RATIONALE FOR A CONFERENCE

It was recognized that a person might need help with bureaucratic structure professional ritualism, unnecessary restrictive guidelines, de-facto discrimination, cultural chasms, problems in communications and practical obstacles that stand in the way of expressing one's needs or asserting one's right.¹

The quotation above summarizes many of the problems involved in getting people to the service they seek and getting the service to people. One solution to this communication gap is the information referral clearinghouse, commonly known as the neighborhood information center. A center of this kind would centralize information on available welfare programs and provide an interpersonal link between people and services. In the mid-1960s Alfred Kahn in his book Neighborhood Information Centers; A Study and Some Proposals, presented the idea and urged the establishment of a nationwide network of neighborhood centers, which would alleviate the confusion and frustration surrounding access to service agencies. He concluded that although many groups such as service agencies, community councils, civic groups and churches worked hard at reaching many people, "the average citizen in the typical place does not know about and have easy access to an expert non-stigmatic service of broad range, not committed to narrow remedies, and which is ready when necessary to meet him half-way to help him."²

After extensive analysis Kahn favored an independent network of referral centers. Although the specific organizational plan he recommended has not yet materialized, a plethora of narrowly oriented centers sponsored by various agencies have developed. This uncoordinated patchwork of information centers seems to possess the same faults that created the original problem. Either they overlap and duplicate service or they provide information limited to the service of the sponsoring agency.

It has been suggested by various librarians concerned with inner-city service that the library serve as an informational and interpersonal link between community residents and social agencies. The
major question is whether it is necessary to add another agency to the already overburdened social service bureaucracy. The rationale for envisioning the library in this role is twofold: (1) the library has achieved a reputation for impartiality because it provides information on all sides of an issue and is not committed to any particular action program, community service or clientele; and (2) librarians are specifically trained to locate, organize, update and disperse information.

The public library in the past few years has been looking for innovative approaches to inner-city service. Traditional library service is no longer adequate for serving the urban people. When librarians finally realized this they began searching for new approaches and ideas. Neighborhood information centers, envisioned as expanded reference services, are now beginning or under consideration in several urban libraries.

With the foregoing thoughts in mind, a conference on library-based neighborhood information centers was considered. It seemed both logical and expedient to have a forum where librarians could explore the concept and ramifications of this service before libraries jumped wholesale into its establishment. A parochial approach involving libraries alone was rejected. Only by exploring the broadest parameters of the topic could librarians begin to get perspective on their situation.

This naturally seemed to include a look at what had been attempted by other groups with experience in information referral. Legal aid, unions and social welfare agencies, to name a few, have all experimented with the best way to help people by directing them to appropriate services. A look at the Citizens’ Advice Bureaus from which Kahn derived his approach was also desirable. Perhaps librarians were headed, as the old expression goes, "where angels fear to tread."

A variety of speakers from various disciplines and fields of experience were asked to participate in this conference. The first day was directed toward a broad picture of the urban scene presenting some of its problems and services. It was hoped this would provide the necessary backdrop for examining the library's possibilities and chances for success in the development of information centers. Also, testimony about non-library information projects was given to expand perspectives.

During the second day librarians from libraries already embarked on information referral service outlined the development and reported the current status of their projects. From these reports and the ensuing questions, informal discussion groups were formed to discuss what appeared to be the most prevalent problems involved in the establishment of neighborhood information centers.
The planning committee did not envision a how-to-do-it conference which would instruct librarians on the best way to open information centers. Rather, we wanted to open librarians’ eyes to the realistic problems this service entailed and give them some points of departure when considering information centers in their own library situation.

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REFERENCES