

Developing Networks of Services to Single Parents: A Population at Risk*

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Introduction

The Single Parent is an individual at risk as a result of the loss of a marital partner because of separation, divorce, or the death of a spouse. I will describe the steps the Jewish Community Center of Greater Rochester took which culminated in the establishment of a Single Parent Department. To illustrate the process and the features of the program, I will describe four representative case histories.

As introduction to discussing my experiences in working with this population, I wish to identify myself. I am the daughter of a single parent. My mother died four years ago. After a short marriage, my parents separated in 1931 when I was six months. My father returned to Chicago; I never met him again until I was 27. My mother remained a divorced single woman, dependent on an ambivalent primary family network for sustenance and child care, and on community agencies for counselling or financial supplement. I learned early the value of external supportive systems to augment a dysfunctional family. As a Jewish professional, I draw on a variety of early experiences which continue to influence my life. The availability of a network of supportive services were essential to my growth: committed social workers of Jewish Family Service of Greater Boston, directors and counselors at agency camps,

the social, medical, and psychiatric staff at Beth Israel Hospital, Aid to Dependent Children, and sensitive school personnel at each significant milestone or crisis. However, there was no single parent program for my mother in the 1930's.

Either through personal or professional experience, many colleagues or their clients have similar stories to relate. For me, at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Rochester, single means members or non-members, male/female, single-again parents ranging in age between 21 and 60.

The loss of a marital partner plunges surviving or separated parents into the world (subculture) of the single in a coupled society. For the Jewish single-again parent, this world is partially characterized by social and religious societal institutions primarily organized to meet the needs and interests of a coupled or intact two-parent nuclear family. Other reality factors he or she may encounter are loss or reduction of income, loss of attachment-figure, solo parenting, loss of friends, loss of home, an adversary legal system, the absence of a sexual partner, and coping alone, or in conflict, with Bar or Bat Mitzvah, graduations, or weddings. The provision of services within the first three months of the crisis can prevent chronic debilitation. Beyond the crisis stage, many services are required to maintain the single parent and his or her children on a positive course of growth, development and productivity for themselves and the community as a whole.

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Agency Response in the Development of a Single Parent Program

In Rochester the development and growth of the delivery of services to single members has occurred over a four-year period in a series of steps that I will outline. The Jewish Community Center of Greater Rochester, established a Single Parent family membership rate in July, 1977. In response to a rapidly rising divorce rate and the presence of over 160 Single Parent family memberships, a part-time social worker, at 12 hours per week, with strong casework and group work skills was hired in 1978 to form a Single Parent Steering Committee, to assess the needs of this population and the availability of resources within and outside of the Center and develop an intake process consonant with the style and characteristics of the Center. In 1979, a United Way Grant enabled the agency to hire the same worker at 30 hours per week to further establish and implement the overall goals and specific objectives of a Single Parent Program. In 1980, the Center Board approved the establishment of a Single Parent Department to work closely with the Adult Worker to develop programs for singles of all ages, with or without children, and specialized programs for men and women recently single, with children of college age and under. In late 1980, the worker added programming for the nest-emptied, recently separated or widowed single parent, usually between the ages of 48 and 60 based on observation of need and the absence of services for this age group.

A community-based program for single parents has a strong preventive thrust. It is a non-threatening setting and rich in resources such as adult classes, a youth department, and early childhood program, after-school day care, all-day care for infants and toddlers, a variety of physical fitness programs, a library, and an arts department with year-round theater and music offerings. A "Deli" on the premises provides an

informal place to gather before and after classes with new friends and children. The JCC provides the single parent a visible, manageable, attractive, and resourceful community of people and services. The Single Parent Worker facilitates autonomous goal setting and self-networking within this setting. It is a *shtetl* without walls in which the single is free to move from a home replete with situational and emotional deficits to an environment rich in cultural, traditional, and contemporary programming. When he or she feels isolated, guilty, fragmented, frightened and overwhelmed, the Center-based program offers continuity, availability, professionalism, acceptance, and caring—all fundamental Jewish values.

The Center is not an isolated island. It has a history of reciprocal and collaborative program development with a variety of agencies, organizations, professionals, and lay people in the secular and nonsecular community. The development of a support system for the delivery of services to its members was a "modus operandi" before the terms networking and single parent were popularized. The Single Parent Worker built on this history to create innovative, contemporary programming tailored to meet the needs of single parents and their children.

Components of the Single Parent Program

The support system and services developed by the Single Parent Worker includes the following components:

1 Crisis intervention limited to three interviews to assess the individual and family needs for emotional support, legal and financial aid, employment, child care and recreation. Referral is then made to appropriate people, groups and activities within the JCC and the general community.

2 Peer Resource Training of single-again men and women with children who have made a successful adjustment to a new life

style to lend support to recently single-again parents.

3 The Single Parent Group which plans a wide range of activities for single parents and their children.

4 Specialized services:

(a) Two Single Parent "Rap" Groups meet the first Sunday of each month at the JCC from 1:00-3:00 P.M. One group is targeted for parents whose children are approximately 14 and under. Children meet in a separate playroom while parents "rap." The same child care worker is used throughout the year.

(b) A small group support and informational program for widows.

(c) "Rap"—Cope Groups for separated or divorced men and women with men and women meeting on separate evenings over a two-month period.

(d) A weekly "Rap"—Friendship Group for Teenagers-Whose-Parents-Have-Split, led by the JCC Youth Director.

5 A Legal Information series on separation and divorce which covers New York State laws, how to pick a lawyer, negotiating a separation agreement, judges and the courts, the *get*, and the role of mediation and divorce counseling.

6 Educational seminars or workshops on parenting, budgeting, sexuality, and building and maintaining relationships.

Process

The process of evolving, maintaining and extending the network can be summarized as follows:

After reviewing the literature of local and national programs designed for single parents, the worker conducted many brainstorming sessions with single parents at the JCC. Needs were defined and matching local resources were identified. Key people in professional agencies or lay organizations were interviewed in order to apprise them of the JCC's evolving program

and to solicit them as speakers in the early stages. The worker followed up the contacts by telephone or in person in order to elicit feedback and engage their on-going collaboration. Willingness to visit resource people on their turf built trust, understanding of program goals, and contributed to their willingness to reciprocate by coming to the JCC in the future.

During the first year, the worker visited Rabbis of six major synagogues and temples on their turf in order to learn about their needs in working with single parents and convey synagogue-related concerns of Single Parents to them. This led to an all day workshop for rabbis at the JCC on the "Single Parent and His or Her Children." Several rabbis have since led workshops and seminars on Living as a Jewish Single, the *Get*, and Identity and Affiliative Issues of Life Cycle Events.

A similar process was used with legal, financial, mental health, vocational and sex-educational professionals and lay leaders of other mutual self-help groups. Although the Single Parent Department is not at a stage to work out collaborative programming with Jewish Family Service, at least one orientation meeting with line workers took place at the JCC and cross referral occurs as needed.

Single parents who have coped successfully describe themselves as "survivors" or individuals who are launched on a new life style. Intra-agency programming to help this process required new approaches to singles in general. The Adult Worker and Single Parent Worker began a monthly Singles Forum, open to leaders from all existing adult groups, in order to clear calendar, share common concerns about publicity and use of Center facilities and offer program ideas for staff-sponsored events. Bimonthly Sunday informational recreational brunches were first developed for single parents and then opened to singles of all ages. The Adult Department now sponsors these brunches. An attrac-

tive monthly publication, *Center Singular*, was jointly designed and is now coordinated by the Adult Worker. This publication includes events sponsored by staff for singles of all ages and by the individual singles groups.

The client's receptivity and use of services depended on a variety of factors: on a knowledge and understanding of their needs, strengths, and weaknesses; on inclusion in the planning process; on their participation, leadership, and eventual ownership of self-help and clustering modules; and on the cultivation of trust with the Single Parent Worker and other staff members. The worker was aware of and actively working through unresolved attitudes and feelings about loss, singleness, noncustodial, custodial, and joint custodial issues, and she was comfortable in her own Jewish identity. Discretionary willingness to meet with singles on their turf; i.e., homes, family activities, and holiday celebrations, built trust and broke down exclusiveness.

Let us now look at the target population and the services within and outside the Center. In general, they are women who have a deficit of "marketable" and home maintenance skills; men who have a deficit of homemaker competence and budgeting skills to meet the needs of two households. Both lack skills in parenting singularly, dealing with an adversary legal system, and building new relationships.

Four parents have been selected to illustrate the needs of the first point of contact and the systems they moved through. Each required a prescription of services offered by the worker based on an assessment of their needs. Each required facilitating or "bridging" interventions by the worker. Each has moved beyond isolated, dysfunctional personal and social functioning. As a result of a flexible intake process involving a high degree of personal contact with the worker, each moved on to a high level of peer group relatedness and program partici-

pation in a relatively brief period with only a touch-base contact with the worker.

Case Histories:

Nancy D., aged 30, custodial parent of Jean, age 6, had returned to Rochester two weeks prior to contact. She had temporarily moved into her parents' home. Parents are in early 50's. A single 27 year-old brother also lives in their home. She secured her divorce in New York City, although could not secure a *Get* at the time. She was referred by the Membership Director. I saw Nancy the first day she applied for membership; two additional assessment interviews were scheduled. She was given the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of two women whose children were about the same age and who had moved back to Rochester after divorcing elsewhere. They accompanied her and Jean at the first activities they attended. She continues to participate in the monthly Sunday Parents Rap Group and the monthly Single Parent Family Outing. She is also active in the younger Center Singles Social Group.

A weekly six session Monday evening "rap" group for recently separated or relocated women was developed to meet her and other members needs. I later put another newly arrived woman in touch with her; they rented an apartment together near the JCC and Hillel Day School where both children attend. I saw Nancy's parents twice, at their request, during points of greatest tension until she relocated.

Ruth L., aged 39, unemployed R.N., was separated two weeks when she came to a Singles Forum meeting to see what groups could help her cope. She had moved to Rochester seven months before with daughter, Beth, age 13 and a son, Danny, age 11, to join her husband after a series of company transfers. Mr. L. is not Jewish. Mrs. L. is Jewish with strong family and traditional ties. The L's had joined the JCC after moving to Rochester. I met with Ruth outside the meeting room; she was panicky, wanted to see a lawyer immediately, was confused about staying in Rochester, angry and despairing of having to give up studies toward a B.S. degree. She was concerned about the impact of the separation on the children.

Ruth L. was subsequently seen for three assessment interviews over a six week period. She began a four month period of active use of services at the Center; the Sunday Parents "Rap," the weekly Monday Evening Women's "Rap," the Legal Information series on Separation and Divorce, and monthly session of the Sunday Single Parents Institute on Self Esteem and Changing Family Relationships; Sexuality, Yours, Your Kids; Financial and Legal Planning; and Issues of Jewish Affiliation and Identification. One of her children joined the "Rap" Session for Teenagers-Whose-Parents-Have-Split. Five months later, she is negotiating her divorce with clarity of mind; she has decided to remain in Rochester; she plans to resume part-time studies in September; she works full time at the Jewish Home and Infirmary, and has accepted a leadership role on the Single Parent Group's Steering Committee.

Deborah G., aged 47, widowed six months, mother of twenty-two-year-old daughter, Leslie, a Hebrew School Teacher, and a fourteen-year-old son, Bruce, had been employed prior to husband's death. She learned of the program from printed material I sent her daughter when Leslie phoned me at their Rabbi's suggestion. Her mother was not going out and was feeling very low. The G's were not JCC members. Deborah was not seen in my office for a scheduled appointment. When I spoke with her by telephone, she seemed ready to move directly into a group program, but felt "strange." I gave her the name of another parent near her home whom I knew would be happy to drive her to a first meeting. I sought her out before and after the first few meetings she attended. In contrast to an office interview, or conversation as I call them at the Center, my style was informal, but clearly focused on her needs. She was sensitive to being a widow among a majority of separated and divorced men and women. Although the widow or widower has a different story to relate than the separated or divorced person, they share the common need to develop new relationships and a new life style. I introduced her to two widows actively attending meetings. A series of eight rap sessions for widows was developed for her and others. After a year, Deborah became chairperson of the Jewish Content

sub-committee of the Single Parent Group. She has trained as a Peer Resource Person in a four-week training program I organized for people who have their "act together" to serve as buddies for people recently singled. At her request, on one occasion, I referred her to Jewish Family Services for help in coping with her aged mother.

Norman R., aged 42, separated two weeks and living in a newly furnished apartment, father of three teenagers living with mother in "his" home had been an active temple member prior to marital discord. His son's Bar Mitzvah was scheduled in ten weeks. He had dropped his JCC membership two years ago. He made his first contact with the program at a Wednesday Evening Lounge Series for Single Parents after rejoining the JCC a few days after he "moved out."

After a brief exchange at the evening meeting, I telephoned him twice in order to schedule some assessment interviews in my office. In addition to helping him with his intense feelings of shame, humiliation, and isolation, I described and gave him well underlined, handwritten and printed program information such as times and dates of upcoming events at JCC. I referred him to a weekly support group called "Parachute," sponsored by another organization, and to the Consumer Credit Bureau for financial counseling prior to legal contracting. I matched him with a JCC male Peer Resource Person whom he could call anytime for support. Although his work prevented his regular weekday attendance at meetings, he attended all Sunday morning or afternoon scheduled events over a four month period such as the monthly Sunday Single Parent "Rap" Session and the Single Parent Institute Seminars. He remained in the "Parachute" peer support group for a second session.

Conclusion

It is possible to incorporate a preventive program for Single Parents building on traditional concepts of service delivery within a community center. The program uses a blend of agency commitment, generic social work skills in casework, group work, and community organization, and

client participation in program development and peer support.

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