

Association of Practitioners in Jewish Social Agencies

THE PRACTITIONER'S VIEWPOINT ON COORDINATION PLANNING

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"COORDINATION" is being discussed, attempted, organized and argued about throughout the country at this time to such an extent that it takes on some of the characteristics of a fad. Much of our professional literature is concerned with coordination now. There are surveys and there are committees and papers—and, here and there, some amalgamation projects are actually being undertaken. In Pittsburgh, Jewish case-work services have been merged. Chicago has merged two child-care agencies. New York is contemplating the merger of several child-care agencies and has already merged the fund-raising activities of its two big Federations.

Coordination in this paper is used as a general descriptive term characterizing attempts to eliminate duplication of services and contradictory practices, although the individual agencies may retain their original identity. Amalgamation or merger is used to indicate the transformation of two or more agencies into one agency.

There are many reasons usually given for justifying the coordination or mer-

ger of agencies. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to consider these from the points of view of the various groups interested in community philanthropic organization. There are distinctions among the viewpoints of board members, executives and practitioners. Board members are primarily motivated by economic advantages associated with centralized services. Only too often, some who speak of ideals in connection with the term coordination do so only with profound concern for economies. The term "coordination" is in these instances used only as a shield for the true term descriptive of coordination in the business field, i. e., plain, old-fashioned economic merger. One might well ask, then, why it is mergers have not occurred more frequently. According to Mr. Herman W. Bloch, president of the board of the New York Jewish Child Clearing Bureau, "vested interest, mutual distrust and opposing personalities have stood in the way." It has remained for board members more directly concerned with solving financial problems of community fund-raising to take the initiative in stimulating the consummation of mergers. Thus, in New York City, surveys in 1919, 1921, 1926 and 1930 recommended merger, but actual steps towards merger were initiated by the Federation, with the New York Foundation offering \$100,000, to facilitate and expedite its achievement.

It is more difficult to define a viewpoint that would characterize all executives. There is no doubt but that they necessarily identify themselves to some extent with the viewpoint of the boards of their agencies. In this sense, they, too, have a "vested interest" in the continuation of their own agency and its program. At the same time there are progressive executives who wish to see the creation of the most effective services. Even these, however, are hindered by an inevitable concern with questions of finance and economy. This results frequently in a confused approach to the problem.

Practitioners are in closest contact with the clients, their problems and their needs. They acquire a body of knowledge, based on day to day experience in trying to meet these needs, which, when generalized, can be helpful in pointing to a program. Social work has gone a long way from the stage when it meant "charity" done by kind laymen, "trustees," their relatives, or religious-minded people. A whole philosophy of social case-work with specialized techniques has developed, even though at an uneven pace in different communities and in different agencies within any single community. On the basis of their knowledge and their experience, practitioners are qualified to make a contribution to program-making that is indispensable in the consideration of any program realistically based on clients' needs as best understood. Since practitioners are not primarily concerned with agency survival or economic problems, their testimony regarding their clients' needs is more likely to be of prime importance in determining the details of program and policy-making. They cannot be ignored in any attempts to readjust agency functioning.

From the practitioner's point of view,

the desirability of any efforts towards coordination can be considered only in the light of effectiveness in meeting all clients' needs. Coordination *per se* is of no interest to practitioners. Practitioners favor and are anxious to further that kind of coordination which guarantees preservation and extension of existing good practices, while at the same time allowing for creation of new and better standards as these are discovered. In this sense, coordination becomes a progressive development and practitioners can give it their whole-hearted support.

Since it is unlikely that anyone would question the fact that practitioners are best able to interpret the needs of clients and the effectiveness of a program in meeting these needs, one must ask why it is that practitioners have not been consulted more often. One sees immediately a condition prevailing in the social work field similar to that in other fields. We live in a "broker's" world and not a "technician's" world. In every field, we know more than we use, or, more aptly stated, more knowledge is available than is used. Frankwood Williams, in a paper at the 1932 National Conference of Social Work, asked pertinent questions in this connection and stated the problem clearly:

"Does it seem strange to you that only after mighty effort was it possible to have gasoline, which, at the time, was a drug on the market, clearly differentiated in the stores from kerosene, then much in use, even though many died horrible deaths from explosion as the result of mistakes? Does it seem strange to you that only after the most courageous fighting has it become possible to make public announcement of epidemics? That there must be a contest over the matter of pure food and pure drugs; a contest as yet

1. This paper was written by a committee on which was a representative from the Jewish Social Service Association, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Federation and the Foster Home Bureau, and was written in consultation with a member of the Steering Committee of the Child Care Practices of New York. This was a committee duly elected at a membership meeting of the Practitioners' Group and authorized to write and present a paper on the subject. It was written by Mrs. Eleanor Hilowitz, a member of the Writing Committee.

unwon, over the control of narcotics? That there must be contests over such matters as proper housing, child labor, a living wage, workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance? One can understand that much effort might go into the preparation of an adequate compensation or unemployment insurance law. But once this effort had been expended, does it seem to you strange that even greater effort should be needed to have them adopted? These are complex problems, you say. Do you really think they are fundamentally complex? So much are we a part of our own civilization, so permeated are we with its fundamental philosophies, so well educated are we in its history, that it does not seem strange to us that enormous effort should be necessary in order to obtain even simple, obvious things. Why must there be such effort? Because others oppose. But who opposes and why? Our effort must be expended in convincing, "educating" influential people who hold the keys to activity, business men, administrators, academies of medicine or of this or of that, legislators, governors . . . Our 'education' consists in persuading them that our plan fits in with their personal plans. In other words, a problem is not solved readily and easily by reason of its own simplicity and obviousness as a child would think. For reasons a child would not yet understand, this has no bearing; effort must first be expended in overcoming an opposition that is not in any way connected with the matter."

To bring the problem nearer to home, social workers have long known many things about their programs which need change and about which they have been unable to do much. We have known, for instance, that children should not be lodged by the hundreds in a single large

building. We have known this most emphatically for more than twenty-five years, if we merely use the White House Conference of 1909 as a marking point. Yet we still have large institutions for children throughout the country. There is no doubt but that the vested interests of board members and, in some cases, executives have perpetuated an undesirable status quo.

It is necessary to ask whether there is logic in a system of care determined largely by board members. Why do they think they have a right to define programs. Here again we must look at the history of "philanthropy."

When social work was merely "charity," contributors decided themselves how their money should be spent, and within the limitations of the concepts then somewhat semi-consciously accepted, this was logical. They had so much money to give to poor people. They had to decide which poor people should get the money and how much. Giving was viewed as purely a voluntary act of kindness; for the Jews, a *mitzvah*. All funds came in such a voluntary fashion and were disbursed in what appeared to be a democratic fashion. The contributors got together, elected trustees to act for them, and these trustees then spent the funds as wisely as they were free to do.

But gradually two changes took place. It became more and more apparent that specialized knowledge was needed to distribute funds in such a manner as to avoid pauperization and aid in achieving independence for recipients. These trends gradually developed into social case work with its technical lore directed towards ameliorating maladjustment. Simultaneously with this change, it became increasingly apparent that poverty or economic insecurity was a social and not an

individual problem. People, in the mass, were not poor because of inherent degenerate characteristics, but because of technological disequilibrium in the economic system: unemployment, low wages, long hours at tedious and nerve-wracking work, dismissal at an increasingly early age as no longer useful, etc. This latter change was increasingly accompanied by the growth of tax-supported public social work programs: widows' pensions, old age pensions, public relief programs, and more recently, unemployment insurance programs. However, though new programs were set up, administrative responsibility remained in the hands of laymen: legislators, boards of prominent citizens, and executives chosen often for their efficiency as "business men." This was the practice with new public programs.

Simultaneously, public agencies made financial contributions to private agencies. Whereas once these private agencies secured their funds entirely through voluntary contributions with board members assuming responsibility for fund-raising and therefore controlling policy-making through control of disbursements, they now received as much as 80 to 95% of their funds from public sources. Control of agency policies, however, remained in the hands of the representatives of those contributing the 5 to 20% of funds with public sources maintaining merely an inspection service in the interests of minimum standards. Taxpayers, therefore, often contribute the major proportion of funds and have little voice in agency policy. Trustees—without technical competence—determine the limits within which technical knowledge may be permitted to operate.

Practitioners maintain that board members are not the logical representatives of the community at large, not only be-

cause of their lack of technical knowledge regarding the criteria for determining effective means of meeting clients' needs—though this is of major importance—but also because they are further removed from the mass of population in the community as well as from the clients. The practitioner—considered as worker *per se*—is better able to identify himself with the interest of the entire community population and with the interests specifically of the client. Since, then, funds are now increasingly drawn from community (tax) sources, and since there is general recognition that at bottom economic insecurity is a social and not merely an individual problem, it would seem logical to invest a greater share of the policy and program-making function in the hands of the great body of practitioners, as opposed to the small and rather exclusive body of trustees.

It may be suggested that the importance of technical competence and information is recognized through the role of the executive as leader and interpreter of the agency program. Practitioners are compelled to point out that executives alone have been unable to secure the adoption of programs that square with their technical knowledge or the knowledge available in the community. Where they earnestly have striven for improved programs, their efforts might have been strengthened or more successful had they considered the power inherent in articulation of the practitioner's viewpoint.

It may be that practitioners have not been called upon more often to make a contribution in an organized fashion on the assumption that they, too, have a vested interest—a vested interest in their jobs. There is no doubt but that workers are concerned with economic security both for personal and social reasons just as are

executives and, in their own realms, board members. But on the practitioner's side, the vested interest in the job coincides with the vested interest of the client who needs the services provided by the person holding that job. Pure economic issues of the practitioner are the concern of the trade unions. Even the trade unions, however, have a great concern with the social implications of the work of their membership and they have not been backward in making their voices heard when social services have been threatened. It seems to us that practitioners are more free from identification with particular agency survival and more interested in securing freedom to translate their professional thinking into action regardless of the outer shell of the organization which employs them. They become concerned with this shell when it frustrates their functioning as social workers. They recognize that their voice will receive a better response in proportion not only to the pressure they can bring through their organized power, but also through their individual abilities in freeing themselves from their particular agency or job identification.

With these general principles stated, we may examine the few situations where mergers have taken place or are being considered. The experience of Chicago reveals some of the difficulties associated with attempts of the "vested interests," agency board members and executives, to re-organize their activities for more effective service to clients. According to A. G. Ballenberg, President of the Chicago Home for Jewish Orphans, "As far back as 1928 and 1929 there was evident a need for some form of coordination in the child care field. Prior to that time, the Chicago Home, the Home Finding Society and the Marks Nathan Jewish Or-

phans Home had each accepted applications and had passed upon them through their own admission committee. But this situation proved intolerable." Some years ago an attempt at coordination of intake, at least, was made in the formation of the Jewish Children's Welfare Society. For a time, this helped to alleviate some of the problems of Chicago, but eventually new problems cropped up which could not be solved by this limited coordination. Mr. Ballenberg states the care of the mentally deficient and the physically handicapped child was neglected. "Other pressing problems," he adds, "included an underlying sense of competition for children, scarcely in the best interests of the child; conflicts in viewpoint between lay board members in the coordinating agency; differences in standards between the several organizations; and advantages to children given by one organization but denied to the children of the others because of lack of funds." Here, it is apparent, vested interests acted in a manner deleterious to the interests of children. It became necessary to remove hindrances to efficiency, and towards this end negotiations were entered into among the three agencies for unification. However, one institution could not agree to consolidation and thus, finally, the remaining institution and the home finding society agreed upon a consolidation. This in itself would seem to be a step forward, even though the consolidation at present will be devoted "mainly to inquiry and mutual education."

It is notable that in Chicago negotiations in connection with the possible merger did not enlist practitioner participation. There can be little doubt but that case workers in that community, working with children before they were removed from their homes, during periods of care away from natural parents, and during

periods of care after return to their homes, had a body of knowledge and experience that could be helpful in throwing light upon the community program for dependent children in Chicago. They also would be in a position to aid in outlining policies and programs for children in Chicago, both with respect to general approach to the entire problem and with respect to the logic of the program as it touched the individual children. They also had a contribution to make in expediting an actual merger of *all* Jewish child-care agencies, since this seems on the face of it to be a logical desideratum. In this way, they could have strengthened the hands of those executives working for the most progressive development. One statement in Mr. Ballenberg's summary of the Chicago situation is enlightening. He states, in concluding, "The 'problem child,' who, after all, is the child requiring the most skilled attention, will be given adequate consideration for perhaps the first time." And this in 1937! Continuous articulation of the case worker's viewpoint might have made it possible to secure this kind of "adequate consideration" many years ago. There must be other areas where this is also true.

In Pittsburgh, prior to the recent merger, there were five agencies, only one of which had a staff exceeding four persons. There was no clear cut definition of function and cases went to each agency by mere chance. If the case had been referred to another agency it would have been accepted there just as well. The city-wide case load for all types of cases was 600 to 700, and these were divided among the five agencies. Obviously, such a small case load did not warrant the maintenance of five separate administrative set-ups, which frequently came into friction with each other.

The merger was launched as the result of a study financed by the Buhl Foundation. There was no pressure from Federation and there was full and free discussion by the various boards and special committees. Nor was economy a motive, because the analysis revealed that there would be an increased cost in launching the new organization. There are many obvious advantages to this kind of amalgamation. Inter-agency frictions will be eliminated; one worker will handle the entire situation, eliminating confusion; inter-agency reports and conferences will be eliminated, thereby economizing workers' time and effort; a better relief job will be possible; administrative control will be unified.

In Pittsburgh, therefore, it appears that board members were able to discuss their special interests and to make sacrifices for the creation of a unified case work agency. An objective study of the situation, which was necessary before re-organization could take place, was made possible by the Buhl Foundation. Since we have been discussing practitioner participation in amalgamations, the question arises as to why Pittsburgh practitioners did not contribute their thinking on the proposed amalgamation. Their thinking might have been a valuable addition to the study, and might have changed the recommendations in many respects. The research group would have been helped greatly had they utilized the knowledge and experience of workers closest to individual clients. It would also have been profitable in various other ways to secure practitioners' participation.

There are probably several reasons why practitioners did not participate. In the first place, there was no precedent for practitioners' participation nor was there any encouragement on the part of those

who were initiating merger. This is a good illustration of Frankwood Williams' contention that we are so permeated with the fundamental philosophies that we do not question established procedure. In the second place, is it possible that the practitioners did not ask to participate because they were unaware of the extent of the contribution which they could have made in formulating plans for merger?

There is no doubt that calling in the Buhl Foundation to make a study indicated that lay members of agencies had some realization of the value of technical assistance.

The experience of New York has been somewhat different from that of any other city. In 1935, before rumblings were heard of a possible imminent merger of child care agencies, professional workers had some experience in influencing the program of a child caring agency. Towards the end of 1934 one institution announced that financial difficulties compelled it to increase its institutional population and thereby its income from per capita subsidies from the public department. It indicated that it proposed to achieve this increase through transferring one hundred children from their foster homes to the institution. Professional workers recognized the threat this meant to the children who would be uprooted from their homes and the threat to case work standards in the arbitrary manner in which this was to be undertaken. Together with some executives, they organized a mass meeting and sent resolutions to the institution involved and to Federation. It is but right to state that the institutional administration was sufficiently alarmed by the prospect of this mass meeting that on the day of the meeting itself they announced the rescinding of their order for this mass uprooting and indi-

cated that they would find other means of solving their financial problems. Social workers felt sufficiently stirred up, however, to go on record with resolutions and to set up a tentative Committee on Child Care Practices. Undoubtedly, this action had some influence on other agencies that might have attempted a similar way of solving financial problems through lowering standards of care for children.

In the Spring of 1936 rumors were heard of an imminent merger of child care agencies within the New York Federation. Workers raised questions about this merger in their various agencies and addressed these questions to their executives. They were told by their executives that nothing was definite and they were given some indication that they had no basis for fearing loss of jobs. They were, in some cases, actually told, in effect: "What are you worrying about. You won't lose your jobs." Workers were not content with this kind of evasive answer. Their interests were greater than job security. They were concerned with the program of any merged agency. Many felt so strongly on the subject of the value of practitioners' uniting to serve standards that they inspired the calling of an open meeting of all practitioners and interested executives within Federation child caring agencies to consider the problems inherent in the community's program for dependent children. Workers from the family welfare and the child guidance agency were also invited to participate. At this meeting there was set in motion the mechanics for registering the professional workers' concern with the threat to standards of care for children implicit in the fact that the stimulus for the merger had come from Federation and that its main objective was economy. Committees—ten of them—were set up

to draw up reports that would indicate what these standards were so that vagaries would be eliminated in the further attempts to secure a better program. On each one of these ten committees were representatives of different functional groups, individuals with varied knowledge and experience. Each committee chose a different phase of the problem. The committees met frequently throughout the summer and fall of 1936. A steering committee had been elected and this steering committee attempted integration of the ten reports. At first the ten reports were brought back to open meetings again of all professional workers and discussed. In the light of these discussions, the steering committee edited a final report which integrated all the suggestions made. This report has just been released in mimeographed form. It is being read by professional workers and will be discussed at an open meeting later of all interested workers and executives. After it is modified to express the wishes of the largest number of practitioners, it will be brought to the attention of the board members responsible for the negotiations looking towards a merger. Already indications have been given that the thinking of these professional committees will be considered. Practitioners know that pressure will be necessary to see that their thinking is not ignored or evaded.

The report of the professional workers in its present form starts with two underlying premises:

1. In any consideration of a merger of Jewish child care organizations, social workers must be concerned with preserving gains made in the fields in service and standards for children. Workers have, on the basis of professional training experience, positive contributions to make to the formulation of plans for a merger

or coordination of services.

2. Prior to the initiation of a new program, definite research study is required which will involve not only expert research workers, but also social workers who have had practical experience within the city's Jewish child care set-up.

The New York report is too lengthy to summarize in detailed fashion. It touches upon every aspect of the child care problem and indicates the direction which progressive development of an adequate children's program must take. It represents a cooperative effort between some executives and the practitioners. The executives have their own group which is also functioning independently. Practitioners feel that this cooperative venture gains value from their participation and their contribution, and that these add great power to the forces making for improved services.

The practitioner also knows that he is the only one who can make clear the kind of personnel practices that are consonant with his giving his best services to the organization and its clients.

Objective study of the New York experience and the report of the New York professional committees in contrast with the experiences of Pittsburgh and Chicago, it seems to us, points to the value of practitioner participation. While no victory has been won in New York as yet, the report supports sufficiently the contention that practitioners have a distinct contribution to make which has value and validity in helping to secure the best social work program. To ignore their contribution is to engage in a subtle, though no longer unconscious form of sabotage. Full consideration of their thinking not only at time of merger possibility, but continuously is to insure the utilization of at least the best knowledge available.