

Localization of Human Services: Using Church Volunteers to Fight the Feminization of Poverty

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Federal budget cuts are changing the design and delivery of human services. The emphasis is moving from Washington to Main Street. In communities across the country staff members of professional human service organizations are uniting with church and civic groups to solve, manage and prevent grave social problems (Salamon and Teitelbaum, 1984). In Cleveland, for example, a group of churches with grants from the Cleveland Foundation, opened a shelter for battered women. In its first year it housed 192 battered women and 303 children, and handled 8094 calls (Doll, 1984). In Denver, an Episcopal group reported that it was providing an advocate to act as a mediator with welfare officials for persons who qualify for public assistance (McDonald, 1984). In Greensboro, North Carolina, Catholics and Lutherans have been working together with social agencies helping Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees make a smooth transition to American life. In each instance volunteers have formed the wellspring of the program.

The pairing of professional service organizations with volunteers from church groups to meet current and future social challenges is filled with pitfalls and possibilities. Future needs of the nation's communities will only be met with success if volunteers are used creatively, positively and effectively. Government aid for not-for-profit organizations dropped 20% from 1982-1984 (Meyers, 1985). Coincident with the decrease in funds has been the growth in reports of family violence (Edelman, 1985), teen pregnancy (Statistical Abstracts of the

United States, 1984), hunger, and the feminization of poverty (Maloney, L., 1984). People in communities nationwide have been facing some cold realities: to find protection, food and shelter for the needy community, members must both muster their local resources (Demone and Gibelman, 1984) and educate their friends and neighbors about the magnitude of these social problems (Wineburg, 1984).

Professional social workers have had to work increasingly with volunteers to creatively provide direct and prevention services. This kind of networking (Cohen, 1983) will certainly continue. The beauty in such arrangements is that successful programs will depend on concerned citizens learning about and making personal commitments to solve trying human problems plaguing their communities. The danger is that successfully meeting community needs will rest increasingly in uncharted territory: true professional and volunteer collaboration. The checks and balances of such relationships should form the foundation for a new way of designing social programs at the community level.

The remainder of this paper will examine a new program of Greensboro Urban Ministry (GUM) in Greensboro, North Carolina called Project Independence. The program is directed by one professionally trained master's level social worker, and run exclusively by a network of 25 volunteers from local churches with help from the Greensboro Junior League, a local affiliate of the National Association of Junior Leagues. The program is designed to help welfare-depen-

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dent mothers develop careers by involving volunteers and other church resources to aid in job search and training; obtaining housing, transportation and day care when necessary; advocating for these women and providing general encouragement for them. Project Independence has been very successful in using volunteers to help women get off welfare and begin new lives. The program is small by design, serving only ten families, but it is a model for new roles for volunteers in providing direct and preventive social services aimed at fighting the growth of women in poverty. As a trendsetting program it has experienced both the pitfalls and possibilities of such new ways of using church volunteers.

What follows is a sketch of why the program is needed, some of the challenges and potential successes in mobilizing volunteers for these services, and a set of recommendations for others seeking to involve volunteers in efforts like these.

NEED FOR PROJECT INDEPENDENCE

During the height of the economic recession of 1982-83 Greensboro Urban Ministry was in fact the safety net (agency) that literally kept people from falling into the abyss. With people being laid off, cut from the welfare roles or terminated from CETA jobs, their last resort for life-sustaining support was Greensboro Urban Ministry which offered emergency assistance. The agency witnessed well over a 20% increase in requests for assistance. A corresponding growth in staff size and volunteer participation occurred. As the recession receded, however, requests for assistance and needs for volunteers did not dwindle. In a two-and-a-half year period the agency grew from a professional staff of seven to 21 and from 18 full-time volunteer equivalents to 54. Even though the agency was helping those in need, and making excellent use of legions of volunteers, the former director found something amiss. The staff and volunteers were "ministering" to the wounded, but they were doing nothing to prevent the wounds.

By far the group in most need of services during and after the recession was single head-of-household women with small children. These women either could not make ends meet on welfare and re-

quired financial, food or housing assistance, or were cut off from benefits altogether and were totally dependent on the services of the agency. This phenomenon is not unique to Greensboro. Nationally, there are officially 35.3 million Americans living in poverty, 57% of whom are women (Maloney, 1984). In North Carolina, women head about 58% of the poverty households (Grimsley, 1983). Zopf (1985) reported that 43% of all children under 18 in Greensboro living in families headed by women were classified in the poverty category. Greensboro Urban Ministry's former director looked around for answers to his questions of what was being done to prevent this kind of dependency and realized that whatever it was, it was not enough and that nothing would prevail if he did not gather the resources to start wrestling with the problems of the local feminization of poverty.

He heard voices buried in these poverty statistics. They were voices of mothers, clients of the agency, those single heads-of-households, telling their story about the confinement and constraints put on them while on welfare. He also heard subtle hints of their lack of self esteem and their feelings of unsuitability for work. And he heard their real concerns for their children, not wanting them to grow up in the same bleak, dire circumstances. With those voices as a background, coupled with the fact that programs for women and children, if not being frozen, were being cut back drastically (Edelman, 1984), he knew that alternative service delivery systems had to be found. It was under those conditions that Project Independence was born.

Project Independence is an unconventional program that addresses the problems of women who receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), problems that other programs cannot or will not address. The focus is to develop a person-to-person approach to supporting welfare mothers in their attempts to get off welfare. The objective of the program is to encourage religious congregations in the community to provide that personal touch through church sponsorship. Volunteers are recruited from within a sponsoring church to help

the welfare mother find employment from the resources within the grasp of the congregation. The commitment of the sponsoring congregation is minimal compared to the rewards seen as the woman and her children no longer need to rely on a monthly check for subsistence and can begin to make their own way.

The role of the church, as sponsor for a welfare family, is not to rescue the family from its current living situation. The role of the sponsor is one of advocacy, negotiation and support. Sponsors are discouraged from doing for the families what they can do for themselves. They are asked to act as a support system for the family when their natural support systems of family, friends and neighbors can no longer help them. Sponsors act as resources for the family and lend encouragement in times of stress.

However, the main responsibility of the sponsors is to locate potential employment for the client. The employment may be found either in one's respective congregation or through one's contacts at work. By encouraging this kind of job search, we are attempting to establish a resource network that functions similar to the "old boy network." It is in essence an informal job referral service for the poor, much like the one used by the middle class male population. By involving the religious community in this network, we are in essence tapping the resources of the middle and upper middle classes. Not only will the congregation be able to find employment for the client, but will become involved in a one-to-one relationship with the issue of poverty.

RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Volunteers in all of Greensboro Urban Ministry's programs are usually active members of any of the 400 churches or places of worship in the community. Therefore it was logical to recruit church members to sponsor families because church volunteers have been the backbone and lifeblood of the agency since its inception in 1968. Many volunteers feel that it is their religious duty to serve the poor. The major difficulty in working successfully with church volunteers is helping them hear the real voices of the welfare mothers and not the myths and

stereotypes that obscure the genuine problems confronted by these women. This challenge is doubled in that many church volunteers take on the volunteer role in order to save "fallen souls."

In an agency like Greensboro Urban Ministry, the agency of last resort in Greensboro, volunteers who work in the soup kitchen, clothes room, or night shelter can get a sense of helping the "fallen" and actually do good, while maintaining the view that the poor will always be with us. The underlying theme of Project Independence is that the poor do not have to be with us always. In the other programs of Urban Ministry, it suffices to believe woe is he (she) who has fallen and has no one to help him (her) up. But Project Independence's focus is on helping one eliminate the need to keep falling. Consequently, Project Independence's approach to volunteers is different from other programs of the agency.

Recruitment for other programs is done through announcements in newspapers and church bulletins. There are ample volunteers, and they come to serve as individuals. They are trained about poverty, and in agency procedures and practices in giving away food or clothing and the like. They are trained to help the needy, only to help the same ones the next day. Recruitment for Project Independence is somewhat different. Churches are recruited to become sponsors. Usually, members of a church's social outreach committee volunteer to act as sponsor in the name of the church. The agency's professionally trained social worker recruits personally, speaking to adult Sunday School classes, or speaking as part of a Sunday sermon. The first set of recruitment strategies revolves around getting ministers involved in making a personal commitment and thus opening the doors to an institutional response to a community problem. The main recruiting technique involves a challenge to help the women in need to help themselves through a job, with day care, and by obtaining transportation.

The ideal sponsorship is to pair two congregations together. This will increase the availability of resources for the sponsored family, reduce the workload for the churches, and create new alliances for

those congregations that have not worked together in the past. The project aims to pair black and white churches as sponsors. A racially mixed sponsorship enhances the ability of the churches to work with either a black or white family comfortably and observe the cultural norms and respect differences. In a city that has a black population of 30% and a high unemployment rate among black single female heads of households, it is important to stimulate discussion between churches about structural barriers that keep a person from employment, and help them understand the plight of the welfare recipient and her family. Thus, the program creates better human relations, a deeper understanding of poverty, and respect for the hardships faced by poor women. The volunteer recruiter is therefore also a community educator and human relations liaison between black and white churches.

RECRUITMENT DIFFICULTIES

Churches nationwide have been challenged to become involved in social services. The major difficulty in meeting such a demand rests with making the commitment and finding the means to contribute in a way that services are enhanced. Preventing dependency is difficult. The commitment required of a congregation is different from the one required in collecting food or money to send to Urban Ministry. The commitment means getting to know the poor, listening to their voices and helping them stand on their own. This kind of service is new. Making the required changes in focus is often slow and difficult for complex organizations like churches.

During this first year of the project, recruitment has been cyclical. Of the 30 churches recruited initially, only six sponsored families. Those churches have been working diligently with a total of ten families. It should be noted that four of the six churches had already participated in helping to resettle refugee families and their volunteers had previously volunteered in other aspects of Urban Ministry's programs. In the initial phase of the program it appeared that already active churches and members were the most willing to become community activists.

Working with the two churches that had not been involved in the refugee resettlement and had fewer volunteers in other Urban Ministry programs was somewhat more difficult, but both have taken sponsorship seriously and are working hard to help their families get over some difficult barriers.

During many of the question and answer periods following the first recruitment presentations, church members posed many interesting, but often hostile questions. The major stumbling block was getting congregations to move beyond their stereotypical images of the Cadillac-driving, promiscuous, caviar-eating welfare recipient. The tactic used to soften that stereotype was always a calm restatement of the facts about poverty: most welfare recipients want to work; most have fewer than three children; most are white; and most have the same wants, dreams, hopes and desires for their children as the rest of society. These facts coupled with the grave note (especially to congregation women) that many women in this country are only one man away from the same plight as welfare recipients usually shook loose some potential volunteers or some unsolicited money for the project.

As noted earlier, four churches that had been active in other community projects joined Project Independence early. Two followed a short time after. Those church volunteers have helped women find and keep jobs, helped others go back to school, obtain transportation, housing, and day care. There was a lull in the recruitment success during the six to nine month stages of the program but in the last month three new churches (two of which had not been recruited actively) have asked to become sponsors of families and several have inquired about the project.

RECRUITING SUCCESS

One of the major unintended consequences of Project Independence is that volunteers are spreading the word about how challenging and exciting it is to see themselves help women begin to "make it." They are beginning to realize that even though a good job is a ticket out of poverty, keeping the job often requires funds for day care, cheap and reliable

transportation, reasonably priced housing, and good old-fashioned support and encouragement to build back a deflated self esteem. As the women become empowered, so do the volunteers. The myths and stereotypes start to crumble as welfare recipients are becoming former recipients and as the volunteers are becoming advocates for the poor on behalf of their churches. Churches that were previously lukewarm to the idea of sponsorship are now making institutional commitments to help fight poverty in the community. While the word has been spreading rapidly and churches are making inquiries and requesting sponsorship as a result of this informed recruiting, a volunteer from a sponsoring church now formally recruits new church sponsors. This is a positive step and plans are developing to use this strategy as a permanent device to insure long term community-wide church involvement in stalling the increase of the feminization of poverty.

The local press has picked up on the project and has covered it from two dimensions: the local human interest aspects of the project, and how the religious community's involvement is helping to solve a complicated community problem. This coverage of the project has created broader support for the project in the community at large. The Junior League of Greensboro gave Project Independence a \$13,000 grant for providing day care for children of the project's clients. This kind of broader community support brings with it the welcomed legitimacy necessary to sustain long term efforts as well as the added benefits of obtaining volunteers from other organizations. A stipulation for receiving Junior League funds is that their volunteers must be involved in leadership roles within both the project and the organization. Therefore, the program's potential and its initial successes had another unintended consequence of picking up funds and volunteer leadership from an organization committed to community service through volunteering.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For those who are intending to recruit volunteers from religious organizations to provide social services to fight the feminization of poverty, it should be kept in

mind that such organizations do not have a rich recent history in providing prevention and advocacy services. Plan a recruitment strategy knowing that initial resistance will probably stem from the organization's lack of know-how in working with poor women beyond giving money and charitable goods. This resistance will surface in a strong defense of the myths and stereotypes about welfare recipients. Be prepared to soften those myths with the facts. Be patient; you may have to return to the organization several times before volunteers sign on.

Once they do sign on, design a set of activities that include studying the issues of poverty, learning the agencies in the community that help the poor, and taking an inventory of church resources such as who has or knows of someone with a job opening, an old car, or a decent piece of property to rent cheaply.

Plan for an evening when a small group of church volunteers can meet the family. Remember that both church volunteers and the family will be a bit nervous, but remember that "getting involved" has its risks and rewards. Make the atmosphere as light and lively as possible so that the people can relax and be themselves. Make the goals of the initial meeting two-fold. first, people should get to know each other as people setting out to solve a problem together, and the church members and the family should understand their roles and commitments in solving that problem. Nothing more should be expected of the initial contact between sponsoring church and family.

When the specific needs of the client are matched with resources of church and community agencies, the professional worker should help the volunteers and the family develop a plan for meeting goals. Sometimes the goals are simple like getting a job. Sometimes they are complicated by housing, day-care, transportation and other prerequisites. The volunteer coordinator should develop specific responsibilities for all involved and a target date to meet the responsibilities. This procedure helps all involved be clear on what is expected and it serves as a built-in motivator to reach stated goals. Use the local media to promote the program. This kind of external

support positively reinforces all involved.

Finally, it is essential to keep the lines of communication open among the professional agency, the volunteer organizations, and clients. Much can be learned by listening to volunteer service providers and recipients of services—that is if social workers are willing to listen. This kind of openness makes it easier for the professional social worker to provide the kind of leadership he/she was trained to provide. Programs of this kind have to be based on a mutual trust and support system.

CONCLUSION

The community human services system is changing. It is becoming much more locally oriented and will depend increasingly on a greater involvement from churches and civic organizations in solving some very complicated problems. Those organizations will be called upon increasingly to provide willing volunteers and other resources to meet current and new demands. Professional agency collaboration with volunteer organizations, much like the kind discussed here, will become more prevalent. Part of Project Independence's success rests with the commitment put forth by all involved. Another reason for its success is because it followed the recommendations put forth above.

The major reason for the initial success has been its two-fold approach to organizing. First, both volunteers and clients were seen as people who needed help. The churches needed help in being freed from the constraints of repeated giving "to the fallen" instead of helping them stand on their own. Second, the clients needed help in being freed from a system of cold, impersonal relationships and programs that glued them in place. Bringing the two groups together in a new way sets the tone for other volunteer programs. It has truly created independence.

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