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OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY COMMUNITY CENTERS— A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

As an attorney practicing in the legal services program of the Office of Economic Opportunity (O.E.O.) for the last three years, I have had the opportunity to view several O.E.O. neighborhood centers in operation. In this paper I will discuss the subject of information centers in other disciplines. The legal aid office is a natural disseminator of information. However, in an effort to make this presentation more meaningful I propose not to limit my topic to the legal services program but to discuss and analyze the O.E.O. neighborhood centers.

The O.E.O. neighborhood centers were the heart of the "war on poverty." They were to function in the poor neighborhoods and were to bring the war on poverty down to the local level. The centers were to become the informational and service resource of the community; however, most failed. Hopefully something can be learned from the O.E.O. experience.

Perhaps presenting my experiences with O.E.O. neighborhood centers will prevent some of their failures from being repeated by other groups or agencies. Initially, I propose to analyze the functions of a neighborhood information center. Secondly, I will examine the O.E.O. model with reference to the functions and criteria proposed. Finally, I will attempt to express my views on the library as an information center in light of the criteria and functions of a neighborhood information center and my experience with the O.E.O. model.

The need for a neighborhood information center appears self-evident. As society becomes more complex and the population becomes more mobile, the need will increase. In the area of government alone the need for information is overwhelming. In Illinois, for example, there are more than 6,700 special taxing districts ranging from park and library, to fire protection districts. These special districts are in addition to state, municipal, county and township governmental units. In addition there are a myriad of state and federal programs which directly affect the lives of all individuals. The average voter and taxpayer cannot fight his way through the maze

of bureaucratic structures without the help of an outside resource. If this maze is overwhelming to the average citizen, imagine the impact on the poor and uneducated. It is little wonder that whole segments of our society feel a deep sense of alienation.

In order to counteract this complexity, government and various institutions in our society have begun to stress the need for community information centers. Fortunately, since World War II the British have continued the working network of information centers called Citizens' Advice Bureaus (CAB). These bureaus were born out of the need for establishing a communications network during the war, and continue to serve an essential public service function in the British Isles.

The Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) has been studied by American scholars in an attempt to determine whether a similar organization could function in the United States. The Columbia University School of Social Work recently published a study on neighborhood centers in which the Citizens' Advice Bureau was analyzed.¹ This study developed the following criteria for an effective information center:

1. *An open door must be maintained.* All persons must feel welcome. No question should be treated as insignificant. The office should be open during the non-working hours of the potential clientele. No appointments should be necessary.
2. *Expertise.* The staff must be prepared to answer almost any question. Information must be backed up by staff training, basic manuals, up-to-date information about the law and social services facilities. If the question is too complex, a system of referral and consultation should be established. A highly trained, perhaps professional, staff is required.
3. *Range.* The center should have information on a broad range of subjects. Where more detailed information is needed, a referral to the specialized agency should be made.
4. *Serve all classes.* The information center must be open to all classes. Its facilities and location must be carefully chosen to avoid alienating various social classes. On the one hand its location must be such that the poor will not be alienated, while on the other hand the location and appearance must avoid the stigma generally associated with public assistance offices.
5. *Confidentiality.* The person seeking information should be given some degree of privacy. Separate interview rooms or at least well spaced desks should be provided. Records, if any, should be confidential unless specifically released by the applicant.
6. *Nonpartisan and nonsectarian.*
7. *Unbiased case channeling.* If a referral is needed the referral should be made to the proper source without predetermined ideological bias.

8. *Accountability.* Records must be kept to establish the continuing need for the information service and to determine the type of person and problem brought to the information center so that its effectiveness can be evaluated. In addition, some method of follow-up should be established.²

These eight criteria were generally met by the Citizens' Advice Bureaus studied by the Columbia group. It was generally found that British CABs functioned well. They were generally accessible to all elements of the population. They maintained a high degree of expertise and they remained politically neutral.

The function of an information center can vary. An information center can be limited to information only, it can make referrals to other agencies or, depending on the degree of involvement, it can become involved as an advocate. In establishing an information center it is essential to determine the role which the center will play, for the type of staff chosen, the type of information available and the population which the information center will serve will depend on its functions.

An information center must provide some or all of the following functions:

1. *Information.* In the narrow sense information involves answering questions about services, facilities, programs, and laws which are not peculiar to any particular individual.
2. *Advice.* Advice differs from information in that an individual interpretation is called for. For example, a person may want to know how a particular rule or regulation affects his situation or how to approach a particular agency.

Since many questions often involve interpretation of laws, the question of unauthorized practice of law generally comes up. The author's general reaction is that this is not a major problem. In a complex society everyone practices law to a certain extent. The staff of the information center must be prepared to answer legal questions. However, they must realize their limitations and make referrals where necessary. Often the line can be drawn by consulting with a lawyer from the community. After a few examples it becomes apparent which problems can be answered and which should be referred. A lawyer or panel of lawyers who could be consulted by the information center staff would be very helpful.

3. *Steering.* Steering consists of directing a person to another place where the information, advice or service can be found.
4. *Referral.* Unlike steering this generally involves contacting the agency or group which can give the needed assistance. An appointment is made, and sometimes the person is taken to the agency.

5. *Personal assistance and emotional help.* This function could involve emergency assistance, such as aid with filling out forms or making an inquiry by mail or telephone. A great many people are simply in need of a friendly person to tell their problem to. This service becomes a form of counseling. Some professional caseworkers will be needed.
6. *Casefinding.* This function requires in-depth interviewing of the applicant for assistance. The theory behind case-finding is that the person seeking help may not really understand his situation. An in-depth interview is conducted in which the interviewer is able to search out the true nature of the problem. This type of interview is often conducted in the legal aid office. It is time consuming and probably requires professional skill.
7. *Outreach.* Outreach is an effort to attract clients to the information service. Advertising is a form of outreach. Attending meetings or informational talks and knocking on doors are other examples.
8. *Feedback.* As a result of analyzing the type of problems brought to the attention of the information service, a pattern of community need might be detected. Statistics can be kept and made public in an attempt to bring about change.
9. *Advocacy.* Advocacy involves not only the giving of advice and information but the taking of further steps to see that results are achieved. For example, if a person has a question of his eligibility for a governmental program, the advocate will not only tell the person that he is eligible but will contact the particular program and advance the client's position. The legal aid office is constantly becoming involved in advocacy. Advocacy in connection with the feedback function may develop into challenging other organizations on broad issues of social policy.

An information center need not and perhaps should not include all these functions. These, however, must be kept in mind while planning the information centers, for it is apparent that the staff and facilities needed will vary considerably as one moves from an agency which merely gives information to one which engages in advocacy. As advocacy increases, the neutrality and impartiality of the information center decrease. The failure to clearly define functions is often listed as a major shortcoming of the O.E.O. neighborhood center.

Many of the problems which the Office of Economic Opportunity faced stemmed from the fact that it was hastily created. In late 1963, following the assassination of President Kennedy, President Johnson was in desperate need of a domestic program which would do something to clarify his position on civil rights. The result was his famous declaration of war on poverty in the 1964 State of the Union Address. Many of the war on poverty problems had their origins in

the programs of the New Deal. Many had been proposed by the Kennedy administration but had not been enacted by the Congress. The Johnson administration because of its southern ties now had the votes to pass its program through Congress. In rapid order and with little debate, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was enacted.

The Economic Opportunity Act was drafted rapidly. Much of the drafting was performed by Attorney General Robert Kennedy's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency.³ The O.E.O. programs consisted of a series of work programs and training programs reminiscent of the New Deal work programs. Aid was given for education, and innovative programs such as Head Start were developed. Grants were authorized to the traditional social services so they could expand into the poor community. However, the truly revolutionary concepts in the Economic Opportunity Act were those of community action and maximum feasible participation of the poor.

The core of the O.E.O. program on the local level was to be the Community Action Agency. This agency was to be funded directly from the O.E.O., often with little or no local governmental control. The Community Action Agency was to establish neighborhood centers which would coordinate existing services to the poor and house the other O.E.O. programs where possible. In addition the concept of community action implied advocacy. The neighborhood centers were to organize the poor into a grass roots political organization to challenge and change those institutions which affected their lives.

The phrase "maximum feasible participation" ensured that the poor had a voice in the operation of the Community Action Agency. Generally the poor and their liberal allies from the social service community controlled the boards of the community action agencies. Not only did the federal government fund an agency which was to challenge the establishment, but these agencies were in large measure controlled by the poor themselves.

It is evident that in enacting the Economic Opportunity Act, Congress had not envisioned the ramifications of the community action concept. In a short time local mayors, governors, and directors of welfare departments were letting their dislike of the O.E.O. programs become known. With certain exceptions, no one was opposed to the various service programs of the O.E.O. The political heat was directed toward the community action program and the legal services program. The legal services program being composed of professionals and having the support of the organized bar on the national level could withstand the political pressure, the community action agencies could not.

The neighborhood center was to be the focal point of the O.E.O. program. The theory was to bring the needed services to the poor. The services were to be provided wherever possible in the community to be served. The location and facilities were to be chosen in

such a way that the poor would not be alienated. They were to give an appearance of not being associated with the establishment.

The typical neighborhood center was to provide all the functions of an information center. In addition all the various social services were to be represented. The neighborhood center was to be a one-stop social service shopping center. Representatives of case-work agencies such as family services, public aid, mental health and legal aid were to be present. Referrals among the services were to be encouraged and there would be a continuous consultation between the various professions involved with the client. The O.E.O. programs such as day care, Head Start, and perhaps a medical clinic would be represented.

In addition to social services components, the neighborhood center was to have both a neighborhood aid component and a community organization component, and the two often overlapped. The neighborhood aides were to become information and referral experts. They were to provide the outreach for the agency. They were to study the community and to find out its needs. They were to assist in referrals. Often neighborhood aides would take persons to other agencies. Not only would they refer applicants but they were to advocate the position of the person being referred. Often this involved the question of eligibility for a particular welfare program. This was very basic confrontation and advocacy.

The neighborhood aides were all to be recruited from the poor who lived in the community to be served, the theory being that only another poor person could communicate with the poor. In addition they would have a natural entree into the poor community. Furthermore, it was hoped that as the poor saw others acting as advocates they would become more self-reliant.

While the neighborhood aide was to provide information, advice, referrals and advocacy services to the individual, the community organization component was to work with neighborhood groups. They were to document community needs and organize local political campaigns. The establishment of welfare rights groups, tenants unions, and neighborhood improvement associations was to be encouraged. Technical assistance was to be provided so that these groups could confront the institutions of the establishment.

The neighborhood aide and community organization programs were the heart of the neighborhood service center. The various social services would play an essential role in the center. They were to provide services which would give the neighborhood center a sense of credibility and respectability. The poor could see that the neighborhood center was providing services. Their children were being enrolled in day care and Head Start programs and employed in the Job Corps and neighborhood youth programs. Help was available from counseling services and legal aid. By providing these needed

services it was hoped that the poor would sense that the situation was not entirely hopeless and they would organize themselves into a viable political force.

The legal services program was an important participant in the neighborhood service center for several reasons. First, the attorneys provided a necessary service—legal aid. Most legal services agencies were immediately inundated by cases. The legal needs of the poor are immense. People are generally in need of a lawyer because of problems with money. The rich need lawyers because they have money, the poor because they do not. It has been estimated that if every lawyer in the nation were to engage in poverty law, there would still not be enough attorneys to properly service the needs.⁴

The service provided by the legal aid program was important not only because it was a needed community service, but also because legal aid brought many persons into the O.E.O. program. Many persons think of their problems in legal terms. In addition many of the problems of the poor involved the interpretation of the laws and governmental rules and regulations. A study conducted by the American Bar Foundation indicated that many of the poor when asked who they would turn to for help in certain situations, indicated either a lawyer or the police. Furthermore, the same study indicated that the poor felt attorneys could achieve results.⁵ Many persons who would not otherwise be attracted to O.E.O. programs would come in to contact an attorney. The O.E.O. theory was that a person coming to see an attorney would be given an in-depth interview, and that as a result of the interview many problems would surface. The lawyer then would refer the client to other O.E.O. programs.

Secondly, an effective legal service program was necessary if the community action program was to engage in advocacy. The threat of legal action by referral to the legal services enhanced the bargaining power of the neighborhood aide working with the individual client. Also the community organizer always had the threat of legal action behind him if a group he was working with was in the process of confronting an established institution. The attorney would be able to provide technical assistance to the group and if necessary the issue could be brought to court. Bringing court action often was an important point in organizing campaigns. Suits always cause publicity which generally helps any political campaign. The availability of legal help brought the poor an unaccustomed sense of power. Of course, this was exactly the theory behind the legal services program. By having legal services available, confrontation was brought from the streets into the courts. This argument was repeatedly used when the legal service would become involved in a political struggle. Fortunately most bar associations and lawyers have supported the program because of this reasoning.

The Legal Services Agency also provided the neighborhood center with a source of information and advice. Since many of the problems of the poor involve questions of legal interpretation, the availability of attorneys in the program eliminated problems of unauthorized practice of law. The other programs were encouraged to consult with the legal staff so that they could advise their clients. The legal services program provided literature and circulars on legal problems and played an active role in the community education program.

The neighborhood centers, where successful, provided a very effective weapon in the war on poverty. Unfortunately most that I observed were not successful. Why? It will be helpful to examine the O.E.O. neighborhood center in light of the eight criteria given above to attempt to answer the question.

The first criterion was that an open door policy must be maintained. Here the O.E.O. was relatively successful. The programs were operated in the neighborhoods and while in theory they were only to serve the poor, most maintained an open door for all in need of advice or assistance.

In the second area—expertise—the program suffered its greatest weakness. The theory of maximum feasible participation often was carried too far. The poor in many communities looked upon the war on poverty as a source of jobs. People were hired rapidly with little training or experience. Often the only difference between the neighborhood aide giving out advice and the person being advised was that one was being paid.

A great deal of the blame for this lack of expertise was due to the fact that the O.E.O. programs were funded rapidly with little planning. Many programs were funded in response to the near emergency situations in the ghettos. Persons were hired with little or no experience. Emphasis was placed not only on hiring the poor in an effort to reduce unemployment but also out of the belief that only poor persons could properly function as neighborhood aides and organizers. The use of poor persons was an innovative and essential part of the O.E.O. program. However, poor persons were often placed in positions requiring skills beyond their ability. Often one would find administrators who had no experience, secretaries who could not type, and bookkeepers who knew nothing about bookkeeping. Aggravating the situation was the fact that the O.E.O. had no training manuals or materials that it could distribute to its employees. Without adequate materials and training sessions, the neighborhood aide was unable to function. I am still not convinced that the concept of hiring persons out of the ghetto will not work if more training and planning are given, since when adequately trained and supervised the poor often functioned extremely competently. The lack of expertise, however, destroyed the effectiveness of the neighborhood aide program. As people learned that information could not readily be obtained, the program lost credibility and fell into disuse.

Third, the information service at the neighborhood center was theoretically a full-range service. However, because of the lack of expertise this was not the case.

Fourth, the O.E.O. neighborhood center should serve all classes, but it was never designed to serve all classes, although it was designed to serve the needs of the entire poor community. However, as the programs became more oriented toward political endeavors, the type of person the programs served often changed. If a neighborhood center would come under the control of one faction in the community, its use by other factions would be discouraged.

In addition the service components soon began to suffer because of staff and yearly funding shortages. It soon became apparent that the administration in Washington, D.C., was not committed to total war on poverty. As funds decreased, social services had to consolidate. It often became impossible to staff the neighborhood centers. In short, the O.E.O. had taken on too big a task. As the expectations in the ghettos were rising, the ability to meet these expectations was diminishing.

The fifth criterion was to preserve the confidentiality of those persons seeking information. Although there generally was an attempt to ensure the confidentiality of persons seeking the use of the neighborhood center, the theory of total problem-solving often worked against confidentiality. The person coming to the neighborhood center to see a lawyer would often be referred to another service as well as to a lawyer.

Sixth, the neighborhood service was to be nonpartisan and non-sectarian, but with its emphasis on community action it was by its very nature political. The political action was not generally partisan but it often was controversial. As the programs became more involved in advocacy and grass roots politics, they lost their sense of neutrality.

The seventh criterion—unbiased case channeling—unfortunately did not generally exist. Neighborhood aides had a tendency to regard the traditional social services as the establishment. These social service agencies were often approached from a position of confrontation rather than cooperation. This bias, passed on to the person being referred, often destroyed any possibility of an effective casework approach. The neighborhood centers had a tendency to refer clients to other O.E.O. programs which often were unable to properly cope with the problem. This internal referral system stemmed both from bias and from the lack of knowledge of non-O.E.O. programs.

The eighth criterion—accountability—really did not exist; that is, there generally was no effort made to keep records. In fact, O.E.O. policy in the early years officially disdained recordkeeping. The O.E.O. was to be an action agency with little or no concern for

bureaucracy. Although many neighborhood aides took their referral and advocacy functions seriously, there was generally no adequate followup. These criticisms of the community action program are in many ways unfair, since the greatest problem, and the one causing many other problems, was its lack of expertise. This fault could have been remedied with time. Time, however, simply was not available; and the commitment to the war on poverty was de-escalating. The community action programs are still in existence, and many are becoming more efficient. The Nixon administration has not killed the O.E.O. The O.E.O. has simply withered away. The service programs exist, but the concept of community action has been so diluted that it is present only in theory.

What can a library which is planning a neighborhood information center learn from the O.E.O. experience? First, there is a need for a general information center which is open to all people. Second, the social service agencies need a method of having cases referred to them, and here the library can play an important role. The library generally meets the criteria for an effective information center. It is neutral politically and it has or can develop the needed expertise. The question is: What function can the library serve?

The library should become involved in the functions of information, advice, steering, referral and perhaps fact finding. The library as presently set up can handle these functions. It is neutral and is found in most communities. The public could be educated to turn to the library as a source of information and advice. The library staff could be trained to steer and refer persons to other sources for information and counseling when needed. They could get involved in feedback with statistics being kept on the type of questions which are asked. These records could then be used to isolate community issues.

The library information center should not become involved in the functions of limited emotional assistance and casefinding. These functions involve extensive counseling and professional skills. The library is not a social work agency and, in my opinion, it should not become one. If counseling is needed a referral should be made to the proper agency. If the library is to develop the necessary informational resources it cannot get involved in extensive counseling.

The library must not get involved in advocacy. If an information center is to be used by all persons it must not become engaged in extensive advocacy. Of course, any referral system employs a certain amount of advocacy. However, it should not be a major function. The library does not have the political base to engage in advocacy. Furthermore, the informational functions will suffer as advocacy increases.

While I am advancing the position that the library as an information center should limit itself to information and referrals, I envision

an informational program which will be more extensive than just providing information on the various social services in the community. The library must be more than a referral system. While the library should not engage in advocacy and political activity, the information available must be stored and cataloged for use in advocacy and in political activities. This paper starts with an expression of the need for sophisticated information as a society becomes more complex. If the citizen is to function properly in this complex society he must have information. The library should become an information center for citizens and groups of citizens so that they can become involved in the political system.

Every political campaign needs a staff which catalogs information on the various issues involved in the campaign. No politician would enter a campaign without information and position papers on the campaign issues. The average citizen has neither the time, money nor ability to gather this information. The library information center can serve as the political staff of the general public.

The library should collect and catalog information on those issues which are being discussed in the local community. This will require a degree of political sophistication, for the information must anticipate issues in the community. Information could be kept for example on police, education, public housing, public health, zoning, and other areas of public interest. Local newspaper clippings organized and filed by subject could be kept. The government publishes numerous informational manuals. The rules and regulations of the various government programs could be maintained. The library should catalog the various planning reports involving the community and, if possible, obtain copies. If the community has a college or university some effort should be made to catalog and make available the numerous research projects that the students prepare. The University of Illinois Library Research Center is presently collecting community studies conducted by University of Illinois students and storing them in the Urban Planning Library.

The library should be a source of current community information. The information is available but the general public does not know how to find it. The library, by storing this information, can provide an essential role in the advocacy process without becoming directly involved in confrontation. The library can supply the information which is needed for effective advocacy. Citizens cannot confront institutions in the society without information. Libraries can best serve the advocacy function by doing those things which they do best, collecting and cataloging information.

Initially I was skeptical of libraries as information centers, but I am now convinced that they could and should serve this function. They are neutral, already in existence, and are found in almost every community. They are staffed by trained personnel and they are a

natural source for information. However, if the library is to provide a service in our society similar to the service provided by the CABs in Britain, it must not become involved in social work or advocacy. It must remain politically neutral, but it must not ignore the local political scene. It is my opinion that the most important function a library can perform is to catalog information which can then be used by citizens and groups interested in local political issues. As society becomes more complex the citizen and political group must have a ready source of information if they are to actively participate in the democratic process.

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