not mean working quietly, if something needs to be said. According to Sandra King, executive director of Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, advocacy in some form has always been a part of their 143-year-history. And in Milwaukee, Jewish Family Services has been active in advocacy for 30 years, as a founding member of the Wisconsin Association of Family and Children's Agencies and also as a Board member of the Jewish Council. Clearly, repairing the world implies that we must do more than repair families; we must help repair the conditions in which families find themselves, many of which can be and are affected by public policies adopted by federal, state, and local governments.

Yet in this day and age some professionals claim they do not have time for advocacy or, perhaps more circumspectly, that they belong to national organizations that do it for them. National membership organizations, of course, are facilitators made up of the sum of their parts. They are only as strong and influential as the membership is willing to make them—by their involvement. Otherwise, at least, in terms of advocacy, the organization is leading a band that plays no music.

Increasingly, however, Jewish agencies are finding it important to step up their public policy advocacy, especially at the state and local levels, and more often than not in coalition with other human service providers in their states and communities. Jewish Family Service in Dallas is a good example. "We need to be more effective and proactive," says Michael Fleisher, executive director. "Welfare reform demands new activity with others; we need to identify issues that we can affect and provide strategies for." So where there

was previously no organized effort, they have in the last year formed an advocacy committee chaired by a former Board chair. Immigration and employment issues will be their two initial priorities.

In discussions with various Jewish agency executives around the country, much concern was voiced about service issues that are both national and state in scope, including the future of Medicaid and Medicare funding, mental health parity, health care access, managed care and state regulation of health maintenance organizations (HMOs), juvenile justice, elder services, local use of community development funds, immigration, and welfare reform implementation, which itself touches on some of the other issues at stake. The breadth of this incomplete list is a striking example of how diverse the community service concerns and therefore the political interests of Jewish family agencies have become. After all, the problems that face society at large also confront Jewish families.

For as Anita Friedman, executive director of Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties, wrote in her 1995 *Journal* article, "The Great Welfare Debate of 1995—Top Ten Changes in Jewish Family Life and Their Social Policy Implications," "There is no longer any one lifestyle that characterizes the Jewish (or non-Jewish) family. The traditional family of the 1950s now represents less than 10 percent of our households."

Dr. Friedman's article makes it clear that after generations of assimilation, American Jewish families today share most of the same characteristics of any other American family, both good and bad. As Dr. Friedman (1995, p. 29) states, "Alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and sexual abuse are not uncommon problems in Jewish families. At least 15 percent of the Jewish population lives at or below the federally established poverty level and receives some form of public welfare." That is very close to general population statistics. U.S. Department of Commerce data for 1995 show that 13.8 percent of all persons in the United States

fall below the poverty line, 0.7 percent higher than in 1989, although the same fractional percentage lower than in 1994. But that does not tell the whole story.

When considering the possible impact of welfare reform on poor families, it is important to recognize that public assistance does not lift families out of poverty. The combined value of AFDC and Food Stamps was below the poverty line in every state, and less than 75 percent of the poverty line in 41 states and the District of Columbia (*Kids Count Data Book*, 1995). Additionally, Census data show that about 12 percent of the nation's poor are elderly and that 46 percent of all single mothers live below the poverty line (*Action Agenda*, 1996/97). Given such data, the real test of welfare reform will be the extent to which current policy and funding stream changes will result in fewer poor families. Will it provide the necessary resources and support structures to alleviate the problem and protect the most vulnerable, or will it have the effect of exacerbating the problem by creating a broader stratum of permanent working poor?

Jewish or not, therefore, the new welfare-to-work movement will have a profound effect on all poor families. As a landmark policy shift, this movement is a prime example of why local, state, and national family service organizations must be alert to political mood swings and the environmental changes they can engender. The impact on family-serving agencies will be felt both directly through funding and regulatory streams and indirectly on the families and communities they serve. Agencies will have the opportunity to fill new roles and take on new responsibilities as they work within evolving state social service systems, but in all cases the nonprofit sector will have to help set the stage for those opportunities by working to guide the reformation of state and local policies that determine how families will be treated and who gets to do what in the new scheme of things. What will new funding mechanisms be like? Will they be controlled more by the state or the county? Will public/private partnerships be encouraged? Will there be allowances for privatized

services? Will nonprofits have to compete with for-profit companies in the management and delivery of services that family service agencies are already experienced in providing? Are they willing to diversify their services, if that's what is called for? What about services to legal immigrants that the federal government no longer will pay for? To the elderly poor? To children? All of these are questions that will be answered in the near future by state legislatures and governors' offices all across the country, with or without the advocacy efforts of the family-serving field.

Iowa is often touted as a state that has been working longer and harder at moving welfare recipients into jobs than most other states. Yet according to information provided by their state Division of Economic Assistance, Iowa's Family Investment Program has not been able to move more than 35 percent of its adult caseload into work initiatives. When asked why, Susan Hart Sandler, executive director of Jewish Family & Community Services (JFCS) in Des Moines, reported that the largest problems continue to be a lack of sufficient child care and a lack of jobs that pay a living wage. The Welfare Reform Coalition of Iowa, of which JFCS is a member, is calling for the state to establish a Family Investment State Fund of \$55 million from their projected \$900 million surplus to fund the gap in services that will be left by the federal cuts. The Coalition advocates that the new money be used for education and training, Food Stamps, services to legal immigrants, Supplemental Security Income for disabled children, reduction of caseloads for case managers, and other useful functions to help families overcome multiple barriers to self-sufficiency. The question for Iowa and most other states currently running budget surpluses because of the robust economy is, Will they be willing to spend some of that "found" money to assure the kind of benefits and services that really are necessary to move large numbers of people from welfare to work while assuring some decency of life? Will they help care for those who are having a hard time making it on their own,

including legal immigrants? Or will they succumb to the temptation to reduce the surplus simply by cutting taxes?

One of the most egregious aspects of federal welfare reform is the elimination of benefits for legal immigrants. The federal Welfare Reform Act and immigration laws passed in the last Congress impose severe restrictions on public benefits for legal immigrants that will be felt in at least three ways: (1) increased hardship on low-income immigrant families, especially if they are older or disabled; (2) diminished ability to afford services for immigrant families; and (3) increased need for services among these same families. "The partnership that the Jewish community has developed with the federal government in the resettlement of almost 350,000 former Soviet Jews over the past two decades" (Friedman, 1995) will be tested severely. The fact that public welfare dependency was minimal among these legal immigrants and that they ultimately became tax-paying citizens did not seem to make much difference to federal policy-makers. Rather, cutting out welfare benefits to immigrants was a prime target for budget savings, perhaps made all the easier by anti-immigrant sentiment prevalent in some parts of the country.

The mood of the country and the political response to it are reactive and cautious. For some, it is a time for getting even; for others, it is a necessary correction to government grown too cumbersome. In looking for corrective action, it is always easy to blame "them," the poor and immigrants and others who are different from us. Politically, that is where the easy cuts are. Our national and state legislatures are not likely to change that practice any

time soon unless they hear loudly and clearly that in this country we will not stand for letting citizens and other legal residents suffer for want of adequate food, shelter, and medicine.

By moving the House of Representatives into a more moderate stance, the election of 1996 did confirm that the American electorate generally does not like extremes of either the Right or the Left. But no trend is constant. To make government responsive requires utilizing the six "Ps" of politics: Planning, Preparation, Presence, Patience, Persistence, and Partnerships.

That's what it's all about in a democratic society. Our cause depends on our ability to make it live in the minds of policy makers everywhere. The big "A" word—Advocacy—is what makes it happen.

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V. ENDNOTES

